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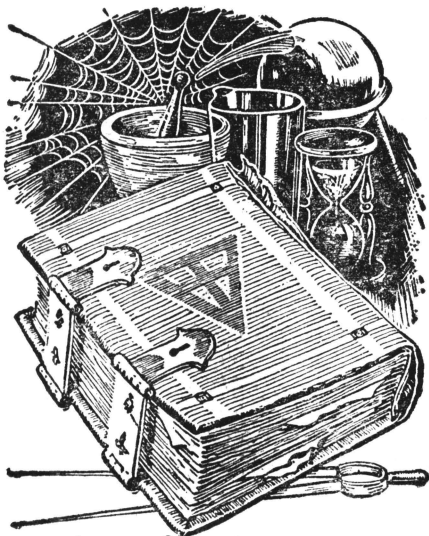
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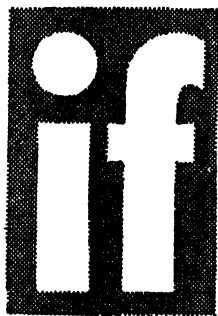
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A HOLE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

THAT looks very like a Fred Pohl story title, doesn't it? It happens not to be, however, but instead the name of an extra-ordinary book by Willard Bascom, published by Doubleday at \$4.95.

Bascom is the head of the Mohole Project, which intends to drill a hole right through the earth's crust into the mantle to see if they can't bring up a core. They'll drill where the crust is thinnest, and that happens to be under some miles of sea-water. You have to be crazy in some very special way even to think of such a thing, and that's Bascom.

The book includes an account of the organization from which this heady idea sprang: AMSOC. AMSOC had its beginnings somewhere in the inner circle of the Office of Naval Research, which guides the Navy's basic research program and keeps up contacts with universities and private laboratories. One hot summer day in '52, two of these broad-spectrum geniuses tried to organize a huge pile of incoming proposals and suggestions for research, by putting them in a few neat piles. When they were finished, desks, tables, chairs and floor were covered with neat piles—each one paper deep. They then gathered them together into one pile and

sweatily looked at each other, and at that moment the organization got its name: the American Miscellaneous Society.

To this day the now respectable deep-drilling project has the cable address AMSOC, Washington, D.C., and its letterhead bears the figure of a geophysicist ram-pan on his fields of action—earth, air, fire and water.

Right at the start the organization (which has no membership rolls, dues, officers, bylaws or meetings) was efficiently organized into five divisions: Etceterology, Phenomenology, Calamitology, Generalogy and Triviology. These men got together at brainstorming sessions which would take the breath away from E. E. Smith. Once, just for kicks, they conceived a plan to bring water to California by hauling, with tug-boats, an Antarctic iceberg (the Arctic ones are salty) 600 feet thick and 10 miles long from Little America and (because of prevailing currents) around Hawaii so that it could be moored in the Channel Islands near Los Angeles. They worked the project out in such detail that it looked not only feasible but perhaps too efficient: it might well change the climate too much.

Yet project Mohole is now a serious, practical endeavor,

for all its wild letterhead; and in telling about it, Bascom briefs you in everything connected with it—the creation of the earth, the origins of life, the structure of stars, the natural history of the ocean and the land and the atmosphere. There's drilling, as it is, and as it's going to have to be before they're through; ships, navigation, explosives, buoys and anchors—why, the man's a whole corps of specialists all by himself.

THERE'S one sharp and timely point connected with this whole astonishing effort. Last September a letter appeared in a New York paper, pouncing on an article a few days before headed **SOVIET CONSIDERS FIVE EARTH PROBES**. The letter was written by this same Bascom, and, even admitting that it's his own pony he's riding, I think you'll agree he has something to say.

On August 24, he reports, he was invited to show pictures and to lecture on Project Mohole before the scientists of the Soviet research ship *Vityaz*. He did so. He says they were warmly congratulatory and seemed surprised by the scale of the U.S. deep sea operations. He says they spoke vaguely about a Russian effort on land in the near future.

So along comes this Sept. 10 release from Moscow describ-

ing a monster five-pronged Soviet mantle-drilling project: one in the Caspian, four on land: In Karelia, the Ural Mountains, the Caucasus and the Kuriles.

Bascom goes on to say that though scientists all over welcome the competition—it makes more work get done—the fact remains that this “scientific Olympics,” as he calls it, isn't altogether just a jolly game. Bascom, who certainly should know, says we have the initial advantage. On land we have drilled to 25,000 feet, the Soviets about 17,000. Project Mohole's test drilling in water, totaling 11,700 feet, is nearly 100 times their record. “Nevertheless,” Bascom writes, “I am concerned that another hare and tortoise race will develop... Although they have a long way to go, they have accepted the conditions of the race... We must... be wary that even in areas where they are not superior, propaganda may make them seem so. We must run, and win, and tell the world we have won.”

This department couldn't agree more; and it seems time to remind the world that at Sputnik time, and at Russian H-bomb time, and even at astronaut time, sleepy people were stumbling about, bleating that no one had warned them.

Well, about this one Bascom has issued the warning. Let's see what happens. **END**

THE YILLIAN WAY

I

JAME Retief, vice-consul and third secretary in the Diplomatic Corps, followed the senior members of the terrestrial mission across the tarmac and into the gloom of the reception building. The gray-skinned Yill guide who had met the arriving embassy at the foot of the ramp hurried away. The councillor, two first secretaries and the senior attaches gathered around the ambassador, their ornate uniforms bright in the vast dun-colored room.

Ten minutes passed. Retief strolled across to the nearest door and looked through the glass panel at the room beyond. Several dozen Yill

lounged in deep couches, sipping lavender drinks from slender glass tubes. Black-tunicked servants moved about inconspicuously, offering trays. A party of brightly-dressed Yill moved toward the entrance doors. One of the party, a tall male, made to step before another, who raised a hand languidly, fist clenched. The first Yill stepped back and placed his hands on top of his head. Both Yill were smiling and chatting as they passed through the doors.

Retief turned away to rejoin the Terrestrial delegation waiting beside a mound of crates made of rough greenish wood stacked on the bare concrete floor.

As Retief came up, Amba-

The ceremonious protocol of the Yills was impressive, colorful — and, in the long run, deadly!

sador Spradley glanced at his finger watch and spoke to the man beside him.

"Ben, are you quite certain our arrival time was made clear?"

Second Secretary Magnan nodded emphatically. "I stressed the point, Mr. Ambassador. I communicated with Mr. T' Cai-Cai just before the lighter broke orbit, and I specifically—"

"I hope you didn't appear truculent, Mr. Magnan," the ambassador said sharply.

"No indeed, Mr. Ambassador. I merely—"

"You're sure there's no VIP room here?" The ambassador glanced around the cavernous room. "Curious that not even chairs have been provided."

"If you'd care to sit on one of these crates—"

"Certainly not." The ambassador looked at his watch again and cleared his throat.

"I may as well make use of these few moments to outline our approach for the more junior members of the staff; it's vital that the entire mission work in harmony in the presentation of the image. We Terrestrials are a kindly, peace-loving race." The ambassador smiled in a kindly, peace-loving way.

"We seek only a reasonable division of spheres of influence with the Yill." He spread his hands, looking reasonable.

"We are a people of high culture, ethical, sincere." The

smile was replaced abruptly by pursed lips.

"We'll start by asking for the entire Sirenian System, and settle for half. We'll establish a foothold on all the choicer worlds. And, with shrewd handling, in a century we'll be in a position to assert a wider claim."

The ambassador glanced around. "If there are no questions—"

RETIEF stepped forward. "It's my understanding, Mr. Ambassador, that we hold the prior claim to the Sirenian System. Did I understand your Excellency to say that we're ready to concede half of it to the Yill without a struggle?"

Ambassador Spradley looked up at Retief, blinking. The younger man loomed over him. Beside him, Magnan cleared his throat in the silence.

"Vice-Consul Retief merely means—"

"I can interpret Mr. Retief's remark," the ambassador snapped. He assumed a fatherly expression.

"Young man, you're new to the Service. You haven't yet learned the team play, the give-and-take of diplomacy. I shall expect you to observe closely the work of the experienced negotiators of the mission. You must learn the importance of subtlety."

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan said, "I think the reception

committee is arriving." He pointed. Half a dozen tall, short-necked Yill were entering through a side door. The leading Yill hesitated as another stepped in his path. He raised a fist, and the other moved aside, touching the top of his head perfunctorily with both hands. The group started across the room toward the Terrestrials. Retief watched as a slender alien came forward and spoke passable Terran in a reedy voice.

"I am P'Toi. Come this way..." He turned, and the group moved toward the door, the ambassador leading. As he reached for the door, the interpreter darted ahead and shouldered him aside. The other Yill stopped, waiting.

The ambassador almost glared, then remembered the image. He smiled and beckoned the Yill ahead. They milled uncertainly, muttering in the native tongue, then passed through the door.

The Terran party followed.

"—give a great deal to know what they're saying," Retief overheard as he came up.

"Our interpreter has forged to the van," the ambassador said. "I can only assume he'll appear when needed."

"A pity we have to rely on a native interpreter," someone said.

"Had I known we'd meet this rather uncouth reception," the ambassador said stiffly, "I would have audited the language personally, of

course, during the voyage out."

"Oh, no criticism intended, of course, Mr. Ambassador."

"Heavens," Magnan put in. "Who would have thought—"

Retief moved up behind the ambassador.

"Mr. Ambassador," he said, "I—"

"Later, young man," the ambassador snapped. He beckoned to the first councillor, and the two moved off, heads together.

Outside, a bluish sun gleamed in a dark sky. Retief watched his breath form a frosty cloud in the chill air. A broad doughnut-wheeled vehicle was drawn up to the platform. The Yill gestured the Terran party to the gaping door at the rear, then stood back, waiting.

Retief looked curiously at the gray-painted van. The legend written on its side in alien symbols seemed to read "egg nog."

THE ambassador entered the vehicle, the other Terrestrials following. It was as bare of seats as the Terminal building. What appeared to be a defunct electronic chassis lay in the center of the floor.

Retief glanced back. The Yill were talking excitedly. None of them entered the car. The door was closed, and the Terrans braced themselves under the low roof as the engine started up with a whine of worn tubos.

The van moved off. It was an uncomfortable ride. Retief put out an arm as the vehicle rounded a corner, just catching the ambassador as he staggered, off-balance. The ambassador glared at him, settled his heavy tri-corner hat and stood stiffly until the car lurched again.

Retief stooped, attempting to see out through the single dusty window. They seemed to be in a wide street lined with low buildings.

They passed through a massive gate, up a ramp, and stopped. The door opened. Retief looked out at a blank gray facade, broken by tiny windows at irregular intervals. A scarlet vehicle was drawn up ahead, the Yill reception committee emerging from it. Through its wide windows Retief saw rich upholstery and caught a glimpse of glasses clamped to a tiny bar.

P'Toi, the Yill interpreter, came forward, gestured to a small door. Magnan opened it, waiting for the ambassador.

As he stepped to it, a Yill thrust himself ahead and hesitated. Ambassador Spradley drew himself up, glaring. Then he twisted his mouth into a frozen smile and stepped aside.

The Yill looked at each other, then filed through the door.

Retief was the last to enter. As he stepped inside, a black-clad servant slipped

past him, pulled the lid from a large box by the door and dropped in a paper tray heaped with refuse. There were alien symbols in flaking paint on the box. They seemed, Retief noticed, to spell "egg nog."

II

THE shrill pipes and whining reeds had been warming up for an hour when Retief emerged from his cubicle and descended the stairs to the banquet hall.

Standing by the open doors, he lit a slender cigar and watched through narrowed eyes as obsequious servants in black flitted along the low wide corridor, carrying laden trays into the broad room, arranging settings on a great four-sided table forming a hollow square that almost filled the room. Rich brocades were spread across the center of the side nearest the door, flanked by heavily decorated white cloths. Beyond, plain white extended to the far side, where metal dishes were arranged on the bare table top.

A richly dressed Yill approached, stepped aside to allow a servant to pass and entered the room.

Retief turned at the sound of Terran voices behind him. The ambassador came up, trailed by two diplomats. He glanced at Retief, adjusted his ruff and looked into the banquet hall.

"Apparently we're to be kept waiting again," he muttered. "After having been informed at the outset that the Yill have no intention of yielding an inch, one almost wonders..."

"Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "Have you noticed—"

"However," Ambassador Spradley said, eyeing Retief, "a seasoned diplomatist must take these little snubs in stride. In the end—Ah, there, Magnan." He turned away, talking.

Somewhere a gong clanged.

In a moment, the corridor was filled with chattering Yill who moved past the group of Terrestrials into the banquet hall. P'Toi, the Yill interpreter, came up and raised a hand.

"Waitt heere..."

More Yill filed into the dining room to take their places. A pair of helmeted guards approached, waving the Terrestrials back. An immense gray-jowled Yill waddled to the doors and passed through, followed by more guards.

"The Chief of State," Retief heard Magnan say. "The Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau."

"I have yet to present my credentials," Ambassador Spradley said. "One expects some latitude in the observances of protocol, but I confess..." He wagged his head.

The Yill interpreter spoke up.

"You now whill lhie on

yourr intesstinss, and creep to fesstive board there." He pointed across the room.

"Intestines?" Ambassador Spradley looked about wildly.

"Mr. P'Toi means our stomachs, I wouldn't wonder," Magnan said. "He just wants us to lie down and crawl to our seats, Mr. Ambassador."

"What the devil are you grinning at, you idiot?" the ambassador snapped.

MAGNAN'S face fell.

Spradley glanced down at the medals across his paunch.

"This is... I've never..."

"Homage to godss," the interpreter said.

"Oh. Oh, religion," someone said.

"Well, if it's a matter of religious beliefs..." The ambassador looked dubiously around.

"Golly, it's only a couple of hundred feet," Magnan offered.

Retief stepped up to P'Toi.

"His Excellency the Terrestrial Ambassador will not crawl," he said clearly.

"Here, young man! I said nothing—"

"Not to crawl?" The interpreter wore an unreadable Yill expression.

"It is against our religion," Retief said.

"Againstst?"

"We are votaries of the Snake Goddess," Retief said. "It is a sacrilege to crawl." He brushed past the in-

terpreter and marched toward the distant table.

The others followed.

Puffing, the ambassador came to Retief's side as they approached the dozen empty stools on the far side of the square opposite the brocaded position of the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau.

