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NO. 34

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CLOAK AND STAGGER

by Gordon R. Dickson



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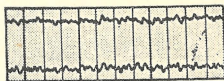


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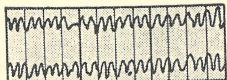
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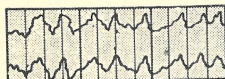
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● NOVELET

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It would have been hilarious if Earth's acceptance into the Federation hadn't depended upon how Tom Lindsay carried out his mission—because no one, particularly Lindsay, had the faintest notion of what he was expected to do, or not do!

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

MARGARET ST. CLAIR has become one of those authors whose name is a hallmark of quality, since her first appearance in science fiction during the war years. Lovers of fantasy know her under another name, as well—Idis Seabright. She also writes detective fiction, and authored one of the best fictional treatments of Jack-the-Ripper we have ever seen.

★ GORDON R. DICKSON is one of those rareties in science fiction—a man who can write a really funny story which has a lot more to say than its gags. Readers are still chuckling over his novelet, "Perfectly Adjusted", which appeared a couple of years ago in *Science Fiction Stories*.

★ THOMAS N. SCORTIA also has a sense of humor, even though our crack about him last time had to be explained. The lad's real serious about letting someone else mix, sell, or discover chemicals while he turns to full-time writing.

★ ROBERT SILVERBERG, we presume, is known to you all. And he'll be still better known after his novel, "We, The Marauders" appears in the February issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*. That's not just a hint—it's a proclamation!



STAROBIN

by Margaret St. Clair

illustrated by FREAS

Something had to be done to spark the Pilot Recruitment Service. People needed the exquisite Llewellyn artifacts, which had to be brought across space, and a Pilot shortage was approaching. One man could give the campaign that spark—Starobin, the great spaceman who vanished years ago; if Starobin could be found, and brought back...

“HE WAS ON the edge of Brocchi’s cluster in Vulpecula when he disappeared,” Ellen read aloud from the sheet of typescript. “There was a sort of demon in him. The things it takes a crew of four to do, he did single-handed. Starobin never took anybody with him. Only after he had died did we realize how many worlds he had visited. It wasn’t the entries in the history books he wanted, it was the stars. There was a demon in the man.”

Ellen let the sheet drop on Toby’s desk. “Nice copy,” she said.

“Yeah. Thanks. And then of course there’ll be the usual stuff about ‘*don’t be earth-bound... give yourself the STARS!*’ and the tie-up with the Pilot Recruitment Serv-

ice. We found a picture of Starobin we’re going to use; he looks noble and slightly cross-eyed in it. It ought to bring the little boulder’s tumbling in, eager to sign up with the Service.”

“How’s the campaign coming, anyhow?”

Toby made a face. “Not so well. There’s been a lot of publicity lately on pilot injury, and mortality statistics—especially in the Earth-Llewellyn run. The kids are scared.”

“It oughtn’t to be allowed,” said Ellen vaguely. She prodded at her hair which, this morning, had been lacquered into a structure rather like a blonde pagoda, with small green animals adorning the edges. “What will happen to us if there aren’t enough pilots for the Llewellyn serv-

ice? The Llewellyn artifacts are wonderful, delicious. Sometimes I think they're all that keeps me alive."

"THAT'S WHAT everybody says," replied Toby. "With some help from the pharmaceuticals, of course."

"Yes, they help." She picked up the copy again. "When did he die?"

"Nobody knows. The last anybody heard of him was ten years ago, when he was just margining on Brocchi's cluster, the way it says in my blurb. Since then, Starobin's rest has been silence." He coughed, perhaps to draw attention to his joke.

"Then—how do you know he is dead?"

They looked at each other. Toby's eyes had begun to glow. "If he's not dead..." he said slowly.

"How old was he when he disappeared?"

"Forty-two. Even now, he'd be a long way from being an old man."

Once more they looked at each other. It was Toby who said, at last, "We could send a ship to bring him back."

"What would be the point of that? Outside of curiosity, I mean."

Toby had got up from his desk and was walking up and down. "I'm surprised at you, woman," he said over his shoulder. "The Recruitment Campaign. 'Search for Staro-

bin, Pioneer Star-rover.' It would be fabulous publicity."

ELLEN HAD picked up one of the ambiguous Llewellyn artifacts and was manipulating it absently. It became a vase, a cup, a piece of abstract sculpture, an arrowhead, a ceramic rabbit, before it reverted to its primary identity, a marble ash-tray. "How could you trace him? You'd have all space to look for him in."

"Well, we might have trouble; but we know exactly when and where he left Earth. We know how much Earth has moved in the meantime, and can make allowance for variation in magnetic fields and gravity. We know what kind of a craft he had, and how it was, and how it was powered. We know how much he weighed, and what his pulse was, and what his metabolic rate. We know all about him."

"Except what his demon was," Ellen murmured.

"Eh? As I was saying, we know all about him. For practical purposes. Now, his departure has left traces in the continuum. Events are inefaceable. With the data we have, we can use the Sparrow Marker to pick up his traces. And follow him back."

"Sparrow Marker?" Ellen yawned.

"I guess you don't tune the science channels. Sparrow Marker is called that because



This world was a paradise—at first...

it's capable of marking the sparrow's fall. In other words, it enables one to pick up the track of any past event, provided one has certain basic data about it.

"Following Starobin with it would be like laying a course for a space ship along a single strand of spider web. But it could be done."

"And then?"

"We'd find Starobin and bring him back. And you'd get your Llewellyn artifacts."

THE ECONOMIC considerations that made heavy armor unfeasible for the ships on the Earth-Llewellyn run didn't apply to the Starobin Rescue Ship. She was protected against everything the engineers could imagine. Her passengers would be almost as secure as they would have been on Earth, though less comfortable. Besides, they could sleep a lot.

The passenger list was short: Toby (he wanted to go, but public opinion would have compelled him, even if he had been reluctant); Erickson, the Sparrow Marker man; Cheng, the mechanic; and Brown, the astrogator. There hadn't been as many candidates for passage as one would have expected. The "star hunger" Toby wrote about didn't seem to be acute. Despite the purpose of the Rescue Mission, there were only four bunks installed, which might argue a

certain lack of optimism in the designers.

At the next-to-the-last moment, Ellen decided that she wanted to go. She had drifted into one of the ambiguous relationships with Toby that were the current fashion; perhaps she didn't want to be parted from him, perhaps... She herself couldn't have told what her motives were.

Since she was also in some sort of a relationship with a man named Mortimer, a high-up in the Pilot Recruitment Service, she was able to use his influence to bump Sparrow Marker Erickson out of his post. There was no reason to think that substituting her for Erickson would be unfortunate. Ellen was intelligent; and after four weeks' intensive training, she knew most of the things about the Sparrow Marker that Erickson had known. And the publicity—under the stimulus of the ship's building, the recruitment rate into the Pilot Service really had picked up a bit—the publicity her inclusion got for the expedition was marvelous.

LA TE IN June, amid verbal paroxysms, the Starobin Rescue Ship left earth. They had picked up the traces of Starobin's own ship without too much difficulty, and on planetary drive they slipped through the solar system and out into space. This part was

easy, pleasant, like sight-seeing; but once they were on the space drive and headed toward Brocchi's cluster, the weary time began.

There is always some psychological stress in being in space. Ellen was troubled by a persistent sense of psychic emptiness. She had brought along her favorite artifacts; the pharmaceuticals helped more. Two or three times in the night she would waken from her cold dreams to swallow a pill. Even when Toby came to her, the emptiness persisted. Meantime, the spiderweb-thin red line that denoted the ten-and-a-half-year-old course of Starobin's ship unrolled itself steadily across the flat white face of the Sparrow Marker.

THEY WENT off space drive and into deceleration, long before they reached the cluster. Ellen, better now, spent much time watching the cluster grow in the direct viewers. "Looks more like a coat hanger than anything," she said to Toby. "Funny that all those stars should just remind me of a coat hanger."

"Un-hunh." Toby had endured the trip better than she; its main effect on him had been to make him morose. "Listen, don't you think you'd better concentrate a little more on the Marker? From here on, we're very likely to lose Starobin's track, since we

haven't any idea where he went."

"There's an automatic signal on the Marker if the line breaks," Ellen objected. Nonetheless, she went over and seated herself by the instrument's face.

The line broke, forty-eight hours later. The Rescue Ship had to cast about maddeningly for it, while Brown cursed and Toby chewed his fingernails. They picked it up on an unlikely hunch of Ellen's, a long way from where Starobin had seemed to be going. Still, there was no doubt that it was his line.

The stars of the cluster had grown dazzlingly bright. Ellen snapped the dark screen in place across the direct viewer to shut out the glare. Even so, she felt she could still see it—cold white, hard blue, and dull and dangerous red.

STAROBIN seemed to have been heading for a white and yellow double star. They couldn't be sure. The line broke; they picked it up again. It was the double star.

"He's going to land on the planet, I think," Toby said.

"Which planet?" Ellen asked.

"There's only the one in the system." Toby was still morose.

"Why do you think he picked that particular planet?"

"How should I know? He

must have been acting at random. Star-rover pi-jaw aside, he couldn't have been doing anything else. One man's life isn't time enough for him to have landed—just landed, kicked the dust with his boots, and taken off again—it isn't time enough for him to have landed on more than a tiny fraction of the planets in Brocchi's cluster alone."

"Were his reports scientifically valuable?"

"Mainly from the point of view of random sampling. He didn't do things scientifically."

Ellen sighed. "What's this planet like?"

"Can't you read the data on the dials? It's bigger than Mars, smaller than Venus, and about as near to its primary as Earth is. It has a breathable atmosphere. The double primary will make it some different from what you're used to, but not a lot. Worlds are pretty much the same, through space."

"The stars, like clams—" said Ellen. She began to giggle hysterically.

"What's that?"

"Oh, a quotation."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I hate this. I hate space. It's nothing but a terrible repetitive emptiness."

"You shouldn't have come if you feel that way about it. Why *did* you come?"

THEY FOLLOWED the red line of Starobin's landing on down in a spiral. It was night when they made the first light, grazing contact with the planet. Ellen, who was sitting before the Marker, gave a cry. "He's here! He's still here!"

"What?" Toby demanded.

"Well, his ship is." She pointed at the Marker's face. The thin red line had been replaced by a solid reddish blot. "The line turned blue, and violet, and orange, and then red again; that means a temporal telescoping. Then the blot came; that means he's still here."

There wasn't any argument about waiting until morning. They all wanted to see what they had come so far to find. They left the rescue ship as soon as they could.

The stars of Brocchi's cluster burned like jewels against the sky. Ellen shivered. "Over toward the left, I think."

STAROBIN'S ship was much smaller than the one that had set out to rescue him. Grass had grown up around it; it had been in the same place a long time. The port was open.

"Starobin!" called Toby. He swallowed. "Starobin!"

His voice came back flatly from the ship. No answer. Ellen said, "Let's go inside. He may be dead."

The ship's tiny interior was

dusty, but there was no body in it. The fuel tank was empty. The bunk might not have been slept in for ten years.

"What happened to him?" asked Ellen. "Wait. I'll go back to Sparrow Marker and see if I can pick up his individual track."

She started to go. A voice behind them said, "He's not here; he took another ship."

They all jumped. "Who are you?" asked Toby.

The man came forward. He walked limpingly; his hair was white. They couldn't make out much more than that in the light of the torches. "Oh—call me Mike."

"Whose ship? Where did he get it?"

"My ship. He took it from me."

They were silent. At last Cheng, the mechanic, said, "You mean he stole...?"

"Well, he didn't get it by persuasion," Mike said reasonably.

"But... You've been here ever since? Ten years? The bunk doesn't look as if anybody'd been sleeping in it. And where did he go?"

MIKE DIDN'T answer. "Do you know where he is?" asked Ellen.

"I know where he thought of going," Mike answered reluctantly.

"What kind of a ship was it? Maybe Ellen could pick it up in the Marker."

"Marker? What's that?"

Ellen explained.

"Oh. No, I couldn't tell you. It's been so long ago; I've forgotten a lot of things." He rubbed his head.

"You don't remember what kind of a ship your own ship was?" Toby was incredulous. "Well, then, where did he say he was going to go?"

"...Why should I tell you?"

"We'll pay you."

"What good would money be here?"

"Oh—we'll take you back to Earth with us."

"It's been so long I'm not sure... What did you want Starobin for?"

THEY TOLD him, looking at each other, correcting, interrupting. Mike said, "You want to find Starobin so he can help you recruit youngsters into this Pilot Service business. And the Pilot Service is important because it brings back the Llewellyn artifacts."

"You make it sound so vulgar," Ellen protested, a little angrily. "As if they were just playthings. Why, the artifacts are charming, delicious, wonderful..."

"The flower of your culture. Just about the finest things you have on Earth." Mike cleared his throat. "Well, young lady, that may be why the others are hunting Starobin, but it's not why you

want to find him. My guess is you have motives of your own."

Ellen turned aside abruptly, out of the light of the torches. Her head was bent. "Never mind her motives," said Toby. "We want to know where Starobin was heading."

"You won't find out from me."

Ellen stepped forward again, into the light. "Make him tell, Toby. Are we going to go back to earth and say we couldn't find Starobin because the man who knew where he was wouldn't tell us? *Make him tell.*"

Toby grasped the white-haired man's thin arm. He shook him. "Tell us." He twisted the arm.

Mike laughed. "How can you make me tell? There's an infinite number of places where he might have gone, and only one where he did go. All I have to do is to tell you the wrong place."

"You'll tell," Toby answered grimly. He gave the old man's arm a twist and shoved him in the direction of the Starobin Rescue Ship. "We're going to take you with us. And if it turns out you lied to us—we'll take it out of your hide."

MIKE'S BEING aboard made them miserably overcrowded. Only the astro-gator had much to do; and after he had worked on the coordinates of the stars to

which Mike affirmed Starobin had been heading, and fed the course data into the computers, there wasn't much for him to do either. Like the others, he lay in his bunk and swallowed tranquilizing pills. Like the others, when the depressing effects of being tranquilized got too much for him, he took one of the "jag" pharmaceuticals, which directly stimulate the pleasure centers in the brain, and was then ready to start the cycle over again.

Their target star was deep within Brocchi's cluster. Mike didn't seem much troubled by the possibility that he might have given them the wrong one. Since he hadn't any regular bunk, he slept on the floor—or in whatever bunk might be temporarily vacant. Though he was offered a reasonable share of the pharmaceuticals aboard, he generally declined.

A SORT OF friendship sprang up between him and Ellen. They talked a good deal, in a desultory way. She did most of the talking—about Earth art, and science, and culture; about the wonderful goods and services Earth gave her children these days—or, when she was in a less solemn mood, she talked about herself. Mike almost never talked about himself.

"What was Starobin like?" she asked one wake-period. She was lying in her bunk.

Mike sat beside her on the floor.

Mike considered. "I didn't know him very well."

"I suppose robbery doesn't exactly constitute friendship," Ellen answered, with a ghost of humor. "But..."

"Well... He was a man who was hunting something. He seemed to me to be a man who was searching for the fulfillment of an aesthetic ideal. Almost an intellectual ideal."

"What ideal?"

"He drove himself," Mike said, ignoring her question. "There was certainly something masochistic about the way he drove himself. He seemed to feel that if he put himself under enough pressure, suffered enough hardships, exerted himself enough, he'd be sure to find what he was hunting."

"What was he hunting? I asked you before."

"It isn't easy to say. I don't think he knew himself. Perhaps for a place where he could lead a serene, beautiful, significant life. Harmony and order. A place where the simplest acts would be meaningful. I guess it really was an intellectual ideal."

"There's nothing intellectual about that," Ellen answered a little scornfully.

"Isn't there? There could be. Earth wasn't any place for a life like that, Earth or the humanoid colonies. He had to find it somewhere else."

"Earth's...all right."

"Not for a beautiful, easy life."

There was a noise from the bunk. Ellen may have been crying. After a moment she said, "I'm going to take a euph pill. Would you like one, Mike?"

"Thanks, I don't care if I do," Mike answered, departing from his usual habit.

He took the pill from her. They swallowed in companionable silence. He reached out and took her hand; they both dozed.

THE STAROBIN RESCUE SHIP had been on planetary drive most of the time since they left the double sun on whose planet they had picked up Mike. Now their goal was in sight—the planet whose coordinates Mike had given them.

"Two planets," said the astrogator. "It can't be the inner one; that's entirely too near the primary. Whereabouts on the outer one do you want me to try for a landing?"

"Ask him," Toby answered. He gestured toward Mike.

"How should I know?" the old man replied. There was a small, tight smile on his lips.

Toby looked at him levelly. "I think you do know," he said. "I don't know how you know, but you do. Tell Brown where to try to put down the ship."

"Oh, as to that... I'll pilot, if you want me to."

Brown stood aside. Mike took over the controls. With amazing expertness, he began to bring down the ship.

IT WAS DAYBREAK when they landed. Moments before, when they had gone into a braking orbit, Ellen had said, "This looks like a lovely world."

"I expect Starobin thought so," Mike had said.

From the air they saw a swarm, a flight, of islands, lying like brown leaves against the blue-violet seas. "Not much in the way of large land masses," said Brown, the astrogator. "Still, it would be hard to find a man here. If he didn't want to be found."

"If he didn't want to be found," Mike echoed.

Toby glanced at the older man's profile sharply; but Mike's face was relaxed and self-confident. Mike set the Starobin Rescue Ship down on one of the largest islands, as delicately and precisely as a man putting an egg in a basket of eggs.

The usual moment of numbed silence followed the shutting-off of the blasts. Then Ellen said, "Open the ports. I want to go out."

The automatic samplers had already said that what she wanted was safe. The ports swung wide.

The ingredients of paradise are simple. Trees with pale scarlet flowers. The glint of

salt water, the low thunder of surf. Tall cycads that lean slantwise into the fresh, scented wind. And against the violet horizon, a low-lying bank of cloud, molten rose in the light of the rising sun.

"Oh," Ellen said.

TOBY HAD followed her. "How lovely," he said. "A little garish. But lovely all the same."

The others had left the ship too. Toby turned to Mike. "Take us to Starobin."

"Find him yourself," Mike answered. "You brought me here by force. If you don't find what you want..."

"I'll take it out of your hide." Toby caught Mike's wrist and began pressure and twisting. "You'd better do as I say."

As well as he could, Mike shrugged. "A man my age isn't much afraid of being hurt. But come along. I meant to show you. It's only that I don't like you, Toby. It's remarkable how you represent everything I don't like. But come along."

He led them into the island, away from the beach. The way was slightly uphill, past bushes that were masses of waxy white flowers and taller shrubs that drooped with pendant greenish-purple fruit. The fresh sweet wind blew steadily in their faces.

THE WALK was long. He was obviously taking them

to the center of the island. Once Ellen said, "This place is really the earthly paradise. Nobody could imagine anything more beautiful."

Mike, in front, twisted around to look at her. "You don't sound particularly happy, though."

"Oh, well, paradise!" she answered, trying to laugh.

The flora grew denser and wetter. In mossy rock pockets ferns spread their bronzy green leaves. There was a sprinkling of tiny purple flowers. At last Mike led them out on an elevated rocky ledge.

Opposite them, a mountain stream poured out across the rock and broke in a gentle cascade. Its waters were collected into a pool fifteen feet or so below. Three or four women were bathing in the pool. An arc of rainbow from the misty waterfall hovered over their heads.

They looked up, startled, as the members of the Starobin Rescue Mission came out onto the rock ledge. The women were certainly humanoid, probably human. Their skins were a velvety gold, their hair hung down their shoulders in rich black coils.

One of the women hesitated. Then she came out of the water and began to clamber up the rocks toward them. She could climb well.

She swung herself over the ledge and stood up. She was

beautiful, as beautiful as her island, as beautiful as her world. Only a carping critic would have said that she was a little over-ripe.

She looked at Mike, and smiled. "Starobin! Starobin!" she said in a high, bird's voice. She put out her hand.

"Hello, Amta," he said.

"**W**HY DID you lie to us?" Ellen asked when they had gone back to the beach.

"You were hunting me. I didn't want to be hunted," Starobin-Mike replied.

"But—what happened? What were you doing there on the planet beside the double sun? Who took your ship?"

"Oh, I took his. We got into a quarrel, you see, and I killed him. It wasn't murder. I buried him properly. His grave wasn't far from where you landed. And then I took his ship. It was better than mine."

"And then you came here. But—why did you leave? This place is like paradise. Why did you go back to where you had killed a man?"

"It wasn't remorse, if that's what you mean," replied Starobin. "I don't even know what his name was, or what he was doing there. He was probably a space-tramp."

"But why did you go back?"

"This place..." said Starobin, and paused. "I told you I—Starobin—was hunting an ideal. Beauty, serenity, significance. Here..."

"Wasn't that what you found?" Ellen demanded. Her face was white and lined.

"IT WAS MEANINGLESS. Physical pleasure, certainly. Beautiful, accessible women, beautiful natural surroundings, easy means of life. So easy. There was no content. Paradise was like a drug. Like the drugs you take."

"And you went back—"

"To a more austere planet. I was trying to break the paradise habit; I was trying to knit my life together again. I thought, if I could succeed, I would go back to Earth. Perhaps I might yet be able to do some useful work... I might have been able to do it. But then the Starobin Rescue Mission came in the Rescue Ship.

"You talked about Earth a lot on the way here, Ellen. You made me hate too many things about it. I realized why I'd run away from it. No. I won't go back."

He reached across to a bush and plucked one of the greenish-purple fruits. He bit into it. "Try one," he said to Ellen. "It's delicious."

"No. I don't want it. What are you going to do?"

"Stay here."

ELLEN BEGAN to cry. Starobin dropped the fruit half-eaten. He touched her gently on the arm. "Poor girl," he said sorrowfully, "poor girl, you're so unhappy. The pharmaceuticals and the artifacts and the whole glittering flood of goods and services you told me about—none of them help you with your dreadful emptiness. You thought Starobin might have something for you; that's why you came so far, hunting him. And he hasn't. All he has to offer is an ideal—that betrayed itself."

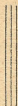
"Come back with us. Please come back."

"No. I wish I could help you. I can't. I haven't anything to help you. I'll just stay here, getting old rather quickly. But at any rate..." something positive, a wan gleam of human courage and pride had come into his face... "at any rate, I shan't help Earth to get any more Llewellyn artifacts."

Ellen held out her hand to him. He did not see her. Eyes half-closed, he was plucking another purplish fruit and putting it in his mouth.

She turned back to the ship. She was weeping bitterly. But even in her grief—for him, for herself—she understood that it was a sort of triumph that the Pilot Recruitment Service was going to have to get along without Starobin.

★
Novellet



illustrated
by
EMSH

CLOAK AND STAGGER

by Gordon R. Dickson

Nothing about Torm Lindsay's mission seemed to make sense except the fact that Earth's acceptance by alien Federation of Peoples depended upon his success. Fine—only exactly what he was expected to do? No one seemed to know.

FIRST IT was just a haze of light. Then it was something distant and white, with a dark blob swimming against it. Then it all cleared; and the white was the ceiling and the blob was the face of a medician.

"Hello, Torm, boy," said the medician. "Easy, now. How's the head?"

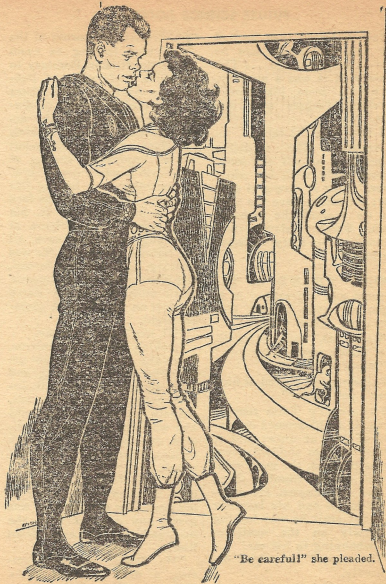
Torm Lindsay reached up and felt a skullcap bandage smooth and tight under his fingers. "Whuzzat?" he said.

"I'll take it off now," said the medician. His hands went to Lindsay's head, and Torm could feel the bandage being peeled and rolled back. "Now how does it feel?"

"Feels fine," said Torm, his voice strengthening.

"Fine. Not the best operating conditions here, you know. How d'you feel?"

"Feel?" For a long moment Torm just lay silent, puzzling over this last question. Feel? How *did* he feel? He certain-



"Be careful!" she pleaded.

ly felt different than he had ever felt before. Or had he once—a long time ago...? The memory, if it was a memory, slipped from his mind's searching fingers and was gone.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Ataboy." The medician helped him up off the long, narrow table with its white cover. "Take it slow and easy now; the aliens have the oxygen up around the embassy again. Breathe slowly and naturally. Don't try to move too fast."

TORM TRIED it. The room and everything in it began to settle around him once more. "Now what?"

"Room 243," said the medician. "She's waiting for you."

"Who's waiting?"

The medician peered at him. "Don't you know?"

Suddenly Torm remembered. It all blossomed out inside of him at once; and it seemed to him suddenly that it was the best, the most wonderful, and the funniest thing he had ever known. He started to laugh and his laughter mounted until he was leaning helplessly on the medician and whooping in his ear.

"I'm a spy!" he yelled delightedly.

The medician's face went white. He glanced frantically around him. "For...Torm, you crazy fool! Keep it down! *Keep your voice down!*"

TURNING the corner of the corridor leading to room 243 of the Human Embassy to the alien Federation of Peoples, on Arcturus Five (there was a peculiar feeling of dizziness accompanying the action, as if he had been turning corridors all morning—but not an unpleasant feeling at all; Torm Lindsay could hardly remember ever having felt so good) he came face to face with a mirror. From it, his own image beamed back at him, pug nose, blue eyes, all the normal attributes. He was wearing, he noted, his formal, one-piece suit of diplomatic black with the Green Earth emblem on the chest. A pleasant sight.

"Hi, me," said Lindsay.

Looking beyond the mirror, down the corridor, he saw the doorway he was seeking and went on to and through it. Inside was an office with a tall, shapely brunette in the gold and white of a research medician, standing with her back to him, searching through the spools of a filing cabinet.

"Rrruff!" Coming up behind, Lindsay gathered her in his arms. For a moment it was touch and go; but then she managed to break away from him.

"No, Torm," she said, getting a desk between them. "Not now. "You sit down over there."

"But I love you," said Torm. "I love you madly, Selagh."

Selagh Maron, who had been about to say something, closed her mouth and swallowed a little convulsively. "This is no time to break the news to me."

"You mean I haven't told you before?" said Torm, frowning. "That's odd."

"Oh, it is?"

"Of course. I've loved you ever since they first sent you out from Earth."

"Torm, will you please sit down?"

TORM SAT down. "Now," said Selagh, briskly, seating herself in turn behind the desk. "I want you to answer a few questions."

"Carry on."

"Name?"

"You know my name."

"Name?"

"Torm Alexander McTavish Lindsay."

"Age?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Position?"

"Junior attache, diplomatic, Embassy to the Federation, Arcturus Five."

"Present duty?"

"To reach by any possible means the planetary center of government, and bring our case to the attention of the higher authorities."

"And what is our case?"

"Ha!" said Torm. "We haven't one."

"Torm!" cried Selagh, sitting up in her chair.

"Well, what do you think?

They've got umpteen thousand races and half the galaxy. If they don't like us, how can we make them? If they don't want us, what can we do about it?" Torm scratched the tip of his nose. "Seems silly to me."

"Torm, that's not the point," retorted Selagh, swiftly. "The Representative they've assigned to deal with us is just being obstructionistic, that's all. Your job is just to find someone else that Ambassador Coran and Admiral Natek can take our case to."

