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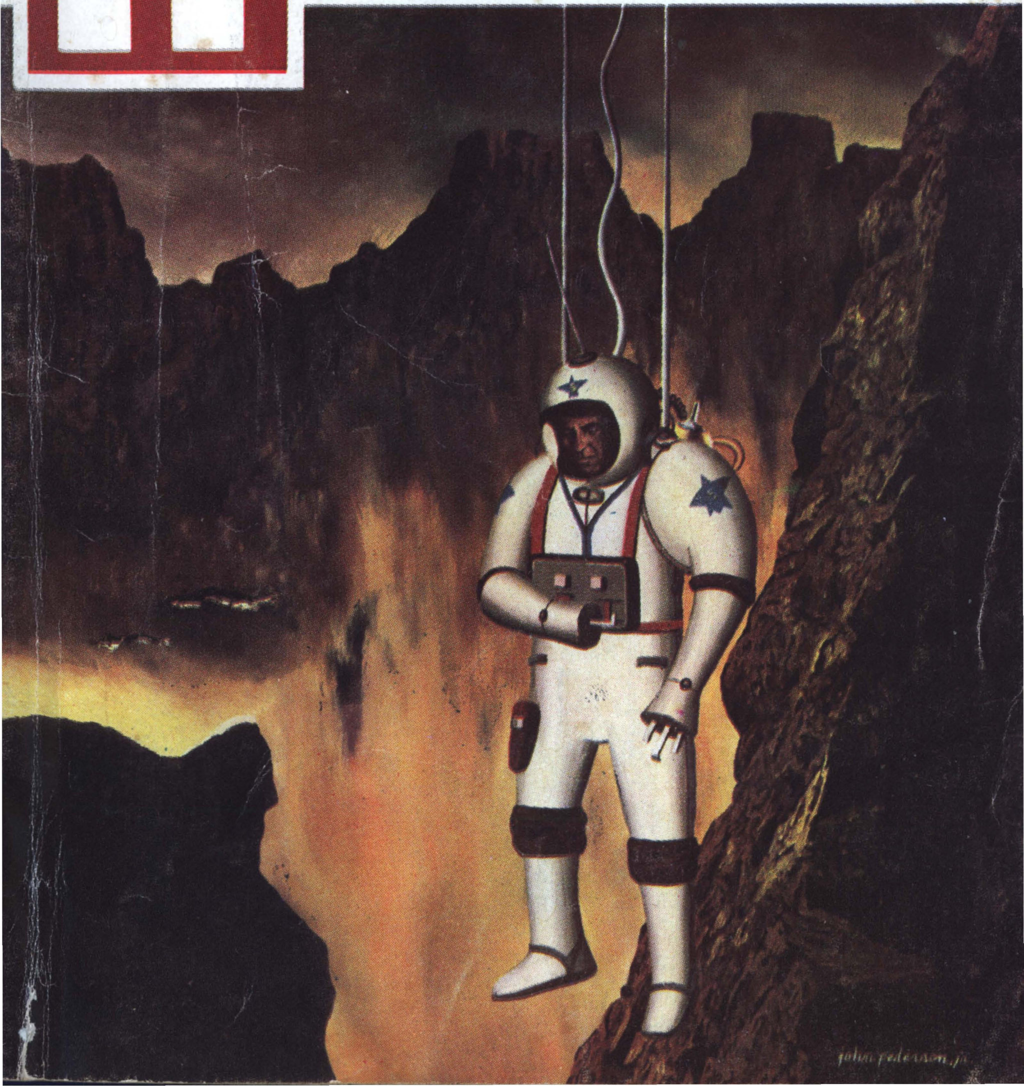
SUMMER GUESTS

by James H. Schmitz



WORLDS OF

SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER 1959

All Stories New and Complete

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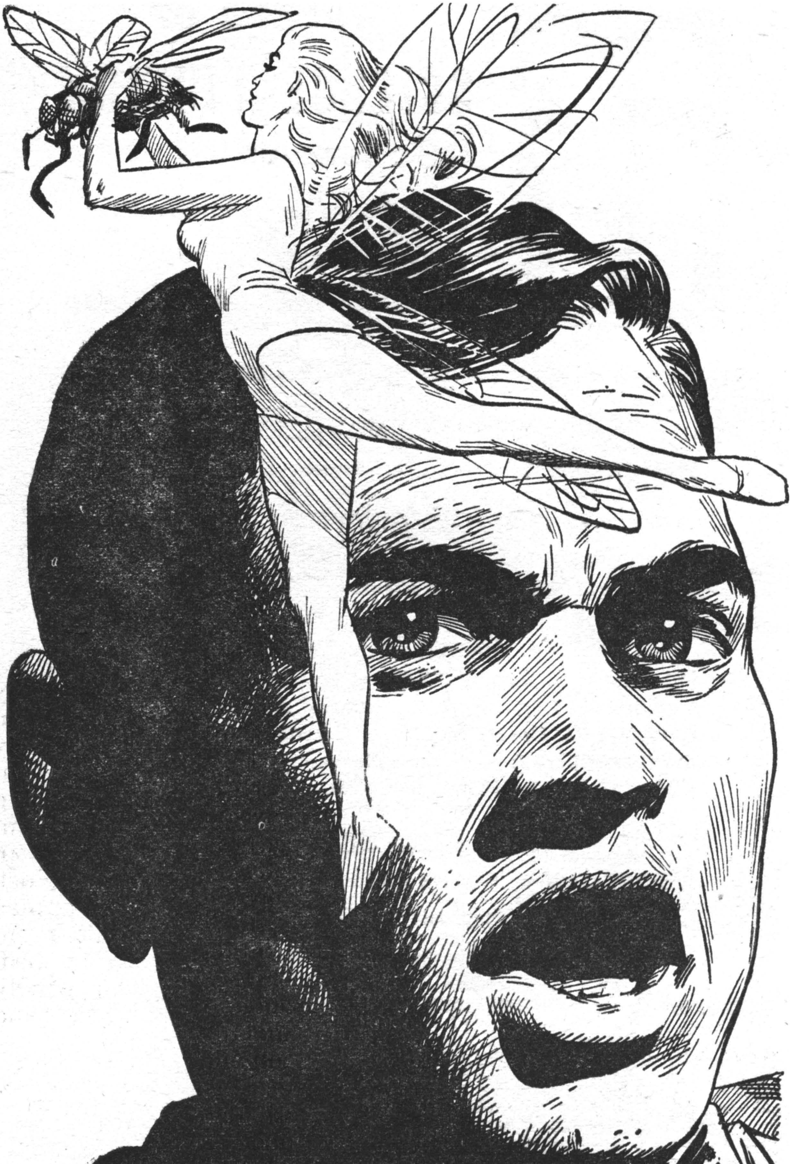

Summer Guests

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

No birds were these, and surely not of a feather, and there was no need to tell Mel by the company he kept — it told him!

ALL through that Saturday night, rain drummed down mercilessly and unseasonably on Sweetwater Beach. Thunder pealed and lightning flared. In between, Mel Armstrong heard the steady boom of the Pacific surf not a block from his snug little duplex apartment. Mel didn't mind any of it. He was in bed, slightly swacked and wholly comfortable. He dozed, and now and then woke up far enough to listen admiringly to the racket.

At nine A. M., when he opened his eyes once more, he discovered the room was full of summer sunshine. Beyond his window gleamed a cloudless sky, and only the occasional gusts of wind indicated there had been anything like a storm during the night.

An exceptionally beautiful Sunday morning—made more beautiful, perhaps, by the fact that it marked the beginning of Mel Armstrong's annual two-week paid vacation. Mel was a salesman for Marty's Fine Liquors, a wholesale house. He was twenty-eight and in fairly good shape, but his job bored him. This morning, for the first time in months, he was fully aware of that. Perhaps it was the weather. At any rate, he had a sense, almost a premonition, of new and exciting events approaching him rapidly. Events that would break down the boundaries of his present humdrum existence and pitch him into the life of romantic adventure that, somehow, he seemed to have missed so far . . .

Recognizing this as a daydream, but unwilling to give it up completely, Mel breakfasted unhurriedly in his pajamas. Then, struck by a sudden, down-to-earth suspicion, he stuck his head out of his living room window.

As he'd guessed, there were other reminders of the storm in the narrow courtyard before the window. Branches and assorted litter had blown in, including at least one soggily dismembered Sunday paper. The low rent he paid for his ground-floor apartment in the Oceanview Courts was based on an understanding with the proprietor that he and the upstairs occupant of the duplex would keep the court clean. The other five duplexes that fronted on the court were bulging with vacationing visitors from the city, which made it a real chore in summer.

Unfortunately, he couldn't count on his upstairs neighbor, a weird though rather amiable young character who called herself Maria de Guesgne. Maria went in for painting abstractions, constructing mobiles, and discussing the works of Madame Blavatsky. She avoided the indignity of manual toil.

Mel made himself decent by exchanging his pajamas for swimming trunks. Then he got a couple of brooms and a hose out of a garage back of the court and went to work.

HE'D cleared the courtyard by the time the first of the seasonal guests began to show up in their doorways, and went on to inspect another, narrower court behind his duplex, which was also his responsibility. There he discovered Maria de Guesgne propped on her elbows on her bedroom window sill, talking reproachfully to a large gray tomcat that was sitting in the court. Both turned to look at Mel.

"Good morning, Mel!" Maria said, with unusual animation. She had long black bangs which emphasized her sallow and undernourished appearance.

"Morning," Mel replied. "Scat!" he added to the cat, which belonged to somebody else in the neighborhood but was usually to be found stalking about the Oceanview Courts.

"You shouldn't frighten poor Cat," said Maria. "Mel, would you look into the bird box?"

"Bird box?"

"The one in the climbing rose," said Maria, leaning precariously from the window to point. "To your left. Cat was trying to get at it."

The bird box was a white-painted, weather-beaten little house set into a straggly rose bush that grew out of a square patch of earth beside Mel's bedroom window. The box was about ten feet above the ground.

Mel looked up at it.

"I'm sure I heard little birds peeping in it this morning!" Maria explained sentimentally.

"No bird in its senses would go into a thing like that," Mel assured her. "I don't hear anything. And besides—"

"Please, Mel! We don't want Cat to get them!"

Mel groaned, got a wobbly stepladder out of the garage and climbed up. The gray cat walked over and sat down next to the ladder to watch him.

He poked at the box and listened. No sound.

"Can't you open the top and look in?" Maria inquired.

Holding the box in one hand, Mel tentatively inserted his thumbnail into a crack under its top and pushed. The weathered wood splintered away easily.

"Don't break it!" Maria cried.

Mel put his eye to the crack he'd made. Then he gasped, jerked back, letting go of the box, teetered wildly a moment and fell over with the stepladder. The cat fled, spitting.

"Oh, my!" said Maria, apparently with some enjoyment. "Poor Mel! Are you hurt?"

Mel stood up slowly. The bright morning world seemed to be spinning gently around him, but it wasn't because of his fall. "Of course not," he said. His voice quavered somewhat.

"Oh?" said Maria. "Well, then—*are* there any little birds in the nest?"

Mel swallowed hard. "No," he said. He bent over and carefully picked up the ladder and placed it against the wall. The action made it unnecessary to look at her.

"Eggs?" she asked in a hopeful tone.

"No eggs either! No nothing!" His voice was steady again, but he had to get rid of Maria. "Well, I'll clean up this court now, I guess. Uh—maybe you'd like to come down and lend a hand?"

Maria replied promptly that she certainly would like to, but she hadn't had breakfast yet; and with that she vanished from the window.

Mel looked round stealthily. The cat was watching from the door of the garage, but no one else was in sight.

Hurriedly, he replaced the stepladder under the bird nest and climbed up again.

SETTING the box carefully down on the table in his living room, he locked the apartment door and closed the Venetian blinds. All this had been done in a sort of quiet rush, as if every second counted, which it did in a way. Mel wasn't going to believe, even for a moment, that what he thought he'd seen in that box could be really there; and he couldn't disprove it fast enough to suit him. But something warned him that he wouldn't want to have any witnesses around when he did take his second look.

Then, as he turned from the window, he heard a thin piping cry, a voice as tiny as the peeping of a mouse, coming from the table, from the box.

An instant fright reaction froze him where he stood. The sounds stopped again. There was a brief, faint rustle, like the stirring of dry parchment, and then quiet.

The rustling, he thought, must have been the wings—he'd been *sure* they had wings. Otherwise—

It could all have been an illusion, he told himself. An illusion that transformed a pair of featherless nestlings into something he still didn't want to give a name to. Color patterns of jade and pink flashed into his memory next, however, which made the bird theory shaky. Say a rather small green-and-pink snake then, or a lizard—

Except, of course, for the glassy glitter of the wings. So make it instead, Mel thought desperately, a pair of big insects, like dragonflies, only bigger . . .

He shook his head and moistened his lips. That wouldn't explain that tiny voice—and the more he tried to rationalize it all, the more scared he was getting. Assume, he took the mental jump, he really had seen the figures of two tiny, naked, green-and-pink people in there—with wings! One didn't have to drag in the supernatural to explain it. There were things like flying saucers, presumably, and probably such beings might exist on other worlds.

The thought was oddly reassuring. He still felt as if he'd locked himself in the room with things potentially in the class of tarantulas, but there was excitement and wonder coming up now. With a surge of jealous proprietorship, he realized that he didn't want to share this discovery with anybody else. Later, perhaps. Right now, it was *his* big adventure.

The room was too dim to let him distinguish anything inside the box as he had outdoors, and he was still reluctant to get his face too close to it. He gave it a gingerly rap with his knuckle and waited. No sound.

He cleared his throat. "Hello?" he said. Immediately, that seemed like an idiotic approach. Worse than that, it also brought no reaction.

For the first time, Mel had a sense of worry for the occupants of the box. There was no way of guessing how they'd got in there, but they might be sick or dying. Hurriedly he brought a lamp over to the table and tried to direct light inside, both through the round hole in its side and through the opening he'd made in the top. It wasn't very effective and produced no stir within.

With sudden decision, he shoved one hand into the opening, held the box with the other, and broke off the entire top. And there they were.

Mel stared at them a long time, his fears fading slowly. They were certainly alive! One was green, a tiny body of luminous jade, and the other was silkily human-colored, which was why he had been confused on that point. The wings could hardly be anything else, though they were very odd-looking, almost like thin, flexible glass.

He couldn't force himself to touch them. Instead, he laid a folded clean towel on the table and tilted the box very slowly over it. A series of careful tappings and shakings brought the two beings sliding gently out onto the towel.

Two delicately formed female figurines, they lay there a moment, unmoving. Then the green one passed a tiny hand over her forehead in a slow, completely human gesture, opened slanted golden eyes with startled suddenness and looked up at Mel.

He might still have thought he was dreaming, if his attention hadn't been caught just then by a detail of undreamlike realism. The other, the human-colored one, seemed to be definitely in a family way.

THEY were sitting on the folded bath towel in a square of afternoon sunlight which came in through the kitchenette window. The window was high enough up so nobody could look in from outside, and they seemed to want the warmth of the sun more than anything else. They did not appear to be sick, but they were still rather languid. It wasn't starvation, apparently. Mel had put bits of a variety of foods on a napkin before them, and he changed the samples as soon as his guests indicated they weren't interested. So far, canned sardine was the only item that had attracted them at all, and they hadn't done much more than test that.

Between moments of just marveling at them, assuring himself they were there and not an illusion, and wondering *what* they were then and where they'd come from, Mel was beginning to get worried again. For all he knew, they might suddenly die on the bath towel.

"Miss Green," he said in a very low voice—he didn't want to give Maria de Guesgne any indication he was in the house—"I wish you could tell me what you like to eat!"

Miss Green looked up at him and smiled. She was much more alert and vivacious than the other one who, perhaps because of her condition, merely sat or lay there gracefully and let Miss Green wait on her. The relationship seemed to be about that of an elf princess and her personal attendant, but they were much too real-seeming creatures to have popped out of a fairy tale, though their appearance did arouse recurrent bursts of a feeling of fairy tale unreality, which Mel hadn't known since he was ten. But, tiny as they were, Miss Green and the princess primarily gave him the impression of being quite as functional as human beings or, perhaps, as field mice.

He would have liked to inspect the brittle-seeming wings more closely. They seemed to be made up of numerous laminated, very thin sections, and he wondered whether they could fly with them or whether their race had given up or lost that ability.

But touching them might have affected their present matter-of-fact acceptance of him, and he didn't want to risk that . . .

A door banged suddenly in the apartment overhead. A moment later, he heard Maria coming down the hall stairs.

Mel stood up in sudden alarm. He'd known for some time that his neighbor had supplied herself with a key to his apartment, not to pry but with the practical purpose of borrowing from the little bar in Mel's living room when she was out of both money and liquor. She rarely took much, and until now he'd been more amused than annoyed.

HE went hurriedly into the living room, closing the door to the kitchenette behind him. If Maria knocked, he wouldn't answer. If she decided he was out and came in to steal his liquor, he would pretend to have been asleep in the chair and scare the hell out of her!

She paused before the apartment door a moment, but then went out into the court.

Mel waited until her footsteps died away, going toward the street. As he opened the door to the kitchenette, something buzzed noisily out of the living room past his shoulder—a big, unlovely looking horsefly. The apartment screens didn't fit too well, and the fly probably had been attracted by the smell of food.

Startled, he stopped to consider the new problem. There was a flyswatter hanging beside the door, but he didn't want to alarm his guests—and then, for the first time, he saw Miss Green's wings unfold!

She was up on her feet beside the princess, who remained sitting on the towel. Both of them were following the swift, erratic course of the big fly with more animation than they'd shown about anything so far.

Miss Green gave a sudden piping cry, and the glassy appendages on her back opened out suddenly like twin transparently gleaming fans, and blurred into motion too swift for Mel to follow.

Miss Green rose into the air like a tiny human helicopter, hands up before her as if she were praying.

It wasn't till the horsefly swerved from the kitchenette window and came buzzing back that Mel guessed her purpose.

There was a sharper, fiercer drone like a hornet's song as she darted sideways into the insect's path. Mel didn't see her catch it. Its buzzing simply stopped, and then she was dropping gently back to the towel, with the ugly black thing between her hands. It looked nearly as big as her head.

There was an exchange of cheerful piping cries between the two. Miss Green laughed up at Mel's stupefied face, lifted the motionless fly to her mouth and neatly bit off its head.

Mel turned hurriedly and went into the living room. It wasn't, he told himself, really so *very* different from human beings eating a chicken. But he didn't feel up to watching what he knew was going to be a dismemberment and a feast.

At any rate, the horsefly had settled the feeding problem. His guests could take care of themselves.

THAT night, Miss Green hunted down a few moths. Mel woke up twice with the sudden sharp drone in his ears that told him she had just made her catch. Both times, it was a surge of unthinking physical fright that actually roused him. Awake, and remembering the disproportion in size between himself and the huntress, his reaction seemed ridiculous; but the second time he found he was reluctant to go back to sleep until it would appear that Miss Green was done with her foraging.

So he lay awake, listening to the occasional faint indications of her continuing activity within his apartment, and to more familiar sounds without. A train rattled over a crossing; a police siren gave a sudden view halloo and faded into silence again. For a long time, there was only the whispering passage of distant cars over wet pavements, and the slow roll and thump of the surf. A haze of fog beyond the window turned the apartment into a shut-off little world of its own.

Miss Green moved about with no more than a whisper of air and the muted pipe of voices from the top of the kitchenette cupboard to show where she was. Mel had put a small carton up there, upholstered with the towel and handkerchiefs and roofed over with his best woolen sweater, to make a temporary home for his guests. The princess hadn't stirred from it since, but Miss Green remained busy.

He started suddenly to find her hovering directly over his bed, vaguely silhouetted against the pale blur of the window. As he stared, she settled down and came to rest on the blanket over his chest, effortlessly as a spider gliding down along its thread. Her wings closed with a faint snap.

Mel raised his head carefully to squint down along the blanket at her. It was the first time either of them had made anything resembling a friendly advance in his direction; he didn't want to commit any blunders.

"Hello," he said quietly.

Miss Green didn't reply. She seemed to be looking up at the window, disregarding him, and he was content to watch her. These strange creatures seemed to have some of the aloofness of cats in their manner, and they might be as easily offended.

She turned presently, walked up over the blanket and perched herself on Mel's pillow, above his head and somewhat to his right. And there she stayed silently. Which seemed catlike, too: the granting of a reserved and temporary companionship. He would not have been too surprised to hear a tiny purring from above his ear. Instead, drowsily and lulled in an odd way by Miss Green's presence, he found himself sinking back into sleep.

IT WASN'T surprising either that his mind should be filled for a time with vague pictures of her, but when the room about him seemed to have expanded into something like a faintly luminous fishbowl, he knew he was dreaming. There were others present. They were going somewhere, and he had a sense of concern, which had to do either with their destination or with difficulties in getting there. Then a realization of swift, irrevocable disaster—

There were violent lurchings as the luminosity about him faded swiftly into blackness. He felt a terrible, energy-draining cold, the wet clutch of death itself, then something like a soundless explosion about him and anguished cryings. The motion stopped.

Blackness faded back to gray, but the cold remained. Icy water was pounding down on him now, as if he were fighting his way through a vertical current, carrying somebody else. A desperate hunt for refuge—and finding it suddenly, and slipping inside and relaxing into unconsciousness, to wait for the return of warmth and life . . .

Mel's eyes opened. The room was beginning to lighten with morning. He turned his head slowly to look for Miss Green. She was still there, on the pillow beside his head, watching him; and there was something in her position, in the unwinking golden eyes, even in her curious fluff of blue-white hair, that reminded him now less of a cat than a small lizard.

He didn't doubt that she had somehow enabled him to share the experience that in part explained their presence here. Without thinking, he asked aloud, "What happened to the others?"

She didn't move, but he was aware of a surge of horrified revulsion. Then before his open eyes for a moment swam a picture of a bleak, rain-beaten beach . . . and, just above the waterline, in a cluster of harsh voices, jabbing beaks and beating wings, great gulls were tearing apart a strange jetsam of tiny bodies too weakened to escape—

A small, plaintive crying came from the kitchenette. The picture faded as Miss Green soared into the air to attend to her princess.

MEL breakfasted in the living room, thoughtfully. He couldn't quite understand that luminous vehicle of theirs, or why it should have succumbed to the rain storm of Saturday night, which appeared to be what had happened. But his guests obviously were confronted with the problem of getting back to wherever they'd come from—and he didn't think Miss Green would have confided in him if he wasn't somehow expected to be helpful in solving the problem.

There was a thump on the sill outside his bedroom window, followed by an annoyed meowing. The gray cat that had been spying on the bird box seemed to suspect he was harboring the refugees. Mel went out into the little courtyard through the back door of the duplex and chased the animal away. The fog, he saw, was thinning out quickly; in an hour or so it would be another clear day.

When he came in, Miss Green fluted a few soft notes, which Mel chose to interpret as gratitude, from the top of the cupboard and withdrew from sight again.

One couldn't think of them, he decided, as being exactly like any creatures of Earth. The cold rain had been very nearly deadly to them, if the memory Miss Green had transmitted to him was accurate—as destructive as it had been to their curious craft. Almost as if it could wash right through them, to drain vital energies from their bodies, while in the merely foggy air of last night she had seemed comfortable enough. It indicated different tolerance spans with more sharply defined limits.

The thought came into his mind:

Venus?

It seemed possible, even if it left a lot to explain. Mel got up in sudden excitement and began to walk about the room. He knew not much was known about the second planet, but he had a conviction of being right. It struck him he might be involved in an event of enormous historical significance.

Then, stopping for a moment before the window, he saw it—

Apparently high in the gray sky overhead, a pale yellow circle moved, much smaller than the sun, but like the disk of the sun seen ghostlike through clouds. Instantly, another part of his dream became clear to him.

HE LOST his head. "Miss Green! Come here, quick!"

A buzz, the swift drone of wings, and she was beside him, perching on his shoulder. Mel pointed.

She gave a lamenting little cry of recognition. As if it had been a signal, the yellow circle darted sideways in a long streaking slant, and vanished. Miss Green fled to report to the princess, while Mel stayed at the window, and quickly returned to him again. Evidently she was both excited and distressed, and he wondered what was wrong. If that apparition of pale light had been one of their vessels, as her behavior indicated, it seemed probable that its mission was to hunt for survivors of the lost globe.

Miss Green seemed either less sure of that, or less confident that the rescue would be easily effected. Some minutes later, she pointed to a different section of the sky, where the yellow circle—or another very like it—was now moving slowly about. Presently it vanished again, and when it reappeared for the second time, it was accompanied by two others.

Meanwhile, Miss Green might have been transmitting some understanding of the nature of her doubts to Mel, because the ghostly vagrants now gave him an immediate impression of insubstantiality: not space-spanning luminous globes but pictured shapes projected on the air. His theory of interplanetary travelers became suddenly much less probable.

In the next few moments, the concept he was struggling with abruptly completed itself in his mind, so abruptly, in fact, that there was no longer any question that it had originated with Miss Green. The rescue craft Mel thought he was seeing actually were just that.

But the pictures in the sky were only signals to possible survivors that help was approaching. The globes themselves were elsewhere, groping their way blindly and dangerously through strange dimensions that had nothing to do with the ones Mel knew.

And they were still, in some manner his imagination did not even attempt to clarify, very, very "far away."

"I WAS wondering what you'd done with the bird box," Maria de Guesgne explained. "It's not there in the bush any more!"

Mel told her annoyedly that the bird box had been damagd by the storm, and so he'd thrown it into the incinerator.

"Well," Maria said vaguely, "that's too bad." Her handsome dark eyes were shifting about his living room meanwhile, not at all vaguely. Mel had left the apartment door partly open, and she had walked right in on her way to the market. When she wasn't drinking or working herself up to a bout of creative painting, which seemed to put her into a tranced sort of condition, Maria was a highly observant young woman. The question was now how to get her out of the apartment again before she observed more than he wanted her to.

"How does it happen you're not at work on Monday afternoon?" she inquired, and set her shopping bag down on the armchair.

Keeping one eye on the kitchenette door, Mel explained about his vacation. Miss Green hadn't been in sight for almost an hour; but he wasn't at all sure she mightn't come out to inspect the visitor, and the thought of Maria's probable reactions was unnerving.

"Two weeks?" Maria repeated chattily. "It'll be fun having you around for two weeks—unless you're going off to spend your vacation somewhere else. Are you?"

"No," Mel said. "I'm staying here—"

And at that moment, Miss Green came in through the kitchenette door.

At least, Mel assumed it was Miss Green. All he actually saw was a faint blur of motion. It went through the living room, accompanied by a high-pitched hum, and vanished behind Maria.

"Good Lord!" she cried, whirling. "What's that? *Oh!*" The last was a shrill yelp. "It stung me!"

MEL hadn't imagined Miss Green could move so fast. Rising and falling with furious menace, the sound seemed to come from all points of the room at once, as Maria darted out of the apartment. Clutching her shopping bag, Mel followed her out hastily and slammed the door behind them. He caught up with Maria in the court.

She was rubbing herself angrily.

"I'm not coming into that apartment again, Mel Armstrong," she announced, "until you've had it fumigated! That thing kept stinging me! What was it, anyway?"

"A wasp, I guess." Mel felt weak with relief. She hadn't really seen anything. "Here's your bag. I'll chase it out."

Maria stalked off, complaining about screens that didn't even protect people against giant wasps.

Mel found the apartment quiet again and went into the kitchenette. Miss Green was poised on the top edge of the cupboard, a gold-eyed statuette of Victory, laughing down at him, the laminated wings spread and raised behind her like iridescent glass fans. Mel looked at her with a trace of uneasiness. She had some kind of small white bundle in her arms, and he wondered whether it concealed the weapon with which she'd stung Maria.

"I don't think you should have done that," he told her. "But she's gone now."

Looking rather pleased with herself, Miss Green glanced back over her shoulder and piped a few questioning notes to the princess. There was a soft reply, and she soared down to the table, folded her wings and knelt to lay the bundle gently down on it. She beckoned to Mel.

Mel's eyes popped as she unfolded the bundle. Perhaps he really shouldn't have been surprisd.

He was harboring four guests now—the princess had been safely delivered of twins.

AT DUSK, Miss Green widened the biggest slit in the bedroom screen a little more and slipped out to do her own kind of shopping, with a section of one of Mel's handkerchiefs to serve as a bag.

Mel left the lights out and stayed at the window. He felt depressed, but didn't quite know why—unless it was that so many odd things had happened since Sunday morning that his mind had given up trying to understand them.

He wasn't really sure now, for example, whether he was getting occasional flash-glimpses of those circular luminous vessels plowing through another dimension somewhere, or whether he was half asleep and imagining it. Usually it was a momentary glow printed on the dark air at the edge of his vision, vanishing before he could really look at it.

He had a feeling they had managed to come a good deal closer during the day. Then he wondered briefly whether other people had been seeing strange light-shapes, too, and what they might have thought the glimpses were.

Spots before their eyes, probably.

Miss Green was back with a soft hum of wings, on the outer window sill, six feet from where he sat. She pushed the knotted scrap of cloth through the screen. There was something inside it now; it caught for a moment on the wires. Mel started up to help, then checked himself, afraid of feeling some bug squirming desperately inside; and while he hesitated, she had shoved it through. She followed it, picked it up again and flew off to the living room. After a moment she returned with the empty cloth and went out again.

She made eight such trips in the next hour, while night deepened outside and then began to lighten as a half-moon shoved over the horizon. Mel must have dozed off several times; at least, he suddenly found himself coming awake, with the awareness that something had just landed with a soft thump on the window sill outside.

It wasn't Miss Green. He saw a chunky shadow at one corner of the window, and caught the faintest glint of green eyes peering into the room. It was the cat from the courtyard.

