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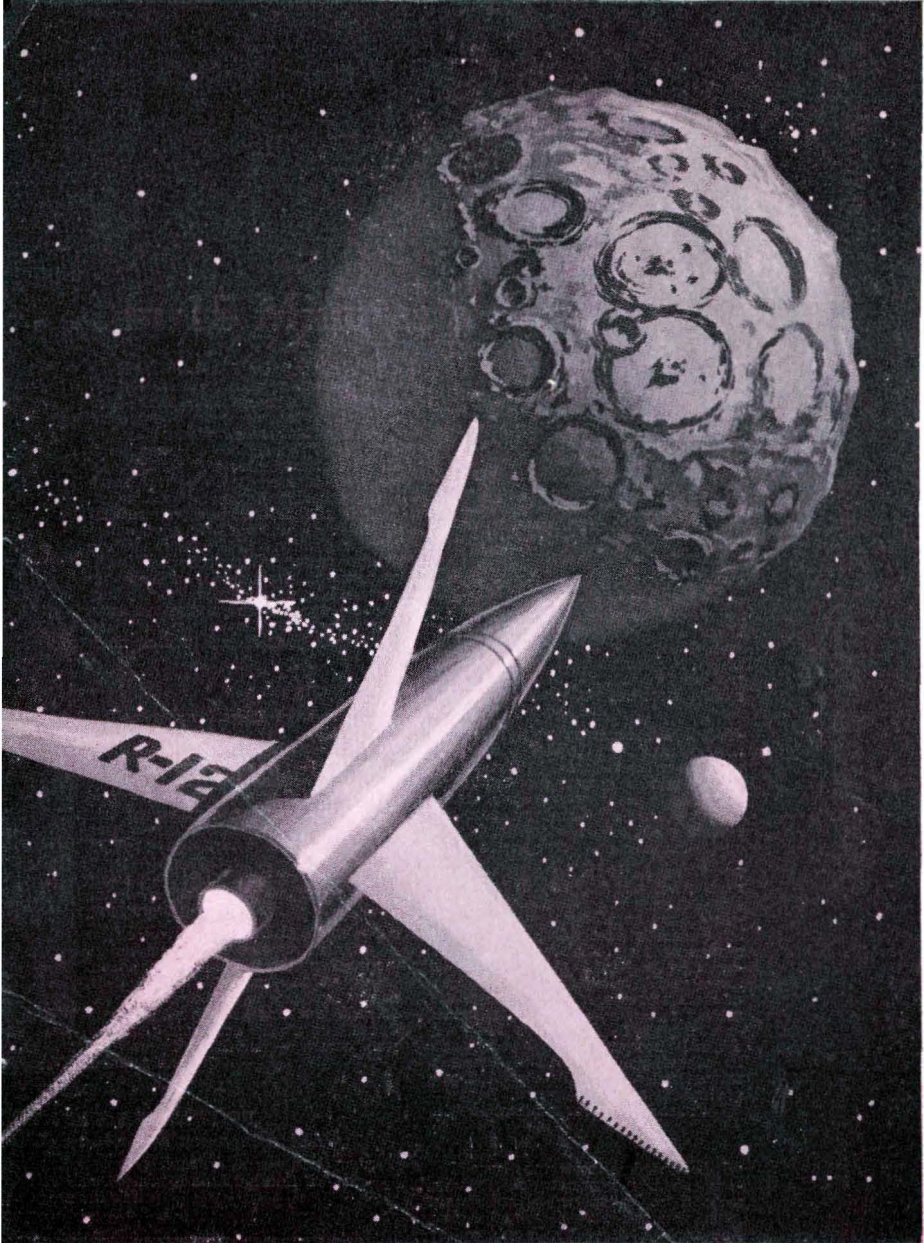
WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION



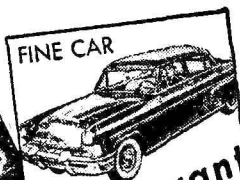
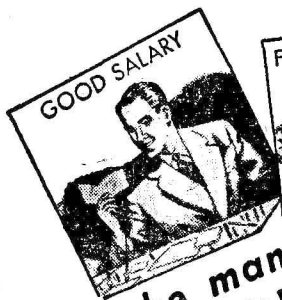
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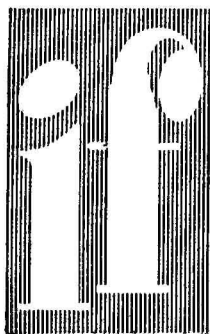
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WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER 1954

All Stories New and Complete

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SPECIAL!

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A CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

HAVE YOU ever seen any of those ludicrously funny cartoons on ash trays or cocktail napkins or home bar glasses entitled "People are no damned good" or "Nobody loves me" or "Farewell cruel world" or some of the others? No doubt you have; they have become quite a fad. And whole you do get a heck of a big laugh out of them, it's still sort of tragic that they hit home so accurately. They pin-point the foibles of so many of us, and that's what makes them funny in the last analysis.

Quite probably you have, at some time or other, gotten into conversation with someone who has said, "Oh I guess the place is all right, but the people are so damned unfriendly." Or, something like this: "Have you noticed how cliquish this town is?" Or, "If my job weren't here I'd leave like a shot." Etcetera, etcetera. New York City

is a classic example. Scores of people who left home to make their money there call it a cold, unfriendly place. And New York isn't unique in this respect; you can hear similar comments about other cities all over the USA.

A good many of these "grippers" probably left the old home town because they felt that way there . . . and they carry the seed of discontent with them wherever they go. A sort of invisible chip on the shoulder. Perhaps if they gave whatever town they're talking about half a chance to be friendly they'd be singing a different tune. Then, again—maybe they wouldn't. Maybe, psychologically, they'd be unhappy anywhere unless they could complain. But to give them their due, you can find a bad egg now and then in any basket. So if nothing but a basket of perfect eggs will do, maybe living alone on a four by four island in the Pacific is the answer. And there is no guarantee that even that will be Utopia. If you want to like a town, it will like you. And that goes for the biggest place in the world as well as the smallest.

I have good reason to think that so-called "cold" and "unfriendly" New York is the greatest city in the world—and not only because of its size. I never "froze" during the 14 years I spent there, and I met a lot of people who were certainly far from unfriendly. And I left it with more than I had when I went there.

As far as this particular spot called Kingston is concerned, I don't know of a better place on the map. I've been here ten years and I wouldn't mind another hundred.

PERSONALLY, I prefer a small city like this one on the banks of the Hudson. You get to know most of the folks and they get to know you. It's kinda good to have someone yell across the street "Hi, Jim!" Or to stop and gab in the middle of the street until a car honks you on your way. Then, too, maybe it's because in less than 20 minutes after you leave the office you can be fishing or swimming or playing golf or paddling a canoe on the river or just walking through the woods or sightseeing from the top of a mountain. Yup, it's very nice around here.

Of course, while I like vanilla, another man likes chocolate. Which is fine. But those who don't like vanilla or chocolate or strawberry or lemon or lime or tutti-fruitti or anything else . . . well, that's their privilege. They are what the dictionary calls "misanthropes". And the way this old world of ours is getting smaller every day there isn't much room for that kind of philosophy. People have a lot of living *together* to do, and a lot of liking to do. Perhaps it will require a good deal of effort on each individual's part to develop a "give" attitude; but our society today seems to demand that effort from all of us. Tolerance is not enough, we need a definite policy that is concerned with putting our best foot forward in taking a step toward our neighbor. You could live in a town or city forever and a day without griping; but without liking it either, if you are merely tolerant of the "coldness and unfriendliness". You've got to pitch in with

your neighbors, develop a "give" attitude, become an integral part of community affairs . . . and the cliques and the coldness melt away. Moral and intellectual and political distrust between nations is too rampant today to let it penetrate to next door neighbors. When a choice is made, whether it be in local politics, or in international diplomatic relations, it always seems to be a choice of "the lesser of two evils". Perhaps I'm naive, but why can't it be the "better of two goods"? Or isn't that cricket in politics and diplomacy? "Give" isn't an easy thing to acquire. It so often involves pride and ethics and prejudice and an almost complete about face of personality and thinking. Such a reversal of opinions may seem like too big a job. But there are hundreds of people who have managed just that task, who have stepped out of the ranks of the misanthropes, and found that here is no such thing as an unfriendly town, and that life can be a very pleasant thing whether they are living in Oshkosh or in Dallas. It's a big job for the individual and may not seem to have much affect on the rest of mankind or on world politics. But it is a beginning. And perhaps if we start in a small way, those cartoons that seem to point out that we're all going to hell in a handbasket won't hit the mark so closely any more.

Maybe all this is Sunday school stuff. Maybe it's too Pollyanna-ish. Maybe so. Maybe you don't think it's science fiction. I do. And heck, a little slice of optimism does a fellow good now and then. —jlg

THE SEVEN WINNERS IN IF'S \$2000 COLLEGE SCIENCE FICTION CONTEST!

*What the Youth of Today Thinks About
the America of Tomorrow Reflected
in Stories by Undergraduates*

A UNIVERSITY of Louisville junior, Andy Offut, of Louisville, Kentucky, captured the first prize of \$1000 with his manuscript entitled "And Gone Tomorrow" in the nation-wide College Science Fiction Contest sponsored by IF Magazine which closed midnight May 15th. His story was judged best among those submitted by amateur writers in colleges all over America in answer to the theme question: "What Will Life in America Be Like 100 Years From Now?"

Second prize of \$500 went to Jack Nelson, of Norwalk, California, a Brigham Young University senior, for his story "Men of Boru".

Five runner-up prizes of \$100 each went to the following: Leo Kelley, of Kingston, Pennsylvania, a Wilkes College sophomore, third prize for "Dreamtown, U.S.A."; Lee Holum, of Spokane, Washington, a senior at Whitworth College, fourth prize for "The Third Party"; John R. Arnold, of Rochester, New York, a senior at Cornell University, fifth prize for "One Remained to Question the Gardener"; Edward D. McHugh, of Holyoke,

1st PRIZE \$1000

ANDY OFFUT, Junior, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky

2nd PRIZE \$500

JACK NELSON, Senior, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

3rd PRIZE \$100

LEO P. KELLEY, Sophomore, Wilkes College, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania

4th PRIZE \$100

LEE HOLUM, Senior Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington

5th PRIZE \$100

JOHN R. ARNOLD, Senior, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

6th PRIZE \$100

EDWARD D. McHUGH, Senior, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

7th PRIZE \$100

STANLEY GLEIT, Sophomore, City College of New York, New York City

Massachusetts, a senior at Dartmouth College, sixth prize for "Image of God"; Stanley Gleit, of New York City, a sophomore at City College of New York, seventh prize for "It's Really Sirius".

Last fall IF Magazine announced its first College Science Fiction Contest to 674 colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. Students, who had never written professionally, were invited to submit stories, based on their own ideas and interpretations of events today, predicting what life in America will be like 100 years from now. Prizes of \$2000 in cash were offered for the best stories.

The idea caught on like wildfire. Here was a chance to draw attention to their own thoughts, tenets, philosophies and moral and political convictions which had been the subjects of classroom discussions and "bull sessions" in fraternity houses and dormitories.

Inquiries, ideas and suggestions poured into our offices from all corners of the country. When we finished them we had a pretty clear picture of what the youth of today thinks will be the American Way of Life 100 years from now. Unfortunately, only a few manuscripts were received from the fair sex and these were eliminated well before the final judging. And we did want to include a pretty coed in our gallery of winners. But—!

When Jules Verne wrote his imaginative tales about submarines and airplanes, he was accused of writing "fairy tales". These stories by the young people of today are predicted on the same sort of data-cum-imagination that prompted

Verne to predict a future filled with mechanical and technical marvels. Perhaps, in these winning manuscripts, there is much indicated and predicted that will become actuality in 100 years.

Predictions that covered almost every aspect of our society from religion and philosophy to biology and technology made the choice of winners an intensely interesting and very difficult problem. But the choice was finally made; and here are the winners, with what they predict, fiction-wise, for America and the world to come:

ANDY OFFUT

"And Gone Tomorrow"



GRAY-EYED, brown haired Andy Offut was born in Louisville, Kentucky twenty years ago. After what he terms a very conventional childhood, he made his bid for unconventionality by skipping his senior year at high school and entering the University of Louisville on a Ford Scholarship in 1951. Now a senior studying for an AB, he's majoring in English and psychology, and has had a smattering of everything else from math and

philosophy to French and political science. He has also found time to be Secretary of the Student Council, house manager and assistant pledge master of his fraternity, editor-in-chief of one school paper and columnist and assistant editor of the college weekly. He was recently initiated into Pi Delta Epsilon, national journalism fraternity. He also spends twenty hours a week as "chief flunky" with an advertising agency and another ten hours a week as a clothing salesman.

As if all this wasn't enough to fill up his time, Andy's hobbies sound like a full time job in themselves. He draws and writes an "uncomical comic strip", writes a biting and satirical advice-to-the-lovelorn column, plays poker and bridge, and reads science fiction and Roman history.

The future includes a job in Uncle Sam's army, then a career in advertising or public relations.

And Gone Tomorrow foresees a world wherein government has reverted to a complete autocracy. In a very literal sense, the time of Julius Caesar has returned in the person of an Italian dictator whose legions and centurions are ruling the world. There is one ruler, one capital, one army, one language, one nationality, one world, one religion. There is time travel, there are locks that open when "recognizing" fingerprints, there are telephones that recognize voices. There are self-shaping sandals, air baths, ever-running chronometers, gyro-jet cars that hug the road like a magnet but can sprout wings and fly, and cyanide pellet guns that kill instantly with-

out pain or maiming. Cigarettes have been outlawed as detrimental to health and there is no insurance. The trial marriage system in effect works so well that there are never any divorces. The story that Mr. Offut tells concerns a young man of today, who is whisked one hundred years into the future, and a political truth which he discovers: "there is no perfect government."

Mr. Offut's story will appear in the next issue of IF. Watch for it.

JACK NELSON

"Men of Boru"



JACK NELSON is twenty-three years old, single, and was born in Artesia, California. His family moved to nearby Bellflower, and he attended Excelsior High School where, according to Jack, he learned to chase girls and to throw a reverse body block in football. It was here, too, that Jack was stricken with the malady that has confined him to a wheel chair for the last five years.

His hobbies are hunting and fishing—which he does from a wheel-chair. That handicap hasn't

bothered him much though; he's gotten his deer each season for the last three years, plus innumerable rabbits and ducks. And he manages to get his limit of trout quite often by fishing from a rubber raft.

After high school, he went to Fullerton Junior College and while taking a writing course there won the California Junior Colleges award for creative writing. At Brigham Young University, from which he graduated this June with a Bachelor of Arts degree, he majored in journalism, was sports editor of the paper, did quite a bit of work in political science and history, won a medal for rope climbing and two other medals for the men's yearly literary award.

He's sold magazines, picked fruit, worked in a dairy, been an electrician's helper and a reporter on a daily paper. For the immediate future Jack wants nothing more than to work on a newspaper for a while—one "where a fellow can whistle when he wants."

Men of Boru pictures a future where most of the American people live in underground cities. Fear and a desire for security have driven them into an almost mindless slavery under a "Leader". People sleep when they're told, wake when they're told, eat when and what they're told, and work at a job arbitrarily assigned to them. Each person lives alone, and women mate only with the "Leader's" chosen representatives. Children are cared for by the "Leader's" nurses from the day of their birth. Salt is the highest of luxuries, and mechanically induced dreams are the only recreation. Those who rebel against such slavery are sterilized

and brainwashed and forced to live outside on the surface of the Earth. There are a few men who never succumbed to the need for security and who live lives of freedom in the world outside. This is the story of those free men and their efforts to bring the ant-like people of the cities back to reality.

Mr. Nelson's story will appear in the January issue of *IF*, published in November.

LEO KELLEY

"Dreamtown, U.S.A."



LEO KELLEY is twenty-five years old and has lived all twenty-five of those years in Kingston, Pennsylvania where he was born. A sophomore at Wilkes College, Wilkes Barre, he is working toward the Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English. Coupled with his interest in English and literature is an equally strong interest in psychology, subjects which he feels will help him reach his goal of professional writer.

After leaving high school he held sundry, short-lived jobs in various parts of the country. He has worked

as a concessionaire at seashore resorts, as dishwasher in restaurants, and as a freight handler and window trimmer in department stores. One year was spent sailing the seas in the Merchant Marine. Italy, Nova Scotia and Venezuela were on the itinerary that year.

A childhood ambition to join the circus was realized to some degree when Leo brought to life a clown marionette called "Candy", which he operates nightly on a television program in Wilkes Barre. He'd been working with marionettes for years, ever since the fifth grade. Between high school and the Army he toured professionally with the Meredith Marionettes presenting "Pinocchio" for school children. His tour of duty with the Army Signal Corps was spent in the States.

The G.I. Bill and some money saved from the seafaring days are paying his way through college. With two more years of school ahead and a nightly T.V. show, he expects to be kept pretty busy, but hopes, nevertheless, to continue his writing.

A world where every effort is bent to the pursuit of pleasure and sensation is the tomorrow of *Dreamtown U.S.A.* Drugs are a casual everyday part of living, clothes are decorative and brief. There are moving sidewalks, invigorating and soothing rays which relieve tension and hangovers. Each home has a dimensional theater and a ceiling television screen, and parties are an all day and an all night event. Schools of all kinds have been abolished and children are sent to big, bright playgrounds where the biggest bully is considered

the "prize" pupil. All books have been burned, and a person who is caught reading one is a subversive. A council is the protector and provider and producer, and as long as there are parties, pleasures and drugs no one cares who or what the council may be. There are some rebels outside the city; people who remember the dignity of learning, the wonder of books and art, who feel that life has more to offer than pleasure and sensualism. This is the story of the rebels and their fight to capture the city and to give back man's dignity to those caught in the web of hedonism.

Dreamtown, U.S.A. will appear in the February issue of *IF*.

LEE HOLUM

"The Third Party"



LEE HOLUM was born twenty-three years ago in the town of Wolf Point, Montana, located in the northeastern corner of the state; but has spent most of his life in the Pacific Northwest. He completed the work for his Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry at Whitworth College this year.

He had a paper route while in grade and high schools, and the money saved from that paper route paid his first semester at college. Since then he has earned his way by working in a dairy bottling plant during summer vacations.

Lee says his only hobby is reading science fiction which he does "voraciously". He started to read it in his junior year in high school and has been doing more and more of it ever since. His favorite authors are Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov.

Although the BS is now an accomplished fact, he plans to start work on his master's at New Mexico Highlands University this fall, with a major in organic chemistry. Research is the real love of his life and Lee Holum hopes fervently that the government or some private industry will come up with a job in that field when he's ready to start a career.

The Third Party envisions a future in which the moon has been reached and colonized, where the arctic is honeycombed with underground cities, and weather station satellites circle the Earth. Rocket ships are a common mode of travel and there are convertiplanes, conveyor sidewalks, self-molding chairs and electrically heated clothes. The movie industry is a thing of the past, with television providing all entertainment. Chicago is the North American capital, the U.S.S.R. is gone, split into tiny, constantly warring states. The United States after a severe economic collapse, has risen again as part of the North American Republic. There is an Asian Commonwealth, a South American Republic, an Arctic

League, a Baltic Federation and a very powerful League of Islam which had gained much stature after the collapse of Russia and the United States. This is the story of political intrigue and attempts by the League of Islam to start a war of destruction between the North and South American Republics; and of the one man, an eminent scientist, who is the focal point in the conspiracy.

The Third Party will appear in the March issue of IF.

JOHN ARNOLD

"One Remained to Question
the Gardener"



TWENTY-TWO year old John Arnold was born in New York City. High school math and science stimulated a desire to be an engineer, and a scholarship made a course in electrical engineering at Cornell University the next obvious step. He graduated with his BEE this year, after a five year program. The liberal electives that he found time for stimulated a new interest in writing, and writing about the frontiers of science "just sort of

came naturally”.

Participating in almost all sports is his hobby; but wrestling is the only one that he takes seriously. He plans to continue as an amateur athlete in the hope that he may someday place in a national tournament.

The immediate future is pretty well mapped out for John. He's a reserve officer in the Army Ordnance Corps, but has received a year's deferment to work for Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York City. He's been accepted by Bell Labs for their Communications Development Program, which is the equivalent of graduate study in electrical engineering.

Writing is harder than he thought it would be; but John finds that it has forced him to think more deeply and to discover more about himself; and that is enough of a reason to prompt him to plan to go on writing whenever he can find the time.

One Remained To Question the Gardener has an America of the future run by electronic brains and computers. Factories, weather bureaus, social insurance—all that men can feel, taste, see or be affected by in a physical sense is effortlessly controlled by computers. Research laboratories are the center of all human effort. Music, art and literature have flourished in this leisure society. Women have reached a state of complete independence. Cooking and cleaning are done by machines, unborn children are carried only three months instead of nine, there is compulsory education from the cradle through college. Cities are deserted by all but career women,

and the men have retired to athletic lodges or clubs. This is the story of a new computer which begins to infringe on personal philosophy of the people, of their willingness to be led and controlled on this level too, and of the one man who determines that he will stand by his beliefs and help man transcend the machine.

One Remained to Question the Gardener will appear next spring.

EDWARD McHUGH

“Image of God”



EDWARD McHUGH was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in 1932, and has had his heart set on being an M.D. ever since. He entered Dartmouth in 1950, after getting his primary and secondary education in the local schools, and this June was awarded an AB in chemistry and zoology.

Summer vacations provided experience as a bus boy, waiter, mail carrier and ditch digger. While marking time between graduation and entering Georgetown Medical School he is working at a local brewery. To while away the hours

between chemistry-zoology and ditch digging he explores the "dark mysteries of magic" and gives performances of the art of prestidigitation for church groups, children's parties, etcetera. Photography is another of his sidelines, and developing and printing his own pictures and those of his friends takes up a good part of his spare time.

That Medical degree he wants so much has even been the reason for Ed's writing. While at Dartmouth, he discovered that he would need at least two full years of English in order to qualify as a candidate for a medical school. He had already had one year, and a friend suggested some courses to complete the necessary two. A so-called creative writing course was among the suggestions and Ed blindly wandered into it, took it, found he liked it very much.

Image of God pictures an America in the grip of an autocracy. It is a world without wars, where Negroes have been exterminated to avoid friction, where all printed matter has been confiscated and burned and where man has been reduced to the level of the machine. Radiation sickness has been conquered but mutations crop up in the succeeding generations, and mutants are hunted down like animals. There are electro guns that paralyze or kill, backjets that can be worn by men and so enable them to fly, and any thinking, above the mindless machine level, is done by members of a world federation which rules the Earth. There are men with a desire for freedom and self-government who have banded together in an underground to revolt against the tyranny

that oppresses man. McHugh tells the story of a hunted mutant with a desire to live like other men who finds kinship with the rebels and joins them in their fight for liberty and equality and the right to tread the Earth as an accepted human being.

Image of God will appear in IF next spring.

STANLEY GLEIT

"It's Really Sirius"



STANLEY GLEIT is the youngest of our winners. He was born in New York City nineteen years ago, and has been a staunch resident of the Bronx ever since. He has always been interested in design and construction and majored in art and architecture in high school. After graduation he decided to enter engineering school at the College of the City of New York so that he might combine the fields of engineering and architecture. In the fall he will be entering his junior year at college, still working toward a Bachelor of Science in

(Continued on page 96)

BY PATRICK WILKINS

FOR EVERY MAN A REASON

*To love your wife is good; to love your State is good, too.
But if it comes to a question of survival, you have to
love one better than the other. Also, better than
yourself. It was simple for the enemy; they
knew which one Aron was dedicated to . . .*

THE THUNDER of the jets died away, the sound drifting wistfully off into the hills. The leaves that swirled in the air returned to the ground slowly, reluctantly.

The rocket had gone.

Aron Myers realized that he was looking at nothing. He noticed that his face was frozen into a meaningless smile. He let the smile slowly dissolve as he turned to look at his wife.

She was a small woman, and he realized for the first time how fragile she was. Her piquant face, framed by long brown, flowing hair, was an attractive jewel when set on the plush cushion of civilization. Now her face, set in god-forsaken wilderness, metamorphosed into the frightened mask of a small animal.

They were alone.

Two human beings alone on this wild, lonely planet. Aron's mind suddenly snapped from that frame of reference—his subjective view of their position—to the scale of galaxies. It was a big planet to them, but it was a marble in the galaxy that man had discovered and claimed, and was now fighting with himself to retain. This aggregate of millions of pebbles was wracked with the violence of war, where marbles were more expendable than the microbes that dwelt on them.

The two walked hand in hand away from the meadow where the ship had been. The feeble wind snuffled at the scraps of paper and trash, the relics of man's passing.

They walked up the hill to their

station, the reason for their being on this wayside planet.

Aron thought about the scenery around them. The compact, utilitarian building that was the station did not seem out of place against the bleak landscape. The landscape did not clash or conform to its location—it just didn't give a damn whether there was a building there or not.

Aron and Martha, his wife, took their time. They had an abundance of that elusive quantity known as time at this lonely outpost. The trail up to the station was rough, with rocks and weeds tearing at them. Aron resolved that that would be one of his first projects, to put in a good path to the meadow where the rocket would come for them—five years from now.

The sunset did nothing to enhance the countryside. There was not enough dust in the air to create any striking colors. As the shadows began to lap at the hill, they hurried the last few steps to the building.

That evening they were both nervous, justifiably so, for not only were they starting on the questionable adventure of sequestered watchdogs on the planet, they were starting the adventure of marriage.

Aron had met Martha on Tyros, a planetary trade center of some importance. She was a waitress.

Since he was marking time on Tyros, waiting for his assignment, he had a chance to cultivate her acquaintance. On their dates, what he had to tell her about his life was brief, impersonal.

Aron was in the Maintenance division of the Territorial Administration and his duties were to hold



posts on various planets and act as an observer of that planet's caprices.

The rush of mankind from Earth, like a maddened swarm of bees from a hive, had carried it through the galaxy in a short time. On all the discovered planets that had to be reserved for future inhabitants, the Territorial Administration had set up observation stations. The men posted there were merely to record such fascinating information as meteorological and geographical conditions.

When the time came to expand, the frail little creatures with the large brains and larger egos would know the best havens for migration.

Another reason for these stations was the war. When man had flung himself madly at the galaxy, he had diffused himself thinly over a macroscopic area. Some almost isolated colonies had developed the inevitable thirst for independence.

From local but violent wars between colonies, some semblance of order had been wrought. Now there were two sprawling interstellar empires, the United Empire—Aron and Martha were citizens—and the People's Republic.

Since Aron's realm relied on industrial technology and agriculture and the People's Republic based its economy on mining and trade, there seemed to be plenty of room for consolidation.

Unfortunately this consolidation, or even peaceful trading, was not possible, due to the fact that the two dominions had entirely different forms of government and religion. The result was, as always, war.

These were the general facts that both Aron and Martha knew. What Aron discussed with his fiancee were the effects of this macropolitical situation upon their personal lives. The previous posts that Aron had held in the TA were planets in the interior of the United Empire.

During his stay on Tyros, he received the assignment he expected. It was a post on the fringe of the empire, a planet called Kligor. These stations of the fringe served dual purposes, not only their usual function of planetary observation but as military outposts to warn and halt any attempted invasion.

When he heard this assignment, Aron proposed, holding up to Martha the prospect of comfortable living in civilization once the five year hitch on Kligor was over.

She consented—not really knowing if she loved him or not.

They had been married the day they left. The space ship was so crowded there was no chance for privacy, so the two had no honeymoon till they reached the station.

ARON AND his bride arrived on Kligor in what was autumn on the planet, for the seasons were consistent in all hemispheres.

Aron planned to spend a week at the station with his wife and then begin a planetary check of the various automatic observation stations that compiled the meteorological and other data and relayed it by radio to the main station. This check had to be completed before snow came to the planet.

In that week they learned about each other. Neither of them was

young and both were mature and prosaic enough to develop the daily routine of a long-married couple. There were many free hours which they would spend talking about themselves.

To Martha, marriage was not new. She had experienced matrimony before. Her husband, a gambler, had killed himself after a bad loss, leaving her with an impossible burden of debt and a disillusioned mind.

Since then she had worked, gradually paying off his debts. When Aron had come along, she liked the big man and thought that the years on Kligor would give her respite from a demanding reality.

She did not picture herself as a tragic figure, but rather as merely competent and stable, not realizing that that attitude in itself is a sure sign of instability. A smile seldom found her face. She was slightly nervous with a tendency towards moodiness.

Aron's history was not so bitter. He was born in a large family and had formed an aloof, reserved nature to achieve a sense of individuality in the group. His life had been spent in government work and he had never tasted the variable brew of the nuptial cup till he met Martha.

He was not a deep man in emotion. His nature was such that he had to be constantly occupied with something—not the frenzied scurrying of insecure individuals—but a solid problem that he could work out. A project that he could carefully shape with a keen analytical mind or capable hands.

They did not think of each other in terms of these thumbnail

sketches, but merely watched and observed—and adjusted to each other. Their marriage was almost one of convenience, with just enough affection involved to oil over any disputes.

The spell of the planet gradually lulled them into hypnotic acceptance of their sequestered lives. Their daily duties became the only things worth thinking about.

Aron learned about the planet in the next two months on his tours of inspection. He used a small atmosphere flier to cover the various posts scattered over its surface.

The small blockhouses were automatic and hermetically sealed to preserve the instruments, but something could go wrong and then it was his job to fix it.

As for the military defense system of Kligor, that was also automatic but not Aron's responsibility. It was a series of artificial satellites on the rim of the planetary system, with long-range detecting and tracking systems that would activate and co-ordinate firing mechanisms to blast any ship from the void.

It was Aron's duty to de-activate them with a control in his station if he was signalled by a pre-arranged code from a friendly United Republic ship. That was all he had to, or could, do with them.

The planetary stations were all in good shape except for minor repairs, which Aron attended to with the quiet joy of a man who loves machinery. He was home sooner than expected and just in time. The next day it began to snow.

The weather had opposite effects on the people in the station. Aron,

long used to such confinements, settled down and began reading some of the great mass of books which he had brought, or working painstakingly on hobbies.

Martha grew more distraught as the snowbound months went by. The wild enthusiasm of her youth had left her, but she was not stoic enough to take the long confinement and inactivity. She tried to pick arguments, but Aron wouldn't argue. She tried to get interested in some time-consuming hobby, but she lacked the patience.

Spring finally came. On the first nice day Martha went on a long walk to watch the few flowers that Kligor boasted push their fragile buds into the air. Aron spent the day working on the path and the clearing that was a spaceport.

When night came, he was alone at the station.

Aron waited up all night, knowing it would be futile to search in the dark, not knowing in which direction or how far she had gone on her stroll. Aron was not too worried, since there were no dangerous animals. She was probably lost or had a sprained ankle, in which case she would have the sense to find a sheltered place and be safe for the night.