"Mr. Retief, kindly see me after this affair," he hissed. "In the meantime, I hope you will restrain any further rash impulses. Let me remind you *I am chief of mission here.*"

Magnan came up from behind.

"Let me add my congratulations, Retief," he said. "That was fast thinking—"

"Are you out of your mind, Magnan?" the ambassador barked. "I am extremely displeased!"

"Why," Magnan stuttered, "I was speaking sarcastically, of course, Mr. Ambassador. Didn't you notice the kind of shocked little gasp I gave when he did it?"

The Terrestrials took their places, Retief at the end. The table before them was of bare green wood, with an array of shallow pewter dishes.

Some of the Yill at the table were in plain gray, others in black. All eyed them silently. There was a constant stir among them as one or another rose and disappeared and others sat down. The pipes and reeds were shrilling furiously, and the susurrations of Yillian conversation from the other

tables rose ever higher in competition.

A tall Yill in black was at the ambassador's side now. The nearby Yill fell silent as he began ladling a whitish soup into the largest of the bowls before the Terrestrial envoy. The interpreter hovered, watching.

"That's quite enough," Ambassador Spradley said, as the bowl overflowed. The Yill servant rolled his eyes, dribbled more of the soup into the bowl.

"Kindly serve the other members of my staff," the ambassador said. The interpreter said something in a low voice. The servant moved hesitantly to the next stool and ladled more soup.

RETIEF watched, listening to the whispers around him. The Yill at the table were craning now to watch. The soup ladler was ladling rapidly, rolling his eyes sideways. He came to Retief, reached out with the full ladle for the bowl.

"No," Retief said.

The ladler hesitated.

"None for me," Retief said.

The interpreter came up and motioned to the servant, who reached again, ladle brimming.

"I ... DON'T ... LIKE ... IT!" Retief said, his voice distinct in the sudden hush. He stared at the interpreter, who stared back, then waved the servant away.

"Mr. Retief!" a voice hissed.

Retief looked down at the table. The ambassador was leaning forward, glaring at him, his face a mottled crimson.

"I'm warning you, Mr. Retief," he said hoarsely. "I've eaten sheep's eyes in the Sudan, ka swe in Burma, hundred-year *cug* on Mars and everything else that has been placed before me in the course of my diplomatic career. And, by the holy relics of Saint Ignatz, you'll do the same!" He snatched up a spoon-like utensil and dipped it into his bowl.

"Don't eat that, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said.

The ambassador stared, eyes wide. He opened his mouth, guided the spoon toward it—

Retief stood, gripped the table under its edge and heaved. The immense wooden slab rose and tilted, dishes sliding. It crashed to the floor with a ponderous slam.

Whitish soup splattered across the terrazzo. A couple of odd bowls rolled across the room. Cries rang out from the Yill, mingling with a strangled yell from Ambassador Spradley.

Retief walked past the wild-eyed members of the mission to the sputtering chief. "Mr. Ambassador," he said. "I'd like—"

"You'd like! I'll break you, you young hoodlum! Do you realize—"

"Pleass..." The interpreter stood at Retief's side.

"My apologies," Ambassador Spradley said, mopping his forehead. "My profound apologies."

"Be quiet," Retief said.

"Wha—what?"

"Don't apologize," Retief said. P'Toi was beckoning.

"Pleasse, arll come."

Retief turned and followed him.

The portion of the table they were ushered to was covered with an embroidered white cloth, set with thin porcelain dishes. The Yill already seated there rose, amid babbling, and moved down the table. The black-clad Yill at the end table closed ranks to fill the vacant seats. Retief sat down and found Magnan at his side.

"What's going on here?" the second secretary said angrily.

"They were giving us dog food," Retief said. "I overheard a Yill. They seated us at the bottom of the servants' table—"

"You mean you know their language?"

"I learned it on the way out. Enough, at least."

The music burst out with a clangorous fanfare, and a throng of jugglers, dancers and acrobats poured into the center of the hollow square, frantically juggling, dancing and back-flipping. Black-clad servants swarmed suddenly, heaping mounds of fragrant

food on the plates of Yill and Terrestrials alike, pouring a pale purple liquor into slender glasses. Retief sampled the Yill food. It was delicious.

Conversation was impossible in the din. He watched the gaudy display and ate heartily.

III

RETIEF leaned back, grateful for the lull in the music. The last of the dishes were whisked away, and more glasses filled. The exhausted entertainers stopped to pick up the thick square coins the diners threw.

Retief sighed. It had been a rare feast.

"Retief," Magnan said in the comparative quiet, "what were you saying about dog food as the music came up?"

Retief looked at him. "Haven't you noticed the pattern, Mr. Magnan? The series of deliberate affronts?"

"Deliberate affronts! Just a minute, Retief. They're uncouth, yes, crowding into doorways and that sort of thing..." He looked at Retief uncertainly.

"They herded us into a baggage warehouse at the terminal. Then they hauled us here in a garbage truck—"

"Garbage truck!"

"Only symbolic, of course. They ushered us in the tradesman's entrance, and assigned us cubicles in the servants'

wing. Then we were seated with the coolie class sweepers at the bottom of the table."

"You must be... I mean, we're the Terrestrial delegation! Surely these Yill must realize our power."

"Precisely, Mr. Magnan. But—"

With a clang of cymbals the musicians launched a renewed assault. Six tall, helmeted Yill sprang into the center of the floor and paired off in a wild performance, half dance, half combat. Magnan pulled at Retief's arm, his mouth moving.

Retief shook his head. No one could talk against a Yill orchestra in full cry. He sampled a bright red wine and watched the show.

There was a flurry of action, and two of the dancers stumbled and collapsed, their partner-opponents whirling away to pair off again, describe the elaborate pre-combat ritual, and abruptly set to, dulled sabres clashing—and two more Yill were down, stunned. It was a violent dance.

Retief watched, the drink forgotten.

The last two Yill approached and retreated, whirled, bobbed and spun, fainted and postured—and on the instant, clashed, straining chest-to-chest—then broke apart, heavy weapons chopping, parrying, as the music mounted to a frenzy.

Evenly matched, the two



hacked, thrust, blow for blow, across the floor, then back, defense forgotten, slugging it out.

And then one was slipping, going down, helmet awry. The other, a giant, muscular Yill, spun away, whirled in a mad skirl of pipes as coins showered—then froze before a gaudy table, raised the sabre and slammed it down in a resounding blow across the gay cloth before a lace and bow-bedecked Yill in the same instant that the music stopped.

In utter silence the dancer-fighter stared across the table at the seated Yill.

With a shout, the Yill leaped up, raised a clenched fist. The dancer bowed his head, spread his hands on his helmet.

Retief took a deep gulp of a pale yellow liqueur and leaned forward to watch. The beribboned Yill waved a hand negligently, spilled a handful of coins across the table and sat down.

The challenger spun away in a screeching shrill of music. Retief caught his eye for an instant as he passed.

And then the dancer stood rigid before the brocaded table—and the music stopped off short as the sabre slammed down before a heavy Yill in ornate metallic coils. The challenged Yill rose and raised a fist. The other ducked his head, put his hands on his helmet. Coins rolled. The dancer moved on.

Twice more the dancer struck the table in ritualistic challenge, exchanged gestures, bent his neck and passed on. He circled the broad floor, sabre twirling, arms darting in an intricate symbolism. The orchestra blared shrilly, unmuffled now by the surf-roar of conversation. The Yill, Retief noticed suddenly, were sitting silent, watching. The dancer was closer now, and then he was before Retief, poised, towering, sabre above his head.

The music cut, and in the startling instantaneous silence, the heavy sabre whipped over and down with an explosive concussion that set dishes dancing on the table-top.

THE Yill's eyes held on Retief's. In the silence, Magnan tittered drunkenly. Retief pushed back his stool.

"Steady, my boy," Ambassador Spradley called. Retief stood, the Yill topping his six foot three by an inch. In a motion almost too quick to follow, Retief reached for the sabre, twitched it from the Yill's grip, swung it in a whistling cut. The Yill ducked, sprang back, snatched up a sabre dropped by another dancer.

"Someone stop the madman!" Spradley howled.

Retief leaped across the table, sending fragile dishes spinning.

The other danced back, and

only then did the orchestra spring to life with a screech and a mad tattoo of high-pitched drums.

Making no attempt to following the weaving pattern of the Yill bolero, Retief pressed the other, fending off vicious cuts with the blunt weapon, chopping back relentlessly. Left hand on hip, Retief matched blow for blow, driving the other back.

Abruptly, the Yill abandoned the double role. Dancing forgotten, he settled down in earnest, cutting, thrusting, parrying; and now the two stood toe to toe, sabres clashing in a lightning exchange. The Yill gave a step, two, then rallied, drove Retief back, back—

And the Yill stumbled. His sabre clattered, and Retief dropped his point as the other wavered past him and crashed to the floor.

The orchestra fell silent in a descending wail of reeds. Retief drew a deep breath and wiped his forehead.

"Come back here, you young fool!" Spradley called hoarsely.

Retief hefted the sabre, turned, eyed the brocade-draped table. He started across the floor. The Yill sat as if paralyzed.

"Retief, no!" Spradley yelled.

Retief walked directly to the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau, stopped, raised the sabre.

"Not the chief of state,"

someone in the Terrestrial mission groaned.

Retief whipped the sabre down. The dull blade split the cloth and clove the hardwood table. There was utter silence.

The Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau rose, seven feet of obese gray Yill. Broad face expressionless to any Terran eyes, he raised a fist like a jewel-studded ham.

Retief stood rigid for a long moment. Then, gracefully, he inclined his head, placed his finger tips on his temples.

Behind him, there was a clatter as Ambassador Spradley collapsed. Then the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau cried out and reached across the table to embrace the Terrestrial, and the orchestra went mad.

Gray hands helped Retief across the table, stools were pushed aside to make room at F'Kau-Kau-Kau's side. Retief sat, took a tall flagon of coal-black brandy pressed on him by his neighbor, clashed glasses with The Admirable and drank.

IV

RETIEF turned at the touch on his shoulder.

"The Ambassador wants to speak to you, Retief," Mag-nan said.

Retief looked across to where Ambassador Spradley sat glowering behind the plain tablecloth.

"Under the circumstances,"

by Keith Laumer

Retief said, "you'd better ask him to come over here."

"The ambassador?" Magnan's voice cracked.

"Never mind the protocol," Retief said. "The situation is still delicate." Magnan went away.

"The feast ends," F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. "Now you and I, Retief, must straddle the Council Stool."

"I'll be honored, Admirable," Retief said. "I must inform my colleagues."

"Colleagues?" F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. "It is for chiefs to parley. Who shall speak for a king while he yet has tongue for talk?"

"The Yill way is wise," Retief said.

F'Kau-Kau-Kau emptied a squat tumbler of pink beer. "I will treat with you, Retief, as viceroy, since as you say your king is old and the space between worlds is far. But there shall be no scheming underlings privy to our dealings." He grinned a Yill grin. "Afterwards we shall carouse, Retief. The Council Stool is hard and the waiting handmaidens delectable. This makes for quick agreement."

Retief smiled. "The king is wise."

"Of course, a being prefers wenches of his own kind," F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. He belched. "The Ministry of Culture has imported several Terry—excuse me, Retief—Terrestrial joy-girls, said to be top-notch specimens. At

THE YILLIAN WAY

least they have very fat watchamacallits."

"The king is most considerate," Retief said.

"Let us to it then, Retief. I may hazard a fling with one of your Terries, myself. I fancy an occasional perversion." F'Kau-Kau-Kau dug an elbow into Retief's side and bellowed with laughter.

Ambassador Spradley hurried to intercept Retief as he crossed to the door at F'Kau-Kau-Kau's side.

"Retief, kindly excuse yourself. I wish a word with you." His voice was icy. Magnan stood behind him, goggling.

"Mr. Ambassador, forgive my apparent rudeness," Retief said. "I don't have time to explain now—"

"R u d e n e s s!" Spradley barked. "Don't have time, eh? Let me tell you—"

"Lower your voice, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said.

Spradley quivered, mouth open, speechless.

"If you'll sit down and wait quietly," Retief said, "I think—"

"You think!" Spradley spluttered.

"**SILENCE!**" Retief said.

Spradley looked up at Retief's face. He stared for a moment into Retief's gray eyes, closed his mouth and swallowed.

"The Yill seem to have gotten the impression I'm in charge," Retief said. "We'll have to keep it up."

"But—but—" Spradley stuttered. Then he straightened. "That is the last straw," he whispered hoarsely. "I am the Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. Magnan has told me that we've been studiedly insulted, repeatedly, since the moment of our arrival. Kept waiting in baggage rooms, transported in refuse lorries, herded about with servants, offered swill at table. Now I and my senior staff, are left cooling our heels, without so much as an audience while this—this multiple Kau person hobnobs with—with—"

Spradley's voice broke. "I may have been a trifle hasty, Retief, in attempting to restrain you. Blaspheming the native gods and dumping the banquet table are rather extreme measures, but your resentment was perhaps partially justified. I am prepared to be lenient with you." He fixed a choleric eye on Retief.

"I am walking out of this meeting, Mr. Retief. I'll take no more of these deliberate personal—"

"That's enough," Retief snapped. "You're keeping the king waiting. Get back to your chair and sit there until I come back."

Spradley's face purpled.

"One more word, and I'll silence you forcibly," Retief said.

Magnan found his voice.

"What are you going to do, Retief?"

"I'm going to handle the negotiation," Retief said. He handed Magnan his empty glass. "Now go sit down and work on the Image."

AT his desk in the VIP suite aboard the orbiting Corps vessel, Ambassador Spradley pursed his lips and looked severely at Vice-Consul Retief.

"Further," he said, "you have displayed a complete lack of understanding of Corps discipline, the respect due a senior agent, even the basic courtesies. Your aggravated displays of temper, ill-timed outbursts of violence and almost incredible arrogance in the assumption of authority make your further retention as an officer-agent of the Diplomatic Corps impossible. It will therefore be my unhappy duty to recommend your immediate—"

There was a muted buzz from the communicator. The ambassador cleared his throat.

"Well?"

"A signal from Sector HQ, Mr. Ambassador," a voice said.

"Well, read it," Spradley snapped. "Skip the preliminaries."