In the same moment, he heard the familiar faint hum, and Miss Green appeared at the opposite end of the sill.

AFTERWARD, Mel realized he'd simply sat there, stiffening in groggy, sleep-dazed horror, as the cat-shadow lengthened and flowed swiftly toward the tiny humanoid figure. Miss Green seemed to raise both arms over her head. A spark of brilliant blue glowed from her cupped hands and extended itself in an almost invisible thread of fire that stabbed against the cat's forehead. The cat yowled, swung aside and leaped down into the court.

Mel was on his feet, shaking violently, as Miss Green slipped in through the screen. He heard Maria open her window upstairs to peer down into the court, where the cat was making low, angry sounds. Apparently it hadn't been hurt, but no wonder Maria had suspected that afternoon she'd been stung by a wasp! Or that Miss Green's insect victims never struggled, once she had caught them!

He pulled down the shade and stood undecided in the dark, until he heard her piping call from the living room. It was followed by an impatient buzzing about the standing lamp in there, and Mel concluded correctly that he was supposed to turn on the light.

He discovered her on the living room table, sorting out the plunder she had brought back.

It wasn't a pile of electrocuted insects, as he had expected, but a puzzlingly commonplace collection — little heaps of dry sand from the beach, some small white pebbles, and a sizable bundle of thin twigs about two inches in length. Since she was disregarding him, he shifted the lamp over to the table to see what this human-shaped lightning bug from another dimension was going to do next.

That was the way he felt about Miss Green at the moment . . .

What she did was to transport the twigs in two bundles to the top of the cupboard, where she left them with the princess. Then she came back and began to lay out a thin thread of white sand on the dark, polished surface of the table.

Mel pulled up his armchair, poured himself a glass of brandy, lit a cigarette, and settled down to watch her.

BY THE time Miss Green indicated to him that she wanted the light turned out again, he had finished his second drink and was feeling rather benevolent. She had used up all her sand, and about a square foot of the table's surface was covered now with a confusingly intricate maze of lines, into which she had placed white pebbles here and there. Some of the lines, Mel noticed, blended into each other, while others stopped abruptly or curved back on themselves. As a decorative scheme, it hardly seemed worthwhile.

"Miss Green," he told her thoughtfully, "I hope it makes sense to you. It doesn't to me."

She piped imperiously, pointing: the light! Mel had a moment of annoyance at the way she was ordering him around in his own apartment.

"Well," he said, "I'll humor you this time."

For a moment after he had pulled the switch, he stood beside the table to let his eyes adjust to the dark. However, they weren't adjusting properly—a patch of unquiet phosphorescent glimmering floated disturbingly within his field of vision, and as the seconds passed, it seemed to be growing stronger.

Suddenly, Mel swore in amazement and bent down to examine the table.

"Now what have you done—?" he began.

Miss Green fluted soothingly at him from the dark and fluttered up to his shoulder. He felt a cool touch against his ear and cheek, and a burst of oddly pleasant tinglings ran over his scalp.

"Stop that!" he said, startled.

Miss Green fluted again, urgently. She was trying to tell him something now, and suddenly he thought he understood.

"All right," he said. "I'll look at it. That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

Miss Green flew down to the table again, which indicated agreement. Mel groped himself back into the chair and leaned forward to study the curiously glowing design she had created of sand and pebbles.

He discovered immediately that any attempt to see it clearly merely strained his vision. Details turned into vaguely distorted, luminous flickerings when he stared at them, and the whole pale, spidery pattern made no more sense than it had with the light on. She must have some purpose in mind with it, but Mel couldn't imagine what.

Meanwhile, Miss Green was making minor adjustments in his position which Mel accepted without argument, since she seemed to know what she was doing. Small tugs and pushes told him she wanted his hands placed on the table to either side of the design. Mel put them there. His head was to be tilted forward just so. He obliged her again. Then she was back on the table, and the top two-thirds of the pattern vanished suddenly behind a blur.

After a moment, he realized she had opened her wings and blotted that part from his sight.

IN THE darkness, he fastened his puzzled gaze on the remaining section: a quivering, thinly drawn pattern of blue-white light that faded periodically almost to the limits of visibility and slowly grew up again to what was, by comparison, real brilliance. His head was aching slightly. The pattern seemed to tilt sideways and move upward, as if it were creeping in a slow circle about some pivot-point. Presently, it turned down again to complete the circle and start on another round. By that time, the motion seemed normal.

When a tiny shape of light suddenly ran across the design and vanished again as it reached the other side, Mel was only moderately surprised. The figure had reminded him immediately of Miss Green. After a while, it crossed his field of vision in another direction, and then there were two more . . .

He seemed to be swimming forward, through the pattern, into an area of similar tiny figures like living silhouettes of light, and of entrancingly delicate architectural designs. It was like a marionette setting of incredible craftsmanship, not quite real in the everyday sense, but as convincing as a motion picture which was spreading out, second by second, and beginning to flow about him—

"Hey!" Mel sat up with a start. "You're trying to hypnotize me!"

Miss Green piped pleadingly. Clearly, she had only been trying to show him something. And wasn't it beautiful? Didn't he want to see more?

Mel hesitated. He was suspicious now, but he was also curious. After all, what could she do to him with her tricks?

Besides, he admitted to himself, the picture had vanished as soon as he shifted his eyes, and it *was* beautiful, like moving about through a living illustration of a book of fairy tales.

He yielded. "All right, I do want to see more."

This time, the picture grew up out of the design within seconds. Only it wasn't the same picture. It was as if he had turned around and was looking in another direction, a darker one.

There were fewer of the little light-shapes; instead, he discovered in the distance a line of yellow dots that moved jerkily but steadily, like glowing corks bobbing on dark water. He watched them for a moment without recognition; then he realized with a thrill of pleasure that he was getting another view of the luminous globes he had seen before—this time an other-dimensional view, so to speak.

Suddenly, one of them was right before him! Not a dot or a yellow circle, but a three-foot ball of fire that rushed toward him through the blackness with hissing, sputtering sounds!

Mel surged up out of the chair with a yelp of fright, and the fireball vanished.

As he groped about for the light, Miss Green was piping furiously at him from the table.

Then the light came on.

SHE was in a rage. Dancing about on the table, beating the air with her wings, she waved her arms over her head and shook her tiny fists at him. Mel backed off warily.

"Take it easy!" he warned. He could reach the flyswatter in the kitchenette with a jump if she started shooting off miniature electric bolts again.

She might have had the same idea, because she calmed down suddenly, shook her wings together and closed them with a snap. It was like a cat smoothing down its bristling back fur. There was a whistling query from the princess now, followed by an excited elfin conversation.

Mel poured himself a drink with a hand that shook slightly, and pretended to ignore the disturbance of his guests, while he tried to figure out what had happened.

Supposing, he thought a trifle guiltily, settling down on the couch at a safe distance from the table — supposing they simply had to have his help at this point. The manner in which one of the rescue globes suddenly had seemed to shift close to him suggested it. Was he justified in refusing to go on with it? In the directionless dark through which the globes were driving, they might have been reacting to his concentrated awareness of them as if it were a radio signal from the human dimensions. And it would explain Miss Green's rage at the sudden interruption of the contact.

But another thought came to him then, and his guilty feelings vanished in a surge of alarmed indignation.

Well, and just supposing, he thought, that he *hadn't* broken the contact. And that a three-foot sputtering fireball materialized right inside his living room!

He caught sight of Miss Green eying him speculatively and rather slyly from the table. She seemed composed enough now; there was even the faintest of smiles on that tiny face. The smile seemed to confirm his suspicions.

Mel downed his drink and stood up.

"Miss Green," he told her evenly, choosing his words with care, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't intend to be the subject of any more of your experiments. At least not until I've had time to think about it."

Her head nodded slightly, as if she were acknowledging his decision. But the smile remained; in fact, Miss Green had begun to look rather smug. Mel studied her uneasily. She might be planning to put something else over on him, but he knew how to stop that!

Before he turned out the light and went to bed, Mel methodically and somewhat grimly swallowed four more shots of brandy. With that much inside him, it wouldn't matter what Miss Green tried, because he wouldn't be able to react to her suggestions till he woke up again in the morning.

ACTUALLY it was noon before he awoke—and he might have gone on sleeping then if somebody hadn't been banging on his apartment door.

"Wake up, Mel!" he heard Maria de Guesgne shouting hoarsely. "I can hear you snoring in there!"

He sat up a little groggily and looked at the clock. His guests weren't in sight.

"You awake, Mel?" she demanded.

"Wait a minute!" he yelled back. "Just woke up and I'm not decent."

When he opened the door, she had vanished. He was about to close it quietly and gratefully again, when she called down the stairway. "That you, Mel? Come on up! I want to show you something."

He locked the door behind him and went upstairs. Maria received him beamingly in her living room. She was on one of her rare creative painting sprees, and this spree, to judge by the spattered appearance of the room and the artist, was more riotous than usual. A half dozen fair-sized canvases were propped on newspapers against the wall to dry. They were turned around, to increase the shock effect on Mel when he would get his first look at them.

"Ever see a salamander?" Maria inquired with anticipation, spreading a few more papers on the table.

Mel admitted he hadn't. He wished she'd given him time to have coffee first. His comments at these private showings were ususally regarded as inadequate anyway.

"Well," Maria invited triumphantly, selecting one of the canvases and setting it abruptly up on the table before him, "take a look at one!"

Mel gasped and jerked back. "Holy Judas!" he said in a weak voice.

"Pretty good, eh?" For once, Maria appeared satisfied with his reaction. She held it away from her and regarded it. "One of my best!" she cried judiciously.

About three times life-size, it was a quite recognizable portrait of Miss Green.

IT DIDN'T occur to Maria to offer Mel coffee, but he got a cigarette from her. Fortunately, he wasn't called upon to make any more comments; she chattered away while she showed him the rest of the series. Mel looked and listened, still rather shaken. Presently he began to ask questions.

A salamander, he learned, was a fire elemental. Maria glanced at her fireplace as she explained this, and Mel noticed she seemed to have had a fire burning there overnight, which wasn't too unusual for her even in the middle of summer. Listening to the bang-haired, bright-eyed oddball rattling off metaphysical details about salamanders, he became aware of a sort of dread growing up in him. For Miss Green was pictured, wings and arms spread, against and within furling veils of yellow-white flame . . .

"Drawn from life?" he inquired, grinning to make it a joke. He pointed at the picture.

Without looking directly at her, he saw Maria start at the question. She stared at him intensely for a moment, and after that she became more reticent.

It didn't matter because it was all on the canvases. She had seen as much as he had and more, and put it down with shocking realism. Seen through somebody else's eyes, Miss Green's world was still beautiful; but now it was also frightening. And there was what Maria had said about salamanders.

"Maria," he said, "what actually happened last night?"

She looked at him sullenly. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mel."

"I imagine," he suggested casually, "you were just sitting there in front of the fire. And then—"

"Gosh, Mel, she was beautiful! It's *all* so beautiful, you know . . ." She recovered quickly. "I fell asleep and I had a dream, that's all. Why? What makes you ask?"

She was beginning to look rather wild-eyed, but he had to find out. "I was just wondering," he said, "whether they'd left."

"Why should they leave—Look, you oaf! I called you in to give you the privilege of looking at my paintings. Now get out. I've got to make a phone call."

He stopped at the door, struck by a sudden suspicion. "You're not going to try to sell them, are you?"

"*Try* to sell them!" She laughed hoarsely. "There are circles, Mel Armstrong, in which a de Guesgne original is *understood*, shall we say? Circles not exactly open to the common herd . . . This series," she concluded, rather prosaically, "will get me two thousand bucks as soon as I let one or two of the right people have a look at them!"

BREWING himself a pot of coffee at last, Mel decided that part of it, if true, wasn't any of his business. He had always assumed Maria was living on a monthly check she got from an unidentified source in Chicago, but her occasional creations might have a well-heeled following, at that. As for the way Miss Green had got in to sit for her portrait—the upstairs screens weren't in any better shape than the downstairs ones. The fiery background, of course, might have been only in Maria's mind.

There was a scratching on top of the cupboard and whispery voices. Mel ignored the slight chill that drifted down his spine. Up to that moment, he'd been hoping secretly that Maria had provided a beacon for the rescue team to home in on while he slept, and that his guests had been picked up and taken home.

But Miss Green was peering down at him over the edge of the cupboard.

"Hi, salamander!" he greeted her politely. "Had a busy night? Too bad it didn't work."

Her head withdrew. In the living room Mel stopped to look at the design of sand and pebbles, which was still on the table. Touching one of the threadlike lines, he discovered it was as hard and slick as lacquer. Otherwise the pattern seemed unremarkable in daylight, but Mel dropped a cloth across it to keep it out of sight.

Miss Green fluttered past him to the sill of the bedroom window. He watched her standing on tiptoe against the screen, apparently peering about at the sky. After a while, it began to seem ridiculous to let himself become obsessed by superstitious fears about this tiny and beautiful, almost jewellike creature. Whatever abilities she might have, she and the princess were only trying to get home—and, having seen their home, he couldn't blame them for that.

He had a return of the fairy-tale nostalgia his glimpse of those eerily beautiful places had aroused in him the night before, a pleasantly yearning sensation like an awareness of elfin horns blowing far away to send faint, exciting echoes swirling about the commonplace sky of Sweetwater Bay. The feeling might have been resurrected from his childhood, but it was a strong and effective one.

He recalled how bored he'd been with everything before they appeared . . .

He walked softly through the bedroom and stopped behind Miss Green. She was making an elaborate pretense of not having noticed his approach, but the pointed ears that could follow the passage of a moth in the dark were tilted stiffly backward. Mel actually was opening his mouth to say, "Miss Green, I'll help you if I can," when it struck him sharply, like a brand-new thought, that it was an extremely rash promise to make, considering everything that had happened so far.

He wondered how the odd impulse ever had come to him.

In sudden suspicion, he began to trace the last few minutes through again. He had started with a firm decision not to let his guests involve him in their plans any more than was healthy for him, if at all—and the decision had been transformed, step by step, and mental twist by mental twist, into a foolish willingness to have them make use of him exactly as they pleased!

Miss Green, still maliciously pretending to watch the sky, let him think it all out until it became quite clear what she had done and how she had done it. And then, as Mel spluttered angrily at this latest interference with his freedom of thought and action, she turned around and laughed at him.

IN A way, it cleared the air. The pressure was off. Maria had proved a much more pliable subject than Mel; the rescuers had their bearings and would arrive presently. Meanwhile, everybody could relax.

Mel couldn't help feeling relieved as he grew sure of that. At the same time, now that the departure was settled, he became aware of a certain amount of belated regret. Miss Green didn't seem to know the exact hour; she was simply watching for them well ahead of their arrival.

Where would they show up? She waved her arms around in an appealingly helpless gesture at the court outside and the sky. Here, there—somewhere in the area.

It would be a fire globe. At his question, she pointed at the opposite wall of the court where a picture of one formed itself obligingly, slid along the wall a few feet, and vanished. Mel was beginning to enjoy all this easy last-minute communication, when he heard Maria come downstairs and open the door to the other court. There was conversation, and several sets of footsteps went up to her apartment and down again.

Cautioning Miss Green, he took a look around the shutters of the living room window. A small panel truck stood in the court; Maria was supervising the careful transfer of her paintings into its interior. Apparently she didn't even intend to let them dry before offering them for sale!

The truck drove off with Maria inside with her paintings, and Mel discovered Miss Green doing a little spying of her own from the upper edge of the shutters. Good friends now, they smiled at each other and resumed their guard at the bedroom window.

The princess joined them around five in the afternoon. Whether she had been injured in the accident or weakened by the birth of her babies, Mel couldn't tell, but Miss Green carried her friend down from the cupboard without visible effort, and then went back for a globular basket of tightly woven tiny twigs, which contained the twins.

It was a masterfully designed little structure with a single opening about the thickness of a pencil, and heavily lined. Mel had a notion to ask for it as a souvenir, but decided against it. He lifted it carefully to his ear, to listen to an almost inaudible squeaking inside, and his expression seemed to cause Miss Green considerable silent amusement.

All in all, it was much like waiting patiently in pleasant company for the arrival of an overdue train. Then, around seven o'clock, when the room was already dark, the telephone rang abruptly and returned Mel with a start to the world of human beings.

He lifted the receiver.

"Hello, oaf!" said Maria de Guesgne in what seemed for the moment to be an enormous, booming voice.

Mel inquired agreeably whether she'd succeeded in selling her paintings. It was the first thing that occurred to him.

"Certainly I sold them!" Maria said. He could tell by now that she was thoroughly plastered again. "Got a message to give you," she added.

"From whom?"

"Maybe from me, ha-ha!" said Maria. She paused a moment, seemed to be muttering something to herself, and resumed suddenly, "Oaf, are you listening?"

Mel said bluntly that he was. If he hung up on her, she would probably ring back.

"All right," Maria said clearly. "This is the message: 'The fiery ones do not tolerate the endangering of their secrets.' Warning, see? Goo'-bye."

She hung up before he could say anything.

HERS had been a chilling sort of intrusion. Mel stood a while in the darkening room, trying to gather up the mood Maria had shattered, and discovering he couldn't quite do it. He realized that all along, like a minor theme, there had been a trace of fear underlying everything he did, ever since he had first looked into that bird box and glimpsed something impossible inside it. He had been covering the fear up; even now he didn't want to admit it, but it was there.

He could quite simply, of course, walk out of the room and out of the apartment, and stay away for a week. He didn't even ever have to come back. And, strictly speaking, this was the sort of thing that should have happened to somebody like Maria de Guesgne, not to him. For him, the sensible move right now would be to go quietly back into the normal world of reality he had stepped out of a few mornings ago. It was a simple physical act. The door was over there . . .

Then Mel looked back at his guests and promptly reversed his decision. They were certainly as real as any living creatures he'd ever seen, and he felt there weren't many human beings who would show up as well as Miss Green had done in any comparable emergency. His own unconscious fears meant only that he had run into a new and unpredictable factor in a world that had been becoming increasingly commonplace for a number of years now. He could see that once you'd got settled into the idea of a commonplace world, you might be startled by discoveries that didn't fit that notion—and he felt now, rather hazily, that it wasn't such a bad thing to be startled like that. It might wake you up enough to let you start living again yourself.

He took the receiver off the phone and laid it on the floor, so there wouldn't be any more interruptions. If he ran off now before seeing how the adventure ended, he knew he would never quit regretting it.

He went into the bedroom and pulled his chair back up to the window. The shadowy sihouette that was Miss Green turned and sounded a few fluting notes at him. He had the immediate impression that she was worried.

What was the matter?

She pointed.

Clouds!

THE sky was still full of the pastel glowings of the sunset. Here and there were patches of black cloud, insignificant-looking, like ragged crows swimming through the pale light.

"Rain," the thought came. *"The cold rain—the killing rain! Another storm!"*

Mel studied the sky uneasily. They might be right. "Your friends are bound to get here first," he assured them, looking confident about it.

They smiled gratefully at him. He couldn't think of anything he might do to help. The princess looked comfortable on the towel he had laid along the screen, and Miss Green, as usual, looked alert, prepared to handle anything that had to be handled. He wondered about asking her to let him see how the globes were doing, and, instantly, a thought showed clear in his mind: *"Try it yourself!"*

That hadn't occurred to Mel before. He settled back comfortably in the chair and looked through the screen for them.

Four or five fiery visualizations quivered here and there in the air, vanished, reappeared, vanished . . .

Mel stopped looking for them, and there was only the sky.

"Closer?" he said aloud,

rather pleased with himself. It had been easy!

Miss Green nodded, human fashion, and piped something in reply. Closer, but—

He gathered she couldn't tell from here how close, and that there was trouble—a not quite translatable kind of trouble, but almost as if, in *their* dimension, they were struggling through the radiant distortions of a storm that hadn't gathered yet here on Earth.

He glanced up at the sky again, more anxiously now. The black clouds didn't seem to have grown any larger.

BY AND by, because he had not had any awareness of going to sleep, Mel was surprised to find himself waking up. He knew immediately that he had been asleep a long time, a period of hours. There was grayness around him, the vague near-light of very early morning, and he had a sense of having been aroused by a swirling confusion of angry sounds. But all was silent at the moment.

Her answer was instantly in his mind. The storm had caused a delay—but a great globe was almost here now!

A curious pause followed. Mel had a sense of hesitation. And then, very swiftly and faintly, a wisp of thought, which he would have missed if that pause had not made him alert, showed and vanished on the fringe of his consciousness:

"Be careful! Be very careful."

Miss Green turned back to the window. Beside her now, Mel saw the princess sitting as if asleep, with one arm across the twig basket and her head resting on her arm. Before he could frame the puzzled question that was struggling up in his mind, there was a series of ear-splitting yowls from the court outside. It startled Mel only for a moment, since it was a familiar sort of racket. The gray cat didn't tolerate intruding felines in its area, and about once a month it discovered and evicted one with the same lack of inhibition it was evidencing right now. It must have been the threatening squalls which usually preceded the actual battle that had awakened him.

The encounter itself was over almost instantly. There were sounds of a scampering retreat which ended beyond the garage, and, standing up at the window, Mel saw the gray shape of the winner come gliding back down the court. The cat stopped below him and seemed to turn up its head. For a moment, he felt it was staring both at him and at Miss Green, very much like a competent little tiger in the gusty, gray night; then it made a low, menacing sound and moved on out of sight. Apparently it hadn't yet forgotten its previous meeting with Miss Green.

Mel looked down at her. "Why should I be careful?"

There was a pause again, and what came then hardly seemed an answer to his question. The princess was very weak, Miss Green indicated; he might have to help.

He was still wondering about that—and wondering, too, whether he'd really had something like a warning from her—when a sudden wavering glare lit up the room behind them!

For a moment, he thought the fireball was inside the building. But the light was pouring in through the living room window; its source was in the opposite court, out of his line of sight. There was a crackling, hissing sound, and the light faded.

Miss Green came darting at him. Mel put his hand up instinctively and felt her thrust the basket into it. Almost instantly, she had picked up the princess and was outside the screen—

Then the cat attacked from below in a silent, terrible leap, a long, twisting shadow in the air, and they seemed to drop out of sight together.

MEL was out in the court, staring wildly around. In the swimming grayness nothing stirred or made sound. A cool, moist wind thrust at his face and faded. Except for the toy basket of twigs in his hand, he might have been awakening from a meaningless dream.

Then a lurid round of light like a big, wavering moon came out over the top of the building, and a sharp humming sound drove down through the air at him. Instinctively again, he held out the basket and felt it plucked away. He thought it was Miss Green, but the shape had come and gone much too swiftly to be sure of that.

The light grew brilliant, a solid white—intolerable—and he backed hurriedly into the shelter of the garage, his heart hammering in excitement and alarm. He heard voices from the other court; a window slammed somewhere. He couldn't guess what was happening, but he didn't need Miss Green's warning now. He had an overwhelming urge to keep out of sight until the unearthly visitor would be gone—

And then, running like a rabbit, the gray cat appeared from behind a box halfway down the court and came streaking for the garage. Mel watched its approach with a sort of silent horror, partly because it might be attracting undesirable attention to him—and partly because he seemed to know in that instant exactly what was going to be done to it.

It wasn't more than twenty feet away when something like a twisting string of fiery white reached down from above. The animal leaped sideways, blazed and died. There was a sound very like a gunshot, and the court was instantly dark.

Mel stayed where he was. For half a minute or so, he was shaking much too violently to have left his retreat. By the end of that time, he knew better. It wasn't over yet!

Pictures forming in the moist, dark air . . . delicate, unstable outlines sliding through the court, changing as they moved. Elfin castles swayed up out of grayness and vanished again. Near the edge of his vision other shapes showed, more beautiful than human . . .

Muttering to himself, between terror and delight, Mel closed his eyes as tightly as he could, which helped for a moment. But then the impressions began drifting through his mind. The visitors were still nearby, hanging somewhere outside the limits of human sight in their monstrous fireball, in the windy sky. They were talking to him in their way.

Mel asked in his mind what they wanted, and the answer showed immediately. The table in his living room with the pattern of glassy sand and pebbles Miss Green had constructed. The pattern was glowing again now under the cloth he had thrown over it. He was to go in and look at the pattern . . .

"No!" he said aloud. It was all terror now.

"Go look at the pattern . . . Go look at the pattern . . ."

The pictures burst round him in a soundless wild flowering of beauty, flickering rains of color, a fountain of melting, shifting forms. His mind drowned in happiness. He was sinking through a warmth of kindness, gratitude and love . . .

A DRIFT of rain touched his cheek coldly — and Mel found himself outside the garage, moving drunkenly toward the apartment door. Then, just for a moment, a picture of Miss Green printed itself on his mind.

She seemed to be standing before him, as tall now as he was, motionless, the strange wings half spread. The golden unhuman eyes were looking past him, watching something with cold malice and contempt —and with a concentration of purpose that made a death's mask of the perfectly chiseled green face!

In that second, Mel understood the purpose as clearly as if she had told him. In the next, the image disappeared with a jerky, complete abruptness—

As if somebody were belatedly trying to wipe it out of his memory as well! But he knew he had seen her somehow—somewhere—as she actually was at that moment. And he knew what she had been watching. Himself, Mel Armstrong, staggering blindly about in his other-dimension, down in the court!

He hadn't stayed in the court. He was back in the garage, backed trembling against a wall. She—*they*—weren't trying to show him gratitude, or reward him somehow; before they left, they simply wanted to destroy the human being who had found out about them, and whom they had used. The table and the pattern were some sort of trap! What he couldn't undertand was why they didn't simply come down in their fireball and kill him as they had the cat.

They were still pouring their pictures at him, but he knew now how to counteract that. He stared out through the garage window at the lightening sky—looked at, listened to, what was there, filling his mind with Earth shapes and sounds!

And he promptly discovered an ally he hadn't been counting on. He hadn't really been aware of the thumping wind before, and the sketchy pattering of raindrops, like a sweeping fall of leaves here and there. He hadn't even heard, beyond the continuous dim roar of surf from the beach, the gathering mutter of thunder!

They couldn't stay here long. The storm was ready to break. They weren't willing to risk coming out fully into the Earth dimension to hunt him down. And he didn't have to go to their trap . . .

Rain spattered louder and closer. The sweat chilled on Mel's body as his breathing grew quieter. They hadn't left him yet. If he relaxed his eyes and his mind, there was an instant faint recurrence of the swirling unearthly patterns. But he could keep them out by looking at what was really here. He only had to wait—

Then the rain came down in a great, rushing tide, and he knew they were gone.

FOR a few seconds, he remained where he was, weak with relief. Over the noise of the storm, he heard human voices faintly from the other court and from neighboring houses. That final crash must have awakened everybody—and someone had seen the great globe of fire when it first appeared.

There should be some interesting gossip in the morning!

Which concerned Mel not at all. After drinking in the sweet certainty of being still alive and safe, he had become aware of an entirely unexpected emotion, which was, curiously, a brief but sharp pang of grief at Miss Green's betrayal. Why, he must have been practically in love with that other-dimensional, human-shaped rattlesnake! Mulling it over in moody amazement at himself, it struck Mel suddenly then that one could interpret her final action somewhat differently, too.

Because she could have planted that apparently revealing picture of herself deliberately in his mind, to stop him from stumbling into the trap the others had set for him! She might have been planning to save him from the beginning, or merely relented at the last moment. There was no way of ever really knowing now, but Mel found he preferred to believe that Miss Green's intention was good.

In the driving rain, he hesitated a moment beside the blackened lump that had been the cat, but he couldn't force himself to pick it up and remove it. If someone else found it, it might add to the gossip, but that wasn't any business of his any more. Everyone knew that lightning did funny, selective things. So far as he was concerned, the matter was all over.

He opened the duplex door and stood staring.

His apartment door was open and the room beyond was dark, as he had left it. But down the little stairway and out of Maria's upstairs apartment, light poured in a quiet flood.

SHE must have returned during the night while he was sleeping, probably drunk as a hoot-owl. The commotion downstairs hadn't been enough to arouse her. But something else had — she'd come down following swirling, beautiful, unearthly pictures, hunting the pattern that would guide her straight into a promised delight!

Mel didn't have to reach into the apartment to switch on the light. Lightning did funny, selective things, all right, and from where he stood, he could smell what had happened. They hadn't wasted that final bolt, after all!

Oddly enough, what was uppermost in his mind in those seconds, while he continued to put off seeing what he was going to have to look at very soon, was the final awareness of how he must have appeared in their eyes:

A stupid native, barely capable of receiving training and instruction enough to be a useful servant. Beyond that, they had simply had no interest in him.

It was Maria they had worried about. The mental impressions he'd picked up in the court had been directed at her. Miss Green had been obliged to stop him finally from springing a trap which was set for another.

For Maria, who might have endangered their leaving.

END

By PHILIP K. DICK

FAIR GAME

No question of it, Douglas was a prize catch . . . but by whom . . . and for what?

PROFESSOR Anthony Douglas lowered gratefully into his red-leather easy chair and sighed. A long sigh, accompanied by labored removal of his shoes and numerous grunts as he kicked them into the corner. He folded his hands across his ample middle and lay back, eyes closed.

"Tired?" Laura Douglas asked, turning from the kitchen stove a moment, her dark eyes sympathetic.

"You're darn right." Douglas surveyed the evening paper across from him on the couch. Was it worth it? No, not really. He felt around in his coat pocket for his cigarettes and lit up slowly, leisurely. "Yeah, I'm tired, all right. We're starting a whole new line of research. Whole flock of bright young men in from Washington today. Brief cases and slide rules."

"Not—"

"Oh, I'm still in charge." Professor Douglas grinned expansively. "Perish the thought." Pale gray cigarette smoke billowed around him. "It'll be another few years before they're ahead of me. They'll have to sharpen up their slide rules just a little bit more . . ."