"Ah, well..." Torm shrugged.

Selagh looked at him severely. "Got it?"

"Yup!" said Torm, with a yawn. "Makes no difference to me, anyhow."

"That's right," Selagh got up. "Come on now."

THE GUARD at the entrance stood to one side, stiff in his maroon and grey uniform, and they went in. The office of the Human Ambassador to Arcturus was long and wide, lit by the same bright sourceless lighting that illuminated the whole interior of the embassy building. Around a table at the far end of the room sat three men.

No—not quite three. One had a curiously crippled look about him. On closer inspection, it could be seen that he did not have the outjutting

shoulder bones that belong to the human skeleton. In their place was something like a large double ball-and-socket joint into which his arms fitted at the top, but the details of which were hidden by the sort of loose smock he wore. This structural peculiarity, and the unvarying stillness of his expressionless face, tagged him as an alien of one of the races which together made up the humanly unknown numbers and extent of the Federation of Peoples.

"Oh, there you are," said Ambassador Coran, looking up, his thin, lined face under its grey hair alertly upon Selagh and Torm as they came up to the table. He turned to the alien. "This, Representative, is the young man we're sending out."

THE FEDERATION Representative turned his unmoving face to Torm. His eyes were dark and lustrous, and seemed to burn with a deeply hidden light. He stared at Torm.

"Reading my mind?" asked Torm, cheerfully.

"Lindsay!" snapped Coran.

The Representative raised one hand, slowly. The hand, too, was very human, though somewhat long and fragile looking.

"It's all right, Ambassador," he said, in words lacking the faintest trace of any accent. "I've seen you before; you're Torm Lindsay, aren't you."

"Right."

"I thought so. No, Torm, I wasn't reading your mind; I can't. We in the Federation, even the best of us, can receive only what is consciously projected at us. You people are not telepathically dumb, you know. Merely deaf—or rather, lacking in proper education. "Now, Torm, you've been warned that going outside of the Embassy may be—to my mind, certainly will be—dangerous for you?"

"Check," said Lindsay.

"And you're going out of your own free will?"

"I am."

The alien's hand disappeared into the long sleeve of his smock and came out holding a small, metallic-looking capsule. He handed it to Torm. "Break this with your thumbnail."

Torm did; and a silver mist seemed to rise from the broken capsule, to flow about him and disappear.

"What's that?" asked Coran.

"Roughly the equivalent—but I should say a great deal better than one of your space suits," answered the Representative. "It will ensure a constant physical environment for him. His own atmosphere, temperature, pressure, gravity, and so on."

THE EYES of stocky Admiral Natek lit up eagerly, then the glow faded resigned-

ly. He had tried prying loose technical improvements from the Representative before this; and with no success.

"Selagh," said Ambassador Coran. "Will you take Lindsay to the door and start him out? Then come back here. We're going to...just come back."

"Yes, sir," said Selagh.

She led Torm back out the door, down several levels and along a corridor that ended in a small door. At her touch it slid back, revealing a short ramp sloping down to a walkway that curved past the embassy building, and curved off to lose itself among further buildings of the great city—of which the humans, imprisoned in their embassy, knew next to nothing.

"There you are." Selagh looked up into his face. "Take care of yourself." Suddenly she threw her arms around him and clung to him. "Oh, take care of yourself!"

"Hey..." began Torm. But before he could respond, she had kissed him quickly and pushed him out onto the ramp. The door closed between them; and Lindsay was left staring foolishly at it.

"Well..." said Torm. "Well..." After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He went down the slight slope of the ramp and turned to his right on the walkway.

II

AS HE STEPPED on to it, it seemed deserted. Aliens of all types, observation from the Embassy's windows had informed its human staff, seemed to prefer the simplicity of disappearing from one place and appearing in another, to more ordinary and personal methods of locomotion. However, Torm Lindsay, being only human, was finding an actual pleasure in stretching his legs; he strode along, whistling to himself.

He had, however, covered only a short distance before he discovered that the walk itself was moving him along. When he stopped and looked down at his feet, they seemed to be firmly planted upon an immovable surface. When he looked at the low walls edging the walkway, he saw, however, that he was undeniably in motion. By way of experiment, Torm sat down: he proceeded as easily and comfortably as before.

"Marchons!" This reminded him of the Marsellaise, and he sang a couple of verses. "Allons," he said. "*A l'estacion. Aus den bierstube. Rrrr-apido*—" he said, liking the sound of the rolling r's "corrimos los carrros del *ferrrocarril*."

The walk, apparently puzzled, slowed down and stopped. Torm patted it reassuringly. "That's all right.

boy. Just take me to the nearest transportation center."

The walk picked up speed again.

"Faster," ordered Torm.

It went faster.

"Faster!" cried Torm.

The edging walls began to blur with the speed.

"Faster!"

THE WALK stopped abruptly—and somehow without snapping Lindsay's head off at the neck. But at the moment he was not so concerned with that as with its evident disobedience to his command.

"What is this farce? I said—*faster!*" The walk did not stir. "How will I ever get to...oh."

He had just noticed that he was halted opposite a towering building that stretched impossibly up out of sight beside him.

"I am there? You are there!" he told himself. He got to his feet with another charitable pat for the walkway. "Thanks—and pardon my misunderstanding."

He turned and headed for the building's wide entrance. Just inside the shadow of it stood a tall, bipedal alien with several extra joints in each of his arms and legs. It looked at him with large, spaniel-like brown eyes set in a high, bony forehead that was scamed with wrinkles.

"Hi," said Tom. "This the transportation center?"

The alien continued to stare at him. Torm produced a small cube of plastic. "My identification." The alien looked down at it. "Torm Lindsay, Human Embas—" the cube abruptly disappeared. Torm stared at his empty fingers in some surprise.

THE ALIEN unexpectedly produced another pair of eyes from the wrinkles above the first pair. These four now surveyed Torm Lindsay with interest, then closed, one at a time, almost in cadence, from left to right, from top to bottom. Apparently blind, the alien turned and walked unerringly toward a small booth inside the doorway. Torm followed.

The door to the booth opened; the alien stepped inside, the door closed. Torm waited. After a few minutes he knocked.

The door opened. The booth was empty.

"Hmmm?" Torm stepped inside the booth himself.

Behind him the door closed. In the opposite side of the booth, another door opened. Torm stepped out and found that he was no longer in the lobby of the tall building. He was possibly on the top of it—at any rate, in some large, open area with what seemed to be a curtain of white light shimmering by itself off at some distance from him.

The many-jointed alien was not in sight; but nearby was what appeared to be an over-size Gila monster, or something very like it, with a bushy black whiskers. The whiskers were just now in the process of being retracted; as Lindsay watched, the alien split down the back.

A second later, the essential creature began to struggle out through the crack, leaving the heavy, discarded skin behind.

"Need a hand?" asked Torm politely.

The alien did not answer. It was almost completely out of the old skin now, revealing a pink, semi-transparent new skin through which an assortment of organs could be seen dimly in palpitant motion.

"My congratulations", said Torm. "And now I wonder if you could direct me..." the alien abruptly disappeared. A moment later the old skin disappeared also.

"Ah, well," said Torm, philosophically, "it takes all kinds." He looked about him and saw at some distance away the shimmering wall of luminescence. A number of aliens of all descriptions seemed to be coming and going from it.

"When in doubt," Torm Lindsay advised himself, "follow the crowd." He commenced to stroll off in the direction of the shimmering wall.

THE WALK to it was uneventful. Occasionally, he had to sidestep to avoid aliens of various shapes and sizes who appeared in his path. He was almost trapped once, and was forced to detour, by a large hole that appeared before him for no apparent reason, and then as suddenly closed up again. And he stopped to watch what appeared to be a couple of twelve-foot grasshoppers fighting. It was a close match for a couple of minutes; then one of the grasshoppers got the head of the other between his enormous, bony jaws, and crushed it.

"The winnah, and new champeen!" applauded Torm. The winnah, however, like so many winnahs, appeared to have let success go to his head. For he ignored Lindsay and stalked off into the distance with a lordly air. The loser, as might have been expected, disappeared.

Torm shook his head and continued on. As he approached the wall of luminescence, he discovered that it was not a solid unit—as it had seemed to be from a distance—but a long line of glowing capsules of light, in continuous movement from left to right. Every so often, one of the aliens standing in front of it would plunge forward into an empty capsule; the alien would then be carried off, fading as he went, until by the time the capsule he had

entered had covered a dozen feet or so, it was once more empty. Occasionally, other aliens would appear in an otherwise-empty capsule, ride along for a short distance until they had acquired full solidity of definition; and then pop out onto the floor. It was a busy scene.

"Eureka?" said Torm. "It doesn't look like an ordinary transport system. Still..."

Talking it over with himself, he stepped up to the line of capsules. A good share of them he saw, were filled by aliens either dissolving or resolving. Occasionally there was an empty, however. He finally spotted one coming along between a capsule holding something that looked like a small, leafless bush, and another containing a sort of tuskless walrus.

"Heigh-ho, and here we go."

The capsule slid opposite.

"To the governing center of the planet, driver," said Torm, stepping into it. "And don't spare the..."

The lights went out.

TORM LINDSAY was having a dream. He was dreaming that he was his own ancestor back on the border marches between Scotland and England. Appropriately dressed in kilt and broadsword, he was arguing with the Earl Douglas. His Scots accent was impeccable.

"Douglas," he was saying.

"I gi' ye fair warning. Dinna let yersel be cozened into gae-in' tae Bannockburn. Yon Percy hae a lean and hungry look."

"Hoot, awa wi' ye, Lindsay!" The Douglas retorted. "Wi'sic as yersel' and Montgomery beside me, there's nae danger. Danger! Hoot, Hoot! Hoooooot! Hooooooo..."

Torm blinked his eyes open and sat up shakily. A few feet in front of him, the walrus-shaped alien was doing push-ups on his front flippers and hooting distressfully. As Torm Lindsay sat up, the other sank down, closed his eyes as if exhausted, and became silent.

Torm shook his head—in gingerly fashion. It had been a trifle sore to begin with; now, it had picked up a pounding ache. Moreover, to top it all off, he had the dirty, ragged-nerved feeling that follows on a case of severe shock; and he was most outrageously thirsty.

HE LOOKED around in search of something drinkable. There was no such something in sight. In fact, little less than what he saw could have been in sight. Besides himself and the walrus-shaped alien, (which Torm, in his own mind, nicknamed "the monster") there was to be seen only the plant-shaped alien that had occupied the adjoining bubble of light on

Torm's other side; and some evidently damaged contrivance of metal lying sprawled about. Elsewhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing—nothing at all except a dead and level plain of sand. A blinding double sun burnt brightly overhead.

"Well," said Torm thoughtfully. "Well!"

"Hoot!" said the monster, suddenly. "Hoot. Hoot, hoot!"

Torm looked back at the fat alien and discovered him doing push-ups again. As far as it was possible to tell about such things, he seemed to be eyeing the plant. Torm got stiffly to his feet and went over to inspect this other companion in misfortune.

Unlike Lindsay himself and the monster, the plant appeared to be either still unconscious, or else done for altogether. It lay sprawled out on the sand, looking like something weeded from a garden and thrown on a rubbish heap for burning. Torm supposed that the monster was urging him to give it some kind of aid. At least, that was the natural assumption. But how do you go about—say—giving artificial respiration to a plant?

TORM SCRATCHED his head and fell, rather than sat, down on the sand beside it to look at it. There was nothing in the way of clues about its anatomy. Generally speaking, it appeared to re-

semble a small scrawny bush, a little over a meter in height. Its limbs were leafless, short and sparse, sticking out straight from its body and ending in sharp, but delicate tips. At its base, several of what Lindsay took to be roots sprawled out limply. And just above these, at the base of the stem, there was a bulge of about the same size as a small grapefruit. Torm touched the bulge dubiously with one forefinger, in the rather forlorn hope of running into something resembling a heart-beat. But the bulge was hard and silent.

Torm went back to the monster. His knees felt shaky and he dropped onto the sand facing it.

"Well, I guess something went wrong."

"Hoot," said the monster, companionably.

"Sorry to drag you two into it."

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Look here," said Torm, "we're obviously all stuck someplace we didn't intend to be; and our friend over there doesn't seem to be in any too good shape. Now, I think the first thing we better do is work out some kind of a code for communication purposes. To start off with, if you can understand me, hoot twice."

"Hoot. Hoot!" hooted the monster.

"Fine. Marvelous. Now—is our friend over there alive?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"Is there something I can do to him?"

"Hoot. Hoot!"

"GOOD," SAID Torm, pushing himself painfully to his feet. "I'll just go get him and bring him to you..."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot—" the monster went off into a frenzy of trumpeting.

Torm paused, astonished. "Don't bring him over?"

"Hoot—"

"Leave him where he is?"

"Hoot! Hoot!"

Torm goggled at the monster. "But shouldn't we—"

"Hoot!"

"But you just said—you know," said Lindsay thoughtfully, "I'm beginning to wonder if you understand me after all."

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

"Oh, fine; that explains everything." Torm glanced over at the plant. It was beginning to stir feebly. "Wait here," he told the monster. "I'll go see if I can't make a little more sense out of him than I can out of you."

IGNORING the busy hooting that the monster set up, the minute he turned his back on it, Torm Lindsay walked over to the plant, which was making weak efforts to stand upright. He gave it a hand up; it pushed out with its roots, rocked dizzily for a moment and found its balance. Now

that it was once more animated and erect, a lot of the scrubbing of its appearance seemed to have vanished. Vibrant and alive, it marched away on its roots for a few feet, turned and marched back, looking a little like a strutting dandy out of medieval Europe.

"Well now," said Torm. "That's better. Can you understand me?"

The plant regarded him. Its top bent toward him and its limbs quivered slightly. It took a couple more steps toward him and quivered again. It came on and started to climb up his leg.

"Here!" said Torm, detaching it—the root and limb ends were a little on the sharp and thorny side. "No. Stay down." The plant was evidently anything but amenable to suggestion—it was trying to climb his leg again. "No, I say! Stay on your own—er—base."

He slapped it gently for emphasis. The plant retreated a few steps, dug its roots firmly into the sand, and began to quiver violently, as if with indignation. It occurred to Torm that possibly he was being told off.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, soothingly. "Very probably you're one of the leading lights of the Federation. The point is, how am I to know? And I don't like you climbing on me like that. Gives me a prickly feeling."

"Hoot!" put in the monster. "Another precinct heard from." Torm glanced over at the larger alien. "Now—" he turned back to the plant, "let's see if I can get into some kind of communication with you. At least one of the two of you ought to be telepathic."

THE PLANT waved a few limbs and quivered expressively.

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but I'll take it for agreement. Now..." Lindsay sat down on the sand again. He found himself a trifle dizzy, and the dizziness seemed to subside a bit when he was closer to the ground. "Here's the situation as I see it. When I stepped into that—er—bubble, it threw something or other out of kilter. And as a result we're all both lost and stranded. Right?"

"Hoot," said the monster. Torm looked over at him; but it was impossible to tell whether the fat alien was agreeing, or merely felt like hooting. Torm inclined to the latter opinion. The monster was not a particularly impressive looking being; he looked like a grounded sea-cow, and his hoot resembled the note of a querulous fog horn. Torm turned his attention back to the plant, whose continual nervous movement seemed to augur a more alert and intelligent nature.

"At any rate," he wound up, "the point is we're stuck here. And the question is—what to do about it? Any suggestions?"

The plant quivered and did a little one-two step.

"Well, don't either of you have any notion of how to get out of this fix?"

His two auditors preserved their uninformative attitudes.

"Now look," said Torm. "We can't just stay here indefinitely. For one thing, I'm thirsty; and there's no water in sight. And whatever you two eat or drink—"

The plant turned and began to move away, abruptly. It marched over to the damaged-looking Metallic contrivance and began to climb over it.

"Hey," said Torm, getting to his feet; "is this the gimmick that does the transporting?" He walked over to the 'gimmick'. The plant retired about the distance of a meter and quivered busily at him.

"I wish I knew what you were trying to tell me." Torm looked down at the gimmick again. "It makes sense, though. This is the transporter, or whatever it was. And it's been damaged." He looked at the plant. "Are you trying to tell me we can fix it?"

III

THE PLANT stamped twice with its roots, marched in a half circle around to Lindsay's flank;

as he turned to face it, the plant quivered once again. Torm looked over at the monster. "What do you think?"

The monster was lying still with its flippers limp on the sand and its eyes closed. It did not answer.

"Our friend yonder," said Torm to the plant, "doesn't seem to be mechanically inclined."

The plant turned half around, as if discovering the monster for the first time. For a second it merely quivered in the other's direction. Then, abruptly, it began to march toward the monster.

"That's right; wake him up."

The plant continued on its way, trundling along stiffly like a Napoleonic soldier on parade. When it was halfway to the monster, the latter suddenly opened his eyes. He took one look at the advancing plant; and began to hoot violently, waving its flippers. His eyes were on Lindsay.

For a moment, Torm hesitated. "This doesn't make sense," he said. But the plant continued to advance and the monster continued to hoot.

Torm shook his head, walked over and caught up with the plant, and picked it up from behind. The monster's hooting abruptly ceased. The plant craned itself around in his hands, quivered energetically, and tried to

climb his arm. It was unsuccessful.

Torm looked from it to the monster. "What's wrong between you two?"

NEITHER answered. Torm Lindsay shook his head and put the plant down. It immediately lit out once more in the direction of the monster.

"No," said Torm, going around and getting in its way. "Whatever there is between you two, we're all in this thing together and we can't afford to take picks at each other."

The plant was not convinced; it tried to go around Lindsay. Remembering a technique that had worked before, he slapped at it a couple of times, lightly. It retreated half a meter, dug itself perhaps twenty centimeters into the sand and quivered violently for a good minute.

"Consider me told off again," said Torm. The plant dropped rather limply. "You shouldn't excite yourself that way. *He...*" Lindsay glanced over at the monster, "isn't doing any harm, just lying there that way."

"Hoot," said the monster. "Of course, he isn't doing us any good either."

The monster closed his eyes and relaxed. The plant continued to droop.

"Perk up, son," Lindsay said to the plant, "and let's

get back to business. You, at least, were making yourself useful on this gimmick business. Let's go back and see what can be done about getting it working again, eh?"

THE PLANT made no response. After a minute, Torm dug the sand away from its roots, picked it up and carried it back to the gimmick. It gave a couple of half-hearted quivers on the way over.

"Cheer up," said Torm. "Nothing is impossible. Now..." he sat down and placed the plant in front of him, between himself and the apparatus. "Let's see what we have here."

The plant walked off a meter's length or so and stood still. Lindsay poked interestedly at the gimmick.

In appearance, it was so simple as to appear easily understandable. There were several plates spaced along a narrow rod, which seemed to have been twisted somewhat out of plumb. There was a long coil of fine wire, attached to the bottom plate and trailing loosely off to one side. And there was a fine, colorful little object that would have made an excellent child's marble back on Earth if it had not been for the fact that it was ellipsoidal in shape, rather than spherical.

"Hmmm." Torm lifted the long coil of wire. It draped nicely in length. "Where do you suppose this goes?"

IT WAS A good question. The coil was too long to fit between the plates—unless Torm didn't mind having a lot left over. But the loose end had an uncompleted look about it, as if it were supposed to fit somewhere.

"Hey!" Torm called, looking over at the plant. "Give me a hand, here."

The plant ignored him.

"Fine thing!" I draw one alien who spends all his time snoozing when he isn't hooting his head off; and another who's a little bundle of temperament." He reached over and poked the stem of the plant, gently. "Hey—"

The plant quivered briefly. That was all.

"Now look," said Lindsay, "what good's it going to do to you to sulk? If this thing is completely unfixable, just wave your top back and forth a couple of times. If something can be done, just move a little closer to me."

This request got him nowhere. The plant refused to stir.

"I wouldn't bother you," said Torm. "But our friend yonder seems a little too bovine to be helpful. I've got a hunch you're the one with the brains in this crowd."

He waited; but flattery, it seemed, would also get him nowhere.

"Very well," said Torm, rising. "You force me to take me made to the opposition."

He gathered up rod and plates, coil and mable; and went over to the monster. He poked it in the region where in any reasonable scheme of bodily organization, it should contain its ribs.

"Pardon me; but about this gimmick..."

The monster opened one eye, suspiciously.

"How do I fix this?" demanded Torm.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," said the monster and apparently went back to sleep.

"Much obliged. But couldn't you be a little more explicit?"

The monster lay quiescent.

"**A**H WELL." Torm Lindsay sat down and resigned himself to fiddling with the apparatus alone. He tried wrapping the coil around the rod; he tried attaching it to the various plates; he searched for some evidence of a broken connection point. He picked up the marble and examined it.

"You wouldn't know this," he said confidentially to the motionless and silent monster, "but I'm supposed to be rather good at intuitive reasoning, according to the aptitude tests. Even with good intuitive reasoning, however—" he caught sight suddenly of the plant which was working around in a wide arc so as to come up behind the monster. He put the equipment down, struggled to his feet, and

walked wearily over to confront the plant.

It stopped. "Son," said Torm, "this is unworthy of you."

The plant quivered.

"I know. He's probably one of your own trail herd; or maybe he broke out of the pasture once and ate your uncle Otto by mistake. But I've already told you I can't take chances on one of you doing something to the other. I'm just about positive I'm responsible for this situation we're in; and if I don't get both of you back in top shape, I can just imagine what kind of reaction I'll get from the authorities—w h o e v e r they happen to be. Now, will you go back a reasonable distance and sit down?"

THE PLANT took half a step toward him.

"All right," said Lindsay, "you asked for it." He looked around for some way of immobilizing the plant, without hurting it. With the exception of the monster and the equipment nothing presented itself as providing a possible restraint. Finally, an idea occurred to him. He took off his one-piece suit of embassy black, and tied a leg of it around the plant's stem just above the bulge.

"There," said Torm. The plant swayed and struggled against the weight of the suit. Dragging on the ground, the tangle of cloth made an effee-

tive hobble. Torm went over and got the equipment. He brought it back and sat down on one arm of the suit to work on it. The plant was neatly tethered. It quivered violently at Lindsay.

"Fortunes of war," said Torm, and got back to work.

It was a little hard to concentrate, he found. His headache was getting worse, and the desert seemed to shimmer and dance in the distance. When he tried to focus down on the metallic objects in his hands, these too seemed to waver and bend out of focus. It occurred to him, somewhat belatedly, that the contents of the capsule the Representative had given him to pop with his thumbnail, while "good as a spacesuit" might be somewhat lacking in protective qualities where the possibility of sunstroke was concerned. He looked over at the plant, which had dug itself into the sand and was, apparently, sulking again.

"You should grow some shade leaves," he told it.

The plant, however, showed no signs of obliging; and Torm Lindsay went back to fiddling with the coil of wire. He tried it in every way he could think of—without success; wadded up, wound around the rod, festooned from the plates. No results.

HE TURNED his attention to the marble again. He tried it against both ends of

the rod and against all of the plates, unsuccessfully. His eyes were seeing dots by this time; and he stopped to rest.

He would probably not make it, he thought. In a little while, he would pass out from sunstroke; the plant would get free and eat the monster—or vice-versa, which was more likely. The survivor would keel over in due time; and eventually sometime in the galactic future, a passer-by would find them all, three bleached skeletons, in the sand. *Alas, poor Lindsay, I knew him well.* . .

Torm squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head to clear it and opened his eyes again. *Concentrate*, he told himself.

"Hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot, hoot," hooted the monster, suddenly waking up and doing an energetic series of pushups.

"And a happy New Year to you," said Torm, looking over at him. He picked up the equipment and bent once more to his task.

Sometime later, quite by accident, he got his first break. He was twisting the coil around aimlessly, and without any great enthusiasm, when it suddenly clung to the rod, as if a sort of magnetic force and abruptly asserted itself. Torm rubbed his eyes; and looked at it. Through the swimming dots, he made out that he had looped the coil in an arc; and the middle of it was apparently glued to the

top tip of the rod, while the far end had caught and frozen itself tight to the near end, where it fastened to the rod's base. The whole thing now looked something like a directional antenna.

"Hey!" said Torm, pleased. He set the contraption upright on the sand and stared at it.

"Let's see now; suppose it is directional. Suppose it taps some kind of channel of power; and then when you think of where you want to go—" Torm Lindsay closed his eyes and thought devoutly of the spot he had last seen back on Arcturus V.

He opened his eyes again. The desert still surrounded them.

UNDISCOURAGED, he kept his eyes closed, thought of the Arcturian station, and carefully rotated the device in a circle, on the sand.

No results.

He tried rotating it vertically.

No results.

He pondered the situation somewhat woozily for a few seconds; and then remembered that he'd forgotten the marble. He hunted for it among the sand and swimming dots before him and finally found it.

"All right, little marble," he told it. "Where do you go?"

Shakily, but methodically, he set out at the top end of the rod, and commenced to run the marble over every pos-

sible inch of the apparatus. He progressed down the rod, and over the three plates, with no success. However, the moment he touched the wire coil where the two ends joined together against the rod, the marble stuck.

"Hallelujah!" Torm bent down to take a closer look at the marble and found to his surprise that it was not merely sticking to the wire; in some mysterious fashion, it had melted around the wire so that it was now strung on it like a bead on a string. Torm poked it with his finger. It slid freely on the wire.

"Well, whither now?" Torm slid the marble around the coils, moving it up along the rod. At the very tip, the marble froze, making it seemed, a connection between the tip of the rod and the wire.

"What a clever little old diplomat you are, to be sure," said Torm, admiringly. "Sub-spatial transporters repaired, rebuilt..." The sentence trailed off, uncompleted. He became conscious of the fact that the effort involved in finishing it was not worth the trouble. He swayed a little, where he sat on the sand. It was taking most of his strength now just to remain upright. In fact, thought Torm, looking affectionately at the inviting bed of sand stretching off to the horizon, why stay upright, anyhow? A little nap...

A SLIGHT tugging sensation brought him back for a moment to his full senses. With a great effort, he turned his head to look behind him—and stared blankly for a moment at the sight of his suit lying still and empty upon the sand. For a moment, he gazed at it stupidly; then he remembered what it should, instead, have been occupied with.

He swiveled his head toward the monster. Sure enough. There was the plant, loose from the suit, already well on its way toward the rotund alien.

"Hey!" cried Torm, in a cracked voice. The plant paid no attention. Lindsay made a spasmodic effort to get to his feet and found that his legs were like strips of unbaked dough, with neither substance nor muscle to them. The plant marched on.

"Wait—wait—" mumbled Torm. Gazing around, his eye fell on the apparatus. Dizzily he fumbled for it.

"Now—" he said. "Got to—" He made a mighty effort with his mind. "Station—"

Nothing happened. He fumbled with it.

"Got to work—" he muttered. "Push? Pull? Something—button to push? Button—" through waves of dizziness and swimming specks, and the nightmare marching of the plant bearing down on the silent monster, his atten-

tion was caught by the glitter of the marble.

"Button—" he mumbled; and, sliding his hand up the length of the rod, touched, marble, wire and rod, all at once.

There was a sort of colorless flash; and a black wave rose up over Tom Lindsay and swallowed him entirely.

IV

THIS TIME, he was very cautious about opening his eyes.

He lifted his right lid no more than a fraction of an inch and peered carefully through the tiny aperture. He saw a portion of white ceiling and the face of Selagh. Relieved, he opened both eyes.

Not only Selagh, but Ambassador Coran, Admiral Natek, and the Alien Representative were standing looking down at him. He was lying in the same recovery room where it had all started.

"Uh...hello," he said.