"Congratulations on the unprecedented success of your mission. The articles of agreement transmitted by you embody a most favorable resolution of the difficult

Sirenian situation, and will form the basis of continued amicable relations between the Terrestrial States and the Yill Empire. To you and your staff, full credit is due for a job well done. Signed, Deputy Assistant Secretary—”

Spradley cut off the voice impatiently.

He shuffled papers, eyed Retief sharply.

“Superficially, of course, an uninitiated observer might leap to the conclusion that the—ah—results that were produced in spite of these... ah... irregularities justify the latter.” The Ambassador smiled a sad, wise smile. “This is far from the case,” he said. “I—”

The communicator burped softly.

“Confound it!” Spradley muttered. “Yes?”

“Mr. T’Cai-Cai has arrived,” the voice said. “Shall I—”

“Send him in at once.” Spradley glanced at Retief. “Only a two-syllable man, but I shall attempt to correct these false impressions, make some amends...”

The two Terrestrials waited silently until the Yill Protocol chief tapped at the door.

“I hope,” the ambassador said, “that you will resist the impulse to take advantage of your unusual position.” He looked at the door. “Come in.”

T’Cai-Cai stepped into the
THE YILLIAN WAY

room, glanced at Spradley, turned to greet Retief in voluble Yill. He rounded the desk to the ambassador’s chair, motioned him from it and sat down.

“I have a surprise for you, Retief,” he said, in Ter-ran. “I myself have made use of the teaching machine you so kindly lent us.”

“That’s fine, T’Cai-Cai,” Retief said. “I’m sure Mr. Spradley will be interested in hearing what we have to say.”

“Never mind,” the Yill said. “I am here only socially.” He looked around the room.

“So plainly you decorate your chamber. But it has a certain austere charm.” He laughed a Yill laugh.

“Oh, you are a strange breed, you Terrestrials. You surprised us all. You know, one hears such outlandish stories. I tell you in confidence, we had expected you to be overpushes.”

“Pushovers,” Spradley said, tonelessly.

“Such restraint! What pleasure you gave to those of us, like myself of course, who appreciated your grasp of protocol. Such finesse! How subtly you appeared to ignore each overture, while neatly avoiding actual contamination. I can tell you, there were those who thought—poor fools—that you had no grasp of etiquette. How gratified we were, we profession-

als, who could appreciate your virtuosity—when you placed matters on a comfortable basis by spurning the cats'-meat. It was sheer pleasure then, waiting, to see what form your compliment would take."

The Yill offered orange cigars, stuffed one in his nostril.

"I confess even I had not hoped that you would honor our Admirable so signally. Oh, it is a pleasure to deal with fellow professionals, who understand the meaning of protocol!"

Ambassador Spradley made a choking sound.

"This fellow has caught a chill," T'Cai-Cai said. He eyed Spradley dubiously. "Step back, my man. I am highly susceptible.

"There is one bit of busi-

ness I shall take pleasure in attending to, my dear Retief," T'Cai-Cai went on. He drew a large paper from his reticule. "The Admirable is determined than none other than yourself shall be accredited here. I have here my government's exequatur confirming you as Terrestrial consul-general to Yill. We shall look forward to your prompt return."

Retief looked at Spradley.

"I'm sure the Corps will agree," he said.

"Then I shall be going," T'Cai-Cai said. He stood up. "Hurry back to us, Retief. There is much that I would show you of Yill."

"I'll hurry," Retief said and, with a Yill wink: "Together we shall see many high and splendid things!"

by Keith Laumer

END

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Coming in the March issue of If —

THE MADMAN FROM EARTH

by Keith Laumer

TYBALT

by Stephen Barr

A great new cover novelette by Poul Anderson — plus short stories, Theodore Sturgeon's column, features, etc. On sale January 14th at all newsstands.

He was already a thief, prepared to steal again. He didn't know that he himself was only booty!

AN

INCIDENT ON

ROUTE 12

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

PHIL Garfield was thirty miles south of the little town of Redmon on Route Twelve when he was startled by a series of sharp, clanking noises. They came from under the Packard's hood.

The car immediately began to lose speed. Garfield jammed down the accelerator, had a sense of sick helplessness at the complete lack of response from the motor. The Packard rolled on, getting rid of its momentum, and came to a stop.

Phil Garfield swore shakily. He checked his watch, switched off the headlights and climbed out into the dark road. A delay of even half an hour here might be disastrous. It was past midnight,

and he had another hundred and ten miles to cover to reach the small private airfield where Madge waited for him and the thirty thousand dollars in the suitcase on the Packard's front seat.

If he didn't make it before daylight...

He thought of the bank guard. The man had made a clumsy play at being a hero, and that had set off the fool woman who'd run screaming into their line of fire. One dead. Perhaps two. Garfield hadn't stopped to look at an evening paper.

But he knew they were hunting for him.

He glanced up and down the road. No other headlights in sight at the moment, no

light from a building showing on the forested hills. He reached back into the car and brought out the suitcase, his gun, a big flashlight and the box of shells which had been standing beside the suitcase. He broke the box open, shoved a handful of shells and the .38 into his coat pocket, then took suitcase and flashlight over to the shoulder of the road and set them down.

There was no point in groping about under the Packard's hood. When it came to mechanics, Phil Garfield was a moron and well aware of it. The car was useless to him now...except as bait.

But as bait it might be very useful.

Should he leave it standing where it was? No, Garfield decided. To anybody driving past it would merely suggest a necking party, or a drunk sleeping off his load before continuing home. He might have to wait an hour or more before someone decided to stop. He didn't have the time. He reached in through the window, hauled the top of the steering wheel towards him and put his weight against the rear window frame.

The Packard began to move slowly backwards at a slant across the road. In a minute or two he had it in position. Not blocking the road entirely, which would arouse immediate suspicion, but angled across it, lights out,

empty, both front doors open and inviting a passerby's investigation.

Garfield carried the suitcase and flashlight across the right-hand shoulder of the road and moved up among the trees and undergrowth of the slope above the shoulder. Placing the suitcase between the bushes, he brought out the .38, clicked the safety off and stood waiting.

Some ten minutes later, a set of headlights appeared speeding up Route Twelve from the direction of Redmon. Phil Garfield went down on one knee before he came within range of the lights. Now he was completely concealed by the vegetation.

The car slowed as it approached, braking nearly to a stop sixty feet from the stalled Packard. There were several people inside it; Garfield heard voices, then a woman's loud laugh. The driver tapped his horn inquiringly twice, moved the car slowly forward. As the headlights went past him, Garfield got to his feet among the bushes, took a step down towards the road, raising the gun.

Then he caught the distant gleam of a second set of headlights approaching from Redmon. He swore under his breath and dropped back out of sight. The car below him reached the Packard, edged cautiously around it, rolled

on with a sudden roar of acceleration.

THE second car stopped when still a hundred yards away, the Packard caught in the motionless glare of its lights. Garfield heard the steady purring of a powerful motor.

For almost a minute, nothing else happened. Then the car came gliding smoothly on, stopped again no more than thirty feet to Garfield's left. He could see it now through the screening bushes—a big job, a long, low four-door sedan. The motor continued to purr. After a moment, a door on the far side of the car opened and slammed shut.

A man walked quickly out into the beam of the headlights and started towards the Packard.

Phil Garfield rose from his crouching position, the .38 in his right hand, flashlight in his left. If the driver was alone, the thing was now cinched! But if there was somebody else in the car, somebody capable of fast, decisive action, a slip in the next ten seconds might cost him the sedan, and quite probably his freedom and life. Garfield lined up the .38's sights steadily on the center of the approaching man's head. He let his breath out slowly as the fellow came level with him in the road and squeezed off one shot.

Instantly he went bounding

down the slope to the road. The bullet had flung the man sideways to the pavement. Garfield darted past him to the left, crossed the beam of the headlights, and was in darkness again on the far side of the road, snapping on his flashlight as he sprinted up to the car.

The motor hummed quietly on. The flashlight showed the seats empty. Garfield dropped the light, jerked both doors open in turn, gun pointing into the car's interior. Then he stood still for a moment, weak and almost dizzy with relief.

There was no one inside. The sedan was his.

The man he had shot through the head lay face down on the road, his hat flung a dozen feet away from him. Route Twelve still stretched out in dark silence to east and west. There should be time enough to clean up the job before anyone else came along. Garfield brought the suitcase down and put it on the front seat of the sedan, then started back to get his victim off the road and out of sight. He scaled the man's hat into the bushes, bent down, grasped the ankles and started to haul him towards the left side of the road where the ground dropped off sharply beyond the shoulder.

The body made a high, squealing sound and began to writhe violently.

SHOCKED, Garfield dropped the legs and hurriedly took the gun from his pocket, moving back a step. The squealing noise rose in intensity as the wounded man quickly flopped over twice like a struggling fish, arms and legs sawing about with startling energy. Garfield clicked off the safety, pumped three shots into his victim's back.

The grisly squeals ended abruptly. The body continued to jerk for another second or two, then lay still.

Garfield shoved the gun back into his pocket. The unexpected interruption had unnerved him; his hands shook as he reached down again for the stranger's ankles. Then he jerked his hands back, and straightened up, staring.

From the side of the man's chest, a few inches below the right arm, something like a thick black stick, three feet long, protruded now through the material of the coat.

It shone, gleaming wetly, in the light from the car. Even in that first uncomprehending instant, something in its appearance brought a surge of sick disgust to Garfield's throat. Then the stick bent slowly half way down its length, forming a sharp angle, and its tip opened into what could have been three blunt, black claws which scrabbled clumsily against the pavement. Very faintly, the

squealing began again, and the body's back arched up as if another sticklike arm were pushing desperately against the ground beneath it.

Garfield acted in a blur of horror. He emptied the .38 into the thing at his feet almost without realizing he was doing it. Then, dropping the gun, he seized one of the ankles, ran backwards to the shoulder of the road, dragging the body behind him.

In the darkness at the edge of the shoulder, he let go of it, stepped around to the other side and with two frantically savage kicks sent the body plunging over the shoulder and down the steep slope beyond. He heard it crash through the bushes for some seconds, then stop. He turned, and ran back to the sedan, scooping up his gun as he went past. He scrambled into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut behind him.

His hands shook violently on the steering wheel as he pressed down the accelerator. The motor roared into life and the big car surged forward. He edged it past the Packard, cursing aloud in horrified shock, jammed down the accelerator and went flashing up Route Twelve, darkness racing beside and behind him.

WHAT had it been? Something that wore what seemed to be a man's body like a suit of clothes, moving

the body as a man moves, driving a man's car... roach-armed, roach-legged itself!

Garfield drew a long, shuddering breath. Then, as he slowed for a curve, there was a spark of reddish light in the rear-view mirror.

He stared at the spark for an instant, braked the car to a stop, rolled down the window and looked back.

Far behind him along Route Twelve, a fire burned. Approximately at the point where the Packard had stalled out, where something had gone rolling off the road into the bushes . . .

Something, Garfield added mentally, that found fiery automatic destruction when death came to it, so that its secrets would remain unrevealed.

But for him the fire meant the end of a nightmare. He rolled the window up, took out a cigarette, lit it, and pressed the accelerator . . .

In incredulous fright, he felt the nose of the car tilt upwards, headlights sweeping up from the road into the trees.

Then the headlights winked out. Beyond the windshield, dark tree branches floated down towards him, the night sky beyond. He reached fran-

tically for the door handle.

A steel wrench clamped silently about each of his arms, drawing them in against his sides, immobilizing them there. Garfield gasped, looked up at the mirror and saw a pair of faintly gleaming red eyes watching him from the rear of the car. Two of the things...the second one stood behind him out of sight, holding him. They'd been in what had seemed to be the trunk compartment. And they had come out.

The eyes in the mirror vanished. A moist, black roach-arm reached over the back of the seat beside Garfield, picked up the cigarette he had dropped, extinguished it with rather horribly human motions, then took up Garfield's gun and drew back out of sight.

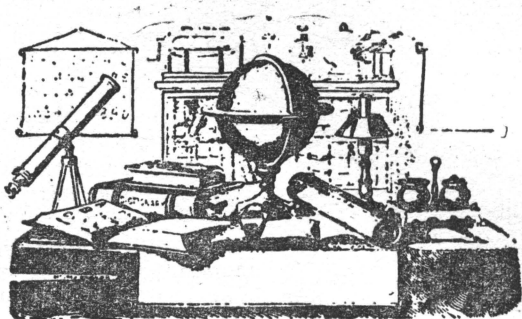
He expected a shot, but none came.

One doesn't fire a bullet through the suit one intends to wear . . .

It wasn't until that thought occurred to him that tough Phil Garfield began to scream. He was still screaming minutes later when, beyond the windshield, the spaceship floated into view among the stars.

END

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science briefs

REMEMBER, a few years ago, the brilliant work done by a graduate student who duplicated Earth's primordial atmosphere, shot "lightning" through it, and came up with a "soup" which contained amino acids, the basic substances of life? A Dr. Carl Sagan has recently done somewhat the same with the known substances of Jupiter's atmosphere. He flooded them with ultraviolet light. The result, he says, "would create the conditions necessary for complex pre-biological organic reactions." He theorizes that due to induced infra-red under the clouds, Jupiter may be a comfortable 70° or so, with seas of ammonia or even water. Let's go find out.

In 1948, on the little island

of Bimini, less than half an hour by air from Miami, the American Museum of Natural History founded the Lerner Marine Laboratory. Long the happy hunting ground for sport fishermen, Bimini is now attracting scientists from all over the world. Mr. Michael Lerner, who donated the land and houses to start the project, is associated with the Museum's renowned Dr. James Oliver and one-time s-f writer Philip (*When Worlds Collide*) Wylie. One of the many things being studied there is—of all things—cancer, which afflicts birds and amphibia, as well as fish. Cancer is after all a phenomenon of chemically-directed growth, and the teeming waters of Bimini offer simple animals with life-cycles per-

fectly suited for the study of inherited characteristics over many brief generations. Others have the mysterious power to grow new limbs—and to stop the growth when it's finished. Still others produce poisons—which is to say, drugs. And sea water itself is known to kill certain strains of the stubborn staphylococcus. So keep an eye on Bimini.