His wife smiled and continued preparing dinner. Maybe it was the atmosphere of the little Colorado town. The sturdy, impassive mountain peaks around them. The thin, chill air. The quiet citizens. In any case, her husband seemed utterly unbothered by the tensions and doubts that pressured other members of his profession. A lot of aggressive newcomers were swelling the ranks of nuclear physics these days. Old-timers were tottering in their positions, abruptly insecure. Every college, every physics department and lab was being invaded by the new horde of skilled young men. Even here at Bryant College, so far off the beaten track.

But if Anthony Douglas worried, he never let it show. He rested happily in his easy chair, eyes shut, a blissful smile on his face. He was tired—but at peace. He sighed again, this time more from pleasure than fatigue.

"It's true," he murmured lazily. "I may be old enough to be their father, but I'm still a few jumps ahead of them. Of course, I know the ropes better. And—"

"And the wires. The ones worth pulling."

"Those, too. In any case, I think I'll come off from this new line we're doing just about . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"What's the matter?" Laura asked.

Douglas half rose from his chair. His face had gone suddenly white. He stared in horror, gripping the arms of his chair, his mouth opening and closing.

At the window was a great eye. An immense eye that gazed into the room intently, studying him. The eye filled the whole window.

"Good God!" Douglas cried.

The eye withdrew. Outside there was only the evening gloom, the dark hills and trees, the street. Douglas sank down slowly in his chair.

"What was it?" Laura demanded sharply. "What did you see? Was sómebody out there?"

DOUGLAS clasped and unclasped his hands. His lips twitched violently. "I'm telling you the truth, Bill. I saw it myself. It was real. I wouldn't say so, otherwise. You know that. Don't you believe me?"

"Did anybody else see it?" Professor William Henderson asked, chewing his pencil thoughtfully. He had cleared a place on the dinner table, pushed back his plate and silver and laid out his notebook. "Did Laura see it?"

"No. Laura had her back turned."

"What time was it?"

"Half an hour ago. I had just got home. About six-thirty. I had my shoes off, taking it easy." Douglas wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

"You say it was unattached? There was nothing else? Just the—eye?"

"Just the eye. One huge eye looking in at me. Taking in everything. As if—"

"As if what?"

"As if it was looking down a microscope."

Silence.

From across the table, Henderson's red-haired wife spoke up. "You always were a strict empiricist, Doug. You never went in for any nonsense before. But this . . . It's too bad nobody else saw it."

"Of course nobody else saw it!"

"What do you mean?"

"The damn thing was looking at *me*. It was *me* it was studying." Douglas' voice rose hysterically. "How do you think I feel—scrutinized by an eye as big as a piano! My God, if I weren't so well integrated, I'd be out of my mind!"

Henderson and his wife exchanged glances. Bill, dark-haired and handsome, ten years Douglas' junior. Vivacious Jean Henderson, lecturer in child psychology, lithe and full-bosomed in her nylon blouse and slacks.

"What do you make of this?" Bill asked her. "This is more along your line."

"It's in *your* line," Douglas snapped. "Don't try to pass this off as a morbid projection. I came to you because you're head of the Biology Department."

"You think it's an animal? A giant sloth or something?"

"It must be an animal."

"Maybe it's a joke," Jean suggested. "Or an advertising sign. An oculist's display. Somebody may have been carrying it past the window."

Douglas took a firm grip on himself. "The eye was alive. It looked at me. It considered me. Then it withdrew. As if it had moved away from the lens." He shuddered. "I tell you it was *studying* me!"

"You only?"

"Me. Nobody else."

"You seem curiously convinced it was looking down from above," Jean said.

"Yes, down. Down at me. That's right." An odd expression flickered across Douglas' face. "You have it, Jean. As if it came from up there." He jerked his hand upward.

"Maybe it was God," Bill said thoughtfully.

Douglas said nothing. His face turned ash white and his teeth chattered.

"NONSENSE," Jean said. "God is a psychological transcendent symbol expressing unconscious forces."

"Did it look at you accusingly?" asked Bill. "As if you'd done something wrong?"

"No. With interest. With considerable interest." Douglas raised himself. "I have to get back. Laura thinks I'm having some kind of fit. I haven't told her, of course. She's not scientifically disciplined. She wouldn't be able to handle such a concept."

"It's a little tough even for us," Bill said.

Douglas moved nervously toward the door. "You can't think of any explanation? Something thought extinct that might still be roaming around these mountains?"

"None that we know of. If I should hear of any—"

"You said it looked down," Jean said. "Not bending down to peer in at you. Then it couldn't have been an animal or terrestrial being." She was deep in thought. "Maybe we're being observed."

"Not you," Douglas said miserably. "Just me."

"By another race," Bill put in. "You think—"

"Maybe it's an eye from Mars."

Douglas opened the front door carefully and peered out. The night was black. A faint wind moved through the trees and along the highway. His car was dimly visible, a black square against the hills. "If you think of anything, call me."

"Take a couple of phenobarbitals before you hit the sack," Jean suggested. "Calm your nerves."

Douglas was out on the porch. "Good idea. Thanks." He shook his head. "Maybe I'm out of my mind. Good Lord. Well, I'll see you later."

He walked down the steps, gripping the rail tightly. "Good night!" Bill called. The door closed and the porch light clicked off.

Douglas went cautiously toward his car. He reached out into the darkness, feeling for the door handle. One step. Two steps. It was silly. A grown man—practically middle-aged—in the twentieth century. Three steps.

He found the door and opened it, sliding quickly inside and locking it after him. He breathed a silent prayer of thanks as he snapped on the motor and the headlights. Silly as hell. A giant eye. A stunt of some sort.

He turned the thought over in his mind. Students? Jokesters? Communists? A plot to drive him out of his mind?

He was important. Probably the most important nuclear physicist in the country. And this new project . . .

He drove the car slowly forward, onto the silent highway. He watched each bush and tree as the car gained speed.

A Communist plot. Some of the students were in a left-wing club. Some sort of Marxist study group. Maybe they had rigged up—

In the glare of the headlights something glittered. Something at the edge of the highway.

Douglas gazed at it, transfixed. Something square, a long block in the weeds at the side of the highway, where the great dark trees began. It glittered and shimmered. He slowed down, almost to a stop.

A bar of gold, lying at the edge of the road.

IT WAS incredible. Slowly, Professor Douglas rolled down the window and peered out. Was it really gold? He laughed nervously. Probably not. He had often seen gold, of course. This *looked* like gold. But maybe it was lead, an ingot of lead with a gilt coating.

But—why?

A joke. A prank. College kids. They must have seen his car go past toward the Hendersons' and knew he'd soon be driving back.

Or—or it really *was* gold. Maybe an armored car had gone past. Turned the corner too swiftly. The ingot had slid out and fallen into the weeds. In that case there was a little fortune lying there, in the darkness at the edge of the highway.

But it was illegal to possess gold. He'd have to return it to the Government. But couldn't he saw off just a little piece? And if he did return it there was no doubt a reward of some kind. Probably several thousand dollars.

A mad scheme flashed briefly through his mind. Get the ingot, crate it up, fly it to Mexico, out of the country. Eric Barnes owned a Piper Cub. He could easily get it into Mexico. Sell it. Retire. Live in comfort the rest of his life.

Professor Douglas snorted angrily. It was his duty to return it. Call the Denver Mint, tell them about it. Or the police department. He reversed his car and backed up until he was even with the metal bar. He turned off the motor and slid out onto the dark highway. He had a job to do. As a loyal citizen—and, God knew, fifty tests had shown he *was* loyal—there was a job for him here. He leaned into the car and fumbled in the dashboard for the flashlight. If somebody had lost a bar of gold, it was up to him . . .

A bar of gold. Impossible. A slow, cold chill settled over him, numbing his heart. A tiny voice in the back of his mind spoke clearly and rationally to him: *Who would walk off and leave an ingot of gold?*

Something was going on.

FEAR gripped him. He stood frozen, trembling with terror. The dark, deserted highway. The silent mountains. He was alone. A perfect spot. If they wanted to get him—

They?

Who?

He looked quickly around. Hiding in the trees, most likely. Waiting for him. Waiting for him to cross the highway, leave the road and enter the woods. Bend down and try to pick up the ingot. One quick blow as he bent over; that would be it.

Douglas scrambled back into his car and snapped on the motor. He raced the motor and released the brake. The car jerked forward and gained speed. His hands shaking, Douglas bore down desperately on the wheel. He had to get out. Get away before—whoever they were got him.

As he shifted into high he took one last look back, peering around through the open window. The ingot was still there, still glowing among the dark weeds at the edge of the highway. But there was a strange vagueness about it, an uncertain waver in the nearby atmosphere.

Abruptly the ingot faded and disappeared. Its glow receded into darkness.

Douglas glanced up, and gasped in horror.

In the sky above him, something blotted out the stars. A great shape, so huge it staggered him. The shape moved, a disembodied circle of living presence, directly over his head.

A face. A gigantic, cosmic face peering down. Like some great moon, blotting out everything else. The face hung for an instant, intent on him—on the spot he had just vacated. Then the face, like the ingot, faded and sank into darkness.

The stars returned. He was alone.

Douglas sank back against the seat. The car veered crazily and roared down the highway. His hands slid from the wheel and dropped at his sides. He caught the wheel again, just in time.

There was no doubt about it. Somebody was after him. Trying to get him. But no Communists or student practical jokers. Or any beast, lingering from the dim past.

Whatever it was, whoever they were, had nothing to do with Earth. It—they—were from some other world. They were out to get him.

Him.

But—why?

PETE BERG listened closely. "Go on," he said when Douglas halted.

"That's all." Douglas turned to Bill Henderson. "Don't try to tell me I'm out of my mind. I really saw it. It was looking down at me. The whole face this time, not just the eye."

"You think this was the face that the eye belonged to?" Jean Henderson asked.

"I know it. The face had the same expression as the eye. Studying me."

"We've got to call the police," Laura Douglas said in a thin, clipped voice. "This can't go on. If somebody's out to get him—"

"The police won't do any good." Bill Henderson paced back and forth. It was late, after midnight. All the lights in the Douglas house were on. In one corner old Milton Erick, head of the Math Department, sat curled up, taking everything in, his wrinkled face expressionless.

"We can assume," Professor Erick said calmly, removing his pipe from between his yellow teeth, "they're a nonterrestrial race. Their size and their position indicate they're not Earthbound in any sense."

"But they can't just *stand* in the sky!" Jean exploded. "There's nothing up there!"

"There may be other configurations of matter not normally connected or related to our own. An endless or multiple coexistence of universe systems, lying along a plane of coordinates totally unexplainable in present terms. Due to some singular juxtaposition of tangents, we are, at this moment, in contact with one of these other configurations."

"He means," Bill Henderson explained, "that these people after Doug don't belong to our universe. They come from a different dimension entirely."

"The face wavered," Douglas murmured. "The gold and the face both wavered and faded out."

"Withdrew," Erick stated. "Returned to their own universe. They have entry into ours at will, it would seem, a hole, so to speak, that they can enter through and return again."

"It's a pity," Jean said, "they're so damn big. If they were smaller—"

"Size is in their favor," Erick admitted. "An unfortunate circumstance."

"All this academic wrangling!" Laura cried wildly. "We sit here working out theories and meanwhile they are after him!"

"This might explain gods," Bill said suddenly.

"Gods?"

BILL nodded. "Don't you see? In the past these beings looked across the nexus at us, into our universe. Maybe even stepped down. Primitive people saw them and weren't able to explain them. They built religions around them. Worshiped them."

"Mount Olympus," Jean

said. "Of course. And Moses met God at the top of Mount Sinai. We're high up in the Rockies. Maybe contact only comes at high places. In the mountains, like this."

"And the Tibetan monks are situated in the highest land mass in the world," Bill added. "That whole area. The highest and the oldest part of the world. All the great religions have been revealed in the mountains. Brought down by people who saw God and carried the word back."

"What I can't understand," Laura said, "is why they want *him*." She spread her hands helplessly. "Why not somebody else? Why do they have to single him out?"

Bill's face was hard. "I think that's pretty clear."

"Explain," Erick rumbled.

"What is Doug? About the best nuclear physicist in the world. Working on top-secret projects in nuclear fission. Advanced research. The Government is underwriting everything Bryant College is doing—because Douglas is here."

"So?"

"They want him because of his ability. Because he *knows* things. Because of their size-relationship to this universe, they can subject our lives to as careful a scrutiny as we maintain in the biology labs of—well, of a culture of Sarcina Pulmonum. But that doesn't mean they're culturally advanced over us."

"Of course!" Pete Berg exclaimed. "They want Doug for his knowledge. They want to pirate him off and make use of his mind for their own culture."

"Parasites!" Jean gasped. "They must have always depended on us. Don't you see? Men in the past who have disappeared, spirited off by these creatures." She shivered. "They probably regard us as some sort of testing ground, where techniques and knowledge are painfully developed—for their benefit."

Douglas started to answer, but the words never escaped his mouth. He sat rigid in his chair, his head turned to one side.

Outside, in the darkness beyond the house, someone was calling his name.

HE GOT up and moved toward the door. They were all staring at him in amazement.

"What is it?" Bill demanded. "What's the matter, Doug?"

Laura caught his arm. "What's wrong? Are you sick? Say something! *Doug!*"

Professor Douglas jerked free and pulled open the front door. He stepped out onto the porch. There was a faint moon. A soft light hovered over everything.

"Professor Douglas!" The voice again, sweet and fresh—a girl's voice.

Outlined by the moonlight, at the foot of the porch steps, stood a girl. Blonde-haired, perhaps twenty years old. In a checkered skirt, pale Angora sweater, a silk kerchief around her neck. She was waving at him anxiously, her small face pleading.

"Professor, do you have a minute? Something terrible has gone wrong with . . ." Her voice trailed off as she moved nervously away from the house, into the darkness.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

He could hear her voice faintly. She was moving off.

Douglas was torn with indecision. He hesitated, then hurried impatiently down the stairs after her. The girl retreated from him, wringing her hands together, her full lips twisting wildly with despair. Under her sweater, her breasts rose and fell in an agony of terror, each quiver sharply etched by the moonlight.

"What is it?" Douglas cried. "What's wrong?" He hurried angrily after her. "For God's sake, stand still!"

The girl was still moving away, drawing him farther and farther away from the house, toward the great green expanse of lawn, the beginning of the campus. Douglas was overcome with annoyance. Damn the girl! Why couldn't she wait for him?

"Hold on a minute!" he said, hurrying after her. He started out onto the dark lawn, puffing with exertion. "Who are you? What the hell do you—"

There was a flash. A bolt of blinding light crashed past him and seared a smoking pit in the lawn a few feet away.

DOUGLAS halted, dumfounded. A second bolt came, this one just ahead of him. The wave of heat threw him back. He stumbled and half fell. The girl had abruptly stopped. She stood silent and unmoving, her face expressionless. There was a peculiar waxy quality to her. She had become, all at once, utterly inanimate.

But he had no time to think about that. Douglas turned and lumbered back toward the house. A third bolt came, striking just ahead of him. He veered to the right and threw himself into the shrubs growing near the wall. Rolling and gasping, he pressed against the concrete side of the house, squeezing next to it as hard as he could.

There was a sudden shimmer in the star-studded sky above him. A faint motion. Then nothing. He was alone. The bolts ceased. And—

The girl was gone, also.

A decoy. A clever imitation to lure him away from the house, so he'd move out into the open where they could take a shot at him.

He got shakily to his feet and edged around the side of the house. Bill Henderson and Laura and Berg were on the porch, talking nervously and looking around for him. There was his car, parked in the driveway. Maybe, if he could reach it—

He peered up at the sky. Only stars. No hint of them. If he could get in his car and drive off, down the highway, away from the mountains, toward Denver, where it was lower, maybe he'd be safe.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Only ten yards to the car. Thirty feet. If he could once get in it—

He ran. Fast. Down the path and along the driveway. He grabbed open the car door and leaped inside. With one quick motion he threw the switch and released the brake.

The car glided forward. The motor came on with a sputter. Douglas bore down desperately on the gas. The car leaped forward. On the porch, Laura shrieked and started down the stairs. Her cry and Bill's startled shout were lost in the roar of the engine.

A moment later he was on the highway, racing away from town, down the long, curving road toward Denver.

HE COULD call Laura from Denver. She could join him. They could take the train east. The hell with Bryant College. His life was at stake.

He drove for hours without stopping, through the night. The sun came up and rose slowly in the sky. More cars were on the road now. He passed a couple of diesel trucks rumbling slowly and cumbersomely along.

He was beginning to feel a little better. The mountains were behind. More distance between him and them . . .

His spirits rose as the day warmed. There were hundreds of universities and laboratories scattered around the country. He could easily continue with his work someplace else. They'd never get him, once he was out of the mountains.

He slowed his car down. The gas gauge was near empty.

To the right of the road was a filling station and a small roadside cafe. The sight of the cafe reminded him he hadn't eaten breakfast. His stomach was beginning to protest. There were a couple of cars pulled up in front of the cafe. A few people were sitting inside at the counter.

He turned off the highway and coasted into the gas station.

"Fill her up!" he called to the attendant. He got out on the hot gravel, leaving the car in gear. His mouth watered. A plateful of hotcakes, side order of ham, steaming black coffee . . . "Can I leave her here?"

"The car?" The white-clad

attendant unscrewed the cap and began filling the tank. "What do you mean?"

"Fill her up and park her for me. I'll be out in a few minutes. I want to catch some breakfast."

"Breakfast?"

Douglas was annoyed. What was the matter with the man? He indicated the cafe. A truck driver had pushed the screen door open and was standing on the step, picking his teeth thoughtfully. Inside, the waitress hustled back and forth. He could already smell the coffee, the bacon frying on the griddle. A faint tinny sound of a juke box drifted out. A warm, friendly sound. "The cafe."

The attendant stopped pumping gas. He put down the hose slowly and turned toward Douglas, a strange expression on his face. "What cafe?" he said.

THE cafe wavered and abruptly winked out. Douglas fought down a scream of terror. Where the cafe had been there was only an open field.

Greenish brown grass. A few rusty tin cans. Bottles. Debris. A leaning fence. Off in the distance, the outline of the mountains.

Douglas tried to get hold of himself. "I'm a little tired," he muttered. He climbed unsteadily back into the car. "How much?"

"I just hardly began to fill the—"

"Here." Douglas pushed a bill at him. "Get out of the way." He turned on the motor and raced out onto the highway, leaving the astonished attendant staring after him.

That had been close. Damn close. A trap. And he had almost stepped inside.

But the thing that really terrified him wasn't the closeness. *He was out of the mountains and they had still been ahead of him.*

It hadn't done any good. He wasn't any safer than last night. They were everywhere.

The car sped along the highway. He was getting near Denver—but so what? It wouldn't make any difference. He could dig a hole in Death Valley and still not be safe. They were after him and they weren't going to give up. That much was clear.

He racked his mind desperately. He had to think of something, some way to get loose.

A parasitic culture. A race that preyed on humans, utilized human knowledge and discoveries. Wasn't that what Bill had said? They were after his know-how, his unique ability and knowledge of nuclear physics. He had been singled out, separated from the pack because of his superior ability and training. They would keep after him until they got him. And then—what?

Horror gripped him. The

gold ingot. The decoy. The girl had *looked* perfectly real. The cafe full of people. Even the smells of food. Bacon frying. Steaming coffee.

God, if only he were just an ordinary person, without skill, without special ability. If only—

A sudden flapping sound. The car lurched. Douglas cursed wildly. A flat. Of all times . . .

Of all times.

DOUGLAS brought the car to a halt at the side of the road. He switched off the motor and put on the brake. For a while he sat in silence. Finally he fumbled in his coat and got out a mashed package of cigarettes. He lit up slowly and then rolled the window down to let in some air.

He was trapped, of course. There was nothing he could do. The flat had obviously been arranged. Something on the road, sprinkled down from above. Tacks, probably.

The highway was deserted. No cars in sight. He was utterly alone, between towns. Denver was thirty miles ahead. No chance of getting there. Nothing around him but terribly level fields, desolated plains.

Nothing but level ground—and the blue sky above.

Douglas peered up. He couldn't see them, but they were there, waiting for him to get out of his car. His knowledge, his ability, would be utilized by an alien culture. He would become an instrument in their hands. All his learning would be theirs. He would be a slave and nothing more.

Yet, in a way, it was a compliment. From a whole society, he alone had been selected. His skill and knowledge, over everything else. A faint glow rose in his cheeks. Probably they had been studying him for some time. The great eye had no doubt often peered down through its telescope, or microscope, or whatever it was, peered down and seen him. Seen his ability and realized what that would be worth in its own culture.

Douglas opened the car door. He stepped out onto the hot pavement. He dropped his cigarette and calmly stubbed it out. He took a deep breath, stretching and yawning. He could see the tacks now, bright bits of light on the surface of the pavement. Both front tires were flat.

Something shimmered above him. Douglas waited quietly. Now that it had finally come, he was no longer afraid. He watched with a kind of detached curiosity. The something grew. It fanned out over him, swelling and expanding. For a moment it hesitated. Then it descended.

Douglas stood still as the enormous cosmic net closed over him. The strands pressed against him as the net rose. He was going up, heading toward the sky. But he was relaxed, at peace, no longer afraid.

Why be afraid? He would be doing much the same work as always. He would miss Laura and the college, of course, the intellectual companionship of the faculty, the bright faces of the students. But no doubt he would find companionship up above. Persons to work with. Trained minds with which he could communicate.

THE net was lifting him faster and faster. The ground fell rapidly away. The Earth dwindled from a flat surface to a globe. Douglas watched with professional interest. Above him, beyond the intricate strands of the net, he could see the outline of the other universe, the new world toward which he was heading.

Shapes. Two enormous shapes squatting down. Two incredibly huge figures bending over. One was drawing in the net. The other watched, holding something in its hand. A landscape. Dim forms too vast for Douglas to comprehend.

At last, a thought came. *What a struggle.*

It was worth it, thought the other creature.

Their thoughts roared through him. Powerful thoughts, from immense minds.

I was right. The biggest yet. What a catch!

Must weigh all of twenty-four vagets!

At least!

Suddenly Douglas' composure left him. A chill of horror flashed through his mind. What were they talking about? What did they mean?

But then he was being dumped from the net. He was falling. Something was coming up at him. A flat, shiny surface. What was it?

Oddly, it looked almost like a frying pan.

END

Promoters of institutional research are ill-informed according to W. J. Kroll, originator of the famous Kroll process used for producing metallic titanium and zirconium. Kroll points out that in the last few years two-fifths of all U. S. patents have been taken out by individual inventors, and that only a very few institutional scientists ever received the Nobel Prize . . . The problem seems to break down into basic and applied research. The former needs little organization and not much equipment—only an idea. But applied research does lend itself to organization . . . Setting up institutions and teams just happens to be the easiest way of accomplishing this.

—*Institutional Research*

the scarlet hexapod

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Of course they were batty

. . . wouldn't you be if you

were right all the time?

"HE CERTAINLY is a cute animal," Mrs. Norris said, looking down at Jeff, who had tied himself into a close lover's knot around her left ankle. "That color's *beautiful*. But what is he, anyway? I thought he was some sort of dog when he came squirming under the gate to say hello, but I never saw a dog with six legs."

"He's a Darkside hexapod," Bixi Clovis replied. "Maybe you've read about them—hexies have had a good deal of publicity lately."

"A hexapod? . . . Yes, I remember seeing a voca-piece in the last issue of *Vue* about them. But I thought they were always violet or plum color."

"Usually they are. But Sonsy's last litter had two that were that sort of sunset color, like Jeff, and one that was jet black all over except for her toenails and the irises of her eyes. They were a sort of kingfisher blue."

"It sounds lovely."

"Oh, she was. Everyone that saw her wanted her."

"You raise them to sell?" Mrs. Norris asked. Jeff had come loose from her ankle and was lying on the garden path in front of her, all six feet raised in adoration, while his bushy, flame-colored tail thumped rhythmically on the plastic stepping stones.

"Well, yes and no," Bixi answered. "In the first place, all that stuff about how they have litters as soon as they get some borax to eat is nonsense. They are crazy about borax, of course, but they have litters when they feel like it, and not before. The litter Jeff was born in is the first one Sonsy's had in six years. And in the second place, you can't sell a hexapod unless he wants to be sold. If he doesn't like the person you sell him to, he'll come right home again. Hexies have a better sense of direction than carrier pigeons, and they won't compromise—either it's love at first sight or it's no sale."

"The voca-piece said they were highly intelligent." Mrs. Norris was rubbing Jeff between his ears; his eyes were nearly shut, and he was making a noise that was a cross between a gurgle and a coo.

"Oh, they are. Really, they are uncanny. They won't learn tricks or anything like that—if you try to teach them, they just look at you and thump their tails. But they seem to understand everything you say, and Bill, my husband, says that Sonsy's always doing things he only thought about her doing. The other day he couldn't find a blank for the dictatype, and she picked one up in her mouth and brought it over to him."

JEFF had climbed into Mrs. Norris' arms somehow and was licking her ear appreciatively. He looked startling and improbable against the background of her white dress and silvery hair.

"You know," she said, "I feel like I've just *got* to have this little fellow. I've been wanting a pet for some time, but Evan—he's my nephew—says it would be too much trouble, traveling around the way we do. He likes to be always on the go. But I just know *Jeff* won't be any trouble; he's so cute and sweet. How much is he, anyway?"

Bixi told her, feeling a little apologetic.

"Oh," Mrs. Norris said. "Well, I guess I can afford it. I won't tell Evan, though. He—well, I won't tell him."

The big zircoridiums on her hand glittered brilliantly as she put her thumbprint on the voucher. The papers were made out, the transaction was complete. Jeff licked Bixi politely on the nose in farewell, and trotted sedately after his new boss.

The next morning, while Bixi and her husband were at breakfast, there was a scratching at the door. "It's Jeff," Bixi reported when she came back. "He looks as if he has something on what passes for his mind. Do you suppose something's wrong?"

Jeff trotted into the center of the room, fixed his eyes on the Clovises, and began to howl.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" Bill asked, holding out a piece of whost toward the hexapod.

Jeff sniffed briefly at the whost, wagged his tail twice, and then began howling more loudly than ever.

"I'm going to call the hotel," Bixi said above the din. "This is very funny. I'd have said Mrs. Norris was crazy about him and he about her."

Bill nodded.

"The clerk says the Norrises left for Bagdad by stratoliner this morning," Bixi Clovis reported after a session on the video.

"Bagdad?"

"Mm-hmm. And when I asked him if they had a hexapod with them, he said, 'What is a hexapod?' So—where's Jeff?"

"He went out of the room while you were talking. Probably went back to the hotel to look for Mrs. Norris. Don't worry about him; he's got more sense about traffic than most human beings."

"Oh, I'm not nervous about him. But what's going on? I wonder—"

Bill left to go to work, and Bixi went on wondering. Late that afternoon the clerk at the stratoport called on the video.

"Say, is this your hexapod?" he asked, holding up the struggling, scarlet form of Jeff for her to see.

". . . Why, yes."

"Well, you better come down and get him. It's a good thing I remembered you people breed hexapods. He's been trying to get on stratoliners all afternoon. Twice they stopped him at the gangplank, and once he got into the cabin before he was caught."

"Were the liners for Bagdad?" Bixi asked, feeling a thrill of superstitious awe that was almost fear.

"Why, no, they were en route for South America, for Valparaiso. I don't know how he happened to pick three headed for the same place."

"Valparaiso. O.K., I'll come down and get him."

"YOU'RE sure it isn't dangerous, Evan?" Mrs. Norris asked. "I must confess the idea rather frightens me."

"Oh, not in the least, Aunt Emily," her lanky nephew said. "I wouldn't want you to try it if I thought it might be dangerous. But I know you'll enjoy it. First the long ski run—"

"Do you think I can manage skis at my age, Evan?" Mrs. Norris asked a little doubtfully.

"Oh, they're motor-driven. No trick to it at all. First the long ski run and then, just at the top, when you're almost two kilometers up, the anti-grav comes on automatically, and you go floating slowly down. The harbor's in front of you and the mountains behind; I read the other day that that view of Valparaiso is one of the seven wonders of the modern world. You wouldn't want to miss a thrill like that, would you, Auntie?"

"No, I guess not," Mrs. Norris agreed. Her face grew wistful. "You haven't had any answer to your grams to Mrs. Clovis yet, have you?"

"No, not a word."

"I can't understand it. She seemed so conscientious and reliable. What do you suppose happened to the little fellow? Sometimes I think we ought to go back to Oakland and hunt for him."

"Oh, nonsense. It's a racket, that's all. She has him trained to come back from wherever she sells him, so she can sell him over and over again. You are lucky to get out of it without more trouble, Aunt Emily, dealing with people like that. . . . You'd better get your things on, dear, before it's too late to make the ski jump today."

"IT IS beautiful, Evan," Mrs. Norris said, looking at the prospect before her. She gave her nephew's hand a quick squeeze. "I'm glad you made me come. Have I got my feet in the skis right?"

Evan knelt in the snow and looked at the fastenings. "Exactly right," he reported. "I'll be just behind you, Auntie, and remember, don't lean too far out at the turns." He walked over to the anti-grav mechanism.

"I won't, dear. What's that man yelling about?"

"Senor! Senor!" The fat little man who had taken their admission fees at the barrier was running up the snowy slope toward them, puffing and stumbling over his feet. *"Cuidado! Muy peligroso! No toques la maquina! Cuidado!"*

"Probably wants more money," Evan said, turning negligently to face him. Mrs. Norris' skis began to move. "I'll take care of it."