"Hello, Torm," said the Representative.

Torm Lindsay decided to sit up. He swung his legs over the edge of the narrow couch-like affair he was lying on and pushed himself up with his hands. Selagh hurried to help him. He was back in his suit, he noticed with some relief; and the medician that he had first talked with was hovering in the background. Ambassador Coran noticed the direction of Torm's gaze.

"You can go now, Hartlye," he said. With an air of something very like relief, the medician nodded, went across to the door and slipped out, closing it behind him. Coran turned back to Torm. "How do you feel?"

"Rocky," answered Torm. His head had come to life when he sat up; and now it seemed to be full of shooting pains.

"Anesthetics all out?" asked Coran, looking over at Selagh.

"Yes sir."

"WELL, THEN," said the Ambassador, turning to the Representative, "I think we've proved our point. Lindsay has certainly returned unharmed; and since you were watching his progress on that screen of yours along with the rest of us, you must admit that he behaved successfully in his contacts with other members of your Federation."

"Perhaps, Mr. Coran, perhaps," replied the Alien. "But you may have settled one point of objection only to another. Torm was operated on by your people before being turned loose. Suppose you explain that operation to me."

Coran nodded at Selagh. "Commandress..."

"A refinement of the old operation of prefrontal lobotomy," said Selagh.

"I don't understand,"

"On our home planet, back

in the days when psychiatry was young," explained Selagh, "it was found possible to relieve cases of chronic tension, by, in essence, cutting off a certain portion of the brain from its normal connection with the rest of it. The tension would be relieved. Unfortunately, the patient normally suffered a loss of will power at the same time. He would start eating, say, and keep at it until the food was all gone, or someone stopped him. Or he might start doing something like chopping wood; and once started, keep at it until he was ordered to stop."

"Go on," said the Representative.

"WELL, OVER the years, the technique was improved. The last innovation was a development of my own—the basis of my surgical thesis, in fact. What we did on Torm Lindsay was what you might call a selective topectomy, except that instead of cutting, we merely anesthetised to block off certain parts of his brain. When we finished, we hoped that we'd made him emotionally immune—that is, incapable of reacting emotionally to outside stimuli."

"I see," said the Representative, thoughtfully. He turned back to the cot. "You know about this, Torm?"

"Yes," said Lindsay, as cheerfully as he could with

invisible little men probing through his head with white-hot needles. "I volunteered."

"And how did you feel—after the operation?"

"Oh...fine, I guess. Good. Yes, I felt good."

"I see," said the Representative

"Well?" demanded Coran. "You claim we humans aren't ready yet for contact with the rest of the races in your Federation. You offer to let us prove this to ourselves by sending a man out. You say that he will find contact psychologically unacceptable." He waved a hand at Lindsay. "Here's our answer."

THE ALIEN looked at him. "My dear Ambassador, you insist on misunderstanding my objection to allowing your people to join our group of races. It is not that you are a young people, or a primitive people, for those are minor points. It is simply that you must be able to rise above all barriers of mistrust and prejudice. Now, just recently, Torm here did very well. He was not shocked by a being with double the number of eyes he had himself, and a different skeleton, nor by the sight of alien viscera in the case of the being changing his skin. He made no attempt to judge between the two members of the same race which he saw fight until one was killed at the transport center. But that was the result of

your operation. While now..."

He turned abruptly, and put an impossibly fragile hand on Lindsay's shoulder, at the same time bringing his inhumanly still face up against Torm's. In spite of himself, Torm started, and shrunk back slightly.

"You see?" said the Alien, sadly, letting go. "Prejudice. Fear, suspicion, and disgust toward the strange and unfamiliar."

"I—" began Torm, miserably.

"Never mind," said the Representative. "Don't feel that you have to apologize. I was merely proving a point where your race as a whole is concerned. I do not blame you for your fault, but you must see why it bars you from acceptance by the rest of us."

"But why isn't Torm's operation the answer?" asked Coran.

"BECAUSE," sighed the Representative, "your cure is more crippling than your disease. It is no solution to stop a man scratching his nose by cutting off his nose. In the case of Lindsay, you rendered him immune to emotional upset over something he might see or hear, or experience. But the moral sense in all beings is based upon emotion; by removing emotion, you destroyed this, too. You created, in fact, a psychopathic personality.

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

"I grant you he did not immediately act like one, but that was because his habit patterns reacted for him out of sheer momentum. Given time, he would have behaved very badly, indeed. He would have become a danger to any community. You remember I noticed something odd about him, when he came in to meet us before leaving. His actions and his speech—even then—showed evidence of a complete non-morality, and a complete unconcern for others." His glance singled out Selagh. "You," he said. "You noticed it."

Selagh blushed, and nodded.

"So you see," wound up the Representative, "by rendering yourself acceptable in one sense, you immediately render yourself unacceptable in another. In the galaxy, no race may judge another; but also no race may harm another. It is live and let live with a vengeance. If it had occurred to Torm to do damage to another individual, or to any thing, there would have been nothing within him to hold him back."

He looked around the room at the unhappy faces of the humans.

"Now wait," said Torm, suddenly. "Wait a minute—"

The Representative turned to him.

"If I'm so non-moral," he said, "why was it that I had

to be the one to keep the plant and monster from each other? They certainly weren't living and let living!"

HE STARED demandingly at the Alien. He did not notice the looks of slight embarrassment on the faces of the other humans.

"Now, Torm," said Ambassador Coran, clearing his throat, "you jumped to the wrong conclusion about those two."

Torm Lindsay stared at him in surprise.

"Wrong conclusion?"

"My dear Torm," said the Representative. "The gadget was not what you thought it was. The monster was not—what you thought he was—but a rather nice old gentleman taking a botanical specimen home to his private laboratory."

"Specimen—oh," said Torm. "You mean, the plant—"

"Exactly," said the Alien.

"But—but—"

"Yes, Torm?"

"But look here. How did it happen he was so helpless and frightened of the plant? Why did it have to be me who fixed the gimmick and got us home?"

"But you didn't," replied the Representative. "You were picked up by a transport rescue crew, summoned by me, when we saw on our viewer what had happened; and also by the old gentleman, himself, who sent out a men-

tal call the moment he discovered what had happened to the three of you."

"But the gimmick?"

"IT HAD NOTHING to do with the mechanisms of transport, Torm. It was a device for restraining the plant." He shook his head at Lindsay's puzzled face. "The plant," he explained, "requires moisture to live. On its native planet, it gets it by sucking the juices from other flora and fauna native to the place. Because it's actually rather a weak, slow-moving creature, it has developed a weapon. It is capable of broadcasting a rather limited mental stimulus that induces a paralyzing fear in its victims. The gimmick inhibited this capacity in it and kept it immobilized by a counter field. The gimmick was set up in a center capsule to keep the plant under control; and it was that capsule you stepped into with conflicting directions of destination, just as the unit of three capsules was about to discharge for the old gentleman's home planet."

"I see," said Torm. There was a short silence. "But why didn't the plant affect me?"

The alien chuckled. It was an odd sound to hear coming from his still face.

"How could it?" he answered. "You were anesthetized. Remember?" He chuckled again. "The plant has relatively little intelli-

gence; but what it has must have been rather sorely tried by the way you reacted to its best attempts to immobilize you. You do deserve congratulations for putting the restraint back together though. It protected the old gentleman until the rescue squad arrived."

"Thanks," said Torm.

"Don't be bitter," replied the Alien, kindly. "You did the best you could under the circumstances, and it turned out to be very good indeed, even if you were acting on false premises."

OFF TO ONE side, Ambassador Coran cleared his throat.

"All this..."

"Yes," the Representative turned toward him with regret in his voice. "All this is beside the point. The situation stands that you cannot be accepted into the Federation of Peoples, for the reasons I have given you. You are still too rigid, too bound with prejudice; and Torm's operation is not an acceptable way of mending that fault. You must be all that you are normally; and, in addition, be free of the tendency to judge from your own small basis of experience."

"I must again request," said Coran, stiffly, "that we be allowed to take this matter to higher authorities."

"There are no higher authorities," replied the Alien.

"From the day when your interstellar ship first entered this system, from the day of my first meeting with your people, you have been unable to accept the fact that I am literally what I call myself. I represent the Federation. I speak not for myself, but for every member of every race included in it. Believe me, if you could question each one individually, he would say only what I say."

"I feel I must doubt that," said Coran.

The Representative sighed. "This embassy building is yours. Free passage to this world, and to this spot, is yours. But the rest of the Federation is closed to you. You will not be allowed in any of its solar systems, or on any of its worlds. If you approach them, you will be turned back." He looked about at them. "But don't give up hope. Don't be discouraged. This fault is one that time will inevitably mend; and the scale is larger out here in the galaxy. What are ten, fifty, a hundred thousand years, if they have to be?"

"We can't stand still, cried Coran, desperately. "It isn't in us. We aren't built to stand still."

"I am sorry."

THE REPRESENTATIVE was turning and going away toward the door, his strange form oddly pyramidal under the robe he wore. Torm

Lindsay felt a choking sensation in his throat, as if from something huge and desperate, clawing to get out. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Frantically, he tried again. "Wait..."

The Representative, almost to the door, paused and turned.

"Wait," said Torm, chokingly. "Listen..."

"I am listening."

"We aren't all prejudiced. We aren't all like this. What would you say if we produced some people with an open mind? I mean—open completely?"

"Torm," said the Alien, softly. "You don't understand. They must be without a single prejudgement; and yet unspoiled. And none of you are like that."

"But that's just it!" Torm cast a frantic look around at his fellow humans. "We're all alike here. But I noticed something. It was the way I felt, after the operation; I couldn't put my finger on it until just now. You see, it wasn't the first time I'd felt that way—and for a while I couldn't remember when."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Coran, harshly.

"WHAT I REMEMBERED," said Torm. "I remembered that once I was free and unbound. Once I could look at anything new and accept it, and take it for

granted as being just what it seemed to be and nothing else. You see? You understand?"

"No," said Coran.

"I see," said the Alien. "And I should have seen before. But there is something about you people that is different from all we others. You would say your answer lies in the untouched minds of your children."

"Is that it? Am I right?"

"Perhaps..." In the Alien eyes of the Representative, it seemed that a distant fire dimmed as something in him went away, and far far away, until nothing but the shell of a being stood before them. For a moment it stood, unguess-

able, and unknowable, facing them; and then slowly, gradually, he began to come back. The light kindled again, and the Representative was once more with them.

"Yes," he said. "It will be a long road for them and a hard one. And you will have to let them travel it alone and apart from you. But I think you have found your answer."

His eyes moved from Torm and took them all in. And they stood, the four humans and the one inhuman; caught then in a single crystal moment of a hope of peace and final brotherhood, and dream of greatness, future, everlasting....

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THE LONELY STARS



by Scott Nichols

"When your own race finally looks outward, you'll find how lonely it is to live in an endless desert."

YEARS LATER, as he tiredly circled the two thousandth lifeless world, saffron-washed by the thousandth yellow sun, Arnold Brin could still remember her vividly. She was a thing of golden mist, drifting with a strange grace across the meadow, the rising sun turning her wind-swept hair into glowing metal threads.

It seemed that the universe was filled with yellow suns, he thought, watching the endless sweep of textured ~~and~~ below, each waiting for the single thing that gave it meaning: a world of life to shatter the sterile silence.

"Had we not found you," she had said those years ago, "you might have searched for us for centuries."

"We would have searched," he remembered answering. "Man couldn't have remained alone forever."

Alone! The word had the sound of echoing corridors. "To be lonely is like a star," his sister's small son had said, when the boy's teacher asked him to define the word.

How strange, Brin

thought, and yet how natural that a small child, looking for a way to express his feeling for the word, should have defined it in terms of this fundamental longing of the race.

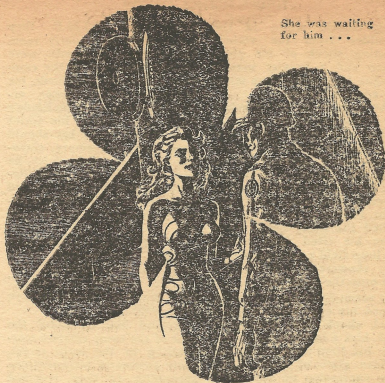
And that longing had sent an endless stream of ships out among the stars to search for one yellow sun, one golden world, one race of beings... lost in the endless night...

To circle the single world of the yellow star had taken a bare hour; to check the radiation and spectrum plots another ten minutes. In the end he ran the spore and bacteria counts from the atmosphere-sample collected by a low-flying drone torpedo he had dispatched earlier.

Then he sat, crowding the disappointment into a tiny corner of his mind, feeling very tired and trying not to think of the time when he and the countless other searchers throughout the galaxy had not been the seekers, but the sought-and-found.

When, for a scarce instant the 'Avanu and men had met; and 'Elyen had come from the great ship onto the green

She was waiting
for him . . .



meadow in a shining haze of golden motion...

FIRST LIEUTENANT BRIN had already returned to the Bachelor Officers' Quarters when Division Headquarters called his company to signal a yellow alert for Emergency Plan White. His battalion had jumped that day under full combat equipment, in spite of a heavy wind. The Corps G-3 had designated Bougainville Drop

Zone for the operation, forgetting the tall stands of pine ringing the area. Brin supervised the evacuation of their three bad Parachute Landing Fall casualties; completed a field inventory with his supply officer of the scattered major equipment from the heavy drop that had preceded their bailout; held a field muster of the company, and entrucked them for the main. By the time that was done, he had become aware of a nag-

ging muscle strain in the shoulder from the violent opening shock of his parachute and a heavier muscle fatigue from three days without adequate sleep.

As soon as he had checked the Battalion Daily Bulletin, and signed three supply requisitions he gave First Sergeant Dowd instructions to have the Charge of Quarters call him thirty minutes before reveille the next morning. Brin returned to the BOQ, pulled the dusty jump boots from his tired feet, kicked his limp field pants into a corner, showered, and literally fell onto the field cot.

It seemed that he had barely closed his eyes when a thick hand shook him awake. It took him a moment to recognize his first Sergeant in the sudden glare of harsh light. The expression on the man's face drove the haze of sleep from his eyes in a second.

"What's wrong?" he asked, throwing his feet to the cold floor.

"They're not kidding this time," Dowd said. "It's a yellow alert and they mean it."

"Bombers?"

He began to dress rapidly.

"Who knows? Battalion trucks are due in the company area in twenty minutes."

"They're crazy. Those men can't jump; they're dead on their feet," Brin muttered, buckling his web belt.

"Battalion said twenty minutes."

BY THE TIME they reached his orderly room the platoon sergeants were forming the men in the company street. Mr. MacBlade, his Company Administrator, arrived seconds later. McBlade's right lapel, where his Chief Warrant Officer's bar should have been, was empty, showing the haste with which he had dressed. His graphite-grey hair was showing tangled and uncombed under his visored, stiffly-blocked field cap.

"I can't find Lieutenants Gorm or Dale," he said. "They must have gone into town."

"Get yourself a helmet," Brin told him. "You'll have to jump with us."

Behind him he heard the roar of the troop carriers marshalling in the main street, their automatic transmissions screaming as they reversed themselves and backed into the curb for loading.

"Move the men out," he told Sergeant Dowd, as the tail gates of the trucks fell with a rattle of chains.

Major Lawson, the Division G-3, was waiting for them at the field.

"Listen," he told Brin, "the drop area is twenty minutes away. Low altitude. The pilot will show you the field. You're to throw a skirmish line around the field and hold it until we can bring in planes for a heavy equipment drop. Corps will have a 240 mm recoilless howitzer dropped a

mile south within the hour. She'll be ready to drop big stuff on your position ten minutes later."

"Big stuff," he said. "You mean atomic?"

"Mister," the major said. "We're pouring everything we can on that Kentucky bluegrass meadow. An hour ago, a rocket landed there. Washington says it intersected the transatlantic T.V. beam that bounces from the moon."

"A space ship?"

"Exactly. The whole eastern seaboard is arming to the teeth. What worries me is that maybe our best won't be enough."

A NIGHT jump without a moon is frightening—falling into blackness, with heavy pressure of the ground a solid thing as you fall. A low altitude jump under such conditions is worse. You can't see the ground until the last few feet and then it's often too late to take a stiff-leg roll on the PLF. A bad Parachute Landing Fall under those conditions can splinter a leg before the jumper can compensate for his misjudgement. Fortunately, a skeleton reserve company had arrived minutes earlier, from nearby Louisville, and had lighted five bonfires to mark the area.

In spite of the darkness and the fatigue of the men, the bonfires brought them in safely; when Sgt. Dowd held his muster, Brin was pleased to find only one casualty, a

Walbrook gunner. He had lost his automatic rifle in the jump, however, which left them with only eight.

He called his platoon NCO's together, listened while the reserve lieutenant, whose men had lighted the fires, briefed them and then gave orders to the non-coms on posting their men and weapons.

It was only then that he was able to look out, over the dark meadow, to the mass occulting the stars and faint glow of the horizon.

It was only then that the full exciting impact of what he was seeing burst upon him.

A ship from space...from the stars. The thought brought a throbbing knot to his throat and it was suddenly painful to swallow.

THE MEADOWLAND upon which the ship had landed stretched out for a rolling mile, the reserve lieutenant had told him. The ship looked massive from what he could judge at a distance; it was from a hundred to a hundred-and-fifty feet tall, he estimated—a vague white shape that loomed powerfully against the night sky, at perhaps a quarter of a mile.

How, he wondered, could they hope to throw more than a series of outposts around such an area, with the bare hundred and eighteen men he had?

"What kind of bugs do you think they are in that thing,"

Mr. McBlade's voice said behind him.

The sudden sound made Brin's hand dart automatically to the service automatic at his hip. In the dark, he smiled unseen at his fright. "Bugs? Why do they have to be bugs?"

"You can't tell me men built that thing," the Warrant Officer said drily.

"Not any man of earth," Brin agreed.

"Whatever they look like, it's ten to one you'll want to get drunk after seeing one. That is—if you or any of us lives long enough to get back to a bar."

BRIN STARTED to say something, then thought better of it. He shrugged, wondering what twist in the minds of most men caused them to hate and fear the strange.

He thought of the brilliant yellow and black spiders in his aunt's garden when he was a kid. He had known that they were harmless. One summer he had found one near the decaying board fence that set off the rear yard; its graceful web stretched between a hollyhock and a rose trestle, gleaming with the diamond glints of morning dew. When he hadn't come to breakfast, his aunt had found him sitting directly under the web, watching the golden creature build its fabric higher and higher, like a cloud, from the juices of its

own body. His aunt had pulled him bodily from the spot and attacked the jeweled web with a broom. He still remembered the way the green juices glittered on her undersole after she lifted her foot from the crushed thing that had been so beautiful to him.

"No," he said, "whoever or whatever they are, I don't think we have to worry. They wouldn't have landed this way if they meant trouble. They'd have come in shooting."

"We've just tied into Corps and Division Command Radio Net. Try and convince *them* of that," MacBlade snorted.

Brin felt a flash of annoyance for a moment. Like most enlisted men who had gained their warrant late in their Army career, MacBlade always spoke to officers with a faint undercurrent of impatience and contempt in his voice.

"What about Corps?" Brin asked.

"Corps C. P. is back in Louisville. Division Command Post is fifteen miles to our rear. No other troops are to come nearer than five miles. That's in case they have to drop a big one in. Which means we're the patsies if your aliens turn out to have tentacles and 'fight' in their bug eyes."

You had to play it safe, Brin admitted but... "I hope Division Artillery doesn't get itchy lanyard fingers," he said.

MORNING brought a faint glow in the east and a dis-

tant rustling of conversation. He pulled out of his field bed-roll and looked across the meadow. There were scattered groups of civilians, ringing the area. For a moment he swore silently; then he yelled for Sergeant Dowd.

"Where in hell did they come from," he demanded.

"They started showing up about an hour ago. Most of them drove in from Louisville."

"How the blazes did they get past Division's road-blocks?"

"Division only blocked the main highways. That reserve lieutenant told me there's a whole web of dirt roads to the north and west." He gestured over his shoulder.

"Didn't want to wake you. I gave our boys orders to keep 'em herded back. Told the boys to get a little rough if necessary. Crazy flatheads think they're at a picnic."

By the time it was light enough to make out the details of the spaceship, the crowd of civilians was an unbroken line hemming the north extension of his lines. Brian turned and, for a moment felt the sudden tightness of his throat again. Every time he looked at the great gleaming ship, he felt excitement. He had borrowed an M-3 compass from one of the gunners and shot a vertical azimuth to the tip of the ship. By juggling his angles

a bit and doing some pencil calculation on the canvas leg of his field trousers, he found that the ship was nearly a hundred and thirty feet tall.

IT WAS A single, seamless I-vaned needle shape, with the exception of four circular ports near the tip and a gleaming insignia halfway down the body that looked like green anodized aluminum. The insignia was shaped like the petals of a four-leafed clover without the stem. For some reason the sign made him smile. Maybe the four-leafed clover didn't mean to the aliens what it meant to men; but if men had built the ship, they might well have graced it with something half-humorously symbolic, such as that. Peculiarly enough, the idea was comforting. Perhaps the aliens in the ship knew men well enough to use just such a device in an attempt to reassure them.

The civilians were beginning to give his men trouble, and Brian started toward the restless line of people. Mac-Blade fell in beside him.

"Div Arty says they got a geodetic survey map of this area and have the ship surveyed in. Give 'em the word and they start dropping stuff. High Explosive first, to give us a chance to get out. Then a big one, twenty K. T."

"Twenty thousands tons of T.N.T.? That's a firecracker."

"Oh, they got a B-60 in the

air with a granddady, if they need it. Coupla hundred megaton type."

"O.K.," Brin said. "I want you by that radio. Give the order if you have to, but don't do anything wild."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant," Mac-Blade replied with a faint touch of insolence, and turned away before Brin could say anything.

HE WALKED over to the line of civilians and yelled, "All right, listen to me."

They were all talking at once. Damned fools; some of them had even brought their kids along.

He unholstered his .45 and fired twice into the air. In the sudden silence, he yelled, "If you've got any sense, you'll go home. There's liable to be artillery dropping in here soon."

"Ah, Cap'n," a slurred voice yelled from his left, "we wanna see the monsters."

"Damn it," he yelled, "you get in the way of my men and I'll bring tear gas in here."

A young man near at hand yelled, "Forty eight..."

Others who could be former army men took up the chant, "Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty..."

"Hurray for the soldier boy," a woman yelled and they all began to yell, drowning out even the last of the vulgar Army chant the young man had started.

In that instant, it were as if someone had pulled a switch. Like a wave, deadening silence flowed over the crowd; it seemed as if the mass of people were breathing in perfect unison.

He saw one of the riflemen near him staring toward the ship, his carbine pressed into his hip alertly as he half-crouched. Brin turned his momentary sweeping glance, saw all his men freezing into menacing positions. Then he saw that a hatch had opened near the base of one of the spaceship's airfoils; a small platform moved silently down the side of the needleshape. Before it disappeared between the tripod extensions upon which the ship rested, he saw a black shape on its surface. He watched the hatch disappear as though it had melted into the metal.

This is it, he thought. *Oh, Lord, this is it*, and he felt his hand straying toward the newly-holstered automatic.

He saw a shape moving under the ship then, but the morning shadows blotted out all details.

HE GLANCED up and down his side of the meadow, seeing his automatic rifle crews flattened behind their weapons, the arming bolts at full load... waiting.

He turned back, watching the approaching figure. The far end of the crowd nearest the ship suddenly broke its

calm and he heard a shrill rebel yell.

He saw one of the automatic gun crews jump from behind their weapon and begin to pound each other on the back. Then he turned and looked again. Recognition came with the force of an electric shock.

For a moment he forgot the people around him. The sudden change from silence to confused noise behind him didn't register. For an instant, emotion held him paralyzed.

The feeling washed over him like scented air. The feeling of wanting, needing, and final realization. A part of his mind sneered at the fears of MacBlade, for here was the complete realization of the impossible desire for completion that every man had ever felt.

She was like a mist floating toward him, something so completely unmortal that, for an instant, the distant childhood awe of things beautiful and unreal seized him.

THE MORNING sun glinted in her hair, turning it into yellow metal. He knew her limbs were moving, that she was walking, but no such prosaic explanation could explain the supernal grace with which she moved.

Near at hand, some of his men were throwing down their weapons without thought. He saw golden skin

with ochre shadows the youthful hollows of the throat, between slender cords that rippled as she turned her head. He saw impossibly smooth skin with the faint ripple of light muscles as she walked. The incongruity of her abbreviated costume flitted through his mind and was discarded.

Then, as he heard the swelling sound of the crowd behind him, he was suddenly aware of what was happening. "Sergeant Dowd," he yelled. "Get your men under control."

The First Sergeant seemed to start visibly.

"Move these damned civilians back. Use your rifle butts if you have to."

"Yes, sir," Dowd said without enthusiasm. He began to yell commands at the men, trying to snap them out of the spell.

The golden woman paused, looking at Brin with wide eyes. He started toward her as Dowd and his men began to move in on the crowd.

"No..." the voice was organ music, deep and vibrant but very feminine. He could scarcely see her lips move.

"No," she said, "don't force them; I'll return to the ship."

"It would be better," he said, wondering at the calm matter-of-factness of his tone, "if we could both move back toward the ship."

AN HOUR later, after the woman, whose name was 'Elyen, (*Funny, he had thought, it sounds like "Helen."*) had returned to her ship, he made his way to the gully where MacBlade had mounted his command radio and set up the company C.P. Up to that moment, he had taken the mammoth forces centered on this small piece of land for granted; but now the sheer brute power, poised to obliterate everything within the mile, weighed upon him with the oppression of a coming storm.

He could imagine the wide sighs of relief when he radioed the meeting with the girl back to Division, and they in turn transmitted it to Corps. He had still not returned completely to normal. The remembered warmth of the woman lived with him, an emotional aura, as though she radiated physical warmth like the sun.

MacBlade looked up with a grin as he came over the edge of the wash. "Why'n't you call me, Lieutenant? I missed most o' the show."

"I was busy," Brin said.

"Nice kinda business. Boy, what a piece, I hear. Man, wouldn't I like to..."

"You shut your damned mouth, Mister," Brin told him, angrily, "That's an order."

For a minute, anger flared in the Warrent Officer's eyes.

Then he twisted his lips in a humorless smile and said, "Yes, sir," stretching out the second word.

BRIN PICKED up a pad of message blanks and began to write a description of what had happened. Then he handed it to MacBlade.

"Code that and send it out. Better use verification, too. We don't want this to get out to the civilian newsmen until the brass decides."

He left the gully, walked over to the spot where he had left his bedroll, and sat down.

Now, he thought, it's out of my hands.

Would the men who were the final recipients of his message believe him, believe that there was no menace in the great ship on the meadow? Well, if they came to see the woman, they would certainly believe.

He thought of what her offer of technical and cultural exchange between the two races would mean to Earth.

They'd get along, he told himself, Earthmen and the race she called 'Avanu.

Thank God, they're not too different, he thought.

THREE MEDIUM tanks, equipped with flame-throwers, moved into the area in the afternoon. The flame-throwers had been loaded with a crude oil-water emul-

sion; and under the threat of being sprayed with high pressure jets of such a messy combination, the crowd of civilians began to disperse. Brin silently thanked the bright boy in the rear who had thought that one up.

After the second lieutenant in charge of the tank detail had reported to him, and he had assigned an area of responsibility for them, he returned to the Command Post in the gully and waited. In due course, the radio operator handed him a decoded message from General Hickman, the Corps Commander. He wasn't particularly surprised that the General had jumped command channels for the moment.