When morning came he began searching. He used the atmosphere flier to cruise over the nearby country.

Up and down hillsides he flew the craft, gliding slowly at a low altitude. He stopped over clumps of bushes for a careful scan, occasionally roaring towards what looked like a piece of cloth, but always turned out to be a bright stone.

When he found her, he knew before he landed. She was sprawled at the bottom of a high cliff.

She was not pretty any more. She wasn't even a live animal, just dead flesh lying there, smeared with blood and covered with tattered clothes.

Aron remained in a stage of pre-shock, a state of cold clear rationality, until he had taken her back to the station, dug a grave and buried her. He wasn't sad, it was just a job to be done. This wasn't his wife he was burying.

It wasn't until that evening that the fact of her death penetrated and was accepted by his mind.

THE NEXT few days were spent in routine actions. Aron relied on his usual anodyne—work. The pathway and the meadow were filled with cement by the end of the fifth day.

He let his stunned mind become wrapped in the problem of completing this job—the weight of the shovel in his hand, the heat of the sun on his back—these were what he thought about. It was not a solution or even escape, just a stall.

The sixth day brought a visitor. The shock of someone knocking at the door, walking in, introducing himself and sitting down to talk yanked Aron's mind into awareness.

The only way to achieve a landing would be for a friendly ship to signal him and have him deactivate the defenses—which definitely had not happened!

Therefore it was hallucination, a miracle, or at least an interesting trick that this man had appeared

at his station. Aron took interest, demanding that the man start from the beginning again as he had missed the introductions due to slight surprise.

"I said I am Karl Rondwell, an agent and representative of the People's Republic, being a member of the Intelligence department of her imperial navy," the man replied.

"The first question is, naturally," Aron said, "How the Hell did you get here?"

A slight smile. "Your much-vaunted defenses that are supposed to be able to snuff out the mightiest fleet, these defenses are easy to pass—for one man."

Aron could see that easily enough. "What is your purpose here then?"

"A deal, naturally!"

"I imagined so. You will have to persuade me, because you can't remove me and take over those defenses. Lack of knowledge of the proper code would trip you up when our United Empire ships came snooping around as they do so often."

"Since we understand the rules of the game," the enemy agent said, "let's proceed with it."

"Let me begin with a discussion of civilization. You may have forgotten something about it in your secluded life here."

The agent went on to speak of civilization, its comforts. Since he was a spy, he had spent a good deal of time in the United Republic. He spoke in terms of a man with money, the plush night spots, the beautiful girls that would be only too glad to be friendly with a wealthy man.

"All right," Aron interrupted him. "That's clever oratory, but money isn't all I'll take to sell out my empire. What else have you to offer, and remember, I'm not buying—just looking."

The agent made his case stronger by comparing plush civilization to the futile hermit's existence of a TA observer, throwing in a few remarks about the brevity of one's life to be wasted in such a barren pastime as five years in solitary confinement.

When he began talking about a comfortable married life in a civilized community, he noticed Aron growing distraught.

"Why does talk of marriage so disturb you?" he asked.

Aron looked at him with a sneer in his eyes, "You must know, you check your victims before you begin your Judas acts."

With a rueful grin, the agent replied, "That is one place our agents can't penetrate, your Personnel Records Office. You, being a hard man to know, have made very few acquaintances that we could approach to get your history."

Silence. Then Aron said, "All right, here's a bone I'll toss you. You may use it, I don't give a damn!"

"My wife died five days ago on this planet." He said it with vehemence, probably imagining by some twist of thought that he was shocking, hurting the enemy agent, whereas he actually was deliberately shocking himself. Masochism.

"Your wife?" the agent was amazed. "I didn't know your TA observers took wives with them."

"I'll bet you didn't know. Though, most of them don't, come

to think of it.”

The agent relaxed, lighted a cigarette—an ancient habit that cropped up in all eras.

“Men can take it,” he began quietly. “Women are different. They can take it if they want to, but it’s hard to find the right woman; and even then she must want to take it by being with the man she loves, or perhaps it is psychological—martyring themselves to gain a subtle control of that man, which they all want to do.

“When you get a woman who can’t, or doesn’t want to take it, she can pull a beautiful crack-up. Without friends to appreciate her martyrdom, with a husband who refuses to acknowledge it, she sometimes uses the supreme martyrdom to gain recognition.”

“Instinct tells me to slug you in the teeth,” Aron said, “but apathy forbids me.”

“Couldn’t it be that you refuse to slug me because you want me to keep talking? Because you recognize the truth, that your wife committed suicide because of the loneliness and now your devotion to state has become meaningless? ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away’ was the old maxim, but ‘the State only taketh away’ is the new.”

There was more talk and some drinking, for the agent had conveniently brought some choice liquor.

The next morning, after they had arisen from where they had fallen asleep in a stupor, the agent proposed his plan. With the disgust and despair of the hangover, the agent’s biting attack on his pride and his state, Aron listened.

Later the agent was no longer the enemy, but a partner in a deal.

THE NEXT week the ships came. Twenty-seven proud cruisers of the People’s Republic; also troop and supply ships. They landed in the broad valley on the main continent of Kligor, twenty miles from Aron’s station.

The professional fighters emerged from their tools of war, the dull hulls of the ships and the dark uniforms lapping up the pleasant sunshine. The only reflection was from the polished bits of metal that hung at their sides, bits of metal that could spit destruction in ten different forms.

They looked at the planet but did not see it, it was just their newly gained base. They did not see the poignant beauty of the seemingly senescent hills covered with wisps of green and bathed in blazing sunshine. They only saw strategic positions, avenues of approach and tactical advantages.

The pebble had become a pawn. War had come to Kligor. The slow, subtle weavings of individual threads of human psychology were ripped and snarled as the Mass Effort took over.

Conferences were held, land surveyed, machinery trundled from the cavernous holds of supply ships and the base was begun. To the cadence of barked orders, shuffling feet and grinding, pounding, thumping machinery, the buildings rose, the men moved in.

There was the usual bustle of a new military operation, the normal tension of a top-secret operation, the usual bungling and mix-up of

supplies. But there was a slightly different attitude toward the gradually growing base. This was not a standard military location, one that had existed for years, or an enemy one that had been capture, or even a piece of ground that had been paid for in blasted hulks and smashed bodies.

This gain was by treason.

Naturally then, the men felt contempt for the operation and their contempt was manifested in sloppiness. The commanding officers would ordinarily have become raging martinets at such lax discipline and slovenliness, but the taint and contempt of treasonous gain was upon them also.

This contempt was displayed openly whenever the Traitor came to the base. Weak egos must be flattered by derision of others. They would have killed him as a matter of course, if he hadn't been clever enough to refuse to relinquish the secret codes which allowed the friendly ships to pass. Torture was obsolete, for hypnosis allowed a victim to die before he could reveal secret information.

He came every week to get free supplies and have conferences with the Intelligence men. The Traitor would walk the freshly-laid sidewalk boldly, his head up, his eyes flashing about to take in every new building.

The soldiers hazed him, spitting at him, bumping into him, glaring and swearing at him; but he always reciprocated with such a withering look of contempt that they soon grew tired of the sport.

The worst day for the Traitor, alias Aron Myers, was when he went into the Soldier's Club to

quench his thirst of a hot day. Since it was a week-end and there was nowhere to go on what few week-end passes were given, the Club was packed.

In the dimmed-light atmosphere, the black uniforms made the place seem filled with vagrant and ominous shadows with white faces. The noise was almost unbearable and Aron had a mind to leave.

He was confronted by a group of these shadows. They were all the same, indistinguishable in their identical uniforms, crew-cuts and young, arrogant faces.

"Hello Mr. Myers," one of them said. "Won't you join us in a drink?"

When he started to demur, they interrupted, "But we insist, Mr. Myers." One took him by an arm and led him to a table.

"After all," they said as the drinks came up, "We owe you at least a drink for giving us such a nice new base and everything, now don't we." It was sarcasm, and hammy sarcasm at that, Aron thought.

He recognized the situation as another case of hazing, but this time by a group of soldiers made even more obnoxious and bellicose by the liquor in their guts.

"You don't owe me anything," Aron said, "I gave it to you for my own reasons and not for money." Sure enough, they even came out with the corny laughter.

He let them play out their little satire without protest. Their grandiose courtesy towards him, the toasts drunk in his honor. That is, until one of them, more drunk than the others, said, "Mr. Myers, I hope you don't mind my telling you,

but you are a—". The epithet was a new slang word but its vileness stemmed from prehistoric days.

Aron replied with blazing eyes. "I can't insult you back and you know it. I don't want to be killed that badly. All I can say is:

"Who are you to judge me? You are blind little men in a cage trying to judge someone on the outside.

"Your hearts and minds have been forged in the crucible of duty and battle. You live for your uniforms and the distinction those uniforms bring you. You live to fight and die, to spend your spare time in dank, noisy holes like this. Drinking and lying to each other about your adventures and love-life.

"Then you try to judge galactic politics and the decisions of a man caught up in the rip tides of these politics, when all you know is your own vicious lives. You are traitors as much as any man, for you have sacrificed your normal lives to dedicate yourself to the violent dead-end of a soldier of space.

"Yes, you know what I am talking about, the Fermi radiations! The hard radiations of space that make every person who stays in space any length of time a sure candidate for an early grave.

"You're young now, so terribly young, only twenty or so years old in a possible life-span of a hundred years.

"You are traitors to yourselves by rejecting this life-span for a few brief years of glory as a soldier, then a slow decay for ten years till you are in a grave at thirty or forty.

"Your motto ought to be, 'live

fast, fight hard, die young and have a radiation-rotted corpse'.

"And yet you condemn a man because he tries to seek a few comforts from an uncomfortable, im- placable universe."

They didn't get it. They never get it, he thought ruefully. They continued in their cat and mouse game until they realized the mouse refused to be terrified, then they let him go.

During the next few weeks, someone started the rumor that the Traitor was actually a native of the People's Republic who had been trained and then planted in the United Empire's TA to do this job for Intelligence. The soldiers quickly believed it and almost came to respect the Traitor.

FROM THE way that the Intelligence officers freely talked about classified information with him in his weekly visits, Aron was aware that they would probably kill him once his usefulness was over. He was devising ways, though, to get around that at the last minute.

From this knowledge that had been blatantly tossed in front of him, he knew how strategic Kligor was in the stalemated war between the empires.

The People's Republic now had a fair-sized striking force based there, so that when an all-out offensive, which was scheduled in a few weeks, started, this hidden force could attack United Republic's squadrons from the rear and be doubly effective because of surprise.

So the weeks trotted by, the soldiers' camp expanding daily as the

Traitor let the supply ships through the barrier. There are moods in war just as in people. This was a crucial point, the People's Republic had gained a slight edge by its gain on Kligor. So the usual pitch of anticipation was infused with the higher excitement of a sure victory.

The days were slipping furtively away as the Kligor garrison gathered itself together, crouched and got ready to spring into blind, violent action on the big day.

The laughter of the soldiers was tinged with nervous hysteria, but when they thought of that grim array of defense satellites, with its all-seeing eyes, its electronic brain, its steel guts and large parcel of hell in its fist, all this United Empire strength protecting them, their laughter grew louder and more sincere.

Aron thanked providence that Kligor didn't have any moons. This particular night called for every ebony patch of darkness that he could find.

He was on a nocturnal visit to the base, not using his flier. He knew there were guards posted near his station that would notify the camp when this craft was used. Slipping out the night before and avoiding the guards, Aron had begun the twenty mile hike to the base.

As he neared the base his precautions increased, his speed decreasing proportionately. Avoiding the outer ring of guards was easy, as they were spaced far apart. Moving in undetected, through the tighter nets of guards around the camp, required the skill and pa-

tience of a feline.

That this base should have foot soldiers patrolling the ground around it seemed absurd on the face of it, especially to the men who had to do it. The planet was uninhabited and their only worry was from the skies above where the TA satellites defended them.

The Intelligence officers knew better. They knew how easily one man could slip through these defences. One man at a time, for several weeks, and a sizable ground force could be built up in some remote spot on Kligor. It was a long shot probability, but it was their duty to protect against such a probability destroying what they had achieved.

There was also a traitor, one of those fluctuating spineless things, loose on the planet—a clever man who couldn't be trusted by anyone.

This lack of trust was justified as Aron crawled and inched his way through the last circle of sentries. His whole body was a detecting device, listening for footsteps, watching for dim figures in the dark, even his nose was waiting to detect the odor of a cigarette.

According to the paper he had been lucky enough to read in the Intelligence offices when they weren't looking, he knew the Captain of the guards should be making an inspection about then. The seconds hung suspended, reluctant to pass, and Aron waited.

The Captain finally showed up, walking briskly, a smile on his face. This smile was rudely erased and all future occasions for smiles removed by a swiftly moving figure that plunged a knife into his throat before his mind could translate the

shock into a cry of alarm.

More movement on the path and a new Captain of the guards emerged, walking just as briskly, but in a new direction.

The People's Republic's base occupied the narrow end of the valley, with a canyon entrance serving as the apex of the triangle it covered. Near this apex were the buildings, the dozens of barracks and administrative buildings, all dwarfed by the massive concrete warehouses set around them against the hills. In these warehouses were the fuel, food and munitions of the enemy.

Below these buildings were the ships, first the rows of the 27 warships and then the 40 or so cargo and troop ships. These supply ships made up the base of the triangle. From the air these ships looked like a tiny forest of needles stuck upright in the ground, but from close range on the ground, where Aron walked in the captain's uniform, they were mammoth towers of steel—again, a matter of scale.

He emerged from the sentry lines near the cargo ships. These were all sealed and unoccupied and he passed the rows of them without a glance. It was a long walk, for the ships were hundreds of feet apart. The open field where they rested had the rough ground of a meadow, making his attempted military stride more of a burlesque jerky gait while he tried not to stumble.

There was a guard outside the airlock of each of the warships, for the crews remained aboard constantly. These guards were standing around talking to friends or moving restlessly about.

The sentries saluted Aron as he marched by, for they could see the brass on his uniform gleaming in the dark. He found what he wanted, a group of four guards talking by one airlock. They snapped to attention as he approached.

The base had expanded so rapidly, with new units and men being shifted constantly, that Aron counted on the men not knowing exactly who the Captain of the guards should be. All the sentries knew was the insignia of the Captain was before them and the man who wore them was to be obeyed.

His orders sent a chill of alarm through them. He said he had received a report of someone slipping through the guards and moving among the cargo ships. Since the soldiers were needed to patrol, he wanted these men to gather all the warship guards together and search the area of the cargo ships.

In answer to the question in their eyes, he said he knew the warships would be unguarded but he was ordering a special detail to replace them immediately.

The four dispersed and, in a few minutes, all of the lock guards had left their posts and were moving down to the cargo ships.

Time was the critical element now. Aron had taken a terrific chance by donning the Captain's uniform, but he had pulled off the bluff and now he had to capitalize on it—fast!

While the ship sentries were on their futile search, he ran from ship to ship, jumped into the open airlocks and worked quickly with pliers and a screwdriver. It was a little trick that he had learned

from a talkative spaceman in a bar many years ago. It worked on any ship. Disconnect a tiny spring, cut a wire, and it was impossible to close the massive airlock door.

Aron wanted very badly to have those doors stay open.

Twenty-seven ships, hundreds of feet apart. He was on his last five when the search was abandoned and the sentries began returning. He hoped they would react normally, taking their time, dragging their feet and talking to each other in disgust about the wild goose chase.

On the last two ships he had to use different tactics. The sentinels had returned. When he walked up to them, they came to attention sullenly, waiting the chance to deride the usual stupidity of the soldiers and their Captain.

Instead, they had their throats cut.

Finishing the last airlock, Aron then walked through the post. Right up the main street he strode, his heart in his throat but his step and demeanor firm. The time of night helped him, for there were few soldiers about that might recognize him, and what few patches of light were thrown out from windows and doors were quickly swallowed by the black maw of darkness.

Up the main street, past the barracks, towards the last warehouse at the head of the valley. The two pillars of rock that marked the opening of the canyon served as a background for the massive blank walls of this warehouse.

At the little door set in the center of the front wall there was a sentry. He was grumbling to him-

self about having to do such a damn-fool thing as guard a warehouse when there wasn't an enemy within light years of the building.

He was wrong. And the enemy killed him.

Inside the warehouse, there being no lock on the door, Aron groped about in the stuffy, pitch blackness till he came to a little fire station set against a wall. There was a locker containing an insulated suit, hatchet and other fire-fighting equipment, at this station.

He donned the fire-fighting suit and helmet and went to one end of the building that was walled-off. In this separate room was the emergency power supply for the base. There was a turbine with a fuel supply and tiers of high-voltage storage batteries. There was also a fire hose on one wall because of the presence of the combustible turbine fuel.

Aron had to pause for a minute to gather his thoughts. He had come so far, so fast through the first steps of his plan and now he was ready for the final action.

What Aron now needed for success was three things. Sulphuric acid and salt water in large quantities and the right wind.

The first two had been thoughtfully provided by the People's Republic. The third was a matter of waiting. The land on Kligor was dry. What little water supplies were available weren't enough to maintain a base the size the garrison had built. Since the ocean was only fifteen miles from the valley where the base was located, it was a simple matter to pipe in water.

One of the mammoth cargo ships

had been loaded with six inch flexible hose, tougher than steel, wound on drums. It was a matter of a day's work to fly the ship slowly from the ocean to the base, laying out fifteen miles of this flexible pipe on the ground.

It was salt water, then, that was received at the base. Most of it was filtered through a chemical plant in the valley to make fresh water, but it was salt water that was available to the fire hoses for the needed quantity and pressure.

The emergency power supply and the fire hoses were only normal safety precautions, but now, in the hands of the Traitor, they became deadly weapons.

By pushing the lever that removed the lids from the storage batteries automatically for inspection he had sulphuric acid—for the law of conservation of energy said that man had achieved the highest efficiency of electro-chemical conversion, in practical form, in the lead acid storage battery.

After finding the light switch and flipping it on, Aron found this lever and released it. Now all he needed was wind, and he had that, blowing a cool ten miles an hour down the canyon and over the valley. He had to consult the weather maps at his station for weeks to determine the probability of this wind occurring and the weather conditions that produced it. One small breeze to chart, when his recording instruments gave hourly descriptions of the whole planet's climate. It wasn't too hard a job.

Yet that breeze had to be at the right time, at night and on the night he wanted. Close enough to the attack date to be effective yet

not too soon. Last night his instruments recorded the data that would produce this wind, so he was making his strike tonight.

He could not stand and gloat exultantly over his success. There were dead sentries and sprung airlocks that might be discovered.

With a twist of a nozzle, the fire hose came to life, throwing a pulsing stream of water on the batteries.

What Aron had done by ingenuity, luck, daring and careful planning was finished. It was now nature's turn.

THE NEXT night after his one man attack on the base, Aron had a visitor at his weather station. The visitor was in sad shape. His clothing was disheveled, his face dirty and unshaven, his eyes bloodshot and he seemed to be on the verge of a mental collapse with a frantic gleam to his eye.

But he held a pistol in his hand and Aron didn't.

He was an officer of the Intelligence Corps of the People's Republic. It was not the officer who had first visited Aron, but one of the others that Aron had come vaguely to know, like picking out sheep from a flock.

He had been away from the base on a planetary reconnaissance mission the night before. Since then he had gone through a nightmare ordeal.

He had returned to his base to find sixty ships of the People's Republic about to fall into enemy hands without a struggle, because 200,000 men were dead or dying of chlorine gas poisoning.

The gas that had come pouring out of the warehouse at the head of the valley last night. It had billowed down the valley, its streamers and tentacles pushed by the gentle wind bringing the sleeping men awake coughing and gasping only to fall asleep again—permanently.

It had seeped through the barracks, the warehouses and into the open airlocks of ships, while dying men tried frantically to close those locks. They wouldn't close though, and the spacemen died puzzled as to why not.

In galactic warfare, with the emphasis on speed, maneuverability, range and power of space cannon, et cetera, everyone had forgotten an archaic weapon—gas. Aron hadn't.

After the horror of this discovery, the Intelligence officer had taken a flier to Aron's station.

He was feeling justifiably sorry for himself and his empire's thwarted plans for conquest, now completely impossible since the United Empire had been notified of the impending attack, and since the most strategic part of that attack, the Kligor task force, had been destroyed.

His military mind refused to admit that one man, the Traitor, Aron, could have caused this tragic

defeat. He was willing, however, to vent his desire for revenge on this one man.

Aron was unmoved by his threats and denunciations. The Intelligence man was going to kill him, certainly, but the officer wanted to make him suffer first, to make him squirm.

When one man has defeated and completely made fools of a galactic empire, killing is too simple.

"We weren't stupid enough to try to coerce you with pure logic," the agent was saying to Aron. "We knew you must have a large amount of patriotism to even take such a thankless job as this Kligor post.

"There had to be something else, some stronger reason to make you reject your empire."

Aron watched him warily. He could tell by the malevolent gleam of the Intelligence man's eye and the sneer that he was playing a trump, that he had a choice bit of information he thought would hurt Aron. All Aron could do was listen.

"You came here happily married and full of patriotic zeal," the armed man said. "That way you were no prospect for us.

"We changed those conditions by a very simple act.

"We killed your wife."



The officer watched him like a hungry animal, waiting for the reaction.

The reaction was a pitying smile and the following words.

"Why don't you sit down. I know you are going to kill me, there's nothing I can do about it and, actually, I don't object. But I would like to say several things first and you might as well be comfortable while I'm talking.

"I want to speak my piece mostly to clarify my ideas before death, but also so that you, who will continue to live, will be able to think about them in the future."

While the agent sat down with a puzzled look, Aron continued, "That is why, when there is combat between men, it will always be in doubt. Even though one side may be outnumbered, outmaneuvered and have all the military laws of advantage against it, that side can still win.

"You have made the one mistake, the perpetual mistake, of combat. You forgot about the psychological factor. The force that can make a man surrender when the odds are with him, or fight like a demon when it is hopeless.

"So long as there is war, this psychological factor will make it an even, undecided combat despite all laws of logic.

"The psychological factor in this case, the one you overlooked, was that I love my empire more than my wife. She was merely a companion. You wouldn't know that, or the reasons for it, unless you knew my whole life—and not just the events of my life, my whole psychological life."

"Of course we couldn't know

that," the enemy agent said, "but we could go on general rules of human behavior, and those rules deny the fact that a man can love a state more than a woman."

"Good God!" Aron exclaimed. "What training do you Snooper boys get? You don't even know the rudiments of psychology. Intelligence men—ha! All you know how to do is steal papers, kill in the dark and be suspicious of everyone all the time."

In a quieter tone, Aron went on, "It is easy to love a state like a woman, because a State is a woman.

"A love for State fulfills all emotional needs. The censorship of yourself by your super-ego, manifested in a desire for repentance or masochism, this need is effected by dedication such as my lonely watch here.

"Your destructive tendencies, half of the love-hate primary drive of life, can be expressed by fighting and destroying an enemy. You can't destroy your wife because of laws, yet everyone wants to.

"The other half of the ambivalent drive, your love desire can be committed in a platonic admiration or a patriotic zeal as you call it.

"Sure, the State is a woman. It'll kick you around, neglect you and abuse you; but when she rewards you, she does so lavishly. And this, plus the self-satisfaction of having protected her from her enemies and helping her to survive—this is all the consummation of a love affair that a man could want.

"I know, what about the physical love? If all your other emotional needs are so well satisfied, you can be happy without that, especially if you're used to it—"

The agent interrupted. Aron knew he was not comprehending what he was saying, the man was still in a state of shock. But Aron knew the words were there, in the man's brain till he died. He could reason them out later.

"All right, all right," the agent said, "I am not here to argue philosophy. I just want to know why our plans failed.

"Since your wife's death didn't make you disillusioned enough to be receptive to treason, weren't you at least impressed with our offers of fabulous wealth and release from this prison?"

Aron rose from his chair and walked to the window. He didn't notice the agent and his menacing gun. He didn't care.

He looked out at the lifeless sunset of the world that sported the bare minimum of vegetation so it couldn't be insulted with the word "barren".

"Just another case of Intelligence men's stupidity," Aron said so quietly that the other man had to lean forward to hear. "Don't you know anything about your own territorial administration or ours? Do you know how they choose their men for these stations?"

"No, that isn't our department," was the answer.

Aron turned from the window and looked at him, seeming surprised to see him and hear him.

"Well, what sort of men would they choose? Where could they get men with the intelligence and ability required to operate one of these stations and cope with situations such as I've faced here? Where would they get such men to renounce the brilliant careers they

could have amongst civilization with such capabilities?"

"Damn it! Stop playing games. Spill what you've got to say!"

Aron looked at him coldly, searchingly, "Since you are attached to the Navy I imagine you've clocked many hours in space." When the agent nodded, Aron said, "Then, if you are lucky and show enough sense, you will become a TA man."

Slowly, comprehension came to the Intelligence man. The gun clutched in his hand lowered, his whole body slumped as he caught on to the fact they had overlooked. The fact that caused the failure of their plans. The fact that was his grim future.

"Fermi radiations!" Aron barked. "They rot your cells, weaken the blood, ruin the body. A man can spend about five years as a spaceman, about twenty months of which is spent in actual space. Twenty months and the man is doomed.

"If the man is smart he can become a space officer, then when he retires at twenty-five, he can land a good job with the TA. He doesn't want anything to do with civilization. That five years has made him love space, love isolation. So, they are willing to take these jobs, to be put out to pasture on wayward planets until they die at thirty-five." It was said with all the bitterness of a condemned man.

"What use would I have of your offers, even if they were true. When I finish, or rather, if I had finished my stay on Kligor, I'd only have a few months till I die. Your pleasant little cries of adventure, luxury, women, meant nothing.

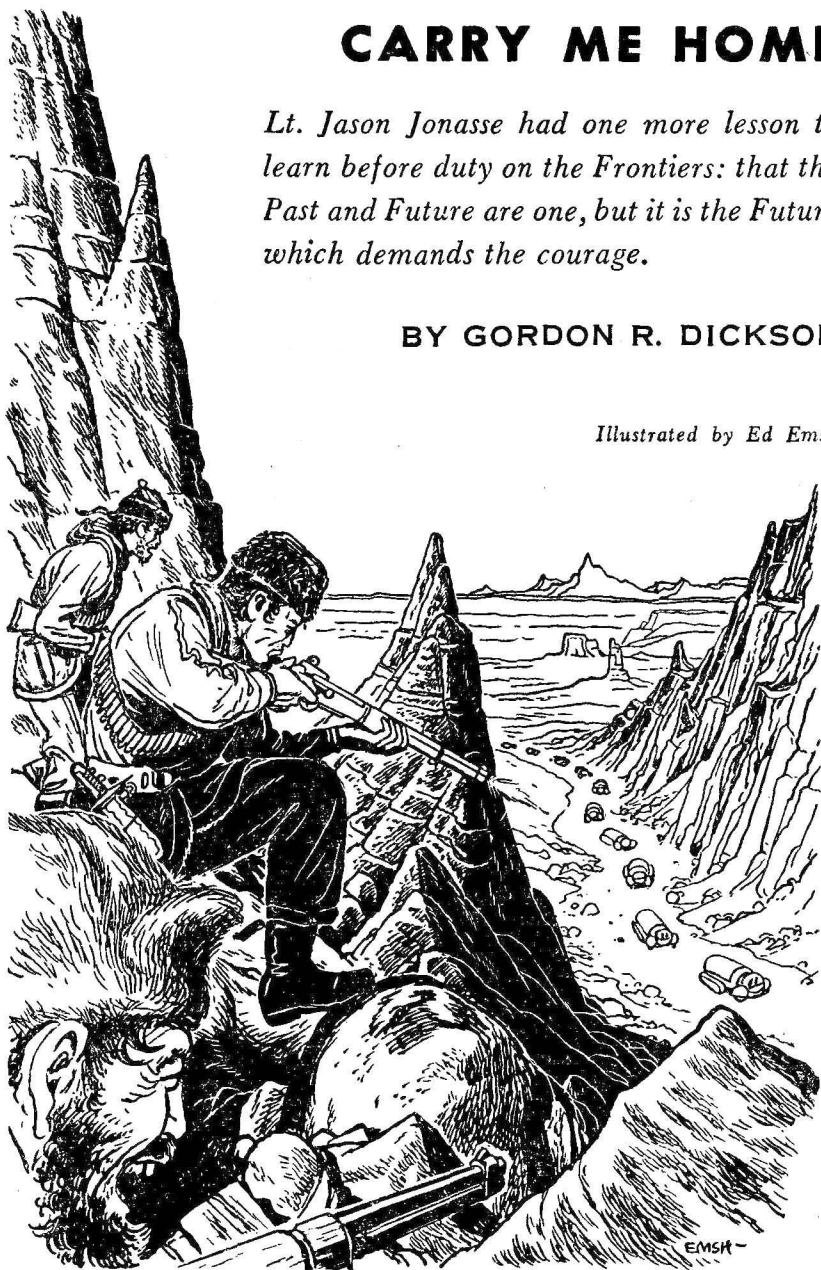
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CARRY ME HOME

Lt. Jason Jonasse had one more lesson to learn before duty on the Frontiers: that the Past and Future are one, but it is the Future which demands the courage.

BY GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by Ed Emsch



PARTIALLY, it was the youth of Jason Jonasse that made it difficult for him to understand his fellow man. But mainly, it was his background.

His family was of the military. From their native city on Kilbur Two, during the past hundred years or so, had come a steady stream of Jonasses. Mostly, they died, in one way or another, while serving humanity on the Frontier of man's expanding spatial area. Those who did not, won through to advancement and posts of high honor. All, however, without exception, made the first step of transfer from the backwaters of military duty, earning their right to carry their officer's buttons to Class A Service in the Frontier Zone.

It was this transfer that Jason had just received and which was propped now on the toilet shelf beside the shaving mirror in his quarters, where he could feast his eyes on it during the process of trimming the straight black lines of his little mustache, with the aid of that self-same mirror. The mustache was an index of his character, so essentially Kilburnian, so uncompromisingly military, so uniquely Jonasse. It was the final seal upon his difference, the crown upon his height and the lean good looks of his breed, and the uniform of which tunic cape and boots were custom-tailored.

There was no one thing about him which did not set him off from the other officers of this small military garrison on Aster. For this small lost planet out in the Beltane Quadrant was class C duty; and the other officers were Class C officers, as Jason had been, serving his apprenticeship in a sort of police

duty, until the blessed arrival of the transfer, welcome as a pardon to a life sentence prisoner. Jason beamed at it, working the clippers carefully over the ends of the mustache, for his baggage was packed and ready for the next courier ship that came and the transfer was his passport to the future.

A buzzer rang through his room, and Jason jerked at the unexpected suddenness of the sound. For a split-second the clippers slipped, chopping a little, ragged v out of the top line of the mustache, a v unfortunately beyond the ability of any clipping to disguise and anything but time to mend. For a moment, Jason stared at its reflection in the mirror. Then he cursed, threw down the clippers and thumbed the switch of the intercom.