Add to the list of subatomic particles (if you haven't lost count by now) the *omega*, an elusive little beauty which hangs around for all of ten sextillionths of a second. It took a specially designed computer to scan 2500 photographs of the star-shaped collision tracks resulting from anti-proton collisions with protons in the U. of Cal.'s bevatron. 93 of the "stars" showed the predicted slight curvature indicating that sometimes the proton breaks into five instead of four pimesons—two positive, two negative, and one with no charge at all. This latter is the short-lived *omega*.

At last fall's Conference on High Energy Accelerators, the boys decided to think big—*real* big. An international gathering, they looked past Brookhaven's monstrous 33 billion electron-volt synchrotron, and set their sights on machines with outputs all the way up to a *trillion* e-v, and

even higher. Such a machine might cost upwards of \$700 million; it would be a precision-built hollow steel-and-concrete doughnut four miles across!

Have you ever met a coypu? If we call it a nutria, you might recognize it as the source of a pretty fair fur for coats. But in England just now it's called not only coypu but a great number of other things we couldn't possibly print here. Seems some were imported from their native Argentina about 30 years ago by farmers who wanted to get into the skin trade. Then nutria got (a) unfashionable and (b) loose in the swamps of East Anglia. Now there are thousands of them, lacking natural enemies and breeding three litters a year. They like farm products best of all, but don't mind sections of mooring cable regardless of the river-boats that get lost; newly-planted oats and wheat, and even, if the complaint is true, a farmer's window-frames.

Small World Dept.: The Asahi Chemical Co. of Osaka has just completed the second of five water-desalting plants for U. S. towns. Webster S.D., now enjoys salt-reduced drinking water from its brackish supply, thanks to the Japanese-designed electro dialysis installation. **END**

Naturally an undertaker will get the last word.

But shouldn't he wait until his clients are dead?

THE

LAST PLACE

ON EARTH

By JIM HARMON

Illustrated by Gaughan

I

SAM Collins flashed the undertaker a healthy smile, hoping it wouldn't depress old Candle too much. He saluted. The skeletal figure in endless black nodded gravely, and took hold of Sam Collins' arm with a death grip.

"I'm going to bury you, Sam Collins," the undertaker said.

The tall false fronts of Main Street spilled out a lake of shadow, a canal of liquid heat that soaked through the iron weave of Collins' jeans and turned into black ink stains. The old window of the hardware store showed its age in soft wrinkles, ripples that had caught on fire in the

sunset. Collins felt the twilight stealing under the arms of his tee-shirt. The overdue hair on the back of his rangy neck stood up in attention. It was a joke, but the first one Collins had ever known Doc Candle to make.

"In time, I guess you'll bury me all right, Doc."

"In my time, not yours, Earthling."

"Earthling?" Collins repeated the last word.

The old man frowned. His face was a collection of lines. When he frowned, all the lines pointed to hell, the grave, decay and damnation.

"Earthling," the undertaker repeated. "Earthman? Terrestrial? Solarian? Space Ranger? *Homo sapiens?*"

Collins decided Candle was sure in a jokey mood. "Kind of makes you think of it, don't it, Doc? The spaceport going right up outside of town. Rocketships are going to be out there taking off for the Satellite, the Moon, places like that. Reminds you that we are Earthlings, like they say in the funnies, all right."

"Not outside town."

"What?"

"Inside. Inside town. Part of the spaceship administration building is going to go smack in the middle of where your house used to be."

"My house is."

"For less time than you will be yourself, Earthling."

"Earthling yourself! What's wrong with you, Doc?"

"No. I am not an Earthling. I am a superhuman alien from outer space. My mission on Earth is to destroy you."

COLLINS pulled away gently. When you lived in a town all your life and knew its people, it wasn't unusual to see some old person snap under the weight of years.

"You have to destroy the rocketship station, huh, Doc, before it sends up space-ships?"

"No. I want to kill *you*. That is my mission."

"Why?"

"Because," Candle said, "I am a basically evil entity."

The undertaker turned away and went skithering down Main Street, his lop-

sided gait limping, sliding, hopping, skipping, at a refined leisurely pace. He was a collection of dancing, straight black lines.

Collins stared after the old man, shook his head and forgot about him.

He moved into the hardware store. The bell tinkled behind him. The store was cramped with shadows and the smell of wood and iron. It was lined off as precisely as a checkerboard, with counters, drawers, compartments.

Ed Michaels sat behind the counter, smoking a pipe. He was a handsome man, looking young in the uncertain light, even at fifty.

"Hi, Ed. You closed?"

"Guess not, Sam. What are you looking for?"

"A pound of tenpenny nails."

Michaels stood up.

Sarah Comstock waddled energetically out of the back. Her sweet, angelic face lit up with a smile. "Sam Collins. Well, I guess *you'll* want to help us murder them."

"Murder?" Collins repeated. "Who?"

"Those Air Force men who want to come in here and cause all the trouble."

"How are you going to murder them, Mrs. Comstock?"

"When they see our petition in Washington, D.C., they'll call those men back pretty quick."

"Oh," Collins said.

Mrs. Comstock produced the scroll from her voluminous handbag. "You want to sign, don't you? They're going to put part of the airport on your place. They'll tear down your house."

"They can't tear it down. I won't sell."

"You know government men. They'll just take it and give you some money for it. Sign right there at the top of new column, Sam."

Collins shook his head. "I don't believe in signing things. They can't take what's mine."

"But Sam, dear, they will. They'll come in and push your house down with those big tractors of theirs. They'll bury it in concrete and set off those guided missiles of theirs right over it."

"They can't make me get out," Sam said.

ED Michaels scooped up a pound, one ounce of nails and spilled them onto his scale. He pinched off the excess, then dropped it back in and fed the nails into a brown paper bag. He crumpled the top and set it on the counter. "That's twenty-nine plus one, Sam. Thirty cents."

Collins laid out a quarter and a nickel and picked up the bag. "Appreciate you doing this after store hours, Ed."

Michaels chuckled. "I wasn't exactly getting ready for the opera, Sam."

Collins turned around and saw Sarah Comstock still waiting, the petition in her hand.

"Now what's a pretty girl like you doing, wasting her time in politics?" Collins heard himself ask.

Mrs. Comstock twittered. "I'm old enough to be your mother, Sam Collins."

"I like mature women."

Collins watched his hand in fascination as it reached out to touch one of Sarah Comstock's plump cheeks, then dropped to her shoulder and ripped away the strap-sleeve of her summer print dress.

A plump, rosy shoulder was revealed, splattered with freckles.

Sarah Comstock put her hands over her ears as if to keep from hearing her own shrill scream. It reached out into pure soprano range.

Sarah Comstock backed away, into the shadows, and Sam Collins followed her, trying to explain, to apologize.

"Sam! Sam!"

The voice cut through to him and he looked up.

Ed Michaels had a double-barreled shotgun aimed at him. Mrs. Michaels' face was looking over his shoulder in the door to the back, her face a sick white.

"You get out of here, Sam," Michaels said. "You get out and don't you come back. Ever."

Collins' hands moved emphatically in air. He was always better with his hands than words, but this time even they seemed inexpressive.

He crumpled the sack of nails in both fists, and turned and left the hardware store.

II

HIS house was still there, sitting at the end of Elm Street, at the end of town, on the edge of the prairie. It was a very old house. It was decorated with gingerboard, a rusted-out tin rooster-comb running the peak of the roof and stained glass window transoms; and the top of the house was joined to the ground floor by lapped fish-scales, as though it was a mermaid instead of a house. The house was a golden house. It had been painted brown against the dust, but the keening wind, the relentless sun, the savage rape of the thunderstorms, they had all bleached the brown paint into a shining pure gold.

Sam stepped inside and leaned back against the front door, the door of full-length glass with a border of glass emeralds and rubies. He leaned back and breathed deep.

The house didn't smell old. It smelled new. It smelled like sawdust and fresh-hewn lumber as bright and blond as a high school senior's crewcut.

He walked across the flowered carpet. The carpet didn't mind footsteps or bright sun. It never became worn or faded. It grew brighter with the years, the roses turning redder, the sunflowers becoming yellower.

The parlor looked the same as it always did, clean and waiting to be used. The cane-backed sofa and chairs eagerly waiting to be sat upon, the bead-shaded kerosene lamps ready to burst into light.

Sam went into his workshop. This had once been the ground level master bedroom, but he had had to make the change. The work table held its share of radios, toasters, TV sets, an electric train, a spring-wind Victrola. Sam threw the nails onto the table and crossed the room, running his fingers along the silent keyboard of the player piano. He looked out the window. The bulldozers had made the ground rectangular, level and brown, turning it into a gigantic half-cent stamp. He remembered the mail and raised the window and reached down into the mailbox. It was on this side of the house, because only this side was technically within city limits.

As he came up with the letters, Sam Collins saw a man sighting along a plumb-line towards his house. He shut the window.

Some of the letters didn't have any postage stamps, just

a line of small print about a \$300 fine. Government letters. He went over and forced them into the tightly packed coal stove. All the trash would be burned out in the cold weather.

Collins sat down and looked through the rest of his mail. A new catalogue of electronic parts. A bulky envelope with two paperback novels by Richard S. Prather and Robert Bloch he had ordered. A couple of letters from hams. He tossed the mail on the table and leaned back.

HE thought about what had happened in the hardware store.

It wasn't surprising it had happened to him. Things like that were bound to happen to him. He had just been lucky that Ed Michaels hadn't called the sheriff. What had got into him? He had never been a sex maniac before! But still...it was hardly unexpected.

Might as well wait to start on those rabbit cages until tomorrow, he decided. This evening he felt like exploring.

The house was so big, and packed with so many things that he never found and examined them all. Or if he did, he forgot a lot about the things between times, so it was like reading a favorite book over again, always discovering new things in it.

The parlor was red in the fading light, and the hall be-

yond the sliding doors was deeply shadowed. In the sewing room, he remembered, in the drawers of the treadle machine the radio was captured. The rings and secret manuals of the days when radio had been alive. He hadn't looked over those things in some little time.

He looked up the shadowed stairway. He remembered the night, a few weeks before Christmas when he had been twelve and really too old to believe, his mother had said she was going up to see if Santa Claus had left any packages around a bit early. They often gave him his presents early, since they were never quite sure he would live until Christmas.

But his mother had been playing a trick on him. She hadn't been going up after packages. She had gone up those stairs to murder his father.

She had shot him in the back of the head with his Army Colt .45 from the first war. Collins never quite understood why the hole in back was so neat and the one in front where it came out was so messy.

After he went to live with Aunt Amy and the house had been boarded up, he heard them talking, Aunt Amy and her boy friend, fat Uncle Ralph. And they had said his mother had murdered his father because he had gone ahead and made her get preg-

nant again and she was afraid it would be another one like Sam.

Sam Collins knew she must have planned it a long time in advance. She had filled up the bathtub with milk, real milk, and she went in after she had done it and took a bath in the milk. Then she slit her wrists.

When Sam Collins had run down the stairs, screaming, and barged into the bathroom, he had found the tub looking like a giant stick of peppermint candy.

AUNT Amy had been good to him.

Because he didn't talk for about a year after he found the bodies, most people thought he was simple-minded. But Aunt Amy had always treated him just like a regular boy. That was embarrassing sometimes, but still it was better than what he got from the others.

The doctor hadn't wanted to perform the operation on his clubfoot. He said it would be an unproductive waste of his time and talent, that he owed it to the world to use them to the very best advantage. Finally he agreed. The operation took about thirty seconds. He stuck a knife into Sam's foot and went *snick-snick*. A couple of weeks later, his foot was healed and it was just like anybody else's. Aunt Amy had paid him \$500 in pay-

THE LAST PLACE ON EARTH

ments, only he returned the money order for the last fifty dollars and wished them Merry Christmas.

Sam Collins could work after that. When Aunt Amy and Uncle Ralph disappeared, he opened up the old house and started doing odd jobs for people who weren't very afraid of him any more.

That first day had been quite a shock, when he discovered that not in all these years had anybody cleaned the bathtub.

Sometimes, when he was taking his Saturday night soaker he still got kind of a funny feeling. But he knew it was only rust from the faucets.

Collins sighed. It seemed like a long time since he had seen his mother coming down those stairs...

He stopped, his throat aching with tightness.

Something was very strange.

His mother was coming down the stairs right now.

She was walking down the stairs, one step, two steps, coming closer to him.

Collins ran up the stairs, prepared to run through the phantom to prove it wasn't there.

The figure raised a gun and pointed it at him.

This time, she was going to shoot *him*.

It figured.

He always had bad luck.

"Stop!" the woman on the

stairs said. "Stop or I'll shoot, Mr. Collins!"

COLLINS stopped, catching to the bannister. He squinted hard, and as a stereoptic slide lost its depth when you shut one eye, the woman on the stairs was no longer his mother. She was young, pretty, brunette and sweet-faced, and the gun she held shrunk from an old Army Colt to a .22 target pistol.

"Who are you?" Collins demanded.

The girl took a grip on the gun with both hands and held it steady on him.

"I'm Nancy Comstock," she said. "You tried to assault my mother a half hour ago."

"Oh," he said. "I've never seen you before."

"Yes, you have. I've been away to school a lot, but you've seen me around. I've had my eye on you. I know about men like you. I know what has to be done. I came looking for you in your house for this."

The bore of the gun was level with his eye as he stood a few steps below her. Probably if she fired now, she would kill him. Or more likely he would only be blinded or paralyzed; that was about his luck.

"Are you going to use that gun?" he asked.

"Not unless I have to. I only brought it along for pro-

tection. I came to help you, Mr. Collins."

"Help me?"

"Yes, Mr. Collins. You're sick. You need help."

He looked the girl over. She was a half-dozen years younger than he was. In most states, she couldn't even vote yet. But still, maybe she could help, at that. He didn't know much about girls and their abilities.

"Why don't we go into the kitchen and have some coffee?" Collins suggested.

III

NANCY sipped her coffee and kept her eyes on his. The gun lay in her lap. The big kitchen was a place for coffee, brown and black, wood ceiling and iron stove and pans. Collins sat across the twelve square feet of table from her, and nursed the smoking mug.

"Sam, I want you to take whatever comfort you can from the fact that I don't think the same thing about you as the rest of Waraxe."

"What does the rest of the town think about me?"

"They think you are a pathological degenerate who should be lynched. But I don't believe that."

"Thanks. That's a big comfort."

"I know what you were after when you tore Mom's dress."

In spite of himself. Collins

felt his face warming in a blush.

"You were only seeking the mother love you missed as a boy," the girl said.