Allow no one to leave the immediate area of the ship, the message directed. Representatives of the Departments of State and Defense would arrive sometime in the morning to assess the situation. Good work out there. Period. End of Message. Hickman, MGen.; FECORCOG.

"What now?" Mac Blade asked.

"We wait," Brin said, handing him the message.

FOR THE first time in his career, Arnold Brin violated one of his own orders. As soon as it was quite dark, and most of the men not on duty had sought sleep in their bedrolls, he walked across the

meadow toward the great ship. He was not sure of what he would find, but he couldn't resist.

He paused under the great shape and peered up into the blackness of the jets, imagining the flame that could pour from them. Where had they first thrown out their fury?

Within the system or from far out? The girl hadn't told him and he hadn't thought to ask. The emotional effect of her closeness had been so great that just the thought of her brought the same quick tenseness, the...

He turned and sensed her close at hand.

"Yes," she said, in the darkness, "the rockets do give us a high velocity, but you need more than a reaction motor to bridge the distance between your world and mine."

"Your world?"

"Very far away," she said huskily. "It's a beautiful world, with a sun larger than yours, but gentler—a golden sun, rather than a fiery yellow. With even the drive it took a long time."

"If your world is so far away, why come to Earth then? Why not some nearer world?"

"OH, WE VISIT other worlds," she said. "But life is a rare thing in the universe. We've searched for centuries of your time for another race, and we have better

means of detecting such than your people. When we found your people, a decade ago..."

"A decade ago..." he said, seizing on the words. "And you've just made yourself known?"

He felt her touch on his arm.

"You must understand," she said. "There's nothing sinister in this. We wanted some other race, some partnership. When your own race finally looks outward, you'll find how lonely it is to live in an endless desert. But we had to be sure before we contacted you. We had to learn your way of thinking, how best to approach you. When we were ready, we changed the form of our ship to something you would recognize as a space vessel; we picked the good-luck symbol that the English-speaking people use, to help allay your fears. That's why only I appeared today... because we knew that my appearance would be completely disarming to a group of men."

"Others?" he asked.

"Yes, three men, two other women. They generated the empathy field that had such an emotional effect on your men."

For the first time, Brin felt sudden doubt. If these people could control emotions in that manner...

HE MUST have moved away from her for she

said, "No, please believe me; we need you, but only as fellow beings. You don't know the loneliness..."

"We... perhaps you'll regret knowing us," he said after a moment.

"We must take that chance."

"You're close enough to us so that there shouldn't be major trouble."

"We seem to be alike," she said, "but this fear of your people for the strange—the outre—I don't understand. We know instinctively that the form isn't important. There is an essential humaneness, an essential maleness or femaleness in races we might meet, that transcends form..."

He thought of the pain and fear that the colors of men's skin, of worshipping God, had brought in times past, but said nothing. In the end they talked of what the stars were like outside, the vast stretches of lifeless void.

"Had you been the one to develop the drive, without certain instrumentes, you might have searched for centuries without finding us, or any other life," she said.

And they talked of what she would give to men tomorrow, the knowledge of their star drive and knowledge of bio-chemistry that would prolong life—even the possibility of rejuvenation. Of techniques unthought of in Earth

culture, like the robots her race built—in which a man's distant mind might go searching in depths of the ocean while he still remained on land, or where that same mind might brave the crushing pressures of Jupiter.

And the new ways of thinking, the growth of both their races with this contact after years of searching by the 'Avanu.

And they stood silently for long moments, just savoring the awareness of closeness.

It was like no other experience in Arnold Brin's life, this feeling of completeness, he realized suddenly the feeling for this alien woman, growing in him.

When finally he started to go, she stopped him for an instant and said, her voice suddenly uncertain:

"I...I wanted you to know that the empathy field... Well, it was turned off this afternoon."

He was not even aware of walking the distance from the ship to where he had left his bedding.

AT TEN THE next morning the staff helicopter arrived. Brin and MacBlade watched it land, and then ran forward. Two men in business suits alighted, followed by an officer whom Brin recognized as General Hickman.

He stopped before the group and saluted.

"This is Lt. Brinn, whom I mentioned," the General said after he had returned the salute. Then he introduced Mr. Swinton of the Defense Department and Mr. Hale of State.

"Would you like a guard," Brinn asked.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Hale said.

"No point in delaying," Swinton added. "Will you lead the way, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," he said and turned toward the ship, MacBlade flanking him on the left.

THEY WALKED in silence for several minutes and then Brin halted. The girl had appeared near a tripod leg and was approaching them. As she came closer, Brinn saw that she was now wearing a loose-sleeved flowing robe of some white textured cloth.

'Elyen he thought. Helen...Helen, thy beauty is to me like those Nicean barques of old...

'Elyen... Helen who would start the race of man on the path to the stars...

Helen... Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?

"Good morning," she said, "I'm very happy to see you."

Organ music...

"The others have asked me to give you this." He saw that she was ~~carrying~~ carrying a sheaf of

papers, bound between plastic boards. She smiled shyly then. "Guests should always bring presents."

Beside Brin, MacBlade snorted faintly.

"On behalf of the President of the United States..." Hale began.

"Would it be better?" she asked, "if the leader of this party were present."

"Aren't you the only one?" Hale inquired.

"No," she said.

"We would like very much to meet him," Swinton said.

"Do you think this wise?" she asked, turning to Brin.

"Of course," he replied. "Mr. Hale represents the President."

IT WASN'T until she called out in a chopped guttural language that he felt the premonition of what was to come.

He was too stunned to speak for an instant.

Someone—he thought it was the General—screamed. Even at that detail-blurring distance, he saw enough to make him want to vomit.

MacBlade was yelling. "Oh, my God, my God," and his revolver was suddenly in his hand, its blast drowning his voice.

"No!" Elyen screamed and stepped in front of him. Bullet after bullet tugged at her robe. Brin heard the sound of

ricochets and stared at her with sudden horror.

"Get down," she yelled and fell forward, missing MacBlade and felling Brin, and the General, and the two civilians to the ground.

There was a sudden roar of sound and a wave of fading heat. He rolled over to see the great ship, streaking for the heavens.

Someone was sobbing as he rose to his feet. He looked down and saw her sitting while her body shook with the force of her grief. As they ringed her, she looked up at them. "What beasts you are," she said.

"Wait," Hale protested; "you don't understand."

"No, not until you have changed will we meet."

"You've got to come back," Swinton said.

"No," she said, her voice fading in intensity, "when my mind leaves this body, you will not see us again until you yourselves find us. When you want us badly enough to search for us, as we have searched for you, that will be the time. You have the drive and the knowledge to prolong your life. When you are ready you will find us."

She turned dulling eyes on Brin. "Remember, the essence of maleness, of femaleness no matter what form. I tried to tell you."

He could feel the horror of

what had happened closing on him.

As her body sank back limply to the green grass, he heard her say softly, "I did love you."

THE UNIVERSE was filled with yellow suns, endless sterile suns. Nowhere in the galaxy was there the sign of life. Arnold Brin sat with the limp coils of paper in his hand, the coils of paper with the jagged lines that told of failure.

Long ago, he had found a sign—a fused place on the desert planet, but the sand was radioactive.

And there had been the jagged foundations of a temporary camp on a nearer sun. All clues that might point the way.

And throughout the stars,

men of Earth search endlessly for the single golden sun, with the golden planet and the single race that had come to offer to man their hand in the loneliness of the stars.

Brin looked at the wrinkled flesh of his hand, felt the tired weight of his aging body—which might be young again if only he found them... found her.

He keyed the drive, feeling the ship surge forward in its endless search. The clues. Perhaps they had been left deliberately. He would never know until he found the golden sun.

But he had to find them.

Helen. Of the thousand ships his must find them.

Someday.

But it must be soon

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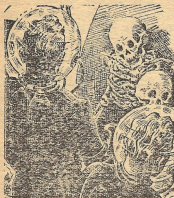
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FORCE OF MORTALITY

by Robert Silverberg

How could everyone on this planet have died, all at the same time, when they knew the secret of immortality?

KENDRICK pointed to the small brown planet out in front. "I guess that's the one. Looks harmless enough."

Arthur Quantrell consulted the chart, nodded, and slouched back into his acceleration cradle, wincing in anticipation of the bash of the jets.

As the younger man's fingers skipped over the keyboard, the ship shot into its spiral landing orbit. Quantrell felt the flabby roll of flesh around his middle sag as gravity hit him, and tried to ignore the pain.

"*I grow old...I grow old...*" he thought grimly to himself, quoting a half-forgotten ancient poem, while the ship roared down. *I'm just about ready for the boneyard.*

And that reminded him of the scout's report on the planet growing larger and larger before them. "It's boneyard," the scout had said. "A planet full of skeletons."

Quantrell considered that. The prospect of a planetary boneyard was one to look forward to, after all his fruitless surveys, all the journeys to Deneb IV and Procyon II and Rim planets and Edge planets, only to poke aimlessly at the mouldered bits and scraps of some long-forgotten civilization. He realized, sadly, that in his sixty years in Extraterrestrial Archaeology he had never uncovered anything important, never written a major book, never put forth a theory

of any consequence. And now, as he writhed with the pain of acceleration, he knew the years were catching him.

"How's it going?" Kendrick yelled back at him.

"All fine," Quantrell said, biting hard. "But I'll be glad when we put down."

"Any minute now," said Kendrick.

QUANTRELL winked, in what he hoped was a brave gesture. "*I grow old*," he thought again, and tried to recall the next line. He couldn't. Something about trousers—*I shall roll up my trousers*?... No, no, that can't be it. He looked at Steve Kendrick, lying comfortably in the acceleration cradle, his strong young body effortlessly rolling with every blow, and allowed himself a moment of painful sentimental recollection of the days when he had been as strong and as sturdy.

I'm not going to black out, he thought fiercely, remembering the last landing, when the final moment of acceleration had shot him into a humiliating faint. But as the ship glided into the small planet's atmosphere and started the last steady swerve to the ground, his grip on consciousness gradually but inexorably began to loosen.

KENDRICK was standing over him with an expression of concern on his face and a yellowed skull in his

hands. Quantrell's immediate interest was the skull. Almost as a reflex, he found himself classifying it: dolichocephalic, platyrrhine nasal structure, cranial capacity high—probably 1800 cc. Then he realized he had blacked out after all; he struggled out of the cradle, fussing with the clamps to cover his embarrassment, and clambered to his feet.

"I've been out already, Doc," said Kendrick. "Found something while you were resting." That was all. No reference to his collapse under gravitational strain, which would be enough to cashier him out of the service if they ever found out. *But Steve is always tactful and sympathetic about the difference in our ages*, he thought.

He took the skull from Kendrick and scrutinized it. It was definitely humanoid, probably fairly close to human in structure. The skull was long and tapering, with a gentle, receding jawline and firm brows.

"They're lying around all over the place. Some of them buried, some just lying in the open. And all of them big, real big—about nine feet tall, I'd say. Every last one."

"Looks good, does it?"

"Probably be a record find. And I hope so; Terra can learn a lot from these dead worlds."

"Yes," said Quantrell. He studied Kendrick's plain, open

face almost as intently as he had examined the skull.

STEVE KENDRICK was a fanatic, and that was surprising in one so young. His particular form of fanaticism, Quantrell had discovered almost as soon as they had been teamed, was the desire not to overlook even a scrap of information, to bring it all back to Terra. On that most frustrating expedition of Arthur Quantrell's long life—the trip to Deneb IV—they had found just a few muddy remnants of a dead culture in four months of digging. Quantrell had, at last, managed to dredge up an immense carved monument from the bottom of a swamp; at the last minute the winch gave and the whole thing crashed back into the depths of the swamp.

Disgusted, exhausted, covered with mud, Quantrell had suggested they abandon the project and move on; but Kendrick, reproaching him—mildly, as befitted the fifty-year age differential—had insisted on recovering the huge thing and dragging it back to Terra. If it had the slightest interest, Kendrick would not leave it behind.

Quantrell examined the skull. "Let's get out there," he said. "This looks exciting."

"I know what you mean. I'm all worked up too. This is really my first big chance. But something like this ought to be old hat to you, though."

No, Quantrell thought. *It's*

my first big chance too, after all these years. But he didn't want to tell that to Steve.

He slipped into his space-suit with ease born of long practice, and swung out onto the catwalk. He started to lower himself to the ground, then paused and stared.

"Lord," he said softly.

As far as he could see, there were vast stretches of buildings. It seemed like one immense tenement, stretching out to the horizon, standing dead and windowless. And sprawled over the ground, hanging out of the broken windows, carpeting the streets—skeletons.

HE FELT his heart starting to throb with the old excitement that had first hit him the day he had hewed a head out of a river bank in southern France. Hastily he went down the catwalk, grunting out an involuntary *huhh-whoeeze* as he moved. He dropped the last couple feet, feeling the ground give slightly beneath his feet, and waited for Kendrick to come down.

"What do you make of it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Think it's a ceremonial burial ground?"

"Not likely," smiled Kendrick; he knelt and examined a skeleton sprawled almost at his feet. "They wouldn't just dump their dead like this, would they? Without even an attempt at burial?"

Quantrell shook his head.

"It's a non-human race, Steve. We can't ever be sure how their minds operated."

He let his eyes rove over the entire incredible panorama. It was a cosmic charnel-house; he had never seen so many skeletons at once, just lying about. What catastrophe could have overtaken these people all at once? What could have happened, he wondered, feeling a little dizzy at the immensity of the project they had stumbled on.

"This must be a totally dry planet," he said. "These bones would have rotted long ago if there'd been any humidity to speak of."

KENDRICK nodded, agreeing. "Let's see what's in these houses," he suggested. They crossed the little clearing to the nearest entrance to the massive pile of architecture. It was grisly to have to step over the heaped-up bones, and Quantrell was beginning to find the silence oppressive.

Kendrick pushed open the door and they edged in. The mustiness was almost tangible; it was like stepping into a family vault. Quantrell's fingerbeam flicked into the opening. The light revealed heaps of corpses stacked everywhere, some neatly composed with arms locked across the sternum, others sprawled out bizarrely, some clinging to others in what could have

been a final desperate embrace or a mortal struggle.

"There's one funny thing about all these skeletons," said Kendrick. "They're all the same size. All about nine feet tall."

"You're right," Quantrell agreed. "And all about the same age, too, I'd guess, though I wouldn't put more than a week's pay behind it." He opened an inner door and the hinges fell away from the wood as he did so. "Whatever happened here happened a long time ago," he said.

He shot a beam of light into the next room. A skull grinned back at him, and he saw dimly that there were more behind that one.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."

HE CHECKED the points off on his fingers. "One, they're all about the same size and age. Two, this whole planet's covered with them."

"Without an inch of breathing space," added Kendrick. "I don't imagine we missed much when we made our tour yesterday. Wherever you go, heaps of bodies."

"Point three," said Quantrell. "Three—that's the snapper. What did they die from? How? Why? What happened? We're going to be filling out an awfully puzzled-sounding report, something tells me."

"But at least we'll bring back a load of skeletons.

That's something concrete."

"True."

"I'd like to check that building again," Kendrick said. "Perhaps they left some record—some history of whatever happened to them. If they did, it shouldn't be too hard to put together a pattern."

"Good idea."

"You want to go now?"

"No. You go by yourself; I'll stay here. I want to do the articulation on the skeleton you brought in." Arthur Quantrell busied himself over the long, graceful body while the younger man donned his spacesuit.

FINALLY, Kendrick left. Quantrell gratefully sank down to rest. He stared balefully at the skeleton stretched out on the floor. *Why couldn't this have happened to me when I was younger,* he thought. *Why now, when I'm old and worn out and too tired even to string together that fellow's ribs?*

Tired. He thought of Steve Kendrick, clambering around in the heaps of rubble and bones, and bent down to loosen his boots. His feet were starting to swell from the morning's walking, and his ankles ached; the ligaments were getting to be weak and yielding.

"*I grow old... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled,*" he said triumphantly, at last remembering the poet's next line. Warily he

got up and forced himself down to work on the ticklish job of articulating the skeleton; the dried remnants of muscles and ligaments that held it together now would never stand up to acceleration.

AN HOUR later, he had managed to complete the powerful foot (with prehensile toes? he wondered) up to the femur. He decided to take a break, to let some of the squint go out of his eyes and some of the quivering from his hands; but after a moment of relaxation he heard Kendrick bounding up the catwalk, and hastily snapped to. He didn't want Steve to find him napping on the job.

"Suit up in a hurry," yelled Kendrick as he burst through the hatch. "I think I've found the answer to the whole business. There's a set of pictograms running down a corridor on the second floor of that building, with explanations in an E Double Four language."

"Great," Quantrell said. He pulled himself together, slid into his suit, and followed Kendrick down the catwalk. They headed silently across to the entrance, skirting the heaps of skeletons strewn all over.

"Upsy daisy," said Kendrick pointing to a rope ladder dangling from a hole in the ceiling. "I jury-rigged a ladder for us; I don't trust

the strength of those stairs."

"Wise move," Quantrell said. "They might be a billion years old, for all we know." But all the same he did not feel happy about having to struggle up a rope ladder.

Kendrick scrambled up lightly and easily, and waited at the top for Quantrell. When he finally made it, huffing and coughing, Kendrick snapped on his beam and pointed. "There you are."

Quantrell whistled. They were in what seemed to be an endless corridor, stretching off to a pinpoint in the distance, and up here there were no skeletons—just long rows of paintings, done in bright pigments and almost photographic realism.

Quantrell squinted and looked closely. The aliens shown were finely-built, handsome people, roughly humanoid. The first few panels showed pleasant scenes of what he supposed was everyday life. Under each painting ran a line or two of commentary, in a language which he recognized as close kin to Old High Sirian.

"Here's the story all spread out for us," he said. "Let's get to work."

WHAT SEEMED like hours went by as they moved down the rows of paintings, carefully studying the scene portrayed, then

digging away at the words below. Kendrick, who had specialized in linguistics, did most of the translating, but it was Arthur Quantrell who patiently accumulated fact after fact to put the story together.

"This one seems contradictory," said Kendrick. "Here it says that they were immortal. But how could they die, then? Why?"

"You've jumped to conclusions. What does it say there?"

Kendrick read it aloud. "*'On this unhappy day we put an end to the force of mortality. From this day on, none of us grew old.'* If that doesn't mean immortality, what does?"

"Examine the words. They ended the force of mortality," said Quantrell. "That doesn't mean they did away with death. But you wouldn't understand the distinction yet."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," said Quantrell. "Let's move on; maybe it'll come clear to you here."

KENDRICK looked at the picture. It showed a radiant man, glowing with youth. He translated the commentary: "*'At first we were happy, for age had gone from us. We had put an end to the force of mortality.'*"

Kendrick turned to Quantrell. "It's not right of you to play games with me. How could these people be immor-

tal and still be able to die?"

"You're missing the distinction," said Quantrell, leaning against the far wall. "The force of mortality, Steve, isn't the same thing as death. It's only the probability that an individual who's survived to Time T isn't going to make it to T plus 1. It's a statistical reference. Among Terrans, the force of mortality increases in proportion to age; the longer you've lived, the less probable it is that you'll continue to live. I'm eighty; you're thirty. Senescence increases the force of mortality. Statistically, it's more probable that natural causes will finish *me* tonight than you."

"And you mean these people overcame this force of mortality and still died?"

QUANTRELL frowned impatiently. "You still don't see it. They didn't stop death; just old age. *They didn't deteriorate.* They grew up, reached adulthood, and stayed happy and healthy until something carried them off. But since they weren't getting progressively older and more decrepit, the odds on their surviving didn't get shorter as they went along."

"I get it," said Kendrick. "It's the glass bottle analogy: bottles break, but the probability of breaking has nothing to do with the age of the bottle. It's just as likely for a brand-new bottle to break as one a

century old. The odds are the same."

"Exactly. That's the difference between humans and bottles—and between humans and these people. They died, just the way we die, but without crumbling apart first—the way I'm doing."

"You're still in good shape, oldtimer," said Kendrick. "But I still don't see what it was that came along and killed them like this."

"The pattern's obvious enough," said Quantrell. "To me, at least; I don't know if you'd arrive at the same conclusion. But I'll let you work it out as we go along. If I keep on telling you things, your brain'll atrophy. That's a common ailment among men of your age, I hear."

Kendrick laughed, and they edged on. The corridor began to narrow here, and footing became precarious.

"I don't trust the solidity of the floor here," said Quantrell, observing the groan of the wood beneath his feet. And then, abruptly, as if the remark itself had cracked the wood, the ancient planks gave way and he went crashing through to the floor below.

A BLINDING bolt of pain shot along his leg as he landed. He fought to keep himself from screaming, and, looking up, saw Kendrick's anxious face peering down through the hole.

"How's that for calling my

shot?" Quantrell asked, trying to smile.

"Don't be funny. You all right?"

"I think I cracked it," he said, pointing to his left leg, crumpled underneath him. "At my age, we get pretty brittle."

"Should I come down?"

"Better get the emergency kit from the ship first. I'm going to need a splint."

"You want me to leave you here all alone while I get it?"

"No other way," said Quantrell. "But I don't mind; I won't be all alone." He indicated the shattered skeleton he had landed on, and the others heaped around.

"If you want—"

"Go on, go on," said Quantrell impatiently. "Get the kit, and don't stand here chattering." Steve Kendrick's face vanished instantly, and Quantrell was alone.

He stared at the skeletons, wondering how long it would be before he would be on one of their number. A broken leg out here—they'd have to hop over to Rigel II for immediate medical treatment, or he'd be crippled. And in any event he'd be through, as soon as the surgeons got a look at the wreck of a body he'd been dragging around so long. The broken leg would finish him, even if the other things didn't. Broken legs don't heal quickly or cleanly when you're old.

He looked at the skeletons

again. *They* had never been old; they had been handsome, powerful youths to the day of their death. But they had died too.

"The pattern's obvious enough," he had told Kendrick. And it was. Even without seeing the later pictograms, he could construct the rest of the planet's history.

THEY HAD beaten senescence. There was no physical deterioration of the body with advanced age. Thus, fertility continued throughout the entire lifetime. *A doubtful blessing*, he thought, from the vantage point of his eighty years. But that meant a birth-rate way up; and the death-rate had probably dropped down to next to nothing. The result: in two or three generations, the planet must have been packed to its rafters. And there's a limiting factor; one small planet can hold only so many people and still have room to produce food.

It was easy to picture the last days of the planet. Frantic attempts at birth control, all going to naught because people wouldn't listen. Perhaps leagues of volunteer suicides, doing their bit to reduce congestion. Death, death, and more death, but the overcrowding was barely alleviated. And then mass starvation, bodies lying all over the place, finally just a few survi-

vors struggling along, possibly trying to farm somewhere amid all the corpses. And, at last, they too succumbed, perhaps to disease brought on by the decomposing dead, and all was quiet—a tiny brown planet covered with billions and billions of corpses.

"Hey!" came a distant voice from somewhere. "Can you hear me?"

"Where are you?" Quantrell shouted, loud as he could.

"I'm outside. The whole works caved in, and I'm going to have to dig through the rubble to get you. It's going to take a couple of hours."

"Dig away. I'm in no hurry."

THE PAIN from his leg was fierce, and since he didn't dare move he had become stiff and cramped and his leg had fallen asleep right up to the thigh. He wondered if he could hold out until Steve got there.

The skull of the skeleton he had landed on lay just by his left hand. He picked it up and looked at it—the wide nose, the empty, staring eyes.

If Kendrick had fallen down here he'd have got up and brushed himself off. *But I'm old, and my bones are brittle.*

Yet these people conquered senescence. Their bones weren't brittle. And look what happened to them.

He put the skull down and felt something sharp and metallic next to it. He groped around and his hand closed on an edge. He tugged. It was a book, made up of metal sheets bound together. Trying not to disturb the fractured leg, he pulled the book up to where he could see it.

Flashing on the beam, Arthur Quantrell puzzled over the characters, straining hard to read them. *This will be a good way to pass time*, he thought. From far away came the constant *thud-boom* as Kendrick dug his way toward him. Slowly, painstakingly, he began to translate the unfamiliar figures.

It was a medical book; it explained the simple formula that had brought doom to this planet. The process was simplicity itself, set forth clearly and precisely. Growing more and more excited, he raced on through the book, as the sound of Kendrick's digging grew louder.

IT WAS ALL here; the whole recipe for ending old age forever. No more slow, endless deterioration. No more Quantrells groaning from the pain of a brittle broken bone in an old, worn body.

And then he hit something that made his eyes widen: the statement that the process was capable of reversing aging already under way. No complete

rejuvenation, of course, but it could restore some measure of youth and vitality.

It was all here, neatly packaged and waiting for him to stumble over it. Simply apply the formula and the flabby roll of fat, the weak eyes, the tired feet, the broken leg—all magically washed away.

Do I dare, he asked himself.

What have they ever done for me? For sixty years I've gone from planet to planet; is that a life? *Here I am, an old man—on a dry planet*, he thought, deliberately misquoting.

Why not do it? Why not simply bring the book back? They would rejuvenate me, wash all my troubles away. What of it if they end up in a boneheap too? What of it?

An involuntary shudder of horror ran through him, twitching together the raw, broken ends of the bone.

No.

Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season. Wonderful the way I still recall the Eliot, he told himself.

He smiled, letting the tension ooze away, thinking to himself, *I thought I was too old for temptation.* He looked at the book, wondering what it would be like to be young again. He shook his head sadly.

SUDDENLY, there came the sound of scrabbling from

above, and Kendrick's shout rang out clear and loud. "Still hanging on, old man?"

It shook him from his moment of abstraction. He glanced upward and said. "I'm fine, Steve. How far away are you?"

"Just a little more," Kendrick said. "A few feet and I'll be with you."

"I'll be waiting." Quantrell looked at the book in his hand, and began to sweat. It was suddenly imperative to bury it—deep.

He remembered Kendrick's tenacity in that swamp on Deneb IV. Steve was never one for leaving an artifact behind; and Kendrick wouldn't understand the casual relationship at all, or if he did he'd not believe it. He wouldn't see that eternal youth carries with it the price of death; he'd bring the book to Terra...and they wouldn't listen to Quantrell's theory either.

He allowed himself to visualize the result, as the sound of Kendrick's digging grew louder. Perhaps, several million years later, a pair of archaeologists from someplace out near the Magellan Cluster might come upon the third planet of a small yellow sun. They might wonder what had happened to bring about the disaster that had befallen this planet: vast mounds of skeletons, all over.

QUANTRELL quivered with anguish and regret. He eased himself to a sitting position.

"How you doing?" Kendrick called.

"Won't mind seeing daylight again." He heard the sound of Kendrick's furious activity. Slowly, almost blind with pain, Quantrell began to drag himself across the room. It felt as if the jagged ends of the broken bone were gouging into his nerves. Clinging to the book grimly, he pulled himself ten feet, then fifteen. He was heading for the huge heap of bones at the far end of the room.

Then he was there, sprawled out full-length, the precious volume dangling limply from his hand. He shook his head sadly and gingerly shoved the book into the boneheap, trying not to disturb the dust in any way; this was one artifact he didn't want Kendrick to find.

When it was hidden, he started mournfully at the bones for a moment, and then started the long crawl back to the other end of the room. He wanted to be as far away from that book as possible when Kendrick got there.

There was the sound of a final blow; and then, just as Arthur Quantrell had composed himself in a position of repose, Kendrick appeared.

AS IF IN a dream, Quantrell watched Kendrick splint up his leg, lower him to the dolly like some incredibly ancient and fragile relic, and wheel him through the long nightmare corridor to the ship. He sensed upward motion, and knew he was going up in a sensed upward motion, and knew he was going up a hoist to the hatch, and then that he was snug in his acceleration cradle.