"Officer Five Jonasse here," he said.

"Headquarters, Chief Troopman Basker, Sir," said the Speaker. "The Commandant would like you to report to his office right away, Officer."

"It'll be right there, Chief."

"Right, sir."

Scowling, Jason buttoned his tunic and clipped his cape about his shoulders. There was no good reason why the Commandant should want to see him, unless there had been some change in his orders directing the transfer. And if that . . .

Jason clamped down on the speculative section of his mind and left his quarters, hurrying across the drill-ground to the Headquarters Building.

Hot sunlight hit him a solid blow as he stepped out of the shade of his quarters. The Timudag, as the

plains country of Aster's one large continent was known, broiled during the summer months under a cloudless sky. Jason strode across it and stepped gratefully into the air conditioned coolness of the Headquarter's Building.

The Commandant was waiting for him in the outer office. Like Jason, a Kilburnian, but without the Jonasse family tradition of Service, he had won little recognition during his short term of Frontier Class A Service; and, having no prospects to speak of on retirement from that, had fallen back on Class C duty, where the retirement age was much higher. A thin, cold man, he did not particularly like Jason though a scrupulous sense of fairness forced him to admit that the younger Kilburnian was far and away the most valuable of his men.

"You messaged for me, sir?" said Jason.

The Commandant took Jason's elbow and drew him aside, out of earshot of the troopers at work at clerical tasks about the outer office. "Something has come up, Jason."

Jason felt cold apprehension and hot resentment. But he held it locked within him.

"The courier ship has just arrived," the Commandant said. "It brought your replacement—and another man."

The Commandant looked out the window and back to Jason again.

"The other man's an officer retired from Class A Service," he went on. "And he carries a request from the General Commander of our Quadrant to give him every assistance in returning home."

Jason looked at the Commandant in puzzlement. This was nonsensical. If the man was from Aster, he was already home. If he was not from Aster, why had he come to Aster, to this outlying station to obtain assistance?

"I don't understand," he said honestly.

"His home," explained the Commandant briefly, "is in the Timumang."

AT THAT, Jason began to understand.

North of the Timudag, on Aster's one large land mass, lay the Timumang, the Mountains of the People. Boulder-strewn upthrust of the continental geosyncline to the north, it housed the degenerate descendants of an early abortive attempt at colonization, four hundred years before the coming of civilization proper to Aster. Wild and suspicious, these forgotten people had backslid to a clan-tribal form of organization. They warred on each other, lived off their inhospitable country in the course of nomadic wanderings, and shunned their latter-day cousins of the lowlands as if they had been plague-ridden.

The Timumang ignored the Timudag. Jason had not, in his term of service guarding the Interstellar Message Station and the few raw little towns of the Timudag, been anywhere near the Mountains of the People. Nor, as far as he knew, had any of the other men at the station. But of course he had heard stories.

There were other worlds where the tragic accident of too-early colonization had taken place, and

the settlers had backslid to savagery or near-savagery. They were the cobwebbed corners that the Central Headquarters on Earth, like a busy housewife, was always planning to do something about and never getting to. From them, every so often, would come the rare case of a degenerate who ran away or escaped from his own people to join the ranks of civilization. Sometimes such men rose to respectable positions. But the tendency of ordinary people was to feel some repugnance toward them—reminders as they were of the fact that the human race was not completely without exception shooting up the dizzy stairs toward the millenium.

"A degenerate!" Jason muttered.

"An ex-officer," corrected the Commandant coldly.

Jason felt his temper rising, but held it back. He returned to the crux of the matter.

"I interrupted you, sir," he said. "Pardon me."

"Well," said the Commandant. "He'll need an escort and an officer to command the escort."

"You don't mean me, sir?" said Jason, aghast. "My orders—"

"I've no choice," said the Commandant, irritably. "And the delay in your transfer needn't be fatal. I've got no one else I can trust with such a job. He won't take more than twenty men."

Jason stared, incredulous.

"You can't go into the Timumang with just twenty men," he said, at last.

The Commandant snorted.

"Come and talk to him, yourself," he said, turning and leading the way toward his private office. "And remember, the Commander

General requests our assistance. There's no dodging this."

Bitterly, Jason followed him, the sour anger of the betrayed curdling in his stomach. Mere hours from shipping out, they had to send him off on a what sounded like a suicide mission. Not that Jason had any objections to dying, if the time and place were right—but to be possibly clubbed to death in what amounted to a backyard brawl!

The Commandant ushered him in and a man sitting in one of the easy chairs of the office rose to greet them. He was a curious figure, as tall as the two Kilburnians, but so broad of shoulder and long of arm that he seemed much shorter. In the dark skin of his face, set above flat, heavy cheekbones and beneath pronounced brows, his brown eyes looked out at them with the soft liquidity of an animal. There was something yielding and sad about him. Not guts, thought Jason, harshly, out of the fury of his resentment. No backbone.

The Commandant was introducing the two men. Jason shook hands briefly.

"Mr. Potter, this is Officer Five Jason Jonasse," said the Commandant. "Jason, this is Mr. Kerl Potter, formerly an Officer Three."

"Honored to meet you," said the degenerate. His voice was husky and so deep that he almost seemed to croon the words.

"Pleasure is mine," replied Jason briefly and mechanically. "The Commandant tells me you think twenty men is a sufficient escort into the Timumang."

"Yes," replied Potter, nodding.

"Why, that isn't nearly enough strength," said Jason. "The average

clan usually musters at least a hundred fighting men."

"I know," Kerl Potter smiled, a warm, but deprecating smile. "I grew up in the Timumang—or had the Commandant told you?"

He didn't have to, thought Jason, looking at the man with disgust and disfavor. Aloud he said, "Any single tribe would be more than a match for us."

"Please——" Kerl held up his hand. "Let me explain."

Jason nodded, curtly.

"I wish to get back to my own clan—the Potter Clan," said the dark man. "For that we must go in on foot and search, because the clans move constantly, and from the air—which would be the quickest way of going—there is no way to tell which tribe is which. They go to earth when they see a flyer."

"I'll admit that——" began Jason.

"So we must go in on foot," continued Potter, his deep voice like distant summer thunder in the office. "We must hunt for campsites until we find Potter sign at one. And then we must trail the clan until we catch up with it." He paused, looking at Jason and the Commandant to see if they understood.

"Now," he said, "that means we must go through much Timumang territory. If we are too large a group, the word will go ahead of us and all clans will hide and we will never catch up with the Potters. If we are too few, the first tribe we meet with will destroy us. Therefore the solution is to have enough men to discourage attack, but not enough to frighten the clans into moving out of our way. When we have found the Potter Clan, you can drop me off and call for air trans-

port to pick you and the men up and bring you back."

Kerl wound up the argument and smiled at Jason as if to soften the young man's opposition with good humor. Jason looked helplessly at the Commandant, who shrugged and looked out the window, washing his hands of the matter.

"Look, Mr. Potter," said Jason, turning back to the man and making an effort to be reasonable. "These men of ours are all Class C. They know something of police duty in the towns here, and maintaining order generally. What they know about expeditioning is nothing——"

"You can take your pick of the station, Jason," said the Commander.

It was the culminating blow, the stab in the back. Turning to look at his superior officer, Jason realized finally that he was not to be allowed to avoid this expedition, nor to alter the conditions of it. For some reason, some intricacy of interbranch politicking, it had become necessary for the General Commander to oblige Kerl Potter and for the Commandant to oblige the General Commander. It struck him as symbolic. As the degenerates were a clog and hamper upon the progress of humanity, here was Kerl Potter, their representative, to be a clog and hamper upon the progress of Jason, representative of the out-seeking spirit of Man. His spirit bent under the blow, but pride held his body upright.

"Well, thank you, Commandant," said Kerl, turning to the commanding officer. "I'll look forward to leaving tomorrow then." He turned back to Jason. "Until then, sir."

"Until then," said Jason, and watched him leave. When the door had shut behind the broad back, he turned once more to the Commandant.

"This is unfortunate," said the Commandant, reading his eyes. "But into each life some rain must fall, eh?"

Damn him! thought Jason.

"Yes sir," he replied woodenly.

JASON picked the twenty men for the expedition with the same lack of sympathy the Commandant had shown in the choice of Jason, himself. He was curt with the Quartermaster, harsh with Ordnance, and unfeeling toward Transportation. At the end of the day the expedition had been outfitted with brilliant organization and Jason returned to his quarters to write a letter to his family on Kilbur Two, explaining that his expected entrance into the realm of glory would be somewhat delayed.

"... the duty (he wrote his father, after the usual family well-wishes) is hardly one that I would have wished for at this time. Aside from the fact that I am naturally eager to enter on my Class A assignment at the Frontier, I do not expect to find it pleasant to be cooped up, possibly for weeks, with such a man. Your instincts, I know, would cause you to advise me to treat him with respect for his former rank as an Officer Three. Ordinarily, such respect would be automatic on my part. However, this is no ordinary case. In the first place, he has obviously left the Service long before the earliest age of retirement, which argues a lack of courage, or at least

of character. And in the second place, to meet the man is to realize there is, nothing at all to respect about him. And finally (if any more were needed) the fact that he is turning his back on the competition of civilized life and running back to hide in the stagnant safety of the primitive. If there is one thing that revolts me, it is a lack of courage . . ."

And more in that vein. By the time Jason had filled a couple of micro-reels, he was more resigned, if not reconciled to his task. He got to bed and managed to get to sleep.

He awoke to the day's duty. The men were mustered on the drill field under the leadership of Chief Troopman Acy, a non-commissioned officer who had grown up in the foothills of the Timudag to the north, and whose knowledge of local conditions, slight as it was, might prove to be useful. Looking the detachment over, Jason had to admit that if any men from the station could do this job properly, these were the ones. All were fit professionals with more than one hitch to their credit and a few had even had some combat experience. Jason nodded and ordered Chief Troopman Acy to move them over to Transportation.

Kerl Potter was waiting for them when they arrived, his dark figure a still monument of patience in the clear morning sunlight. A transport was waiting for them, already loaded with two man cars and supplies. They embarked.

The transport flew them to a spot where the foothills gave way to the mountains. Here they landed and transferred all personnel and equipment to the two man cars. When all

was ready, Jason signed off the transport and gave the order to mount, taking the lead car himself, with Kerl in the bucket seat beside him. The transparent tops of the cars were shut and the caravan led off up a steep and unmarked valley toward a pass into the mountains.

"Now," said Jason, turning to his passenger as they topped the pass. "Where to?"

Kerl turned brown eyes to him and away and pointed out and ahead to where a long canyon that lay like a knife slash through the mountains, its further end lost in distance.

"North," he said. "Straight north until we pick up sign."

Jason nodded and turned the car off in the direction of the canyon. Like obedient mechanical sheep, the cars behind swung through the turn, each in their proper order, and followed him.

It was about an hour's run to the beginning of the canyon. From there, the route they were following sloped down and the steep walls rose high and forbiddingly above them. Gazing at this barrenness and the apparent lack of life, with the exception of the stunted bushes clinging in the cracks of the boulders, Jason felt his stomach turn over at the thought of deliberately spending a lifetime, *by choice*, in such an environment. It would be worse than being dead. It would be hell without a purpose. How did these people live?

"Mainly off game," said Kerl beside him; and, turning with a jerk, Jason realized she had spoken his last thoughts aloud. "There's quite a bit of it. Wild mountain sheep

and goats descended from stock the early settlers themselves brought in. Native species, too, of course, but they aren't edible. Only their furs are useful."

"I see," said Jason, stiffly.

"It's not a bad life when you're used to it," Kerl went on. "You'd be surprised, Jason—you don't mind me calling you Jason, do you? Seems foolish to be formal when we're cooped up like this—but if you like the mountains and like to hunt, it can come close to being ideal."

Jason had meant to keep his mouth shut; but this last statement was too much.

"Exactly," he said, bitterly, "and let the rest of the race take care of you."

Kerl looked at him in surprise.

"The Peoples of the Mountain don't ask help from others," he protested, mildly.

"How about the Frontier?" demanded Jason. "How about the Class A troops that protect the inner worlds like this from attack by some inimical life form?"

"What inimical life form?" countered Kerl. "We've never run across one intelligent enough to be a threat."

"That's no sign there isn't one," said Jason.

"Nonsense," said Kerl, but without heat. "The Class A troops have only one real function and that's to clean up planets we want to take over. You know that."

"I—" Jason realised he was getting into the sort of argument he had promised himself to avoid. He bit his tongue and closed his mouth. Two seconds more and he would be telling this man what he thought

of degenerates in general.

"The mountaineers are a sturdy self-sufficient people," Kerl went on. "They even have a few virtues that are largely lacking in the outside world."

"Virtues!" said Jason.

His hard-held temper was about to snap when an interruption occurred that saved him from himself. From nowhere there was suddenly the sound of thin, crescendoing screams. Something slapped with sickening violence against the transparent cover of the car, leaving a small grey smudge; and half a second later came the sound of a distant report.

"What was that?" Jason snapped.

Kerl pointed away and up to the high rim of the canyon where a tiny plume of white smoke rose lazily in the still air.

"They're shooting at us," he said. "They use chemical firearms, you know, with solid missile projectiles. We've moved into the area of one of the clans."

Jason's hand shot toward the intercom button that would activate the speakers in all the cars behind him. Kerl caught his fingers before they could activate the mike.

"Let it go," he said. "That was just a warning to make sure we keep traveling. If they meant to attack they wouldn't give themselves away by shooting from a distance." He pointed at the smudge on the overhead transparency. "No harm to it. The plastic is missile proof."

Jason looked at him icily for a minute then continued to reach for the intercom. His fingers touched the button.

"All cars," he said, into the mike. "Keep your tops up. There'll be

sporadic shooting at us from now on."

Kerl smiled a little sadly, and looked away, into the distance of the canyon, winding out of sight ahead.

FOR A WEEK they searched, always headed north. They traveled by day, barracking at night, sentries posted, and sleepers locked in their individual cars. By night, the stars glittered, cold and frosty and distant, far above the jagged tops of the mountains; and every rattle and slither of falling stone made the sentries jerk nervously and grab their power rifles in sweat-dampened hands.

By day it was better only because of sunlight and company. The eleven cars jolted and rocked their way down one valley and up the next, moving in single file. From time to time they would run across the cold ashes and litter of an abandoned clan campsite and halt for a few minutes while Kerl prowled about it, sifting the ashes with his finger, sniffing like a huge black bear at any discarded equipment. Then they would rebark and be moving again.

Every so often from the cliff tops above them would spurt a little puff of grey smoke and seconds later would come the report of a chemical energy missile, firearm and the whack and scream of a solid slug as it bounced off the transparent cover of one of the cars. The shooting ground on the nerves, a constant reminder of the unseen, inimical, mountain dwellers waiting just out of sight and reach for something to happen to the detachment.

It was hard on the nerves of the men of the detachment. And it was hard on Jason, chafing at the bit to be free of this degrading duty, faced with the responsibility of holding untested troops to their work, and forced to live cheek by jowl with a man whom training and his own inclinations forced him to despise.

It was a situation with explosive potentials. And the first touch of violence brought these out into the open.

On their seventh day out and some nine hundred miles north and slightly west of the point at which they had entered the Timumang, they were proceeding down a long narrow valley. To the left, a small stream marked their road for them, clear water singing down the narrow, level throat of the valley. Beyond it, a series of slopes faded up and back to the skyline. To the right, the cliffs rose more steeply, sharp, pitching angles rubbled with boulder and sharp-cornered loose rock. Jason had been guiding the caravan of cars as usual, his hands on the controls, his mind a dozen light years off on the Frontier and the job he had yet to do there.

Abruptly he felt a hand on his arm.

Yanked abruptly back to the present and the Timumang, he turned with no great pleasure to see Kerl staring at him with a frown line deep-graven between the brown eyes.

"What is it?" said Jason.

"I've got a hunch," answered Kerl. His deep voice filled the interior of the little car with hollow sound. "I think we ought to turn back."

"Turn back?" echoed Jason.

"This valley," said Kerl. "I don't like it. I don't like the feel of it. We could go back and take another one."

Jason throttled down the speed of the car but kept it moving forward.

"Now let's get this straight," he said, impatiently. "You don't think we ought to go any farther down this valley. Why?"

"We may be attacked," answered Kerl. "We haven't been shot at for some hours now. That's a bad sign."

"Couldn't we be traveling through an area where there are no people?"

"Could be," admitted Kerl. "But I've got this hunch—"

Jason considered, keeping his face blank. On the one hand, the man beside him was supposed to know these mountains. On the other hand, the little knowledge he had so far gained of the mountaineers had given him a kind of contempt for them.

"Tell me," said Jason abruptly, "have you any definite reason for warning us out of this valley? Any—" he stressed the word slightly—"real evidence?"

"No," said Kerl.

"We'll go on," Jason said flatly.

The detachment proceeded without trouble. As they approached the far end of the valley, it became too narrow for two of the cars abreast. Abruptly, Kerl shot out an arm and skidded the car to a halt. Behind them the rest of the detachment slammed brakes to keep from piling up.

"What now?" demanded Jason, exasperated.

"I was right. Look—" Kerl pointed directly ahead to a low

mound of stones that half-blocked the route. "A food cache. The tribe around here has been on a hunting sweep."

"What's that got to do with us?" demanded Jason. "We don't want their food."

"But they don't know that," said Kerl.

Jason looked at him; and the thought crossed his mind that the other man was pushing his point home out of sheer stubbornness. It bolstered his belief that there was a cowardly streak in Kerl.

"We'll go forward," he said. "If trouble comes, it'll be time enough to turn back."

"I don't—" said Kerl; and suddenly his face twisted in alarm. He thrust out with both hands, slamming home the throttle and activating the intercar communicator.

"Forward! Full speed!" he yelled. And, Jason, slammed back in his seat by the acceleration, had just time to grab for the steering bar as the little car leaped forward.

As he shot past the cache, the reason for Kerl's actions became horribly apparent. High up the steep slope to the right the top of the cliff seemed to be bowing forward like the head of an old man and crumbling slowly and majestically into a thousand pieces. Distance lent it a gentle air as if the whole process was taking place in slow motion, but Jason realized suddenly with a sickening sense of shock that thousands of tons of rock were in that landslide, tumbling down upon him and upon the detachment that was his responsibility. With no time for cursing fate or bawling orders, he hung grimly to the controls of the car and prayed

that the men behind him had followed.

For an agonizingly long time it seemed that they would make it. And finally, when the dust and the rattle of smaller stones closed about them, it proved impossible to tell. At that moment a huge rock came springing out of nowhere at Jason's car, and he felt a terrific blow that flung him into darkness.

LATE THAT night, after two dead troopers had been buried in the shattered frame of one of the cars, Kerl went hunting Jason.

He found the young officer standing off by himself, wrestling with his devils in the darkness. It is not easy at any time, but particularly the first, to have to face the fact that an arbitrary decision of yours has cost two men their lives. And this becomes worse when there is ground for self-blame in the reasons behind that decision. Rightly or wrongly, Jason believed, and would go on believing for the rest of his days, that his dislike of Kerl had killed two men. He was not particularly glad, therefore, when Kerl loomed up out of the darkness beside him.

"Well?" he said.

"The men are pretty well bedded down," replied Kerl. "I thought you'd like to know. They've got the last car fixed, so we can go on with nine of them, tomorrow."

They stood in silence for a little while.

"I know how you're feeling," volunteered Kerl, finally.

"Do you?" said Jason, savagely.

"I did the same thing myself once," said Kerl. "Shortly after I

was taken into Class A Service. I was on Kelmesh and I thought I'd save time by fording a river. It was shallow enough and the water was clear enough, but there was more current than I thought and I hadn't the foresight to rope the men together. I lost five troopers."

Jason said nothing.

"You'd better come back inside the ring of cars," said Kerl.

Jason looked up at the cliff. And then, just at that moment, the moon crept into sight, bathing the whole long valley suddenly in silvery luster. And in that same split second, born almost it seemed of the light itself, came a long, keening, wavering cry, that quivered out alone over the valley for a minute and then was taken up by many voices in something half-song, half-wail.

Jason halted as if struck.

"What's that?" he said, staring at Kerl.

The dark man's face in the bright moonlight was etched and hollowed by mysterious shadows. He looked off at the hills.

"There was some shooting while you were unconscious," he answered. "One of the men evidently hit and killed the clan's head. That's the lament for a chieftain."

They turned in silence and went back to the cars. The voices followed, crying on their ears.

The men in the cars were somber and quiet as they broke camp the next morning. Once they were moving, their little car trundling up out of the valley to head into the next one, Kerl spoke to Jason.

"Things may start occurring to the men," he said.

"Things?" repeated Jason, sharp-

ly. "What things?"

"That if I was out of the way, they could start back to the lowlands."

Jason stared at him.

"What?" he said, half-unable or unwilling to believe he had heard right.

"Don't look so shocked," said Kerl. "It's a natural reaction."

"These troops are completely trustworthy!" Jason felt his face warming with anger.

Kerl shrugged and looked away, out front at the barren cliffs.

"It's something to think of," he said. "It's important to me to reach my destination."

Jason felt words coming to his lips. He tried to check them, but the pressure inside him was too great.

"More important than men's lives?"

Kerl turned to face him again. His features were unreadable.

"To me," he said, "yes."

For what seemed a very long moment they seemed to sit poised, staring at each other. Then Kerl said, very softly:

"You don't understand."

"No," said Jason.

"Tell me," said Kerl. "What do you intend to do with your life?"

"I am a career officer," answered Jason stiffly.

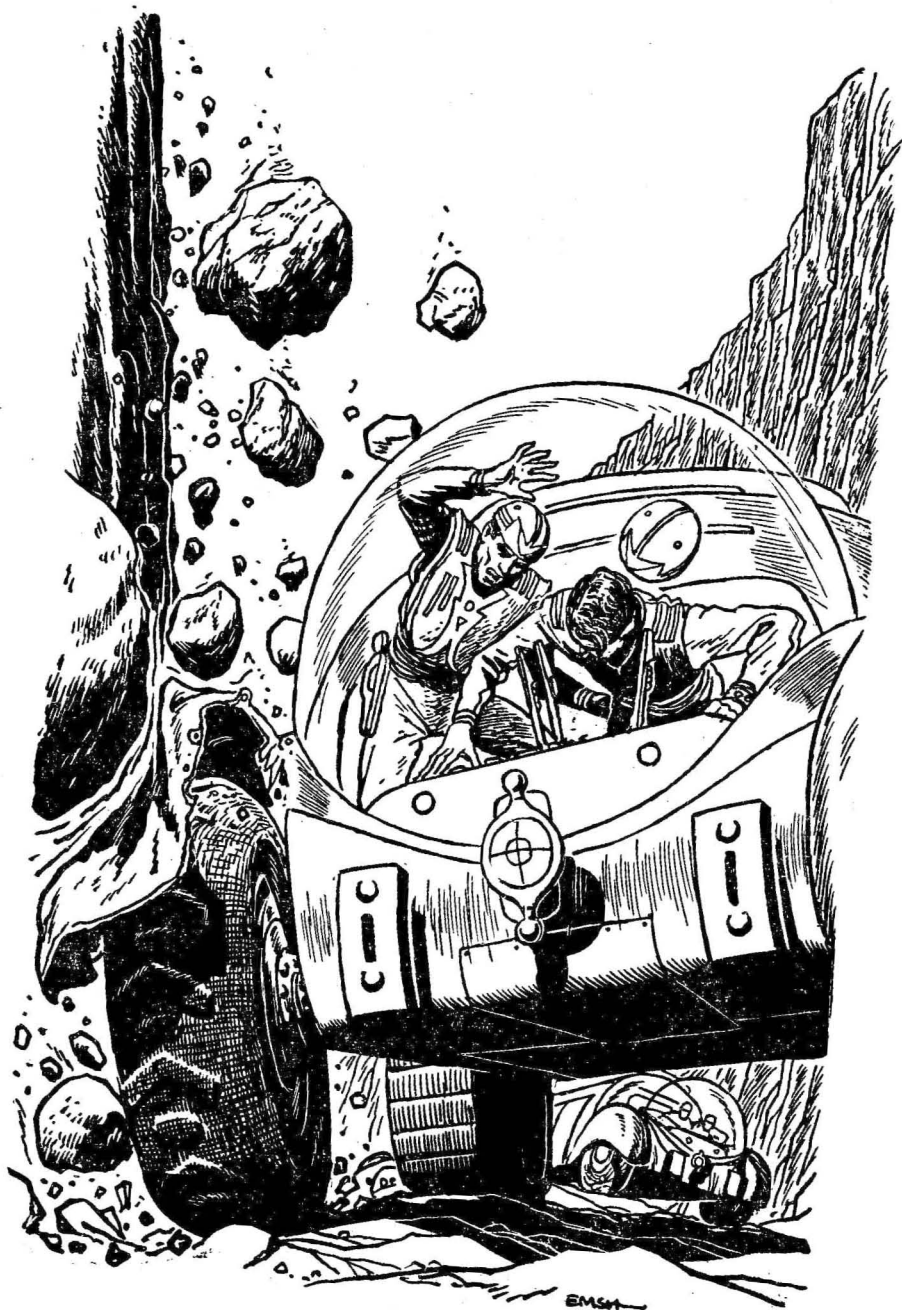
"Serving humanity on the Frontier, eventually, no doubt?"

"Of course." Effort kept Jason's voice level. "I was ready to leave for the Frontier when you arrived."

"And I held up your transfer," said Kerl, thoughtfully.

Jason could think of no rejoinder to this that would not be explosive; and so said nothing.

"Each to his own," Kerl went on,



after a pause. "I was a Frontier officer myself, as I said. On Kelmesh."

It was the one weak spot in the armor of Jason's resentment. This man was a former officer. To Jason the words implied the very opposite of all that the word degenerate implied. He felt his fury ebb with a rush leaving him floundering in uncertainty.

"I don't understand you," he said helplessly. "I don't understand you at all."

The new valley dipped abruptly before them and Jason found that all the attention of his eyes was required to guide the car.

"Let me tell you about myself," he heard Kerl say.

"I was a chief's son," said Kerl. "I am still, for that matter, for there is nothing that can take that away from you. If my father has died while I was gone I am chieftain; my people will offer their hands to me as if I had never been away. But I am also a deserter."

"Deserter," murmured Jason, finding the military ring of the word odd in context with the mountain people.

"Deserter," repeated Kerl, strangely, as if for him the word had some hidden, personal meaning. "I ran away. I wanted to go down to the lowlands. I wanted to go to civilization and become famous. Not that being famous in itself was important. It was what it stood for. I wanted to leave my mark on the race."

"So you ran away?"

"We were camped one day near the southern foothills. My father had refused permission for about the thousandth time. That night I went. Three days later I was wear-

ing a uniform back at your station there. That was twenty years ago. I was fourteen years old."

Jason shot him a glance of shocked surprise.

"You were in the Service for twenty years?" he asked.

Kerl shook his head.

"I put in three years and saved my money. Then I took off toward the frontier as a civilian pioneer. I bounced from new planet to new planet, doing everything—mines, timber, weather, construction. It was a rough life, but I liked it. It was like home."

He means the Timumang, thought Jason, looking bewilderedly at the bleak mountains.

"Then one day I woke up. I was twenty-eight and I hadn't even started to do the things I wanted to do. I hadn't left my mark on the progress of civilization, but it had left its mark on me. Suddenly all the wishing dreams I'd had as a boy came back. I just had to build something permanent and lasting that would be my own."

He paused.

"I went to Kelmesh," he said. He turned his head to look at Jason. "You've heard of Kelmesh?"

Jason nodded.

"A good world," said Kerl, his voice thoughtful as if he was half-talking to himself. "A fine world. Sweet water and clean air and all the natural resources. Nothing but little harmless life-forms as far as we could see. Everything was beautiful. I looked at Kelmesh and I told myself that here was where I would make my mark and finish my days. Someday Kelmesh would have schools where history was taught. And near the beginning of that his-

tory would be the name of Kerl Potter." He sighed, a thin husk of a sound.

"I went to work," he said. "People were pouring into Kelmesh in those first couple of years after the planet was cleared and opened up. I bought land. I bought into the new towns and started things—an ore processing plant here, a tool factory there. I backed prospecting expeditions, and news services and everything else that I had the time or finances for." He looked down at his big hands in his lap with something like satisfaction. "I got a lot done."

"I suppose you made money," said Jason, thoughtlessly.

"Oh, I made it, all right," said Kerl. "But I ploughed it back in, every cent of it, as fast as I got my hands on it. It was history I was really after. And I made it, too, until the hordes came."

"Locusts, weren't they?" asked Jason, his eyes on the ground as he guided the little car through a small scattered forest of huge boulders.

"No," said Kerl, "they just resembled them in their life habits. Like the seven year (is it seven years?) locust. Millions of eggs were buried as much as ten feet underground. Every forty years they worked their way to the surface as worms and came out as little, hopping creatures as big as a small frog. Then they grew. They swelled up to the size of a grown sheep and spread out by the millions all over Kelmesh and devoured everything."

His voice stopped on a flat note.

"Everything," he repeated.

Jason had the good sense to keep his mouth shut. After a little bit, Kerl went on again.

"The colonists ran," he said. "God, I didn't blame them. Homes, lands, the grass, the trees, everything up to and including the clothing they wore was meat for the hordes. But I hated them for it. I stood on the spaceport landing stage with a silicoid jumper over what was left of my clothing and a thermite gun in my hand and cursed the last ship out of sight."

"You didn't leave?" asked Jason, incredulously. "I thought everybody left."

"Not I," said Kerl. "And not some others. It took us about two weeks to find each other for we were scattered all over the planet. But at the end of that time there were sixty of us gathered together in what was left of Kelmesh's governing city hall. Sixty-odd lousy, dirty, hungry men, with just one thought in common: that the hordes might chew the planet to the bone this time around, but the next generation wasn't going to live to boast about it."

The fierce note on which Kerl ended rang through the little car. He stopped, as if abashed by it, and then went on in a mild voice.

"They live for five years, you know," he said, "and lay their eggs at six week intervals all during that time. They don't all lay at once, either. A bunch go off somewhere by themselves and bury themselves alive. The body of the parent is food for the grubs when they hatch."

Jason shivered.

"Well, our first plan was to take to the air and track down a group that was about to lay and incinerate it. The first few months we tried it. Then we woke up to the

fact that the job was too big and started just tracking them down and marking the laying areas. When the hordes began to split up and the individuals began to spread all over the place, we finally yelled for help. By that time we were down to about eighteen men."

Jason glanced sideways at him in surprise. Kerl caught the look.

"Lack of food," he explained. "Long hours in the air. Men would go asleep at the controls and crash. On foot you couldn't count on lasting very long. A human being's organic, and anything organic suited their appetites.

"We messaged our story out to the nearest Message Relay Station. Three months later a spruce Frontier Cruiser dropped down on our spaceport. I was there to meet it with two other men. A neatly tailored little commandant came down the landing ramp and looked me over.