Collins chewed on his lip a moment, and considered the idea. Slowly he shook his head.

"No," he said. "No. I don't think so."

"Then what do you think?"

"I think old Doc Candle made me do it. He said he was going to bury me. Getting me lynched would be one good way to do it. Ed Michaels almost blew my head off with his shotgun. It was close. Doc Candle almost made it. He didn't miss by far with you and that target pistol either."

"Sam—I may call you 'Sam'?—just try to think calmly and reasonably for a minute. How could Dr. Candle, the undertaker, possibly make you do a thing like you did in Mr. Michaels' hardware store?"

"Well...he said he was a superhuman alien from outer space."

"If he said that, do you believe him, Sam?"

"*Something* made me do that. It just wasn't my own idea."

"It's easier that way, isn't it, Sam?" Nancy asked. "It's easy to say. 'It wasn't me; some space monster made me do it.' But you really know better, don't you, Sam? Don't take the easy way out! You'll

only get deeper and deeper into your makebelieve world. It will be like quicksand. Admit your mistakes—face up to them—*lick them.*"

Collins stood up, and came around the end of the table.

"You're too pretty to be so serious all the time," he said.

"**S**AM, I want to help you. Please don't spoil it by misinterpreting my intentions."

"You should get a little fun out of life," Collins listened to himself say.

He came on around the big table towards her.

The first time he hadn't realized what was happening, but this time he knew. Somebody was pulling strings and making him jump. He had as much control as Charlie McCarthy.

"Don't come any closer, Sam."

Nancy managed to keep her voice steady, but he could tell she was frightened.

He took another step.

She threw her coffee in his face.

The liquid was only luke-warm but the sudden dash had given him some awareness of his own body again, like the first sound of the alarm faintly pressing through deep layers of sleep.

"Sam, Sam, *please* don't make me do it! Please, Sam, *don't!*"

Nancy had the gun in her hand, rising from her chair.

His hands wanted to grab her clothes and *tear*.

But that's *suicide*, he screamed at his body.

As his hand went up with the intention of ripping, he deflected it just enough to shove the barrel of the gun away from him.

The shot went off, but he knew instantly that it had not hit him.

The gun fell to the floor, and with its fall, something else dropped away and he was in command of himself again.

Nancy sighed, and slumped against him, the left side of her breast suddenly glossy with blood.

ED Michaels stared at him. Both eyes unblinking, just staring at *him*. He had only taken one look at the girl lying on the floor, blood all over her chest. He hadn't looked back.

"I didn't know who else to call, Ed." Collins said. "Sheriff Thurston being out of town and all."

"It's okay, Sam. Mike swore me in as a special deputy a couple years back. The badge is at the store."

"They'll hang me for this, won't they, Ed?"

Michaels put his hand on Collins' shoulder. "No, they won't do that to you, boy. We know you around here. They'll just put you away for a while."

"The asylum at Hannah, huh?"

"Damn it, yes! What did you expect? A marksman medal?"

"Okay, Ed, okay. Did you call Doc Van der Lies like I told you when I phoned?"

Michaels took a folded white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his square-jawed face. "You sure are taking this calm, Sam. I'm telling you, Sam, it would look better for you if you at least *acted* like you were sorry. . . Doc Van der Lies is up in Wisconsin with Mike. I called Doc Candle."

"He's an undertaker," Collins whispered.

"Don't you expect we need one?" Michaels asked. Then as if he wasn't sure of the answer to his own question, he said, "Did you examine her to see if she was dead? I—I don't know much about women. I wouldn't be able to tell."

It didn't sound like a very good excuse to Collins.

"I guess she's dead," Collins said. "That's the way he must have wanted it."

"*He?* Wait a minute, Sam. You mean you've got one of those split personalities like that girl on TV the other night? There's somebody else inside you that takes over and makes you do things?"

"I never thought of it just like that before. I guess that's one way to look at it."

The knock shook the back door before Michaels could say anything. The door

opened and Doc Candle slithered in disjointedly, a rolled-up stretcher over his shoulder.

"Hello, boys," Candle said. "A terrible accident, it brings sorrow to us all. Poor Nancy. Has the family been notified?"

"Good gosh, I forgot about it," Michaels said. "But maybe we better wait until you get her—arranged, huh, Doc?"

"**Q**UITE so." The old man laid the canvas stretcher out beside the girl on the floor and unrolled it. He flipped the body over expertly like a window demonstrator flipping a pancake over on a griddle.

"Ed, if you'd just take the front, I'll carry the rear. My vehicle is in the alley."

"Sam, you carry that end for Doc. You're a few years younger."

Collins wanted to say that he couldn't, but he didn't have enough yet to argue with. He picked up the stretcher and looked down at the white feet in the Scotch plaid slippers.

Candle opened the door and waited for them to go through.

The girl on the stretcher parted her lips and rolled her head back and forth, a puzzled expression of pain on her face.

Collins nearly dropped the stretcher, but he made himself hold on tight.

"Ed! Doc! She moved! She's still *alive*."

"Cut that out now, Sam," Ed Michaels snapped. "Just carry your end."

"She's alive," Collins insisted. "She moved again. Just turn around and take a look, Ed. That's all I ask."

"I hefted this thing once, and that's enough. You *move*, Sam. I've got a .38 in my belt, and I went to Rome, Italy, for the Olympics about the time you were getting yourself born, Sam. I ought to be able to hit a target as big as you. Just go ahead and do as you're told."

Collins turned desperately towards Candle. Maybe Nancy had been right, maybe he had been imagining things.

"Doc, you take a look at her," Collins begged.

The old man vibrated over to the stretcher and looked down. The girl twisted in pain, throwing her head back, spilling her hair over the head of the stretcher.

"Rigor mortis," Doc Candle diagnosed, with a wink to Collins.

"No, Doc! She needs a doctor, blood transfusions..."

"**N**ONSENSE," Candle snapped. "I'll take her in my black wagon up to my place, put her in the tiled basement. I'll pump out all her blood and flush it down the commode. Then I'll feed in Formaldi-Forever Number Zero. Formaldi-Forever, for

the Blush of Death. 'When you think of a Pretty Girl, think of Formaldi-Forever, the Way to Preserve that Beauty.' Then I'll take a needle and some silk thread and just a few stitches on the eyelids and around the mouth..."

"Doc, will you...?" Michaels said faintly.

"Of course. I just wanted to show Sam how foolish he was in saying the Beloved was still alive."

Nancy kicked one leg off the stretcher and Candle picked it up and tucked it back in.

"Ed, if you'd just turn around and *look*." Collins said.

"I don't want to have to look at your face, you murdering son. You make me, you say one more word, and I'll turn around and shoot you between the eyes."

Doc Candle nodded. Collins knew then that Michaels really would shoot him in the head if he said anything more, so he kept quiet.

Candle held the door. They managed to get the stretcher down the back steps, and right into the black panel truck. They fitted the stretcher into the special sockets for it, and Doc Candle closed the double doors and slapped his dry palm down on the sealing crevice.

Instantly, there was an answering knock from inside the truck, a dull echo.

"**D**IDN'T you hear that?" Collins asked.

"Hear what?" Michaels said.

"What are you hearing now, Sam?" Candle inquired solicitously.

"Oh. Sure," Michaels said. "Kind of a voice, wasn't it, Sam? Didn't understand what it said. Wasn't listening too close, not like you."

Thud-thud-thump-thud.

"No voice," Collins whispered. "That infernal sound, don't you hear it, Ed?"

"I must hurry along," the undertaker said. "Must get ready to work on Nancy, get her ready for her parents to see."

"All right, Doc. I'll take care of Sam."

"Where you going to jail me, Ed?" Collins asked, his eyes on the closed truck doors. "In your storeroom like you did Hank Petrie?"

Michaels' face suddenly began to work. "Jail? Jail you? Jail's too good for you. Doc, have you got a tow rope in that truck?"

Ed Michaels was the best shot in town, probably one of the best marksmen in the world. He had been in the Olympics about thirty years ago. He was Waraxe's one claim to fame. But he wasn't a cowboy. He wasn't a fast draw.

Collins put all of his weight behind his left fist and landed it on the point of Michaels' jaw, just the way



he used to do when gangs of boys jumped onto him.

Michaels sprawled out, spread-eagled.

Then Collins wanted to take the revolver out of Ed's belt, and press it into Ed's hand, curling his fingers around the grip and over the trigger, and then he wanted to shake Ed awake, slap his face and shake him...

Collins spun around, clawed open the door to the truck cab and threw himself behind the steering wheel.

He stopped wanting to make Ed Michaels shoot him.

He flipped the ignition switch, levered the floor shift and drove away.

And he was going to drive on and on and on and on.

And on and on and on.

IV

COLLINS turned onto the cold McHenty blacktop, his foot pressed to the floorboards. Ed Michaels didn't own a car; he would have to borrow one from somebody. That would take time. Maybe Candle would give him his hearse to use to follow the Black Rachel.

Trees, fences, barns whizzed past the windows of the cab and then the steel link-mesh fence took up, the fence surrounding the New Kansas National Spaceport. Behind it, further from town, some of the concrete had been poured and the horizon was a

remote, sterile gray sweep.

The McHenty Road would soon be closed to civilian traffic. But right now that the government wanted people to drive along and see that the spaceship was nothing terrible, nothing to fear.

The girl, Nancy Comstock, was alive in the back. He knew that. But he couldn't stop to prove it or to help her. Candle would make them lynch him first.

Why hadn't Candle stopped him from getting away?

He had managed to break his control for a second. He had done that before when he deflected Nancy's aim. But he couldn't resist Candle for long. Why hadn't Candle made him turn around and come back?

Candle's control of him had seemed to stop when he got inside the cab of the truck. Could it be that the metal shield of the cab could protect an Earthling from the strange mental powers of the creature from another planet which was inhabiting the body of Doc Candle?

Collins shook his head.

More likely Candle was doing this just to get his hopes up. He probably would seize control of him any time he wanted to. But Collins decided to go on playing it as if he did have some hope, as if a shield of metal could protect him from Candle's control. Otherwise...there was no otherwise.

COLLINS suddenly saw an opening.

The steel mesh fence was ruptured by a huge semi-trailer truck turned on its side. Twenty feet of fence on either side was down. This was restricted government property, but of course space-ships were hardly prime military secrets any longer. Repairs in the fence had not been made instantaneously, and the wreckage was not guarded.

Collins swerved the wheel and drove the old wagon across the waffle-plate obstruction, onto the smooth tarmac beyond.

He raced, raced, raced through the falling night, not sure where he was headed.

Up above he saw the shelter of shadows from a cluster of half-finished buildings. He drove into them and parked.

Collins sat still for a moment, then threw open the door and ran around to the back of the truck, jerking open the handles.

Nancy fell out into his arms.

"What kind of ambulance is this?" she demanded. "It doesn't look like an ambulance. It doesn't smell like an ambulance. It looks like—looks like—"

Collins said, "Shut up. Get out of there. We've got to hide."

"Why?"

"They think I murdered you."

"Murdered me? But I'm alive. Can't they see I'm alive?"

Collins shook his head. "I doubt it. I don't know why, but I don't think it would be that simple. Come with me."

The blood on her breast had dried, and he could see it was only a shallow groove dug by the bullet. But she flinched in pain as she began to walk, pulling the muscles.

They stopped and leaned against a half-finished metallic shed.

"Where are we? Where are you taking me?"

"This is the spaceport. Now shut up."

"Let me go."

"No."

"I'm not dead," Nancy insisted. "You know I'm not dead. I won't press charges against you—just let me go free."

"I told you it wasn't that simple. He wants them to think you're dead, and that's what they'll think."

Nancy passed fingers across her eyes. "Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Doc Candle. He won't let them know you're alive."

Nancy rubbed her forehead with both hands. "Sam, you don't know what you're doing. You don't—know what you're getting yourself into. Just let me show myself to someone. They'll know I'm not dead. Really they will."

"Okay," he said. "Let's find somebody."

HE led her toward a more nearly completed building, showing rectangles of light. They looked through the windows to see several men in uniforms bending over blueprints on a desk jury-rigged of sawhorses and planks.

"Sam," Nancy said, "one of those men is Terry Elston. He's a Waraxe boy. I went to school with him. He'll know me. Let's go in..."

"No," Collins said. "We don't go in."

"But—" Nancy started to protest, but stopped. "Wait. He's coming out."

Collins slid along the wall and stood behind the door. "Tell him who you are when he comes out. I'll stay here."

They waited. After a few seconds, the door opened.

Nancy stepped into rectangle of light thrown on the concrete from the window.

"Terry," she said. "Terry, it's me—Nancy Comstock."

The blue-jawed young man in uniform frowned. "Who did you say you were? Have you got clearance from this area?"

"It's me, Terry. Nancy. Nancy Comstock."

Terry Elston stepped front and center. "That's not a very good joke. I knew Nancy. Hell of a way to die, killed by some maniac."

"Terry, I'm Nancy. Don't you recognize me?"

Elston squinted. "You look familiar. You look a little like

Nancy. But you can't be her, because she's dead."

"I'm here, and I tell you I'm *not* dead."

"Nancy's dead," Elston repeated mechanically. "Say, what are you trying to pull?"

"Terry, behind you. A maniac!"

"Sure," Elston said. "Sure. There's a maniac *behind* me."

Collins stepped forward and hit Elston behind the ear. He fell silently.

Nancy stared down at him.

"He refused to recognize me. He acted like I was crazy, pretending to be Nancy Comstock."

"Come on along," Collins urged. "They'll probably shoot us on sight as trespassers."

She looked around herself without comprehension.

"Which way?"

"*This way.*"

Collins did not say those words.

They were said by the man with the gun in the uniform like the one worn by Elston. He motioned impatiently.

"This way, this way."

NO priority," Colonel Smith-Boerke said as he paced back and forth, gun in hand.

From time to time he waved it threateningly at Collins and Nancy who sat on the couch in Smith-Boerke's office. They had been sitting for close to two hours. Collins now knew the Colonel

did not intend to turn him over to the authorities. They were being held for reasons of Smith-Boerke's own.

"They sneak the ship in here, plan for an unscheduled hop from an uncompleted base—the strictest security we've used in ten or fifteen years—and now they cancel it. This is bound to get leaked by somebody! They'll call it off. It'll never fly now."

Collins sat quietly. He had been listening to this all evening. Smith-Boerke had been drinking, although it wasn't very obvious.