An indeterminate period of time passed, and then he realized Kendrick was looking down solicitously at him.

"We're on our way to Rigel," he said. "They'll have you as good as new in a few days."

"I didn't hear the blastoff."

"I know. You've been really out, for two days."

"I'm very tired."

Kendrick nodded. "It's rough to be old," he said. "Lord, it's criminal that a man like you should get old and brittle."

"Don't feel sorry for me," Quantrell said weakly.

"As soon as they get you together at Rigel, we'll shoot back here and find out just what happened to those people, yes?"

Quantrell smiled. "You'll have to do that on your own," he said. "They'll cashier me the minute they see me. I haven't had a physical for years, which is the only reason I'm still here."

and they'll know it in no time."

"Don't say that; it's not true."

"You don't have to spare my feelings. We don't last forever, you know."

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to wonder what it would be like had he brought the book back with him. To live the rest of his life untormented by his myriad aches, without the nagging consciousness that his body was rotting away piecemeal—

But it was foolish to think that way. The aches, the rotting, were all part of a teleo-

logical pattern. And the book was the random hypothesis that would upset the pattern. It would only turn Terra into another planetary bone-yard, given time.

He smiled faintly at the irony whereby the most worthwhile accomplishment of his archaeological career had been an act of deliberate vandalism—hiding an artifact. It was an odd way to finish.

"Sleeping?" asked Kendrick softly.

"Just dreaming," said Arthur Quantrell. He leaned back and closed his eyes and waited.

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LAST MEETING PLACE

by Thomas N. Scortia

Decadence had set in within the Imperium, and Garth found that a history student had to be a new Machiavelli.

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms
In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech...

"The Hollow Men"—T. S. Eliot

THE FLAGSHIP was a mile-long pod of metal and glass and plastic and muttering energies. In its center, laced by the starkness of metal ribs, was the room. Space was at a premium within even the great ship, but concessions had been made to the importance of the room.

It was huge.

Much longer than it was wide, its dun walls curved upward to meet a shadowed ceiling, fifty feet above. It was quite bare except for the thick cobalt carpet that muffled the metal floor, and the long dark table of basalt wood around which ranked a score of low, wide-backed chairs. The only other feature that marred the spartan rigidity was the view-screen that fused with one wall and stretched the length of the chamber. The ship had been impressed with a spin to give a light psuedo-gravity, but the picture on the screen did not reflect this motion. It was stationary and, if one stood so that the boundaries of the screen were hidden by the limits of sight, frighteningly three-dimensional.

For one flashing instant

Kevin Garth felt a sickening vertigo and the most irrational conviction swept over him that a sudden move would hurl him outward to fall endlessly through those cold distances. In the upper left of the screen he saw the talcumbushed crescent of the moon poised in the sooty blackness. Its darkened hemisphere reflected the faint haze of earthshine. He could see other moons now scattered across the mirrored emptiness, the winking moons that were the lazily rotating ships of Elric's vast fleet. Absently he identified Elric's task force, flanked on either side by the lesser fleets from Dunkwelt and Freelanding. The ships were drawn into a hollow cylinder, whose axis pointed like the barrel of a monstrous cannon at the cloud-streaked Earth, far below.

IT WAS VERY much like Elric, Garth thought wearily, in the simplicity of his trust in raw strength, to position the flagship on the edge of the fleet cylinder so that the full impact of the massed forces would add its silent weight to the coming conference. The fleet, of course, was not quite as large as the one the Imperium had dispatched a month ago, to counter the feint against the Dvorak Worlds; but the Imperium stood now defenseless in its home space, and to the wor-

ried men below the outworld fleet must look like the axe of an executioner, tensed for the inevitable blood-letting. They could only hope to buy time.

He did not hear the whisper of the iris door, or the cat steps upon the deep carpeting, until Choldar's voice rasped against his ears.

"There's a sight for a strong man," the Chief Minister said, his voice faintly mocking. The words echoed from the metal walls and Garth grimaced, thinking how much he detested the thin, fox-faced Stoddard.

"Imperial Earth," he said, "could have mustered a fleet a hundred times as large in the old days."

"But the old days are gone."

"Yes," Garth agreed, wishing silently that the old man would go away. He could not understand why Elric still maintained the treacherous Stoddard as minister. Of course, he was one of the old Stoddard ruling line and perhaps that carried some weight.

"You don't sound very happy about it," Choldar arched an eyebrow significantly. "But I forgot. You were born on Earth, weren't you?"

"LOOK," GARTH said, turning on the man. "I don't like you any more than you like me. Let it go at that. I've been drawn into this mess out of a personal loyalty to Elric; but that

doesn't make me happy to see the destruction of an order that kept peace in the galaxy for a thousand years."

"And drained the blood of every colony it had," Choldar added, his lips thin and deadly. "But, you're speaking as an historian."

"Take it any way you like."

"You've a sharp tongue. Watch yourself, or you'll make the wrong enemies."

"I choose my enemies very carefully," Garth said.

Fury clouded the man's eyes as the iris door dilated and Bolton of Dunkwelt, and Tremaine of Freelanding, appeared at the far end of the room. The tall figure of a man in the uniform of a lieutenant in the Freelanders Space Forces trailed the two rulers. They were speaking earnestly, in low buzzing undertones, as they moved the carpeted length of the chamber. When they drew within earshot, Tremaine made a silencing gesture to his companion.

"Huh," Bolton said, rubbing his stubby fingers down the sides of his corduroyed military kilt with a soft burring sound, "so the renegade is waiting for the kill."

TREMAINE laughed—a thin, deadly laugh—and looked at Garth with his glowing yellow eyes. His almost skeletal face was cold, and Garth suddenly felt like a small brown mouse that had wandered into the center of a

group of very hungry cats.

"Not 'the renegade', gentleman," Choldar said with mock horror. "You know how Elric dislikes that."

"Yes," Bolton said, the words rumbling in his barrel chest, "'the historian.' I forgot."

"Or perhaps 'the New Machiavelli.'" Behind Tremaine, a grin distorted the face of the Freelanders lieutenant, revealing long thin teeth with distinct brown mottling.

"Well, my lord historian," Bolton said, "Elric is waiting for you in his quarters."

"Ready, I imagine, to dictate chapter three of *'My Rise to Imperial Power'*," Tremaine said.

"Your excellency grows in cleverness each day." Garth bowed slightly. As he made his way to the door, he felt the burning sensation of three murderous pairs of eyes fastened on his back. He felt very cold.

Outside the conference room, the heavy carpeting gave way to the bare metal of the ship. Garth walked crisply down the corridor, thinking how foreign this taut atmosphere was to his old leisurely way of life; for a moment he wished he were back at his post with the Imperial University. It was frightening, the way in which he had gradually been forced to relinquish his detached position as an observer. More and

more each day, he found himself sinking into the morass of intrigue and tight-rope politics in which Elric held his uneasy dominion over the outworld provinces.

Perhaps Elric had intended that this would happen when he has first invited Garth to the Stoddard system. The man was capable of an intense personal loyalty and a deep emotional friendship. He had never forgotten those student days at the university when Garth had rescued him from the assassin sent by Elric's uncle. Still, Garth decided, Elric would not hesitate to use anyone for his involved purposes.

HE PASSED a group of spacemen who were repairing an electric cable buried in the metal wall of the passage. After he had progressed the length of the corridor, Garth turned and looked back, feeling a bitter amusement in the way the men quickly lowered their gaze to their work. Not, however, before he saw the hate and distrust in their eyes.

They were all squat, heavy-thighed Dunkwelers, he saw.

The door to Elric's quarters was guarded by a pair of broad-shouldered Stoddard marines in form-fitting blue. They stood rigidly at attention, their equipment harnesses gleaming with the reflected light of burnished metal and soft, polished leather.

Garth acknowledged their salute with a nod and walked through the bare anteroom, past the thick hangings in the archway, and into the large living chamber with its paneled walls of silver-grained white canelwood. The blond boy who was sitting quietly on a foam relaxer lowered the stripviewer from his eyes. Garth felt a silent warmth as the boy jumped to his feet and ran to him, exclaiming, "Uncle Kevin."

"Hi, youngster," Garth said. He ruffled the blond head fondly. "Keeping out of mischief?"

The boy drew himself up in mock formality. "Of course." He broke into a smile. "But you should see the new library strips."

"Later." Garth peered down at the flushed young face, into the wide blue eyes. The boy looked more like his dead mother each day, he thought. He could not help but wonder, each time he saw Mikael, how long Elric's orphaned son would live. It was a terrible thing for a boy to be born into Mikael's position in these times.

A MUSCULAR form, clad in the Stoddard blue, materialized in the doorway leading to the chambers and Garth said, "The wolves are gathering in the conference room."

"I expected they would by now." Elric nodded. His eyes

were beginning to show the fatigue and strain of sleepless nights. His voice sounded very tired. "The envoy ship will make contact in another ten minutes."

He walked across the room and placed a massively biceped arm around his son. For a moment a soft affection played across his stern square face and his coarse brows arched in sorrow. "You'd better run along while Kevin and I talk business."

"Can't I stay and show him the new strips?"

"Later," Garth promised and winked at the boy.

When he had left the room, Elric said, "I wish I could have left him behind on Stoddard."

"You know he wouldn't have lasted a day after you warped out of the system," Garth said.

"I suppose not." Elric lowered his body wearily to the relaxer and said, "Look, if anything happens..."

Garth nodded silently. "The deck watch is all Dunkwelters," he said at last.

"That means they don't intend to wait until we leave the system. I wonder what fantastic deal they hope to make with the Earth envoy behind my back." He rose to his feet and began to walk nervously to and fro. "What they don't know," he said with a scowl, "is that every man in deep freeze on this ship is a Stod-

dard. I ordered five hundred thawed last watch."

"So it's reduced to the mailed fist again," Garth sighed.

"WHAT ELSE do those jackals understand?" Elric demanded. "Believe me, Kevin, I'm honestly sorry to drag you into this, but I need someone I can trust."

"I'm still the perennial student," Garth said, "and I'm getting an inside look at the breakdown of the historical process of a millenium." He snorted. "I hope I live to write about it." Or, he thought, *that someone is around to read what I write.*

A soft chime sounded and Elric crossed to the camouflaged communicator panel set in the wall. He spoke for a moment and then turned. "The Imperium ship is crossing the fleet axis. He'll be here in another three minutes."

"I'll leave for the rendezvous with Courtney then."

"No, not yet. You know Baron Flambert, don't you?"

"We met two years ago at the Aldebaran partitioning. A real fop, but clever. Is he...?"

Elric nodded. "I want you here when he presents his credentials. The group down below is tricky; they may try to waste time by sending an impostor."

"They wouldn't dare."

"Maybe," Elric said. "Anyway, your Luzon meeting

isn't for two hours, and I don't want my bright princelings to miss you too soon."

"But why bother with Flam-bert? You know what he'll have to say."

"A bribe to pack up and go home probably. That's what the Imperium has been doing for the last century, buying time with fissionables." Elric whirled and slapped the wall with his hand. "My God, can't they see their very power rotting from under them?"

"Probably not. It takes longer than one lifetime for a monolithic structure like the Imperium to fall apart. Bolton and Tremaine certainly don't see it. They're merely interested in a deal for black-mail."

"And settling with me," Elric said bitterly.

THREE minutes later, the communicator panel announced that the ship of the envoy had grappled to the flagship and that Baron Flam-bert was on his way to Elric's quarters. The Stoddard ruler chose a high-backed chair, fashioned massively from the white canelwood, and waited silently with Garth on his right. At last they heard the outer door open and the hangings shielding the anteroom stirred in the breeze.

Choldar pushed through the draperies, a smug expression on his face, and intoned stiffly, "Baron Flam-bert, envoy of the Imperium."

Elric waved a hand and the minister withdrew. A second later a small group filed in. Flam-bert, Garth saw, had brought a standard bearer, a slender youth who carried the Imperium colors draped negligently over his right arm. For a moment Garth felt a distant nostalgia at the sight of the proud blue field studded with golden stars. How many years, he wondered, before even this pretense was a memory? And when the Imperium was gone? A galaxy of tiny worlds lashing out spasmodically at each other and then the long night of millennial barbarism? No, he thought fiercely, not the terrible irony of...

"Baron the Lord Flam-bert, envoy of His Imperial Majesty, Terrence, Lord of a Thousand Suns," Choldar was saying loudly.

THE EARTHMAN'S thick jowls pendulumed as he approached, and even the layer on layer of blood red cloth that draped his short figure did not hide the folds of adipose tissue that larded his body. His face was glistening with perspiration, but the black eyes, buried in their white beds of fat, glittered with quick intelligence. Around his neck he wore an intricately worked gold sigil of office. A heavy perfumed scent preceded him, filling the room.

When he was half a dozen

steps from the chair where Elric sat, he bowed, his long, many-pleated sleeves sweeping the floor. Garth wondered what the absurd costume must weigh with the countless carefully arranged folds of crimson cloth.

"Your Highness, Most Noble Lord," the man said in a high voice, "the Envoy of the Imperium brings His Imperial Majesty's gracious wishes."

A flicker of amusement crossed Elric's face. The man, Garth thought, did look absurd, though not in the way Elric thought. Behind the mincing words of the formal greeting, there had once been an overwhelming power that did not need the show of iron the outworlders found necessary in their rule.

"Thank you, Baron," Elric said, "but we don't use titles here."

Choldar's lips twisted in silent mirth. "Lord Flambert," he said, "this is Elric of Stoddard. No other title is Elric's wish."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," Flambert stammered, reddening.

"We're happy to receive you," Elric said. "My minister will see you to your quarters. After you've freshed, he'll conduct you to the meeting room."

"If I may, ah, Elric," Flambert said, "a few words of sincere wishes from his Imperial

Majesty...in private." He looked meaningfully at Choldar and Garth.

"We have no secrets here," Elric said.

"Oh, no. It was only..." the envoy blinked, reddening even more.

"We shall meet at the table then?"

The baron inclined his head and at a gesture from Elric the group withdrew.

"That set him on his heels," Garth observed.

"Bah," Elric said, getting to his feet, "he expected to twist me round his little finger. Are you sure that's Flambert?"

"There could be only one like that. Phew! How long does it take to clear the room of that stink?"

Elric consulted his wrist chronometer. "You have an hour and a half to make it to Luzon. I've ordered you an escort of Stoddard marines."

Garth started for the door.

"Wait a moment." Elric opened a panel in the wall and removed a small, deadly-looking sonic gun. "You may need this."

"I hope not," Garth said, pocketing the weapon.

IN HIS quarters, Garth secured a light fleeced-lined mantle and then made his way down the echoing corridors past the countless squat Dunkwelters to the spaceboat lock where his escort was waiting. The escort, as Elric had promised, were all Stod-

dard marines, but Garth was surprised to see the group commanded by the amber-eyed Frelander lieutenant who he had seen earlier with Tremaine. He paused for a moment, eyeing the stiff arrogant figure and debated dismissing the man. No, he decided, that would undoubtedly make Tremaine, Bolton, and Choldar more suspicious. Better to handle the Frelander himself.

He acknowledged the lieutenant's diffident salute and said, "You may attend me forward after you've disposed your men aft." He walked past the lieutenant through the hermetic tube to the boat's airlock. Behind him he heard the Frelander give clipped orders to a Stoddard non-com. A moment later the man followed into the ship.

AS SOON AS they were in the forward passenger compartment, Garth began to strap himself into the padded acceleration couch while the pilot hovered over him like a worried hen. He saw the lieutenant watching him icily from his own couch on the other side of the compartment. Surely, Garth thought, the man didn't expect his presence to be accepted as mere coincidence. The chilling thought came to him that perhaps Elric had underestimated his opponents.

The pilot left the compartment, and a moment later

Garth felt the sudden lurch as the boat was thrown at a tangent from the mother ship. Through the filtered port on his right, he saw a confused pattern of lights as the ship catapulted into the midst of the hovering fleet. Then there was the pressure of acceleration as the flaring rockets brought the boat under control.

As they crossed the fleet axis, Garth thought of how unstable the power was behind those ranked points of light dropping swiftly astern. The fleet, together with that task force which had lured the Imperial fleet from its home system, represented the greatest striking force in the galaxy. It was compounded of the several contributions of Freelanding and Dunkwelt, and lesser dependent systems, all of which Elric had brought under the Stoddard house through the use of quislings and puppet rulers, such as Bolton and Tremaine.

With each passing year, the Imperium withdrew closer and closer to its home world, leaving a vacuum that a hundred rulers eyed covetously. Everyone agreed that some power must fill that political vacuum, but each kinglet and dictator saw his own system as the center of a new Imperium. The jealousies and ambitions within the union that Elric had established in the peripheral worlds only gave the dreams of empire new and

closer objectives, until the Stoddard Combine daily more and more resembled an over-ripe melon about to burst.

EVEN IN the days when he and Garth had been fellow students at the Imperial University, Elric—then only a minor prince from a raw system settled two hundred years before—had seen the growing instability of the empire. The disenfranchisement of the outworlds had antagonized the new, not-quite-human breed of men arising in the colonies; the economy-destroying wars of the commercial interests of Earth, for contracts to exploit the resources of the subject worlds, had foreshadowed the present breakup only too clearly. After the incident of the assassin, Kevin Garth and Elric had become close friends; and the Stoddard prince had often spoken of his hopes that a strong man might unit the periphery in a new non-terran culture that would fend off the seemingly inevitable collapse of interstellar civilization.

Later, Elric had returned to a system which had declared and won its independence without a struggle. The period of almost yearly revolts had begun on Earth and the emperor, little more than a captive of each succeeding power group, had no time to worry about the revolt of worlds light years distant.

Garth was already an assistant department head at the university, and well known in academic circles for his studies of the early Imperium, when Elric had offered him the post with the Stoddard House. There was not a doubt in Garth's mind about why Elric wanted him; but the political situation at the university had become intolerable, and he welcomed the unique chance to observe the growth of imperial power in the periphery at such close vantage.

"I don't pretend I'm an altruist," Elric had said when he first explained his goal in expanding so closely upon the heels of the withdrawing Imperium, "but someone has to grab the reins quickly, or the whole galaxy will collapse into a series of small wars."

FUNNY, Garth thought; at first he had viewed the present situation as one culture advancing as another decayed. It was so easy to make the fatal error of substituting that word 'culture' for a political sphere of action. Only lately had he begun to realize that the outworlds were still an integral part of Earth culture. And now Elric would become the Imperium; it was inevitable, Garth thought ironically. Not a new Imperium—just an interlude in the old. How long an interlude depended on the ruthlessness with which Elric consolidated his gains. Garth had never

been a mechanist, but more and more he saw each new move of Elric's dictated rigidly by his previous one. Now Garth wondered if, in some fantastic fashion, they were not following a pattern irrevocably determined from the birth of the Imperium.

The first tenuous wisps of atmosphere were whistling past the rocket now. The lieutenant looked up from the port and said, "We should make planetfall in twenty minutes." Garth noted that he omitted the 'sir'.

Below, as the ship wallowed slightly on its side, Garth saw the cloud-mottled western hemisphere, brightly lighted by a high sun. As he watched, their eastward progress brought them over the Atlantic and he could see a good size squall in progress near Greenland. The whole area was blotted by seething clouds and occasionally he could see the reflected flash of lightning. At their height the disturbance looked small and insignificant, but he knew the churning violence hidden by the low matted clouds. It was late afternoon in Europe and, as they passed over the Black Sea, the light in the port dimmed and suddenly thick night clotted about the ship.

THE SPACEBOAT dipped steeply and he could feel the sharp forward tug of deceleration. He could see nothing from his port, but the ship

began to settle vertically and he knew that they must be above the deserted strip of beach on the Lingayen Gulf where he was to meet Courtney.

The ship grounded with a slight jar and the pilot was back almost instantly, fussing over his straps and helping him up. The lieutenant preceded him through the airlock as he paused to secure a flare from the pilot. He jumped the short distance to the sand and saw the lieutenant giving instructions to the NCO in charge of the escort.

They had landed in a spot scarcely fifty yards from the encroaching jungle. The sea was a good two hundred yards to Garth's left and he heard the muffled roll of surf. In the background a night bird voiced a series of high staccato cries. He drew the mantle around him against the moist chill of the night. It must be about three A. M., he decided, and turned to the lieutenant.

"I don't want the escort with me," he said. "Just so long as they can come on the double if I call." He thought for a moment.

"You come with me," he told the lieutenant and set out across the sand, feeling the damp granular surface crunch like snow under his quick tread.

They walked for almost five minutes, going slowly because of loose footing. When they

were partly hidden from the escort by the curve of the shore, Garth said, "We'll wait here."

The lieutenant grunted. Garth stood a little apart, and covertly inspected the man. In the moonlight he could see him standing negligently, his hands on his hips in the loose-limbed way of the Freelanders. Garth could not see his face, but he could imagine the tight arrogance stamped on it.

THE COOL NIGHT air suddenly held a faint hissing sound and Garth looked up to see the pin-point glow of an atmosphere jet overhead. From his belt he took the magnesium flare he had carried from the spaceboat, stuck it in the sand and said, "Cover your eyes."

He triggered the flare and saw the white light through the fingers he pressed over his own eyes. The flare was only a small one and persisted just long enough for the ship overhead to get a bearing. A moment later it was settling onto the water and taxiing toward shore. He saw two figures pull themselves from the passenger section and lower themselves over the side.

A moment later a voice said, "*How dark the night,*" and he answered with the counter-sign, "*The stars shine in the valley.*"

Another figure appeared from the jet, as one of the two

recently landed flashed an amber light. The two figures approached, and the taller said, "Which is Kevin Garth?"

"I am," Garth said.

A thin beam of light stabbed out, blinding him.

"You're not an outworlder," the first voice said.

A new voice cut the darkness. "Put down your gun. That's the man I was expecting."

"Yes, excellency," the tall man said as the third man from the jet stepped in front of the first two.

"I am Courtney," the man said. "This can be settled very quickly. Does Elric agree to my offer?"

"May I talk?" Garth asked.

"Of course."

"FIFTY PER CENT of the system's uranium production for the next five years, and allegiance of the Imperium if he puts you on the throne?"

"As agreed," Courtney's dark figure nodded. Garth wondered what the man looked like. He couldn't see anything but the occasional glint of moist eyes in the moonlight. He decided he didn't care to know; he felt a little ill.

"All right," Garth said.

"The first division of Stoddard marines will land tomorrow evening at six, Greenwich Time, with the Freelanders and Dunkwelters following an hour later."

"The first phase of my operation will start immediately," Courtney said. He turned and walked swiftly back to the jet. The other two men waited until he had boarded the craft, then turned to go. The taller of the two stopped and very deliberately spat on the ground. Garth heard the lieutenant chuckle behind him.

Garth watched the aircraft mount into the darkness. He heard the faint hiss of its jets disappear to the west. Then he turned to the shadowed figure of the lieutenant and drew Elric's sonic gun under the cover of his mantle.

"Do you think you can report this to Tremaine verbatim," he asked coldly, "or shall I refresh your memory."

"That won't be necessary," the lieutenant said, drawing the weapon holstered at his side. Garth saw him raise his arm and deliberately sight the weapon.

He stiffened and fell like a log when Garth shot him.

WHEN GARTH returned to the flagship, he found Elric in his quarters, sitting in the same chair in which he had received Flambert and staring at the floor.

Garth told him what had happened on the beach. "I've never killed a man before."

"It won't be the last time," Elric said.

"What did Flambert have to say?"

"What we expected. Oh, very nicely phrased, of course, but a bribe just the same."

"The conscript fathers trying to pay the Gauls not to burn Rome."

"Something like that." Elric got to his feet. "I put them off until you returned. They're waiting for us."

"Things will start to happen when they see me," Garth said.

Elric spoke briefly into the wall communicator and then said, "Let's go."

"Wait a minute. They may try to move against you and Mike simultaneously. Hadn't you better get a guard up here?"

"Mike's asleep inside," Elric said. "The regular guard is enough."

Before Garth could argue, he was striding from the room.

WHEN THEY entered the conference room, Garth saw Choldar, Bolton, and Tremaine grouped around Flambert at the far end of the table. When the group saw Garth and Elric, they rose quickly and Garth felt a cold amusement at the surprise in Tremaine's eyes.

Flambert stepped forward and said, "Your excellency, I trust you've seen fit to accept his Imperial Highness' offer of friendship."

"His bribe?" Elric asked. "The answer, baron, is no."

"But we've already agreed," Choldar said.

"I have not agreed." Elric turned on the earth envoy. "You fat swine, don't you think I know what you've been up to?"

Flambert licked his suddenly bloodless lips. "Really, really, this is hardly the way to..."

"You're here on a promise of safe conduct, baron. Don't tempt me."

"I think we've had about enough..." Bolton rumbled into the momentary silence.

"Shut up, Bolton. I've let you have your little game of blackmail; now we'll talk about the real issues."

"We may have other ideas," Choldar simpered.

"Flambert," Elric said, "you can tell His Imperial Majesty that I do not recognise his right to the Imperium. My troops land today to support Courtney."

"Choldar," Bolton said. With a smile of triumph Choldar marched the length of the room toward the door. It opened as he approached and a group of uniformed men with drawn weapons surged into the room.

The uniforms were blue.

GARTH SAW the quick fear that fled across Choldar's face as he retreated before the group. The men did not move from their position just across the threshold.

"Do you think I'm that naive?" Elric asked.

"You're not so naive as to kill us out of hand," Tremaine said. Of the group only he seemed to have retained his poise.

"He's right," Garth said. "You'll have an open revolt on your hands."

"You misunderstand, Tremaine," Elric said slowly. "My men are here to arrest a traitor." He turned to stare at Choldar. "Do you understand?"

"Bolton, where are your men?" Choldar whimpered.

"What does he mean, Bolton?"

Bolton started to speak, but Tremaine's hand reached out to silence him. "How should we know what the traitor means?"

"That's the proper answer." Elric gestured for his men to come forward.

Choldar stepped backward, a look of shocked disbelief on his face. Then his eyes widened as he realized what was happening. His right hand dipped into his tunic and appeared again, clutching a small metal box.

"Better stop your men." Elric made a small motion with his hand and the men halted.

"**I** THINK you know what a detonator is," Choldar said. "This is keyed to a bomb in your quarters. Now Flambert and I will leave under safe conduct, or..."

"This is not my doing," Flambert protested, his voice shrill and frightened.

Damn it, Garth thought helplessly, why hadn't Elric listened to him? But who would have thought they would try to get at the boy with anything so crude?

"I'm quite aware of your part in this, baron," Elric said. He turned to the group of blue-uniformed marines. "Escort these two to the baron's ship. They are to be given safe conduct."

As soon as the group had left the room, Garth said, "Stop them, damn it. Don't you see? With Mike gone, that leaves only you and Choldar of the old Stoddard line."

Elric said nothing. He stood, staring silently at Bolton and Tremaine, his brows wrinkled. In the upper part of the great viewscreen a point of light appeared and began to drop rapidly through the fleet formation.

Garth grabbed Elric fiercely by the arm. "That maniac can still set off the bomb," he said, feeling a sick horror.

"Yes," Elric said, turning to face the screen, "I know."

The spot that was Flambert's ship reached the middle of the fleet cylinder before it suddenly blossomed into a blinding incandescent mass.

"FLAMBERT brought the bomb with him," Elric said after they had returned

to his quarters. "We spotted it on his standard bearer as they left his ship."

"The next time they won't be so stupid," Garth said. "How long do you think you can continue to get away with this sort of thing?"