"Where is everybody?" he asked."

"Dead," I said."

"He looked at me as if I was pulling some kind of joke on him."

"Well, come on inside," he said. "We'll fix you up with some food and clothes."

"The hell with food and clothes," I said. "Give us thermite recharges for the guns."

"He peered at me.

"You're out of your head, planter," he said. And I took a swing at him and woke up in the ship's hospital two days later.

"Well, they wanted to send us back to civilization, but none of the three of us would go. So we compromised all around by having us sign on as Frontier Special Troops.

Then the war began.

"It wasn't what Sector Headquarters ten light years away had thought it would be. It wasn't even what I thought it would be. It was worse. The whole thing tied in with the evolution process of these critters. They had no natural enemies, so they weeded each other out on a survival of the fittest basis. Within a few months after they came out of the ground—inside half a year at the latest—they'd cleaned up everything else worth eating. That meant the only source of food was—each other.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?" Kerl smiled briefly at Jason, "Sounds as if they were helping us along in our extermination program? But it turned out that this process had bred some intelligence into them and with that intelligence, the ability to learn—fast.

"They had no use for brains when the whole planet was one big dinner table. But when the numbers began to thin out—when they were down to the last few millions of them—intelligence began to show up.

"First, they took to cooperating. Each little group began to show signs of internal organization. Then the groups began to work together, and we woke up to the fact that the critters were fighting back; what had started out as a fumigating project had turned into a war."

Kerl broke off suddenly to stare intently out the transparent front of the car. The seconds lengthened into minutes, and finally Jason spoke.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Potter sign, I think," said Kerl. "A campsite about five hundred

yards ahead. Drive on up to the foot of that big rock and halt the detachment."

THE SIGN was Potter sign. Kerl toured the area of the camp, like a hunting animal, running the cold ashes from the cooking fires through his fingers, and raking through the discarded litter around them. His investigation kept him occupied until noon, so the midday meal was eaten where they stood. They pushed on after lunch, covering another fifty miles before night brought them to a stop.

The going was slower now, for Kerl was forced to watch the ground and the rocky walls closely to make sure that they were staying on the Potter trail and not drifting off on the track of some other clan that might have crossed or paralleled the same route. Consequently, there was no further chance for conversation between him and Jason and it was not until that evening that Jason had an opportunity to draw him aside.

They sat down in their car and closed the top—that being the only meager means to privacy the situation afforded.

"How much farther before we catch up with them?" asked Jason.

"Not far," replied Kerl. His voice seemed to have grown old and weary since the morning. "Say thirty miles. We should catch up with them tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," said Jason.

They sat in silence for a little while, each occupied by his own thoughts. Finally Jason broke the pause.

"You were telling me about Kel-

mesh earlier today—"

"Oh—yes," said Kerl, abruptly, like someone whose thoughts are suddenly recalled from a great distance. "I was. Well—right now I'm a little tired. If you don't mind—"

"Of course," replied Jason promptly. He threw back the lid of the car and stepped out. "Good night."

"Good night," said Kerl, from the interior shadows of the car.

Jason did not feel like sleeping. He had always been a straightforward man, as honest with himself as nature permitted. He believed thoroughly in the solid universe that he knew. It contained space and the human race, whose manifest destiny it was to occupy space. Occasionally, among the teeming hordes of mankind emerged those who perceived this destiny. These went out and dedicated themselves to it. The rest lived and bred in happy ignorance. To them, no blame, but no glory.

But among the dedicated— By no possible stretch of the imagination could Jason imagine a man who saw the light, followed it, then turned his back on it, and went again to dwell in darkness. What flaw in the ideal of man's manifest destiny could prompt such an action? The thought was very disturbing to Jason. After all, this was the ideal he was probably going to get himself killed for—unless good luck and skill preserved him.

Jason could no longer write Kerl off as a man basically lacking in courage and the virtues that the frontier demands. Jason had read and heard enough about Kelmesh to recognize that the other man

was speaking the truth. Had Kerl's nerve finally broken under those conditions? Jason could not believe it. There was nothing broken about the big, dark man.

What then? Pacing the narrow circle of the camp, Jason looked up at the stars and did not know the answer.

But he would find out tomorrow, before Kerl parted company with them for good—he made himself that promise.

MORNING came bright and sudden. A little of the sparse rain that fell upon these mountains had fallen during the night, and the rocks around them were dark and had a damp smell that began to fade quickly as a thirsty sun licked up the moisture through the dry air. Camp was struck, and the circle of cars took up the trail again in customary file.

For four hours, the going was the same as it had been the day before, the detachment crawling along slowly, with Kerl in the lead car tensely scrutinizing the ground for sign. They crossed out of the valley and into another that ran parallel for some twenty miles. This at a point where the mountains split three ways, Kerl called a halt.

He got down from the lead car and began to examine the little open area where the four valleys came together. For some time he combed the area minutely, eyes bent on the rock at his feet; long arms dangling loosely from hunched shoulders, so that he looked almost more ape than human from a distance. Finally, he

returned to the car where Jason waited.

"There," he said, pointing to the rightmost of the three new valleys as he climbed into the car. "And about thirty miles off. I know where they're headed, now."

Jason looked at him; then closed the open top of the car and gave the order to move out over the intercom. They rolled ahead between the rocky walls that had been steadily about them since the beginning.

In his bucket seat in the car, Kerl leaned back and sighed, rubbing one big, square-fingered hand across his eyes.

"A strain, that tracking, I suppose," said Jason.

Kerl turned to look at him. He managed a tired grin.

"I'm out of practise," he replied. "Too much being done for me by gadgets has spoiled the senses."

His eyes had wandered off to look at the mountains. Now he brought them back again to Jason.

"You've done a good job for me," he said. "I'm grateful."

"My duty—" said Jason, with a little deprecating shrug. He half-turned to look at the other man.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"Go ahead," Kerl told him.

The strict Kilburnian ethics of Jason's upbringing fought a momentary, short and silent battle with his curiosity and lost.

"Why are you going back?" he asked.

Jason could see the sharp barb of his question strike home. Kerl did not answer. And, as the seconds slipped past and were lost in silence, he began to think that he

had, indeed, stepped beyond the bounds of all propriety and right. And, then, just as he was about to apologize, words did come from the other man.

"You asked me to tell you about the rest of what happened to me on Kelmesh," said Kerl.

"I—yes," replied Jason. "Yes, I did."

"I'll tell you now," said Kerl. "You've heard what it was like, no doubt."

"I had a cousin who came in on the tail end of it," said Jason. "I read some letters from him."

"A lot of men died," Kerl spoke softly, "more men than I could ever have imagined dying in one place at one time. That's why I earned rank so quickly. They discharged me as an Officer Two, but I was acting Commandant for the last six months."

"You know," Jason said, "I have trouble understanding how creatures like that, even with a little intelligence, could stand up to our war equipment so long, and cause such trouble."

Kerl chuckled a little bitterly, "Sector Headquarters had trouble understanding it, too. But then, they weren't on the planet."

Jason blinked at such open criticism of the Frontier's military leadership. Kerl went on:

"It was easy enough to understand when it was under your nose. There were two reasons. One was that we were not fighting a war, we were conducting an extermination project, in which all of those critters had to be killed off. The second was that we couldn't defend, we had to attack. Impose those conditions on men fighting in

what amounted to a wasteland, and what did you have?"

"You had small patrol action and nothing but small patrol action. There was so much ground to be covered and so many of the things to be killed. You called in your junior officers and lined them up in front of a map and drew out their routes for them. Then out they went to make their patrols on foot—on foot, mind you, because the critters buried themselves in the ground during the daytime and even in a two man car you'd drive right over them.

"They'd take off—" Kerl's eyes had grown bleak and distant, seeing again the bitter plains of his memories. "—extended in a skirmish line, looking for spots where the earth was loose. And when they found one, they'd dig it out and incinerate it, unless it woke up first and got away before the thermite charges could cripple it enough to make escape impossible.

"When night came the men would bivouak and dig in, with their guns charged and portable searchlights illuminating the ground all around them. And they'd try to sleep—but the night would be one long battle.

"Nothing kept the critters away. The searchlights even attracted them—but what could you do? The men needed light to shoot by, and some warning when they came. For they came at top speed. They must have been crazy mad with hunger, during this period when there was nothing for them to live on but each other and us. One would spot the light and come up quietly, then suddenly charge in as fast as it could. And they could

move fast. The idea seemed to be to pick up a man and carry him off into the darkness.

"Sometimes, two or three would work together and we'd have them charging at once. The horrible thing was, there was a sort of instinct in them that made them try to continue eating even when they were dying. If they grabbed a man and couldn't make it out of the circle, they still tried to make a meal of him, even while being burned by the gun charges.

"Their notion of fighting was just to start eating their enemy. In fact, fighting and feeding was the same thing. In the beginning the losses from night attacks were fantastically high. But after a while we began to keep them down to a minimum. The men kept their lives, but they lost their nerve—"

This was so close to what Jason had been thinking about Kerl himself the night before, that the young officer started involuntarily. Kerl, however, went on without noticing.

"—and cracked. And the commonest form of cracking was to blow up some night when the patrol was dug in, to jump out of the hole you had dug and go running off into the darkness to hunt down the critters that were prowling out there. That waiting—" Kerl shuddered, "—it was bad. Sooner or later, the men would lose their self-possession and go to meet them halfway." He turned to look at Jason. "They estimate around a hundred thousand men were lost that way."

"A hundred thousand!" Even Jason's military-conditioned mind was shocked by the number. "But not all of them. Not—" his tone was

almost accusing,—"not you."

"No, not me," said Kerl. He sighed. "I was the exception—the freak. It bothered me, but I lasted through five long years of it. I even kept other men from cracking up as long as they were with me. Nothing particular I did—just knowing I was around seemed to brace them."

Jason stared at him.

"But that was marvelous—wasn't it?" he said. "I mean, they could study you and find out what was needed to keep other men from cracking up. You could turn yourself into Service Research and. . ." his voice faltered, died before a supposition so monstrous that it overwhelmed him. Finally he put it into words. "You aren't—that isn't what you're running away from?"

Kerl laughed.

"Nothing so melodramatic," he said. "Research didn't even wait for the business to finish on Kelmesh before pulling me back to Earth. They tested me and worked me over and scratched their heads and finally came up with an answer. In plain words, what was happening was that the civilized man of today was many times as susceptible to the emotional strains of war as his remote ancestor. It was a matter of environment—what the psychologists called having a 'wider mental horizon'."

"But what are they going to do about it?" asked Jason.

"There isn't too much they can do," said Kerl soberly. "There are two obvious solutions. One is to return to the environment of eighteenth—nineteenth century Earth, which is impossible. The other is to freeze the present environment

long enough for the human race to mature up to it. Which is unpalatable and which people won't stand for."

"Of course not!" cried Jason. "Why, that'd be ridiculous! It—it'd be fantastic. To hold up our proper and necessary expansion for a little problem like that. The human race solves problems—it doesn't knuckle under to them."

A shadow passed across Kerl's face for an instant, saddening it.

"You're right," he said. "The race does."

"There must be some practical steps they can take," continued Jason. "Some conditioning process, or such."

Kerl shrugged.

"Some factors seem to help a little," he said. "You may have wondered why you've been held in Class C duty so long when it's usual to promote to Class A Frontier posts fairly quickly."

"They have been slow with me," frowned Jason.

"And with a lot of others in your class," said Kerl. "That's one of the little things that seems to help some—a longer tour of garrison work."

"Look here!" said Jason. "*I'm* not liable to crack up. My mental health is excellent."

"A fresh water fish," replied Kerl, "can be in fine shape. But put him in salt water and he sickens and dies."

"But this is all backward!" exploded Jason. "You're supposed to have come through on Kelmesh. To you that environment should have been much more of a shock than to a man like me—I take new and different worlds for granted. I grew up with an open mind. Why,

if what you say is true, then these mountain people of yours—"

He broke off abruptly, a realization taking startling form in his mind. In the little silence that followed, Kerl's voice answered him.

"It is the opposite from what you might expect," he said. "Early in the beginnings of psychology, men began to notice that some primitive peoples were amazingly well adjusted. Not all primitive peoples, of course. The majority ran the scale from bad to worse. But a few stood out."

"But you can't scrap civilization!" cried Jason, desperately.

"I don't know," answered Kerl. "Can't you? I can't. You can't. No government or controlling power can—or wants to. Maybe we won't have to. But when Research dug into the matter they came up with some funny answers. For instance—the individual has a survival instinct. They've known that for a long time. Now they think the race has one, too."

"Of course," said Jason. "Survival of the fittest—"

"No," said Kerl. "Think of the race as a single individual with instincts. And one of the instincts is not to put all his eggs in one basket."

Jason merely looked puzzled. Again, that shadow crossed Kerl's face, shading his eyes with an obscure pain.

"Never at any time," Kerl said, "have all the people been all alike. Some were more one way than another. Geographical accident, they used to think—and of course it was, largely. But there's a real instinctive tendency for groups to be different, even as there is for

the individual to be different—and for the same reason, survival. It wouldn't be good for them all to be alike. Then, some new thing that could wipe out one, could wipe out all."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Jason, spacing the words slowly, and, he thought, calmly, "that the trillions or quadrillions or whatever it is we have of people on all the civilized worlds, are an evolutionary dead end; that you and these mountaineers squatting on their rocks represent the future of the race?"

"No," Kerl shook his head, "not *the* future. A possible future. A remotely possible future. One of nature's extra strings to its bow. Imagine civilization breaking down. Would that make any difference to my people here? Not a bit. They're completely self-supporting. They don't need and don't want the rest of you. They might pull humanity back up out the mud again."

Kerl's words died in the car. For what seemed a long while, Jason sat thinking. Finally, he turned to Kerl.

"But *you* think your people will make the future," he said. It was an accusation. "That's why you've come back."

Kerl's dark face was suddenly ravaged with sorrow.

"No," he said. "No. I came back for an entirely different reason."

Jason waited.

"Research turned me inside out," said Kerl, painfully. "When they were through with me, I knew myself—too well. I knew myself inside and out. And I realized—" his voice faltered, then picked up with

a new strength—"that I was different. From the time when that difference came home to me, living in civilization became living among strangers. There was a barrier there I could not cross because it was inside me and now I knew it was there." He stopped.

"I had no choice," he said suddenly. "I had to go home."

He let out his breath and looked down at his hands, big and dark, folded in his lap.

"I—am sorry," said Jason, stiffly. "I beg your pardon."

"That's all right," said Kerl. "It's almost over now." He raised his eyes from his lap and looked out ahead. "You can stop anyplace along here. We don't want to drive up to the camp. We'll stop a bit short and let them find us."

"All right," said Jason. He switched on the intercom and gave the necessary orders.

The cars circled in the light of the afternoon sun, halted, men got out, and camp was made.

ABOUT an hour before twilight, the Potter clan put in its appearance. One moment, the valley was empty beyond the camp and then—it seemed, almost without transition—a small host of rough-clad figures had sprung into view, on the valley floor and down the rocky slopes some two hundred yards from the circle of cars. They stood silent, waiting. Two groups with centuries of apparent difference between them. Silent, they stood and watched. Jason went to get Kerl and found him sitting in their car, chin on hand, his eyes absent and thoughtful.

"Well, they're here," said Jason. Kerl nodded.

"I know," he answered.

"They've come right out in the open," continued Jason. "Almost as if they knew you were with us."

"I imagine they do," said Kerl. "Other tribes will have seen me with you and passed the word along." He got heavily to his feet and stepped out of the car. Beyond the cars were the troopers. Followed by Jason, Kerl walked to an open space where a number of the men of the tribe stood waiting. Kerl turned and looked at the troopers.

"Goodby," he said. "Thanks."

The men murmured self-consciously. Kerl turned again and started off, stepping surely down the rugged path. Jason followed, without quite knowing why.

Where the rough going ceased and the valley began to broaden out, Kerl stopped again and turned to Jason as the younger man came up level with him. They were far enough from the troopers now so that low voices would not carry their words back.

"Goodby," said Kerl.

"Goodby," Jason replied. Kerl put out his hand and Jason took it. They shook briefly, but Kerl held on to Jason's hand for a minute before releasing it.

"Don't—" he began earnestly,

but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Yes?" said Jason.

Kerl's face was twisted as if with a mighty inner effort.

"Don't be afraid of the future," he said, tightly. "Keep going. Keep looking. There's nothing so wonderful as that."

Jason stared at him.

"You say that?" he could not keep the incredulity out of his voice. He nodded toward the waiting mountaineers. "But you're going back!"

"Yes," whispered Kerl. "I told you. I have no choice."

Jason swallowed.

"Come back with us," he said. "I didn't know. But if it's our future you want, not theirs, come back. You can if you want to."

"I can't."

"Why not?" cried Jason. "It's all a matter of what you want. I thought you wanted this."

"This?" echoed Kerl, looking bleakly about him at the mountains. "This?" His face worked.

"God, *no!*" he cried. "The only thing I ever wanted was Kelmesh!"

He turned, tearing himself away from Jason and facing towards the clansmen. Pebbles rattled and rolled under his uncaring feet as he lurched away.

Walking like a blind man, he went down the valley. • • •

The universe is vast and men but tiny specks on an insignificant planet. But the minute we realize our minuteness, our impotence in the face of cosmic forces, the more astonishing becomes what human beings have achieved.

—Bertrand Russell



STALEMATE

*The rules of a duel between gentlemen are quite different
from the rules of war between nations.*

*Is it because gentlemen do not fight wars, or is it that
men in war cease to be gentlemen?*

BY BASIL WELLS



Illustrated by Leo Summers

THE BULLET slapped rotted leaves and dirt into Gram Treb's eyes. He wormed backward to the bole of a small tree.

"Missed!" he shouted. He used English, the second tongue of them both. "Throw away your carbine and use rocks."

"You tasted it anyhow," Harl Neilson's shrill young voice cried. "How was the sample?"

"That leaves you two cartridges," taunted Treb. "Or is it only one?"

The sixth sense that had brought him safely through two of these bloody war duels here in space made him fling his body to the left. He rolled over once and lay huddled in a shallow depression. He knew all the tiny hollows and

ridges—they were his insurance on this mile-wide island high above Earth.

Something thudded into the tree roots behind him. He hugged the ground, body flattened. His breath eased raggedly outward, and caught. The waiting—the seconds that became hours! If the grenade rolled after him, down the slope into his shelter, he was finished.

There was nothing he could do. His palms oozed sweat . . .

The grenade exploded. It was like a fist slammed against his skull. He was numbed for a long instant. Then he checked.

Unharméd. The depression had saved his neck this time. He wanted to shout at Neilson, tell him he was down to a lone grenade, but that

was poor strategy. Now he must withdraw, make Neilson think him injured or dead, and trap him in turn.

They were the last of the belligerents here within Earth Satellite. For two months, since what would be May on Earth, they had carried on this mad duel. Of the other eighteen who had started the war in November of the preceding year, only four had survived their wounds. The United Nations' supervisory seconds had transported them to their homes in Andilia and in Baryt . . .

Treb wormed his way as noiselessly as possible into the undergrowth, sprawling at last in the shelter of an earthen mound thirty feet from the grenade's raw splash. He waited—and thought.

Memories can be unpleasant. He could see his comrades of the three battles as they had fallen, wounded or gray with death. Too many of them had he helped bury. He remembered the treasured photos.

The draining wound in his right forearm throbbed . . .

The enemy dead too. He had killed several of them—more than his share, he thought savagely. They too were young despite the ragged beards some of them cultivated.

Treb felt like an old man. And he *was* old. He was twenty-nine. He had a son also named Gram, a boy of five, and little Alse, who was two. Had little Alse's mother lived he would never have volunteered for this third United Nations' war duel.

He would have been with her in the mountain valley of Krekar working hard, and gradually erasing those other ugly episodes here

on Earth Satellite One . . .

Minutes crawled by, lumped together into hours. Birds sang in the trees so laboriously maintained here in the satellite's disk-shaped heart. And, a hundred feet overhead, where the true deck of the man-made island in space began, other birds nested in the girders.

An ant crawled over Treb's earth-stained hand and passed under his outstretched carbine's barrel.

There was a movement in the clustering trees off to his right. Neilson had circled and was coming in from an opposite angle. Treb thumbed off the safety and waited.

An earth-colored helmet, with a trace of long pale hair around its rim, came slowly into view. Could be a dummy, Neilson was clever at rigging them to draw fire. And he had exactly two cartridges. After that it would be his three grenades, his two-foot needle-knife, that doubled as a bayonet, and the steel bow he had contrived from a strip of spring steel.

He held his fire. The trees made grenade lobbing a touchy business. And his bow was back in one of the dozens of foxholes he had spotted in both the inner and outer rings of trees.

In the fantasy stories of adventure in space that he enjoyed reading, the hero could always whip up a weird paralysis ray, a deadly, invisible robot bullet, or an intelligent gaseous ally from the void would appear. And out of scrap glass, metal and his shoestrings he could contrive a solar-powered shell that stopped any missile, deadlier than a marshmallow, cold.

In actual life he was finding it difficult enough to contrive a

primitive sort of bow, a knife-lashed spear, and snares for the increasingly wary rabbits. Lack of sleep and lack of food supplies were sapping his lanky body of the whiplash swiftness and wiry strength it once possessed. Nor was the week-old wound any aid to his dulled wits . . .

The helmet advanced; he could almost see the twig-stuffed gray shirt's pockets, and he let his nostrils expand as he sucked in a steadying breath. Now, a yard behind the fake Andilian, he could see the moving shoulders and skull of Harl Neilson—or so his bloodshot eyes told him.

He squeezed the trigger. There was a subdued yip, and then a derisive jeer. Missed again—or had he?

"Sour rocketing, Grampaw," Neilson laughed. "Try again. And then I'm coming after you."

Only Neilson wouldn't. Unless he'd miscalculated the number of grenades, he wouldn't come charging at Treb. And he couldn't be sure of the number of cartridges Treb possessed. He was just talking to keep his nerve up.

Especially if he was wounded now. That sudden yip . . .

IT WAS NIGHT again, an artificial night as artificial as the central ten-acre pool of water, the ring of flowering green trees and grasses, and the final outer ring of forest trees. It was here that the two thousand UN employees and soldiers on Earth Satellite One normally took their recreation periods.

Only the supervised war-duels, that since 1969 had been the only blood-letting permitted between na-

tions, could long keep a Terran from visiting the green meadows and trees of this lowest of the three levels . . .

"I'd give half that quarter million," Neilson groaned, across the darkness, "for a cigarette."

"You mean," corrected Gram Treb, "half your ten thousand."

"It's the winner's grant or nothing, Treb. I promised Jane I'd hand it to her. Then we'll marry."

"But not if you are the loser?"

"I wouldn't—she wouldn't—it's impossible to think of asking her to share poverty and disgrace."

"I'd hardly say that. We lost our first war here on the Satellite. Baryt was obligated to cede a thousand square miles to Tarrance. Most of my ten thousand paid off my family's debts.

"Yet I married. I married Nal who had nursed me back to health. And we were happy. Until the second war with Duristan. I wanted money for her—for the children—for my impoverished valley."

Treb broke off. He backed away several feet and shifted noiselessly to a new position. Every night, and sometimes in the artificial sunlight, they talked together. But they never forgot that they were sworn foes.

"So you won it didn't you?" From his voice Neilson had shifted closer and to the left.

"Sure. And I wish I were as poor as before. For Nal was kicked to death—by the horse I should have been using—while I fought here."

Neilson made a sympathetic sound. Treb felt his lips twitch into a thin crooked line. This is what it meant to be human. To feel sorrow for another man's misfortunes—and then kill him!

Sure, Neilson was a good sort. Only twenty-four and in love with a girl, a woman really, widow of a dead lunar explorer. And he was a clean-living sort, nothing dishonorable or hateful about him. They even honored the same God.

But tomorrow, or the next day, or a month from now, he would kill or wound Neilson. Unless, as might well happen, Neilson got to him first.

He pushed aside a thought that came more and more often of late. Why not surrender, or let Neilson capture him? He did not consider suicide—little Gram and Alse needed him—although he had not been thinking of them when he signed for this ugly miniature battle in space. His wife's death had been too vivid yet.

But, why not surrender? He had enough money. The valley people could struggle along without the machines and the dam he had hoped to grant them with victory. And Baryt could lose the island of Daafa to Andilia without crippling herself. The three hundred and fifty inhabitants could be transferred to the mainland.

Treb laughed silently, a laugh that cut off with a twinge of drawing ugly pain from his wounded forearm. He knew that he could no more surrender without a fight than he could command his breathing to stop forever. He was a man, and men cannot give up dishonorably . . .

"I'd like to see those two kids sometime, if you're still around, Treb." Neilson had moved again. His voice was lower but he was nearer.

"Stop around anytime, Harl."

Treb moved a few feet deeper into a thicket. "We'll show you what real Baryt hospitality is."

"That's a promise, Treb."

Killing. That's what war was. So you had to kill. Or you volunteered to kill. But you didn't have to like it. All these little wars under UN supervision were needless—arbitration would serve as well. But the people, the leaders—someone—wanted blood. So ten or twelve or fifteen citizens of one nation fought an equal number of the other state's sons.

Doubtless it was an improvement over the mass bombings of innocent city dwellers, and the horror of atomic dusts and sprays. No overwhelming army could sweep, unchecked, over a helpless neighbor. It was fairer, too, for those involved. Equal numbers of men, guns, supplies. Wealth if your side won, and a fair sum if you lost.

The United Nations saw to that. After all the avenues to peaceful settlement had been explored and turned down they finally permitted bloodshed. Much against their better judgement, perhaps.

So he could destroy likeable young Andilians like Neilson.

"Why don't you send up a rocket?" Neilson kidded, his voice coming from a changed direction again. "So I can see you."

"Anything to oblige."

Neilson was circling out around, as though to drive him into a trap or trick him. They were getting back to the primitive now. Soon it would be knives, spears, and deadfalls.

"Come on over and I'll show you Jane's picture, Treb," invited Neilson. He laughed hoarsely. "If we

weren't where we are, I'd mean that."

"I know. I feel that way myself sometimes. We've been here alone too long. Hate hasn't lasted."

"Why aren't you a wrongo, Treb?" The young voice was cracked and savage. "Why'd you have to tell me about—Gram and Alse?"

Treb was backing away again, cautiously. He scented a trap. No doubt Neilson's words were sincere, at the moment, but in a second's time he could change into a cold-blooded executioner. He knew. He had seen the gentlest of men suddenly turn killer . . .

And then his foot struck a yielding branch and his aroused suspicion sent him lunging forward.

A heavy something fell with a sickening thud, brushing as it struck, the sole of his distintegrating shoe. A cleverly rigged deadfall of small trees and rock, doubtless.

"You're slipping, Harl," he shouted.

But he could feel the sudden sweat damping his palms, and the muscles twitched unsteadily in his arms and across his stomach.

WITH MORNING he was half a mile away, in a foxhole less than sixty yards from the massive outer perimeter of the arena. Two of his snares had yielded a rabbit each, and so he was supplied for several days.

The foxhole had two entrances, both well-concealed, and he had rigged elaborate warning devices should the vicinity be approached. So he was sleeping.

His dreams were unpleasant.

In his latest dream an extremely shapely and smiling young woman with dark hair was heaving a grenade into a pit where he lay bound and helpless. The grenade swelled until it became a space ship heading directly toward the frail scout craft he piloted . . .

And a tiny blob of dislodged mud from the dugout spat his face. He sat up.

Another day to hunt or be hunted. Or to lie here and try to rest and make plans. There was slight possibility that Neilson could find him here.

He gnawed at the scantily-fleshed ribs of the first rabbit, savoring the raw meaty smell and flavor. Hunger was his salt.

Now that they had lost contact with one another it might require several days to find Neilson. A wooded platter, a smile in diameter, can afford many hiding places for one creature hiding from another hunting beast.

It was time to set some of the traps he had been contriving.

There were the two nooses, attached to bent-down triggered young trees that could not be set until darkness fell again. The net, too, would need darkness to conceal the four rough pulleys, and the rocks that a tug on his rope would spill.

But the almost invisible nylon cords, set at ankle height across the paths, and the ugly little pits with their sharpened stakes set three feet below, could trip up a man and cripple him. He must put out several of those.

He had no wish to kill Neilson. If he could capture him, very good. He could go back to Andilia and

perhaps his Jane would be glad to take him. If she did not—it was worth knowing how little she really cared, was it not?

So he would try to trap the younger man and save his life.

It would be difficult. The other man had grenades, a carbine and a keen needle-knife. Perhaps, before the end, he would be forced to kill after all. But regretfully.

Treb dumped the last of the *tsaftha* antibiotic into his wound and lay back for a few more hours of rest before going out to prepare the traps.

His head was not clear. And his eyes drew together from exhaustion . . .

Another night and another day, and it was night again.

His traps were set and ready. All through the day he had prowled the trees, watching for some sign of Neilson. He found he was muttering to himself, hungry for the sound of spoken words.

It was nervous work. His muscles were jumping in faint spastic explosions. Neilson could have been lying in ambush in any of a hundred leafy coverts, resting there and waiting . . .

He had covered less than two miles of inching, crawling paths, his eyes ever alert for deadfalls, pits and spear-traps that might flash across the way to impale him.

And he had caught no sight of Neilson.

Now it was night again. Time to check on his traps. The rabbit traps as well as the human traps.

He was approaching the net. And the awareness that this furtive game of hide-and-seek might go on for

weeks oppressed him. He might lie here close by the net for days without sight of Neilson. They were too evenly matched—and Neilson was younger. It was Neilson's youth against his experience.

He found the thin rope of knotted nylon and plastic scraps that led to the four balanced rocks. One stout yank and the net would jerk upward four feet and tighten around its victim.

But, in the dim starlight from the small globes spotting the Satellite's ceiling, the path was an indistinct blur. A moving body's exact position . . . And at fifty feet . . .

He saw Neilson—it could only be Neilson.

Moving on hands and knees, he was, keeping low and to the side of the little-used trail—but within the width of the hand-patched net. And he moved slowly, probing before him with a stick or his needle-knife; Treb could not tell which.

Another two feet and he could trip the net. Neilson would be captured, alive, and the stalemate ended.

Now!

The net flung into the air, snapped tight about Neilson's thrashing body! He heard the pop of parting strands as Neilson slashed with his knife. And then he swung the butt of his carbine, twice, against the trapped man's skull.

Neilson went limp. It was finished. He could take his prisoner to the lock, summon the UN guards, and go home to the Krekar Hills. And an end to all blood-letting for him.

He set about binding tight the arms and legs of Neilson, and had barely completed his task when the

prisoner groaned and struggled.

"So this is it, Treb?"

"Yes."

"You win again. And I—I lose everything."

"So?" Treb touched his pocket torch to a heap of shredded dry twigs. "What have you lost? Your health, your life? And will not the woman forget all else and love you?"