Smith-Boerke turned to Collins.

"I've been waiting for somebody like you. Just waiting for you to come along. And here you are, a wanted fugitive, completely in my power! Perfect, *perfect*."

Collins nodded to himself. Of course, Colonel Smith-Boerke had been waiting for him. And Doc Candle had driven him right to him. It was inescapable. He had been intended to escape and turn up right here all along.

"What do you want with me?"

Smith-Boerke's flushed face brightened. "You want to become a hero? A hero so big that all these trumped-up charges against you will be dropped? It'll be romantic. Back to Lindbergh-to-Paris. Tell me, Collins, how would

you like to be the first man to travel faster than light?"

Collins knew there was no way out.

"All right," he said.

Smith-Boerke wiped a hand across his dry mouth.

"Project Silver *has* to come off. My whole career depends on it. You don't have anything to do. Everything's cybernetic. Just ride along and prove a human being can survive. Nothing to it. No hyperdrives, none of that kind of stuff. We had an engine that could go half lightspeed and now we've made it twice as efficient and more. No superstitions about Einstein, I hope? No? Good."

"I'll go," Collins said. "But what if I had said 'no'."

Smith-Boerke put the gun away in a desk drawer.

"Then you could have walked out of here, straight into the MP's."

"Why didn't they come in here after me?"

"They don't have security clearance for this building."

"*Don't* leave me alone," Nancy said urgently. "I don't understand what's happening. I feel so helpless. I need help."

"You're asking the wrong man," Collins said briefly.

COLLINS felt safe when the airlock kissed shut its metal lips.

It was not like the house, but yet he felt safe, surrounded by all the compli-

cated, expensive electronic equipment. It was big, solid, sterilely gleaming.

Another thing—he had reason to believe that Doc Candle's power could not reach him through metal.

"But I'm not outside," Doc Candle said, "I'm in here, with you."

Collins yelled and cursed, he tried to pull off the acceleration webbing and claw through the airlock. Nobody paid any attention to him. Count downs had been automated. Smith-Boerke was handling this one himself, and he cut off the Audio-In switch from the spaceship. Doc Candle said nothing else for a moment, and the spaceship, almost an entity itself, went on with its work.

The faster-than-light spaceship took off.

At first it was like any other rocket takeoff.

The glow of its exhaust spread over the field of the spaceport, then over the hills and valleys, and then the town of Waraxe, spreading illumination even as far as Sam Collins' silent house.

After a time of being sick, Collins lay back and accepted this too.

"That's right, that's it," Doc Candle said. "Take it and die with it. That's the ticket."

Collins' eyes settled on a gauge. Three quarters lightspeed. Climbing.

Nothing strange, nothing

untoward happened when you reached lightspeed. It was only an arbitrary number. All else was superstition. Forget it, forget it, forget it.

Something was telling him that. At first he thought it was Doc Candle but then he knew it was the ship.

Collins sat back and took it, and what he was taking was death. It was creeping over him, seeping into his feet, filling him like liquid does a sponge.

Not will, but curiosity, caused him to turn his head.

He saw Doc Candle.

The old body was dying. He was in the emergency seat, broken, a ribbon of blood lacing his chin. But Doc Candle continued to laugh triumphantly in Collins' head.

"Why? Why do you have to kill me?" Collins asked.

"Because I am evil."

"How do you know you're evil?"

"*They told me so!*" Candle shouted back in the thundering silence of Death's approach. "They were always saying I was bad."

They.

COLLINS got a picture of something incredibly old and incredibly wise, but long unused to the young, clumsy gods. Something that could mar the molding of a godling and make it mortal.

"But I'm not really so very bad," Doc Candle went on.

"I had to destroy, but I picked someone who really didn't care if he were destroyed or not. An almost absolutely passive human being, Sam. You."

Collins nodded.

"And even then," said the superhuman alien from outer space, "I could not just destroy. I have created a work of art."

"Work of art?"

"Yes. I have taken your life and turned it into a horror story, Sam! A chilling, demonic, black-hearted horror!"

Collins nodded again.

LIGHTSPEED.

There was finally something human within Sam Collins that he could not deny. He wanted to live. It wasn't true. He did care what happened.

You do? said somebody.

He does? asked somebody else, surprised, and suddenly he again got the image of wiser, older creatures, a little ashamed because of what they had done to the creature named Doc Candle.

He does, chorused several voices, and Sam Collins cried aloud: "I do! I want to live!" They were just touching lightspeed; he felt it.

This time it was not just a biological response. He really wanted help. He wanted to stay alive.

From the older, wiser voices he got help, though he never knew how; he felt the ship

move slipwise under him, and then a crash.

And Doc Candle got help too, the only help even the older, wiser ones could give him.

THEY pulled him out of the combined wreckage of the spaceship and his house. Both were demolished.

It was strange how the spaceship Sam Collins was on crashed right into his house. Ed Michaels recalled a time in a tornado when Sy Baxter's car was picked up, lifted across town and dropped into his living room.

When the men from the spaceport lifted away tons of rubble, they found him and said, "He's dead."

No, I'm not, Collins thought. I'm alive.

And then they saw that he really was alive, that he had come through it alive somehow, and nobody remembered anything like it since the airliner crash in '59.

A while later, after they found Doc Candle's body and court-martialed Smith-Boerke, who took drugs, Nancy was nuzzling him on his hospital bed. It was nice, but he wasn't paying much attention.

I'm free, Collins thought as the girl hugged him. *Free!* He kissed her.

Well, he thought while she was kissing him back, as free as I want to be, anyway.

END

THE TALKATIVE TREE

Dang vines! Beats all how some plants have no manners — but what do you expect, when they used to be men!

ALL things considered—the obscure star, the undetermined damage to the stellar drive and the way the small planet's murky atmosphere defied precision scanners—the pilot made a reasonably good landing. Despite sour feelings for the space service of Haurtoz, steward Peter Kolin had to admit that casualties might have been far worse.

Chief Steward Slichow led his little command, less two third-class ration keepers thought to have been trapped in the lower hold, to a point two hundred meters from the steaming hull of the *Peace State*. He lined them up as if on parade. Kolin made himself inconspicuous.

"Since the crew will be on emergency watches repairing the damage," announced the Chief in clipped, aggressive tones, "I have volunteered my section for preliminary scouting, as is suitable. It may be useful to discover temporary sources in this area of natural foods."

Volunteered HIS section! thought Kolin rebelliously.

Like the Supreme Director of Haurtoz! Being conscripted into this idiotic space fleet that never fights is bad enough without a tin god on jets like Slichow!

Prudently, he did not express this resentment overtly.

His well-schooled features revealed no trace of the idea—or of any other idea. The

Planetary State of Haurtoz had been organized some fifteen light-years from old Earth, but many of the home world's less kindly techniques had been employed. Lack of complete loyalty to the state was likely to result in a siege of treatment that left the subject suitably "re-personalized." Kolin had heard of instances wherein mere unenthusiastic posture had betrayed intentions to harbor treasonable thoughts.

"You will scout in five details of three persons each," Chief Slichow said. "Every hour, each detail will send one person in to report, and he will be replaced by one of the five I shall keep here to issue rations."

Kolin permitted himself to wonder when anyone might get some rest, but assumed a mildly willing look. (Too eager an attitude could arouse suspicion of disguising an improper viewpoint.) The maintenance of a proper viewpoint was a necessity if the Planetary State were to survive the hostile plots of Earth and the latter's decadent colonies. That, at least, was the official line.

Kolin found himself in a group with Jak Ammet, a third cook, and Eva Yrtok, powdered foods storekeeper. Since the crew would be eating packaged rations during repairs, Yrtok could be spared to command a scout detail.

Each scout was issued a

THE TALKATIVE TREE

rocket pistol and a plastic water tube. Chief Slichow emphasized that the keepers of rations could hardly, in an emergency, give even the appearance of favoring themselves in regard to food. They would go without. Kolin maintained a standard expression as the Chief's sharp stare measured them.

Yrtok, a dark, lean-faced girl, led the way with a quiet monosyllable. She carried the small radio they would be permitted to use for messages of utmost urgency. Ammet followed, and Kolin brought up the rear.

TO reach their assigned sector, they had to climb a forbidding ridge of rock within half a kilometer. Only a sparse creeper grew along their way, its elongated leaves shimmering with bronze-green reflections against a stony surface; but when they topped the ridge a thick forest was in sight.

Yrtok and Ammet paused momentarily before descending.

Kolin shared their sense of isolation. They would be out of sight of authority and responsible for their own actions. It was a strange sensation.

They marched down into the valley at a brisk pace, becoming more aware of the clouds and atmospheric haze. Distant objects seemed blurred by the mist, taking on

a somber, brooding grayness. For all Kolin could tell, he and the others were isolated in a world bounded by the rocky ridge behind them and a semi-circle of damp trees and bushes several hundred meters away. He suspected that the hills rising mistily ahead were part of a continuous slope, but could not be sure.

Yrtok led the way along the most nearly level ground. Low creepers became more plentiful, interspersed with scrubby thickets of tangled, spike-armored bushes. Occasionally, small flying things flickered among the foliage. Once, a shrub puffed out an enormous cloud of tiny spores.

"Be a job to find anything edible here," grunted Ammet, and Kolin agreed.

Finally, after a longer hike than he had anticipated, they approached the edge of the deceptively distant forest. Yrtok paused to examine some purple berries glistening dangerously on a low shrub. Kolin regarded the trees with misgiving.

"Looks as tough to get through as a tropical jungle," he remarked.

"I think the stuff puts out shoots that grow back into the ground to root as they spread," said the woman. "Maybe we can find a way through."

In two or three minutes, they reached the abrupt bor-

der of the odd-looking trees.

Except for one thick trunked giant, all of them were about the same height. They craned their necks to estimate the altitude of the monster, but the top was hidden by the wide spread of branches. The depths behind it looked dark and impenetrable.

"We'd better explore along the edge," decided Yrtok. "Ammet, now is the time to go back and tell the Chief which way we're—*Ammet!*"

Kolin looked over his shoulder. Fifty meters away, Ammet sat beside the bush with the purple berries, utterly relaxed.

"He must have tasted some!" exclaimed Kolin. "I'll see how he is."

He ran back to the cook and shook him by the shoulder. Ammet's head lolled loosely to one side. His rather heavy features were vacant, lending him a doped appearance. Kolin straightened up and beckoned to Yrtok.

For some reason, he had trouble attracting her attention. Then he noticed that she was kneeling.

"Hope she didn't eat some stupid thing too!" he grumbled, trotting back.

As he reached her, whatever Yrtok was examining came to life and scooted into the underbrush with a flash of greenish fur. All Kolin saw was that it had several legs too many.

He pulled Yrtok to her feet. She pawed at him weakly, eyes as vacant as Ammet's. When he let go in sudden horror, she folded gently to the ground. She lay comfortably on her side, twitching one hand as if to brush something away.

When she began to smile dreamily, Kolin backed away.

THE corners of his mouth felt oddly stiff; they had involuntarily drawn back to expose his clenched teeth. He glanced warily about, but nothing appeared to threaten him.

"It's time to end this scout," he told himself. "It's dangerous. One good look and I'm jetting off! What I need is an easy tree to climb."

He considered the massive giant. Soaring thirty or forty meters into the thin fog and dwarfing other growth, it seemed the most promising choice.

At first, Kolin saw no way, but then the network of vines clinging to the rugged trunk suggested a route. He tried his weight gingerly, then began to climb.

"I should have brought Yrtok's radio," he muttered. "Oh, well, I can take it when I come down, if she hasn't snapped out of her spell by then. Funny...I wonder if that green thing bit her."

Footholds were plentiful among the interlaced lianas. Kolin progressed rapidly.

THE TALKATIVE TREE

When he reached the first thick limbs, twice head height, he felt safer.

Later, at what he hoped was the halfway mark, he hooked one knee over a branch and paused to wipe sweat from his eyes. Peering down, he discovered the ground to be obscured by foliage.

"I should have checked from down there to see how open the top is," he mused. "I wonder how the view will be from up there?"

"Depends on what you're looking for, Sonny!" something remarked in a souging wheeze.

Kolin, slipping, grabbed desperately for the branch. His fingers clutched a handful of twigs and leaves, which just barely supported him until he regained a grip with the other hand.

The branch quivered resentfully under him.

"Careful, there!" whooshed the eerie voice. "It took me all summer to grow those!"

Kolin could feel the skin crawling along his backbone.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

The answering sigh of laughter gave him a distinct chill despite its suggestion of amiability.

"Name's Johnny Ashlew. Kinda thought you'd start with *what* I am. Didn't figure you'd ever seen a man grown into a tree before."

Kolin looked about, seeing little but leaves and fog.

"I have to climb down," he

told himself in a reasonable tone. "It's bad enough that the other two passed out without me going space happy too."

"What's your hurry?" demanded the voice. "I can talk to you just as easy all the way down, you know. Airholes in my bark—I'm not like an Earth tree."

Kolin examined the bark of the crotch in which he sat. It did seem to have assorted holes and hollows in its rough surface.

"I never saw an Earth tree," he admitted. "We came from Haurtoz."

"Where's that? Oh, never mind—some little planet. I don't bother with them all, since I came here and found out I could be anything I wanted."

"What do you mean, anything you wanted?" asked Kolin, testing the firmness of a vertical vine.

"JUST what I said," continued the voice, sounding closer in his ear as his cheek brushed the ridged bark of the tree trunk. "And, if I do have to remind you, it would be nicer if you said 'Mr. Ashlew,' considering my age."

"Your age? How old—?"

"Can't really count it in Earth years any more. Lost track. I always figured bein' a tree was a nice, peaceful life; and when I remembered how long some of them live, that settled it. Sonny, this

world ain't all it looks like."

"It isn't, Mr. Ashlew?" asked Kolin, twisting about in an effort to see what the higher branches might hide.

"Nope. Most everything here is run by the Life—that is, by the thing that first grew big enough to do some thinking, and set its roots down all over until it had control. That's the outskirts of it down below."

"The other trees? That jungle?"

"It's more'n a jungle, Sonny. When I landed here, along with the others from the *Arcturan Spark*, the planet looked pretty empty to me, just like it must have to— Watch it, there, Boy! If I didn't twist that branch over in time, you'd be bouncing off my roots right now!"

"Th-thanks!" grunted Kolin, hanging on grimly.