"You were right, Evan," Emily Norris said when she and her nephew were down by the copter again. "It *is* one of the wonders of the world. The Terrestrial Chamber of Commerce isn't exaggerating when it says there're things on Terra that none of the other planets can match. It was a little scary when I got to the top of the incline, because I thought, What if the anti-grav *doesn't* go on? I'd have been smashed into a dozen pieces. But I went floating down like a feather. But where were you? I waited quite a while before I thought of looking for you here. Did you decide not to make the jump? You really missed something."

"Got into a row with that damned ticket taker," Evan said a little thickly. His face was pale. "Jabber, jabber—couldn't make out what he wanted. Upset me—no use making that jump then. It was spoiled." He cleared his throat. "Aunt Emily, how would you like to go to China next? I know how nervous you are about getting off of Terra, and we haven't been to China for several years."

"To China?" Her face was doubtful. "Why, Evan, we only just got here. Wouldn't you like to stay a little while before we start traveling again? It's so beautiful here."

"Yes, I know, Auntie, but you know how easily I get bored. I'm afraid that's just the way I am. Restless. Impatient." He was chewing at his lower lip.

". . . Well, all right, dear. Anything you say."

BILL CLOVIS stuck out his jaw. "I will not take a stratoliner to Asia!" he said defiantly. "What's the matter with you, Bixi? Are you and that blasted animal both crazy? I had to draw a big hunk out of our savings account to get the tickets to Valparaiso when Jeff acted up, and now one of you has decided, before we even get there, that we've got to go to Asia instead. *Asia!* And we're only to Mexico City! God only knows if I can get a refund on the tickets."

"Ssh!" Bixi said warningly. "People can hear you all over the waiting room." Jeff put his front feet up on her knees and looked at her pleadingly; he had been shivering ever since they got into the Ciudad Mexico stratoport. His bushy tail was lusterless and limp. "Can't you see Jeff knows something? He didn't keep pulling us over to the Chinese stratoliners for nothing. He's nearly worried to death. It's serious. You know how hexies are."

"Yeah, I know how they are. Crazy. He's had too much borax, that's all. Don't you realize I can't possibly get back to work on Monday if we go to China? This is Saturday! And Darnell is out for my scalp anyhow. I've had enough of this idiotic wild-goose chase."

"But darling—"

"Jeff's imagining the whole thing! We're going home!"

"BUT I FEEL so weak," Mrs. Norris said pleadingly. "I ought to be over the food poisoning by now, oughtn't I, Evan dear? Surely it wouldn't hurt me to have a little more to eat. I feel so hungry and faint all the time, and I never get anything except broth."

Evan Norris shook his head. "Now, Auntie, the doctor knows what's good for you. You don't realize that you've been very ill. If you overload your stomach, you might have a relapse."

Mrs. Norris sighed. "I don't like the nurse, either," she said.

"Why not? Isn't she competent?"

"Oh, I guess so, but—she isn't respectful, and she's so rough when she gives me my bath. And yesterday I heard her muttering something under her breath when I asked her for my somni-spray."

"Aunt Emily, you mustn't go imagining things."

"I do try, but . . . Evan, couldn't I have an English doctor? I'm sure Dr. Chung does not understand me when I tell him about my symptoms, and I know *I* don't understand anything *he* says. I always feel worse after I take my medicine; it isn't doing me any good."

"Now, Auntie," Evan said with a touch of severity, "you mustn't talk like that about Dr. Chung. He's the best physician in Canton."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Norris said. Tears came into her eyes; she cried so easily nowadays. "I wish I had that little hexapod I bought. What was his name? Jeff. I wish I had Jeff."

"Don't think about it, Auntie," Evan advised. "It isn't good for you. After lunch there are a few papers I want you to sign and thumb for me."

"I thought I did everything like that in Valparaiso. Oh, Evan, I just don't feel equal to business now."

"All you have to do is print your thumb a couple of times. That's all I want you to do."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Norris said again. Weakly she turned her head toward the wall. It annoyed Evan to see her cry. "Oh, dear."

"I *KNEW* you'd come, Bill!" Bixi said. Her face was radiant. "I'm so glad you're here!" She gave her husband a vigorous hug.

"After I got your gram, what else could I do? Couldn't have you getting into a lot of trouble by yourself," he answered with a hint of grimness. "Everything's fixed; I got leave from the office, and the hexies at home are fine. Listen, are *they* still here?"

"The Norrises? Sure. They are three doors down, on the same balcony that this room is." Bixi's face grew sober. "She's sick in bed, Bill," she said with a rush. "I pretended to be an agent of China Tourist interviewing visitors. Her nephew talked to me at the door. I looked over his shoulder and saw *her*. She's so thin, and her face is a funny color, almost green. They have a Chinese doctor and a dizzy blonde nurse with the tallest stilt heels I ever saw, and her uniform fits her so tight it's a wonder she can breathe without an oxygen mask. I'm sure Mrs. Norris isn't sick. You'd know what I mean if you saw her nephew and that nurse."

Bill rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "How's Jeff taking it?"

"He spends most of the time on the balcony outside their room, listening. I was afraid he'd try to jump in through the window (this hotel is a dump—windows with glass in them), but he stays out of sight and listens. But what are we going to do? Even if something *is* wrong, Evan is her nephew, and we're not even friends of hers. If we try to start anything, he'll just take her somewhere else and—what are we going to do?"

There was a long, thoughtful pause. "I guess we'll have to leave it to Jeff," Bill Clovis said at last.

"THANK YOU, Aunt Emily," Evan Norris said. He folded the documents his aunt had just thumbed and signed, and put them neatly away in a dispatch case. "It's almost sixteen," he said, looking at his informeter. "Mab—the nurse—is still off duty. What do you say we have tea together, Auntie dear?"

"You're sure it won't upset me?" Mrs. Norris said feebly from the bed. "Yesterday the tea made me feel a little sick."

"It was only your imagination. A nice cup of tea will do you good." He rang the service bell.

"Couldn't I have one of those little crumpets?" Mrs. Norris asked when the tea had been brought. "They smell so good."

"Better not, Auntie," Evan advised, beginning to pour out the tea. "It might make—good God, what's that noise?"

An appalling racket had begun at the window, a scratching, grinding, clashing, rattling noise, like a fight between a Martian vrys and a dhobi in an electrical storm.

Evan went over to the window and looked out. "Nothing there or on the balcony, as far as I could see," he reported when he came back to the tea table. "Can't imagine what caused it. I'll complain to the management if it happens again."

"It *is* refreshing," Mrs. Norris declared after a pause, during which she had been sipping from her cup. "Not at all like what I had yesterday. Don't you think it's better, Evan? Why, Evan, what's the matter? *Evan!* Are you ill?"

Evan did not answer. He had slumped back against the side of his chair. His face was a dull red and his breathing rasping and slow. As Mrs. Norris watched, the thin porcelain teacup slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor.

Jeff jumped through the open window. He paused to lick Mrs. Norris quickly on her astonished nose, and then took his stand in front of her unconscious nephew. He began to bark. Jeff had a deep chest, even for a hexapod. He was a really notable barker when he chose. They heard him all over the hotel.

"HE SAVED my life," Mrs. Norris said. Jeff, who was lying curled elaborately around her ankles, thumped the eutex languidly with his tail. He had the air of a hexapod whose troubles are over.

"If I'd drunk the tea Evan had fixed for me, as weak as I was . . . It was supposed to finish me off, you see, make it look like a natural death . . . But this little fellow made all that racket at the window just at the right time, and Evan got mixed up and drank it himself. I couldn't understand what had happened at first; I thought he'd had some sort of fit. I never was so glad to see anybody in my life, Mrs. Clovis, as I was when you came to the window, after Jeff began to bark, and asked me if your hexapod was annoying me. It was like waking up from a dreadful dream. Are you sure five thousand will be enough to build the new hexapod kennel, Mrs. Clovis? I'd be glad to give you more; I feel that I owe you people a great, great deal."

"Skip it," Bixi said hastily. "Jeff deserves all the credit. Where is Evan now?"

"The court sentenced him to be rehabilitated." Mrs. Norris sighed. "I hope the treatment does him good. It's hard for me to believe; his mother was my husband's favorite sister. But now that I look back on it, I realize that at Valparaiso, too, he was trying . . . He meant to damage the anti-grav mechanism on the ski-jump there, so I'd fall. He said at the trial that the nurse (she wasn't a nurse at all, really) suggested it, but that Dr. Chung didn't know what was going on. Evan never gave me any of the medicine the doctor left—what I had was drugs he and that nurse got—and they lied to the doctor about my treatment . . . Anyhow, I still have Jeff. When I get a little stronger, I'm going shopping for the finest collar for him I can find. He's a wonderful, wonderful animal, Mrs. Clovis."

"Yes," Bill Clovis answered, smiling at Bixi, "it all goes to show the truth of the old saying Bixi is always quoting at me: 'If a hexapod bites a man, put the man in jail.' Hexapods are always right."

END

How could it give away such buys? Very easy—by doi[ng]

a business in pennies and a profit in billions!

bargain basement

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

JACK HANSHAW was madder than a wet hen and his roommate, Ken Adaman, was enjoying his misfortune hugely.

"Not a blame thing!" snarled Jack, fiddling with the knobs of the television set. "Not even static lines. First they give me a set without a plug-in cord, and now this one's got a no-good picture tube."

"You get what you pay for," said Ken, laughing. "I've warned you about these so-called bargains. But what's this about the plug-in cord?"

Ken had been at work the day before, when Jack first brought the new television set into their apartment and discovered that omission.

"I didn't see any point in saying anything about that last night," admitted Jack. "After I bought the thing yesterday and brought it home, I found out it didn't have a cord to plug it in—not even a connection in the back for a cord. I took it back to them and they said something about the wrong kind of power and fixed it up for me last night."

"You got stung, old buddy," said Ken, unwinding his long legs from the arm of the easy chair. "They probably made it from junk parts."

"It doesn't look like it," said Jack stubbornly.

It didn't. The television set was shiny and new-looking, although rather odd. With a thirty-five-inch screen, it was only about six inches thick, and it had a strange antenna of concentric circles on top instead of the conventional rabbit ears. There were only two dials, one for the channels (it was lettered instead of numbered) and one for off-on and volume.

"I'd take it back and demand my money," said Ken.

"I'll take it back, all right, but if they'll fix it, I don't want my money back. Guess how much it cost me."

"Well . . ." Ken pulled a stubby pipe from his coat pocket and began to pack it slowly from a humidor on the chairside table. "Knowing your bargains, I'd say about a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Two dollars," said Jack. "Two dollars and no strings attached."

KEN WHISTLED. "I smell a sucker game somewhere."

"Maybe so, but what's two dollars? The materials are worth more than that as junk. And if they fix it . . . How about going along with me to return it, Ken?"

Ken lit his pipe carefully and glanced at his wristwatch.

"Okay," he said, "if we can be back in an hour. I'm curious to see this place, but I've got a date with Lorene tonight and I have to get cleaned up."

Jack winced. The roommates were competitors for the hand of Lorene Shavely, the pert brunette in the tobacco store down the street. But Ken was getting so much the better of it that it could be called competition in name only by now.

"It's only about five blocks, on Gehannon Street," Jack said. "We'll be back in time."

He repacked the television set in its box.

"Ardex," said Ken, reading the name on the box. "Off-brand. I never heard of it before."

They set out, Jack carrying the box under one arm. The set was remarkably light for its size.

The street lights were coming on along Gehannon Street, for it was five o'clock on a winter afternoon. Jack bought a late edition from a newsboy on the corner.

"Probably closed by now," said Ken.

But it wasn't. Just past Wing Fan's Chinese laundry, Jack turned into an alley and went down a flight of concrete steps. There was a door there, leading into a basement under the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant. It was unlighted, and there were no signs there to indicate anything but that the Grove Brothers Circus, Greatest Show on Earth, was coming to town two years ago.

But when they opened the battered wooden door, the light inside was like fairyland. Soft, of many changing hues, it lit a spotless expanse of floor that stretched away farther than Ken had realized the basement extended. The floor was broken by merchandise-loaded counters and gleaming machines. Here and there a clerk moved, in raiment that changed color with the light.

One of the clerks approached them. He was black-eyed, black-haired and handsome, and wore a tunic and balloon trousers.

"Ah, Mr. Hanshaw!" he exclaimed, recognizing Jack. "Glad to see you back again. But I see you have the—uh—television with you. Still having trouble?"

"Yeah," said Jack. "The screen's no good. No picture at all."

The clerk looked puzzled. "The tube couldn't be bad. It must be in the transmission facilities."

"You mean the TV stations? I don't see how—"

"Different methods of transmission," said the clerk hastily. "Just a minute, Mr. Hanshaw, and I'll see what our communications man can do about this."

He took the box from Jack and started off.

"Wait," said Jack. "Here's your newspaper."

WITH A SMILE of thanks, the man accepted the paper and disappeared into the depths of the basement store.

"What's with the newspaper business?" demanded Ken.

"That's part of the bargain," said Jack. "When I bought the television set, I agreed to bring him a late newspaper every time I come in the store."

"Hmm. Queer setup. And

what kind of funny clothes is he wearing?"

"Store uniform, I guess."

"Some uniform," remarked Ken, who worked in a men's clothing store. "That fabric's spun glass, I think. And some of these people in 'store uniforms' seem to be customers."

Indeed, some of the perhaps two dozen people visible, all dressed like the clerk, appeared to be making purchases.

While waiting for the clerk to return, the two of them looked around at the nearby counters.

"Funny thing about this place," said Ken, "is I don't know what seventy per cent of these gadgets they're selling are. Those I can recognize look strange. Like that set of dishes—I'm no housewife, but I've never seen shapes like those before."

"I noticed that, too," said Jack. "But anything they've got that we can use, we can't afford not to buy, at the prices they ask."

"Let's wait and see how the television set turns out," suggested Ken.

THE clerk returned, empty-handed.

"My communications man thinks he can fix your comm—television set so it will be all right, if you can bring us a technical manual on television sets. I hate to ask you to go to such trouble—"

"What! You mean you've got a television repairman who doesn't have a manual on the things?"

"Not on the type you need," said the clerk apologetically. "It wouldn't matter what brand or trade name the manual applies to."

"Why can't you have your communications man go out and buy his own?" demanded Ken. "Or order one?"

"Well—let's just say it would cause great inconvenience at this time. Mr. Hanshaw, I realize it would inconvenience you also, so in return for the favor I will be willing to give you, free, any item of merchandise in the store."

"Fair enough," agreed Jack, his eyes gleaming. "I'll bring it tomorrow."

"Incidentally, sir, would your friend be interested in a purchase while you are here?"

"No, absolutely not," said Ken, turning away.

Jack caught his arm. "Oh, come on, Ken! Price these things, anyhow. You'll be astonished. Show Mr. Adaman something he can use."

"Mr. Adaman?" The clerk's eyes widened delightedly. "Why, sir, that's my name, too. Edigo Adaman."

"Mine's Kenneth Adaman," said Ken shortly, but he showed more interest.

"It isn't a common name," said Edigo. "Are you by any chance a merchant, Mr. Adaman?"

"You might say so. I'm a

clerk in a men's clothing store."

EDIGO nodded gravely. "My family has been in the mercantile business for many generations," he said. "My father owns this store and it will be the largest in the Americas when we finish it. Now, Mr. Adaman, do you see anything that interests you? Anything at all?"

"Well," said Ken, moving over to a counter, "is this a watch?"

"Yes, sir, and a very good one." Edigo picked it up. It was a thin dial, with three hands and twenty-four numerals instead of the usual twelve.

"It's very nice-looking. But it's a pocket watch, isn't it? I wear a wristwatch."

"Oh, no," said Edigo. "Hold out your arm."

Ken obeyed. Edigo placed the dial on his wrist, and it clung without apparent support.

"Say, that's keen!" exclaimed Ken. "Some sort of magnetism, I suppose? How much?"

"Would—would fifty cents be too much?" asked Edigo anxiously.

"Fifty cents? Sold!" Ken pulled a coin from his pocket.

"Oh, no, sir. Not the cash. Deposit it in the account, please, and bring me the deposit slip. Mr. Hanshaw knows the bank."

"That's right," said Jack. "Broadway National, account of Supercolossal Mercantile Company. Here's the deposit slip on the two dollars for the television set."

"And we'll have it straightened out for you right away, Mr. Hanshaw, if you can only bring us the manual."

As the two of them headed for the door to the basement, Ken said to Jack in a low tone: "There goes another customer out ahead of us. I'm going to stop him outside and see if he can give us the answers to some of the things I don't understand about this place."

The customer, dressed like Edigo and all the others in the basement, went through the door just ahead of them. Jack caught it just before it shut. But when he and Ken mounted the steps, the man was nowhere in sight, either up or down the alley.

"Where could he have gone?" asked Ken in amazement. "He'd have had to run like hell to get out of the alley before we got up here."

They walked to the mouth of the alley and emerged into the glare of the neon lights. Ken held up his new watch and looked at it in a stunned sort of way.

"Say, you know something?" he said thoughtfully. "That fellow Edigo Adaman looks vaguely familiar to me."

"I noticed that, too," said

Jack. "Look like any of your relatives?"

Ken considered. "No, not in the least."

SEVERAL days later, Jack was in the tobacco store chatting with Lorene. Mr. Schmit, the store's owner, registered silent disapproval in the background, but was not likely to protest openly unless Lorene slighted a customer.

Jack had told Lorene about the strange bargain basement the day after he and Ken visited it. He found that Ken had mentioned it to her that night, too.

"I couldn't find the kind of complete television manual they need at any of the bookstores," said Jack gloomily. "I had to have one of them order me one, and while I'm waiting, no television. The man said it was color TV, too. I can't understand any store that big not getting its own manuals."

"Have you ever been upstairs?" asked Lorene.

"Upstairs? There's nothing there but the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant."

"Oh. Ken said they had something like elevators going up, and it looked like they might have floors above."

"I didn't know Ken had been back after that night," said Jack in surprise. "He didn't say anything to me about it. I got the impression he thought the whole thing was a fake."

Lorene's black eyes sparkled as she smiled, and she turned a cheek to exhibit oddly cut earrings.

"He brought me these earrings from there. I'd think you'd be buying other things, too, Jack, at those prices, instead of moping over that television set."

"Oh, I have," said Jack. "I bought several suits of clothes at a dollar each. They didn't have any in stock except those funny outfits they wear in the store, but I took them a picture from a magazine advertisement and they made me some suits to order."

"Is that one of them?" asked Lorene, gazing critically at the somewhat baggy suit he was wearing.

"No," said Jack sheepishly. "I thought they were too nice to wear to work. They're that spun glass, or whatever it is. Go dancing with me tonight and I'll wear one."

"Can't," said Lorene. "I've got a date with Ken."

"I never get to go out with you any more, Lorene," Jack said glumly. "What have I done to make you turn me down every time?"

"Nothing," said Lorene candidly. "I like you as a friend, Jack. But Ken—well, he's got that extra something I can't resist. We're going to get married, you know."

"No, I didn't," said Jack,

but he wasn't very surprised.

Just then Ken breezed in.

"Hi, honey," he said. "Hello, Jack. Say, you two, come out and take a look at my new car."

"New car!" squealed Lorene. "Oh, Ken! But I can't leave the store. I'll have to look from the door."

"It's down the block," said Ken. "I'll drive by, and you can get a good look tonight. Come on, Jack."

Jack went with him. The automobile was one of those low-slung, half-block-long affairs like one Jack vaguely remembered seeing pictured in a foreign car magazine.

"That's not yours," he said flatly. "Those things cost ten or fifteen thousand dollars."

"Cost me fifty," said Ken smugly. "I got it at our friend Edigo's store. Fifty bucks."

"You mean they carry things like that?"

"I took them a picture and they made it for me," said Ken. "Had to widen that door and put runways up the steps to drive it out of there. It cost me twice as much as the car to get the door widened and then bricked back the way it was. They worked on the inside and I got a crew to work on the outside."

"Seems to me they'd have had it out in the street for you, instead of building it in the basement and then having to get it out," said Jack critically, gazing up and down the gleaming length of black and chrome.

"Ha!" said Ken slyly. "That's just it, son. They couldn't. I've found out the secret of our friends in the bargain basement."

"Secret? You mean there *is* something phony about it?"

"I'll tell you while we're driving around in this dream wagon. But first let me show you something."

He went to the front of the car and raised the hood. Inside was the strangest little engine Jack had ever seen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Turbo-jet," said Ken proudly. "And if you'll notice, you can't see inside the car—one-way glass. And it's got radar brakes and a hundred other new gadgets on it."

"But I thought the turbo-jet engine was still in the future," protested Jack.

"It is," said Ken solemnly. "That's where our bargain basement is—in the future."

THE BIG CAR swept along the superhighway as silently as a floating cloud. The speedometer read 160. Ken explained that was 160 kilometers, or about 100 miles an hour. He buzzed it up to 200 kilometers once when some youngsters in a souped-up sports car sought to race with them.

"They use solar power," Ken explained, "but it's broadcast power and wouldn't work in a car sent back to the past. They made one like the picture, which just showed the outside, and I suppose they assumed we use turbo-jets back in this period. It must be pretty ancient to them."

"Why would people from the future want to set up a store in the basement under the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant?" protested Jack.

"Not *from* the future—*in* the future. For some reason, that basement door is in a time fault. People from now can go through it into the future and come back, and bring inanimate objects with them. But the people from the future can't come back to the past for some reason—that's why they can't go out and get things themselves, and that's why they want us to bring them rare antiques, like newspapers and books."

"Maybe," said Jack doubtfully. "How did you guess all this?"

"A little deduction. I had some conversations with Edigo while I was shopping there. He said he just dug that basement as the lower floor of his new fifty-story building; but actually that basement's been there for years and is supposed to be empty. It belongs to old man Caswell, who owns the building the Eat-A-Bite's in, and God knows how he's going to react if he ever walks into it and finds that store. And it's not just that. The costumes, the strange objects they have for sale, even that peculiar accent."

"HOW far in the future?" asked Jack.

"I don't know. Pretty far, I expect. How much interest does that bank account draw? You know, the one in their name, where we've been depositing the money for the things we bought?"

"Three per cent, I think, compounded quarterly."

"It would have to be compounded to amount to anything in a couple of hundred years or so."

"I still don't get it. Why do they sell things so cheap? Will prices be that much lower in the future?"

"Probably a lot higher," said Ken. "They don't even use the same sort of money we do—that's why they don't just ask us to make deposits of their own money for them. But they can afford to sell us at these ridiculously low prices because the deposits in their name draw compound interest and build up to a lot higher than the value of the merchandise in the future—*their* time. I expect every dime we deposit for them means a hundred dollars or more to them in their equivalent of our money."

"I just don't see that," said Jack. "We're in their past. How could they have us deposit money to build up for them, unless, to them, the deposits are already there?"

"Edigo—you know, Jack, that fellow still reminds me of somebody I know—Edigo explained it to me when I made him admit this future business was true. The future can be changed, and we could change the present if we could influence the past. And don't I wish I could manage *that* trick!" Ken added greedily. "So every time we put a dime in their account—pop!—at their end, they've got an extra hundred dollars or more in the bank."

"I suppose so," said Jack thoughtfully. "But how about this fellow Edigo digging the basement? The basement's already there now. The real one, I mean."

"In a hundred years, two hundred years, you think it'll still be there?" demanded Ken scornfully. "Old Caswell's basement's going to fill in again, and some time in the future, this fellow Edigo Adaman's going to dig it out again. You know, Jack, with that name, he could be a descendant of mine."

"He seemed to think he might be, from what he said that first evening."

"Look, buddy, we'll have to go back," said Ken, pulling the car into a cloverleaf to turn around. "I've got a date with Lorene tonight, and I'm sure anxious to see her face when she climbs into this buggy."

"Sure," said Jack. "But drop me off at the bargain basement, will you? I've got an idea for something I want to buy."

EDIGO LOOKED at Jack curiously. There was that odd familiarity to the man's face that Jack couldn't quite place.

"We have strict regulations against influencing an individual's attitudes by artificial means," he said. "But I don't suppose it's against the law in your time, is it?"

"Not unless it's a dangerous or habit-forming drug," said Jack. "Possession of certain drugs, you know, can get you a stiff prison sentence. But there are milder things, like perfumes and alcohol, that influence people temporarily. That's sort of what I had in mind, only with a stronger effect — not a habit-forming drug."

"Hmm," murmured Edigo. "What we have wouldn't have been discovered in your time and wouldn't be covered by law. And it isn't dangerous or habit-forming. It's prescribed by psychologists in certain cases. But I am not sure I should—"

"One hundred dollars," said Jack.

"It's a great deal for five klens' worth of . . . All right. Would you prefer it in liquid, tablet or powder form?"

"How about like this?" suggested Jack, handing over a package of chewing gum.

"Yes, it could be mixed in that. If you can wait a few minutes, I'll have our chemist prepare it."

Edigo went away with the chewing gum, and Jack gave himself over to doubts. Perhaps it wasn't fair, but what was that old saying about love and war? Jack convinced himself that Ken hadn't been fair in getting that flashy car.

What if Ken had thought of the same thing?

A momentary chill passed over Jack. But no. Ken didn't need it.

In a few moments, Edigo returned with the chewing gum. It looked no different. Jack couldn't tell whether it was the same gum, with a new ingredient added, or new sticks put in the old wrappers. It didn't matter.

"Thank you. I'll deposit the hundred dollars right away," said Jack. He took the gum and left.

He went straight to the tobacco store. He was just in time. Lorene was getting her hat and jacket on to return home. Surprisingly, Ken was not waiting outside for her with the new car.

"I'll walk you home, Lorene," suggested Jack.

"All right," she agreed, smiling at him. "Ken was to pick me up, but he phoned and said he had to work late on inventory."

They left the store together.

"Have some chewing gum," suggested Jack, offering her a stick. It was much better than trying to slip liquid or a tablet in a milk shake.

"Not right now," she said. "It's too soon before supper."

"Oh, come on," he invited jovially. "You only live once. I'll have some, too."

No harm in that. It couldn't change his feelings much, anyhow.

She accepted a stick, and they chewed as they walked. Jack could guess her feelings from the intensification of his own. Suddenly Lorene was the most beautiful woman in the world—Cleopatra, Helen, the Queen of Sheba. He would have died for her gladly.

He took her hand in his and squeezed it. She leaned against his shoulder and turned starry eyes up to him. That walking kiss was the most ecstatic thing he had ever experienced.

"Let's get married, Lorene," he said huskily. "Now."

"Yes, Jack, yes," she sighed.

KEN TOOK the announcement rather hard. After all, he and Lorene already had set their wedding date. He looked very thoughtful, but Jack was not worried. Ken would never suspect that Lorene had been won away from him by a package of chewing gum doctored with some unknown drug from the future.

Jack and Lorene would not

be able to get married until the next day, because the city hall had closed for the afternoon and they were unable to get a license. They spent the evening shopping in the bargain basement for Lorene's trousseau, ordering things from pictures in magazine advertisements, and planning for the future.

"I'll get them to make us a car like Ken's," said Jack, "and maybe we can work out some way of buying a house through them. With this setup, we can live like royalty, even on my salary."

THEIR wedding was a peculiar one—as the minister pronounced them man and wife, Jack's clothing vanished. He was kissing his bride when a sudden chill and the gasps of those around him made him realize he was in his underwear.

He borrowed a suit from the minister and took Lorene back to the apartment. Ken was packing his things.

"I'll move my stuff to a hotel until I can find another apartment," said Ken. "Call me a cab, will you, old man? Somebody's stolen my car."

Jack and Lorene were to leave on their honeymoon the next day. That afternoon he announced his intention of going to the bargain basement and lodging a complaint.

"That suit and shirt I had on were clothes I bought there," he said. "If their stuff's going to disintegrate like that, it's not worth even what little I paid for it. After that trouble with the television set . . . Say, what happened to the television set? I'll bet Ken took it with him!"

"And to think I almost married him!" shuddered Lorene.

On the way to the bargain basement, Jack explained to Lorene what Ken had told him: how the bargain basement existed in the future, and the door to it was a fault in time.

They passed Wing Fan's laundry and turned into the alley. They went down the steps to the basement door and opened it.

A blank wall of raw earth met their eyes.

"What in blazes!" exclaimed Jack.

There were footsteps in the alley above them. Old man Caswell came down the steps with a policeman in tow.

"My basement!" Caswell was complaining bitterly, almost shouting. "I was going to rent it today, and somebody fills it up with dirt. Why, I ask you, *why?* Why would anybody want to fill my basement with dirt?"

He caught sight of Jack and Lorene standing to one side.

"You!" he cried. "You have anything to do with this?"

"Absolutely nothing," Jack assured him. "I thought there was a store here."

"Store!" snorted Caswell. "Dirt!"

Jack and Lorene got away and made their way back to the street.

"Was there really a store there, Jack?" she asked.

"We're really married, aren't we, honey? I mean yes, there was. I don't know what happened."

He looked at her, smiling, and the smile faded.

"Oh, oh," he said slowly. "I think I know now."

"What?"

"I know now who Edigo Adaman reminded me of. You!"

HE DIDN'T tell her the rest. He didn't tell her he was almost sure that, the way things would have been, Lorene and Ken would have been married and Edigo would have been their descendant.

But Edigo had changed all that when he sold Jack a drug that Jack used, to make sure that Ken wouldn't marry Lorene, but that he would instead. And since Ken and Lorene wouldn't be married now, Edigo would never be born, and would never have the idea of building a fifty-story building at that spot, starting it by digging a basement.

So that was what happened to the suit and Ken's car and the television set. Since the basement wasn't to be built there, they wouldn't be, so they weren't—they never had been.

The strange thing about it was that Jack remembered it all, and even stranger, he was still married to Lorene, and he wouldn't have been except for the drug. But then that had to be, because if he hadn't married her, she'd have married Ken—and then the basement would have been, and he'd have gotten the drug, and Ken wouldn't have married Lorene because Jack would have, and then there wouldn't have been any basement . . .