"Hah! She will laugh at me if I come near her. Defeated, and with a paltry ten thousand to offer. Better that I died than this."

"Perhaps you do not—know this woman, Harl. If she is good, she will come to you."

The growing firelight was on Neilson's bearded face. And beneath his eyes something glistened and beaded. He laughed bitterly.

"She's not good, Treb, understand that. She's evil and money-hungry, and ambitious. But she is beautiful and I love her. I'd sell my soul and my body to possess her.

"That's why I volunteered. With the winners' grant I would have money. Prestige. Honor. There would be a thousand new opportunities for a career. And Jane could not refuse me then."

"It is wrong, Harl Neilson, to so worship a woman. Like alcohol or Venerian fire pollen—it is unnatural."

"I know. I have tried to forget, to put her memory aside. But it is like a disease. An incurable disease. I must have Jane."

Treb threw more wood on the little fire and checked over the lashings about Neilson's body.

"I am going to look at my rabbit snares," he said, "and to spring the other traps. We will eat and

sleep, and in the morning try to shave and look decent before going to the locks."

Neilson let his head sag between his shoulders, and said nothing. He was leaning against a tree, his arms lashed behind him and to it.

"There is one more thing, Harl, that I wish to discuss. It is about the Paul Hubble Foundation Award. Think about it."

Treb moved off into the darkness.

THE SUNLIGHT from the overhead "suns" of the Satellite revealed a greatly changed Treb. He was shaved, his hair combed and hacked off above his ears, and he was stitching the last rough patch on his dark green trouser leg.

Now he donned the trousers and went over to the bound Andilian. He cut the ropes, his carbine ready.

"Get down to the lake," he ordered. "You'll find a razor, soap and an old shirt to dry yourself with."

Harl Neilson was chunky and fair-haired, with a healthy looking red-brown skin. His eyes were wide and darkly blue. Now the wide mouth under his shapeless nose twisted into a faint grin.

"I'll try to get away," he warned. "Aren't you afraid of that?"

"I have all the guns, grenades and needle-knives, Harl. I'll shoot you if you attempt escape, of course, but I hope you'll listen to what I propose first."

Neilson slowly stripped off his ragged tunic and trousers. There was the scar of a recent bullet's path across his right shoulder blade. It was crusted with blackened blood.

"I thought I heard you two days

back, Harl," said Treb.

"Just a scratch." Neilson took up the soap and waded into the nearby lake. "Start talking, Treb."

"I told you to think about Paul Hubble's Award, Harl. He's the American industrialist who opposed violence in settling any issue."

"Sure. Heard about him in the lower grades. Fifty million dollars he sunk in his worthless Peace Foundation. What about it?"

"Hear me out. Did you like what we just went through? Your friends and comrades dying—my friends dead and wounded? And all to settle some territorial dispute or to wipe out some imagined slur.

"Would you like to prevent your kid, or mine, from having to face this again?"

"Stop sounding off, Treb, and say something." Neilson scrubbed vigorously. "Of course I would—if I ever had a kid, I mean."

"We could help, Harl. By calling off the duel and making peace right here. Of course there might be new balloting—even another battle between our countries. But we would crack the theory that victory means more than humanity."

Neilson snorted. He splashed water into his eyes and over his soapy beard and hair.

"And go home penniless? To have every friend and neighbor avoid us? What's eating you? You won. You'll get the quarter of a million."

"I want you to share equally. I want our two countries to know that friendship means more than glory."

"I don't get it. If neither side wins we get nothing."

"You forget about the Hubble

Award. Two hundred thousand to each member of both sides, or their survivors, if they declare an armistice."

"I had forgotten. You'd give up fifty thousand so I could get the same two hundred thousand! You're a prince, Treb.

"But I couldn't do it. Jane would turn against me. The radio, the newswires, television and the magazines would crucify me—both of us."

"We'd ride it out. None of the participants in the twenty-two duels here in Satellite has had the courage to admit he hates war. In years to come our stand would be honored."

"It means losing Jane. I can't do it."

"You've lost her anyway, Harl, if she's the way you say. How about your three wounded buddies: Wasson, Clark, and Thomason? Badly cut up aren't they? Clark blind. Wasson with no arms.

"Couldn't they use the two hundred thousand?"

Neilson was coming ashore. A sudden resolve hardened his face, and his blue eyes were dark and angry. His jaw jutted through the sandy fairness of his dragged beard.

Treb felt his vitals knot at what he sensed in Neilson's expression. He'd gambled on the essential fairness and sympathy of the Andilian's character. But now . . .

"I'll do it," Neilson said tonelessly.

"I hope you'll never regret what you are doing, Harl."

"Aw, lock valves!" snarled Neilson. "Get ready to go while I finish shaving."

So that was the way it was to be. Treb turned wearily away. He went

back through the screen of flowering shrubs and trees to where the coals of their fire turned gray.

The grenades and the three cartridges, his own and Neilson's, he buried in a hasty hole under a tree's sprawled roots. Afterward he tamped sod back into place and spread leaves.

His needle-knife he laid on the turf. From his pocket he took a long strip of cloth and some of the tough nylon cords from the net. Then he let his trousers drop about his ankles and set about anchoring the needle-knife securely to his upper leg.

When he had finished the keen blade projected a foot below his knee-cap. And around it, carefully, he wound some of the cloth. He donned his battered trousers again. The concealed knife was well hidden, although it did impede the freedom of his stride.

Then he went down to rejoin Neilson.

Neilson was just finishing hacking at his hair with the short-bladed safety razor. He scowled at Treb, his eyes on the carbine that the man from Baryt yet carried.

"Not taking any chances, eh, Treb?"

"Just in case you change your mind, Harl."

"My friend—my very dear friend—Gram Treb!" Neilson laughed. "What trust—what a faith in human nature!"

"Yes, Harl. Your friend."

They left the lake behind, Neilson in advance. Directly ahead, beyond the outer ring of trees, the locks to the upper levels waited. They had less than a third of a mile to traverse.

The rusting shattered debris of a machine gun, with a spilled clutter of empty shell cases, lay just off the trail.

"Harok Dann died here," said Treb. Neilson did not turn.

"The big man, Manross, was killed by Dann's fire even as he threw the grenade," he added.

Treb was watching the broad-shouldered figure ahead.

"Shut it off, Treb, will you?" Neilson shouted, turning. "Isn't it tough enough without you yap-yapping all the way?"

Treb's lips thinned. The knife chafed his leg. Already he was limping slightly. But they had covered more than half the distance. Once they contacted the UN guards and were through the locks he could relax . . .

THE CIRCULAR outer face of the lock was before them. And the button that summoned the guards jutted redly from a shoulder-high recess. Neilson leaned against the lock, his narrowed eyes on Treb as he reached for the button.

Treb jabbed. And he relaxed inwardly. Too late now for Neilson to attempt overpowering him and claiming the victory. He had feared such an attempt—with the lust for the woman, Jane Vanne, driving him, Neilson might have gone back on his word.

It was tough going for the kid. But he wasn't losing anything worth keeping. And hundreds of fine young lads like him might be spared going through this ordeal in space. They'd . . .

Neilson's fist caught him behind the ear. That split-second of inat-

tention was proving costly. Neilson clamped the carbine barrel, wrested it away from Treb. He raised it. Treb lifted his hands.

"So now it's me at the controls," Neilson said, grinning. "Any reason why I should go through with your Hubble Award idea?"

"The guards will be here in no more than a minute, Harl. Throw the gun away and we'll go through together."

Neilson's eyes were shining. He was seeing the crowds waving crazy welcome as his space ship grounded. He was seeing the adulation of the boys, and the adoring glance of the dark-eyed girl named Jane. He was seeing the medals and the banquets and the bundles of money.

"You were crazy, Treb," he said, "to ever trust me. In war promises mean nothing. Study your history."

Treb squared his shoulders, his hands came down.

"If that's the way it is," he said, and then, "coming at you, Neilson."

Neilson flinched. It was the first time Treb had called him by his last name, perhaps that was the reason. Or it could have been the sight of an unarmed man walking directly into his carbine's ugly muzzle.

He pressed trigger. The unloaded weapon was silent. Treb wrenched at the gun. Neilson kicked him in the crotch. The gun came free. He

brought it down at Treb's head, but at the last second before impact Treb dodged. The barrel smacked into Treb's right shoulder and broke the collar bone.

Treb came on, his left hand jabbing, and his right arm dangling. Neilson chopped at his face with the vertically held carbine, and tore a great chunk from his left cheek.

And then Treb's knee came up. The shielded razor-sharp blade sliced through his trouser. He drove the ugly little dagger into Neilson's body.

Neilson went down, squirming away from the sudden pain that tore at his vitals. The carbine went clattering.

Treb knelt beside him; tried to stanch the warm gush of red life, and cursed, soundlessly, the ambition that is mankind's greatest boon—and curse. He tore off the bloody knife.

"You won't die, Neilson," he said gravely. "Not with the surgeon and the hospital here on Earth Satellite so near. You'll live to see Andilia again.

"And about the invitation to visit us—I'm sorry you rejected it like this. But the offer still stands. When I can call you Harl again, when you are a *man*, visit us."

The lock behind them creaked and started to open. . . .

Why does this magnificently applied science which saves work and makes life easier bring so little happiness? The simple answer runs: because we have not yet learned to make sensible use of it.

—Albert Einstein

To define it rudely but not ineptly, research is the art of doing well with one dollar that which any bungler can do with two after a fashion.

—Wellington

What Is Your Science I. Q.?

HERE'S A LITTLE exercise that will test your knowledge of light, sound, atmosphere, bombs, planets and other items you run across all the time in science fiction. How well do you know them? Counting five for each correct answer, you should score 60. Anything over 75 and you're a whizz. See page 119 for the answers.

1. Mach number 1 is equal to the speed of sound at sea level, or _____ miles per hour.
2. What have klystron and magnetron in common?
3. The _____ star visible to the naked eye has a magnitude of plus 6.
4. The gravity on Mars is approximately what fraction of Earth gravity?
5. On Earth, a falling object would have an acceleration of _____ feet per second.
6. What is the name of the companion of the double star Mizar?
7. Electrons are to matter what _____ are to light.
8. What sort of an atmosphere does the moon Titan have?
9. It takes the sun's light _____ minutes to reach us here on Earth.
10. What is the nitrogen content of the air we breathe?
11. An artificial moonlet would have to travel at a speed of _____ miles per hour to maintain a circular orbit around the Earth.
12. When a planet crosses in front of the sun as seen from Earth, it is in _____.
13. What other planet besides Mercury and Pluto has an elliptical orbit rather than a circular one?
14. What is the name of the red star in the constellation Orion?
15. A day on the Moon is _____ times as long as a day on Earth.
16. Within how much time after an atomic explosion is the peak of radiation reached?
17. The lightest of all the elements that are solid at ordinary temperature is _____.
18. A star that is a cepheid variable is what color?
19. What is another name for the great nebula in Andromeda?
20. The explosion energy of A-bombs, H-bombs, and Lithium bombs is caused by a _____ reaction process.

*Intelligent parents readily understand why they must
not try to educate and train their children.*

*Robots do it much better; they do not confuse them
with complexes or emotions or petty impulses.*

Even tired old Ed Doyle could tell you that much . . .

PROGENY

BY PHILIP K. DICK

ED DOYLE hurried. He caught a surface car, waved fifty credits in the robot driver's face, mopped his florid face with a red pocket-handkerchief, unfastened his collar, perspired and licked his lips and swallowed piteously all the way to the hospital.

The surface car slid up to a smooth halt before the great white-domed hospital building. Ed leaped out and bounded up the steps three at a time, pushing through the visitors and convalescent patients standing on the broad terrace. He threw his weight against the door and emerged in the lobby, astonishing the attendants and persons of importance moving about their tasks.

"Where?" Ed demanded, gazing around, his feet wide apart, his fists clenched, his chest rising and falling. His breath came hoarsely, like an animal's. Silence fell over the lobby. Everyone turned toward

him, pausing in their work. "Where?" Ed demanded again. "Where is she? *They?*"

It was fortunate Janet had been delivered of a child on this of all days. Proxima Centauri was a long way from Terra and the service was bad. Anticipating the birth of his child, Ed had left Proxima some weeks before. He had just arrived in the city. While stowing his suitcase in the luggage tread at the station the message had been handed to him by a robot courier: Los Angeles Central Hospital. At once.

Ed hurried, and fast. As he hurried he couldn't help feeling pleased he had hit the day exactly right, almost to the hour. It was a good feeling. He had felt it before, during years of business dealings in the "colonies", the frontier, the fringe of Terran civilization where the streets were still lit by electric lights and doors opened by hand.



Illustrated by Ralph Castenir

That was going to be hard to get used to. Ed turned toward the door behind him, feeling suddenly foolish. He had shoved it open, ignoring the eye. The door was just now closing, sliding slowly back in place. He calmed down a little, putting his handkerchief away in his coat pocket. The hospital attendants were resuming their work, picking up their activities where they had left off. One attendant, a strapping late-model robot, coasted over to Ed and halted.

The robot balanced his notepad expertly, his photocell eyes appraising Ed's flushed features. "May I enquire whom you are looking for, sir? Whom do you wish to find?"

"My wife."

"Her name, sir?"

"Janet. Janet Doyle. She's just had a child."

The robot consulted his board. "This way, sir." He coasted off down the passage.

Ed followed nervously. "Is she okay? Did I get here in time?" His anxiety was returning.

"She is quite well, sir." The robot raised his metal arm and a side door slid back. "In here, sir."

Janet, in a chic blue-mesh suit, was sitting before a mahogany desk, a cigarette between her fingers, her slim legs crossed, talking rapidly. On the other side of the desk a well-dressed doctor sat listening.

"Janet!" Ed said, entering the room.

"Hi, Ed." She glanced up at him. "You just now get in?"

"Sure. It's—it's all over? You—I mean, it's *happened*?"

Janet laughed, her even white teeth sparkling. "Of course. Come

in and sit. This is Doctor Bish."

"Hello, Doc." Ed sat down nervously across from them. "Then it's all over?"

"The event has happened," Doctor Bish said. His voice was thin and metallic. Ed realized with a sudden shock that the doctor was a robot. A top-level robot, made in humanoid form, not like the ordinary metal-limbed workers. It had fooled him—he had been away so long. Doctor Bish appeared plump and well fed, with kindly features and eyeglasses. His large fleshy hands rested on the desk, a ring on one finger. Pinstripe suit and necktie. Diamond tie clasp. Nails carefully manicured. Hair black and evenly parted.

But his voice had given him away. They never seemed to be able to get a really human sound into the voice. The compressed air and whirling disc system seemed to fall short. Otherwise, it was very convincing.

"I understand you've been situated near Proxima, Mr. Doyle," Doctor Bish said pleasantly.

Ed nodded. "Yeah."

"Quite a long way, isn't it? I've never been out there. I have always wanted to go. Is it true they're almost ready to push on to Sirius?"

"Look, doc—"

"Ed, don't be impatient." Janet stubbed out her cigarette, glancing reprovingly up at him. She hadn't changed in six months. Small blonde face, red mouth, cold eyes like little blue rocks. And now, her perfect figure back again. "They're bringing him here. It takes a few minutes. They have to wash him off and put drops in his eyes and take a wave shot of his brain."

"He? Then it's a boy?"

"Of course. Don't you remember? You were with me when I had the shots. We agreed at the time. You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"Too late to change your mind now, Mr. Doyle," Doctor Bish's toneless voice came, high-pitched and calm. "Your wife has decided to call him Peter."

"Peter." Ed nodded, a little dazed. "That's right. We did decide, didn't we? Peter." He let the word roll around in his mind. "Yeah. That's fine. I like it."

The wall suddenly faded, turning from opaque to transparent. Ed spun quickly. They were looking into a brightly lit room, filled with hospital equipment and white-clad attendant robots. One of the robots was moving toward them, pushing a cart. On the cart was a container, a big metal pot.

Ed's breathing increased. He felt a wave of dizziness. He went up to the transparent wall and stood gazing at the metal pot on the cart.

Doctor Bish rose. "Don't you want to see, too, Mrs. Doyle?"

"Of course." Janet crossed to the wall and stood beside Ed. She watched critically, her arms folded.

Doctor Bish made a signal. The attendant reached into the pot and lifted out a wire tray, gripping the handles with his magnetic clamps. On the tray, dripping through the wire, was Peter Doyle, still wet from his bath, his eyes wide with astonishment. He was pink all over, except for a fringe of hair on the top of his head, and his great blue eyes. He was little and wrinkled and toothless, like an ancient

withered sage.

"Golly," Ed said.

Doctor Bish made a second signal. The wall slid back. The attendant robot advanced into the room, holding his dripping tray out. Doctor Bish removed Peter from the tray and held him up for inspection. He turned him around and around, studying him from every angle.

"He looks fine," he said at last.

"What was the result of the wave photo?" Janet asked.

"Result was good. Excellent tendencies indicated. Very promising. High development of the—" The doctor broke off. "What is it, Mr. Doyle?"

Ed was holding out his hands. "Let me have him, doc. I want to hold him." He grinned from ear to ear. "Let's see how heavy he is. He sure looks big."

Doctor Bish's mouth fell open in horror. He and Janet gaped.

"Ed!" Janet exclaimed sharply. "What's the matter with you?"

"Good heavens, Mr. Doyle," the doctor murmured.

Ed blinked. "What?"

"If I had thought you had any such thing in mind—" Doctor Bish quickly returned Peter to the attendant. The attendant rushed Peter from the room, back to the metal pot. The cart and robot and pot hurriedly vanished, and the wall banged back in place.

Janet grabbed Ed's arm angrily. "Good Lord, Ed! Have you lost your mind? Come on. Let's get out of here before you do something else."

"But—"

"Come on." Janet smiled nervously at Doctor Bish. "We'll run

along now, doctor. Thanks so much for everything. Don't pay any attention to him. He's been out there so long, you know."

"I understand," Doctor Bish said smoothly. He had regained his poise. "I trust we'll hear from you later, Mrs. Doyle."

Janet pulled Ed out into the hall. "Ed, what's the matter with you? I've never been so embarrassed in all my life." Two spots of red glowed in Janet's cheeks. "I could have kicked you."

"But what—"

"You *know* we aren't allowed to touch him. What do you want to do, ruin his whole life?"

"But—"

"Come on." They hurried outside the hospital, onto the terrace. Warm sunlight streamed down on them. "There's no telling what harm you've done. He may already be hopelessly warped. If he grows up all warped and—and neurotic and emotional, it'll be your fault."

Suddenly Ed remembered. He sagged, his features drooping with misery. "That's right. I forgot. Only robots can come near the children. I'm sorry, Jan. I got carried away. I hope I didn't do anything they can't fix."

"How *could* you forget?"

"It's so different out at Prox." Ed waved to a surface car, crest-fallen and abashed. The driver drew up in front of them. "Jan, I'm sorry as hell. I really am. I was all excited. Let's go have a cup of coffee someplace and talk. I want to know what the doctor said."

ED HAD a cup of coffee and Janet sipped at a brandy

frappé. The Nymphite Room was pitch black except for a vague light oozing up from the table between them. The table diffused a pale illumination that spread over everything, a ghostly radiation seemingly without source. A robot waitress moved back and forth soundlessly with a tray of drinks. Recorded music played softly in the back of the room.

"Go on," Ed said.

"Go on?" Janet slipped her jacket off and laid it over the back of her chair. In the pale light her breasts glowed faintly. "There's not much to tell. Everything went all right. It didn't take long. I chatted with Doctor Bish most of the time."

"I'm glad I got here."

"How was your trip?"

"Fine."

"Is the service getting any better? Does it still take as long as it did?"

"About the same."

"I can't see why you want to go all the way out there. It's so—so cut off from things. What do you find out there? Are plumbing fixtures really that much in demand?"

"They need them. Frontier area. Everyone wants the refinements." Ed gestured vaguely. "What did he tell you about Peter? What's he going to be like? Can he tell? I guess it's too soon."

"He was going to tell me when you started acting the way you did. I'll call him on the vidphone when we get home. His wave pattern should be good. He comes from the best eugenic stock."

Ed grunted. "On your side, at least."

"How long are you going to be here?"

"I don't know. Not long. I'll have

to go back. I'd sure like to see him again, before I go." He glanced up hopefully at his wife. "Do you think I can?"

"I suppose."

"How long will he have to stay there?"

"At the hospital? Not long. A few days."

Ed hesitated. "I didn't mean at the hospital, exactly. I mean with *them*. How long before we can have him? How long before we can bring him home?"

There was silence. Janet finished her brandy. She leaned back, lighting a cigarette. Smoke drifted across to Ed, blending with the pale light. "Ed, I don't think you understand. You've been out there so long. A lot has happened since you were a child. New methods, new techniques. They've found out so many things they didn't know. They're making progress, for the first time. They know what to do. They're developing a real methodology for dealing with children. For the growth period. Attitude development. Training." She smiled brightly at Ed. "I've been reading all about it."

"How long before we get him?"

"In a few days he'll be released from the hospital. He'll go to a child guidance center. He'll be tested and studied. They'll determine his various capacities and his latent abilities. The direction his development seems to be taking."

"And then?"

"Then he's put in the proper educational division. So he'll get the right training. Ed, you know, I think he's really going to *be* something! I could tell by the way Doctor Bish looked. He was studying

the wave pattern charts when I came in. He had a look on his face. How can I describe it?" She searched for the word. "Well, almost—almost a greedy look. Real excitement. They take so much interest in what they're doing. He—"

"Don't say he. Say *it*."

"Ed, really! What's got into you?"

"Nothing." Ed glared sullenly down. "Go on."

"They make sure he's trained in the right direction. All the time he's there ability tests are given. Then, when he's about nine, he'll be transferred to—"

"Nine! You mean nine *years*?"

"Of course."

"But when do *we* get him?"

"Ed, I thought you knew about this. Do I have to go over the whole thing?"

"My God, Jan! We can't wait nine years!" Ed jerked himself upright. "I never heard of such a thing. Nine years? Why, he'll be half grown by then."

"That's the point." Janet leaned toward him, resting her bare elbow against the table. "As long as he's growing he has to be with them. Not with us. Afterwards, when he's finished growing, when he's no longer so plastic, then we can be with him all we want."

"Afterwards? When he's eighteen?" Ed leaped up, pushing his chair back. "I'm going down there and get him."

"Sit down, Ed." Janet gazed up calmly, one supple arm thrown lightly over the back of her chair. "Sit down and act like an adult, for a change."

"Doesn't it matter to you? Don't you care?"

"Of course I care." Janet shrugged. "But it's necessary. Otherwise he won't develop correctly. It's for *his* good. Not ours. He doesn't exist for us. Do you want him to have conflicts?"

Ed moved away from the table. "I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?"

"Just around. I can't stand this kind of place. It bothers me. I'll see you later." Ed pushed across the room to the door. The door opened and he found himself on the shiny noon-day street. Hot sunlight beat down on him. He blinked, adjusting himself to the blinding light. People streamed around him. People and noise. He moved with them.

He was dazed. He had known, of course. It was there in the back of his mind. The new developments in child care. But it had been abstract, general. Nothing to do with him. With *his* child.

He calmed himself, as he walked along. He was getting all upset about nothing. Janet was right, of course. It was for Peter's good. Peter didn't exist for them, like a dog or cat. A pet to have around the house. He was a human being, with his own life. The training was for him, not for them. It was to develop him, his abilities, his powers. He was to be molded, realized, brought out.

Naturally, robots could do the best job. Robots could train him scientifically, according to a rational technique. Not according to emotional whim. Robots didn't get angry. Robots didn't nag and whine. They didn't spank a child or yell at him. They didn't give conflicting orders. They didn't quarrel among themselves or use the child

for their own ends. And there could be no *Oedipus Complex*, with only robots around.

No complexes at all. It had been discovered long ago that neurosis could be traced to childhood training. To the way parents brought up the child. The inhibitions he was taught, the manners, the lessons, the punishments, the rewards. Neuroses, complexes, warped development, all stemmed from the subjective relationship existing between the child and the parent. If perhaps the parent could be eliminated as a factor . . .

Parents could never become objective about their children. It was always a biased, emotional projection the parent held toward the child. Inevitably, the parent's view was distorted. No parent could be a fit instructor for his child.

Robots could study the child, analyze his needs, his wants, test his abilities and interests. Robots would not try to force the child to fit a certain mold. The child would be trained along his own lines; wherever scientific study indicated his interest and need lay.

Ed came to the corner. Traffic whirred past him. He stepped absently forward.

A clang and crash. Bars dropped in front of him, stopping him. A robot safety control.

"Sir, be more careful!" the strident voice came, close by him.

"Sorry." Ed stepped back. The control bars lifted. He waited for the lights to change. It was for Pete's own good. Robots could train him right. Later on, when he was out of his growth stage, when he was not so pliant, so responsive—

"It's better for him," Ed mur-

mured. He said it again, half aloud. Some people glanced at him and he colored. Of course it was better for him. No doubt about it.

Eighteen. He couldn't be with his son until he was eighteen. Practically grown up.

The lights changed. Deep in thought, Ed crossed the street with the other pedestrians, keeping carefully inside the safety lane. It was best for Peter. But eighteen years was a long time.

"A hell of a long time," Ed murmured, frowning. "Too damn long a time."

DOCTOR 2g-Y Bish carefully studied the man standing in front of him. His relays and memory banks clicked, narrowing down the image identification, flashing a variety of comparison possibilities past the scanner.

"I recall you, sir," Doctor Bish said at last. "You're the man from Proxima. From the colonies. Doyle. Edward Doyle. Let's see. It was some time ago. It must have been—"

"Nine years ago," Ed Doyle said grimly. "Exactly nine years ago, practically to the day."

Doctor Bish folded his hands. "Sit down, Mr. Doyle. What can I do for you? How is Mrs. Doyle? Very engaging wife, as I recall. We had a delightful conversation during her delivery. How—"

"Doctor Bish, do you know where my son is?"

Doctor Bish considered, tapping his fingers on the desk top, the polished mahogany surface. He closed his eyes slightly, gazing off into the distance. "Yes. Yes, I

know where your son is, Mr. Doyle."

Ed Doyle relaxed. "Fine." He nodded, letting his breath out in relief.

"I know exactly where your son is. I placed him in the Los Angeles Biological Research Station about a year ago. He's undergoing specialized training there. Your son, Mr. Doyle, has shown exceptional ability. He is, shall I say, one of the few, the very few we have found with real possibilities."

"Can I see him?"

"See him? How do you mean?"

Doyle controlled himself with an effort. "I think the term is clear."

Doctor Bish rubbed his chin. His photocell brain whirred, operating at maximum velocity. Switches routed power surges, building up loads and leaping gaps rapidly, as he contemplated the man before him. "You wish to *view* him? That's one meaning of the term. Or do you wish to talk to him? Sometimes the term is used to cover a more direct contact. It's a loose word."

"I want to talk to him."

"I see." Bish slowly drew some forms from the dispenser on his desk. "There are a few routine papers that have to be filled out first, of course. Just how long did you want to speak to him?"

Ed Doyle gazed steadily into Doctor Bish's bland face. "I want to talk to him several hours. *Alone.*"

"Alone?"

"No robots around."

Doctor Bish said nothing. He stroked the papers he held, creasing the edges with his nail. "Mr. Doyle," he said carefully, "I wonder if you're in a proper emotional state to visit your son. You have recently

come in from the colonies?"

"I left Proxima three weeks ago."

"Then you have just arrived here in Los Angeles?"

"That's right."

"And you've come to see your son? Or have you other business?"

"I came for my son."

"Mr. Doyle, Peter is at a very critical stage. He has just recently been transferred to the Biology Station for his higher training. Up to now his training has been general. What we call the non-differentiated stage. Recently he has entered a new period. Within the last six months Peter has begun advanced work along his specific line, that of organic chemistry. He will—"

"What does Peter think about it?"

Bish frowned. "I don't understand, sir."

"How does *he* feel? Is it what he wants?"

"Mr. Doyle, your son has the possibility of becoming one of the world's finest bio-chemists. In all the time we have worked with human beings, in their training and development, we have never come across a more alert and integrated faculty for the assimilation of data, construction of theory, formulation of material, than that which your son possesses. All tests indicate he will rapidly rise to the top of his chosen field. He is still only a child, Mr. Doyle, but it is the children who must be trained."

Doyle stood up. "Tell me where I can find him. I'll talk to him for two hours and then the rest is up to him."

"The rest?"

Doyle clamped his jaw shut. He

shoved his hands in his pockets. His face was flushed and set, grim with determination. In the nine years he had grown much heavier, more stocky and florid. His thinning hair had turned iron-gray. His clothes were dumpy and unpressed. He looked stubborn.

Doctor Bish sighed. "All right, Mr. Doyle. Here are the papers. The law allows you to observe your boy whenever you make proper application. Since he is out of his non-differentiated stage, you may also speak to him for a period of ninety minutes."

"Alone."

"You can take him away from the Station grounds for that length of time." Doctor Bish pushed the papers over to Doyle. "Fill these out, and I'll have Peter brought here."

He looked up steadily at the man standing before him.

"I hope you'll remember that any emotional experience at this crucial stage may do much to inhibit his development. He has chosen his field, Mr. Doyle. He must be permitted to grow along his selected lines, unhindered by situational blocks. Peter has been in contact with our technical staff throughout his entire training period. He is not accustomed to contact with other human beings. So please be careful."

Doyle said nothing. He grabbed up the papers and plucked out his fountain pen.

HE HARDLY recognized his son when the two robot attendants brought him out of the massive concrete Station building

and deposited him a few yards from Ed's parked surface car.

Ed pushed the door open. "Pete!" His heart was thumping heavily, painfully. He watched his son come toward the car, frowning in the bright sunlight. It was late afternoon, about four. A faint breeze blew across the parking lot, rustling a few papers and bits of debris.

Peter stood slim and straight. His eyes were large, deep brown, like Ed's. His hair was light, almost blonde. More like Janet's. He had Ed's jaw, though, the firm line, clean and well-chiseled. Ed grinned at him. Nine years it had been. Nine years since the robot attendant had lifted the wire rack up from the conveyor pot, to show him the little wrinkled baby, red as a boiled lobster.

Peter had grown. He was not a baby any longer. He was a young boy, straight and proud, with firm features and wide, clear eyes.

"Pete," Ed said. "How the hell are you?"

The boy stopped by the door of the car. He gazed at Ed calmly. His eyes flickered, taking in the car, the robot driver, the heavy-set man in the rumpled tweed suit grinning nervously at him.

"Get in. Get inside." Ed moved over. "Come on. We have places to go."

The boy was looking at him again. Suddenly Ed was conscious of his baggy suit, his unshined shoes, his gray stubbled chin. He flushed, yanking out his red pocket-handkerchief and mopping his forehead uneasily. "I just got off the ship, Pete. From Proxima. I haven't had time to change. I'm a little dusty. Long trip."

Peter nodded. "4.3 light years, isn't it?"

"Takes three weeks. Get in. Don't you want to get in?"