"Doggone vine!" commented the windy whisper. "He ain't one of my crowd. Landed years later in a ship from some star towards the center of the galaxy. You should have seen his looks before the Life got in touch with his mind and set up a mental field to help him change form. He looks twice as good as a vine!"

"He's very handy," agreed Kolin politely. He groped for a foothold.

"Well...matter of fact, I can't get through to him much, even with the Life's mental field helping. Guess

he started living with a different way of thinking. It burns me. I thought of being a tree, and then he came along to take advantage of it!"

Kolin braced himself securely to stretch tiring muscles.

"Maybe I'd better stay a while," he muttered. "I don't know where I am."

"You're about fifty feet up," the sighing voice informed him. "You ought to let me tell you how the Life helps you change form. You don't *have* to be a tree."

"No?"

"Uh-uh! Some of the boys that landed with me wanted to get around and see things. Lots changed to animals or birds. One even stayed a man — on the outside anyway. Most of them have to change as the bodies wear out, which I don't, and some made bad mistakes tryin' to be things they saw on other planets."

"I wouldn't want to do that, Mr. Ashlew."

"There's just one thing. The Life don't like taking chances on word about this place gettin' around. It sorta believes in peace and quiet. You might not get back to your ship in any form that could tell tales."

"Listen!" Kolin blurted out. "I wasn't so much enjoying being what I was that getting back matters to me!"

"Don't like your home planet, whatever the name was?"

"Haurtoz. It's a rotten

place. A Planetary State! You have to think and even look the way that's standard thirty hours a day, asleep or awake. You get scared to sleep for fear you might *dream* treason and they'd find out somehow."

"Whooeee! Heard about them places. Must be tough just to live."

Suddenly, Kolin found himself telling the tree about life on Haurtoz, and of the officially announced threats to the Planetary State's planned expansion. He dwelt upon the desperation of having no place to hide in case of trouble with the authorities. A multiple system of such worlds was agonizing to imagine.

SOMEHOW, the oddity of talking to a tree wore off. Kolin heard opinions spouting out which he had prudently kept bottled up for years.

The more he talked and stormed and complained, the more relaxed he felt.

"If there was ever a fellow ready for this planet," decided the tree named Ashlew, "you're it, Sonny! Hang on there while I signal the Life by root!"

Kolin sensed a lack of direct attention. The rustle about him was natural, caused by an ordinary breeze. He noticed his hands shaking.

"Don't know what got into me, talking that way to a

tree," he muttered. "If Yrtok snapped out of it and heard, I'm as good as re-personalized right now."

As he brooded upon the sorry choice of arousing a search by hiding where he was or going back to bluff things out, the tree spoke.

"Maybe you're all set, Sonny. The Life has been thinkin' of learning about other worlds. If you can think of a safe form to jet off in, you might make yourself a deal. How'd you like to stay here?"

"I don't know," said Kolin. "The penalty for desertion—"

"Whoosh! Who'd find you? You could be a bird, a tree, even a cloud."

Silenced but doubting, Kolin permitted himself to try the dream on for size.

He considered what form might most easily escape the notice of search parties and still be tough enough to live a long time without renewal. Another factor slipped into his musings: mere hope of escape was unsatisfying after the outburst that had defined his fuming hatred for Haurtoz.

I'd better watch myself! he thought. *Don't drop diamonds to grab at stars!*

"What I wish I could do is not just get away but get even for the way they make us live...the whole damn set-up. They could just as easy make peace with the Earth colonies. You know why they don't?"

"Why?" wheezed Ashlew.

"They're scared that without talk of war, and scouting for Earth fleets that never come, people would have time to think about the way they have to live and who's running things in the Planetary State. Then the gravy train would get blown up—and I mean blown up!"

The tree was silent for a moment. Kolin felt the branches stir meditatively. Then Ashlew offered a suggestion.

"I could tell the Life your side of it," he hissed. "Once in with us, you can always make thinking connections, no matter how far away. Maybe you could make a deal to kill two birds with one stone, as they used to say on Earth..."

CHIEF Steward Slichow paced up and down beside the ration crate turned up to serve him as a field desk. He scowled in turn, impartially, at his watch and at the weary stewards of his headquarters detail. The latter stumbled about, stacking and distributing small packets of emergency rations.

The line of crewmen released temporarily from repair work was transient as to individuals but immutable as to length. Slichow muttered something profane about disregard of orders as he glared at the rocky ridges surrounding the landing place.

He was so intent upon planning greetings with which to favor the tardy scouting parties that he failed to notice the loose cloud drifting over the ridge.

It was tenuous, almost a haze. Close examination would have revealed it to be made up of myriads of tiny spores. They resembled those cast forth by one of the bushes Kolin's party had passed. Along the edges, the haze faded raggedly into thin air, but the units evidently formed a cohesive body. They drifted together, approaching the men as if taking intelligent advantage of the breeze.

One of Chief Slichow's staggering flunkies, stealing a few seconds of relaxation on the pretext of dumping an armful of light plastic packing, wandered into the haze.

He froze.

After a few heartbeats, he dropped the trash and stared at ship and men as if he had never seen either. A hail from his master moved him.

"Coming, Chief!" he called but, returning at a moderate pace, he murmured, "My name is Frazer. I'm a second assistant steward. I'll think as Unit One."

Throughout the cloud of spores, the mind formerly known as Peter Kolin congratulated itself upon its choice of form.

Nearer to the original shape of the Life than Ashlew got, he thought.

He paused to consider the state of the tree named Ashlew, half immortal but rooted to one spot, unable to float on a breeze or through space itself on the pressure of light. Especially, it was unable to insinuate any part of itself into the control center of another form of life, as a second spore was taking charge of the body of Chief Slichow at that very instant.

There are not enough men, thought Kolin. *Some of me must drift through the airlock. In space, I can spread through the air system to the command group.*

Repairs to the *Peace State* and the return to Haurtoz passed like weeks to some of the crew but like brief moments in infinity to other units. At last, the ship parted the air above Headquarters City and landed.

The unit known as Captain Theodor Kessel hesitated before descending the ramp. He surveyed the field, the city and the waiting team of inspecting officers.

"Could hardly be better, could it?" he chuckled to the companion unit called Security Officer Tarth.

"Hardly, sir. All ready for the liberation of Haurtoz."

"Reformation of the Planetary State," mused the captain, smiling dreamily as he grasped the handrail. "And then—formation of the Planetary Mind!"

END

FROM PLYNCK TO PLANCK

by THEODORE STURGEON

FROM San Francisco, reader Kirsten Eaves writes to pose a question:

“Why do people who read Philip Wylie read Theodore Sturgeon? And why do people who read all the Lewis Carroll they can find read both the former?... Is there a character type that takes naturally to this symbiosis of ideas? Are there vast crowds of these people? I have never to my knowledge met one. Or if this character type is just a product of your literary imagination, what am I?”

To answer the last question first and work backwards, I can only say that I invented

Reader Eaves to about the same degree as (another reader wrote me of this conviction) I wrote *Dianetics*. Reader Eaves must therefore answer her own last question. As to the matter of character types, I usually hold myself against categorizations categorically, because of an early and deep conviction that people who begin sentences with “Redheads are—” or “Hungarians are—” are about to speak nonsense.

Yet as to this matter of character type... I think perhaps she has something. I think she is talking about science fiction people—readers, writers, editors. (I purposely don't say *fen* because the field has regular loving readers

whom even fen wouldn't call fans: is Gilbert Highet a fan? or Orville Prescott?) I am quite sure, however, that any sf con, whether -ference or -vention, would afford Reader Eaves the experience of—to her knowledge—meeting a large percentage of people who have read what she reads, like what she likes and will listen, as she mentions elsewhere in her letter, to her reciting *The Pobble Who Has No Toes*.

As to the first question, I have evidence that Sturgeon reads Wylie and I have no doubt that Wylie reads Wylie, but I have as yet no evidence that Wylie reads Sturgeon. This is the kind of thing that makes me back off from categorizations.

Reader Eaves isn't through with me yet. Since I frequently mention books read by people in my stories, and music too, she asks, "Perhaps if you can spare the time you can write out a more complete recommended reading list than you include in your stories." I have the time, but not the space; however, I am delighted to be able to mention some of the books which my characters have found influential, and my character as well. Some of them fall into the class of Books That Nobody Has Read but Me, or So It Seems. It's *hard* to love 'em so much and find them unknown. Others actually do have a certain small reader-

ship. There's Wells' *Time Machine*. Dunsany's *The Charwoman's Shadow*. Pangborn's *A Mirror for Observers*. Arthur Eddison's *The Worm Ouroborous*. Hudson's *Green Mansions*. Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris*. Wylie's *Finnley Wren* and Chap. 13 of *The Disappearance*. Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*. William Morris' *Golden Wings*. De Quincy's *The English Mail-Coach*. Karle Wilson Baker's *The Garden of the Plynck*...these aren't all, by any means, but I've reached the one I wanted to talk about.

I have NEVER met anyone who has read the *Plynck*. It was published by Yale University Press in 1924. It is, if you like, a children's book... which, if you like, *Alice in Wonderland* also is. A series of adventures of a little girl called Sara who has learned to "go inside her head and shut the doors," it deals with the Garden she finds there, and all its wonders.

Something—and I honestly don't know what—keeps the book from being impossibly cute. To this day I find it full of lovely twists and surprises. There's a curly path just inside the doors (only on a later visit it was pink instead of curly) which led to the Garden itself, a pool in which there is a tree on which there sits the Plynck, a beautiful, somewhat haughty, but very kind bird. She looks down at

the water where her Echo lives. Fluttering about among the branches, more often than not, is a Teacup (a widow; her Saucer was broken some time ago.) There's the Snimmy's wife, who when indignant unscrews and angrily hems a doorknob, and her pet the Snoodle, whose mother was a snail and whose father was a pedigreed noodle, and who has a drawback. The drawback is a little isinglass window in his back which, when you pick him up, draws back and releases the odor of castor oil. There are Zizzes, which fly right into dimples unless you remove same and put them in a dimple-holder. And then there's Avrillia.

"Has any mortal but Sara ever seen Avrillia? Certainly there never was another fairy so wan and wild and beautiful...she was leaning over the marble balustrade, looking down into Nothing, and one hand still stretched out as if it had just let something fall. She seemed to be still watching its descent. Her body, as she leaned, was like a reed, and her hair was pale-gold and cloudy. But all that was nothing beside Avrillia's eyes.

"...It didn't stick," she said.

"...Do you throw your poems down there?" asked Sara.

"Of course," said Avrillia. "I write them on rose-leaves...petals, I mean, all colors, but especially blue. And then

I drop them over, and some day one of them may stick to the bottom—"

"But there isn't any!"

"...But there's an imaginary bottom. One might stick on that, you know. And then, with that to build to, if I drop them in very fast, I may be able to fill it up—"

"But there aren't any sides to it either!"

Avrillia betrayed a faint exasperation (it showed a little around the edges, like a green petticoat under a black dress). "Oh, these literal people," she said, half to herself... "Isn't it as easy to imagine sides as a bottom? Well...if I write them fast enough to fill it up...somebody a hundred years from now may come along and notice one of my poems; and then I shall be Immortal." And at that a lovely smile crossed Avrillia's face.

NOW, you either dig this or you don't. Me, I never write my congressman or try a new kind of story or argue with a jingoist but I get a flash of Avrillia leaning raptly over the balustrade...and go inside my mind and shut the doors is something I completely understand...and outer space, and hydrogen transformations, and Planck's Constant, live there along with Schlorge at the dimplesmithy—in a world of things to marvel at, which need not necessarily be understood. **END**

by Theodore Sturgeon

Got a problem? Just pick up the phone. It solved them all — and all the same way!

2 B R O 2 B

by KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

EVERYTHING was perfectly swell.

There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars.

All diseases were conquered. So was old age.

Death, barring accidents, was an adventure for volunteers.

The population of the United States was stabilized at forty-million souls.

One bright morning in the Chicago Lying-in Hospital, a man named Edward K. Wehling, Jr., waited for his wife to give birth. He was the only man waiting. Not many people were born a day any more.

Wehling was fifty-six, a mere stripling in a population whose average age was one hundred and twenty-nine.

X-rays had revealed that his wife was going to have triplets. The children would be his first.

Young Wehling was hunched in his chair, his head in his hand. He was so rumped, so still and colorless as to be virtually invisible. His camouflage was perfect, since the waiting room had a disorderly and demoralized air, too. Chairs and ashtrays had been moved away from the walls. The floor was paved with spattered dropcloths.

The room was being redecorated. It was being redecorated as a memorial to a man who had volunteered to die.

A sardonic old man, about two hundred years old, sat on

a stepladder, painting a mural he did not like. Back in the days when people aged visibly, his age would have been guessed at thirty-five or so. Aging had touched him that much before the cure for aging was found.

The mural he was working on depicted a very neat garden. Men and women in white, doctors and nurses, turned the soil, planted seedlings, sprayed bugs, spread fertilizer.

Men and women in purple uniforms pulled up weeds, cut down plants that were old and sickly, raked leaves, carried refuse to trash-burners.

Never, never, never—not even in medieval Holland nor old Japan—had a garden been more formal, been better tended. Every plant had all the loam, light, water, air and nourishment it could use.

A hospital orderly came down the corridor, singing under his breath a popular song:

If you don't like my kisses,
honey,

Here's what I will do:

I'll go see a girl in purple,
Kiss this sad world toodle-oo.

If you don't want my lovin',
Why should I take up all
this space?

I'll get off this old planet,
Let some sweet baby have
my place.

The orderly looked in at

the mural and the muralist. "Looks so real," he said, "I can practically imagine I'm standing in the middle of it."

"What makes you think you're not in it?" said the painter. He gave a satiric smile. "It's called 'The Happy Garden of Life,' you know."

"That's good of Dr. Hitz," said the orderly.

HE was referring to one of the male figures in white, whose head was a portrait of Dr. Benjamin Hitz, the hospital's Chief Obstetrician. Hitz was a blindingly handsome man.

"Lot of faces still to fill in," said the orderly. He meant that the faces of many of the figures in the mural were still blank. All blanks were to be filled with portraits of important people on either the hospital staff or from the Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

"Must be nice to be able to make pictures that look like something," said the orderly.

The painter's face curdled with scorn. "You think I'm proud of this daub?" he said. "You think this is my idea of what life really looks like?"