"I wish I knew," Elric sighed wearily. "I have to get rid of those other two, of course. After the consolidation of the Imperium, I won't be able to trust them, and they know it."

"So, a palace revolution and paid assassins to do the dirty work."

"I don't like it any more than you do."

"No, I suppose not."

"It's the same thing again and again," Elric said. "There's absolutely nothing else I can do."

GARTH FOLLOWED him from the room and down the shadowed hall. They paused before the open door of Mikael's room. The light that streamed down the hall from the living chamber and over their shoulders showed his curly towhead peeping from under a light coverlet.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my ship went dead-jet off Stoddard and we started to fall into the sun?" Elric said softly.

Garth shook his head.

"It was a terrible sensation. There wasn't a thing I could do but hold on tight and hope

they could get the engines repaired in time. Just hold on tight and watch the ship being drawn inexorably into that inferno."

He turned and sighed. "I feel the same way now that I did then."

"But they *did* fix the engines."

"That time."

Garth watched his figure

move down the hall. Against the light his shoulders seemed all at once to sag like melting wax.

Garth turned and looked at the sleeping boy. *That's all we can do*, he thought, *hang on and hope.*

The boy stirred and whimpered in his sleep.

Poor kid, Garth thought.

It was a dirty shame.



The Reckoning



During the last few months, a number of readers have urged me to re-instate "The Reckoning" in this magazine, as well as in *Science Fiction Stories* and *Science Fiction Quarterly*. These readers would like to see how others felt about various issues, to see if their own preferences were shared by a majority of other voting readers and fans.

I'm perfectly willing to heed this request, and you'll find a Readers' Preference Coupon on page 130; it's backed up with an ad on page 129, so that it can be cut without mutilating any text.

This coupon is merely for your convenience; it's not necessary to use it if you want to vote; we'll pay as much attention to a postal card, and enjoy a letter even more.

The stories are listed in order of appearance; you list them in order of preference. You don't have to rate each story, though it helps; ties are perfectly acceptable. And if you really disliked any particular story, an "X" beside it will tell us what we need to know.



Editorial

YESTERDAY'S
WORLD OF
TOMORROW:
1927 II

IN 1927, transplantation of organs was considered a fitting subject for prophetic fiction; and in the blurb for W. Alexander's "New Stomachs For Old", *Amazing Stories*, February 1927, the editor referred to Dr. Walter Finkler's successful experiments in transplanting the heads of insects. The blurb continues, "So the operation of exchanging your old stomach for a new one may, after all, not be an impossibility. . ."

True enough, such an operation is still in the realm of science fiction; so far as today's knowledge goes, there are difficulties attending the transfer of organs over and beyond surgical requirements. Tissue and cell dissimilarities still make it impossible for you to

give or take an eye, for example, to or from anyone except your identical twin. Any science fiction dealing with transplanted organs today must include an awareness of these difficulties, and offer some sort of explanation about how they were overcome.

Amazing Stories' editor did not, however, see any objection to something else in the Alexander story—a type of reasoning which is fatal in science fiction. In the story, a wealthy man, whose stomach has been weakened by high living, pays a healthy peasant-type immigrant ten thousand dollars to exchange stomachs with him. The operation is a success, but both men experience a strange after-effect: the young Italian finds himself

assailed by cravings that are satisfied only by the most expensive foods; Colonel Seymour no longer enjoys eating at the Ritz, but has to seek out low-class restaurants.

NOW THERE'S an unstated assumption behind this—an assumption that a man's soul is immanent in each part of his body, and that each organ expresses the soul's personality in its own fashion. More—when an organ is transplanted into someone else's body, the part becomes greater than the whole; Colonel Seymour's stomach is more powerful than the young Italian's will power, and vice versa. (Psychological vagaries *might* have some such results in an individual instance, but both author and editor treat the phenomenon as physical; in the end, the operation is reversed, and both patients are "normal" again.) All of which may pass for some sort of magic, but it isn't science; it isn't logic; it's bad theology; and it doesn't belong in science fiction. (In *Weird Tales*, it made some very good stories, though.)

The same assumption underlie two other surgical tales printed in later issues of *Amazing Stories*: "The Black Hand" by Charles Gardner Bowers (January 1931) and "The Ambidexter" by David H. Keller,

MD. (April 1931). I have seen this theme many times since then, in stories purporting to be science fiction; and perhaps you may have seen instances in recent years. It's the sort of fallacy which seems to have a peculiar fascination for writers of imaginative fiction, even some who could be presumed to know better.

IN THE SAME February issue, (all stories mentioned here come from 1927 issues of *Amazing Stories*, unless otherwise specified), we have "The Thought Machine" by Ammianus Marcellinus. The author is presumably one of those "scientists" who, Hugo Gernback relates, were willing to write scientifiction providing that the stories were not published under their own names.

The thought machine is:
 ... a device of a hundred thousand parts, that in its different divisions would perform nearly all the simpler operations of the human mind, with a degree of accuracy of as high degree, as the accuracy of his old friend, the adding machine, and without fatigue. But as the adding machine had been no match for a trained bookkeeper, the Psychomach, as Smith called it, was no match for a trained thinker. It occupied a large circus tent ...

The Psychomach is the beginning; for the rest of the Twentieth Century, scientists and engineers turn out increasingly bigger and better Psychomachs. Eventually, mankind lets the thinking machines do everything for him, and is reduced to savagery when, in the far future, they break down and no one can repair them. The machines warn and threaten men with disaster before the event, but have no control over them.

The theme of the relation between Man and "thinking machine" is still a fruitful one in science fiction. Since the Marcellinus story, we've seen innumerable tales where the thinking machine attained personality of its own and (1) revolted and tried to destroy humanity, (2) deserted Man in order to find its own destiny, (3) controlled Man benevolently until it was destroyed by those who decided that humanity was being ruined (4) deserted Man and/or destroyed itself for humanity's good. Don A. Stuart's "The Machine" (*Astounding Stories*, February 1935) is an outstanding example of the last.

IN THE MAY issue, "The Singing Weapon" by Ben Prout is the first story where-in an invasion of America is

foiled by supersonic weapons, which strike notes that disintegrate the enemy's aircraft.

In the June issue, we have "The Lost Comet" by Ronald M. Sherin, an interesting mixture of sound science fiction, acceptable magic, and utter nonsense. The protagonist, who describes himself as a humble star-gazer and visionary, and who has dreamed up a new system of mathematics, reveals that the principal part of Viela's comet did not disintegrate, as was believed. The story is supposed to take place in 1930. Professor Alphonse Montequieux declares:

"Now listen to this: when Biela's comet divided in 1845, the smaller fragment continued in its course; but the main body was deflected and changed orbit. A real mathematician would have perceived this during its last appearance in 1852, when the two nuclei were already over a million miles apart. *But Biela's comet is at last coming back, and it will strike the earth exactly upon the vernal equinox, six months from today! . . . I have mathematically deduced its greatly elongated orbit and proved the point in which it must appear within a second of an arc. . . .*"

THE REASON why we are in for a catastrophe, the

professor explains, is this:

"... And do not think that comets are so harmless as optimistic astronomers teach. The density of comets, like that of planets, varies with age and chemical constitution. The coming comet possesses a nucleus of considerable density, as its attractive power and gravitational resistance clearly prove. All comets contain carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen, but the relative proportions in which these elements are compounded are not known; consequently there can be no certainty regarding the effect of cometary gases upon terrestrial atmosphere and organisms. ..."

Fair enough, so far; the author has given an acceptable explanation of why the "missing" part of Biela's comet did not break up, as did the rest of it. (While it's generally believed that both halves of the comet *did* disintegrate back in 1852, we do not have absolute proof.) Now the author inserts a bit of magic. I refer to "magic" in the sense that Dr. Macklin, with whom I discussed this story some weeks back, uses the term in analyzing science fiction. It's using magic when, in a story, something exists, or operates, etc., because the author *says* it does—as in the

instance of planets beyond Pluto, or Dr. E. E. Smith's inertialess drive. "Magic" of this nature cannot be attacked, at least not according to scientific knowledge at the time the particular story was written; one can only pick flaws in the way an author has developed his magic, if his logic is faulty. This is quite different from writing stories about a hollow Earth, chemicals that will shrink people to the size of insects, etc., things which are ridiculous by the light of what is known.

"... My opinion, however, is that these elements, combined with a new substance which I strongly suspect to exist within comets, would be absolutely fatal to organic life based upon amorphous carbon. The conclusion, therefore, is evident: terrestrial humanity is about to come to an end, even though the earth itself is not totally destroyed."

MR. SHERIN'S magic is very modest indeed. The professor does not specify his substance, does not claim to have isolated it, nor does he tell how the substance combines with known elements to produce the lethal effect, nor does he indicate just what the effect is. We cannot dispute

him; however, since he has no data except a strong suspicion, it is no wonder that no one believes him. And since he has deduced the orbit of the "lost comet" by the manipulation of only two orbital elements (and, in addition, through a new system of mathematics which he has invented himself, and which no one else understands) it's small wonder that no astronomers or mathematicians will believe that the professor knows what he's talking about. After all, it actually takes the manipulation of six orbital elements to figure out cometary orbits!

Unlike the protagonists in later such stories, the professor has no plan or invention which will prevent the disaster, or save the world. He can only give warning.

Well, it's no great surprise when the professor is incarcerated in a sanitarium, but Biela's comet *does* show up; however, the professor's calculations have been a little off:

"...By an act of Providence, the central nucleus of the comet missed the terrestrial surface by a distance which could not have exceeded 300 miles. The concussion we felt a few moments ago was due to the debris emitted by the coma. ..."

And Professor Montesquieux says sadly:

"I have made a serious and unforgivable mistake. This deviation in the comet's path is wholly accounted for by the perturbation caused in passing the Jovian orbit. ..."

THAT'S PUTTING it mildly, even if we assume that the professor meant that Jupiter was close to the comet when the comet crossed the Jovian orbit. Since it was Jupiter's gravitational field which broke up Biela's comet in the first place, the professor's oversight was indeed serious. That he was able to predict the orbit as closely as he did, with his secret system, is an amazing story in itself. Which all proves that mad geniuses with new mathematical systems had better leave comets alone if they want to keep their freedom.

However, like the wolf in the fable, Biela's comet *did* show up; and to believe that no astronomer was able to predict its return, or that no one thought of Biela's comet, and set out to calculate its orbit in the conventional manner when the first phenomena of its return became visible, is sheer nonsense.

Here we have another unspoken assumption which is to be found in a great deal of fiction (and in some stories is spoken out plainly): that is "conspiracy" theory of scien-

tists' behavior. It assumes that all the scientists are banded together in a clandestine hierarchy, one of the by-laws of which is that no one will pay any attention to anyone who comes up with a startling conclusion derived by unorthodox methods, (or by orthodox ones, if the claimant lacks the "proper" pedigrees) and that any such person persisting in his efforts to get his claim examined, will be railroaded into an asylum, etc.

A particular astronomer or mathematician might well have snorted at the professor's claims, at first. But when the

first phenomena of the "lost comet" became visible, to assume that *no astronomer or mathematician* would sit down and try to determine if this thing really could be that "lost comet" the old professor was talking about some months back is utter nonsense.

Still, Sherin's "Lost Comet" is a model of virtuous science fiction, compared to the numerous "comet doom" stories written and published in later years.

There were a few more "firsts" in 1927, and we'll get to them in the next issue.

R.A.W.L.

Being stopped for speeding is no fun—particularly when one has the body of a lovely, red-headed girl in the trunk compartment!

don't miss

MURDER'S PUPPET

by Edward A.

Dieckmann



*in the
November
issue of*

**FAST-ACTION
DETECTIVE and MYSTERY**

Now on sale

Stories

The Professor From Pyjm

by BRUCE TUCKER
& IRVING COX, JR.

Mytohell was out of this world, and so was his story of impending destruction and the apparatus he swore would save Earth. But, looney or not, he was a fine teacher . . .

MY SON, unity is the necessary prerequisite to maturity; never forget that." He spoke gently, in that paternal way of his—like a teacher lecturing a somewhat thick-witted student. I ignored him. He talked that way most of the time, and I was used to it. Usually I just gave him a transistor, or a coil of wire, or a condenser—or whatever gadget he'd asked me to bring. Then he'd settle down and quit babbling his other-world nonsense.

His name was Mytohell. That might have been his first or his last name; I didn't know. He refused to be called anything else. It was an unusual name, and very much in keeping with the rest of the man. Mytohell was tall—but not unusually so—and a big man, surprisingly well-built and well-preserved for his age. His hair was white, with a foggy touch of blue in it. Dressed in that long, flowing nightgown—which he preferred to wear most of the time—Mytohell resembled a Greek philosopher or a modern prophet. Or, more to the point, a schoolteacher recreated out of ancient Athens. I could never entirely escape that comparison.

Socrates, prophet, teacher: yet his home was the Sunset Sanitarium, where "The Aged Receive a Well-earned Rest in the Golden Years."

I'm majoring in chemistry,

in my second year at the university. My grandfather was committed to the Sunset Sanitarium seven months ago and, because he and I had always been very close, I spent a great deal of time there with him. For the first month or so, grandpop waited eagerly for each of my frequent visits. He'd save every scrap of gossip that his inquisitive—and highly imaginative—mind could uncover, and insist on releasing this jumbled flood on my unsuspecting ears. That was at the beginning. Then slowly grandpop lost interest in the gossip; he became silent and serious. He wanted me to come see him, but when I did he never had much to say. I knew my being there helped him, so I continued visiting the sanitarium whenever I could. I began bringing my assignments and my lecture problems to work on while I sat by his wheelchair.

THAT WAS how I met Mytohell. One day I found him sharing grandpop's room; he'd been moved in from another ward—a prison ward, I found out later. For a while Mytohell watched me working at a particularly aggravating problem in atomic weights. Usually, chem didn't bother me. It was a subject I liked; I went through the work in a breeze. But that afternoon nothing came out the way it should. Maybe it was because I was tired; maybe it was be-

cause I was worrying about Grandpop's condition.

Or maybe it was because Mytohell's eyes were fixed on me—glittering, black agates. His stare was hypnotic and uncomfortable. I felt like a naughty schoolboy caught in a silly, classroom prank. I'll never understand how Mytohell was always able to give me that feeling.

"I'm glad to see you studying a discipline like chemistry," Mytohell said. "Even a system as primitive as yours. Most of your people, I'm afraid, think more in terms of emotion; you give me hope that something can still be worked out."

"I'm sure it will, sir," I answered glibly. I had visited grandpop often enough to know it was necessary to humor the inmates.

"You seem to be having trouble," Mytohell went on. "Is there something your mind can't grasp?"

"It's nothing. I don't really think—"

"Let me see your—ah—your word for it is textbook, is it not?"

MYTOHELL took the text from me and, after glancing at the problem, he began to talk patiently and precisely, for all the world like one of my professors at the university. And he made as much sense. More, perhaps: I'd never heard such a lucid, clear-cut explanation. He talked

from one end of the equation to the other, filling in various related facts and theories which evolved from that particular equation. Unhurried, unassuming he explained a complex chemical statement—a madman who looked like a Biblical prophet. Where had he learned so much? How could he speak so accurately and so completely on a difficult point? Even my college professors would have had to refresh their memories on some of the points he brought up.

But he gave me no chance to question him. He fixed me with those glittering eyes and said, "In my world, the study of the chemical structure of matter is far advanced. We have long known these things which to you are new discoveries."

He was off again. A pity, too, for he could have made my college professors look like kiddies in the kindergarten. And he was a surprisingly good teacher, too. Mytohell could make any problem readily understandable. A complex discussion in the text he always reduced to statements as elemental as grammar school math. When I learned from him—or pretended to—he was very pleased. When I was more thick-witted than usual, he turned curt; sometimes he became furiously angry. I made every effort to avoid angering him in any way.

AND I DID everything I could to humor him, because I had genuine respect for his knowledge and his ability to teach. I brought him transistors, or coils of wire, or chemical compounds—any of the gadgets he said he needed for some secret project he believed he was working on. He called his machine a Unifactor. Once I ventured to ask him for a definition; he snapped that, of course, it was a device which would electronically unify all the nations of the earth. He seemed more than a little touchy on that point, so I didn't ask about the Unifactor again.

"My son, unity is a necessary prerequisite to maturity," he told me, nodding his head sagely.

"Oh?" He seemed to expect me to make some sort of reply, but I was at a loss for words.

"Until such a condition exists, Earth cannot take its place in the System."

"I—ah—I'm sure you're right, sir."

"The others say the Unifactor won't work on your type of mentality, and the alternative is to transpose your system, beyond the universe. But that sort of brutality we want to avoid—at least the minority of us are against it."

HE HAD A great deal more to say in the same vein. I pretended to listen.

It was after that particular conversation that I tried to find out about Mytohell's past. The people in charge of the Sunset Sanitarium told me that Mytohell—the only name under which he was registered—had been committed to the rest home by the alienation proceedings of a police court. At first he had been confined in a locked ward until the sanitarium psychiatrist decided Mytohell was harmless enough to be admitted to the general wards.

I cut classes one morning and spent three hours reading through the record of Mytohell's case in the county courthouse. The information was by no means complete, but it was all I ever learned about Mytohell.

The man had been arrested while stealing drugs from a serve-yourself pharmacy. With no previous record of arrest, Mytohell might have been sent to the county rehabilitation farm, but he told such a strange story he was held for an alienation hearing. Mytohell insisted that he needed the material he had stolen in order to complete a machine he was building. He said he didn't know anything about the use of money, and he considered all that rather trivial.

"Please understand," he was quoted as saying, "I'm working desperately against time. I must finish my Uni-factor before the System

votes to remove your world beyond the universe."

"The System?" he was asked.

"The organized government of the other civilized worlds. My home planet is Pyjm; I came here without a travel permit, and consequently I did not have access to the latest data on your economy. That's how I made this foolish mistake about money. Now that you understand why I am here, you will of course give me your complete co-operation. I expect you to supply me with a place to work and the material I need to complete my machine."

AFTER THAT, naturally, Mytohell was turned over to the psychiatrists. The police were unable to trace a family—not a single relative, near or distant—who could be responsible for the old man. He had no source of income. He held no social security card; he gave no address; neither his fingerprints nor his name were on file with any government agency.

Following Mytohell's first talk with a police department psychiatrist, a notation had been entered in the police file: "The delusion is amazingly well-integrated; subject lectures on details, irritably and impatiently; to a degree, his attitude suggests that he may have been a teacher—possibly a professor of chem-

istry, or a related science." So the psychiatrist had been aware of that, too. I felt better about my own reaction.

By the third interview, Mytohell's irritability was described as rage. His fury was increased by the fact that someone in the department had nicknamed him the Professor from Pyjm and the name had stuck. He threatened to discipline the psychiatrist unless his attitude changed.

The written record broke off there. After a good deal of checking, I found a sergeant who remembered the rest of it. Immediately after that third interview between Mytohell and the psychiatrist, the doctor suffered a disastrous mental breakdown, from which he never recovered. There was no apparent cause; but unfortunately, it gave Mytohell the opening to claim he had punished the psychiatrist, disciplining him for insubordination (The teacher again!) The police didn't waste any more time on Mytohell's case; he was at once committed to the sanitarium, where I had met him.

ALL THAT happened a year ago. Since then, Mytohell told me, it was difficult, to remember that his intention was to help the earth. He had thought a great deal about revenge, he admitted, until I came along

"You've brought me what I

need to build the Unifactor," he said. "I'll never forget that."

"When are you going to let me see the machine?"

"After it's finished, perhaps. I need but two items to complete it. Maybe you can bring them next time you come."

"Sure thing; you name it—I'll bring it." It was a rash statement, but I didn't think about what I was saying. I was too satisfied with my friendship for Mytohell; it was paying big dividends for me. All my university grades had taken a consistent turn for the better. Of course, old Doc Daniels—Biochem 235—suggested that I had invented a new and clever way of cheating. (Nobody had picked off an A from Daniels since 1923—the first year he taught when, as he kept telling us, he didn't know any better.) But, thanks to Mytohell's coaching, I had satisfied even Doc Daniels in the last exam; Doc hung over my shoulder, breathing down my neck, but I still got through it without even a minor mistake. Obviously, then, I would have agreed to bring Mytohell anything he said he wanted to build that dream-gadget of his.

"I WANT A hand generator," Mytohell said matter-of-factly.

"Check."

"And a three inch cube of solid yttrium."

Yttrium—one of the rarest of the rare earths! I swallowed hard. "Sir, wouldn't something else do just as well?"

"No, I must have that. My son, you are a student of chemistry; it should be simple for you to obtain a pure element." His glance turned hard and brittle; he became the schoolteacher, ready to discipline the recalcitrant student. "Don't you let me down, too; I couldn't face that, my son."

For a few days I stalled. I brought the old man a second-hand generator and that satisfied him temporarily. But shortly he was asking for the cube of yttrium again. That good old trivalent, metallic element, atomic weight 89.3. I kept telling Mytohell I was trying to locate what he wanted, but I hadn't rounded up enough quite yet. He seemed to believe I was deliberately stalling.

THE SUNSET SANITARIUM has a private and extensive garden for the use of its inmates. Very private, so the patients would not be subject to prying; and large, because the bigger it was the more space it provided for the patient to use in tiring himself out. The high walls around the garden acted in the interests of both privacy and restraint. There were spa-

ciuous lawns, well-kept pathways and fragrant flowers. And under a patch of hedge, Mytohell had concealed the Rube Goldberg gadget which he called his Unifactor.

He took me there one evening to show me what he had done—so I would understand, he said, how much he needed the cube of yttrium. It was dusk; the brighter stars were already glittering in the darkening sky. We walked along the gravel paths, that prophet-like man and I, until we reached the far end of the garden. Without speaking, he pointed out the hedge he had used. I stooped and pulled aside the lower branches. On the ground lay the thing he called a Unifactor. Not only did it *not* look capable of electronically pulling together this earth's belligerent nationalities; the machine looked as if it would barely stand the strain of holding itself together.

I gazed in what I hoped was a suitable attitude of awed reverence.

"And it's finished?"

"Except for that other substance. I must have the yttrium."

"This means a great deal to you, doesn't it, sir?"

"I've given my life to do this." There was something hypnotic in the way he spoke; he believed in himself, in his own mission.

A BREEZE began to stir through the garden. It whispered and sighed and seemed, somehow, to hold all the sounds of the world. It brought with it the loneliness of eternity, of a martyr's dedication. For a moment the past and the future were one.

"I would bring you peace," Mytohell said softly. "I would save you from oblivion; you and your people. You are worth saving; you have shown me that. If I could, I would tell my feelings to the wind, and let it carry my message around and around your earth until it has been heard and understood by you all. But I cannot reach you with that kind of rationality; in spite of the risks, I must use the Unifactor. And the System has left me so little time." His trembling fingers closed on my arm. "So little time! And I must bring peace to your world. Give me the material I need."

My voice was a choked whisper. "I will do my best," I promised. At that moment I meant it. "Old man," I asked, "you say you came from a world called Pjym; how did you come here?"

"Our techniques of transposition are beyond the means of expression in your primitive science."

"How is it that you speak our language so well?"

"It is an illusion of your own understanding; you

aren't yet able to identify telepathy."

He had an answer to every approach to reality.

We turned back toward the sanitarium. For a moment Mytohell looked up at the stars. The wind, stirring through his white hair, dramatized his Socratic appearance.

"This world called Pjym," I said; "can you see it tonight?"

"A planet of a distant sun, light years beyond your Milky Way? You know better than that, my son."

"Then why do you watch the stars?"

"They are silent and complete; the majestic monuments of time."

THE NEXT time I saw Mytohell he was flat on his back, strapped to his bed. His hands were slowly clenching and unclenching and his lips were drawn back. An attendant sat by the foot of the bed, an apple half-eaten in one hand and a book in the other. He paid no attention.

Mytohell recognized me—at least he seemed to. "Did you bring it?"

I'd almost forgotten the yttrium. "No. It—ah—it slipped my mind. But don't you think something else—"

Mytohell's body trembled with a fury so violent I thought he would snap the straps that bound him to the bed. "You've never really be-

lieved me; you're like the rest of them!"

"What happened?" I asked the attendant.

He looked up, looked at Mytohell, "Oh, him. "Threw a fit."

"ALL RIGHT, fill me in. What kind of a fit? When?"

"About four this afternoon. He came stampedin' in from the garden, screaming that something had happened to some kind of factory he had out there."

"The Unifactor."

"Yeah, maybe that's what he called it. So here he comes pullin' a tantrum. As quick as I could I got the ol' straight jacket on him an' then I called the supervisor. You done it just right, he says to me. You done it right."

"How long are you going to keep him here?"

"Till the Doc looks him over. Probably let him up today."

I left the attendant and walked over to my grandpop's bed. He told me much the same story, with the addition of one more detail. Mytohell seemed to think that someone had deliberately disturbed his Unifactor; and he had threatened to use it for something else. "You fools don't want help!"

FOR THREE days Mytohell's rage lasted; then, suddenly, he was very calm.

He asked to go into the garden. The supervisor was opposed to lifting all the restraints so rapidly; the psychologist was in favor of it—and the psychologist made his point. But there was a condition. Mytohell specified that he wanted me to go into the garden with him before dawn, and the psychologist strongly urged me to comply.

The old man meant nothing to me; yet I agreed to help them out. To help them? No, but I realized then that, in some indefinable way, Mytohell had become more than a friend to me.

The next morning, just before dawn, I met Mytohell in the common room of the sanitarium we went into the garden alone. In silence I followed Mytohell along the gravel path to the hedge at the back of the garden. On the ground I saw the remains of his Unifactor. Mytohell picked up the parts and, cradling the junk in his arm, he began to fit the machine together in a new pattern.

"You didn't let me finish what I came to do," Mytohell said to me very quietly.

"The material you asked for was so difficult to—"

"You didn't mention difficulties; all you wanted to do was humor me—string me along seems to be the popular phrase for it—because I was helping you improve your grades in the university. Naturally telepathy made a

great deal of my knowledge available to you—everything that you had the ability to understand."

HE TWISTED two wires into the generator terminals and looked into my eyes. I felt a s h a m e d—and afraid I was a little boy facing an angry tutor.

"You are typical of your world," Mytohell went on, in the same quiet tone. "A world too selfish to understand your own capabilities. That's the supreme irony of it all; your mind towers far above mine—if you could use it."

"I came to help you; you turned my help down and destroyed my machine."

He raised one arm toward the morning sky. The folds of his nightgown gave him the appearance of an ancient Roman patrician. "The others were right," he said. "You people do not deserve a place in the System. We have every right to banish you into that outer darkness where time has never been."

He caressed the generator. "But that is too serious a decision for me to make alone. I've revised the Unifactor; with this new machine, I could finish the job—but I won't. The final decision, my son, I leave to your world. This morning I'll send you part-way—into the gray limbo of transition. There your world will stay until the Sys-

tem carries out the sentence of banishment, or—" Mytohell smiled gently, sadly, "—or until you give us a reason to bring you back. One valid reason, my son; that's all we ask of Earth. One reason why you should not be condemned to oblivion."

FOR A SPLIT-SECOND he was the schoolteacher again. "Is it a lesson you're capable of learning? I've failed to teach it to you; now, can you pull yourselves up by your own bootstraps?" There was agony in his voice.

He glanced into my eyes and, in a sudden spasm of remorse, he twisted the handle of the generator. Knives of ice tore at my soul; nausea churned through my body. The pain passed. I stumbled back from hedge. Dimly, I was aware that Mytohell and his machine had vanished.