Jack sighed. He was happy that the circle stopped where it did. **END**

A lot has been said about centralizing military R&D (research and development) as a separate civilian activity. Clifford D. Rassweiler, president of the American Chemical Society, has a better idea. He wants us to have a fourth branch of the military outside the Army, Navy, and Air Force for this purpose. Such a service would provide incentives for officers to devote their careers to R&D—which is not possible under the present system. John L. Burns, president of RCA, goes one step further. Burns says . . . a fourth branch of government is necessary. Ranking in importance with the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, the "Permanent Council on Plans and Policies" . . . its function: to look into the future.

—*Industrial Research*

Homecoming

By GORDON R. DICKSON

Returning to the planet of his birth, Jeb was prepared for all changes . . . in people, society, customs . . . but not for this change in Customs!

AS THEY came to the top of the ramp, Jeb Halvorsen felt the little hand of the krillian thrust into his own. He looked down and saw that the small Danibor marsupialoid was shrinking against him the way a child might.

"It's all right, Tommy," he said soothingly. "I'm not going to go off and leave you."

"I'm good," said Tommy, turning the large eyes in his narrow, kangaroolike face up to Jeb.


A
B
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"I know you are." Jeb reached over with his free hand and patted the round furry head that came to a little below his belt. "Don't worry now. These are only human people like you knew back on Danibor. It's just that there's a lot more of them here on Earth. They won't hurt you; and anyway, I'll take care of you. Come on. We go this way."

They turned to their left, down the long, echoing, pillared distance of Customs Row with its alphabetical divisions. The ramp they had taken up from the landing area of the ship that had just brought them in from Danibor and Alpha Centauri had brought them out in the K section. It was a short stroll to the H section where Jeb's luggage would be delivered.

In fact when they got there the luggage had already arrived. It stood piled in a rough pyramid of boxes and cases all but identical with the similar stacks of luggage on the ruled squares about it. They went to it, passing a pleasant-faced young blonde girl who occupied the square to their right.

"Now you wait here," Jeb told Tommy. "I've got to go get a ticket. I'll be right back. Stay with the luggage."

HE TURNED and went off, threading his way between the piled-up squares of luggage back to the rear wall of the section. A stack of large plastic numbers was hanging on a hook there. He took the top one—it was number eighteen—and carried it back to the square where Tommy waited beside his luggage.

Tommy was sitting down with his back against a suitcase, his eyes enormous on the blonde girl on the next square, who was trying to talk to him. Her face, animated now in conversation, had glowed into unexpected prettiness. She was a small girl and very white-skinned, as if she had spent months out of any sunlight whatsoever.

"He's cute," she said, looking up as Jeb approached. "He's not Earth-native, is he?"

"No, he's a mutant variform of Danibor in the Vegan system. His parent strain was *Onychogale*—nail-tailed wallabies, a sort of kangaroo," said Jeb. "They were mutated to provide a balanced ecology on Danibor—but this one's a personal pet of mine."

"I never had a pet when I was little—" she said, a little sadly, looking down at the krillian. Then she smiled at Tommy. "Would you like to come back to Mercury and be my pet someday?"

"No," said Tommy, and the transient glow of her smile was suddenly wiped away by shock. She looked up, hurt, at Jeb.

"It's all right," said Jeb. "He didn't really understand you. This variform can talk a little, but they're still not much brighter than a young chimp, say, though they've got a dog's desire to please. They're awfully affectionate." He put a hand gently on Tommy's head. "You get attached to them."

She smiled again, from him to Tommy. She leaned over and held out her hand. After a moment the krillian reached out and grasped it trustfully with his own small fingers.

"I'm good," said Tommy.

"I'm sure you are," she said. "Good as gold." She looked up at Jeb. "Are you Daniborian? Or are you from Earth?"

Jeb smiled a little twistedly.

"I'm buying my way back," he said.

"Oh." She colored a little.

"It's nothing I'm ashamed of," said Jeb. "I was shipped out on a surplus-population draft like lots of people you've known yourself. And I'm coming back on a talent-and-funds immigration visa. You're Earth yourself?"

"Yes," she answered. "I've lived most of my life on Mercury—but we never lost our citizenship here. My father was a transfer engineer on loan from a Baltimore company to its New Mercury branch." She hesitated. "Can I ask what your talent is?"

"Sound engineering," Jeb said. "I came up with a few new wrinkles in the field. The funds part of it came from a little device I patented to control noise levels on city streets. You know how this re-entry business works, don't you?"

"No. How?" She was watching him interestedly.

"To satisfy the funds requirement, you have to put up a bond in International Earth Credits. To get that type of currency, you have to have something that you can sell or hock on Earth itself. I hocked my rights to the noise-level-control patent."

She opened her mouth to say something further, but at that moment a Customs inspector came threading his way among the squares, calling out, "Number fifteen!"

"That's me," she said, turning away quickly. She held up her hand. "Over here, officer!"

THE Customs man came toward her. Tommy had escaped from her grasp while she was talking to Jeb and was now over on the other side of their pile of luggage, sniffing and staring about interestedly. Two more numbers were called in quick succession, and then came, *"Eighteen!"*

Jeb held up his hand. "Over here!"

The Customs officer who approached was a stocky, thin-haired man with a darkly tanned face and a pleasant smile. He shifted his record board into the crook of his arm as he came up and punched for a new entry.

"Name?" he said. "Place of departure? Planetality? Open your luggage, please—we aren't allowed to touch them until you do so."

His fingers punched rapidly, taking down Jeb's answers, as Jeb went about the pile of luggage, spreading it out and snapping the cases open. The officer followed him, peering at the contents of each, punching out his record and keeping up a small string of conversation.

"—nothing to declare? Right. What have you got here?"

"It's some of my Daniborian clothes," said Jeb. "I was told I could bring in my own personal apparel."

"That's all right," said the Customs officer. "Native woolens, though. You'll have to declare that you have no intention of reselling them. Wools got quite a snob value Earthside these days. Do you so declare?"

"Sure," said Jeb. "I wanted them mainly as souvenirs. These pipes too—"

"That's all right. All these things, you understand, have a certain value because they are off-planet in origin. What's in the metal case?"

Jeb opened it, revealing the neatly racked rows of spools.

"Scientific library and records of some work I've been doing," he answered.

"I'll put them down as so declared. You assure me that in this library there are no items of seditious or immoral literature, or anything otherwise forbidden to importation under the Earth United law?"

"I do," said Jeb. "And that about winds it up, except for this case here." He opened it. "Odds and ends I've got kind of attached to."

The officer looked over a collection of articles ranging from a paper knife to a pipe reamer.

"That's all right," he grinned. "As long as you haven't a diamond or two tucked away amongst it."

"Give you my word," said Jeb, smiling back. "The whole lot isn't worth ten Universal Units."

"I believe you," said the officer. "You should see some of the junk people have paid a couple of hundred light-years' worth of freight on that comes through here. All right." He punched the last few of his buttons. "You haven't any Daniborian fruit, vegetables, seeds, spores, or other vegetation about your person or your luggage?"

"Not a one," said Jeb.

"Then sign here." He presented the record board to Jeb. "Thumbprint to the right of your signature. That's fine. I'll go file this now, and as soon as it's taken up, your luggage will be delivered to the central city depot. You can pick it up there."

"Thanks," said Jeb. "Thank you very much. You've been a lot less rough about some of this stuff than I expected."

"Oh, we're human, too," said the officer. "Though to listen to some of the stories you hear about us—" Stepping back, he almost stumbled over Tommy, who had just then come around the stack of luggage after visiting a neighboring pile during the inspection. "Oops!"

"That's all right," said Jeb. "You didn't hurt him. Say hello to the officer, Tommy."

BUT Tommy merely sat and stared up at the Custom's man with wide-eyed curiosity. And the Customs man looked back down at him with no less interest.

"What is he?" the officer asked. "Some sort of kangaroo? He's yours, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Jeb. "No, he's not a real kangaroo. He's a krillian. He'd speak to you when I tell him, but he's having too much fun right now looking at your uniform ornaments. Tommy, say hello to the man."

"What's a krillian? I never heard of one," said the inspector. "Some species native to Danibor?"

"No, he's a variform—a mutant, you know—of the nail-tailed wallaby here on Earth. They bred them to—" Jeb broke off suddenly. "Is something wrong?"

The officer was frowning.

"I don't know," he said. "Wait here just a minute, will you, please?" He turned and disappeared among the luggage piles, back in the direction of the Customs office for their alphabetical sector.

"Hi," said a voice. Jeb turned. It was the blonde girl on the next square. "How are you and Tommy coming? I'm all finished."

"We are too, I guess," answered Jeb slowly. "The officer just told us to wait a minute until he came back." He looked at the girl. Her face was flushed with pleasure and quite appealing.

"They're nice, aren't they?" said the girl. "I expected all kinds of trouble over some gifts I was bringing in. Oh, not *real* trouble, I mean, but red tape and signing papers and bonds and stuff. But he just waved it off. How was your man?"

"Nice guy," said Jeb.

"Now my vacation starts," said the girl. "Three months of it and then I'll be going to college on the West Coast. Now that it's really here, and I'm really in, I'm ready to burst with excitement."

"Play with me, please?" said Tommy, from beneath them, putting up a hand to clutch at her skirt.

She smiled radiantly down at him. "Of course I'll play with you, Tommy! What would you like to play?"

"Play tag?" said Tommy, bounding suddenly up into the air as if propelled by a spring like a jack-in-the-box, and coming down on top of one of the luggage cases.

"Not now, Tommy," said Jeb. "There isn't room to play tag here."

Tommy's slender ears drooped slightly. "Tag?" he said wistfully.

"No!" snapped Jeb.

Tommy's reaction was instantaneous. He almost cringed, and Jeb, immediately remorseful, put out a hand to stroke the soft head.

"It's all right, boy," he said. "I'm not mad at you. It's just that we can't play tag right now."

"I love you," said Tommy, putting out a sudden pink tongue to kiss Jeb's caressing hand.

"I know. I love you, too," said Jeb automatically. He was aware suddenly that the girl's eyes were on him, and that they were shining with tears.

"I'm sorry," she said, dabbing at them with a small handkerchief. "It's just that today is—so much and everything—and then the two of you . . ."

"Well," said Jeb awkwardly.

Over the heads of the surrounding crowd and the tops of the luggage piles, he saw relief coming.

"Here's our officer now," he said.

The girl turned to look.

"There's somebody with him," she said.

AND indeed there was another man just behind the one who had checked Jeb's luggage, a slightly heavier, older man with graying hair and the silver bar of a senior lieutenant in the Customs service on the shoulders of his uniform. They both came up to where Jeb, the girl and Tommy were standing. The lieutenant was carrying some papers in one hand and he seemed harassed.

"Mr. Halvorsen?" he said.

"Yes," said Jeb.

"This is your entry permit for a Daniborian marsupialoid?" He showed a sheet.

"Yes." Jeb frowned at him.

"Well — uh — perhaps we better step back into my office for a minute. You can go, Harry." The Customs officer turned and left. "This way, Mr. Halvorsen. Bring the marsupialoid with you, will you, please?"

"Here, Tommy," said Jeb.

He took Tommy's hand and began to follow the lieutenant back toward the Customs offices. He felt a tug at his elbow and turned, still walking, to see the girl hurrying along behind them.

"What is it?" asked the girl. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so," said Jeb.

"Can I come along?"

"I don't see why not."

The lieutenant led them into a large room where a number of the Customs officers were busy at work, recording and checking; and through this room into a smaller office with a desk and several easy chairs facing it.

"If you'll sit down for a minute, Mr. Halvorsen—" The lieutenant saw the girl and the eyebrows on his round, not unpleasant face went up. "Miss—?"

"She's with us," said Jeb.

"Not in your party?" said the lieutenant.

"No. Just a friend. You don't mind?" spoke up the girl, quickly and a little breathlessly.

"I—suppose not. Well, sit down, please," said the lieutenant, seating himself behind the desk and spreading out the papers upon it. "Mr. Halvorsen, this entry permit of yours for the marsupialoid—name Tommy—" he glanced at Tommy, who was sitting high beside Jeb's chair and peering over the desk surface at him—"it was made out on Danibor."

"All my papers were, of course," said Jeb. "Why? Something the matter with them?"

"No. Not with them. Not even with *this*." The lieutenant twitched the entry permit for Tommy. "The form's proper and made out correctly. It's just—well, I feel rather bad about this, Mr. Halvorsen. You've been the victim of a mistake on the part of whoever issued this permit back on Danibor."

"What mistake?" Jeb's voice came out with a harshness that surprised him.

"I can understand *you* not knowing, but there's no excuse for whoever's in charge of the office on Danibor. This form has been removed from the lists."

"Is that all?" Jeb could not help smiling a bit.

"You don't understand," said the lieutenant, hitching his chair forward. "The form has been dropped because there's now a law against reintroducing any of the mutated variforms to Earth."

JEB stared at him. "Earth is where they come from in the first place."

"I know." The lieutenant waved a wide, slightly embarrassed hand. "But it's a genetic matter—not merely the variforms themselves, but what sort of disease mutations they may have developed on other worlds. Especially over several generations." He coughed, gazing at Tommy. "He is a cute little fellow, isn't he?" He smiled at Tommy, suddenly became serious and turned again to Jeb. "The law was passed half a dozen years ago. A mutated virus that attacked Earth life could be a problem to an overcrowded world like this."

"But wouldn't a virus that attacked Earth life attack early imports of Earth life on the world where it first appeared?" Jeb put his hands on the edge of the desk. "There's fresh, unmutated life—people, stock, vegetation—being shipped out to all the colony worlds all the time. They'd be the first to catch it."

"Well, possibly—I don't know all the ins and outs of it," said the lieutenant. "Maybe there were other reasons, too. I don't know. It's not my job to justify the law, only to enforce it." He looked at Tommy again. "I'm sorry. I know he must be quite a pet. I've a dog myself at home." He returned his attention to the desk and shifted the papers, stacking them together neatly.

"This is crazy!" burst out Jeb. "Look, the permit was issued. There must be some way around this. Tommy's not like a dog—he's more intelligent, for one thing. And he's lived with me for eight years. We were alone together out at a survey station on Danibor. He couldn't live without me—"

"I'm sorry," said the lieutenant. His face softened, became sympathetic and concerned. "Look, you don't understand. According to a strict interpretation of the order, I should order him destroyed—"

"Oh, *no!*" It was the girl's voice crying out suddenly.

Tommy jerked up his ears and hopped hastily over to her. He licked at her face.

"Don't cry," Tommy said in distress.

She put her arms out and hugged him protectively.

"Please," said the lieutenant. "It's not me. It's the law. The law forbids the importation of variforms and orders them destroyed where they're found on Earth. It's not *that* bad for you. I'll give you a couple of hours to decide what you want to do about it." He nodded at Tommy. "If you can find some means of getting it off Earth in that time, I'll let it go."

"You were calling him *he* a few seconds ago," said Jeb between his teeth.

"Was I?" said the lieutenant. "It doesn't matter. My duty stays the same. And if you're thinking of asking me, or bribing me, to forget the law and let him slip by the basis of the entry permit—please don't make it embarrassing for both of us." He got up from his desk and crossed to the door. "I'll give you a couple of hours. Until then, no pass to leave the Customs area will be issued to you."

"I think I hate you," said the girl.

"You don't understand—either of you," he said gently. "There's no room for exceptions to the rules nowadays. There's too many of us crowded together on Earth for that." He went out, pausing a second in the doorway, with his hand on the door button. "You'll save yourself a great deal if you give up and turn it over to be destroyed now," he said to Jeb.

"The hell I will!" cried Jeb savagely at the closing door.

It clicked shut. He turned to the girl and then to Tommy with fury on his face.

"The hell with it," he repeated. "We'll get out of this place, both of us."

She looked at him, as if across some sort of abyss.

"You know you can't leave," she said.

HE OPENED his lips furiously to speak. But the words died somewhere inside him and after a second he closed his mouth again without saying anything.

"I know," she said, "how hard it is to get back to Earth after you've lost your citizenship. I've heard them talk. My father says it's like climbing a mountain that gets higher every day."

"Yes," he said emptily.

He got to his feet and walked across the office to a window on the far side that looked beyond the Customs building to the first, light, soaring buildings of the city beyond.

"I'll ship him back to Danibor," he said.

She played with Tommy's ears tenderly.

"Don't you have friends back there who'd take him—"

"I guess so," he said. "Brad Alokua—he'd take Tommy. Tommy likes him." He turned back to the doorway. "I'll go over to Shipping and arrange it." He held out his hand, and Tommy, leaving the girl, hopped to him and took it.

"Come on, boy," he said, and went out. The girl followed after.

They crossed the wide area that belonged to Customs and took a walkway to the Outbound area. Here, as at Customs, the destinations were arranged alphabetically. They went to the desk that handled Aldebaran through Evenside.

"Where to?" asked a clerk, coming up on his side of the desk as they approached. He was a lean, young man with dark hair and more of a local accent than the Customs officer or the lieutenant had shown.

"Danibor—" began Jeb.

"Papers?" The clerk held out his hand.

"No, it's not for me," said Jeb. "I just came in from Danibor. But I've found out that I can't bring my krillian in with me. I want to ship him back."

The clerk dropped his hand

and, turning slowly, stared down at Tommy.

"This here?" he said. "Is that a krillian?"

"Yes," said Jeb, a little shortly.

"No offense," said the clerk. "I've just never seen one. So you want to ship him back. You're a Daniborian yourself?" He opened a drawer before him and took papers out of it, laying them on the top of the desk.

"With an Earth immigration visa," said Jeb.

"Your Daniborian citizenship's still in effect then, until your final papers are issued." The clerk stamped several blanks on the papers. "Weight of krillian?"

"Twenty-three point four kilos."

"Fine," said the clerk, finishing off his papers. "Shipping fee will be—let's see—fourteen hundred and thirty-nine International Earth Credits."

Jeb sat still for a moment. The clerk looked up.

"So much?" asked Jeb.

"That's right."

"When we came out—"

"I know," said the clerk. "Everything was a lot lower in price. It's a matter of shipping space. The heavy traffic is outbound from Earth, so the freight and passenger fees are high. Coming in from Danibor, there was plenty of space, so—"

He shrugged.

JEB felt a touch on his elbow. He turned around and saw the girl leaning toward him.

"I could help out," she said.

He swallowed hard. "Thank you."

She passed him a small wad of notes. He dug out his own money case and counted the contents. He was four hundred and thirty short. He took them from her fold of money and returned what was left to her.

"Thanks," he said, with difficulty. "I'll pay you back."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Really it doesn't."

He passed the money over to the clerk, who counted it and put it into an envelope, which he sealed.

"All right," said Jeb. "Where do we take him now?"

"Take him? Oh—" said the clerk. He consulted a paper on the side of his desk. "You're in luck. Bring him back in three weeks to this desk here. I'll give you a pass and directions to the Shipping area—"

"Three weeks!"

Startled, the clerk looked up at him.

"Why, yes—"

"But we've got to ship him off inside of two hours!" cried Jeb.

The clerk blinked at him.

"Oh, that's impossible," he said at last. He even smiled, a little uncertainly. "You're not serious. Even if a ship was leaving today, it'd take five hours to have him taken aboard—"

"But we've got to get him off!" Jeb's voice rang harshly out over the area, and at a neighboring desk another clerk and his customer looked over to see what the matter was. "Three weeks—that's crazy. I just came in on a ship that must be going back sooner than that."

"Oh, the *Dancia,*" said the clerk. "She's going out this afternoon. But she's all emigrant this trip. No room for freight."

"Tommy didn't come as freight. He came in my cabin."

"Well, there you are." The clerk spread his hands on the desk like a reasonable man. "If you were taking him back personally—but you couldn't on this ship unless you were emigrating."

Jeb sat glowering at the clerk. A sudden touch on his elbow made him turn. The girl's face was urgently close to his.

"My family—" she said. "On Mercury. We could send Tommy to them."

"Mercury? Great!" Jeb leaped gladly to his feet. "Which way—"

"Down at the end of the row here," said the clerk, pointing away to Jeb's left.

Jeb saw, diminutive in the distance, a hanging sign proclaiming PLANETS OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM. He turned and went swiftly toward it, hearing the quick clicking of the girl's heels catching up behind him. Tommy bounced happily alongside.

"Race?" he said, looking up at Jeb. "Race me?"

"Not now, Tommy."

THE Inner Planets section was a good four long city blocks away. When at last they arrived at it, warm and breathing hard, both of the humans, they found under the enormous floating overhead sign a multitude of desks.

"This way!" The girl pulled him forward to a desk.

"Sit down, please," said the clerk—a woman this time, about middle age. She smiled at all of them, and particularly Tommy, who warmed to her interest.

"I'm good," he informed her.

The clerk's sudden startlement was interrupted by the girl. Words tumbling urgently from her lips, she explained the situation. The older woman's face gentled.

"Of course, honey," she said, patting the girl's hand and reaching into her desk. She came up with a sheaf of papers. "The next ship for Mercury doesn't leave for six hours. But once you get him aboard, no one'll touch him. Now you give me your parents' name and their home address."

THE girl produced her papers. The clerk nodded to the sound of the girl's voice, taking down the necessary information, while Jeb stood back, feeling at once relief, and a sensation of lostness, as if he had been betrayed into a wilderness, caught up in something beyond his own and proper control.

"Here—" he started to say. And then he stopped. He had nothing to tell them. And anyway, occupied as they were, they had not heard him.

Tommy's small, tight grip closed on the fingers of Jeb's right hand. He patted the krillian on the head absently. There was something unreal about this whole business. They would ship Tommy off to Mercury—to a good home. And after that? Jeb would make the hop from time to time . . .

No, he could not make it seem real.

"All right," the woman behind the desk was saying. She handed Jeb a paper. He took it numbly. He had planned and worked to come back to Earth from the day he had seen that he must go out in an emigrant draft . . .

"What?" he said.

"—off to your right there," the woman was repeating. "Back to the Delivery area, Freight, Section C, Livestock. You'll find it all right."

"Thanks." Slowly Jeb stood up.

"Come on," said the girl. She led the way off.

A short distance off, among the many faces and bodies of the crowd, they found the area they were looking for. There was a counter with an entryway in it and behind it a wall pierced by a door labeled TO LOADING SECTION. The man behind the desk took the papers from Jeb in silence and read them, stamping this section and detaching that.

"All right," he said. He was a lean man in his forties. "This the one?" He reached over the counter for Tommy, and Tommy drew back. "Shy, eh?" He turned and came around through the entryway. "Is he vicious?"

"No!" said Jeb sharply.

The man shrugged at him. "Maybe you better tell him he's to go with me. It helps sometimes."

Jeb looked down. Tommy was pressed close against his leg.

"Tommy," he said. Tommy looked up. "Tommy, you go with the man here."

Tommy stared up at Jeb, his eyes enormous. He did not move.

"Tommy—"

"Probably," said the man, "I better just—" His hands moved swiftly and abruptly to snatch up Tommy—and in that same second Tommy turned and clung with all of his strength to Jeb's leg.

"Tommy—" said Jeb. "Tommy— Let go, will you!" he exploded at the man.

The man let go and straightened up, his lean face a little darkened and hotly flushed.

"Tommy," said Jeb, closing his hands gently but firmly around the slim forearms of the krillian. "Tommy, listen now. It's all right. You've just got to go with him, that's all." He felt the small, warm arms, downy-soft with their fine fur, clinging piteously to him. "Tommy, please!"

A DOUBLE shock wave, of cold, then hot, washed through Jeb. In one twin flash of vision he saw the new, raw cities of Danibor and the long dream of Earth.

"Let go!" he snarled, and wrenched at Tommy. The furry arms pulled away a little, but clung.

"I'll get him for you," said the man. "There's a simpler way." He bent down and clamped his hand over Tommy's muzzle, closing the mouth and nostrils. "When he starts to strangle, he'll let go."

Tommy made no effort to fight the hand. He only pressed as close to Jeb's leg as possible and hung on.

"*Stop it!*" screamed the girl.

Both men started suddenly and the man from Shipping let go, and they looked at her.

"Can't you see he isn't going to? Can't you see he'll die first?" she cried.

"He won't die," muttered the man. "Just pass out and relax, that's all."

"You!" She turned on Jeb. "How can you do that? It just won't—it just won't work."

Jeb was petting Tommy's head automatically. His hand trembled a little.

"Look, I can't fool around all afternoon," said the man. "Bring him in yourself if you want to."

"No." Jeb found his voice. "Go on." The man frowned at him. "I said go on. It's all right. I mean we're not sending him right now, after all." He swallowed.

The man looked at Jeb, turned to take a long look at the girl, turned again without a word, and went. They watched him pass again behind the counter.

"It's all right, Tommy, it's all right now," Jeb was saying.

Tommy slowly let go. Jeb picked him up and looked past one quivering furry shoulder at the girl.

"You could go with him!" she flung out.

"To Mercury?" said Jeb harshly. "What's on Mercury for me? I might as well go back to Danibor."

"Just to leave him there—"

"We'd still have to split up sometime!" he said, taking his own anger out on her. "What's the use of delaying?"

He turned about and started to stride off.

"Where are you going?" She was running after him, alongside him, almost crying.

"Back to that Customs lieutenant," he said, staring straight ahead. "It's up to him."

They threaded their way back through the indifferent crowds to the Customs section and the office of the lieutenant.

The lieutenant glanced up from his desk as they entered, his gray, calm eyes swiftly understanding.

"Too bad," he said.

"There must be some solution!" the girl burst out. "There *must!*"

The lieutenant got up from behind his desk. He went over and opened another door to an inner office.

"Tommy," he said, "you wait in here."

Tommy stayed still, close to Jeb.

"It's all right, Tommy," said Jeb, with a dry mouth. "It's all right this time. I'll be in."

SLOWLY Tommy moved away from them and into the room. The lieutenant shut the door on him and returned to his desk.

"Sit down," he said.

"But there must be *some* way!" cried the girl.

The lieutenant turned to face her.

"You ought to know better," he said. "You're from the Inner Planets." He considered her. "No, you're too young. You don't realize."

"I realize there must be some kind of solution that doesn't mean killing him because nobody can wait more than an hour to find one!" she flared at him.

"That's where you're wrong," said the lieutenant. "That's where you're completely wrong."

"How?" she challenged him.

"The situation is urgent," the lieutenant said, "exactly because it's a situation. No, you don't understand. You're from Mercury—well, that's out a little way from the business of Earth. And your parents must have kept you wrapped up safe from the hard facts of life. Halvorsen here I don't blame. Being from a frontier planet where there's no urgency, he would not know. But you should."

"There's no danger." She glared at him. "You don't even know yourself of a good reason for the ruling."

"It doesn't matter whether the ruling's good or not. Now listen." He spoke almost kindly. "This is the hub of our universe here, Earth. This is where all the big work, the big business goes on. Everybody wants to come here; nobody wants to leave. Ask Halvorsen." He pointed his chin at Jeb. "So no single individual's important here. It's the room that's important, the bit of ground you occupy. If you don't want to play by the rules, somebody else'll gladly take your place. There's no room on Earth for the kangaroo, but there is for Halvorsen. He takes it or he doesn't, and he takes it right now or his chance is over. All of us—me too—only hold our room as long as we stick by the rules. There are too many people and too little room for anything else."

"It's not like that!" She was really starting to cry now. The tears made twin tracks down her young cheeks.

Jeb looked away, but the lieutenant continued to stare gravely at her.

"But it is," he said. "Halvorsen's got a brilliant future here—otherwise they would not have let him back. It's worth the sacrifice of whatever Earth asks of him. Right, Halvorsen?"

There was a moment of silence in the office. Even the girl, looking intently at Jeb, held her breath.

"Right," said Jeb in a low voice, looking at neither of them.

"That's correct," said the lieutenant. "Believe me, I'm sorry for both you *and* Tommy." He opened the drawer of his desk. "I'm not the ogre you'd like to think me, miss. I just don't have any choice—like the rest of you. Perhaps, Halvorsen, you'd rather take care of it yourself?"

Jeb, looking up, saw the other extending a handgun to him across the desk. He hesitated a second, then took it, thrusting it inside the loose bulge of his tunic, where it was hidden.

The girl sobbed. He went into the other office, closing the door behind him.

THE other office was decorated as a library, with one large window giving on the city. Tommy had been sniffing about the shelves of tapes, but he stopped and sat up with bright, intelligent interest as Jeb came in.

"Go now?" asked Tommy.

"Pretty soon," said Jeb. He was surprised that his voice came out steady, though to his own ears it had a dead, strange ring, like the voice of someone he did not know. "Just a minute. Come over here, Tommy—to the window."

He walked to the window and stood facing out. Tommy hopped over to stand beside him.

"See?" Tommy asked.

"Yes," said Jeb. "Look down there, Tommy."

Together they gazed out at the far carpet of buildings rolling away to the horizon. The sight of them at last made Jeb catch his breath a little, in spite of himself. It was all there. Earth.

"Trees?" Tommy was saying, breathing against the window. "Trees?"

"There aren't any trees, Tommy," answered Jeb.

"No trees?"

"And no grass," said Jeb. Tommy's ears went back in disappointment. "No place down there for you to play." With a little effort, Jeb conjured up the picture of Tommy, cramped and prisoned in an apartment. "It's not much fun for a krillian here on Earth, Tommy. Not much fun at all."

"Sheep—?" faltered Tommy, in the faint tone of one who pleads for the realization of some smallest crumb of his hopes.

"No, no—" With a sudden start, Jeb came back to his purpose in this room. His voice hardened, the words extruding like steel between his teeth. "Yes, I think there are some sheep down there. See? Down there."

"Sheep?" Tommy's ears flicked up and he pressed his nose to the pane of the window eagerly. "Sheep?"