Peter slid in beside him. Ed slammed the door.

"Let's go." The car started up. "Drive—" Ed peered out the window. "Drive up there. By the hill. Out of town." He turned to Pete. "I hate big cities. I can't get used to them."

"There are no large cities in the colonies, are there?" Peter murmured. "You're unused to urban living."

Ed settled back. His heart had begun to slow down to its normal beat. "No, as a matter of fact it's the other way around, Pete."

"How do you mean?"

"I went to Prox *because* I couldn't stand cities."

Peter said nothing. The surface car was climbing, going up a steep highway into the hills. The Station, huge and impressive, spread out like a heap of cement bricks directly below them. A few cars moved along the road, but not many. Most transportation was by air, now. Surface cars had begun to disappear.

The road levelled off. They moved along the ridge of the hills. Trees and bushes rose on both sides of them. "It's nice up here," Ed said.

"Yes."

"How—how have you been? I haven't seen you for a long time. Just once. Just after you were born."

"I know. Your visit is listed in the records."

"You been getting along all right?"

"Yes. Quite well."

"They treating you all right?"

"Of course."

After awhile Ed leaned forward. "Stop here," he said to the robot driver.

The car slowed down, pulling over to the side of the road. "Sir, there is nothing—"

"This is fine. Let us out. We'll walk from here."

The car stopped. The door slid reluctantly open. Ed stepped quickly out of the car, onto the pavement. Peter got out slowly after him, puzzled. "Where are we?"

"No place." Ed slammed the door. "Go on back to town," he said to the driver. "We won't need you."

The car drove off. Ed walked to the side of the road. Peter came after him. The hill dropped away, falling down to the beginnings of the city below. A vast panorama stretched out, the great metropolis in the late afternoon sun. Ed took a deep breath, throwing his arms out. He took off his coat and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Come on." He started down the hillside. "Here we go."

"Where?"

"For a walk. Let's get off this damn road."

They climbed down the side of the hill, walking carefully, holding onto the grass and roots jutting out from the soil. Finally they came to a level place by a big sycamore tree. Ed threw himself down on the ground, grunting and wiping sweat from his neck.

"Here. Let's sit here."

Peter sat down carefully, a little way off. Ed's blue shirt was stained with sweat. He unfastened his tie

and loosened his collar. Presently he searched through his coat pockets. He brought out his pipe and tobacco.

Peter watched him fill the pipe and light it with a big sulphur match. "What's that?" he murmured.

"This? My pipe." Ed grinned, sucking at the pipe. "Haven't you ever seen a pipe?"

"No."

"This is a good pipe. I got this when I first went out to Proxima. That was a long time ago, Pete. It was twenty-five years ago. I was just nineteen, then. Only about twice as old as you."

He put his tobacco away and leaned back, his heavy face serious, preoccupied.

"Just nineteen. I went out there as a plumber. Repair and sales, when I could make a sale. Terran Plumbing. One of those big ads you used to see. Unlimited opportunities. Virgin lands. Make a million. Gold in the streets." Ed laughed.

"How did you make out?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all. I own my own line, now, you know. I service the whole Proxima system. We do repairing, maintenance, building. Construction. I've got six hundred people working for me. It took a long time. It didn't come easy."

"No."

"Hungry?"

Peter turned. "What?"

"Are you hungry?" Ed pulled a brown paper parcel from his coat and unwrapped it. "I still have a couple sandwiches from the trip. When I come in from Prox I bring some food along with me. I don't like to buy in the diner. They skin

you." He held out the parcel.
"Want one?"

"No thank you."

Ed took a sandwich and began to eat. He ate nervously, glancing at his son. Peter sat silently, a short distance off, staring ahead without expression. His smooth handsome face was blank.

"Everything all right?" Ed said.

"Yes."

"You're not cold, are you?"

"No."

"You don't want to catch cold."

A squirrel crossed in front of them, hurrying toward the sycamore tree. Ed threw it a piece of his sandwich. The squirrel ran off a way, then came back slowly. It scolded at them, standing up on its hind feet, its great gray tail flowing out behind it.

Ed laughed. "Look at him. Ever see a squirrel before?"

"I don't think so."

The squirrel ran off with the piece of sandwich. It disappeared among the brush and bushes.

"Squirrels don't exist out around Prox," Ed said.

"No."

"It's good to come back to Terra once in awhile. See some of the old things. They're going, though."

"Going?"

"Away. Destroyed. Terra is always changing." Ed waved around at the hillside. "This will be gone, someday. They'll cut down the trees. Then they'll level it. Someday they'll carve the whole range up and carry it off. Use it for fill, someplace along the coast."

"That's beyond our scope," Peter said.

"What?"

"I don't receive that type of

material. I think Doctor Bish told you. I'm working with bio-chemistry."

"I know," Ed murmured. "Say, how the hell did you ever get mixed up with that stuff? Bio-chemistry?"

"The tests showed that my abilities lie along those lines."

"You enjoy what you're doing?"

"What a strange thing to ask. Of course I enjoy what I'm doing. It's the work I'm fitted for."

"It seems funny as hell to me, starting a nine year old kid off on something like that."

"Why?"

"My God, Pete. When I was nine I was bumming around town. In school sometimes, outside mostly, wandering here and there. Playing. Reading. Sneaking into the rocket launching yards all the time." He considered. "Doing all sorts of things. When I was sixteen I hopped over to Mars. I stayed there awhile. Worked as a hasher. I went on to Ganymede. Ganymede was all sewed up tight. Nothing doing there. From Ganymede I went out to Prox. Got a work-away all the way out. Big freighter."

"You stayed at Proxima?"

"I sure did. I found what I wanted. Nice place, out there. Now we're starting on to Sirius, you know." Ed's chest swelled. "I've got an outlet in the Sirius system. Little retail and service place."

"Sirius is 8.8 light years from Sol."

"It's a long way. Seven weeks, from here. Rough grind. Meteor swarms. Keeps things hot all the way out."

"I can imagine."

"You know what I thought I might do?" Ed turned toward his

son, his face alive with hope and enthusiasm. "I've been thinking it over. I thought maybe I'd go out there. To Sirius. It's a fine little place we have. I drew up the plans myself. Special design to fit with the characteristics of the system."

Peter nodded.

"Pete—"

"Yes?"

"Do you think maybe you'd be interested? Like to hop out to Sirius and take a look? It's a good place. Four clean planets. Never touched. Lots of room. Miles and miles of room. Cliffs and mountains. Oceans. Nobody around. Just a few colonists, families, some construction. Wide, level plains."

"How do you mean, interested?"

"In going all the way out." Ed's face was pale. His mouth twitched nervously. "I thought maybe you'd like to come along and see how things are. It's a lot like Prox was, twenty-five years ago. It's good and clean out there. No cities."

Peter smiled.

"Why are you smiling?"

"No reason." Peter stood up abruptly. "If we have to walk back to the Station we better start. Don't you think? It's getting late."

"Sure." Ed struggled to his feet. "Sure, but—"

"When are you going to be back in the Sol system again?"

"Back?" Ed followed after his son. Peter climbed up the hill toward the road. "Slow down, will you?"

Peter slowed down. Ed caught up with him.

"I don't know when I'll be back. I don't come here very often. No ties. Not since Jan and I separated. As a matter of fact I came here

this time to—"

"This way." Peter started down the road.

Ed hurried along beside him, fastening his tie and putting his coat on, gasping for breath. "Pete, what do you say? You want to hop out to Sirius with me? Take a look? It's a nice place out there. We could work together. The two of us. If you want."

"But I already have my work."

"That stuff? That damn chemistry stuff?"

Peter smiled again.

Ed scowled, his face dark red. "Why are you smiling?" he demanded. His son did not answer. "What's the matter? What's so damn funny?"

"Nothing," Peter said. "Don't become excited. We have a long walk down." He increased his pace slightly, his supple body swinging in long, even strides. "It's getting late. We have to hurry."

DOCTOR BISH examined his wristwatch, pushing back his pinstriped coat sleeve. "I'm glad you're back."

"He sent the surface car away," Peter murmured. "We had to walk down the hill on foot."

It was dark outside. The Station lights were coming on automatically, along the rows of buildings and laboratories.

Doctor Bish rose from his desk. "Sign this, Peter. Bottom of this form."

Peter signed. "What is it?"

"Certifies you saw him in accord with the provisions of the law. We didn't try to obstruct you in any way."

Peter handed the paper back. Bish filed it away with the others. Peter moved toward the door of the doctor's office. "I'll go. Down to the cafeteria for dinner."

"You haven't eaten?"

"No."

Doctor Bish folded his arms, studying the boy. "Well?" he said. "What do you think of him? This is the first time you've seen your father. It must have been strange for you. You've been around us so much, in all your training and work."

"It was—unusual."

"Did you gain any impressions? Was there any thing you particularly noticed?"

"He was very emotional. There was a distinct bias through everything he said and did. A distortion present, virtually uniform."

"Anything else?"

Peter hesitated, lingering at the door. He broke into a smile. "One other thing."

"What was it?"

"I noticed—" Peter laughed. "I noticed a distinct odor about him. A constant pungent smell, all the time I was with him."

"I'm afraid that's true of all of them," Doctor Bish said. "Certain skin glands. Waste products thrown off from the blood. You'll get used

to it, after you've been around them more."

"Do I have to be around them?"

"They're your own race. How else can you work with them? Your whole training is designed with that in mind. When we've taught you all we can, then you will—"

"It reminded me of something. The pungent odor. I kept thinking about it, all the time I was with him. Trying to place it."

"Can you identify it now?"

Peter reflected. He thought hard, concentrating deeply. His small face wrinkled up. Doctor Bish waited patiently by his desk, his arms folded. The automatic heating system clicked on for the night, warming the room with a soft glow that drifted gently around them.

"I know!" Peter exclaimed suddenly.

"What was it?"

"The animals in the biology labs. It was the same smell. The same smell as the experimental animals."

They glanced at each other, the robot doctor and the promising young boy. Both of them smiled, a secret, private smile. A smile of complete understanding.

"I believe I know what you mean," Doctor Bish said. "In fact, I know *exactly* what you mean."

• • •

THE JUNGLE, in the December issue, is the first story by Charles Beaumont to appear in IF since his much reprinted *The Beautiful People*. It is a story of human terror and the clash of two cultures, one of the distant tomorrow and one of the ancient yesterday, in a city carved out of the steaming jungle. Which will survive? . . . It's a novelette, by one of America's outstanding young writers, that will rate with the best science fiction you have read all year. Don't miss it!

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

THE HONORED PROPHET

*The black dwarf sun sent its assassin on a mission which was
calculated to erase the threat to its existence.
But prophecies run in strange patterns and, sometimes, an act
of evasion becomes an act of fulfillment . . .*

BY WILLIAM E. BENTLEY





THE RULER of a planet with a black dwarf sun had called a meeting of the council. It was some time before they were assembled, and he waited patiently without thought.

When the patchwork of mentalities was complete he allowed the conclusions of the prognosticator to occupy his mind. A wall of unanimous incredulity sprang up. The statement was that when the inhabitants of a distant planet achieved space flight they would come to this planet, and use a weapon invented by an individual to destroy it. The prognosticator could not lie, and soon the facade dissolved into individual reactions as acceptance became general. Anger, fear, resignation, and greedy little thoughts of self-aggrandizement. Those thoughts were replaced by a quiescent, questioning receptivity. The questioning grew out of proportion, became hysterical, assumed the panic shape. Self-preservation demanding that there be a solution. Minor prophecies had been evaded before. Details of the individual had been supplied, could not something be done?

The Assassin was summoned.

The pattern of Dr. Simon Cartwright's encephalic emanations, and the approximate position of the center of these emanations were impressed on its mind. And in a strangely bulbous ship it plunged outward from that eternally dark and silent planet towards Earth.

A MAN was walking along a road. A high road. A silent, dark road. Below him on both sides of the road flat marshland swept

away, and a little wind caressed him with chill fingers. His tiny world of road beneath him, darkness around him, sky above him, contained only the sound of his footsteps—and one other. A regular, liquid sound. He thought it was a sound from the marsh. He listened to it, and wondered how long it had been with him. It was close behind him on the road. He stopped, turned round in small curiosity, and bellowed in great horror. He threw up his hands against an immense bulk, a frog-like shape, a lurching, flowing movement. Then it was upon him, and stilled his futile writhings, and passed over him, and left him dead.

The Assassin continued along the road. It was aware that it had killed, but it could not contemplate the fact. It possessed all the mental powers of its race, but its conditioning had focused them in one direction, the assassination of Dr. Cartwright. It could consider only those factors which had a direct relation to that purpose.

Daylight was one of those factors.

It was not aware of the passage of time, but when the sensitive patch on its back began to contract it left the road and went to the marsh. There it burrowed into the slime until green-flecked water closed over it. And deeper until a depth of mud protected it from the sun.

Dr. Cartwright groaned and sat up in bed. He silenced the ringing telephone by putting the receiver to his ear.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked, aggrieved.

"Hello? Doctor Cartwright? This is the police."

"It is half-past seven," continued Simon. "For me, the middle of the night. I am in no fit state to measure a drunk's reactions."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's been an accident. On the Waverton Highway. A man is dead, Inspector Andrews is in charge of the case."

"Inspector Andrews? Is mayhem suspected? Never mind, I'll get down there, right away."

He put the receiver down and got out of bed. His wife muttered something unintelligible and wrapped his share of the blankets round her. Simon went downstairs. He made a cup of coffee and drank it while he dressed. The engine of his car was cold, but his house was on a hill and he was able to coast down to the Highway.

The road was level and straight, and after a few minutes driving a little tableau came into sight—two cars, a group of uniforms. Inspector Andrews, tall, thin, dyspeptic, greeted him with a limp handshake. "Something funny about this," he said. "See what you think."

Simon went down on one knee beside the body and began to undo the clothing. After a time he looked up into the sky. "This is very strange," he murmured.

"I know," grunted Andrews. "Can they take the body now?"

Simon stood up and nodded. He remained staring out across the marsh until the body had been removed, and the ambulance a distant object. Then he went and sat in his car. Andrews finished giving instructions to his Sergeant, and joined him. "I'll let you give me breakfast," he said.

"You're very kind," said Simon absently, and released the brake.

"Any use asking for the cause of death?" asked Andrews.

"Oh, the cause of death was crushing, but the cause of the cause of death—" Simon shook his head. "There wasn't an unbroken bone in his body. Could he have been dropped from an airplane?"

Andrews shook a ponderous head. "He was a bus driver on his way to work without an enemy in the world. And I've a feeling his death is going to keep me awake at nights. Anyway, Sergeant Bennet is going over the area with a magnifying glass. We'll put up a pretty good show. Can you suggest anything?"

"It wasn't a car," said Simon carefully. "The skin was unbroken, except from the inside. I can only imagine something like a rubber-covered steam-roller."

THAT NIGHT the Assassin killed two people.

When it grew dark it heaved itself up out of the slime. A long business of bodily expansion and contraction. Two men were on the road and heard the noise it made.

"Somethin' out there."

"Stray cow, maybe."

They stood and peered into the dark, trying to see a familiar shape. The Assassin approached them, and was too big for them to see. They stood in its path and looked for a familiar object in the blackness of its body. So the instant of apprehension was small, the panic and exertion soon over. Without pausing the Assassin moved over them and continued on its way.

A little later Inspector Andrews found them. He was in a radio patrol car, and he was moving in the

same direction as the Assassin. With him in the car were three large men carrying automatic rifles. Andrews stopped the car, and one of the men got out and knelt by the bodies. Andrews watched him somberly for a moment then reached for the microphone. He spoke to the station sergeant.

"Inspector Andrews here. Send an ambulance out here, will you, and phone Doctor Cartwright. Tell him the steam-roller's loose again. It may be on the road heading his way. Yes, steam-roller. He'll understand."

He put the microphone down, called to the man on the road. "I'm leaving you here, Roberts. There's an ambulance on its way. Go back with it. Get in Sergeant Bennet's car and both of you join us up ahead."

He closed the car window and released the brake. The empty road began to unwind slowly into the area of light ahead.

Simon put the receiver down and looked at his wife. She was concentrating on a sock by the fire. He went over and kissed the top of her head. "Goodbye," she said.

"Listen," he said quietly. "When I'm gone lock the door behind me and don't go out. If you hear any funny noises go down to the cellar. Understand?"

She was a little frightened. "Honey, what is it?"

He smiled. "It's nothing. Long John Andrews is out hunting. I'm going along in case he shoots himself."

He took his shot-gun off the mantle and stuffed his pockets with cartridges.

"I'll bring you back a rabbit," he said. "So long."

He drove down slowly. He was scared, but he was still young enough to find it exhilarating. The loaded shot-gun was a great help.

He turned on to the highway, and slowed to walking pace. He stared into the darkness ahead until his eyes burned, and imagination peopled his surroundings with writhing shapes.

Then he saw it, and the muscles across his chest trembled convulsively. Fear clutched his stomach. He slammed his foot down on the brake and gaped up at it. It was standing still in the middle of the road, a giant, pear shaped body, looking something like a man kneeling upright. At the front, turned inwards, were a number of arm-like appendages.

The shot-gun was ridiculous now, the car made of paper. To get out and run was impossible, and he longed to be able to sit still and do nothing. And the seconds dragged by. Time for contemplation built up, and a strange realization dropped into his seething mind. He sensed something about its attitude. A cringing, a withdrawal. "God," he whispered. "It doesn't like the light."

He might have relaxed then, but it moved. One of its arms unfolded, swung outward holding something metallic. Simon yelled. He grabbed the shot-gun, shoved the door catch down, threw his weight sideways. He landed on his shoulder and kept on rolling. He reached the other side of the road, straightened up, and saw the roof of the car fly off with a roar. He fired then, from a crouching position and without tak-

ing aim. A lucky shot that hit the end of the weapon arm and shattered it. Then he ran, and the Assassin followed.

He ran in the direction he'd been heading, and gave himself up to terror. He was primeval man fleeing from sabre-tooth. He was living a nightmare. His brain reeled, air burnt his lungs, and his pounding heart echoed in his temples. Then he was running into a blaze of light, between headlights that enfolded him like a mother's arms, and he was clinging to a radiator cap. Dimly he heard the crash of high powered rifles about him. A black figure came into his haven of light, began to loosen his tie.

"Get out of the light," he gasped. "It doesn't like the light."

"Who invited you?" grunted Andrews. He put Simon's arm round his neck, and half carried him round to the side of the car, pushed him into the front seat.

"I'll be all right in a minute," said Simon.

"Yeah," said Andrews, and left him.

After a little while the trembling in his limbs began to subside, breathing became easier. He leaned forward and watched a strange battle. The Assassin was about seventy yards ahead, moving slowly nearer. Two men stood on the right hand side of the car, pumping bullets into the grey, indistinct mass. Andrews stood watching with his hands in his jacket pockets. Suddenly he said, "All right, let go. You're only wasting bullets."

Simon looked at him in alarm. "Hey, you're not just going to stand there. It doesn't like the light, but light can't kill it."

"Lie down on the floor," said Andrews dourly, without looking at him.

"Eh?"

Andrews ignored him, stepped two paces forward. The Assassin was about twenty yards away now, seeming to have to fight against the stream of light. Andrews took his hands from his pockets. Simon saw what he was holding, and dived for the floor. He clasped his hands over the back of his neck as the night exploded with a gigantic crash.

When his ears had stopped screaming he got up. Andrews, an elbow on the window ledge, was watching him expressionlessly.

"You might have left me something to dissect," complained Simon. "Somebody's got to, you know."

"I'll mop you up a sponge full," said Andrews.

"Oh, no, you won't. You and your men stay back here. It's probably crawling with alien bacteria."

Actually, quite a lot of the Assassin was left, but decomposition was very rapid. Simon did the best he could with a magnifying glass and a penknife. He found that the body was almost entirely composed of bone and flesh in a honey-comb like structure. The bone being highly flexible, and the cavities filled with grey flesh. Flesh which quickly liquified and drained away from the bone. There was no blood, and Simon could find no trace of internal organs.

While he worked two more cars drove up, and gave him a little more light, but soon he had to give up. As he walked slowly back a spotlight sprang suddenly to life,

and a pleasant authoritative voice spoke.

"Will you stay where you are, please, Doctor Cartwright."

Simon obeyed. Hell, he thought wearily. Officialdom has arrived. He shaded his eyes against the light, but he could see nothing.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Commanding officer in charge of operations in this emergency. You've made an examination?"

"As far as I could. There's complete decomposition now."

"Oh, I see." A slight pause, then; "Perhaps I'd better put you in the picture. This is armed aggression, Doctor Cartwright. In any language it says war. Do you understand? We're at war, now.

"We found the vessel your friend came in several days ago. It was in the sea, twenty miles from here. Its discovery was kept secret because we weren't sure of its point of origin. Our people are engaged in finding the method of propulsion. They say it will give us the ability to travel in space. They also say that they can find the approximate position of its home planet. All that is top priority, of course, but in the meanwhile we must have an emergency line of defence against these things. We want to know how to find them and how to destroy them with the least possible expenditure of life and material. You understand?"

"Yes. I've got an idea about light waves. I fired a shot at it back there. The bone structure—"

"Don't tell me," interrupted the voice sharply. "Remember it. You realize, Doctor Cartwright, that you are just about the most important man alive. You know how fast it

can move. You have fought it, you have examined it. So you can be sure that very good care will be taken of you."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm sorry, but you must see that you have to go into strict quarantine now. We dare not risk a plague. After quarantine you will go to work with our people. Now will you please get into the car at the extreme right, and follow the police."

"Where am I going?"

"Please hurry. There is a team of incendiaries waiting to clear the area."

"Oh, damnation," sighed The Most Important Man Alive, and walked towards the waiting car.

WHEN THE ruler consulted the prognosticator again, after the Assassin's failure had been

recorded, he found that a qualification had been added. The prophecy was now being fulfilled. He considered this dispassionately. He visualised the complex pattern of implication almost with pleasure. Was the machine alive? Certainly it could contemplate itself. It had calculated the effect of its existence, and had used the knowledge to destroy them. Or had they condemned themselves? By losing the ability to question. For the information on which the prophecy was based could have been available to them. Or was the machine only obeying a greater Fate? A Decree, stating that any life-form that surrendered itself to the dictates of a machine was doomed.

One thing alone was left to him. A choice. Without haste he began the preliminaries to thinking himself to death. . . .

IF YOU ARE COLLECTING **if**

A FEW weeks ago we asked our printers if they would look in the cellar, the attic, out in the alley, under the shipping counters, etc., and see if they had any back copies of **IF** hanging around collecting dust and whatnot. They did—enough to feed a healthy billy goat for several weeks. But we haven't got a billy goat, and our diet around the office here says we can't eat paper with ink on it. So, if you would like back copies of **IF**—for your collection, of course—just send us 35 cents for each copy ordered. Available issues are listed below. Address: **IF** Magazine, Kingston, New York.

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The Hitch Hikers

The Rell, a great and ancient Martian race, faced extinction when all moisture was swept from their planet.

Then, one day, a lone visitor—a strange, two-legged creature composed mostly of water—landed on Mars . . .

BY VERNON L. MC CAIN

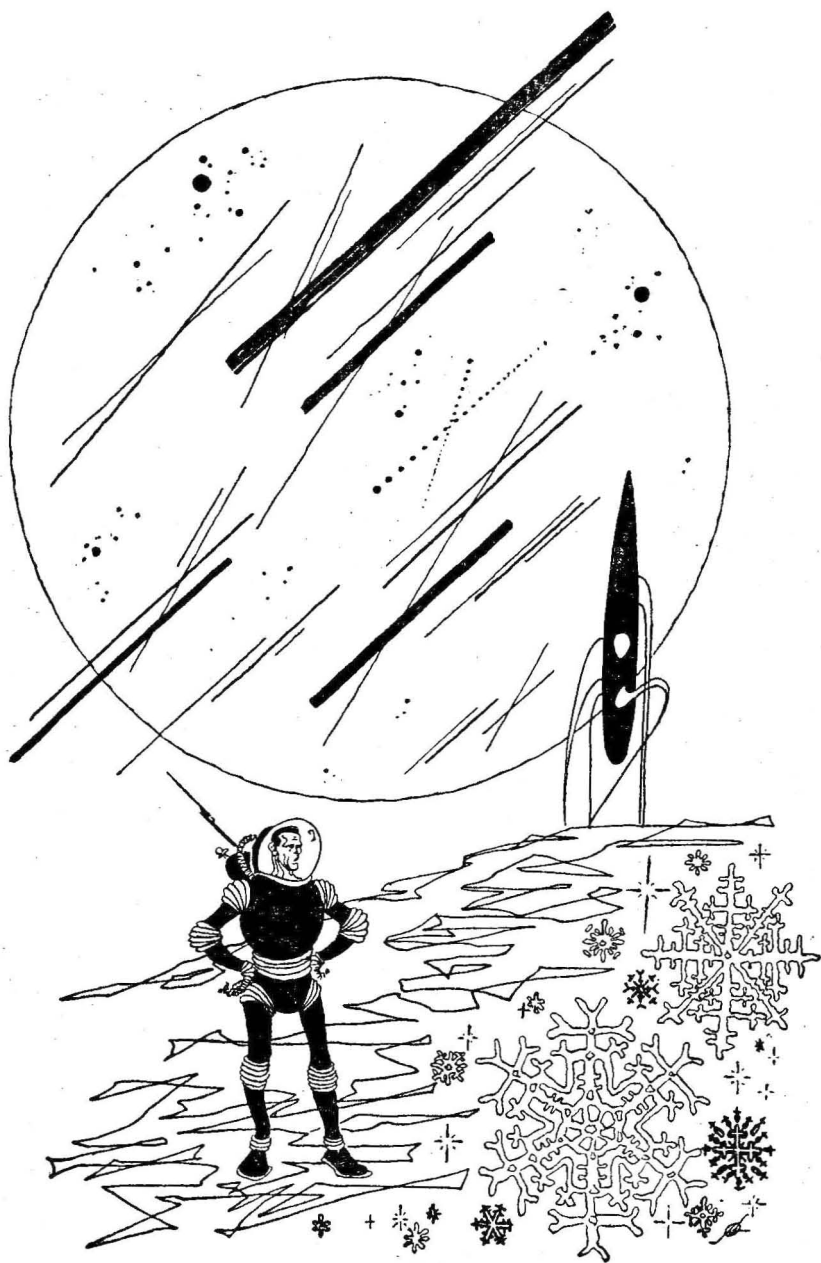
THE DEHYDRATION of the planet had taken centuries in all. The Rell had still been a great race when the process started. Construction of the canals was a prodigious feat but not a truly remarkable one. But what use are even canals when there is nothing to fill them?

What cosmic influences might have caused the disaster baffled even the group-mind of the Rell. Through the eons the atmosphere had drifted into space; and with it went the life-giving moisture. Originally a liquid paradise, the planet was now a dry, hostile husk.

The large groups of Rell had been the first to suffer. But in time even the tiny villages containing mere quadrillions of the sub-microscopic entities had found too little moisture left to satisfy their thirst and the journey ever southward toward the pole had commenced.

The new life was bitter and difficult and as their resources were depleted so also did their numbers diminish.

Huddled at their last retreat the Rell watched the ever smaller ice cap annually diminish and lived with the knowledge they faced extinction. A mere thousand years



more would see even this trifling remainder gone.

Oh, you might say there was hope . . . of a sort. There might be Rell in the northern hemisphere. The canals girdled the globe and a similar ice cap could well exist at the opposite pole. Rell perhaps survived there also.

But this was scant comfort. The fate of the Rell in the South was sealed. What hope of any brighter future for those in the North? And if they survived a few hundred thousand years longer . . . or if they had perished a similar period earlier, what actual difference did it make?

There was no one more aware of this gloomy future than Raeillo/ee13.

In the old days a single unit of the group-mind of the Rell would have possessed but a single function and exercised this function perhaps a dozen times during his life. But due to the inexorable shrinkage only the most important problems now could command mind-action and each unit had been forced to forsake specialization for multi-purpose endeavors.

Thus Raeillo/ee13 and his mate Raellu//2 were two of the five thousand units whose task was to multiply in any group-mind action involving mathematical prediction. Naturally Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 did not waste their abilities in mundane problems not involving prediction. Nor did they divide, add, or subtract. That was assigned to other units just as several million of the upper groups had the task of sorting and interpreting their results. Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 multiplied

only. And it must be admitted they did it very well. It is a pity the Rell could not have multiplied physically as easily as Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 multiplied mentally.

With the exception of an occasional comet or meteor the Rell were seldom diverted by anything of a physical nature. The ice cap was their sole concern.

But one afternoon a rare physical phenomenon was reported by a bank of observer Rell.

"In the sky's northwest portion," an excited injunction came through. "Observe that patch of flaming red!"

More observer Rell were quickly focused on the novel sight and further data was rapidly fed into the interpretive bank.

The Rell were justifiably proud of their interpreters. With the race shrinkage it had proved impossible to properly train new interpreters. So, not without a great deal of sacrifice, the old interpreters, dating back to when the canals still flowed with water, had been kept alive.

They were incredibly ancient but there was no doubt as to their ability. It was a truism among the Rell that the interpretive banks arrived at their conclusions faster than any other group and that these conclusions could be checked to hundreds of decimal places without finding inaccuracy.

So it was no surprise to have the interpretive bank respond almost instantly, "It is quite odd but the flame appears to be of artificial origin."

"Artificial!" came the rough and questing probe of the speculative bank. "But how could Rell possibly be out there?"

"Who mentioned Rell?" was the interpretive bank's smug answer. They were not utterly averse to demonstrating their superior mental abilities on occasion.

The speculative bank replied, "Artificial implies intelligence, and intelligence means Re'l . . ."

"Does it?" the interpretive bank interrupted. The speculative bank waited but the interpretive bank failed to enlarge on the provocative query.

The Rell had found certain disadvantages accrued to abnormal prolongation of life and thus were not unused to the interpretive bank's occasional tendency to talk in riddles.

"Perhaps not" the speculative bank replied after a quick check with the logical formulae held in reserve by the historical bank. "It is theoretically possible that Rell-like individuals might have developed elsewhere, and perhaps even have developed intelligence, although, according to the historical bank, such an idea has never before been subjected to consideration. But what is the flame doing?" they continued, a trifle resentful at having been left to do work properly in the interpretive bank's province.

The observation and interpretive banks once more came into play, studying the situation for several minutes. "The flame appears to be the exhaust of a fairly crude vessel," the interpretive bank finally reported, "propelled by ignition of some gaseous mixture."

"Is it moving?"

"Quite rapidly."

"Where is it going?"

This called into play the proph-

ecy division of the mind and Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2, who had been merely interested on-lookers before, hurriedly meshed themselves with the other forty nine hundred odd of their fellows. (It was impossible to say at any given time just how many there were in their computer section, as several births and deaths had occurred among the group since beginning the current observations. These would be suspended for the next several moments, however, as there was a strict prohibition against anyone being born, dying, or otherwise engaging in extraneous activity while their particular bank was either alerted or in action.)

Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 felt the group discipline take hold much more firmly than the free-and-easy mesh which each unit enjoyed with the complete group-mind during periods of leisure.

With a speed that would have been dizzying and incomprehensible to any individual unit, the observing banks relayed huge masses of extraneous data to the interpretive bank. They strained out the salient facts and in turn passed these to the computing:prediction section. Here they were routed to the groups who would deal with them. Raeillo/ee13 and Raellu//2 found their own talents pressed into service a dozen or more times in the space of the minute and a half it took the computing:prediction and interpretive banks to arrive at the answer.

"It's aimed here," the interpretive bank reported.

"Here!" a jumble of incoherent and anarchistic thoughts resounded

from many shocked and temporarily out-of-mesh units.

"Order!" came a sharp command from the elite corp of three thousand disciplinary units.

As stillness settled back over the group-mind the speculative bank once more came in. "By here . . . do you mean *right* here?"

"Approximately," replied the interpretive bank with what would have sounded suspiciously like a chuckle in a human reply. "According to calculations the craft should land within half a mile of our present location."

"Let's go there then and wait for it!" That thought from the now seldom used reservation of impulse.

The speculative bank murmured, "I wonder if there would be any danger. How hot is that exhaust?"

Calculations were rapidly made and the answer arrived at. The Rell prudently decided to remain where they were for the present.

CAPTAIN LEONARD BROWN, USAF, hunched over the instruments in the cramped control cabin which, being the only available space in the ship, doubled as living quarters. A larger man would have found the arrangement impossible. Brown, being 5' 2" and weighing 105 pounds found it merely intolerable.

At the moment he was temporarily able to forget his discomfort, however. The many tiny dials and indicators told a story all their own to Brown's trained vision.

"Just another half hour," he whispered to himself. "Just thirty more minutes and I'll land. It may be just a dead planet but I'll still

be the first."

There really wasn't a great deal for Brown to do. The ship was self-guided. The Air Force had trusted robot mechanisms more than human reactions.

Thus Brown's entire active contribution to the flight consisted in watching the dials (which recorded everything so even watching them was unnecessary) and in pressing the button which would cause the ship to start its return journey.

Of course the scientists could have constructed another mechanism to press the button and made it a completely robot ship. But despite their frailties and imperfections, human beings have certain advantages. Humans can talk. Machines may see and detect far more than their human creators but all they can do is record. They can neither interpret nor satisfactorily describe.

Brown was present not only to report a human's reactions to the first Mars flight; he was also along to see that which the machines might miss.

"We've never satisfactorily defined life," one of his instructors had told Brown shortly after he started the three grueling years of training which had been necessary, "so we can't very well build a foolproof machine for detecting it. That's why we've left room for 105 pounds of dead weight."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you."

"And I'm your foolproof machine for detecting life?"

"Let's say you're the closest we can come to it at present. We're banking everything on this first trip. It'll be at least eighteen

months later before we can get a second ship into space. So it's up to you to get everything you can . . . some evidence of life, preferably animal, if possible. With public support it'll be a hell of a lot easier squeezing appropriations out of Congress for the next ship and to get public support we need the biggest possible play in the newspapers. If anything is newsworthy on Mars it should be evidence of life . . . even plant life."

So here he was, 105 pounds of concentrated knowledge and anticipation, itching with the desire for action and also from more basic causes having to do with two months confinement in a small space with a minimum of water.

"Life is most probable at the poles," the instructor had said. "You won't be able to stay long so we'll try to set you down right at the South Pole. You won't have room to bring back specimens. So keep your eyes open and absorb everything you see. Don't forget anything. What you bring back in your mind weighs nothing."

"It's just sitting there," the observing banks reported, "and the red flame has gone out."

"Is it safe now?" enquired the speculative bank.

"In what way?"

"Is it safe to go near that thing?"

"It's very huge," ventured the observing banks unasked. There was a stir of activity which encompassed practically all except the most simple units and which lasted for perhaps five minutes while the speculative bank's last question was processed.

Finally the interpretive bank re-

luctantly admitted, "We can't arrive at a positive answer. Too many unknown elements are present. We don't know for sure what caused the flame, when it might start again, or what, if anything, is inside."

"But you said it was a work of intelligence. Doesn't that mean Rell would be inside?"

"Not necessarily. They could have constructed the thing to operate itself."

It was just then that the observing banks reported, "It's opening."

The speculative bank quickly responded, "This is an emergency. We must be able to observe from close up. We'll have to approach it."

"The entire mind?" enquired the disciplinary corps.

The speculative bank hesitated. "No, we'll need to split up. One-fifth of us will go, the rest remain here. It's a short distance and we'll still be able to continue in complete contact."

Those who were to go were quickly sorted out and Raello/ee13 was quite thrilled to find he and Raellu//2 were included in the scouting party.

The group set off briskly toward their objective but had moved hardly one hundred yards when a vertigo seemed to overtake them. Raello/ee13 found himself swimming helplessly in a vortex of darkness and isolation, blanked off from not only the group-mind and his bank but also from Raellu//2. Frantically he grasped for some sort of stasis, but dependence on the group-mind was too ingrained and he was unable to stir his long-

dormant powers of sight and education.

Then the isolation cleared to be replaced by a brief impression of chaos with perhaps a tinge of alienness. Another instant of vertigo followed and then everything was normal once more as the comfortable familiar mesh took hold.

"What was that?" Even the speculative bank sounded frightened.

"Sorry." The usually silent meshing bank sounded abashed. "We weren't prepared for that. Some sort of thought wave is issuing from the opening and it disrupted the group mesh till we were able to take it into calculation and rebuild the mesh around it."

"Thought wave? Then there *are* Rell in that thing."

"Do not compute before the mesh is set." the interpretive bank cautioned. "The presence of Rell, while extremely probable, is not yet entirely certain."

Without waiting for a suggestion from elsewhere the disciplinary group ordered the entire mind forward.

Perhaps, in time of stress, dormant qualities tend to emerge, Raeillo/eel3 mused. Certainly everyone, himself included, appeared to be exercising speculative qualities. Not that specialization isn't a marvelous blessing, he hastily added, in case the disciplinary corps might be scanning his bank. But the disciplinary corps itself was as fascinated by the phenomenon ahead as Raeillo/eel3.

Emerging from the infinitely huge upright thing was a mobile being, also infinitely huge. Not that they were the same size. The mobile

one was small enough to fit easily through the opening in the lower portion of the larger. But beyond a certain point words lose meaning and infinitely huge was the closest measurement the tiny Rell could find for either the upright pointed thing or the knobby one which had emerged and was quickly identified as the source of the disrupting thought patterns.

Leonard Brown was enjoying himself thoroughly. The inside of a space suit can scarcely be termed comfortable but at least you can move around in it and Brown was making the most of this sensation after two months cramped in his tiny cell. He was, in fact, comporting himself much as a three-year-old might have done after a similar release.

But before long he settled down to the serious business of observing and mentally recording everything in sight.

There were none of the mysterious 'canals' in view, which was disappointing; one piece of glamour the publicity boys would necessarily forego until the next trip. The ice cap itself, if such it could be called, was almost equally disappointing. On Earth it would have been dismissed as a mere frost patch, if this section was typical. For a radius of many yards the ground was blasted bare by the action of the exhaust and nowhere in sight did there appear to be more than the flimsiest covering of white over the brown sandy soil.

"Not even lichens," muttered Brown in disgust.

But disgust cannot long stand

against the magic of a fresh new planet and Brown continued his avid, though barren, search until hunger forced his return to the ship. He had been able to detect no life and was completely unaware of his close proximity to the planet's dominant species. It had been considered neither practical nor particularly desirable to build a microscope into the space suit. Simplicity and the least possible weight had been the watchwords here as with everything designed to go aboard the ship.

In any case, a microscope would have done Brown little good in trying to detect the submicroscopic beings of the Rell.

The Rell, who had somewhat lost their fear of Brown, hastily retreated when they saw him returning to the still awesome ship.

"But are you *sure* he's *completely* self-powered?" the speculative bank queried. "No Rell inside him at all?"

"There are many Rell-like beings in various parts of him." replied the interpretive bank. "Some help digest his food, others are predators, and still others their enemies. But most are too big and clumsy to have developed intelligence, and even the small ones appear completely mindless."

"But where do the thought waves come from? We all felt them."

"It's hard to accept but we are almost forced to conclude they are emanating from the mobile unit itself, or rather from the living part within the cocoon."

"You're positive they aren't the

product of some of the Rell-beings inside?"

"Almost positive. The mesh insists not. In fact, it claims this is an un-Rell like type of intelligence, though that appears to be a contradiction in terms. The thought pattern is completely outside our experience. In fact, it is so alien we haven't broken it down yet to the meaning behind it."

"But if the Rell inside are too large to have developed intelligence, how could this gigantic monster in which they live have done so?"

"We cannot yet say. Remember, the theory that intelligence cannot develop in creatures above a certain size is unproven, even though never before challenged. We've watched other races die through failure to adapt to change so apparently it is true of Rell-like creatures on this world. But who can say about organisms on another world or of the unprecedented size of this one? Completely different physical laws may apply."

It was later that afternoon after the Rell had spent much time observing Brown while Brown was busy observing the landscape that the interpretive bank made the triumphant announcement, "We have it! We've broken the thought waves down to their meanings and know what he's thinking. What would you like to know first?"

"Check and see if there are any Rell inside the other thing or on his home world. They might have constructed him."

"Apparently there are none, or at least no intelligent Rell, on his world. We can't guide his mind but the memory bank recorded all

the thoughts we've received and some time ago he was thinking of something he termed 'vermin'. Apparently these are sometimes Rell-like creatures, although far larger. He regards them as a great nuisance, but mindless. The big thing, by the way, he calls a 'ship' and it is utterly lifeless. We needn't fear the flame until this creature leaves."

"What about him? What is he like?"

"That's the most exciting part! He thought of his bodily needs once and we glimpsed a concept dealing with his physical construction. It's incredible! His body is composed almost entirely of water . . . there's enough water in him alone to prolong the life of the Rell many ages. Further, the air in his 'ship' is heavily impregnated with moisture and he even has reserve supplies of water for his needs."

At this, not only Raello/ee13, but all except perhaps the most responsible units felt a shiver of primitive longing and perhaps even greed. Not for millenia had there been such a plentitude of water so close!

"Then can't we appropriate at least part of it?" asked the speculative bank.

"Unfortunately both the 'man', as he calls himself, and his 'ship' are sealed so tightly that we could not penetrate either. Worse yet, almost half his time here is already gone. We don't quite understand his purpose here. His thoughts seem to say he is searching for Rell for some unfathomable reason yet he seems to know nothing of the Rell and cannot even detect us."

IT WAS the next day when the time was almost all gone that the two big discoveries were made. During a routine check, the mesh came across a thought of the man's return and a visualization of his home world. It was so startling that the interpretive bank was recalled from its effort to try to devise a means through the spacesuit and set at the new problem.

A hasty check of the man's subconscious thoughts revealed the big news. "Do you know," the interpretive bank announced, "not only does this being's home world have a moist atmosphere like that in his ship but two thirds of the surface of his world is *liquid water!*"

Even the speculative bank was silent for a full two seconds after this news. Then a hasty impulse was sent to the disciplinary corps and the entire mind called into action. An extreme emergency upon which the fate of the race hinged called for the utmost effort by even the humblest members of the group.

The Rell worked diligently and many blind alleys were explored, but it was not for some time that anyone thought of enquiring of the not-too-bright feeding bank how they were managing to keep the mind operating at considerably more than normal power with no frost within feeding distance.

"We're taking moisture from the air." was the answer.

"Where is the moisture coming from?" the interpretive bank was asked.

The answer didn't take long. Rapid measurements supplied it. "Some of it is vaporized frost but that wouldn't be enough for our

needs. The only other possibility is that moisture must be seeping away from either the man or his ship despite his sureness that they were both airtight and our own investigations which confirmed it."

They had maintained a cautious distance from the ship for the most part despite the interpretive bank's assurance of no immediate danger. But now they swarmed over both it and the spacesuit determined to detect the leak.

They found none.

And now the man was returning to his ship.

"This is the last time," the mesh warned. It was now or never.

For a second there was conflict over control of the circuits to the disciplinary corps which carried with it command of the organism during the emergency. The speculative bank customarily assumed this responsibility, but a slight schism had developed between it and the interpretive bank. The latter's greater age and skill came into play and victory was quickly won.

From the disciplinary corps came the order, "Stay close to the 'man'."

The interpretive bank explained, "He breathes the air so he'll have to get to it some way."

The defeated speculative bank maintained a sulky silence.

Thus it was that the entire mind of the Rell rode into the interior of the ship through the airlock while clustered around Brown.

The Rell had grasped that the man lived and traveled inside his ship and the necessity for it to be air tight. But so desperate were the two races' needs that the necessity for an airlock and the consequent

slight seepage each time it was used had not occurred to even the interpretive bank.

Inside, many Rell, suddenly intoxicated by the heady moisture-laden air, commenced uniting with each other then splitting away, each such union resulting in another unit of Rell, naturally. The interpretive bank again seized control.

"Stop it! Stop it this instant!" it snapped. "Reproduction must be kept to the former minimum for now. That is a firm order."

Reluctantly the process was halted. The interpretive bank explained, "It would not take long for us to use up the entire supply of water if we indulged in uncontrolled reproduction. That might endanger the whole trip."

"What do we do now?" the speculative bank finally asked.

"There is no way of knowing positively whether the man uses this same atmosphere until he returns to his world or not. For our own safety it would seem best, since Rell-like creatures already inhabit him, that we join them. If any place is safe it will be his interior. And there is plenty of moisture within to sustain us. But we must be good parasites," the interpretive bank warned. "Remember, no undue reproduction no matter how many quarts of moisture seem to be going to waste inside this 'man'. He may need it himself and if he does not survive the ship might not complete its trip."

Brown was just emerging from his space suit so the Rell chose his closest available body opening and flowed as a group into his mouth and nostrils.

"Ahchoo!" sneezed Brown, vio-

lently evicting half the Rell.

They re-entered a bit more cautiously in order not to irritate the sensitive membrane again.

"Dammit," said Brown, "don't tell me I've caught a cold clear out here on Mars. Hope I didn't pick up any Martian germs."

But he needn't have worried. By the time he reached Earth he was far less germ-ridden, even if considerably more itchy on the exterior, than when he'd left. The Rell were good at self defense and a surprising number of mindless but voracious creatures in Brown's interior had been eliminated.

Brown dreaded having to give

the news he carried but he needn't have. He was a conquering hero.

So much fuss was made over the first flight to Mars that Congress promptly voted twice the appropriation for the second ship that the Air Force had requested, despite strong opposition from the Navy and headlines which read:

NO LIFE ON MARS

Actually, as it happened, the headlines were one hundred percent correct, but they neglected to mention, chiefly because the headline writers didn't know it, that there were now two races of intelligent life on Earth. • • •

STANLEY GLEIT

(Continued from page 13)

civil engineering.

At five he started the model building which he still works at quite assiduously. At eleven he began reading everything he could lay his hands on. Then came sports. Today, model building, reading and various sports are his main hobbies.

Stanley feels that he hasn't had enough experience to decide what his specialty will be in the engineering field, but he hopes to be able to get that degree before he's inducted into the Armed Services.

THE FUTURE in *It's Really Sirius*, is Earth that has been in stasis for one hundred years. Russia and the United States are still having a cold war, the United Nations is still the hope of small nations and the debating ground for the large ones. The United States has launched a space satellite, and the

other side of the moon has been explored. Venus and Mars have been reached, but society is so lethargic that only a few from the crowded Indo-Asian countries have migrated to the planets. The cities are empty of all but industry; there are overhead monorails, robot servants, brief, utilitarian clothing, visiphones, television and every sort of conceivable gadget and gimmick to make life easy. Life is dull, monotonous, calm and boring, but the drive for security is so great that adventure, excitement, tension are avoided like the plague. The story tells of the efforts of a declining race of Sirians to shock the Earth out of stasis—and to unify it and to teach it to trade and share discoveries and so ready it for the fight against the menace from another galaxy.

It's Really Sirius will appear in IF next spring.

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VACATION

*It was an island paradise, where you could fish and pick
coconuts and be as lazy as you please.*

*For three glorious days just the two of you could be alone
and remember . . . three days out of a lifetime.*

BY JOHN CHRISTOPHER

THE BIRD was singing. He raised himself on one elbow to look for it, but there was only the luxuriant green of the trees, pressing down to the sand. The island was a single hill, and further back, high up on the slope, the vegetation thinned. He could see the hut, surrounded by garden neatness. They had preferred to sleep on the sand. Everyone did.

Jenny said: "You listening, too? It's happy, all right. You can tell that."

He rolled over and smiled at her. "As long as it doesn't come right up and sneer at us, let it be happy."

"I mean it, though. I never heard it sing like that before."

"The air," he said. "The sunshine, sound of a breeze. So many

little differences. It's the same bird."

"It's free", she said. "It's home."

"It doesn't know that."

They lay quietly for a few moments. As it had done last night, just before he drifted off into sleep, his hand went out to the soft sand, the fingers pushing down into its fineness. It was difficult to tell how far the action was a conscious one. Thinking of that, he sat up. The sun was well clear of the line where the two different blues met, the horizon. That was the kind of thing to remember: the open glory of sunrise. He touched Jenny's shoulder.

"Swim, honey?"

Her face was buried in the sand. "You go on. Be right with you."

The fragile golden crust broke under his feet. He walked faster, and then began running. It was perhaps a hundred yards to the water's edge. When the first lapping wavelets were round his feet he began singing, a bawling senseless song but it filled the warm and quiet air with the sound of his voice. The ground dipped quite sharply after it entered the water, and he flung himself forward and went under. Water, all round him.

The consciousness of pleasure was like being a boy again: now, in this instant, you are smoking a cigarette, kissing Abigail Summers—any one of a dozen things long thought of, now realized. Water, water. He came splashing to the surface. Jenny was still lying, face down, on the sand. He called to her, again and again, until she sat up. She got to her feet and began to walk towards the water, but slowly, as though reluctantly.



That morning he worked on the garden round the hut. Two hours' work a day were requested of the men, although, of course, there was no way of enforcing the request. He did four hours in the morning, and carried on again in the afternoon. He wondered how many others had set out to do the full six hours' work on the first day, with the intention of having the remainder of the time free. He rested in the middle of the afternoon, when the sun got really hot, but he went back to the garden again afterwards. He wondered how many had done that, too. The garden was in very good shape.

Jenny, meanwhile, had been busy in the hut. It had three rooms and an annex of an uncompleted fourth. Someone, struggling perhaps with his hazy memories of carpentry, had found three days not quite long enough to achieve his projected improvement. They should have let him stay on, he thought. But if it had been he and Jenny who had been next on the list, waiting?

On the tea table she had prepared the processed foods that had been familiar and monotonous and detestable for over fifteen years. He shook his head.

"Throw that stuff out. We've got plenty fruit here."

"No." She motioned him to sit down. "Unless we want to spend the rest of the time doubled up. Our stomachs aren't used to it. It's this they're used to."

She helped him to slices of soy-stein, and he made no protest. She was right. The rest of the time . . . he wished she hadn't put it like that. The sun was getting low.

When it dipped down to touch the sea, a third of the time would be gone, two days remaining. He had a swift ripple of anger that it should be only three days; just four, even, would make all the difference. Just four.

"God Almighty," he said, "it's not long. Three days."

She looked at him. "No."

"After sixteen years."

She said: "Some will have twenty five, if they live that long. And the boys . . ."

The anger had gone now. He felt very tired; from the unaccustomed work, perhaps.

"I know."

"We're lucky. It might have been the typhoon season."

"I'd like a typhoon. A little one."

THE FOLLOWING morning, after a swim, he went back to work in the garden. Someone, quite recently, had begun an extension along the western slope. Already, in what was clearly a short time, the island's natural plant life had begun to counter-attack; in another week or so the whole of the new ground would have been lost again. He set to the job of clearing it with enthusiasm, and also with relief at having something to do where time's passing would not be so much marked.

After a couple of hours, he wondered where Jenny was. He realized that for some time he had not seen her moving about the hut. He looked down to the beach, to see if she had gone for a swim, but the long stretch of sand and the blue ocean were both unbroken. He called her two or three times,

and got no reply. Then he put down his fork, and went to look for her.

He came upon her unexpectedly, in a clearing on the other side of the hill. She did not hear his approach, and he was able to watch her, and listen to her. She was talking; to herself, he thought at first. Then he noticed the bird they had brought, on a branch quite close to her head. That surprised him—that it should stay there while she talked, although the whole island was open to it. And yet, caged for how many generations, it might even have a need of human speech. He looked at the bird: the last of a species that gradually had ceased to breed in captivity, and so had been freed. A sterile liberty.

Jenny was talking to it in an ordinary tone of voice.

"... you won't be alone. There'll always be people here on the island. Here for three days, and then gone. They'll take it different ways, I guess. But whatever way they take it, it will only be three days. How long does a bird live—your kind of bird? I'd like to think you'll still be here when the boys come. I doubt it, though."

The bird stretched its wings, and she stopped speaking to look at it. It flapped to another branch, no more than a couple of feet away, and stayed there. From peg to peg, even though the cage was gone.

"We saved your kind," Jenny said, "and then we kept you, and you're the last. There was talk of putting a pair here a good few years ago, but there were so few of you and they thought you could be cared for better in the City. They were wrong, but it's too late now.

So you came in the boat with us. I'd rather it had been some other couple. We've set you free, and tomorrow night we go back. I'd rather it had been someone else."

She looked away, towards the branches which screened him, and he instinctively lowered his head. But she had not seen him.

She said to the bird: "What's it like? What's it like, being alive? I'm not alive. How can you be alive, for three days, knowing that the end's there? I don't think Fran and I will be back. We might just make it, but I don't think so."

She got up. He saw her face: sad and angry and despairing, as he had never seen it before, as she had never let him see it. She put her hand on the branch, and shook it more and more vigorously until the bird took flight.

"Go on!", she cried. "Live! Enjoy yourself!"

The bird circled, dark against the hazy blue sky.

"Live till the boys come," she said softly.

He did not return to the garden. All that afternoon he lay in sight of the sea, at first in the sun's glare and then in the small patch of shade thrown on the sand by an outlying palm. The small waves rolled in and cast down their nets of lace and were gone; a thousand of them, or a hundred thousand, or a million. Jenny came and rested beside him for a time. They did not speak to each other. Out of the corner of an eye he could see her arm, and if he listened carefully he could pick her breathing out from the soft unending suspiration of the waves; but that was all. When he

was aware of her getting up and heard her feet scuffing the sand as she went away, he was glad. There was all the rest of the island. Learning to live, one was alone—learning to live after so long. It did not matter whether it was worth it or not.

After so many years of unremitting usefulness it was easier to do what one was supposed to do, even here on the island. And it must be this that was intended, even though he could not think why it should be.

The silence that had come between them was barely broken by the meal they had together; they exchanged the brief necessary words, with no communion either of affection or resentment. She got up from the table before he did and later, standing in front of the hut, he saw her down on the beach. She was walking by the very edge of the sea, occasionally letting the water break round her ankles. She walked slowly, preoccupied. The casualness of his own vision startled him; it was as though this were an everyday thing, as though the world had slipped from wonder into the commonplace, the blessed commonplace. That much was gained; to that extent he had begun to be alive. For Jenny he felt a rising of love: let it be the same for her, even for so short a time.

He stayed up very late, watching the half moon that scored the sea with light. Jenny came back, and said "Good night" and went on into the hut. He followed her there at last. It was natural, after all, to sleep under a roof.

THEY REMAINED apart all the third day. He found the raft that someone had made, and the spears, and he went fishing. For a moment, as the raft drifted out from the shore, he felt afraid because he had provided no means of bringing it back. Then he realized that the shore was, of course, well within swimming distance. Thinking of it, he knew, too, that there had been guilt along with the fear, a guilt of desertion. Not for Jenny, or the boys, but for the City. He thought sadly: no, it isn't long enough. You don't get away as easy as that. He tried to concentrate on fishing, but he had no skill at it and caught nothing. In time another current pulled the raft in to shore. He pulled it high up, under the trees. Someone else might want it.

He spent the afternoon wandering through the brush that covered the base of the island's hill. He remembered being told once—it might be five years ago—that there were lizards, and it began to seem important that he should see one, if possible touch it, hold that cool throbbing smallness within his hands.

He only gave up hunting at the approach of sunset. Jenny was sitting outside the hut, on one of the roughly made wooden chairs. There was a second chair beside her, and he sat down in it.

"I've been hunting lizards," he said. "Didn't find any. Did you see any?"

She shook her head.

"I remember, it was Leon Corter told me he saw lizards. I suppose they might have died out."

"Why should they?"

The silence between them that followed was different now. After a while he broke it.

"It should have been better. I should have made it better. I'm sorry, honey."

"No one's fault."

They watched the sun slide over the edge of the world.

Jenny said: "When we put that request in—to let the boys come in place of us—I hoped they would turn it down." She marvelled at herself. "I didn't really want them to have it—our own kids."

"Neither did I. But it doesn't matter. They couldn't have granted it."

"Why two?," she said angrily. "Why break up a family that way?"

"Why three days? You know how it is: there's only enough power to spare for the boat, and the boat won't take more than two."

"Then why anything?"

He said slowly: "I've been wondering about that."

"What does it amount to? Three days of misery, three days of learning to look at things again, learning to be human . . . three days, and then . . . You don't think they're going to be pleasant, do you—the next few weeks?"

"Weeks? Months, years. Less than a month before we came I woke up crying, from dreaming about home, from remembering." He nodded towards the rosy sunless horizon. "We're only half-seeing things now. But we'll see that sunset as long as we live."

She asked: "Has anyone refused it, ever?"

He shook his head. "Not that I've heard."

"I wish we'd refused it. Oh, Fran, why on . . . Why do they do it? Why not just let us stay in the City, doing what we have to do? Why this? Why force us to remember? It would have been easy enough. Not enough power, even for the boat. Why didn't they do that?"

The light was being drawn from the sky. Other evenings it had seemed fantastically slow after what they had become used to; now the day fled into dusk.

He said: "How long before the boys' turn? Ten years—twelve?"

"About that."

"They could put a stop to it after the last of the old ones. Any excuse—as you said, not enough power. There's never enough power. They could say: what you've never known you don't miss."

"It wouldn't be fair."

"What's the latest figure—a thousand years? Near enough. A thousand years of the City. Better to forget things altogether."

"No!" she said quickly. There was a pause of silence between them, a silence of two people and one bird on an island. "I guess they know what they're doing. They could have warned us, though."

"No, they couldn't. We wouldn't have believed them, would we?"

She said softly: "But such pain . . ."

"Pain makes you remember," he said. "We've got to remember."

He took her arm. "It's due. Better be getting ready, old girl."

THE NEW people were both women, friends and spinsters;

(Continued on page 117)



Illustrated by Ed Emsh

THE VERY SECRET AGENT

Poor Riuku! . . . Not being a member of the human race, how was he supposed to understand what goes on in a woman's mind when the male of the same species didn't even know?

BY MARI WOLF

IN THEIR SHIP just beyond the orbit of Mars the two aliens sat looking at each other.

"No," Riuku said. "I haven't had any luck. And I can tell you right now that I'm not going to have any, and no one else is going to have any either. The Earthmen are too well shielded."

"You contacted the factory?" Nagor asked.

"Easily. It's the right one. The parking lot attendant knows there's a new weapon being produced in there. The waitress at the Jumbo Burger Grill across the street knows it. Everybody I reached knows it. But not one knows anything about what it is."

Nagor looked out through the ports of the spaceship, which didn't in the least resemble an Earth spaceship, any more than what Nagor considered sight resembled the corresponding Earth sense perception. He frowned.

"What about the research scientists? We know who some of them are. The supervisors? The technicians?"

"No," Riuku said flatly. "They're shielded. Perfectly I can't make contact with a single mind down there that has the faintest inkling of what's going on. We never should have let them develop the shield."

"Have you tried contacting everyone? What about the workers?"

"Shielded. All ten thousand of them. Of course I haven't checked all of them yet, but—"

"Do it," Nagor said grimly. "We've got to find out what that weapon is. Or else get out of this solar system."

Riuku sighed. "I'll try," he said.

SOMEONE put another dollar in the juke box, and the threemins started in on Mare Indrium Mary for the tenth time since Pete Ganley had come into the bar. "Aw shut up," he said, wishing there was some way to turn them off. Twelveten. Alice got off work at Houston's at twelve. She ought to be here by now. She would be, if it weren't Thursday. Shield boosting night for her.

Why, he asked himself irritably, couldn't those scientists figure out some way to keep the shields up longer than a week? Or else why didn't they have boosting night the same for all departments? He had to stay late every Friday and Alice every Thursday, and all the time there was Susan at home ready to jump him if he wasn't in at a reasonable time. . .

"Surprised, Pete?" Alice Hendricks said at his elbow.

He swung about, grinned at her. "Am I? You said it. And here I was about to go. I never thought you'd make it before one." His grin faded a little. "How'd you do it? Sweet-talk one of the guards into letting you in at the head of the line?"

She shook her bandanaed head, slid onto the stool beside him and crossed her knees—a not very convincing sign of femininity in a woman wearing baggy denim coveralls. "Aren't you going to buy me a drink, honey?"

"Oh, sure." He glanced over at the bartender. "Another beer. No, make it two." He pulled the five dollars out of his pocket, shoved it across the bar, and looked back at

Alice, more closely this time. The ID badge, pinned to her hip. The badge, with her name, number, department, and picture—and the little meter that measured the strength of her Mind Shield.

The dial should have pointed to full charge. It didn't. It registered about seventy per cent loss.

Alice followed his gaze. She giggled. "It was easy," she said. "The guards don't do more than glance at us, you know. And everyone who's supposed to go through Shielding on Thursday has the department number stamped on a yellow background. So all I did was make a red background, like yours, and slip it on in the restroom at Clean-up time."

"But Alice. . ." Pete Ganley swallowed his beer and signaled for another. "This is serious. You've got to keep the shields up. The enemy is everywhere. Why, right now, one could be probing you."

"So what? The dial isn't down to Danger yet. And tomorrow I'll just put the red tag back on over the yellow one and go through Shielding in the same line with you. They won't notice." She giggled again. "I thought it was smart, Petey. You oughta think so too. You know why I did it, don't you?"

Her round, smooth face looked up at him, wide-eyed and full-lipped. She had no worry wrinkles like Susan's, no mouth pulled down at the corners like Susan's, and under that shapeless coverall. . .

"Sure, baby, I'm glad you did it," Pete Ganley said huskily.

Riuku was glad too, the next afternoon when the swing shift started pouring through the gates.

It was easy, once he'd found her.