The sky was empty. Mytohell offers us a reprieve, a chance to survive. But are we capable of dragging ourselves back from oblivion? Can we find one valid reason why Earth and its culture should survive? I wonder...and I wonder in this gray desert, this fog of nothingness to which we have been condemned. This limbo where the stars do not turn through the black velvet of space; where the suns are dead and color and emotion is drained from our souls...



Special

Feature

FREEDOM—

A

DISCIPLINE

by Donald

Bower

An article which presents a different angle on the possibilities of science fiction.



A DISCIPLINE is a mode of teaching. Men have chosen to follow the "disciplines" of masters as long as the Earth has nourished the race we call human. Cellini's apprentices—as those of Praxiteles, Rembrandt, or a great modern painter, architect, surgeon, or statesman—underwent similar kinds of experience on the path to virtuosity in their chosen field of labor. Ordinarily, the main procedure of any discipline seems to be spending sufficient time with the "master," listening to him outline his thoughts, testing theories and constructions, feeling out the strength of his gifts, his native genius.

A great man attracts others to himself. Usually, these ones who come to study with him are men who feel their weakness, and they seldom produce work of value equal to that of the master. An instance where this did not follow was the case of Socrates, and of his followers. For Socrates, like some other of the profound spirits in the race history, left no written record signed by himself. But through the efforts of his disciples, we are enabled to observe and listen to the movement of this extraordinary mind. Plato never lost his reverence for his master, and, it would seem, he was never able to forgive the Athenians for executing the teacher of his youth.

In this one respect, Plato did not hear and obey Socrates. For the master had told his beloved friends that he was ready for death, and welcomed it, that it made not a whit of difference to him that he must die now rather than later. He meant to prove the law with his life and his death; and obedience to the law was of more value to him at the time of his death than at any other time. It was the occasion of his greatest struggle, the final test of his knowledge of life, the test of his truth.

In the veriest reality, Socrates wished to have the death penalty invoked, if this were the decision of his fellow citizens. He wanted to note his reactions. He wanted to count his spiritual pulse, as rigor mortis crept along his frame, much as a researcher in medicine might observe the action of a new drug upon his own body. Socrates wanted to know whether he, himself, was satisfied that he knew the truth; and only this manner of death, pressed upon him by circumstances beyond his control, could tell him if he had truly schooled himself to die without suffering of the spirit.

ANYONE who reflects deeply about qualities of life will soon come upon this principle: voluntary death, bowing to the necessity of life's cessation before its natural time, is a supreme

test of the faith or integrity of the one involved. There is no struggle with the "self" to be compared with the acceptance of the inevitability of death-with-honor, as against a choice of life-and-dishonor. If we say that Socrates would have kept his integrity by leaving Athens and remaining alive, he would have told us that remaining to accept the decision of the jury would have sustained his honor and integrity in the eyes of all men, but that to leave his city would maintain his good name only among those who knew and loved him. His wish was to be an example of the power to choose, the bodily presence of a disciplined mind, a free soul.

It is because of the free choice of Socrates, to die and give courage to the world, that men are interested in his way of life. For his teachings are secondary in importance to his conviction as to their worth. It is the strength of his conviction, his faith in the goddess of life, that makes us listen when he speaks. But to whom does Socrates speak? As with most great masters, he would speak with the one who gave time for his conversation. That was his only condition. No fees. No material gifts or other considerations. "Stay with me, if you so desire; and we will explore ourselves and each other", was his invitation.

BUT WHY was this necessary? Many wise men kept to themselves, as hermits, seeking only the company of their own thoughts. This was not the way of Socrates. He said men must only bear with each other long enough, and they would come to know the Truth. That the questions and answers of one man with another would prove truth to both of them, eventually. We may say that "Truth" meant to Socrates something like this: That which continues without change, or decay, or alteration at the hands of Time and Circumstance. That which endures in genuine security. Of course, he knew that words, or other symbols, could not be "Truth". So "Truth" could not be taught to another, if one had it in his own experience. Men can *talk about truth*, but though talk might bring one to the conviction of truth within oneself, there is no way to communicate it in words to another. Yet, despite this problem, talk is important, for it allows the movement of the mind to be brought more into the open, for better viewing by both parties in this dialogue of truthseeking. Socrates also said that books could not ask or answer questions.

I BELIEVE that books can, in some instances, ask the questions that are often in

the mind, and help to suggest answers. And, in the realm of free play of the "imagination", I think that this is precisely what occurs to the writer and consumer of Science Fiction.

The level of "improbability" has been altered so much in the last fifty years that we expect wonders, in the "physical" world; we do not expect a lack of them. And one of the most valuable contributions to the sum of mental disciplines is, I believe, Science Fiction. The writer tests himself, in his capacity to conceive in this kind of labor of the intelligence. And the reader tests himself, also, striving to match the creator of the work with freedom of thought sufficient to accompany the writer along the path to his goal.

And what is the goal? I am sure it is not simply to entertain, even though this would be enough, for relaxation of the kind afforded by Science Fiction is of inestimable value to modern man.

Solomon said there is nothing ever *new* under the sun. Yet, in the realm of ideas, at least the mode of expression may be new; and the experience of participating in ideas is always new. It is like a woman, refreshingly different in each change of dress, and not alone because of appearance. She knows that she has expended effort to create a new harmonious pro-

jection of her inner self... a new pronouncement of her being. This shows in her actions and secret joy as she parades before you with her symphony of color and line. She knows she is a different woman, and hopes you will see it, too. But she knows it, all the same.

IT IS THE same way with ideas. It does seem as though one runs into the same ideas over and over again. Nothing is now that was not formerly, even the theory of atomic structure—which must be dated at least 1000 BC. Men knew of the small sub-structure in the material things of life, by the sheer power of thought alone. No laboratory is necessary, if you have the power to think freely. The laboratory enables you to check your findings in one more way, that is true. But, in conceiving the nature of Reality, one checks every conclusion along the path; and no laboratory is necessary for the philosopher, who concerns himself with the problem of the nature of Life and Thought. For these are not material substances, though they have everything to do with the material things we see all about us.

To return to the products of Science Fiction: I see this as one of the finest Discipline of the Mind ever to be employed by mankind in its search for a better instru-

ment of understanding the Reality of life and the universe. In making such a statement, I realize that I have suggested that intelligence is universal, and that all minds are part of this one Intelligence. Whether one holds this view makes little difference as to the effect of the Science Fiction venture into enlarged consciousness. When I say that man searches for a better conceptive and creative instrument, I mean that all men participate in the growth of this general and universal instrument, that as each individual grows and develops in his apprehension of what is Real, he advances the general and unified level of the grasp of Reality, the Truth, which we all seek. (I believe that we seek it in ways unknown to us in ordinary conscious knowledge.)

SCIENCE FICTION is a group therapy of enormous size, in numbers of participants, if by this we mean that men are aided by this form of communication of constructions of the mind. One might call physical exercise "therapy". Massage of the body is used on both the strong athlete and the person not enjoying good physical health. In both instances, the desired results are the same: better levels of function.

The stretching of the mind that occurs in writing and reading Science Fiction is highly effective, as I see it,

for one principal reason: No strings are attached, no particular goals are set. Each reader gives what he is able to give, and receives accordingly. It is not true to say that only excellent quality in literary effort is productive of good results, for, if the reader carries on an analytic procedure while he reads, he not only "enjoys" the work, but he is aided by this analytic function, better to see his own shortcomings, and correct them.

This is the situation with writers, and creative workers in any field of endeavor. Each one notes with great care what is currently in the market. He observes its weak points, and the points of strength and beauty. One writer sees that another has gone ahead in some direction, but that probably there will be poor reception of this step taken toward greater sensitivity. The reader gets what he wants, and is able to use. Progress is always slow, so far as a better form is concerned; but never is creativity slackened, so far as meaning of the expressions. The writer knows he must hold his thoughts in some semblance of order, to make his meanings clear.

BUT THIS is not a short-coming of the effort, a drawback of the written word. Not at all. For, really, the writer works to clarify his thoughts unto himself, as much as to express them to others. And, if his thoughts are not more profound than their ordinary written expression, they are not worth reading, they are not of value to others. His thoughts must always run ahead and more deep than the words in which they are carried. If not, they do not carry far, nor effect the reader strongly. It is the potential power felt in written expression, the wordless message hidden in the words, but revealed in the synthesis of the reader's understanding.

Science Fiction is good precisely because it does not pretend to be *authority*. I see now that this is the point of my attempt, in these sentences. As Roger Bacon, the first modern Western Man, said, "Authority may impel belief; it cannot enlighten the understanding." Science Fiction gives powerful encouragement to the attempt to understand.



COMING NEXT ISSUE

HAUNTED CENTENNIAL

Wallace
by West



a
gun
for
grandfather

by F. M. Busby

Barney had a very
sound reason for his
proposed crime!

"I'M NOT KIDDING you at all, Phil" Barney insisted. "I *have* produced a workable Time Machine, and I am going to use it to go back and kill my grandfather." His pale, determined face certainly showed no sign of concealed humor. He hadn't sounded mirthful on the phone either, asking me to come over to his lab right away.

"But, Barney—what on earth for?" I protested. "In the first place..."

"Oh, don't bother telling me about the paradox. If I kill grandpa before papa is launched, I won't be born; so I can't go kill grandpa, and so forth. I don't know how that will work out."

"Then what's the point?" I asked. "Is this just another go-to-hell Barney Feldman gesture, or what?" Barney had made plenty of those: leaving school a week before graduation to enlist in the Air Force; getting court-martialed for refusing to shoot down an unarmed enemy transport plane; leaving

When the first time-travel stories appeared, a controversy started up at once. Time-travel is impossible, claimed the anti's, because if I could go back in time and shoot my grandfather before he procreated, then I wouldn't have been born. The pro's countered with: The fact that you were born proves that you didn't; it doesn't prove time-travelling impossible, but only that you can't change the past. Then came the alternate time-track stories. But through all this, a few people would ask, "But *why* shoot grandfather?"

a highly-paid job in government atomics for highly quixotic reasons. But this didn't fit.

"I just had a physical checkup, Phil. Seems I have about three years to live—the last two mostly under sedation."

"Barney, I..." There isn't much you can say. If I looked as shocked as I felt, it probably got across all right.

"I don't like that, Phil; I don't like it at all. The doctor gave me a lot of talk about faulty genes and linked characteristics; seems if I had brown eyes instead of blue, I wouldn't be having this particular form of dryrot." He lit one of his midget cigars and blew smoke.

"Have you checked with other doctors yet? Some of them are a lot less willing to write off a patient, you know."

"Three independent reports," he nodded. "There isn't much leeway between them. Finally, I checked back home with our old family doctor—you remember Evans?"

"Sure," I confirmed, "but he must be ninety years old by now."

"About seventy-five, I think," Barney corrected. "Mostly retired, but he keeps his office open for visiting purposes, and he hands out a few pills now and then. I

asked him about my father and grandfather. He scowled, his blue eyes slitting under black brows. "Phil, my grandfather died slowly and painfully. My father died slowly and painfully. Now it's come up to me, and I don't like it."

"But Barney—you can't seriously plan to wipe out three generations to vent your spite. I don't doubt you can do it if you want to, but it's a horrible thought."

"OH, COME off it, Phil," he growled. "It's not spite; I'm merely going to erase a mistake and clear up a lot of suffering, all down the line. My grandmother, my mother, my wife..." he winced... "she's pregnant, you know—they'll all marry other people with sound genes." He snarled at me, "I can take it, and my forbears already have. What I can't take is the thought of my unborn child growing up to the same damn thing."

"Well, it might not be passed on, you know," I argued. "Isn't it a fifty-fifty chance? And mightn't they find a cure before your child grows up?"

"You don't know much about genetics, I guess," he answered. "To show up in three straight generations, the faulty gene has to be a dominant even though it's linked with recessive blue eyes. Not only that, it's getting worse every time. Grandpa was hurt-

ing for more than twenty years, but he could still get around. The thing took eight years to kill dad from the time it started bothering him. With me it's three years, they say. And it's striking earlier each time."

He leaned back in his chair. "I suppose, in the ordinary way, I'd just go through with it. Certainly I couldn't kill myself and the child when it's born. I couldn't do that to Wanda."

"Then how can you..."

"But this way," he overrode me, "with this Time Machine that I was going to get a Nobel prize for, it won't hurt Wanda in the least. She won't ever have met me, and she'll probably marry that bone-headed fullback I rescued her from. Can't knock off *his* grandpa, though—I'd be doing the school out of the only All-American it ever had."

"Barney, why bother to tell me all this?" I asked. He looked hurt. "What I mean is—if you're successful, you won't exist; so I won't ever have met you, and won't remember this because it won't have happened."

"Because I don't *know* what will happen, Phil. If this were somebody else trying such a thing, I'd want to know about it beforehand, so as to be able to check on the results if it were possible. You and I have been friends a long time, and I want you to have the data if there is any data."

He opened a desk drawer and began sorting papers. "I want you to take all this stuff home with you," he said. "I don't know how wide-spread any changes will be. This lab of mine is a building I had constructed for my own use; it may or may not still be here." He started to hand me a piece of paper, then put it back.

"NO, USE YOUR own notebook." I pulled out an address pad. "Now write in there for you to come to this address—no, make it just the block—1400 block on West Fremont Street—to see if there is a brick building at 1425. Write down that you're to look for a man named Bernard Feldman at that address, if it exists. Got it?" I nodded. "That may be general and detached enough to survive the collapse of causation leading to it, being as you wrote it yourself in your own notebook. Put tomorrow's date on it—yes, I'm going tonight—and staple it on your desk calendar when you get back to your office. Then tomorrow, well, see what happens—if you can."

"Sure, Barney," I agreed, uncomfortably. How do you say goodbye to a man who is going to pull himself out by the roots? Do you wish him good luck or just stand silent a moment with your hat held over your heart, as when the

flag passes? And blow Taps, maybe?

I thought of a question to stall the evil moment. "Barney, how come you're only going back to your grandfather? I mean..."

"Good question Phil. Several answers. One is, I don't know that the bad genes existed before his time. His father was killed in the Civil War and his father lived to be ninety-three—obviously the gene pattern was pretty good in his generation."

"How about their wives? Could the bad gene have come in that way?"

"It might; I just don't have enough information. I gathered that it can be passed through either the male or female line, but only shows up in the males—but this is pretty theoretical. None of the medics knew for sure."

"You said there were several reasons for picking on your grandfather. What else?"

He grinned, the first sign of honest amusement since I'd arrived. "Mainly on account of because that's about as far back as the Machine will take me," he chuckled. "The past is pretty darn solid, Phil. It's a little like a compost pile—fairly soft near the surface, but hard packed further down, with all that Time piled on top of it. Don't work too close with that analogy, though—it's rough enough to draw blood if it slips in your hand."

"You're beginning to sound more like Barney, Barney," I commented, which was a mistake; he went serious again.

"Yes, I always shape up when I have work to do. You'll have to be running along, because I have work to do right now, Phil, if I'm going to be ready to step off the way I've planned it."

"What difference does it make when you get into your gadget?" I queried.

"**Q**UITE A bit," he answered. "I've done a certain amount of experimenting—not enough to present a paper to the Physical Society but enough to find out that there are a lot of factors involved in setting up to get to a specific time. For a while, I thought I was coming up with a scientific basis for some form of astrology, but that didn't pan out. Luckily. The PS would have excommunicated me."

"What will they do with you now, Barney?" I asked quietly. His gaze flickered.

"Damn you, Phil; I might have known you'd try to pull a few stops. Sure, I can melt out of my personal life with a bearable amount of struggle, because that's going to be a net plus in human happiness. But I've glossed over, in my own mind, that I'm losing the chance to present Time Travel to the Society as an accomplished fact."

His knuckles were white on

the arms of his chair. "Phil, I would go through my personal torture gladly to be able to hand them that. But I will not put my kid through it." He lit another midget cigar, and his hands were shaking. "OK, you had to try. Now so-long, Phil. Beat it back to your knickknack shop and thanks for listening." I peddle turbine-generators to power companies; to Barney that's selling knick-knacks.

"OK, Barney." We shook hands. "I'll be by here tomorrow, unless the notes and memory both evaporate." A golf ball was in my throat. "And good luck, boy, good luck whatever happens." Barney just grunted something, and I was halfway down the block before it struck me that I'd never know what the last thing was that Barney Feldman would every say to me.

I wasn't much good for business the rest of the day, or at home either. Dorene became quite irritated by the way I'd stare at her and then have no idea of what she'd been saying. When I wasn't bending a fixed gaze on her, it was at one of the kids, Laura or Timmy.

Finally Dorene waved her hand back and forth in front of my face. "Come out of it, Phil," she urged. "What's eating on you tonight, anyway?"

I couldn't tell her; it wouldn't have made sense and would have made her feel badly. The whole thing was too

esoteric to throw at her all at once; and without the background I couldn't explain why I was compulsively absorbing the sights and sounds of my wife and children as if I'd never see them again.

I made a quiet resolution to try my best never again to be "too busy" for them, and said, "It's nothing to worry you about, honey. An unfortunate deal happened to a fellow I know. I think it's going to be all right, but it was a little bit of a shock to me, and I've been mulling it over." We went on to discuss something else. It was a safe bet that I would never have to explain Barney's problem, not if his plans worked out.

We went to bed early, shortly after the kids were down for the night, but I didn't sleep too well. I'd lie awake, doze, dream weirdly, get up for a cigaret (which is not a usual nightly practice with me), and lie awake some more. In the morning, a hang-over would have been an improvement.

BREAKFAST was a mess. The toaster burned out its element, and blew a fuse. We were out of spare fuses and I will not strap across them, having written too many safety pamphlets. The coffeelator is on the same outlet so the coffee was rare; we didn't think of this until Dorene poured it. The station wagon had a flat; the children and I

left home in a cab to be late to school and office.

The Crow River turbine had seized a bearing on its test run. It took me all morning to expedite a repair crew, and ensure rapid shipment of replacement parts. That was due to the obstructionist tactics of our warehouse superintendent, a man dedicated to keeping his stock in the warehouse superintendent, a man dedicated where it won't get worn-out and weather-beaten. I'd been promising myself a try at having him transferred for a long time; it took just one phone call to the head office but there was quite a wait until the right man was out of conference. I celebrated by taking my secretary to lunch, with Martinis. It was 1:30 when we returned, a late start on the day's normal business.

I took a look at my desk calendar to see what was current. That was the first time all day that I'd had time to think of Barney Feldman.

I remembered Barney Feldman! I was out the door without a word to anyone, walking much too fast for my legs and wind.

The building was there at 1425 West Fremont and it had Barney's sign on it. I didn't bother to knock, but went through the front of the building back to Barney's sanctum. There, I knocked.

"Come in, come in."

The blinds were closed.

With only a desk lamp on, the room was dim. Barney, I saw in the light from the hall before I closed the door, was slouched back in his chair, eyes closed, with a half-filled glass in his hand matching the half-emptied bottle on the desk.

"Barney!"

"THE SAME," he drawled. He sat up and looked at me. "No, not the same, Phil. Not exactly." He wasn't drunk, just a little high.

"What happened, Barney?" I gasped. "Did you change your mind?"

"Did I change my..." He broke off, laughing. Laughing until he choked a little and coughed it out. "Yes, you might say I changed my mind. Yes, you might." He started to laugh again and I got sore.

"Damn it, Feldman!" I blurted. "I don't know what you think is so funny. I've been sweating you out ever since you told me that sob story. Is that what's so funny? Was this a rib? If it was, I think I'll just..." I had him by the shirt-front and was taking aim when he recovered his voice.

"No, Phil," he gulped, "no rib. Wait a minute now, I'll tell you. It's a little hazy—yesterday, I mean—*your* yesterday."

"My yesterday?" It still came up blank.

"Yes, your old yesterday; it's getting kind of hazy now

alongside my new one. The change seems to propagate slowly; I don't have it figured out at all."

"What happened?" I yelled. "Did you go back and kill your grandfather?"

"I went back and shook his hand," Barney said, seriously. I just stared.

"Last night I was looking through a lot of old papers," Barney continued. "It seemed to me that I ought to put things in order a little. Don't ask me why; it seemed the thing to do. Among other things, I found grandpa's diary."

He held up the bottle and an empty glass; I nodded and he poured me one. A taste of it helped.

"When my grandfather was thirty years old, he came down out of the logging country with a stake. He came down to farming territory, right around where we grew up—it's city now—to buy himself a farm and find himself a wife. He bought the farm, fixed up the house, and got engaged to a little French-Canadian girl with eyes as dark as his own."

"But two brown-eyed people..." I began.

"They were going to be married in June," Barney went on firmly. "But one day, a young stranger walked up to my grandfather and put a bullet in him." He waved me to silence. "Grandpa was a sick man for a long time, and

it didn't look as if he would ever recover. His bride-to-be's father moved away and took the girl along with the rest of the family. It's a wonder the man ever did get well in what passed for a hospital then, but he had devoted nursing from a comely blue-eyed blonde."

"A blue-eyed blonde," I repeated.

"SHE NEEDED a husband pretty badly, Phil. She was supporting an invalid father, who was dying in a slow and painful fashion. She married my grandfather and bore him a blue-eyed son who was my father." He smiled broadly at my blank stare. "I assure you, I won't wind this up into: I'm my own grandpa."

"My grandfather worked hard on his farm to support his wife and son. He never did recover completely from that bullet wound; it pained him the rest of his life. At the age of fifty-one it killed him."

"I read most of that in my grandfather's diary, Phil," he said. "I guess it's been around here for years but I'd never looked into it before. The rest was in family letters."

"So you went back and..."

"Phil. I read about somebody shooting my grandfather, somebody who appeared, fired a gun, and disappeared before he could be found. That was me, that I read about. Another me."

"But why?"

He shrugged. "Maybe a variation of this same misunderstanding," he hazarded.

"I got into the Machine and went back to the date when my grandfather was shot. I went up to that farm and saw him. Passing by in a neighborly way, I introduced myself and shook his hand. We both thought it was quite a coincidence that we were both named Feldman, of course. Then I went back to the Machine and came home.

"Things started to shake and whirl when I got back into the Machine. I passed out somewhere along the line, and woke up here about two hours ago. I broke out this bottle and have been quietly celebrating and waiting for you to show up. I'll be a little drunk,

getting home, but I guess I can square it with Wanda. Yes, I think I can."

He shook the bottle. "There isn't much left of this, Phil. Why don't we have one more to finish it, and then I'll be going home."

I nodded. He poured and we lifted our glasses. "Here's to grandpa," he toasted, "and to my new brunette grandma."

"Well, that's that." Barney rose and snapped on the overhead lights. He took his coat from the hallrack, put it on, and stuffed some papers into the side pockets. Turning to me, he said, "Let's go, Phil."

There wasn't the sign of a shadow in his clear brown eyes.



NEXT TIME AROUND

The big news this time is that *Future Science Fiction* is returning to a bi-monthly schedule of publication with our next issue, Number 35, which goes on sale the first of December.

At this writing, we cannot predict that all the distribution snarls will have been unravelled at that time, so may I suggest that you place an order with your dealer—or, better still, subscribe. And tell your friends to look for new *Future* in two months, rather than three.

Wallace West will be with us in the first bi-monthly issue, with a topnotch novelet entitled "Haunted Centennial". It's the centennial of the first space rocket under consideration, and a ghost-ridden proposition that turns out to be!



A Department For The
Science - Fictionist

INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION

Reports and Reminiscences

By **Robert A. Madle**

News and Views

THE ELEVENTH anniversary meeting of the Eastern Science Fiction Association attracted approximately 150 attendees. The majority present were flying saucer proponents, most of whom attended because of the announced theme of the meeting, "Flying Saucers—After Ten Years." They

probably went home quite unelated after hearing Lester del Rey, L. Sprague de Camp, and Dr. Thomas S. Gardner take the flying saucer theory apart at its seams. However, Hans Santesson, editor of *Fantastic Universe*, spoke in the affirmative. Those interested in attending a meeting of the Eastern Science Fiction Association should write to Allan Howard 101 Fairmount Avenue, Newark 7, New Jersey. (For a detailed article on the ESFA, see the August *Science Fiction Quarterly*.)

Illegal activities become legal if they are conducted in a space ship—at least 50 miles up! This is the opinion of P. K. Roy, of the International Civil Aviation Organization, who spoke before the American Rocket Society in Washington on April 5th. International

laws, said Mr. Roy, extend upwards into the sky only so far as there is sufficient air to support aircraft. Therefore, above the 50 mile limit anything could go—even murder, according to this interpretation.

Another interesting aspect of the near future, expounded at this same American Rocket Society meeting, is a method of exploring the solar system with unmanned ion-propelled rockets, the cost of which would be quite moderate. This rocket, called the "Snooper," would be boosted into space by a tug, similar to the one which will be used to get the earth satellite into its orbit. Once up there, it would then be sent on a path toward a planet, and orbit around it, collecting data of vital importance. Mr. Martin I. Willinski, spokesman for the group of research engineers who developed "Snooper" while working for the Rocketdyne Division of North American Aviation, said the rocket would attain a speed of about seven miles a second, propelled by the electrically charged atoms and molecules being discharged.

The Challenge of Outer Space is the title of a recently released Office of Armed Forces Information and Education film. Dr. Wernher von Braun is featured in this government-sponsored depiction of what life will be like in a space sta-

tion, more than 1,000 miles above the earth... Fredric Brown gets Anita Ekberg! Yes, he does—as the star for his fabulously successful detective novel, "The Screaming Mimi." Harry Joe Brown, the producer, says that no punches will be pulled in the filming of this flicker.

THE PRO TURNED FAN

QUITE OFTEN you read in this department a statement about a "fan turned pro." In recent months, Robert Silverberg, Harlan Ellison, Randall Garrett, and other have been referred to in this manner. This time, however, the reverse is occurring—the next few paragraphs will discuss a top-flight science fiction and fantasy author who became an active fan after a decade of professional writing! The name of this outspoken member of the beanie-brigade is Robert Bloch.

Yes, Robert Bloch, whose first professionally printed story appeared in *Weird Tales* for January 1935, is one of today's most popular science fiction fans. (Incidentally, Bob was only 17 years old when he sold his first story, so he isn't exactly a granddaddy yet.) In reality, however, the qualification should be made that Bloch spent a long time on the fringes of fandom. Before mak-

ing his first sale to *Weird Tales*, he had been a reader of s-f and fantasy for quite a few years. Through his correspondence, and contact with Raymond A. Palmer, he discovered the fan magazine of its day, *Fantasy Magazine* and, in 1935 and 1936, wrote several pieces for it. A short quote from his first, "The Ultimate Ultimatum," will display that Bloch possessed his keen sense of humor even as a youth. Also, without actually being a fan, he predicted the first s-f convention! The next paragraph is Bloch, word for word, from *Fantasy Magazine*, August, 1935:

It was a big convention. Lovecraft was there. So was Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, and Otto Binder. Ray Palmer was present, and Stanley Weinbaum. Also there was I, thrilled and proud at attending this gathering of masterminds. We met in an old family crypt of mine. Outside the moon was shining, the stars were gleaming—and I was lit up, too.

Typical Bloch, eh? But, as mentioned, he contributed just several items to *Fantasy Magazine*—more or less as a preliminary to his professional success. After selling his first to *Weird Tales*, he was not to

be stopped. Farnsworth Wright, then editor of WT, bought Bloch's stories almost as fast as Bob could write them. For Robert Bloch was just what WT's readers wanted—someone who could write in the style of the master himself, H. P. Lovecraft.