"Don't you see them?" said Jeb tightly. He reached into his tunic and drew out the gun. "Keep looking. Down there. See them?" He pointed the gun's muzzle at the back of the small, furry head.

"See? Sheep?" Tommy's ears flicked in this direction and then that, like semaphores. Jeb's jaws were clenched so tightly together they felt welded shut. The butt of the handgun slid a little in his slippery grip, and the muzzle end of the barrel wavered.

"Keep looking, Tommy!" he said in a stifled voice. "Keep looking."

His finger tightened on the firing button. He could feel its half-marble roundness cold against the tip of his forefinger.

The wavers of the barrel increased, built up until the whole arm was trembling violently.

He laid arm and gun down on his other hand for a second to steady it, then lifted them again. He squinted like a man facing into a merciless sunglare. His whole arm and shoulder were quivering.

Suddenly, he threw the gun across the room. Startled, Tommy jerked around.

Jeb let out a long breath in a sigh of exhaustion.

"Nothing, Tommy," he said. "Never mind." He went across the room and picked up the gun. "I think the sheep are gone now. Let's go back into the other room."

WITH Tommy hopping ahead of him, they returned. As they came through the door, the lieutenant's eyebrows went up. Jeb tossed the gun down on his desk.

"We're going back to Danibor," he said in a tight voice.

"Both of us. On that emigrant ship."

A small female cyclone blew across the room into Jeb's arms and began crying wildly against his shoulder. Tommy was pogo-sticking with excitement all around him. Over the top of the blonde head pressed into his tunic, Jeb scowled furiously at the lieutenant.

The lieutenant shook his head, putting the handgun back into the drawer of his desk.

"It's your funeral," he said, "if you want to give up your chance at Earth and everything it could do for you. I'll bet you can't give me one good, logical reason for what you're doing."

"Maybe not," said Jeb. "But it looks like we have two different sets of standards about what's worth having, me, you, you home-planet people; and whether mine's better or not, I seem to be stuck with it."

"I love you!" cried Tommy, leaping up to lick Jeb's face, without the slightest idea of why this should be an emotional occasion, but convinced it was nonetheless.

"Me too!" wept the girl.

They both clung to Jeb.

"Well," said the lieutenant, "it takes all kinds to make a universe."

END

Instead of worrying about dwindling fossil fuel reserves and radioactive nuclear plants, power engineers will be able to supply this country with free hydrogen fusion power from sea water. Americans will be able to have an almost completely automated life at low cost.

All this before the end of the century, according to the Public Service Electric & Gas Co. in New Jersey.

There are, of course, other dramatic possibilities latent in the oceans, should the above prediction prove overoptimistic:

- Seaweed, with its exceptionally high vitamin content, should begin to provide food for both men and animals—and soon. Recent experiments indicate that livestock thrives on seaweed meal. Milk production increased in cows and the vitamin A content of their milk was greater. Hens laid better eggs; pigs fattened quicker; turkey mortality was reduced.

- Loose-lying metal-bearing ores are worth an estimated $1½ million per square mile in some areas. These deposits and ways to recover them are being investigated by mineral engineers at the U. of California.

- Scientists at Plymouth, England, have found appreciable quantities of the strategic niobium and vanadium in the flesh and blood of ascidians, a sea animal such as the skate.

—*Industrial Research*

By KIRBY KERR

AN HONEST CREDIT

It was just like Nick not to realize that it is bad luck to be superstitious!

SLIPPERY Nick Fernell edged sideways along the sidewalk in front of the Third Blast, cautiously pushed the door open a crack and peeked in. There was a mob of customers—two dozen, maybe—and the big screen above the bar was blank. Slippery Nick clucked softly.

With the rockets blasting out Asteroid Way, a blank screen meant that Ed the manager didn't have any credits riding. Ed liked a quiet bar in the afternoon, and he never turned on the races when he wasn't betting. So Nick had a ten-to-one chance.

He slipped furtively through the doorway, eased his way to the bar in such a way that a congenial group of paying customers masked his presence from Ed, and spoke softly to a bartender.

"One Fission Fizz."

The bartender hesitated. "Cash or—"

A blast from the other end of the bar rattled the glasses and silenced all conversation in the room. "Cash!" Ed thundered.

Two dozen faces pivoted slowly and tensed at the sudden strain as their respective pairs of eyes sought to focus on Nick. Nick cringed in embarrassment.

Ed moved his heavy body carefully along behind the bar, making a minor engineering project of getting his belly past two bartenders. He towered over Slippery Nick. "There ain't no *or* where he's concerned," he snarled. "Cash!"

"Aw, Ed," Nick whined. "One Fission Fizz . . ."

"Is the tenth part of a credit, and the answer is no—N, O. I got principles, one of which says I ain't ever gonna be took for a hundred credits by Slippery Nick Fernell. You ran up twenty-three credits last week when I wasn't around, and your account now stands at ninety-one credits. Which is ninety credits too much."

The customer on Nick's left turned away, blinking, after a strenuous effort to make out Nick's face. He was a skinny, pale-faced man with an overly long neck and thick contact lenses that made his eyes bulge fishlike. He shook his head violently, wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve, and turned his bleary eyes back to Nick.

"Tough to be broke," he muttered, dropping a ticket-sized piece of paper currency on the damp bar. "I know. Give him a Fission Fizz."

THE bartender hesitated and glanced at Ed, who disdainfully turned his back. The bartender scraped the currency from the bar and slid a glass across to Nick.

"Obliged," Nick said patronizingly.

The benefactor leaned toward Nick and squinted. "Quite all right. Tough to be broke. The name's Hullman."

"Fernell," Slippery Nick said. "Course, I ain't exactly broke . . ."

Ed sneered and banged a plastic bottle on the bar. "Course Nick ain't broke. He ain't earned no money since '92, and he owes every bar and every bookie this side of Pluto, but he's got a damned knick-knack in his pocket, so he ain't broke. I say if the only money a man has he won't spend, he's broke."

Nick winced. The Fission Fizz had set his body tingling, and he reared up angrily and pounded on the bar. "Knick-knack—he calls this a knick-knack!" He jerked at the string around his neck and brought forth a worn currency folder. He fumbled in it and dropped something on the bar. It rang out sharply.

"Hey, it's metal!" exclaimed the customer on Nick's right. "Metal money. A credit piece. I never saw one before." He clamped a hairy hand on the coin and examined it with awe.

"My lucky credit," Nick said proudly. "*He* calls it a knickknack. Like to have me spend it here, I suppose."

The customer on Nick's right spun the coin on the bar and watched fascinated as it flashed and sparkled. "The damn thing looks new," he said.

"Naw," Ed said. "That's just because Nick polishes it five times a day. That's the only work he does."

The customer on Nick's right spun the coin again. "Give you five for it."

Nick grabbed the credit. "Worth a lot more than that."

"Ten. It's not worth more than ten."

"Worth more than that to me." Nick returned the coin to his currency folder and leaned on the bar to leer at Ed. "Hear that, Fatso? Knickknack, you say. Broke, you say. You heard him offer me ten for it."

The customer on Nick's right had his own currency folder out, counting carefully. "Twelve. I'll give you twelve. Here — two Fission Fizzes here." He pushed one at Nick. "Shanks is my name, Fernell. What do you say to twelve?"

On Nick's left, the gangling Hullman suddenly slumped over the bar. "Twelve credits. I buy him drinks and he's got more money than I have."

"No," Nick gurgled, as he downed the drink.

"What d'ya mean, no? You drink my liquor and you won't do business?"

"Two tenths," the bartender said.

"Here's one, for my drink," Shanks said. "Collect the other one from him."

"Just a minute, you," Ed bellowed. "*You* ordered them drinks. You maybe want the bar mopped off with you?"

"I pay for what I drink. One drink, one T."

ED'S beefy hands snaked across the bar and snatched at Shanks' throat. Shanks ducked away, but the bouncer came lumbering out of the shadows, and two bartenders were coming around the ends of the bar. Nick watched interestedly.

Hullman said brokely, "You stand me one. That's only fair. I stand you one and you stand me one. You got twelve credits."

"I ain't got twelve credits," Nick protested.

Finding himself outnumbered, Shanks took out a T ticket, ripped it in two, and scornfully flung the pieces on the bar. "I'll be waiting for you outside," he growled at Nick.

Nick shuddered and pressed closer to the bar. The Fission Fizz had made him lose his head, and he figured his chances had dropped to a hundred to one. "Ed," he said, "want to see you alone."

"You finished your drink?" Ed demanded.

"Sure. But—"

"Jet. Your business ain't welcome here. We like *paying* customers."

"Please, Ed. Just for a minute."

"It don't take no minute. Whatever it is, the answer's *no*!"

Ed carefully made his way back to the other end of the bar. The bartender looked sympathetically at Nick and shook his head. "You aren't a bad guy, Nick. Why don't you get a job and settle down? You're getting a little old for bumming around and dodging the police . . ."

Nick started. "Police? I ain't never done nothin' wrong."

"Your wife's got the police looking for you. They were in here yesterday, asking questions. Something about non-support. Why don't you get a job and live right?"

"You ever see my wife?"

"Once, a long time ago. She came in here looking for you."

"You think I should work and let *her* grab the money? You know how they do—she makes a complaint and I don't get as much as one T. I'm just as well off this way. I ain't got nothin', but I ain't givin' her nothin' either."

"Yeah. I see what you mean."

Ed came around the bar and gripped Nick by the ear. "Out!" he commanded.

"Please, Ed. Just lemme talk to you a minute."

"No!"

"Please, Ed."

Ed glared and finally jerked his thumb at the vacant end of the bar.

NICK slunk along the bar, matching Ed's slow progress, and watching him anxiously.

"Give," Ed ordered. He scornfully refused to incline his head toward Nick, so Nick hunched himself up on the bar.

"I got a tip on the second at Asteroid Way."

Ed guffawed. "When did you ever pick a winner?"

"Aw, Ed. It's a *good* tip. It'll pay fifty to one. I could pay you off."

"You got one credit. Go ahead and make your bet."

"Ed, listen. Some scientist—he's made some dope to put in the fuel. This tank could win with its jets plugged. The others won't get close enough to scorch their noses. Fifty to one, and it's *sure*."

"Sure to be disqualified. They always test the fuel."

"Their test ain't no good on this stuff."

"Who gave you the tip?"

"I'd tell you, Ed, but I promised . . ."

"I ain't buying no Moon atmosphere. Who told you?"

"I can't," Nick whined. He waited a moment, anxiously watching Ed's unyielding face. "Rocket Amutz," he whispered.

Ed was suddenly thoughtful. "The Rocket usually knows," he admitted.

"It's fifty to one, Ed!"

"What's the tank?"

"*Up an' Atom.* In the second."

"When'd you see the Rocket?"

"This mornin'."

Ed glanced at the clock. "You sure took your time telling me about it."

"I was broke, Ed. I had a hard time gettin' down here. I hadda hitch a ride with a delivery flyer."

"Then you hadda mooch a couple of drinks to get up the nerve to put the tag on me," Ed snapped. He tapped thoughtfully on the bar. "All right, I'll call it in. Ten for me and five for you. Only it all goes in my name, and I'm deducting what you owe before I pay you."

"Couldn't you just—"

"All right. Three Fizzes on the house. That's for the tip. The five goes on your account, and it better come right off."

ED LEFT to place the bet, and Nick leaned contentedly on the bar and contemplated his three Fizzes. Hullman came staggering toward him and leaned out to squint hungrily at the drinks. Nick's arm encircled them protectingly.

"He's gonna buy it all," Hullman croaked. "He's got twelve credits and he's gonna buy it all. I stood him one, and now I'm broke and he won't stand me one, and he's got twelve credits." He took a wild swing at Nick, who ducked, still protecting the drinks. The bouncer latched onto Hullman and dragged him away.

Ed returned and switched on the visiscope. Nick sipped delicately on the first Fizz and gloated over the other two. The huge screen flickered to life. Asteroid Way. The starting line. First race.

Jets flamed as the ships got under way. Nick watched them absently. The drink warmed and cheered him, and the identification stripes were beginning to blur slightly. The scene changed to the first Way Station. The ships were points of light in the distance, looming suddenly large and flashing past. The announcer barked out the placings. The flaming points of the jets diminished and merged into single bright dots that seemed to hang motionless against the backdrop of space.

Nick set down an empty glass and rubbed his eyes. The scene changed to the second Way Station.

"Wasn't that *Altairian Miss* in the lead?" asked a voice at Nick's elbow.

Nick shrugged, happily indifferent. "Not my race," he said. He reached for the second glass and kept his eyes on the screen. He sipped slowly and finished it just as the race was ending.

A voice droned out the winners and the scene shifted to preparations for the second race. Bustling spacetugs were towing the ships into position. Harried spacesuited workers were putting the finishing touches on the identification marks — shaping the white magnetic particles into the network of stripes that identified the ship's position at the starting line. Nick gripped his third glass firmly, but he did not raise it. He kept his eyes on number six—three short longitudinal stripes—*Up an' Atom.*

The announcer read off the preliminaries in a monotonous singsong. The ships, the pilots, the odds. The ships, the pilots, the odds. The ships . . .

"THEY'RE stallin'," Nick croaked.

"Waiting for the reports on the fuel tests," Ed said gloomily.

The screen flashed as the electronic starting switch fired all jets simultaneously. Nick's hand tightened on the glass. He clung paralyzed to the bar and slowly closed his eyes.

First Way Station: *Up an' Atom* second.

Second Way Station: *Up an' Atom* first.

Nick's trembling hand set the Fizz sloshing wildly in the glass.

Third Way Station: *Up an' Atom* second.

"Got a chance," Ed admitted in a low, almost incredulous voice.

Fourth Way Station: *Up an' Atom* second.

Fifth Way Station: *Up an' Atom* first.

Nick half raised his drink and set it down again.

Sixth Way Station: the halfway mark, *Up an' Atom* first.

"Got a chance," Ed admitted again.

Nick dared to open his eyes. Seventh Way Station: *Up an' Atom* first. The twelve ships were strung out along the course now, half of them hopelessly behind. Eighth Way Station: *Up an' Atom* second. Nick closed his eyes again and kept them closed while *Up an' Atom* was third at the ninth Way Station, and second at the tenth.

The eleventh Way Station: *Up an' Atom* first. Nick opened his eyes and stared hypnotically at the screen. The finish line.

Suddenly Nick jerked the glass to his lips, drained it, and slammed it down. He whirled and raced wildly for the door. A bottle whizzed past his ear, struck the side of the door, and caromed out into the street with a monstrous dent in its plastic side. Nick paused only to verify its emptiness.

Up an' Atom had finished fifth.

Nick charged on down the street, and ran headlong into a sturdy pair of arms. It was Shanks.

"Thought I wouldn't wait, didn't you?" Shanks menacingly snarled.

Nick barely had time to blink before a fist smashed into his face, and knocked him down and out.

HE AWOKE in a dim room and lay motionless, staring at the ceiling. The splotches of dampness, the sprawling network of cracks looked familiar, and yet unfamiliar. He roused himself weakly and looked about him. It was his wife's apartment.

Suddenly she appeared in the doorway, and he stared fearfully at her bloated and bleary image. The bleariness, Nick knew, was his own doing. The bloat was the exclusive property of his wife.

She eyed him hostilely for a moment and called over her shoulder, "He's awake."

She was joined in the doorway by a grotesquely thin, spinsterish-looking female and a pair of husky males.

"Fightin's new with him," Nick's wife said. "He never got in a fight before. He's too much of a coward."

"There, there, you poor dear," the thin woman said, patting her shoulder tenderly. "Don't you worry about a thing. Everything will be all right."

"It's been hard," his wife sniffed. "Twenty-two years we been married, and twelve young ones, and he's never had a job the whole time."

"You should have reported him years ago. But don't you worry. *We'll* take care of things." She advanced to the bed and stood looking grimly down at Nick. "So you're Nicholas Fernell. I won't say I'm happy to meet you, Slippery Nick, but I have a job to do. I'm Officer Holmes of the Family Welfare Bureau. Do you know what *that* means?"

Nick looked up at the sharp protrusion of her nose and covered his face with his hands. "Go away," he moaned.

"On your wife's complaint, Nicholas Fernell, we've been investigating you. Your record isn't a pretty one. Married twenty-two years, father of twelve children, and you've never earned an honest credit in your life."

"That's a lie!" Nick shouted.

"Oh, sure!" his wife shrieked. "A lie, he says! Twenty-one years ago he helped some bartender unload a beer flyer, and he got paid one credit. He's been savin' it ever since, and I guarantee he never earned another one."

"We'll soon change that," Officer Holmes said cheerfully. "This is a court summons, Mr. Fernell. A judge is going to take one look at your record and send you to prison, where all lazy men belong. Unless, that is, we can tell him you've corrected your shiftless ways and gone to work. Which will it be—work or prison?"

Nick stared at the paper. "Go away," he moaned. "I'm sick."

Officer Holmes sniffed reprovingly. "It's that terrible poison you drink. Two years in space will straighten you out nicely."

THE word *space* echoed and re-echoed down long corridors in Nick's alcohol-fogged mind. He tumbled from the bed and scurried toward the door, flinging himself frantically at the narrow gap that separated Officer Holmes' sturdy deputies. The gap slammed shut on him. He was propelled back into the bedroom, where he slumped onto the floor and wailed, "I'm sick."

"Poor man," Officer Holmes said, with sneering sweetness. "Hasn't done any work for so long that the thought of it makes him sick. Come, come, man." Her pointed shoes prodded painfully at his ribs. "Here are your work papers. Sign them and the boys will take you to the spaceport and put you aboard. Or don't sign them and they'll take you to prison. Two years in space or five years in the Lunar Penitentiary—which will it be?"

Face a sickly green, teeth chattering, fingers trembling so that Officer Holmes had to hand him the pen three times, Nick signed.

Officer Holmes purred with satisfaction. "The Vegan Line is a good place to work. We find only the best jobs for our problem cases. And you'll have nothing to worry about here at home. The company will send your lovely family your wages every month."

Fright had startled Nick into a general condition of sobriety. The smug expression on his wife's face enraged him.

"*My* family!" he shouted. "I got no family. Try an' find a kid that looks like me. Not one of 'em's mine!"

Officer Holmes said severely, "It won't help you to insult your wife."

"How could I insult a bag like that? Slipped somethin' in my drink, she did, an' I woke up married to her. I was an honest, hard-workin', law-abidin' man, an' look what she done to me. She got me fired by hangin' around tryin' to get advances on my pay. Every job I got, she got me fired, or she snatched the money for herself. Why wouldn't

I be drove to drink? Just look at her. She was just as ugly twenty-two years ago, except she wasn't so fat. An' the kids —I ain't never slept with her in my life, unless it was the night we was married, an' I don't remember nothin' about that. I don't sleep with her, an' I don't know what man in his right mind would touch her, but she keeps havin' 'em. An' I'll tell you one thing—papers or no papers, space or no space, I ain't workin' to support her and her kids!"

Officer Holmes flew at him, face white, her mouth a grimly etched line. "You wicked, no-good man! Kiss your wife good-by now. *Kiss her!"*

"Lemme out of here!" Nick yelled.

The deputies got him out. They escorted him down the stairway, and the sobs of Nick's wife floated after them, along with Officer Holmes' purring consolation.

"You got my sympathy, fellow," one of the men said. "But we got a job to do."

"That's okay," Nick told him. "I'll get out of it."

"There's no getting out of it, fellow. Space is no place to jump ship, and you won't get a chance in port."

"I'll get out of it," Nick said grimly, "if it has to be space."

At the spaceport Nick was rushed through a medical examination, booted aboard an ugly looking freighter, and locked in a tiny cabin. The door was locked. Nick chuckled quietly to himself, and as soon as things appeared to be quiet, he removed a plastic safety pin from his shirt and went to work on the plastic lock.

FIFTEEN minutes later it gave a satisfying click. Nick cautiously swung open the door. The corridor was deserted. Voices drifted back to him from the control room. In the cabin next to his he heard a man — probably another "caser" like himself—sobbing brokenly. Nick tiptoed carefully along the corridor and found his way to the airlock. The airlock stood open.

He stood for a moment, surveying the field. Ships stood at arithmetically concise intervals. The terminal buildings rose on the far side of the field, distant and impersonal. Nick could see no guards, no human movement. He scrambled down the ladder and dashed to the cover of the next ship.

The edge of the field was a hundred yards away. Then there was only a low board fence, and beyond that a scraggly growth of stunted trees, wild underbrush, and—freedom.

"I'll go west," Nick told himself. "I never shoulda stayed around the east coast. I'll go west, an' maybe I can make a clean start."

He crouched down and

tensed himself for the last dash.

AS SOON as he broke into the open, the sentry saw him. "Caser," he muttered disgustedly. "Someone forgot to lock him in. Well, I'll wait till he gets to the fence. He probably needs the exercise. And boy, oh, boy, has he got a shock coming!"

He dropped to one knee and sighted along a short, oddly bulging barrel. The panting figure was ten feet from the fence when he pulled the trigger and it spun wildly, staggered backward, and toppled to the ground with arms and legs churning in agony. The wide-eyed sentry barked a few words into his communicator and ran forward. A second sentry hurried to meet him, and they stood looking incredulously at the still twitching body.

"I just gave him one shot," the first sentry said, "but it didn't paralyze him. What happened?"

The second sentry bent down and ripped open Nick's shirt. He caught his breath and straightened up, a sickly pallor on his face. "I'll be damned. Metal. He had metal there, inside his shirt. It focused the beam and burned a hole in his chest."

The first sentry slumped to the ground and buried his face in his hands.

"Not your fault," the second sentry said. "Snap out of it now. Who would have thought one of these damned casers would have metal on him? *Nobody* has metal any more. You call an ambulance?"

"Sure. Right away. Do you suppose—?"

"Doubt it. He's alive, but not for long. Did you see that hole? The metal was right against his chest. Wonder what it was." He bent over Nick and came up with a smudged piece of metal.

The first sentry stared at it. "A metal credit. Ever see one before?"

"I never did," the second sentry said.

"We better save it for the poor guy's family. These casers always have big families. Wonder how long he's carried the thing around. He's been rich without knowing it. My brother works for a big shot that collects these things. Any coin at all brings ten thousand credits, and some of the rare dates bring as high as fifty thousand. I'll have my brother get an estimate on this one. The guy's family could probably use the money."

Nick's eyes were open, staring. His lips moved feebly.

"What'd he say?" the first sentry said. "Ask him where he got this thing."

The second sentry bent over, and straightened up disgustedly. "He says he earned it."

"That's a laugh. Wonder what's keeping the ambulance. Fellow, we're sorry about this. You ought to know better than to carry metal around. If you'd been working anywhere near a factory, it would have killed you long ago. We'll see that your family gets the coin. It's worth a lot of money."

Nick's lips moved again, and the second sentry bent over him.

"He wants it back," he said. "He says it's his and he wants it back. If he dies, he wants it buried with him."

The first sentry shrugged and tucked the coin into Nick's pocket. "That's the way these casers are—they never give a damn about their families. If he dies, though, the family will get that coin. He won't have a thing to say about it."

WHITE-FACED, biting his lips to fight the searing agony, Nick summoned his fading strength. "Too good for my family," he whispered. "They don't deserve it. I want it buried with me."

The ambulance swooped down, and a corpulent doctor lumbered over to Nick, took one look at his chest, and expertly stabbed a hypodermic needle into his arm.

"I suppose he's done for," the first sentry said, as the doctor went to work on the chest.

"Well, now," the doctor said. "I wouldn't exactly call him in good shape, but he'll live. He'll be some time healing up, though. And that damned Family Welfare Bureau will never get him into space—not with what he'll have left for a lung. Easy does it, man. You won't feel a thing in a moment. There. Now it's off to the hospital for a long rest."

Stretcher - bearers eased Nick onto a stretcher and started for the ambulance. The first sentry hurried after them. "Say, fellow—if you want, I'll get word to my brother's boss about that coin you got. He'll give you at least ten thousand for it—maybe more. What do you say?"

He stopped abruptly and came stomping back.

"What'd he say?" the second sentry said.

"Said he won't part with it. Said it's his lucky credit." He spat. "The thing half killed him and he calls it lucky!"

END

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

WHAT makes a science fiction story? Must it be packed with gadgets and inventions? Or is a science fiction story better told without them?

There are a number of persons who enjoy science fiction but are repelled by such gadgets as we find in most science fiction magazine stories. These people don't care much for science; they don't read scientific articles, even the ones in science fiction magazines. What they are interested in is people, in what men and women think and feel. The science in science fiction stories, the cracking suns and the alien invaders, are to them only additional strains that can be applied to the human organism, not essentially different from an adulterous wife or an unrequited love. It is the effect of scientific incident, not the incident itself, that these readers enjoy.

Just as numerous, and appearing in unexpected places, are those who say that no science fiction story should dare show itself in print without at least one patentable invention. *Harper's Magazine* is one such place. Its peripatetic reviewer methodically chewed one science fiction anthology apart a while ago, complaining in solemn ignorance that, as none of the stories contained a new ray gun or an improved rocket ship, they were scarcely *science* fiction at all.

Well, that's nonsense on the face of it. Gadgets are not science. Yet there is no doubt that gadgets spring up where science has passed, as meadow flowers mark the paths of long-gone cattle. Certainly advances in science *produce* gadgets. Newton's *Opticks* begat the Schmidt telescope. Einstein was the ancestor of the *Nautilus*. But what is the answer? Can good science fiction be written with few gadgets or none at all? Conversely, can stories that rely heavily on gadgetry be "good"?

HALF a dozen new books offer us insights into this question. Three have gadgets. Three don't. All six happen to be particularly good books, which is a help.

March Cost's *The Bespoken Mile* (Vanguard) is so gadget-free as hardly to be science fiction. (Surely Miss Cost had no such intention for it!) Aubrey Menen in *The Fig Tree* (Scribners) and John Wyndham in *The Midwich Cuckoos* (Ballantine) offer clearer cases, but each has only one "great lie" to set them apart from non-sf writing; neither book multiplies invention past that point.

These are the sort of science fiction books that can be given to those relatives and neighbors who won't read science fiction. They'll read these—that is, if they read, they will read these. The casual reader might finish any one of these without quite knowing that they were science fiction at all.

But they are, surely. Miss Cost's story is of precognition. A young dancer, Summer Day—yes, that's her name; a stage name, but the one she lives under—inherits a home in Scotland. She gives up the music halls, settles down in the Highlands, falls in love and marries. As she becomes a bride she sees ahead to the death of her husband at the Battle of Cassino. She becomes aware that the end of happiness is sorrow; and, having learned this, goes on.

John Wyndham's story is brighter and slighter. In the town of Midwich, where nothing has happened in centuries, the entire town falls impenetrably asleep. Everyone entering it topples over like the rest. When the town awakes, it is to discover that every woman of childbearing age has become pregnant. The children in time are born; they have golden eyes and are telepathic; they are cuckoos—changelings in another bird's nest—begotten by mysterious aliens, and therefore alien themselves in spite of their human mothers.

Aubrey Menen's fig tree is an invention—a true gadget—deliberately developed by one Harry Wesley. As a boy, Harry determines that he will live to see a statue raised in his honor. How can he do this? Why, by solving one of mankind's great needs. He casts about for a suitable need and finds it in overpopulation, in the Malthusian race between birth rate and food supply. His first idea is therefore to invent an oral contraceptive, but a patient schoolmaster talks him out of that: "My dear Mr. Wesley, I am given to understand that already there is available a wide range of contraceptives. They must all have been invented by somebody—clever fellows, too, when you come to think of it. But I don't recall any of them ever getting a statue." Harry sees the logic of the position. He thanks the instructor and selects another project: to invent something which will double the world's food supply. What he invents is a super-fertilizer which he applies to a fig tree, making it *The* Fig Tree.

THE above is what these books are *about.*

It would be witless malice to pretend that these skeletal thematic sketches convey any idea of what the books *are*. The outline of *The Bespoken Mile* shows nothing of March Cost's delicate sense of the interplay of personalities, of her three-dimensional Scottish landscape or of her compassion for the unripe but doggedly maturing Summer Day. In describing the plot of *The Fig Tree* there is no place to tell of Uncle George, the great manufacturer who makes "the bit of a guided missile that always goes wrong" or to recount the morose conversation on classic literature that takes place in the Greek ruins at Paestum, or to repeat Menen's observations of the ins and outs of Vatican life. The plot of *The Midwich Cuckoos* can tell us what the alien children are like, but it takes all of Wyndham's book to show us what it is like to be a human adult entrusted with raising them.

It is the development of these books that makes them of interest. But that development is not in science fiction terms. Once the "one great lie" is told in each case—the single thing that isn't so—there are no subsidiary inventions; there are, in other words, no gadgets.

And these are three first-rate books. They make excellent exhibits for the anti-gadget argument.

But turn to the next three books and we see the other side of the coin.

Clifford D. Simak's *Ring Around the Sun* is now reprinted by Ace, and we also have C. M. Kornbluth's two posthumous short story collections, *A Mile Beyond the Moon* (Doubleday) and *The Marching Morons* (Ballantine).

Gadgets? These books are full of gadgets—both in the strict sense of gleaming little artifacts that *do* things and in the larger sense of any sort of scientific or technological thing or event that is not normally a part of our lives. Simak's story gives us a fresh gadget on every page. We have a razor blade that never wears out, a light bulb that burns forever, a cigarette lighter that needs no fuel. We have a car that is constructed to be passed on from father to son, down the generations.

We have a child's toy that spins and transports the viewer into another dimension.

We have a secret society of mutants, and another secret society devoted to hunting mutants down. We have mechanical spy-mice, robots, androids, telepaths, super-homes, super-garments—everything but a super-kitchen sink, though on page 31 we find a super-toaster, a super-refrigerator and a super-washing machine.