He had tested hundreds, all shielded, some almost accessible to him, but none vulnerable enough. Then this one came. The shield was so far down that contact was almost easy. Painful, tiring, but not really difficult. He could feel her momentary sense of alarm, of nausea, and then he was through, integrated with her, his thoughts at home with her thoughts.

He rested, inside her mind.

"Oh, hi, Joan. No, I'm all right. Just a little dizzy for a moment. A hangover? Of course not. Not on a Friday."

Riuku listened to her half of the conversation. Stupid Earthman. If only she'd start thinking about the job. Or if only his contact with her were better. If he could use her sense perceptions, see through her eyes, hear through her ears, feel through her fingers, then everything would be easy. But he couldn't. All he could do was read her thoughts. Earth thoughts at that. . .

. . . *The time clock. Where's my card? Oh, here it is. Only 3:57. Why did I have to hurry so? I had lots of time. . .*

"Why, Mary, how nice you look today. That's a new hairdo, isn't it? A permanent? Yeah, what kind?"

. . . *What a microbe! Looks like pink straw, her hair does, and of course she thinks it's beautiful. . .*

"I'd better get down to my station. Old Liverlips will be ranting again. You oughta be glad you have Eddie for a lead man. Eddie's cute. So's Dave, over in 77. But Liverlips, ugh. . ."

She was walking down the aisle to her station now. A procession of names: *Maisie, and Edith, and that*

fat slob Natalie, and if Jean Andrews comes around tonight flashing that diamond in my face again, I'll—I'll kill her. . .

"Oh hello, Clinton. What do you mean, late? The whistle just blew. Of course I'm ready to go to work." *Liverlips, that's what you are. And still in that same blue shirt. What a wife you must have. Probably as sloppy as you are. . .*

Good, Riuku thought. Now she'll be working. Now he'd find out whatever it was she was doing. Not that it would be important, of course, but let him learn what her job was, and what those other girls' jobs were, and in a little while he'd have all the data he needed. Maybe even before the shift ended tonight, before she went through the Shielding boost.

He shivered a little, thinking of the boost. He'd survive it, of course. He'd be too well integrated with her by then. But it was nothing to look forward to.

Still, he needn't worry about it. He had the whole shift to find out what the weapon was. The whole shift, here inside Alice's mind, inside the most closely guarded factory on or under or above the surface of the Earth. He settled down and waited, expectantly.

Alice Hendricks turned her back on the lead man and looked down the work table to her place. The other girls were there already. Lois and Marge and Coralie, the other three members of the Plug table, Line 73.

"Hey, how'd you make out?" Marge said. She glanced around to make sure none of the lead men or timekeepers were close enough to overhear her, then went on. "Did

you get away with it?"

"Sure," Alice said. "And you should of seen Pete's face when I walked in."

She took the soldering iron out of her locker, plugged it in, and reached out for the pan of 731 wires. "You know, it's funny. Pete's not so good looking, and he's sort of a careless dresser and all that, but oh, what he does to me." She filled the 731 plug with solder and reached for the white, black, red wire.

"You'd better watch out," Lois said. "Or Susan's going to be doing something to you."

"Oh, her." Alice touched the tip of the iron to the solder filled pin, worked the wire down into position. "What can she do? Pete doesn't give a damn about her."

"He's still living with her, isn't he?" Lois said.

Alice shrugged. . . *What a mealy-mouthed little snip Lois could be, sometimes. You'd think to hear her that she was better than any of them, and luckier too, with her Joe and the kids. What a laugh! Joe was probably the only guy who'd ever looked at her, and she'd hooked him right out of school, and now with three kids in five years and her working nights. . .*

Alice finished soldering the first row of wires in the plug and started in on the second. So old Liverlips thought she wasted time, did he? Well, she'd show him. She'd get out her sixteen plugs tonight.

"Junior kept me up all night last night," Lois said. "He's cutting a tooth."

"Yeah," Coralie said. "It's pretty rough at that age. I remember right after Mike was born. . ."

Don't they ever think of anything but their kids? Alice thought. She stopped listening to them. She heard Pete's voice again, husky and sending little chills all through her, and his face came between her and the plug and the white green wire she was soldering. His face, with those blue eyes that went right through a girl and that little scar that quirked up the corner of his mouth. . .

"Oh oh," Alice said suddenly. "I've got solder on the outside of the pin." She looked around for the alcohol.

Riuku probed. Her thoughts were easy enough to read, but just try to translate them into anything useful. . . He probed deeper. The plugs she was soldering. He could get a good picture of them, of the wires, of the harness lacing that Coralie was doing. But it meant nothing. They could be making anything. Radios, monitor units, sound equipment.

Only they weren't. They were making a weapon, and this bit of electronic equipment was part of that weapon. What part? What did the 731 plug do?

Alice Hendricks didn't know. Alice Hendricks didn't care.

The first break. Ten minutes away from work. Alice was walking back along the aisle that separated Assembly from the men's Machine Shop. A chance, perhaps. She was looking at the machines, or rather past them, at the men.

"Hello, Tommy. How's the love life?" He's not bad at all. Real cute. Though not like Pete, oh no.

The machines. Riuku prodded at her thoughts, wishing he could influence them, wishing that just for

a moment he could see, hear, feel, *think* as she would never think.

The machines were—machines. That big funny one where Ned works, and Tommy's spot welder, and over in the corner where the superintendent is—he's a snappy dresser, tie and everything.

The corner. Restricted area. Can't go over. High voltage or something. . .

Her thoughts slid away from the restricted area. Should she go out for lunch or eat off the sandwich machine? And Riuku curled inside her mind and cursed her with his rapidly growing Earthwoman's vocabulary.

At the end of the shift he had learned nothing. Nothing about the weapon, that is. He had found out a good deal about the sex life of Genus Homo—information that made him even more glad than before that his was a one-sexed race.

WITH WORK over and tools put away and Alice in the restroom gleefully thinking about the red Friday night tag she was slipping onto her ID badge, he was as far from success as ever. For a moment he considered leaving her, looking for another subject. But he'd probably not be able to find one. No, the only thing to do was stay with her, curl deep in her mind and go through the Shielding boost, and later on. . .

The line. Alice's nervousness. . . *Oh, oh, there's that guy with the meter—the one from maintenance. What's he want?*

"Whaddya mean, my shield's low? How could it be?" . . . *If he checks the tag I'll be fired for sure.*

It's a lot of nonsense anyway. The enemy is everywhere, they keep telling us. Whoever saw one of them? "No, honest, I didn't notice anything. Can I help it if. . . It's okay, huh? It'll pass. . ."

Down to fifteen per cent, the guy said. Well, that's safe, I guess. Whew.

"Oh, hello, Paula. Whatcha talking about, what am I doing here tonight? Shut up. . ."

And then, in the midst of her thoughts, the pain, driving deep into Riuku, twisting at him, wrenching at him, until there was no consciousness of anything at all.

He struggled back. He was confused, and there was blankness around him, and for a moment he thought he'd lost contact altogether. Then he came into focus again. Alice's thoughts were clearer than ever suddenly. He could feel her emotions; they were a part of him now. He smiled. The Shielding boost had helped him. Integration—much more complete integration than he had ever known before.

"But Pete, honey," Alice said. "What did you come over to the gate for? You shouldn't of done it."

"Why not? I wanted to see you."

"What if one of Susan's pals sees us?"

"So what? I'm getting tired of checking in every night, like a baby. Besides, one of her pals did see us, last night, at the bar."

Fear. What'll she do? Susan's a hellcat. I know she is. But maybe Pete'll get really sick and tired of her. He looks it. He looks mad. I'd sure hate to have him mad at me. . .

"Let's go for a spin, baby. Out in

the suburbs somewhere. How about it?"

"Well—why sure, Pete. . ."

Sitting beside him in the copter. *All alone up here. Real romantic, like something on the video. But I shouldn't with him married, and all that. It's not right. But it's different, with Susan such a mean thing. Poor Petey. . .*

Riuku prodded. He found it so much easier since the Shielding boost. If only these Earthmen were more telepathic, so that they could be controlled directly. Still, perhaps with this new integration he could accomplish the same results. He prodded again.

"Pete," Alice said suddenly. "What are we working on, anyway?"

"What do you mean, working on?" He frowned at her.

"At the plant. All I ever do is sit there soldering plugs, and no one ever tells me what for."

"Course not. You're not supposed to talk about any part of the job except your own. You know that. The slip of a lip—"

"Can cost Earth a ship. I know. Quit spouting poster talk at me, Pete Ganley. The enemy isn't even human. And there aren't any around here."

Pete looked over at her. She was pouting, the upper lip drawn under the lower. Someone must have told her that was cute. Well, so what—it was cute.

"What makes you think I know anything more than you do?" he said.

"Well, gee." She looked up at him, so near to her in the moonlight that she wondered why she wanted to talk about the plant any-

way. "You're in Final Assembly, aren't you? You check the whatsits before they go out."

"Sure," he said. No harm in telling her. No spies now, not in this kind of war. Besides, she was too dumb to know anything.

"It's a simple enough gadget," Pete Ganley said. "A new type of force field weapon that the enemy can't spot until it hits them. They don't even know there's an Earth ship within a million miles, until *Bingo!* . . ."

She drank it in, and in her mind Riuku did too. Wonderful integration, wonderful. Partial thought control. And now, he'd learn the secret. . .

"You really want to know how it works?" Pete Ganley said. When she nodded he couldn't help grinning. "Well, it's analogous to the field set up by animal neurones, in a way. You've just got to damp that field, and not only damp it but blot it out, so that the frequency shows nothing at all there, and then—well, that's where those Corcoran assemblies you're soldering on come in. You produce the field. . ."

Alice Hendricks listened. For some reason she wanted to listen. She was really curious about the field. But, gee, how did he expect her to understand all that stuff? He sounded like her algebra teacher, or was it chemistry. Lord, how she'd hated school. Maybe she shouldn't of quit.

. . . *Corcoran fields. E and IR and nine-space something or other. She'd never seen Pete like this before. He looked real different. Sort of like a professor, or something. He must be real smart. And so—well, not good-looking especially*

but, well, appealing. Real SA, he had. . .

"So that's how it works," Pete Ganley said. "Quite a weapon, against them. It wouldn't work on a human being, of course." She was staring at him dreamy-eyed. He laughed. "Silly, I bet you haven't understood a word I said."

"I have too."

"Liar." He locked the automatic pilot on the copter and held out his arms. "Come here, you."

"Oh, Petey. . ."

Who cared about the weapon? He was right, even if she wouldn't admit it. She hadn't even listened, hardly. She hadn't understood.

And neither had Riuku.

Riuku waited until she'd fallen soundly asleep that night before he tried contacting Nagor. He'd learned nothing useful. He'd picked up nothing in her mind except more thoughts of Pete, and gee, maybe someday they'd get married, if he only had guts enough to tell Susan where to get off. . .

But she was asleep at last. Riuku was free enough of her thoughts to break contact, partially of course, since if he broke it completely he wouldn't be able to get back through the Shielding. It was hard enough to reach out through it. He sent a painful probing feeler out into space, to the spot where Nagor and the others waited for his report.

"Nagor. . ."

"Riuku? Is that you?"

"Yes. I've got a contact. A girl. But I haven't learned anything yet that can help us."

"Louder, Riuku. I can hardly hear you. . ."

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Alice Hendricks stirred in her sleep. The dream images slipped through her subconscious, almost waking her, beating against Riuku.

Pete, baby, you shouldn't be like that. . .

Riuku cursed the bisexual species in their own language.

"Riuku!" Nagor's call was harsh, urgent. "You've got to find out. We haven't much time. We lost three more ships today, and there wasn't a sign of danger. No Earthman nearby, no force fields, nothing. You've got to find out why."

Those ships just disappeared.

Riuku forced his way up through the erotic dreams of Alice Hendricks. "I know a little," he said. "They damp their thought waves somehow, and keep us from spotting the Corcoran field."

"Corcoran field? What's that?"

"I don't know." Alice's thoughts washed over him, pulling him back into complete integration, away from Nagor, into a medley of heroic Petes with gleaming eyes and clutching hands and good little Alices pushing them away—for the moment.

"But surely you can find out through the girl," Nagor insisted from far away, almost out of phase altogether.

"No, Pete!" Alice Hendricks said aloud.

"Riuku, you're the only one of us with any possible sort of contact. You've got to find out, if we're to stay here at all."

"Well," Alice Hendricks thought, "maybe. . ."

Riuku cursed her again, in the lingua franca of a dozen systems. Nagor's voice faded. Riuku switched back to English.

SATURDAY. Into the plant at 3:58. Jean's diamond again. . . *Wish it would choke her; she's got a horsey enough face for it to. Where's old Liverlips? Don't see him around. Might as well go to the restroom for a while. . .*

That's it, Riuku thought. Get her over past the machine shop, over by that Restricted Area. There must be something there we can go on. . .

"Hello, Tommy," Alice Hendricks said. "How's the love life?"

"It could be better if someone I know would, uh, cooperate. . ."

She looked past him, toward the corner where the big panels were with all the dials and the meters and the chart that was almost like the kind they drew pictures of earthquakes on. What was it for, anyway? And why couldn't anyone go over to it except those longhairs? High voltage her foot. . .

"What're you looking at, Alice?" Tommy said.

"Oh, that." She pointed. "Wonder what it's for? It doesn't look like much of anything, really."

"I wouldn't know. I've got something better to look at."

"Oh, you!"

Compared to Pete, he didn't have anything, not anything at all.

. . . *Pete. Gee, he must of got home awful late last night. Wonder what Susan said to him. Why does he keep taking her lip, anyway?*

Riuku waited. He prodded. He understood the Restricted Area as she understood it—which was not at all. He found out some things about the 731 plugs—that a lot of them were real crummy ones the fool day shift girls had set up wrong, and besides she'd rather

solder on the 717's any day. He got her talking about the weapon again, and he found out what the other girls thought about it.

Nothing.

Except where else could you get twelve-fifty an hour soldering?

She was stretched out on the couch in the restroom lobby taking a short nap—on company time, old Liverlips being tied up with the new girls down at the other end of the line—when Riuku finally managed to call Nagor again.

"Have you found out anything, Riuku?"

"Not yet."

Silence. Then: "We've lost another ship. Maybe you'd better turn her loose and come on back. It looks as if we'll have to run for it, after all."

Defeat. The long, interstellar search for another race, a race less technologically advanced than this one, and all because of a stupid Earth female.

"Not yet, Nagor," he said. "Her boy friend knows. I'll find out. I'll make her listen to him."

"Well," Nagor said doubtfully. "All right. But hurry. We haven't much time at all."

"I'll hurry," Riuku promised. "I'll be back with you tonight."

That night after work Pete Ganley was waiting outside the gate again. Alice spotted his copter right away, even though he had the lights turned way down.

"Gee, Pete, I didn't think. . ."

"Get in. Quick."

"What's the matter?" She climbed in beside him. He didn't answer until the copter had lifted itself into the air, away from the factory landing lots and the bright

overhead lights and the home-bound workers.

"It's Susan, who else," he said grimly. "She was really sounding off today. She kept saying she had a lot of evidence and I'd better be careful. And, well, I sure didn't want you turning up at the bar tonight of all nights."

He didn't sound like Pete.

"Why?" Alice said. "Are you afraid she'll divorce you?"

"Oh, Alice, you're as bad as—look, baby, don't you see? It would be awful for you. All the publicity, the things she'd call you, maybe even in the papers. . ."

He was staring straight ahead, his hands locked about the controls. He was sort of—well, distant. Not her Petey any more. Someone else's Pete. Susan's Pete. . .

"I think we should be more careful," he said.

Riuku twisted his way through her thoughts, tried to push them down. . . *Does he love me, he's got to love me, sure he does, he just doesn't want me to get hurt. . .*

And far away, almost completely out of phase, Nagor's call. "Riuku, another ship's gone. You'd better come back. Bring what you've learned so far and we can withdraw from the system and maybe piece it together. . ."

"In a little while. Just a little while." Stop thinking about Susan, you biological schizo. Change the subject. You'll never get anything out of that man by having hysterics. . .

"I suppose," Alice cried bitterly, "you've been leading me on all the time. You don't love me. You'd rather have *her!*"

"That's not so. Hell, baby. . ."

He's angry. He's not even going to kiss me. I'm just cutting my own throat when I act like that. . .

"Okay, Pete. I'm sorry. I know it's tough on you. Let's have a drink, okay? Still got some in the glove compartment?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

She poured two drinks, neat, and he swallowed his with one impatient gulp. She poured him another.

RIUKU prodded. The drink made his job easier. Alice's thoughts calmed, swirled away from Susan and what am I going to do and why didn't I pick up with some single guy, anyway? A single guy, like Tommy maybe. Tommy and his spot welder, over there by the Restricted Area. The Restricted Area. . .

"Pete."

"Yeah, baby?"

"How come they let so much voltage loose in the plant, so we can't even go over in the Restricted Area?"

"Whatever made you think of that?" He laughed suddenly. He turned to her, still laughing. He was the old Pete again, she thought, with his face happy and his mouth quirked up at the corner. "Voltage loose . . . oh, baby, baby. Don't you know what that is?"

"No. What?"

"That's the control panel for one of the weapons, silly. It's only a duplicate, actually—a monitor station. But it's tuned to the frequencies of all the ships in this sector and—"

She listened. She wanted to listen. She had to want to listen, now.

"Nagor, I'm getting it," Riuku

called. "I'll bring it all back with me. Just a minute and I'll have it."

"How does it work, honey?" Alice Hendricks said.

"You really want to know? Okay. Now the Corcoran field is generated between the ships and areas like that one, only a lot more powerful, by—"

"It's coming through now, Nagor."

"—a very simple power source, once you get the basics of it. You—oh, oh!" He grabbed her arm. "Duck, Alice!"

A spotlight flashed out of the darkness, turned on them, outlined them. A siren whirred briefly, and then another copter pulled up beside them and a loudspeaker blared tinnily.

"Okay, bud, pull down to the landing lane."

The police.

Police. Fear, all the way through Alice's thoughts, all the way through Riuku. Police. Earth law. That meant—it must mean he'd been discovered, that they had some other means of protection besides the Shielding. . .

"Nagor! I've been discovered!"

"Come away then, you fool!"

He twisted, trying to pull free of Alice's fear, away from the integration of their separate terrors. But he couldn't push her thoughts back from his. She was too frightened. He was too frightened. The bond held.

"Oh, Pete, Pete, what did you do?"

He didn't answer. He landed the copter, stepped out of it, walked back to the other copter that was just dropping down behind him. "But officer, what's the matter?"

Alice Hendricks huddled down in the seat, already seeing tomorrow's papers, and her picture, and she wasn't really photogenic, either . . . And then, from the other copter, she heard the woman laugh.

"Pete Ganley, you fall for anything, don't you?"

"Susan!"

"You didn't expect me to follow you, did you? Didn't it ever occur to you that detectives could put a bug in your copter? My, what we've been hearing!"

"Yeah," the detective who was driving said. "And those pictures we took last night weren't bad either."

"Susan, I can explain everything. . ."

"I'm sure you can, Pete. You always try. But as for you—you little—"

Alice ducked down away from her. Pictures. Oh God, what it would make her look like. Still, this hag with the pinched up face who couldn't hold a man with all the cosmetics in the drugstore to camouflage her—she had her nerve, yelling like that.

"Yeah, and I know a lot about you too!" Alice Hendricks cried.

"Why, let me get my hands on you. . ."

"Riuku!"

Riuku prodded. Calm down, you fool. You're not gaining anything this way. Calm down, so I can get out of here. . .

Alice Hendricks stopped yelling abruptly.

"That's better," Susan said. "Pete, your taste in women gets worse each time. I don't know why I always take you back."

"I can explain everything."

"Oh, Pete," Alice Hendricks whispered. "Petey, you're not—"

"Sure he is," Susan Ganley said. "He's coming with me. The nice detectives will take you home, dear. But I don't think you'd better try anything with them—they're not your type. They're single."

"Pete. . ." But he wouldn't meet Alice's eyes. And when Susan took his arm, he followed her.

"How could you do it, Petey. . ." Numb whispers, numb thoughts, over and over, but no longer frightened, no longer binding on Riuku.

Fools, he thought. Idiomatic Earthmen. If it weren't for your ridiculous reproductive habits I'd have found out everything. As it is. . . "Nagor, I'm coming! I didn't get anything. This woman—"

"Well, come on then. We're leaving. Right now. There'll be other systems."

Petey, Petey, Petey. . .

Contact thinned as he reached out away from her, toward Nagor, toward the ship. He fought his way out through the Shielding, away from her and her thoughts and every detestable thing about her. Break free, break free. . .

"What's the matter, Riuku? Why don't you come? Have the police caught you?"

The others were fleeing, getting farther away even as he listened to Nagor's call. Contact was hard to maintain now; he could feel communication fading.

"Riuku, if you don't come now. . ."

He fought, but Alice's thoughts were still with him; Alice's tears still kept bringing him back into full awareness of her.

"Riuku!"

"I—I can't!"

The Shielding boost, that had integrated him so completely with Alice Hendricks, would never let him go.

"Oh, Petey, I've lost you. . ."

And Nagor's sad farewell slipped completely out of phase, leaving him alone, with her.

The plant. The Restricted Area.

The useless secret of Earth's now unneeded weapon. Alice Hendricks glancing past it, at the spot welding machine, at Tommy.

"How's the love life?"

"You really interested in finding out, Alice?"

"Well—maybe—"

And Riuku gibbered unheard in her mind. . . .

WORTH CITING

THE WASTE of organic material when garbage is burned or dumped into the seas and rivers has long been a sore point with chemists. They insisted that a way should be found to convert garbage into topsoil and so feed valuable materials back to the land.

Now, Bernard Haldane, member of the faculty at Wagner College on Staten Island, New York City, has demonstrated equipment that does the trick; and does it automatically and simply and cheaply. The garbage is dumped into the topmost of a series of tanks, is ground up (tin cans and bottles included), inoculated with bacteria, then mixed and aerated by being turned over. It then flows by gravity to lower tanks as the bacteria multiply and digest it at ever increasing temperatures. In the lowest tank the heat is high enough to kill disease-causing bacteria. The loamy end-product, which is an excellent topsoil and smells like good earth after a rain, can be removed through a trap door in the lowest tank. The entire process completely does away with hand labor.

Any big city—such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc.—could deal with its garbage in this new way for less than \$1.50 a ton. In New York City it would mean an annual saving of \$5,000,000. Equipment for incineration costs approximately \$485,000, while digestion and conversion equipment for the same amount of garbage disposal would cost about one-half that amount.

Our Citation this month goes to Mr. Haldane for solving not one but two economic problems of today's civilization: Economical garbage disposal, which has always been a headache in congested areas all over America, and the return to the soil of valuable organic materials which may help to lick the problem of soil erosion and enervation now going on.

VACATION *(Continued from page 103)*

they knew them slightly. There was the same nervousness, the same forced jokes.

"How's the City?"

"Still spreading. The coconuts ripe?"

"Watch out for sharks."

They were glad when the transfer had been made, when it was time to go.

There was no moon yet, but all the stars, and the dim water lapping round them.

She said, her voice sharp: "It's funny no one ever rebels, refuses to go back."

He was attending to the controls. "We're hand-picked, remember? And what good would it do?"

"No good." She turned away. "I've finished looking."

He thrust the control forward.

The jets began to hammer against the glassy sea; the boat shivered and lifted.

The island had remained green only because it was poised mid-way between the two great continents. It was several seconds before they were high enough to see them—Africa and America, burning, burning, and beyond them Europe and Asia and Australasia, all burning. A scarlet glow of death.

Ahead of them lay the City, in the lip of Tycho's crater on the barren sheltering Moon. . . .

FOR EVERY MAN A REASON *(Continued from page 29)*

"I just wanted to be alone to die."

Now it was the enemy agent's turn to speak bitterly. "Then you planned it all along. You led our men on, pretending you were going to aid us while you were in our midst learning everything about us to destroy us.

"You finally found the method, God knows where you dug up that fiendish idea of sulphuric gas, but you planned and watched. I'll never know how you were so lucky—and it was pure luck, but you did it. You destroyed our base."

With a smile, "Yes, I was lucky, I had a chance to end my life in a final battle and victory. That's all a man can ask for."

Aron was still smiling when the blast of the Intelligence man's gun blew his head off.

As he left the station, all the agent could think of was one phrase he had heard many times jokingly; but now it became a grim accompaniment for his footsteps. Though he didn't want to hear it, it kept whispering through his mind every few seconds.

"Live fast, fight hard, die young—and have a radiation-rotted corpse."

Two hours later the United Empire fleet landed on Kligor. They came to claim the sixty ships lying waiting—waiting—in the peaceful valley that was still tainted with the smell of chlorine. . . .



Chemical firms of the future may "employ" microbes as helpers. Laboratory research has shown that if the lakes in the hot desert could be contaminated with the right kind of sewage or "broth" and stocked with specially cultivated sulphur producing bacteria the process of building up sulphur deposits could be speeded up to six times faster than it takes to do it naturally. With such a system in full swing, large scale sulphur production would be an accomplished fact.

The "weather makers" predicted for tomorrow's generations may need no more than common table salt to provide rain when necessary. Intensive studies have indicated that there is a strong possibility that natural salt particles in the air are the rain-making agents. Tests are now going on to determine whether clouds seeded with salt will actually produce precipitation.

The relationship of light to life has long been known, but recent discoveries point to it as becoming the key to farm crop control. The correct use and management of radiant energy in the interest of better crops and better market timing has already proved of considerable

worth. Electric lights and a home generator may soon be as important to the farmer of the future as the seeds and fertilizer.

The Antarctic continent, where the edges haven't been completely mapped and the interior is unknown and unexplored, may be the "last frontier" for the pioneers of the next twenty years. At least one expedition is being planned for 1959 or 1960; and a bill to finance it has already been introduced to Congress.

The automobile driver on the highways of tomorrow very likely will find that all cars are two-tone, and of only two colors—blue and yellow. Studies by traffic and safety engineers have proved that the accident rate could be greatly reduced if this idea were to be adopted. These two colors are more visible against varying backgrounds than any others. The darker blue is good for daylight and fog conditions; and the yellow is the color most readily seen at night.

Plastic pillows filled with helium and joined together to make a mile-high floating dome may "weather condition" communities of the future. Such a dome covering would provide year-round sub-tropical weather without rain or bugs. The sun's light and heat would penetrate (with harmful rays filtered out), and rain pouring off the edges would be caught to provide a pure water supply for all purposes.

Fishing with electricity may revolutionize the commercial fishing industry. Scientists in Germany and Russia have shown that almost all types of food fish can be attracted by electric currents out in the open sea. American trawlers, equipped with electricity producing gadgets and, nets are now conducting trials to test and measure the catches against pre-electric fishing.

Harvesting cattails may some day be a profitable business for farmers who own a piece of swamp land. Nearly a dozen by-products of this "weed" have been found in recent laboratory research. The root can be eaten "as is", or dried and ground into a flour for baking. The flour can also be fermented to produce ethyl alcohol for anti-freeze, medicinal purposes, and as an industrial solvent. The stem fibers when extracted are as useful as jute for making string, burlap, webbing, or for stuffing furniture. The seeds yield an oil very similar to linseed oil and equally as useful; and after the oils have been extracted the meal made from the seeds makes excellent cattle or chicken feed.

Ten years from now, or earlier, electricity will be commercially produced from uranium at a cost that is less than that of the coal-fueled

power now in use. The development of a new boiling reactor has proved that costs will be reduced to a total of 6.7 mills an hour in contrast with the 7.01 mills it now costs for coal powered electricity.

Surgeons of the future may have robot helpers instead of the human team they now have when they operate. A new type of electronic "brain" has been designed which instead of making computations from facts and figures fed into it, picks up its own facts from the unconscious patient's body and relays them to the surgeon. Records of blood pressure, pulse rate, breathing rate and volume of air exhaled per minute are taken continuously, and indicated in such a manner that the surgeon or anesthesiologist can interpret the situation at a glance.

New cars may be coming off the production lines a great deal faster than they do now, and they may be a good deal cheaper too. A tough new plastic has been introduced which requires only three or four weeks to be made into dies for automobile parts. The steel dies now in use need three to eight months of work before they can be used and cost thirty to seventy per cent more than the new plastic dies.

WHAT IS YOUR SCIENCE I.Q.?

ANSWERS: 1—761. 2—Both are vacuum tubes. 3—dimmiest. 4— $1/3$. 5—32. 6—Alcor. 7—photons. 8—methane. 9—eight. 10— $4/5$ ths. 11—18,000. 12—transit. 13—Mars. 14—Betelgeuse. 15—28. 16— $1/10,000$ of a second. 17—Lithium. 18—yellow. 19—Messier 31. 20—thermonuclear.

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Isaac Newton



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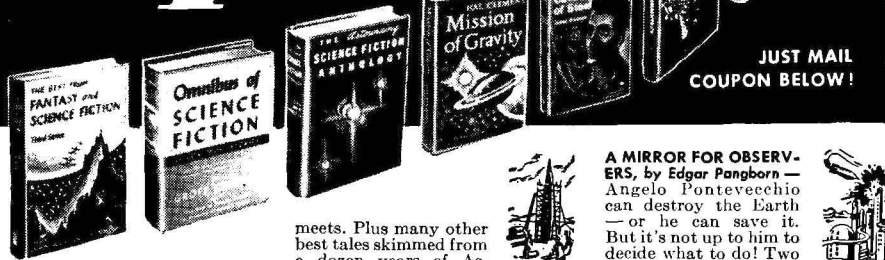
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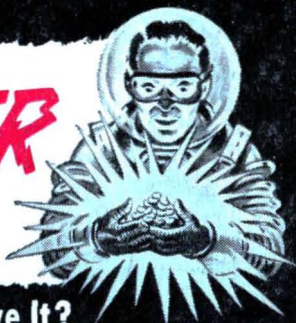
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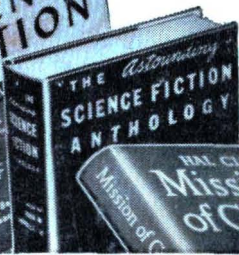
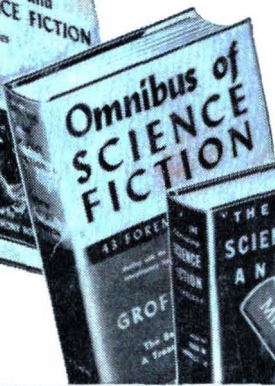
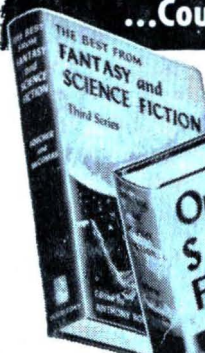
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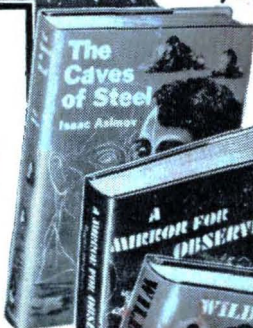
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