BLOCH SAYS that it was during this period that he again almost became a fan—or, at least, was exposed to it. He went west to visit a former fan of his, just turned pro, Henry Kuttner. And, as Bloch puts it: "He introduced me to a fan named Fritz Leiber. I attended as LASFS meeting and met a fan named Ackerman... and an obnoxious young kid whom they tolerated for his puns—a Roy Burberry or Ray Bradley, or some such name." But, even though exposed to fandom, he was only vaguely aware of it and "...the idea of visiting a fan club, or aligning myself with the feuds and factions of time meant nothing to me." For Bloch, being a dirty old pro, was interested only in money.

And, at this time, Bloch became a science fiction writer. (He had been strictly a weird fiction writer up until 1938.) Raymond A. Palmer, whom Bloch had known for years, became editor of *Amazing Stories* and its new companion, *Fantastic Adventures*. To make

this phase of his s-f'ish life brief, Bloch became one of Palmer's mainstays and wrote scores of stories for him, the most popular of which were his humorous "Lefty Feep" series. And he's been writing science fiction ever since, although he will be quick to tell you that fantasy is still his favorite. In this day and age, however, the market for fantasy is just about non-existent.

Then, in 1946, after successfully dodging and skirting fandom for about fifteen years, Bloch "discovered" fandom. He attended the 1946 World Convention in Los Angeles and met many of the popular men of the day, including a Mr. Bob Tucker. Says Bob, "One look from his patriotic eyes (red, white, and blue) and I was hopelessly smitten." Since then, Bloch has attended most all of the big conventions, including every one since 1951, and every Midwestcon since that date. And he has become completely enmeshed in correspondence, fanzine articles, convention programs, and like that.

IT HAS CONSTANTLY amazed us how Bloch has been able to find time to write the scores of fan articles he has written during the past several years. Very few fan editors are turned down when

they request an article from Bob, and he is always among the first to promote worthy fan projects. Lately he has been promoting fandom in the professional magazines. When Bill Hamling found that he was going to have to obtain someone to conduct "Fandora's Box" (due to Mari Wolf's resignation), Robert Bloch was his immediate first choice. Then Bob sold a long article on fandom to Tony Boucher—probably the most comprehensive ever to appear in a professional magazine. ("Some of My Best Fans Are Friends," *F&SF*, September, 1955.) His crowning achievement however, was the story, "A Way of Life," which depicted a future civilization with a fan-oriented political and social system! (*Fantastic Universe*, October, 1956.)

Bob Bloch, although becoming an active fan comparatively late in his science-fictional life, is one of the most sincere members of fandom. He firmly believes that fanzines are the only remaining outlet for a free exchange of personal opinion in the country. On this point Bob is particularly emphatic, and in a recent letter to us he said:

In fanzines you find people of all ages, all walks of life, all backgrounds, all outlooks, going at it

hammer and tongs. Sometimes they're vulgar, sometimes they're banal, but they're always interesting. And they do find that free exchange of ideas which constitutes the working principle of a democracy. To me this is the most stimulating aspect of fandom...the degree of free communication it affords. And, as I say, I've met so many fine and interesting people in the field.

The science fiction world certainly appreciates those comments, Bob. It's a distinct pleasure having you with us.

THE FANZINES

SCIENCE-FICTION FIVE-YEARLY: 25¢ for a five-year subscription from L. Shaw, Ltd., 545 Manor Road, Castleton Corners, Staten Island 14, New York. Edited and published by Lee Hoffman Shaw and Larry Shaw (married-up critters), this is a side-

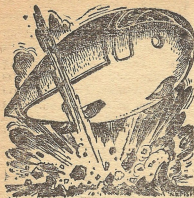
splitting (maybe even front-splitting, too) burlesque of some of today's science fiction magazines. Two new serials start this issue: "Stars of the Slave Giants," by Calvin Aaargh, and "Nissassa," by Nalrah Nosille. These are good examples of the type of stories once featured by the now defunct *Tenalp*, and now being featured by another L. Shaw magazine. (We hate to mention a competitor's title, but this one is a companion to *Infinity*.) SFFY has complete stories, too. As well as article, readers' departments, and even book reviews. It's real fun, and we advise you to send for a copy. Might mention that Calvin Aaargh and Nalrah Nosille are Robert Silverberg and Harlan Ellison, former very active fans, now big-time pros.

Send all fanzines for review to Robert A. Madle, 7720 Oxman Road, Palmer Park, Hyattsville, Maryland.



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THE ROUND PEG

by George R. Hahn

Basil Thorpe was a phoney, all right—but the weirdest phoney imaginable...

ALTHOUGH it was immediately obvious that Basil Thorpe's name was a most clumsily assumed one—hardly a name to fit in with his small, dark, gesticulating person, or with the improbable exoticism of his accent—the obvious answer hasn't occurred to anyone else, apparently. I can't see why; I'm no genius, yet it's obvious to me.

Thorpe exploded into the quiet jingoism of our suburbia one day, just about a year ago. I met him a week after his arrival, and I had already heard much about him.

In a week he had become active, as we say, in the Masquers (our little theatre group); the Red Cross; the Community Chest; the Audabon Society; the Pathfinders, and—dismayingly enough—both the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans.

Taxed lightly with this political ambiguity at a cocktail party at the Waldrons (hostesses and Basil Thorpe discovered each other like the Holy Grail), he had responded, "I approve of some policies of both parties. In the organizations I will work to bring to life those policies."

This conversation-stopper was reported to me with amused admiration as, also, was his answer to the classic question, "What do you do?"

He had answered, "I sell bridges."

HE HAD DENIED that he was a contractor, as one would have supposed; or that he was an engineer; or, indeed, any kind of salesman for any firm.

"It is very easy to sell a bridge," I was told Thorpe had explained to his laughing audience. "I merely select a likely-looking body of water—a river—a lake, possibly—which seems to obstruct a great deal of traffic. Then I find the parties most interested in not having that traffic obstructed. If we can agree on a price, I commit myself and then buy the ingredients necessary for the required bridge. Wholesale."

My informant, a pretty and voluble matron, whooped with laughter on conclusion. We were sitting in my place of business, my maple furniture store, in the office I choose to call the interior decorating department.

"John," she said, "it's obvious he's a social climber of the crudest kind, a joiner—but where's he climbing from? You have to meet him. You're so clever—you'll get it out of him."

I was eager to do just that. Looking forward as I was to the next meeting of the Masquers, my pleasure was considerable when, a few days later, my assistant announced that there was a Basil Thorpe to see me.

My pleasure increased when

it turned out that he had come to buy six rooms of Early American.

BASIL THORPE bought no obvious misfits—which was astonishing considering the clap-trap he ordered. His main attention was to my perennial sales stock. Even at that, he cut every obvious price corner—pine rather than maple, cotton rather than wool.

Sensing the uselessness of sales pressures, I applied none, contenting myself by following him with order pad and pencil, as he floated from one item to another, exhorting and exclaiming.

He had that floating effect, I decided; he moved with short, deliberate blimp movements, like a tiny dirigible set on end.

From his bald, shining, saffron scalp—down his long, conical head—through his massive neck into the open sports shirt which swelled to a humpty-dumpty belt—Thorpe had that fat cigar look. Strangely, and properly for the comparison, he had no paunch. His wide thighs swelled his trousers, which pegged down to rather small feet that were housed in blue suede shoes.

His voice, with its unaccountable accents both guttural and liquids—went snapping through a startling soliloquy.

"Ah...that monster. That lamp! This is Pennsylvania Dutch freshly made? This is to lower the old candles up and down? So amusing it lowers the electric bulb up and down. A mighty anachronism. Good."

He bought it and opening the drawer of a desk, said, "Ah. Nailed, not notched. Ah. Yes...so green. It will warp soon. Yes. Good. Good. Very inexpensive."

His features, although mobile, seemed so small, and so abandoned in the midst of the long taper of his unlined face, that they gave his lively play of expression an effect of not accomplishing anything, a kind of unimportance and uncommunicativeness.

AFTER A full two hours of shopping he laughed finally and diminutively. "That's it. Ha. That's what you would call an Early American Decor, no? Ha!"

He paid cash and gave me the address—the Paul Revere Arms, a new apartment building on a good street. I was sorry it wasn't a credit deal; I would have liked to have had him fill out a questionnaire.

His thanks were profuse, not only to me but to my pretty informant who had referred him to me. "She tells me you are in the Masquers. Perhaps I will encounter you there?"

I agreed that this was likely and, anxious to hear the famous bridge story for myself, took advantage of this personal note to ask, "What kind of work do you do, Mr. Thorpe?"

He looked suddenly woebe-gone. "Ah..."

"Yes, Mr. Thorpe?"

"I've had a setback."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm an unsuccessful hypnotist."

I was astounded, naturally. He continued. "As a realist, my understanding of hypnotism was that it would enable me to make others do my will—to contrive to have bank tellers hand me money, grocers food—even furniture men furniture. I have been very disappointed in this undertaking."

I tried to think of something to say in the face of his seriousness. I didn't want to be taken in, and I didn't want to scoff or laugh at a customer. I said, "That's too bad."

He stared at me for a long minute and I suffered this, though gradually I grew uncomfortable. He finally shrugged. "Oh well, I have not tried it every place, by any means."

FOR ALL HIS setback, Basil Thorpe was well enough fixed to have the biggest, most expensive party of the season.

The instant all his furni-

ture was installed, the invited appeared—dozens and dozens of his new and intimate friends—to help him warm his menage.

If Thorpe were social climbing, his instincts for it were sure. He had invited all the more available specimens of Anglo-Saxonry—some (Anglo) Catholic, but mostly Protestant. The well-liked country-club bartender and his assistant were most liberally meeting their demands on the bar; Haakon's had catered the viables; and the serving girls dispensed not only the right kind of little hot things, but also to the males just the right kind of little hot glances.

It was easily the best party of the season; the only thing unfamiliar about it was the host himself, floating solicitously here and there, contorting his little face, gesticulating meaninglessly, but snapping his accented conversation loudly through the most obvious tall stories, mischievous or not we could not determine.

WHEN ASKED what country he came from he brazenly and gutterally declared himself as deriving from an old Charleston family. He even permitted himself the claim that some of the clap-trap I had sold him were handed-down heir-looms.

When asked his age, he blandly replied, "Thirty."

Someone openly expressing disbelief in his protestation of being a devout Episcopalian, he plunged into complicated and extremely technical explanations of High Church procedure, affecting to misunderstand that his questioner thought him of Low Church persuasion.

Finally, when someone thought to again raise the question of bridges and whether they were going like hot-cakes, he launched into an answer that seemed to ignore that he had ever made this claim.

"I think it most important that we should have available supplies of uncontaminated air. That would be a good business. I shall go into it."

"Hot air!" someone shrieked.

"All kinds. It must be; it makes sense. You have industrial centers filled with air contaminated with poisons that make children and old people die, and others live not so long. Big cities. Little cities.

"So what I shall do is in the pure country-side take many bottles, and jars, hermetically seal them, and ship them to the polluted places where mothers with strangling children, and those with attachments to lingering, senile people will pay any price for the pure air that was sealed in. No inventory. No stock.

No manufacturing costs. Perfect."

A chorus of hysterical laughter exclaimed that Basil Thorpe was a redoubtable social success.

I'M NOT A busybody. I've seen too much in the way of dog-eat-dog in business, and I've suffered too much at the hands of my friends because I sell something necessary—like furniture—instead of dubious stocks or dishonest advertising. So my decision to make the so-called Basil Thorpe's business my business wasn't due to any desire to protect our set from him.

I was honestly curious; that was one factor. I had the means of satisfying that curiosity at hand; that was the other.

You see, Basil Thorpe walked into my store one day and said, "Do you use stamps much?"

I said that I did, in direct mail campaigns. He was pleased; he opened a large and expensive brief-case and said, "Would you like to buy some at a discount?"

The briefcase was stuffed with sheets of three cent stamps. I examined one sheet. It looked perfectly all right. I asked him how much he wanted for it.

"Two dollars and fifty cents. You save fifty cents."

"Why don't you go across the street and get a refund from the post office."

"Oh, I wouldn't deal with a competitor." He offered me some more sheets disarmingly.

I EXAMINED them. "How many can you sell me?"

"Any amount you want." He hesitated. "Naturally, on very large orders I would need several weeks to fill them."

I said, "They aren't hot?" He looked at me inquiringly.

"Stolen?"

"Oh, no."

I looked into his little con-torting face carefully. "Then how can you sell them cheaper than the post office does?"

He laughed, looking relieved. "Oh, that's simple. You see they have a building—and postmen—and a post-master—and real estate. I work out of a briefcase. I have no overhead."

I saw. I nodded, bought two sheets to see how they were, and when he left I called my brother-in-law in the city, who is Assistant District Attorney.

THE TRIAL had its com-ical aspects but as well-conducted, and both these aspects were highly publicized in our suburban paper, the circulation of which zoomed.

My brother-in-law, having broken the case, as it were, was allowed to prosecute it. You might think he would have had an easy job of it,

what with the cooperation Basil Thorpe gave him.

Thorpe (and I continue to call him that because it never developed what his real name was) told the most inconsistent and unbelievable lies in legal history. The court saw fit to reprove him at one point, when, noting His Honor's displeasure at the crowd's applause of some particularly absurd part of his testimony, he announced that he was an accomplished judge, too, and would willingly help His Honor get the conduct of the case on the right road.

The thousands of sheets of stamps found in his possession were, of course, not counterfeit—which was the suspicion that had originally led to his questioning, and which, in turn, had drawn from him the confession that he had made them. They were obviously the loot of some major office robbery, although Thorpe denied any connection with such a crime. He had no explanation for his possession of the stamps except the continuing one that

he had made them, withal the fact that this justifies a more severe sentence than the illegal possession with which he was finally charged.

The prosecution of the case was complicated, however, by its very open-and-shut nature. The defendant's true identity was undiscoverable, as I have mentioned. Fingerprints, *modus operandi*, Bertillion system—nothing helped. He was convicted, ironically enough, as Basil Thorpe of the non-existent Charleston family.

Other authorities were jealous of my brother-in-law and his plum of a case: The immigration authorities, who couldn't disprove Thorpe's stubborn declarations; the Internal Revenue people who of course, had never had a form from a Basil Thorpe. The State people.

Nonetheless my brother-in-law finally bested his competitors—and, incidently Basil Thorpe—and had the accused convicted on a municipal felony count for five to ten years. The others could wait.

THERE WAS a small or—not to be modest about it—large buzzing in our set over my part in this summary justice. I did not forget, of course, that protection of this set did not motivate my apprehending of the small dirigible.

This notwithstanding, I en-

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joyed myself thoroughly in the next few months at the parties I attended, and even at the Masquers whose thespian efforts again gained my support.

I told this story and that. I explained what I thought of Basil Thorpe, and what he wanted, and where he really came from—all this, naturally, stimulating my own curiosity of these points.

I won't say that this curiosity haunted me, but I'll admit that I gave it a lot of thought; so it wasn't too impossible a coincidence that I was thinking about Basil Thorpe at a moment, six months after his conviction, when he walked into my store.

What could I do except gape at him? "You're out!"

HE LAUGHED merrily, floating towards me. "I've been pardoned by the governor."

He floated towards me with this preposterous lie and, alarmed, I shot out of my chair. "Why have you come back?"

He stopped and contorting his face ingenuously said, "Because I like it here. Here's where I want to live."

I simply stared at him, weighing the relative merits of trying to capture him alone and screaming for help.

He sat down across from

my desk. "Now I'm all fixed up," he said. "I have a good profession and I can be a good citizen like you are."

"What profession?" I said blankly.

He weighed me, his little face twisting. "It's a good one. Now I have it. I should never have been a merchant—bridges, air, stamps—I have not the commercial mind. Now I am a public servant."

"What?"

He smiled happily. "I'm the warden of the prison I was in."

I smiled at him, trying to make it gentle. He gazed peacefully at me. "And I have papers to prove it." He extracted a sheaf of papers from his pocket and laid them on my desk.

I looked at them, at first preoccupied, then bewildered.

I was confronted with a letter from the governor on official state house stationery appointing him warden and expressing the confidence the governor had in him, "*in light of his particular intimacy with the situation.*" It underlined the governor's interest in "*this bold experiment.*"

Once before I had been mistaken in thinking Basil Thorpe's goods counterfeit. Now I was not.

THERE WERE other letters addressed to him relating to penitentiary ad-

ministration. There was a plastic, counter-signed identification card from the prison. He had a big, shiny badge.

He swept them all up with a deft movement. "I should have known," he said, "that you all need proof. That is what is important. Naturally."

He laughed. "See you at the Masquers. I now must visit other of my friends."

I said, "Hey..."

He regarded me warmly. "I know. Yes, it's good. What you call turning a new leaf.

From now on, I shall be a public servant; it's much better than being a merchant. You are a merchant and, I have noticed, not comfortable in the role. I am glad I am on my way up, now. Perhaps I shall soon be governor myself. Or president. We will see." He laughed and left.

It was the following day, having thought it all over, I hit upon the obvious explanation; Basil Thorpe came from another planet. And I was afraid that he might be right, that he was on his way up.

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While the editor may comment upon a given opinion, and may express one or two of his own at times, this is your department, and you have the last word. And whether your letter is published or not, rest assured that your opinions are read carefully and taken into consideration. All suggestions for improvement are welcome, and we will follow them wherever feasible.

Dear Bob;

I have just read Bob Olsen's fascinating article "Wanted: A Definition For Science Fiction", and have a few words to add.

I regret that Mr. Olsen's recent death makes it impossible for him to participate further in what will probably

be a hot-diggety-dog discussion, but with all possible respect to his memory I would like to disagree with him in one respect.

I deplore the over-emphasis of science in science-fiction—and I say this as someone who, in such spare time as

he can find, is a professional scientist. Science-fiction is *not* meant to instruct, but to inspire. It is *not* sugar-coated science, but an exercise of disciplined imagination. (Note—"disciplined" imagination.)

Science-fiction is but a branch of something that existed long before science-fiction; and long before science, for that matter. Science-fiction is a branch of literature. The highest branch in my opinion, but a branch. Which means that s. f., like all other forms of literature, must evoke an emotional response. Sugar-coated science will not do that unless written with all the highest literary skills; which will make it the type of s. f. the science-in-science-fiction enthusiasts don't like.

May I point out Robert Heinlein's and Arthur Clarke's stories as examples of science fiction that combine scientific accuracy and literary skill. May I point out Ray Bradbury's and Theodore Sturgeon's stories as examples of science fiction with great literary skill and sometimes dubious scientific accuracy. Now name me someone who has written great science-fiction with scientific accuracy and dubious literary skill. (No fair naming me.)

Incidentally, may I point out a definition of science fiction that may be found in Reginald Bretnor's "*Modern Science Fiction*" (Coward-

McCann, 1953). It goes: "Science Fiction is that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings." You'll find it on page 158 in an article I wrote.

And, *Mister* Lowndes, if you'll look on page 76 of *Future S. F.* No. 33, you'll find that you have misspelled my first name.

—ISAAC ASIMOV

So shaken am I by the horrible discovery that the noble Dr. Asimov has yet again suffered mis-spelling of his name in print, the only comment I can make is this: any work of fiction requires disciplined imagination.

MORE AND MORE PSI

Dear RAWL,

Future #33 is it! That cover brings back memories—the memories of what was *good* about science fiction twenty-five years ago—and Scortia's "Cat O' Nine Tales" shows that the job can be done without including what was *bad* back then—the trite characters and the stuffy writing, etc.

A. Bertram Chandler's "...And a Half-Dozen of the Other" left me helpless. I have an addiction for bad puns, anyway; I contend that only bad puns are really good, so perverse is my nature.

David Gordon's "The Con-
vincer", on the other hand,
left me wondering. As I un-
derstand it, MacIntosh's ma-
chine convinced people that
psionics worked, but it didn't
do anything unusual; at the
same time, Bedford Quinn's
machine actually did some-
thing impossible, but didn't
convince anybody. Frankly, I
don't believe that an honest
scientist would be as bull-
headedly stupid as that;
aren't there some scientists
who are interested in psion-
ics now?

Hey? It struck me! Maybe
there's more truth than fiction
in Gordon's story! Maybe he
knows the inside story on why
more and more scientists are
fooling around with psi now,
huh?

Silverberg's "Season for Re-
morse", while well written,
was just a rehash of Henry
Kuttner's "Vintage Season",
and not much of anything in
comparison. The actual writ-
ing was as good as the Gor-
don story or the Scortia story;
if it only had more idea-con-
tent, it could have been tops.

"Mars Trial" was very
good. Thomas is coming right
along as a writer.

Asimov's parody was all
right, but I'm just not much
of a Gilbert & Sullivan fol-
lower, I guess. I didn't know
the original.

Bob Olsen's article got to

the point very nicely; I wish
you'd make it required read-
ing for all your authors.

The "Readin' and Wri-
thin'" Book Reviews were
strictly for scientists, it seems
to me. I am interested in
science, and I imagine most of
your other readers are, so if
a good book comes along, I'll
get it—and I'll mention your
magazine.

I especially liked the re-
view of "The Descent of
Pierre Saint-Martin". That
gag about "Masses in the cold,
cold ground" got me. (I told
you I was addicted to bad
puns.)

Well, that about winds it
up for this issue. I hope you
didn't find it too difficult
to read my handwriting; may-
be one of these days I'll buy a
typewriter.

I anxiously await *Future*
#34.

ALBERT RILEY,

Topeka, Kansas

But *are* "more and more sci-
entists" experimenting with
psionics now? Or is it rather
"more and more persons with
scientific training?" And, as-
suming that the report is accu-
rate, is this "more and more"
substantial? If say, in 1956,
two or three scientists, and/or
persons with scientific training

were fooling around with psionics; then, during the first half of 1957 two or three more joined in, if would not be a lie to say, "More and more 'scientists' are fooling around with psionics. And the actual number could be much larger without changing the fact that the statement, while true, would still tend to create a false impression. How many "scientists and persons with scientific training (that is, not scitists" by profession) are there? What percent of the total were experimenting with psionics last year? What percent is experimenting this year? How many of those who were fooling around with psi last year are still at it now? One needs the answers to questions of this nature before one can guess whether there really is a trend,

as the bare statement would suggest.

SELF-DEFEATING DEFINITION?

Dear Editor:

It seems to me the big flaw in Mr. Olsen's recipe for science fiction is that it makes impossible demands on writers, editors, and critics. For example, let's say that some American technicians have perfected a kind of super-radar, which is immediately classified as super-duper tip-top secret. Now, while the dingus was being tested, they scanned extraterrestrial space and found that between here and the moon it's full of tiny meteors, etc., going at terrific speeds. It's so full and they're so fast that any rocket leaving the atmosphere will be riddled in a matter of seconds. The government puts that report under wraps, too,

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because to release it would raise the question, "How do you know?"

Well, up to now science fiction writers could have the meteors population just as they wanted. But now any story about a rocket to the moon which doesn't take note of the facts, and figure out some way to solve the problem has violated the Olsen definition. It isn't science fiction. Building a rocket and sible in accord with authentic, scientific knowledge", as well as having people on the rocket; but letting the ship last more than a minute or so once it hits the storm isn't.

Nope, authors have to figure out some way to get the ships through the storm belt, even if they just say that each rocket has meteor-repellant screens on all the time. That's a sneaky way to do it, but I guess it would be acceptable. Meteors either have to be evaded or repelled, and if the author decides that they're going to be repelled he's got to give a plausible explanation of how its done, or produce an affadavit to the effect that it *is* done. In the latter case, he doesn't risk an impossible or absurd explanation. But the one thing the author may not do, and still claim to be writing science fiction, is to pretend that the condition doesn't exist.

Only ... remember ... the only people who know that

this condition is a reality instead of just a possibility are behind the paper curtain. No author knows, no editor knows, and no critic knows—yet *the facts are known*.

Okay, that's an extreme example, but do you get my point? There's no telling how much supposed science fiction—stories written in the light of developing authentic scientific knowledge—can't qualify as science fiction by Mr. Olsen's definition. These stories either assert directly something proved impossible, or indirectly perpetrate impossible events through the author's failure to take known conditions into account—"known" only to a small group of people who are working in the particular field, or at best not general knowledge.

So if you, Mr. Lowndes, decided to make Mr. Olsen's definition a criterion for the stories you accept, pretty soon you'd find that you couldn't find enough stories to fill an issue. You couldn't even read that many—you'd have to spend full time in research. And the same thing goes for the authors who decide to write "authentic" science fiction, and the critics devoted to exposing the false and praising the true.

Not that I know of a better 'ole—but in this instance I don't have to; nothing re-

quires me to settle for any definition of science fiction that doesn't satisfy me. And for all that I enjoyed Mr. Olsen's article very much, and think that he made a lot of very good points, his definition doesn't satisfy me.

NORMAN BARLOW,
San Francisco, Calif.

Well, ye-e-e-s—but isn't that overdoing it?

SIMPLIFICATION

Dear Sir:

In reference to your article, "Wanted: a Definition for Science Fiction," by the late Bob Olsen. He was on a quest that is somewhat defeating within itself.

To make like a "lexicographer," (and I had to copy that monster from the "Text.") Definition, Science Fiction. This is a written or oral evocation which is a part truth, which is based on scientific calculation (a part truth), which is allowed to play on the imagination to conclude a part truth, which is acceptable to the individual EGO (that's a good word) as a truth or part truth.

Now, from this immense evacuation of expanded Galactic ether I personally will conclude one other fact. Since science is being accepted in theory form as being undisputed fact, the people who

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commit science fiction are consequently pure and "simple" scientists who can be underpaid and underfed (better the latter) merely by saying that instead of their work being science it is science fiction.

A science fictionist is really a backward scientist who is going backwards and looking ahead. This really is logic if you can allow yourself the gall to think as a true "fan" to both these "Arts" of science and science fiction.

Actually, I'm like the fellow who asked a man who had a watch, but couldn't tell time, what time it was. The man pulled out the watch and said,

"There she is." The first fellow said, "Durned if it ain't."

Science Fiction: "There she is." My remarks, "Durned if it ain't."

JIM EVANS,
56 N. Ardmore,
Pontiac, Michigan

That sounds good, but there's one real flaw in it. To go along with your own analogy, suppose the gent with the watch hadn't had a watch after all, but a compass. And suppose the fellow asking the question couldn't tell the difference, either. Would the time then be, say, North by Northeast?

RAWL

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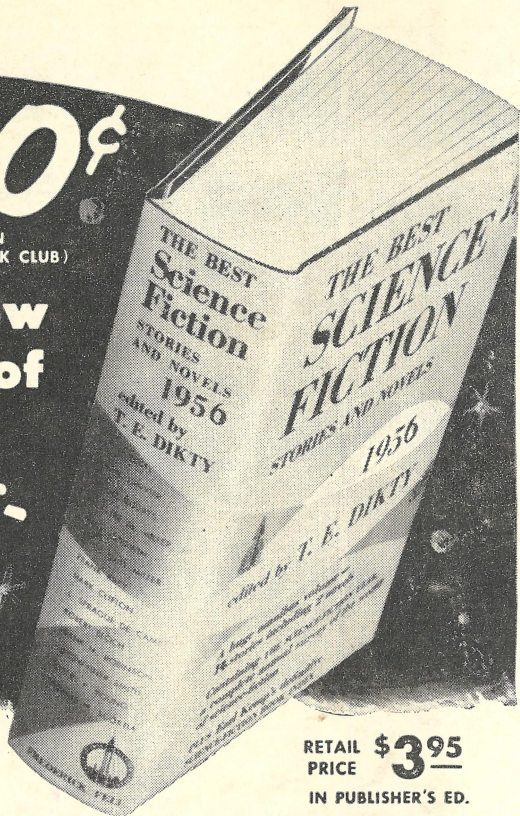
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