WE ALSO have a fine story, even a brilliant story, in which every last one of these gadgets plays an essential part. For Simak does not throw gadgets at the reader in order to distract him, to keep him from noticing that there isn't any story; his gadgets *make* the story. The number of Simak's gadgets is countless, but it is exactly the number he needs to tell his story, each one placed where it must be to make the point he wants made.

What emerges is a tight, warm, human, credible story. And that is what Simak intended all along.

Kornbluth practiced the same art. In the two new volumes of his short stories there are twenty-four separate pieces. Each story is an invention. Each contains many subsidiary inventions: an armorarium of surgical instruments in *The Little Black Bag,* a self-sustaining maritime economy in *Shark Ship,* a recipe for maintaining society on a permanent wartime footing in *The Luckiest Man in Denv.*

What is most notable about a Kornbluth story is that his characters are always perfectly at ease in their surroundings. In *Two Dooms* his time-traveler makes a life for himself in the frightening world that the victorious Axis created after World War II. The described world cannot be—now or ever; but Kornbluth so constructs it, so provides it with tradition, folkways, sex habits, superstitions, vehicles, homes, farms—with all the parts of a world—that it springs up into perspective.

Kornbluth and Simak do not bring their scientific incident to us; they take us to other worlds entirely. They create these worlds for us, building them out of such furniture as does not exist here and now at all. Those are the rules of the game. It is only what does *not* exist that a Kornbluth or a Simak will trouble to tell us about.

The kind of story that takes us away from here and now makes more demands on the writer than the sort that starts with its society already mapped out. Unfortunately for its popularity, it makes more demands on the reader too. For that reason the kind of science fiction we see in the big slick magazines or the major book clubs is likely to be the simple, gadget-free type.

Well, there's nothing wrong with that. If the man across the street won't trouble to follow what Simak or Kornbluth are talking about, so much the worse for him. He will enjoy *The Fig Tree, The Bespoken Mile* and *The Midwich Cuckoos* all the same.

So will we; but we can go farther. Science fiction has resources beyond these. Science fiction can go anywhere and do anything—so long as the journey is planned with intelligence and illuminated with thought—and it is the likes of Simak and Kornbluth who can exploit its potential at its farthest reach.

UP TILL now we have been talking about good books. Unfortunately not all books are good—whether science fiction or anything else. Perhaps we can see what it is that the gadget-haters so dislike by examining a few books that earn lower marks.

Avalon has elected to bring back to life Manly Wade Wellman's twenty-year-old magazine novel, *Giants from Eternity*. This story was preposterous in 1939; age has not helped it. It begins with a mysterious meteorite (or something) that falls on a farm and begins to eat everything in sight, turning what it eats scarlet and threatening to engorge the world. A couple of poisonously juvenile scientists investigate it. They are baffled and helpless, but they manage to extract a sort of resurrection-juice from it, which they use to bring back the greatest minds of all time to help them out. These are the "Giants from Eternity" and they include Thomas Edison, Isaac Newton, Louis Pasteur, Charles Darwin and Madame Curie. One of the juveniles is entrapped by the red stuff and thus works to help it spread; the revived Giants take a few days to master everything that has happened in science since their deaths, then quickly invent everything necessary to wipe out the red menace and bring about a happy ending.

It happens that when Marie Curie died she was sixty-seven years old and paid very little attention to her personal appearance. As this fact did not suit the author, he chose to write it away. When Marie Curie is revived she is "a slender young woman, blonde and pale and lovely." Artistic license? All right. Artistic license should be extended only to art. *Giants from Eternity* is nothing like art. It is fast-moving; but it is also crude.

In *The Involuntary Immortals* (Avalon), Rog Phillips tells us about a woman named Helen Hanover. She is as blonde and lovely as Wellman's Madame Curie, but somewhat older—she is a hundred and forty-one and her third husband has just died of old age. She is immortal. Mourning because everyone she knows dies around her, despondent because she is unique in the world, she hops a train and sits down beside—guess? Why, beside another immortal.

It's a small world, but not that small. Nor is that the end of this book's fantastic impositions on the credulity of its readers. We are asked to believe that there are hundreds of these immortals and that they maintain laboratories and colonies without their existence even being suspected by the government or the public—although for some peculiar reason every priest and nun of the Catholic Church knows all about them. We are told that the villain of the piece is Helen Hanover's long-lost little boy!

It would have taken only the smallest amount of thought and trouble for the author to remove some of the worst implausibilities of *The Involuntary Immortals*, but it was more effort than he was willing to make.

In *The Plot Against Earth* (Ace), Calvin M. Knox has "hypnojewel" smugglers threatening the Earth. His hero is a narcotics agent who zips from planet to planet, is cast away when his interstellar liner is bombed, survives enormous hardship but ultimately stamps out the ring. Earth is saved. It has all been very wearing for Knox's hero, but not for the reader, who, after fanning through 138 pages, has learned nothing more than he knew before, experienced no new emotions, been compelled to do no thinking whatsoever. It is all quite painless for the reader and all quite pointless too.

In *Recruit for Andromeda* (Ace), Milton Lesser follows a group of draftees on the "Nowhere Journey." They have been snatched from Earth and transported to the planet of a far star for the purpose of—well, let's see, reflects the author; this time let's make it a universe-wide contest to see which race is smartest, ablest, strongest.

Our hero is matched against a female specimen of that utterly alien race, the Russians. He wins.

WHATEVER thought has gone into these books was on the run. It is impossible to believe that any page of any one of them could ever represent anything true or real. They are packed with gadgets, invented on the fly for purely cosmetic purposes; opium isn't "science-fictiony" enough so the writer snaps his fingers twice and comes up with a word: "hypnojewels." The typing proceeds. He has to destroy a ship—a bomb—but that's not "science-fictiony" either. Snap, snap. An "implosion" bomb, then! This is in *The Plot Against Earth*, but the same thing happens in *The Involuntary Immortals*.

What's an implosion bomb? A light bulb is an implosion bomb—that is, if you break it, it will implode. Could it destroy a ship or a building? Probably—if they were inside it. *Recruit for Andromeda* has a "gadget" that makes mere implosion bombs look almost sane. A bunch of ships are fighting in the space between galaxies. Our hero can't observe them directly, but that's all right—one of them is on fire, and he can keep track of the others by watching their shadows. The shadows are cast on the Andromeda Nebula!

THERE'S nothing wrong with an hour's nirvana, of course. Poul Anderson's *The War of Two Worlds* (Ace) is light enough and fast enough for any adventure fan; it asks little of him, but it pays for its time with skillful plot carpentry to conceal the loose ends; it has its share of gadgets and gimmicks, but they are put where they serve a purpose and they give at least the temporary illusion that they might work. Anderson's Earth has just lost a war with Mars and is occupied. An Earthman seeks to liberate his planet and does so—in a way that is both satisfying and unexpected. So with John Brunner's *Threshold of Eternity* (Ace), where a man from here and now is kidnaped into a great future war that swirls back and forth through space and time. Edmond Hamilton does a competent, professional job in *The Star of Life* (Dodd, Mead); his hero was fired into orbit, and froze there for thousands of years, coming back to life to find himself in a struggle among much-mutated races of humanity. Peter Bryant's *Red Alert* (Ace) is a first-rate action story about an American Air Force general who, believing in preventive war, elects to start World War III singlehanded.

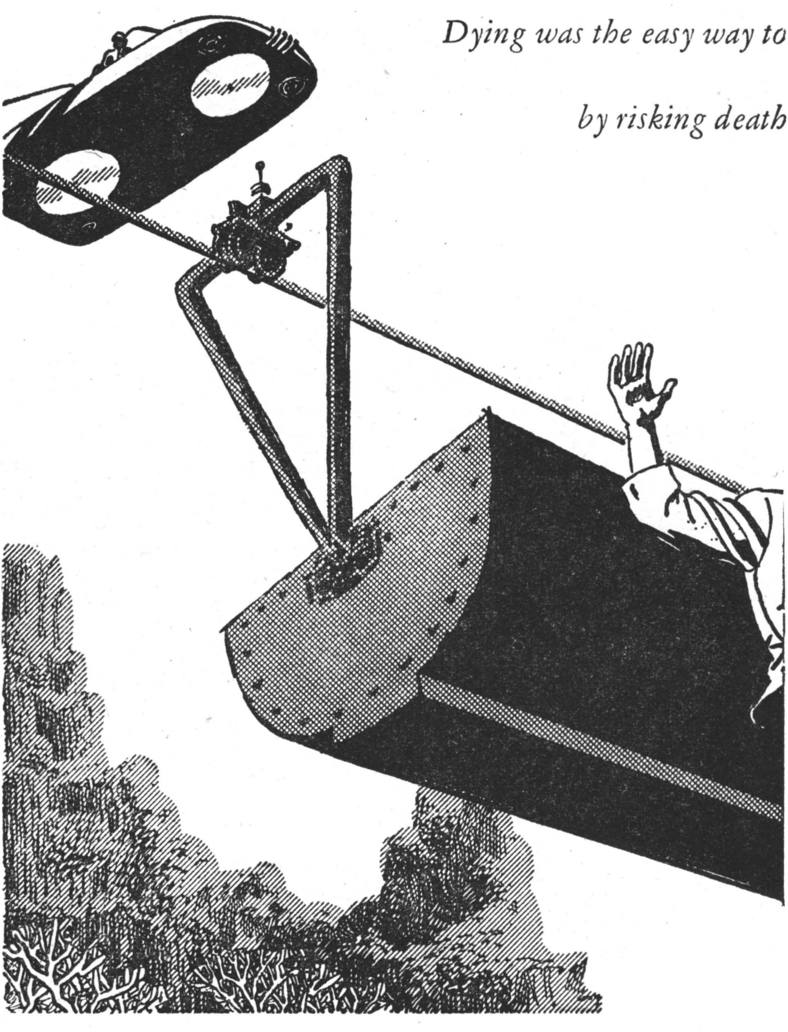
Peter Bryant's story isn't "gadgety" in our present sense, but the novels by Hamilton, Brunner and Anderson are—gadget enough and adventurous enough for anyone. It's unfair to try to guess at the motives or morals of an author—he exposes enough of himself in submitting his printed words to review. But it is tempting to imagine that all four of these books were once, in hasty, rough first draft, much like the previous four; and that then, with hard skillful work, the rough edges were smoothed, the implausibilities removed.

It is that step that seems to have been omitted in the others. END

Escape

Dying was the easy way to

by risking death



into Silence

get to Xaron—so what was Marno gambling to arrive alive?

By WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

THE whistle sounded for the meal break, and the operators switched off their machines and began to stream toward the door. Marno took a long time cleaning his hands, watching the figure of Bellen, the inspector, at the far end of the machine shop, waiting for him to go into his office. As soon as he saw Bellen move, Marno picked up his satchel and strolled out of the door after the others.

The air outside shook with the incessant roar of the ore-reducing plants, a tumult of sound that pounded on day and night, year after year. Marno didn't notice it, for it had thundered in his ears throughout his life. In front of him was the long bridgelike structure that supported the great conveyor belt, reaching straight out across the arid slopes to the ragged line of red hills that stood out sharp and hard against the mauve sky. At one point, their skyline dipped in a V-shaped notch, the cutting that the conveyor belt passed through on its way to the Port.

Marno's pulse hammered in his temples. Either he made his escape now or he would spend the rest of his life here in the Valley. The idea of escape had been in the back of his mind for a long time, and today, with Carn, the overseer, away at a conference, Marno had an opportunity that mightn't come again.

The last of the men ahead of him turned into the canteen, but Marno walked straight on until he reached the end of the building. There was no one in sight. In front of him was the squat bulk of the powerhouse that drove the conveyor belt, with the ore-reducing installations towering beyond it. Away to the right, the dry ground sloped upward, dotted with straggling clumps of purple scrub.

Sweating, he began to run, past the open door of the powerhouse through which came the hum of vast nuclear motors. Above him, the giant conveyor belt rumbled out across innumerable rollers, an endless band that moved on for miles across a countryside unknown to him, for in the twenty-five years of his life Marno had never been beyond the fences that lined the Valley's rim. It was supposed to be unsafe to go beyond the wire fences. Most of the planet was alive with radioactivity, or so they had been told.

MARNO crouched against one of the metal pylons supporting the belt, his knees trembling. There was still nobody within sight. Fifty feet above him, the belt roared endlessly on its way, carrying with it the whole of the industrial output of the Valley, dark bricks of a dense compound that could be made fiercely radioactive, supplying atomic power for a thousand and one industries in the civilizations beyond. The speed of the belt was not too great for a man to jump aboard it.

Steadily, as he had planned, he began to climb the girderwork. He was unaccustomed to heights, and he climbed without looking down. He climbed right to the top of the pylon, inching his way out over the moving belt. It moved much faster than he had thought, but nothing would have made him turn back now.

His breath had a sound like a sob in it as he let himself drop, and then he was spinning over on the hard rubber-like surface. He lay flat on his back, feeling every second or so a sharp jar as the belt passed over another set of rollers.

There was no return now. As he was carried farther and farther away from the powerhouse, he felt a growing elation. He was on his way to freedom. He had only the vaguest ideas of what he would find at the far end of the conveyor. He knew it was a place called the Port, where ships called to take cargoes of the astrium compound away to other places where it was used to generate power.

He had never seen one of these ships close at hand, but he had often watched them take off in the night, sharp daggers of flame stabbing into the dark sky. He knew that they used rockets to lift them above the atmosphere, and he had heard talk about something called an isolator that enabled them to make inconceivable journeys to the planets of other suns. But his knowledge of these things was hazy.

His own people never made such journeys. The spaceships were operated by men of the alien race that had controlled Marno's world since before he had been born—men like Carn, the overseer. Marno had been told that they came from a place called Xaron, somewhere in the planetary system of the great white star Altair. They were strange, alert men with unbounded energy.

As the traveling belt climbed toward the cutting in the hills, he was able to look back over the whole of the Valley—the towering structures of the reducing plants, the colored aluminum houses, the beetlelike electric cars gleaming in the orange sunlight. Away to the right, the crushing batteries threw long plumes of dust into the air, and down by the lagoon a group of girls walked along the beach, limbs dark, dresses bright. He could see the yellow house where he had lived until now with his married brother. This valley had been his world—the whole of it.

SUDDENLY he found the walls of the cutting rising on either side of him, shutting the Valley from his view. He was tempted to spring off the moving belt while there was yet time, but even as he thought of it, he felt it tilt down over the hillcrest, and he knew it was too late.

He had expected the crossing of the ridge to bring him within sight of the Port, but all he could see was a vast wilderness of seamed red hills and purple scrub, sloping down to a flat metallic sea that gleamed like bronze under the deep orange disc of the sun. A desert in which only the conveyor belt moved, snarling away to a horizon lost in heat haze.

Marno was conscious of an appalling loneliness, a feeling that he had been a fool to think of leaving the Valley, where generation after generation of his ancestors had lived and worked and died. He thought of the comradeship of the machine shop, the gaiety of parties by the lagoon, the games he had played with his friends. The fear of the unknown grew in him with each mile the moving belt carried him onward.

The sun dropped slowly over a sea that glared like molten iron as he neared and passed another ridge of wind-scored hills. Once he saw in the distance the corroded wreckage of gigantic machinery, but apart from that there was only rock and sand and scrub, and the miles after endless miles of the conveyor.

He was staring blankly ahead of him at the hazy skyline when he became abruptly conscious of something seen from the corner of his eye—a black shadow skittering over the parched ground. It took him a second or two to grasp its meaning, and then his head went back and he shaded his eyes to look up at the gleaming aircar sweeping down over the belt.

He sprang to his feet. The belt was moving almost at ground-level here, and without hesitating he jumped. As he rolled down a slope of loose sand, he heard a deep-throated shout from above him, but he scrambled up and ran without looking back. The car's air-stream whistled and thrashed about him, but he raced on with his eyes fixed on a sparse line of scrub ahead of him.

He never reached it. Something like an electric shock numbed all his muscles, and he fell headlong. He looked up at the man standing over him, huge and blond, looking at him with strange cold eyes. He felt himself picked up as though he were a child and passed up into the hovering aircar.

THEY acted with a quick efficiency that left Marno dazed. Almost before he had time to wonder what was going to happen to him, he found himself in Carn's office, a cold room with metallic walls bathed in a brilliant green-white light. Carn's massive figure sat facing him across a broad emerald desk, while Bellen stood against the wall with a scornful smile on his thin lips. Marno found himself hating the inspector with an intensity he wouldn't have thought possible, because Bellen was one of the Valley people like himself.

"Why did you run away?" asked Carn.

"I wanted to see the Port," Marno said.

"But why, man—why?"

Marno felt confused. Everything about the Xarian seemed to advertise his alien origin—his size, his vast physical energy, the direct stare of his strange eyes. He couldn't bring himself to answer.

"You thought you might have been able to get aboard one of the ships. Is that it?"

Marno was conscious of nothing but the blank, penetrating stare that seemed to reach into his thoughts. Although he didn't answer, his expression must have told the Xarian what he wanted to know, because for the first time since Marno had entered the room, Carn turned his concentrated gaze away from him, looking down as he spoke in a low voice into some small instrument on his desk. Some of the tension went out of Marno's muscles, and he was able to glance around the room.

The walls were lined with what he had taken to be small round windows, but he now saw that they were video screens giving views of every part of the plant, so that Carn could sit here in his office and see at a glance everything that was going on in and about the building. There was even a screen giving a telescopic view for miles along the conveyor belt on which Marno had tried to escape. When he realized that his attempt at escape had been hopeless from the start, a hot gust of anger swept through him, but there was no way he could express it.

"You don't give me much choice," said Carn, looking at him again. "I'll have to move you."

And so it was that Marno found himself transferred next morning to one of the ore-crushing batteries. Socially, it was a step downward, and he worked all the morning in moody silence. It was easy work, but dull, keeping him isolated from all but two of the others who worked in the place. One of these was a wiry, gray-haired man who supervised the unloading of the ore trucks that tipped their contents into the hopper that fed Marno's crushing mill. He introduced himself as Greg.

"I've been around here longer than anyone," he told Marno. "Why did they send you here?"

"I tried to get to the Port—rode out on the conveyor belt," said Marno.

Greg stared at him, then threw back his head and laughed. "You hadn't a chance!" He became serious. "I went there once. Hid in the back of an aircar."

"What was it like?"

"I don't know. They flew me straight back. I've been here ever since." Greg looked around and moved a little closer to Marno as he spoke. "Things were a bit confused then. The Xarians had just taken over control—but you wouldn't remember that, of course."

MARNO looked at him in surprise. "Just taken over control, did you say? I thought the Xarians had always controlled the place."

"Rot!" Greg spat out the word with a sudden savagery. "I can remember when all this place was ruled from Earth."

Marno smiled tolerantly. "I've heard there was a place called Earth, of course. Supposed to be where our first forefathers came from, wasn't it?" He grinned a little self-consciously.

"Supposed? *Supposed?* It's the truth, man! That's the hell of this education through video. They can make you swallow anything. *Anything!*" Greg walked up and down as he shouted the words, then spun and gripped Marno by the arm, his face coming very close to the younger man's.

"Do you believe all this stuff they give you in the philosophy sessions? This rubbish about reincarnation?"

Marno hesitated. "Well . . ."

GREG shook him. "Do you really believe after you die here you'll be born again on Xaron? As a Xarian?"

"That's what they tell us, and we've no other way of knowing these things—have we?"

"Fool!" Greg threw the younger man from him, turning his back and striding away. A few yards off, however, he stopped, standing with his feet apart and his head down. Then he returned, planting himself directly in front of Marno and looking at him searchingly.

"You've got guts, though," he admitted abruptly, "or you wouldn't have tried to escape. Listen. The things I'm telling you are the truth. D'you understand? Not the sort of rot the Xarians put over the video to keep you quiet. I can remember when they came." He gave a sour smile. "You know, we all come from the same stock, if you trace it far enough back. We're all descended from people who came from the Earth—the Xarians as well as us."

"But that's impossible! They're so different—even a different color!"

"It's only environment that does that. Different sunlight, stronger gravity. But they're still men, like you and me. They just know a bit more, that's all. You might say they have hit on a more successful technique of living."

Marno stared broodingly at the ore fragments cascading into the crushing mill.

"I'll have to go," said Greg. "Here's Rexon coming. I'll see you in the canteen."

As Greg went off, Marno watched the Xarian overseer approaching, moving with long, bounding strides. He vaulted up onto the platform where Marno was standing and dropped a huge hand on his shoulder.

"How's the explorer settling down?"

"Explorer?" Marno looked at him blankly. "I'm from the machine shop."

REXON laughed. "I heard about your ride on the conveyor belt. I get all the explorers up here." He put a long green cigarette between his lips and lit it with an electric lighter.

Seen closely like this, the Xarian gave an overpowering impression of rugged strength, aggressively and blatantly masculine. His hair was neither the black of a young man's hair nor the gray that came with age, but a strange bleached yellow like the color of dry grass, and his eyes were the color of steel that has been heated and then chilled. Ridiculous, thought Marno, to maintain that these beings were of the same race as the Valley people. Who had ever heard of a man with blue eyes?

"Don't take much notice of what old Greg tells you," said the Xarian suddenly. "He's like this." He tapped his finger against his temple.

Marno grinned, but inside he felt taut and uncertain. He looked thoughtfully after Rexon, who sprang off the platform and strode on his way, speaking in a low voice into his wrist radio as he went.

Marno was resentfully conscious of the shallowness of his knowledge of things beyond his immediate surroundings. After all, it was obvious that human life hadn't started here in the Valley. The very plants from which their food was processed had been introduced here from somewhere else—things that grew in tanks of water enriched by chemicals. The local vegetation was all poisonous, life based on a different chemical cycle. So Greg might easily be right in what he had said.

When Marno went along to the canteen during the meal break, he found Greg sitting alone at one of the smaller tables, and sat opposite him, glancing around the room. The other operators were younger than Greg, crowding together in three or four voluble groups of half a dozen or so.

High in one corner of the room, Marno found the wide-angle video lens that watched the whole scene like a Cyclopean eye, and the sight of its void stare sent a cold tingle down his spine.

"Greg," he said. "Just where is this place they call Earth?"

The older man looked furtively about him, then leaned forward. "You know how to pick out the stars at night?"

"Some of them."

"You know the fairly bright yellow one near Sirius—the one called simply the Sun? It's called that because it was the original one. The Earth is one of its planets, and that's where the human race started."

Marno smiled tolerantly. "Sounds as good a theory as any."

"Damn it, man, it's true!" Greg slammed his fist down on the table, a lock of gray hair falling over his eyes. "They used to tell us more, before the Xarians came. Listen, it was like this. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, all the human race lived on that one planet. They found a way to use atomic power to drive a ship through space—first the space between the neighboring planets—later, the space between the stars. Got that?"

Marno nodded doubtfully.

"Well, you can see what's happened. Wherever they found worlds they could live on, they established colonies. They were overcrowded on Earth, and apart from that some of the other planets they discovered had raw materials that were valuable to them. Like the radioactive minerals here."

Marno looked into the black, glittering eyes. "But most of our astrium goes to Xaron, not to Earth."

GREG nodded. "It does now, yes. Because Xaron was a colony that grew up. I'm damned if I know why—some people used to say the Xarians had some method of selective breeding. Others say that it's just because Xaron was a bigger and naturally richer planet than Earth, and it attracted the best brains from everywhere else. Anyhow, the fact is that they control all of the inhabited systems, even Earth."

Marno leaned back. "Where did you get all this?"

"From the last of the Earthmen here. I was young then, but I remember them."

"Why did they leave?"

"I think the Xarians simply bought the place outright, or bartered some technical secret in exchange for it. It was all done quickly and smoothly and quietly. The Earthmen went and the Xarians came. Put in better machines, gave us all cheap electric cars, cheap video sets, polaroid windows —everything we wanted." Greg's lips twisted in a lopsided smile. "Then they put wire fences around the settlements and told us the fences were to keep us from the danger of radioactivity outside—oh, they had the answers to everything, those boys." The smile widened until he showed his teeth with a sudden pent-up savagery. "It's taken me most of my life to realize that they've told us just what they want us to believe, whether it happens to be true or not."

Marno frowned. "But you have got to take some things on trust."

"Like the philosophy sessions?" Greg's shoulders began to shake in silent laughter. "You mean you really believe that you're going to have another life after this one—a fresh new life as a Xarian?"

"If it isn't true—well, nothing would have any meaning, would it?"

Greg laughed aloud — a laugh without any warmth in it. "Does it have to have a meaning?" He got slowly to his feet, while Marno sat staring in front of him. "I've lived a lot longer than you, son," he said quietly. "And I haven't seen any meaning to it yet. Think it over."

And then he was gone.

The whistle sounded for the return to work, and Marno went back to his job of watching the ore thunder down into the roaring mill. The noise and dust and vibration seemed to deaden the turmoil of his thoughts, yet after a while he found his mind running back over the things Greg had told him. The more he thought of them, the more possible it seemed that Greg's fantastic ideas might have had some germ of truth behind them.

"They've told us just what they want us to believe, whether it's true or not."

By God, when you thought of it, you realized it could be true.

FROM the platform where he stood, Marno was able to look out through a window to the landing area where Rexon's aircar was parked. In the middle of the afternoon he saw a smaller aircar land neatly alongside it, and a few minutes later Rexon walked through the plant with a woman visitor, showing her the various machines.

Marno watched, fascinated, for she was the first Xarian woman he had seen. She had the same strange coloring as the men of her race, the same look of eager zest. She was strongly built, yet active, and she laughed easily, a deep laugh that shook the whole of her body.

Rexon helped her up on to the platform, and as Marno listened to him explaining the details of the crushing mill to her, he realized that he had stumbled on something that supported Greg's theory that their ancestors had originally come from the same place. Even between themselves, they spoke the same language that the Valley people did.

"Glad to be going back?" asked Rexon after a pause.

"Of course," said the woman. "Hard to realize I'll be on the ship tomorrow. It's good to feel that I'll soon be under white sunlight again, breathing good fresh air. I think I'll spend the first day just touring the city."

"I'll have time to see you go, before I come here," said Rexon as they moved away.

Marno stared after them as they went. So the woman was going back home to Xaron in the morning. To the hub of all the vast, complex civilization that Greg had hinted at.

In a flash, a plan formed in his mind, dazzlingly complete. Outside was the woman's air-car, with a large luggage compartment similar to the one Greg had hidden in when he had been taken to the Port. Greg had been brought straight back, but Marno felt that once he got there, he would escape—he was forewarned, and on arrival he would have only the woman to deal with. Certainly she was strong and quick, but with the factor of surprise on his side, he should easily get away from her. And tomorrow a ship was leaving for Xaron. All he had to do was get aboard during the night. Could he? He refused to think of failure. He simply had to be aboard.

As soon as Rexon and the woman were out of sight, Marno slipped away from his machine and ran down the length of the plant. Recklessly, he dashed through the Xarian's office and out on to the cement landing stage. Rexon would pass around the other side of the plant, and wouldn't be back near Marno's machine until after the woman had left.

Marno tried frantically to open the luggage compartment, but without success. He looked up at the windows of the plant, but they were blank with reflected sky. Any minute now, Rexon and the woman might return.

It occurred to Marno that the compartment might be controlled from inside the cabin. He opened the door, stared at the glittering banks of instruments. Then he found that the rear seat could be swung forward, giving access to the luggage compartment while in flight. He wormed his way in, pulling the seat back behind him, sealing himself into darkness.

THE thudding of his heart seemed to echo through the metal compartment; then, after what seemed an age, he heard voices. He felt the movement of springs as someone climbed aboard. There was the solid click of a door, the vibrant hum of the compact little nuclear motors. Then the machine was climbing, lifting straight up from the ground with a speed that forced him hard against the floor. The air began to whistle about the smooth hull. The flight was bumpy at first, but soon they had climbed into smoother air.

He had a feeling of exultation, the feeling that this time he must succeed. He would have liked to be able to look out at the country over which they were flying, but it could not be helped—the main fact was that he was escaping. They flew level for a long time. Then he suddenly doubled up, gasping as a sharp dive caught him in the pit of the stomach.

The note of the motors changed and he felt the machine hovering. Then it was on the ground and the hum of the motors ceased.

Marno suddenly began to tremble, a chill fear gripping him. He found himself listening, listening, wondering what had caused this irrational terror that was rising in him. And then he knew.

It was the silence. The abysmal silence. Never in his life had he heard anything like it. Even in the arid desert there had been noise—the rumble of the conveyor belt—and in the Valley there was always the sound of machinery, roaring endlessly on through day and night. Yet here there was only this deafening stillness.

As he listened, though, he realized that there *were* sounds in the background. An occasional voice. Footsteps. The hum of some passing vehicle or aircraft, fading quickly away again.

Then, suddenly, light, blinding him. The whole side of the luggage compartment was open. He blinked out into a walled courtyard bordered with exotic plants. A strange house with translucent sapphire walls towered over one side of it, and a hangarlike building of yellow metal opened off one end, the whole scene bright and pallid in a harsh artificial lighting that blazed from somewhere high above it.

Before his eyes were used to the glare, the woman came briskly around the side of the car. She stopped, rigid.

"Come out of there." Her voice was amused rather than angry.

Marno slid quietly out of the car, his eyes on the walls of the court yard. At the end—a metal gate, open. At once he was running.

He heard the click of plastic heels behind him. When he was halfway to the gate, he felt the woman's arms around him, lifting him off the ground.

"Lars!" she called. "Lars!"

Frantic, he tried to kick back at her legs, but his feet thrashed the air uselessly.

A massive-shouldered giant of a man with stiff yellow hair appeared at the door of the hangar. In an instant, he was across the courtyard in a tremendous, springing run, arms held wide. The woman released Marno, and even as he fell the man called Lars caught him, swinging him to his feet with an arm twisted behind his back. There was no question of a struggle—the man could have snapped Marno's arm like a dry twig.

"Where was he?" asked the yellow-haired giant.

"In there," indicated the woman. "One of Rexon's boys."

MARNO felt as though all the strength had been drained out of him. The giant marched him toward the strange house, while the woman walked ahead, the metallic fabric of her dress gleaming under the fierce white light, with its highlights showing the movement of her muscles as she walked.

They went into a large room, more beautifully furnished than any place Marno had ever imagined, with the same dazzling light pouring down from a luminous ceiling. The woman closed the door, while the man sat Marno in a chair that seemed to have been molded of a single block of plastic foam.

"We can give him to Rexon tonight," he said.

Marno put his head in his hands. His eyes felt hot and moist. The man shook him by the shoulder with a gentleness he hadn't expected.

"Why did you come here, son?" he asked.

Marno looked up, and once his eyes met the other man's bright, cold stare, he couldn't look away.

"Just relax," he heard the deep voice telling him. "Relax. That's it. Breathe deeply and let yourself go. That's right. Now you know you can trust us. All we want to do is help you. Tell us all about it."

Marno felt dazed and confused. He wasn't conscious of anything but the weird, pale eyes, and somewhere behind them the feeling that these were people to whom he could confide his most secret thoughts.

"I want to go to Xaron," he said.

"But you've been told you'll go there some day, haven't you?"

"Yes. But I—I wasn't sure. They tell us that, but I don't think I believe it. Do you?"

The woman's sudden ripple of laughter brought his attention back to his immediate surroundings. The man called Lars glanced at her and said something quickly that Marno didn't understand. Then Lars brought his eyes back on him.

Lars was about to speak again when the woman said, "Lars, what about Deren? He wanted to examine one of them. Why couldn't we take this one with us?"

The man looked at her again. "Why not? It might as well be him." Once more he turned to Marno. "You really want to go to Xaron, do you? Without knowing what it's like?"

"Yes," said Marno emphatically.

The man left him and walked down the long room. He walked straight toward the far wall, yet just before he reached it an arched doorway suddenly opened in it, so that he walked through into another room beyond. After he had passed through, Marno found that he was looking at what appeared to be solid wall again.

The woman came across the room toward Marno with a long glass filled with a sparkling violet liquid.

"Drink this," she said in a quiet voice.

The stuff seemed hot and cold in his throat at the same time, and fumes seemed to rise at the back of his nose, but after he had finished the glass he felt better. He looked up to find Lars standing beside him again.

"Young fellow, you're lucky. We'll be able to take you with us. A friend of ours back home wants to examine one of you Valley people."

Marno began to stammer incoherent thanks, but Lars raised his hand.

"I can't promise to bring you back. But they'll find something for you to do there."

Marno was afraid to show his eagerness. "I don't care if I never come back."

"All right. But remember what I said."

THE woman touched a control on one of the walls and a section of it became transparent, so that they were able to look out over the courtyard. Marno could see varicolored metallic and crystalline buildings beyond the wall of the yard, and he was amazed at the rich diversity of their design. The great red disc of the sun was touching the horizon now, but the scene was still lit by the chill glare of a regular pattern of lights suspended or floating in the air high overhead.

The woman pointed upward.

"Look," she said. "The ship's coming down."

Marno rushed across to her side and stared up. Dropping down out of the darkening purple sky was the spearpoint of flame from the braking rockets of the spaceship. The thing was colossal, bluntly cylindrical, gleaming like silver high up in the red sunlight. The hissing scream of its rockets was the most stirring sound he had ever heard. He watched it until the roof of the neighboring house cut it from his view.

"We'll be on it at sunrise," said Lars.

"You'll like it on Xaron," the woman told Marno. "It's a huge garden, compared to this place. Try to imagine a city with fifty million people in it, stretching for a hundred miles along a coastline, with hundreds of little islands linked by bridges. Buildings as high as your mountains, aircars everywhere like a swarm of insects. There are so many things to do—you'll see for yourself."

They gave Marno a meal of strange varied foods that he didn't like, then showed him to a room with a divan of plastic foam. Lying alone in the dark, he thought over all the things that had happened to him since the afternoon. He was hardly able to believe his good fortune. And then a thought came to him that swept away his dreams like an icy gale.

Rexon. He remembered listening to him talking to the woman back at the ore-crushing plant. "I'll have time to see you leave in the morning"—that was what he had said.

When Rexon saw Marno in the morning, he would want to take him back. The thought of the last-minute loss of everything he had fought for kept him awake, sweating in the dark. Somewhere out near the white splendor of Altair was a world of shining cities and luxuriant forests, of broad turquoise oceans spangled with islands that sparkled like jewels. And a stone's throw away in the darkness was the ship that was leaving for this world in a few hours. The fear of missing the journey kept him rigid and wide-eyed.

MORNING was a bewildering nightmare. They forced Marno to eat something, hustled him into an aircar, and whirred over the rooftops toward the gleaming bulk of the spaceship that towered in the dawn air. They landed on the nearer side of a great embankment marked here and there with black and yellow signs that read *"Danger—Blast Zone"* and waited near the entrance to a narrow high-walled passageway that zigzagged through to the other side.

Another aircar swept down in a wide arc and landed. It looked somehow familiar, and Marno realized why when he saw the man who stepped out of it.

It was Rexon.

Marno shrank against the side of the car, edging his way round it to keep out of Rexon's line of sight. He thought of making a dash for the passageway through the embankment, but he realized that would bring him into full view. He could only stand there with a tense emptiness in him.

Rexon walked into view; he shook Lars by the hand, put his arm around the woman's shoulder. Then he seemed to see Marno for the first time.

"So you weren't content to wait for your next life to see Xaron, were you?" he asked.

Marno forced himself to look straight into the coldly observant eyes, although his knees shook with the tension. He didn't know what to say. If he gave the wrong answer, he might be taken back to the crushing plant. He thought suddenly of Greg, with his untidy gray hair and his sour, defeated smile, and the tiredness that showed now and then about his eyes. He had tried to escape once, only once, and they hadn't given him another chance.

Then he realized that Rexon's eyes had a flicker of laughter in them, as though they were sharing some joke, and with an effort he managed to smile.

"Sometimes I think we underestimate you fellows," said Rexon thoughtfully. He turned to Lars. "You know, I think the standard philosophy is due for some revision, don't you?"

Lars nodded. "I'll take it up with Deren. This alters things, doesn't it?"

The ringing note of an amplified bell sounded from the ship. Lars and the woman made their farewells to Rexon, and led Marno through the angled passageway that cut the embankment, bringing them out onto the scorched cement of the blast zone. They climbed the great escalator that reached up a hundred feet or more to the airlock of the ship. Lars touched Marno's arm.

"Take a last look at it," he said, waving his hand toward the dry red hills with their patches of purple scrub.

Marno gave a brief glance over his shoulder, then continued to gaze up at the flange of the airlock. At last, they stood on it, and Marno was able to look into the interior of the ship, into a room crowded with complex apparatus. Brilliant light reflected from metal surfaces. He waited alongside the woman as Lars went quickly inside.

"It's beautiful where we're going," the woman told him. "Cool and fresh and peaceful. No roar of crushing batteries, no dust. All so qiuet."

"Quiet?"

"I don't suppose you'd be able to imagine what that's like. You've never been where it's really quiet."

A siren warned them of the impending takeoff.

"Come on," said the woman, and stepped in through the massive door.

Marno looked back. The escalator's steps were motionless now, and it was automatically disconnecting from the flange, beginning to fold back. Marno stepped to the edge of the flange.

"Marno!" called Lars from the doorway. "Come in. Quick!"

Trembling, Marno poised for a second on the edge of the metal platform. Then he sprang across the widening gap to the escalator.

"Marno!" thundered the voice behind him, but now he was running down the steps three or four at a time. In seconds now, the blast would be starting.

HE WAS panting when he reached the ground, but he rushed on across the flame-blistered cement toward the shielding embankment, his ears keyed for the first sound of the rockets. If they began to fire before he reached shelter, he was finished.

He was just at the passageway when the first hollow roar broke the tight-stretched silence, its shock-wave hitting him like a fist between the shoulder blades. With his shadow flung ahead of him by the flame, he lurched on, heart pounding. Then he was around the first of the corners.

He came out on the far side of the embankment like a leaf blown by the wind. Behind, the rockets lifted in an eerie scream.

He saw Rexon just getting into his aircar. The Xarian looked up at the rising bulk of the ship, and as he did so, he caught sight of Marno. He waited while Marno staggered up to the car.

"Could I—" began Marno, and leaned against the side of the car, gulping air. "Could I ride back with you?"

Rexon opened the door. "Get in!" he shouted above the roar of the blast, and Marno slid in alongside him.

As the car lifted and skimmed away over the parched red wilderness, Marno said nothing. He stared ahead along the straight line of the conveyor belt until he saw the buildings of the Valley come up over the horizon, the familiar lines of identical little houses, the beetlelike electric cars, the slender dark girls in their bright dresses, and as they swept down to land he felt an odd sense of satisfaction.

But only when he stepped out of the aircar did he realize what it was that he had really missed. It was the unending roar of the machinery, the eternal torrent of sound that had filled the Valley before he was born, sound that would some day thunder in the ears of his children. As he walked into the plant through the vibrant air, he felt at peace.

He was home.

END

The usual way to test for accurate translation is to re-feed a translated sentence into the computer and compare it with the original. Almost classical among computer translator jokes is the input: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," and its twice-translated (from English to Russian to English) output: "The vodka is strong, but the meat is rotten."

Programming a computer to translate language is like dressing a baby: you know what you're trying to do, but the computer doesn't care.

—*Industrial Research*

All they were looking for

was somebody at home—and

all they found was this . . .

HORNETS' NEST

By LLOYD BIGGLE, Jr.

THEY sat in the captain's quarters, relaxed in the easy silence of close friendship as they absently sipped drinks and watched the monitor of the ship's scanner screen. There was Captain Miles Front, big, formidable-looking, a healthy and robust forty-five. There was Clyde Paulson, his brilliant young navigator. There was the expedition's chief scientist, Doctor John Walter, a pleasant-looking, balding man of indeterminate age.

It was Paulson who broke the silence. "I have an important mission of my own," he said.

They regarded him with amused skepticism, and he grinned good-naturedly.

"An ancestor of mine, my great-great-great—how many generations has it been now? Anyway, old Grandfather Paulson left Earth in some kind of disgrace. The details have been forgotten, down through the years, but the legend has been passed along as a family joke. I don't know whether he joined the colonists to run away, or whether that was someone's idea of a good way to get rid of him. Anway, it's kind of a pledge to the family's honor that the first one to get back to Earth will check up, and see whether Grandfather Paulson has been exonerated, or pardoned, or acquitted, or whatever. That's my mission. Not that it will make any difference to Grandfather Paulson one way or the other."

"So that's why you were so eager to make this trip," the captain said. "You needn't have bothered. A lot of chance you will have to rake up a scandal that old!"

"I thought it was a pretty good excuse," said Paulson.

DOCTOR WALTER pointed at a boldly glimmering star. "You're sure that's the one?"

Paulson grinned, and Captain Front chuckled dryly.

"Disappointed to find it looks just like another star?" the captain said.

"Maybe," Walter said dreamily. "This is a different kind of a mission for me. It's a pilgrimage. There are maddening blank spaces in the information that the colonists brought with them about this solar system. I hope to fill in some of those. I'd like to fill all of them in."

"You may be able to," the captain said. "Remember that Earth's scientists haven't been standing still all this time. They must have progressed beyond the point they'd reached when the colonists left. Perhaps they'll have everything you want waiting for you."

Walter shrugged, and the captain chuckled again, and said to Paulson, "I've disappointed him. He doesn't want to find the answers on file. He wants to dig them out for himself."

Doctor Walter said to the captain, "What's your mission?"

"To get us there and back. And frankly—" he turned to look at the lone, flickering star —"there are angles to this thing that bother me. It's just possible that our mother planet might not be at all glad to see us."

"It should greet us with open arms," Walter said. "The population problem was serious when the colonists left. It will be critical by now. We can use the people, and Earth should be able to spare as many as we want. Our science is bound to be ahead of Earth's in many respects, and we know they can't match our starships, or we would have heard from them before now. Ships that bring out new colonists can take essential raw materials back to Earth. Cooperation will benefit all of us."

"It should," the captain said. "But we don't know how Earth will look at it. When the original colonists left, there was supposed to be a new ship every couple of years. Nothing has been heard from Earth since. It looks as if Earth simply wrote us off and forgot about us. Now that we've built our own civilization, and maybe done far better than Earth expected, we might not be welcomed back. Earth might be jealous. Or it might have a guilty conscience. It *should* have!"

"Faulty navigation," Paulson suggested.

"An occasional ship might go astray. Not all of them. No, the thing has me worried. That's why I want to hit Pluto Base and planet-hop our way in. Give Earth notice that we're coming, and a chance to get used to the idea before we arrive."

Doctor Walter brightened. "Pluto Base. I wonder if they ever found a tenth planet."

CLYDE PAULSON laid out a perfect interception course for Pluto, and he was still grinning with satisfaction when they brought the ship down. The captain rotated the scanner and looked broodingly at the frigid, airless landscape.

"Is this Pluto Base or isn't it?" he growled.

"It is," Paulson said confidently.

"They're taking their time about sending out a reception committee. They should have picked us up hours ago. Some security system!"

They waited, straining their eyes to pick out details. Doctor Walter came into the control room. He glanced at the screen and exclaimed, "Why, there's nothing there!"

"Pluto Base is underground," the captain said, rotating the scanner again. "Or at least it was. I imagine it still is."

"Stop!" Paulson shouted. "Over there on that hill—wouldn't that be the base entrance?"

The captain threw in the magnification unit.

"It could be," Doctor Walter said.

"It is," the captain said. "And the airlock is open."

They landed, watched, saw nothing move, and entered.

They went cautiously through the empty corridors. Equipment was there. Supplies were there. Machinery was in operating condition. All signs indicated a hasty departure.

"They left just before lunch," Doctor Walter said in the mess room. "The food is still here, laid out for them."

"All we'd have to do," Captain Front said, "is close the airlock, start the air machines and take over. The supplies would last us indefinitely. I can understand that they might find reasons to abandon this base, but why would they pull out and leave all this stuff?"

"The transmitters are in working condition," a communications officer said. "It'd be easy to start the power station. Shall we call Earth and ask them?"

The captain said, "Now that I think of it, we haven't picked up any signals from Earth, have we?"

There was an uneasy silence. The captain looked around at the faces that peered grotesquely at him through spacesuit faceplates.

"Then we won't call Earth," he said, "until we're certain just what might be there to answer us."

THEY SPIRALED slowly in toward the sun, probing, exploring, searching, constantly alert and cautious. They touched Neptune and Uranus, and such moons as looked promising. They touched a half-dozen of the moons of Saturn. The bases, where they found them, were desolate and abandoned.

Not until they reached the moons of Jupiter did they find the first dusty remnants of human bodies.

"Whatever it was," Doctor Walter said, "it happened quickly."

"Attack?" the captain asked.

"I can't believe it. An attack can take people by surprise, but they're not too surprised to know what's happening. Some of them would take defensive measures. Most of them would act for their own safety. These people were stricken down in the everyday routine of living."

"Disease? Plague?"

"It wouldn't strike everyone at the same instant. This did."

"We might as well go on," the captain said. "If it's necessary, we can hit any of these places again on the way out."

FROM that moment they all knew. No one talked about it. No one even hinted at the cold fear that twisted within him. The communications men continued to search vainly for signals. The scientists carried on their observations. The ship's officers rotated the scanner toward a far-off corner of emptiness and strained to see a fleck of light that would be Earth when they came closer. And they all knew what they would find there.

On Mars, it was no longer desolate bases. It was annihilated cities—except that stone and mortar and steel were untouched. The people had been struck down as unsuspectingly as if a remote deity had suddenly decided upon doomsday. The flimsy atmosphere domes had lost their air and the buildings stood in excellent preservation, a futile monument to a wasted dream.

And then there was Earth. Rolling green hills, majestic cities, awesome natural wonders, all familiar, like a long-forgotten love. Majestic cities of the dead. Towns and villages and hamlets and solitary dwellings of the dead.

They had known what they would find, and they found it, and still were stunned.

"It hit the whole solar system," Doctor Walter said, snapping his fingers, "just like that."

Paulson objected. "There weren't any bodies at the outer bases. Those people had a chance to get away—or at least to try."

The captain nodded. "I have a hunch that Venus and Mercury were caught. If so, that means it struck the solar system out as far as Jupiter's moons. Something from the sun?"

Walter pondered the suggestion, and shook his head. "Heat would have left traces. So would any kind of radiation I know of that could do this. How long has it been? We should be able to pick up the exact date."

They landed at New Washington. The specialists, the experts, went grimly to work. The archeologist who had come to probe eagerly some faded secrets of Earth's ancient peoples found himself with the problem of an extinct interplanetary civilization. The botanist could only wonder at the survival of abundant flora when all fauna had perished. The bacteriologists, the chemists, the physicists, the military intelligence officer masquerading as a diplomat, all pondered the possible source of the catastrophe.

Clyde Paulson, unwanted by the scientists and unneeded by his ship, found his way into the military records section and gazed disheartened at the mountainous files of films.

"Well," he said, "since I've got nothing better to do . . ."

HE SEARCHED the index references, found Paulsons in quantity, but no mention of his dishonored ancestor.

"Odd," he said. "He couldn't have been such a scoundrel that they destroyed his records."

He prowled through the building, sampling the priceless military secrets of a lost civilization, getting himself lost, becoming more frustrated by the hour. He sat down to analyze his problem.

"Permanent records," he mused. "Those would be records that are complete. In other words, when a man's service was terminated, they filmed his records and put them in the permanent file. There should be another file for those on active service. Which means that old Grandfather Paulson was still considered on active service when it happened. Which is odd, because he left with the colonists. Could that mean the colonists . . ."

Impossible. A shipload of colonists wouldn't kill off the civilization that mothered it, and then leave for the stars in search of breathing room—even if it had the power.

He continued his search, and eventually he found active records of the military services. They were crudely kept files containing paper documents and records, and even these were only abstracts of service records. He comprehended, at length, that the complete records were kept with the man at his point of service. What a prodigious amount of effort to devote to such a simple matter as record keeping!

"Paulson, Paul," the file said. "Space Navy. Serial Number 0329 B9472 A8974."

Paulson took the file and carried it out into the fresh air, to a plot of tangled grass where there were no bleached bones to dishearten him. He settled down to read of the bright development of a promising military career that had ended in disgrace.

Paul Paulson had held the rank of captain in the Space Navy. He was a pilot of the highest qualifications. He had served with distinction on a number of dangerous missions. His last assignment had been the Space Navy Base on Callisto, Jupiter Command. The record concluded with the notation of a court-martial on a charge of insubordination, and the terse verdict:

Guilty.

Accompanying the file was a smaller folder, labeled, "Summary of Court-Martial Proceedings Against Paul Paulson." The contents of the folder had been withdrawn for study, a notation informed him. He opened it and found a single sheet of paper that had been overlooked or unwanted.

PAULSON said to the captain, "Have they found anything?"

"They found one thing. This happened just about two Earth months after the colonists left Pluto Base. I remember something in the old records about their communications with Earth breaking down sooner than they'd expected. Now we know why. It looks as if the human race missed extermination by an eyelash. What have you been up to?"

"I found a personnel file on Grandfather Paulson. I suppose no one will object to my taking it."

"None of the natives I've met will object. Have you vindicated the old man?"

"He received a court-martial for insubordination. That would be no disgrace in our family. Funny thing, though—the trial summary is missing, except for one statement by Grandfather Paulson. Interested?"

"Let's have it."

Captain Front took the paper and read:

"To whom it may concern: It is true that I have refused to obey the orders of the Scientific Mission, in spite of the fact that my commanding officer ordered me to do so. It is true that I made a serious attempt to break the neck of the Scientific Mission's chairman, Doctor Harold Dolittle. It is also true that I sincerely regret this attempt.

"I hold nothing personal against Doctor Dolittle. Scientists have been playing at exterminating the human race for centuries, and it's probably only an accident that one of them hasn't succeeded before now. And since Doctor Dolittle actually has succeeded, breaking his neck would not help the situation. It was bound to happen sooner or later, anyway.

"When I was a kid back in Minnesota, there was a boy on our street named Fitzharris Holloway. We all called him Fizz, and he wasn't a bad kid except that he was just too curious to live. Let a bunch of us stand around a puddle and it would always be Fizz who would drop a big rock and splash mud all over our Sunday clothes and get the lot of us whipped. He'd drop it just to see what would happen. The average mentality could figure that out without the experiment, but Fizz's mentality wasn't average. It was scientific. He had to see for himself. Let us find a hornets' nest and it would be Fizz who had to punch a stick into it. He'd get stung, of course, but so would the rest of us.

"You've heard that old gag about throwing an egg into an electric fan? Almost everyone has, I guess, and been satisfied just to hear about it. But Fizz had to see for himself. He got egg splashed all over himself and his ma's new dress, and he wore a pillow to his meals for the next three days.

"They'll never forget Fizz at old Central High School. The scars he left in that chemistry laboratory will last as long as the building. All the teacher had to say was, 'Don't do this,' and there would be Fizz out in the lab trying it out.

"I figure now that Fizz was just a natural-born scientist.

Most of us are curious about things as children—curious within limits, that is—but we outgrow it. A scientist never outgrows it, and the law of averages gives us a certain number of irresponsible scientists. Fizz met his end in a bar one night, when he dropped a lighted cigarette into the bulging front of a woman's dress. She picked up a bottle and broke it over his head, and the jury called it justifiable homicide. If all natural-born scientists had run squarely into the consequences of their curiosity at such an early age, the human race might be no further along than the Bronze Age, but at least it would have a future.

"I attempted to resign my Space Navy commission when I first learned that I was to assist Doctor Dolittle in his experiments. Contrary to normal procedure, my resignation was not accepted. I am now requesting permission to resign and join the star colonists. They have an opening for a reserve pilot and will favorably consider my application. I believe the risks of star colonization to be considerably less than those of remaining in this solar system. Doctor Dolittle has been poking at a hornets' nest, and the more light-years away I am when the hornets come out, the better I'll like it.

"Respectfully yours, Captain Paul Paulson."

CAPTAIN FRONT stroked his cheek thoughtfully. "So they let him go. And then, two months after the colonists left, this happened. What sort of experiments was this Scientific Mission carrying on?"

"The only thing I could find was Grandfather's statement."

"I wonder if they were conducting some kind of solar experiments. I never thought of a sun as being a hornets' nest. What comes out when you poke a sun?"

"Grandfather was attached to the Jupiter Base Command, on Callisto. We might find more information there. Any chance of hitting Callisto again on the way out?"

"We'll see what we find here. If this looks like a likely clue, we'll have to follow it up. So far, there haven't been any other clues. Let's see what Walter says about this."

VAINLY THEY searched such mute records as Earth had to offer. They sifted the bones of the Venus colonists and looked in at Mercury Base, where death had interrupted the lonely vigil of a small group of scientists and soldiers. Then they turned back. Mars again, then an asteroid base, and then Callisto.

And the complete file on Captain Paul Paulson.

Paulson searched further and found the records of the Scientific Mission. He carried an armload of documents to Captain Front.

"Found any answers?" the captain asked.

"Not all of them," Paulson said, "but enough."

"Solar research?"

"No. Jupiter research."

"Odd," the captain mused. "Whatever happened hit everything from the Jupiter moons through the system clear to Mercury."

"This Doctor Dolittle," Paulson said, "was doing some intensified research that concerned Jupiter. First he used a series of atomic warheads to test the depth of the atmosphere. Then he wanted someone to pilot a ship on a tight parabolic orbit that would take him closer to Jupiter than any human had ever been before. As an added twist, the ship was to be paralleled closer in by a guided missile that could broadcast instrument readings. Grandfather Paulson was ordered to pilot the ship. He refused. He was tried for insubordination, convicted, and sentenced to a prison term."

"But he left with the star colonists."

"Yes, by escaping from confinement. He got out to Pluto Base and stowed away on the starship. Jupiter Command was furious when it found out what had happened. The commandant ordered the starship to turn around and bring him back. The starship was out of the system by then and it refused."

"Well, that's an interesting bit of family history, but it doesn't explain what wiped out humanity."

Paulson said grimly, "Doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

"Grandfather Paulson said Doctor Dolittle had been poking at a hornets' nest. He was poking at Jupiter, and it was vigorous poking — he used atomic warheads. Then, when Grandfather refused to pilot Dolittle's ship, Dolittle found another pilot who would. They went into their orbit and made the trip successfully, but they lost their guided missile. Then a few weeks later they found it again."

CAPTAIN FRONT said blankly, "They lost it on Jupiter—and then they found it?"

"The missile came shooting back at them," said Paulson. "I gather that it was only a piece of luck that let them capture it, because the mechanism had been altered in a way they called 'astonishing,' and it used an unknown fuel. Its speed was something they couldn't believe. It represented several hundred years' progress for them at one crack, and it gave them the secret of star travel. They went to work on it, and they were too enthused to give much thought to what else might come up from Jupiter."

The captain walked over to a port and looked out at the sky. *"Jupiter?"*

"It must have been hell for something native to Jupiter to take to space travel, but someone—or something—was as mad as a hornet. Atomic warheads wouldn't soothe anyone's feelings."

"So it—or they—headed in toward the sun."

"At unbelievable speeds," Paulson said. "Those on the outer planets either had time to try to escape, or maybe to come to help."

"And all the humanity they could find—how did they do it?"

"I hope we never know. How did they ever get off Jupiter? Not even our starship could manage that. What's the escape velocity?"

"Too much."

"Well, I found the study they made of that missile. It's an advance in mankind's knowledge—at the price of mankind."

"I'll have Walter go over it."

"Where is he?" Paulson said. "I haven't seen him for days."

The captain stiffened. "My God! He's down on Amalthea, conducting some Jupiter experiments!"

THE desolate, rock-strewn surface of Amalthea curved sharply away from them to its shallow horizon, and the light in the sky was Jupiter. The huge disc of the planet hovered menacingly above them.

The churning bands of clouds writhed and struggled like live beings in the throes of mortal agony. Even as they watched, the colors deepened and faded, yellow clouds boiled into the brown of the North Equatorial Belt, and the enigmatic, so-called *red* spot shimmered with a repulsive, grayish pinkness.

"Grandfather must have had some kind of apprehension about it," Paulson said. "Just the sight of it is enough to scare a man to death. I feel as if it were going to gobble me up."

He turned expectantly to Doctor Walter, and the scientist said nothing. Behind the tinted thickness of his faceplate, his eyes bulged and sparkled.

"I feel," Paulson said, "as if I were on a disabled ship that is likely to crash at any second."

The scientist took a step forward — toward Jupiter. "Out, damned spot!" he muttered. "Out, I say!"

Paulson jumped, and came down slowly. "How was that again?"

"Shakespeare," the scientist said.

"I said I feel as if I were on a disabled ship—"

"I heard you. Nonsense. It's

true that this little moon is falling toward Jupiter, but it's only an inch and a fraction a year. Fifty million years from now, it'll be a few miles closer. Eventually it'll go all the way, but *you* won't be around to worry about it."

"No one will be around to worry about it," Paulson said. "Do you think someone down there will think it's another bombardment when the moon falls, and come up to see who did it?"

Walter said shortly, "I wouldn't know."

"You have to admit that was a stupid way to experiment on an unknown planet. Atomic warheads!"

"Who would have imagined anything could be living down there?" Walter said.

"But what could they learn?"

"I'm sure they had some definite objective. You don't think they did it just for the fun of it, do you?"

Paulson turned. "Your hour's up. Let's get going."

They made long, slow-motion bounds across the crumbling surface. Suddenly Paulson missed Walter, and turned to find him motionless, staring at Jupiter.

"You said an hour was all you wanted," Paulson said sharply. "We're jumping off at midnight, you know, and I only have half the computations made."

"All right," Walter said. "I was just looking."

WHEN they reached the tiny lifeship, Walter turned again before he entered the airlock. "I'd give a lot to know what's down there. With all the study that Scientific Mission put in, they really found out nothing about the planet."

"I can tell you how to manage it," said Paulson.

"How?"

"Give us about a six-months start. Then fly down and see for yourself. We'll leave you the lifeship."

Walter turned abruptly and entered the airlock.

Paulson followed him. "Sure, it's a fascinating thing," he said. "And I'm glad the planets in our own solar systems run Earth-normal and smaller. Otherwise, some scientist might decide to conduct some experiments. I'm glad Jupiter is light-years away from my home town, but after this I'll never feel easy about it. Who can say they won't come out again some day, and take to star traveling?"

They took off, and Paulson set course for Callisto Base. A moment later Walter got up and left the control section. When Paulson got curious and went back to look for him, he found the scientist pressing his face against a porthole, staring at Jupiter. **END**

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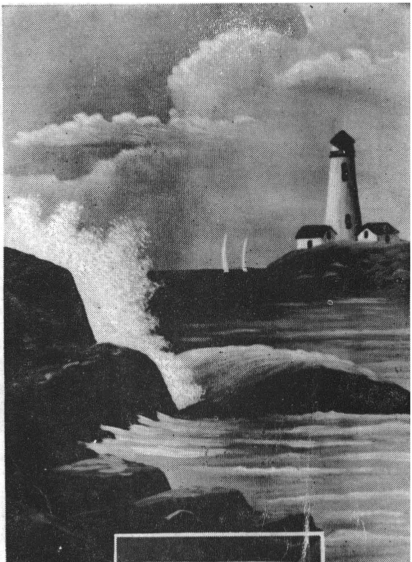

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