"What's your idea of what life looks like?" said the orderly.

The painter gestured at a foul dropcloth. "There's a good picture of it," he said. "Frame that, and you'll have

a picture a damn sight more honest than this one."

"You're a gloomy old duck, aren't you?" said the orderly.

"Is that a crime?" said the painter.

The orderly shrugged. "If you don't like it here, Grandpa—" he said, and he finished the thought with the trick telephone number that people who didn't want to live any more were supposed to call. The zero in the telephone number he pronounced "naught."

The number was: "2 B R O 2 B."

It was the telephone number of an institution whose fanciful sobriquets included: "Automat," "Birdland," "Cannery," "Catbox," "De-louser," "Easy-go," "Good-by, Mother," "Happy Hooligan," "Kiss-me-quick," "Lucky Pierre," "Sheepdip," "Waring Blendor," "Weep-no-more" and "Why Worry?"

"To be or not to be" was the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

THE painter thumbed his nose at the orderly. "When I decide it's time to go," he said, "it won't be at the Sheepdip."

"A do-it-yourselfer, eh?" said the orderly. "Messy business, Grandpa. Why don't you have a little consideration for the people who have to clean up after you?"

The painter expressed with an obscenity his lack of concern for the tribulations of his survivors. "The world could do with a good deal more mess, if you ask me," he said.

The orderly laughed and moved on.

Wehling, the waiting father, mumbled something without raising his head. And then he fell silent again.

A coarse, formidable woman strode into the waiting room on spike heels. Her shoes, stockings, trench coat, bag and overseas cap were all purple, the purple the painter called "the color of grapes on Judgment Day."

The medallion on her purple musette bag was the seal of the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination, an eagle perched on a turnstile.

The woman had a lot of facial hair—an unmistakable mustache, in fact. A curious thing about gas-chamber hostesses was that, no matter how lovely and feminine they were when recruited, they all sprouted mustaches within five years or so.

"Is this where I'm supposed to come?" she said to the painter.

"A lot would depend on what your business was," he said. "You aren't about to have a baby, are you?"

"They told me I was supposed to pose for some picture," she said. "My name's

Leora Duncan." She waited.

"And you dunk people," he said.

"What?" she said.

"Skip it," he said.

"That sure is a beautiful picture," she said. "Looks just like heaven or something."

"Or something," said the painter. He took a list of names from his smock pocket. "Duncan, Duncan, Duncan," he said, scanning the list.

"Yes—here you are. You're entitled to be immortalized. See any faceless body here you'd like me to stick your head on? We've got a few choice ones left."

She studied the mural bleakly. "Gee," she said, "they're all the same to me. I don't know anything about art."

"A body's a body, eh?" he said "All righty. As a master of fine art, I recommend this body here." He indicated a faceless figure of a woman who was carrying dried stalks to a trash-burner.

"Well," said Leora Duncan, "that's more the disposal people, isn't it? I mean, I'm in service. I don't do any disposing."

The painter clapped his hands in mock delight. "You say you don't know anything about art, and then you prove in the next breath that you know more about it than I do! Of course the sheave-carrier is wrong for a hostess! A snipper, a pruner—that's more your line." He pointed to a

figure in purple who was sawing a dead branch from an apple tree. "How about her?" he said. "You like her at all?"

"Gosh—" she said, and she blushed and became humble—"that—that puts me right next to Dr. Hitz."

"That upsets you?" he said.

"Good gravy, no!" she said. "It's—it's just such an honor."

"Ah, You admire him, eh?" he said.

"Who doesn't admire him?" she said, worshiping the portrait of Hitz. It was the portrait of a tanned, white-haired, omnipotent Zeus, two hundred and forty years old.

"Who doesn't admire him?" she said again. "He was responsible for setting up the very first gas chamber in Chicago."

"Nothing would please me more," said the painter, "than to put you next to him for all time. Sawing off a limb—that strikes you as appropriate?"

"That is kind of like what I do," she said. She was demure about what she did. What she did was make people comfortable while she killed them.

AND, while Leora Duncan was posing for her portrait, into the waitingroom bounded Dr. Hitz himself. He was seven feet tall, and he boomed with importance, accomplishments, and the joy of living.

"Well, Miss Duncan! Miss

Duncan!" he said, and he made a joke. "What are you doing here?" he said. "This isn't where the people leave. This is where they come in!"

"We're going to be in the same picture together," she said shyly.

"Good!" said Dr. Hitz heartily. "And, say, isn't that some picture?"

"I sure am honored to be in it with you," she said.

"Let me tell you," he said, "I'm honored to be in it with you. Without women like you, this wonderful world we've got wouldn't be possible."

He saluted her and moved toward the door that led to the delivery rooms. "Guess what was just born," he said.

"I can't," she said.

"Triplets!" he said.

"Triplets!" she said. She was exclaiming over the legal implications of triplets.

The law said that no newborn child could survive unless the parents of the child could find someone who would volunteer to die. Triplets, if they were all to live, called for three volunteers.

"Do the parents have three volunteers?" said Leora Duncan.

"Last I heard," said Dr. Hitz, "they had one, and were trying to scrape another two up."

"I don't think they made it," she said. "Nobody made three appointments with us. Nothing but singles going

through today, unless somebody called in after I left. What's the name?"

"Wehling," said the waiting father, sitting up, red-eyed and frowzy. "Edward K. Wehling, Jr., is the name of the happy father-to-be."

He raised his right hand, looked at a spot on the wall, gave a hoarsely wretched chuckle. "Present," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Wehling," said Dr. Hitz, "I didn't see you."

"The invisible man," said Wehling.

"They just phoned me that your triplets have been born," said Dr. Hitz. "They're all fine, and so is the mother. I'm on my way in to see them now."

"Hooray," said Wehling emptily.

"You don't sound very happy," said Dr. Hitz.

"What man in my shoes wouldn't be happy?" said Wehling. He gestured with his hands to symbolize care-free simplicity. "All I have to do is pick out which one of the triplets is going to live, then deliver my maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan, and come back here with a receipt."

Dr. Hitz became rather severe with Wehling, towered over him. "You don't believe in population control, Mr. Wehling?" he said.

"I think it's perfectly keen," said Wehling tautly.

"Would you like to go back

to the good old days, when the population of the Earth was twenty billion—about to become forty billion, then eighty billion, then one hundred and sixty billion? Do you know what a drupelet is, Mr. Wehling?" said Hitz.

"Nope," said Wehling sulkily.

"A drupelet, Mr. Wehling, is one of the little knobs, one of the little pulpy grains of a blackberry," said Dr. Hitz. "Without population control, human beings would now be packed on this surface of this old planet like drupelets on a blackberry! Think of it!"

Wehling continued to stare at the same spot on the wall.

"In the year 2000," said Dr. Hitz, "before scientists stepped in and laid down the law, there wasn't even enough drinking water to go around, and nothing to eat but seaweed—and still people insisted on their right to reproduce like jackrabbits. And their right, if possible, to live forever."

"I want those kids," said Wehling quietly. "I want all three of them."

"Of course you do," said Dr. Hitz. "That's only human."

"I don't want my grandfather to die, either," said Wehling.

"Nobody's really happy about taking a close relative to the Catbox," said Dr. Hitz gently, sympathetically.

"I wish people wouldn't call it that," said Leora Duncan.

"What?" said Dr. Hitz.

"I wish people wouldn't call it 'the Catbox,' and things like that," she said. "It gives people the wrong impression."

"You're absolutely right," said Dr. Hitz. "Forgive me." He corrected himself, gave the municipal gas chambers their official title, a title no one ever used in conversation. "I should have said, 'Ethical Suicide Studios,'" he said.

"That sounds so much better," said Leora Duncan.

"This child of yours—whichever one you decide to keep, Mr. Wehling," said Dr. Hitz. "He or she is going to live on a happy, roomy, clean, rich planet, thanks to population control. In a garden like that mural there." He shook his head. "Two centuries ago, when I was a young man, it was a hell that nobody thought could last another twenty years. Now centuries of peace and plenty stretch before us as far as the imagination cares to travel."

He smiled luminously.

The smile faded as he saw that Wehling had just drawn a revolver.

Wehling shot Dr. Hitz dead. "There's room for one—a great big one," he said.

And then he shot Leora Duncan. "It's only death," he said to her as she fell. "There! Room for two."

And then he shot himself, making room for all three of his children.

Nobody came running. Nobody, seemingly, heard the shots.

The painter sat on the top of his stepladder, looking down reflectively on the sorry scene.

THE painter pondered the mournful puzzle of life demanding to be born and, once born, demanding to be fruitful...to multiply and to live as long as possible—to do all that on a very small planet that would have to last forever.

All the answers that the painter could think of were grim. Even grimmer, surely, than a Catbox, a Happy Hooligan, an Easy Go. He thought of war. He thought of plague. He thought of starvation.

He knew that he would never paint again. He let his paintbrush fall to the drop-cloths below. And then he decided he had had about enough of life in the Happy Garden of Life, too, and he came slowly down from the ladder.

He took Wehling's pistol, really intending to shoot himself.

But he didn't have the nerve.

And then he saw the telephone booth in the corner of the room. He went to it, dialed the well-remembered number: "2 B R O 2 B."

"Federal Bureau of Termination," said the very warm voice of a hostess.

"How soon could I get an appointment?" he asked, speaking very carefully.

"We could probably fit you in late this afternoon, sir," she said. "It might even be earlier, if we get a cancellation."

"All right," said the painter, "fit me in, if you please." And he gave her his name, spelling it out.

"Thank you, sir," said the hostess. "Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations."

END

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PART TWO OF A TWO PART SERIAL

**They were the Masters, and they
had only to choose: eternal life,
as inhuman monsters — or death!**

MASTERS OF SPACE

BY EDWARD E. SMITH & E. EVERETT EVANS

Illustrated by Berry

What has gone before: The crew of the starship Orion found themselves in the middle of a great space war between the creatures called Stretts and the lost android servants of their own human ancestors. Helped by the androids, the Earthmen formed themselves into the powerful telepathic linkage called "peyondix" to invade the Strett planet itself. As their minds joined they heard the android Tuly cry out, "Good..." And then their minds were out in interstellar space.

X

HILTON did not have to drive the peyondix-beam to the planet Strett; it was already there. And there was the monstrous First Lord Thinker Zoyar.

Into that mind his multi-mind flashed, its every member as responsive to his will as his own fingers—almost infinitely more so, in fact, because of the tremendous lengths of time required to send messages along nerves.

That horrid mind was scanned cell by cell. Then, after what seemed like a few hours, when a shield began sluggishly to form, Hilton transferred his probe to the mind of the Second Thinker,

one Lord Ynos, and absorbed everything she knew. Then, the minds of all the other Thinkers being screened, he studied the whole Strett planet, foot by foot, and everything that was on it.

Then, mission accomplished, Hilton snapped his attention back to his office and the multi-mind fell apart. As he opened his eyes he heard Tuly scream: ".....Luck!"

"Oh—you still here, Tuly? How long have we been gone?"

"Approximately one and one-tenth seconds, sir."

"WHAT!"

Beverly Bell, in the haven of Franklin Poynter's arms, fainted quietly. Sandra shrieked piercingly. The four

men stared, goggle-eyed. Temple and Teddy, as though by common thought, burrowed their faces into brawny shoulders.

Hilton recovered first. "So *that's* what peyondix is."

"Yes, sir—I mean no, sir. No, I mean yes, but..." Tuly paused, licking her lips in that peculiarly human-female gesture of uncertainty.

"Well, what *do* you mean? It either is or isn't. Or is that necessarily so?"

"Not exactly, sir. That is, it started as peyondix. But it became something else. Not even the most powerful of the old Masters—nobody—ever did or ever could *possibly* generate such a force as that. Or handle it so fast."

"Well, with seven of the best minds of Terra and a..."

"Chip-chop the chit-chat!" Karns said, harshly. "What I want to know is whether I was having a nightmare. Can there *possibly* be a race such as I thought I saw? So utterly savage—ruthless—merciless! So devoid of every human trace and so hell-bent determined on the extermination of every other race in the Galaxy? God damn it, it simply doesn't make sense!"

EYES went from eyes to eyes to eyes.

All had seen the same indescribably horrible, abysmally atrocious, things. Qualities and quantities and urges and drives that no words in any

language could even begin to portray.

"It doesn't seem to, but there it is." Teddy Blake shook her head hopelessly.

Big Bill Karns, hands still shaking, lit a cigarette before he spoke again. "Well, I've never been a proponent of genocide. But it's my considered opinion that the Stretts are one race the galaxy can get along without."

"A hell of a lot better without," Poynter said, and all agreed.

"The point is, what can we do about it?" Kincaid asked. "The first thing, I would say, is to see whether we can do this—whatever it is—without Tuly's help. Shall we try it? Although I, for one, don't feel like doing it right away."

"Not I, either." Beverly Bell held up her right hand, which was shaking uncontrollably. "I feel as though I'd been bucking waves, wind and tide for forty-eight straight hours without food, water or touch. Maybe in about a week I'll be ready for another try at it. But today—not a chance!"

"Okay. Scat, all of you," Hilton ordered. "Take the rest of the day off and rest up. Put on your thought-screens and don't take them off for a second from now on. Those Stretts are tough hombres."

Sandra was the last to leave. "And you, boss?" she asked, pointedly.

"I've got some thinking to do."

"I'll stay and help you think?"

"Not yet." He shook his head, frowned and then grinned. "You see, chick, I don't even know yet what it is I'm going to have to think about."

"A bit unclear, but I know what you mean—I think. Luck, chief."

IN their subterranean sanctum on distant Strett, two of the deepest thinkers of that horribly unhuman race were in coldly intent conference via thought.

"My mind has been plundered, Ynos," First Lord Thinker Zoyar radiated, harshly. "Despite the extremely high reactivity of my shield some information—I do not know how much—was taken. The operator was one of the humans of that ship."

"I, too, felt a plucking at my mind. But those humans could not peyondire, First Lord."

"Be logical, fool! At that contact, in the matter of which you erred in not following up continuously, they succeeded in concealing their real abilities from you."

"That could be the truth. Our ancestors erred, then, in recording that all those weak and timid humans had been slain. These offenders are probably their descendants, returning to reclaim their former world."

"The probability must be evaluated and considered. Was it or was it not through human aid that the Omans destroyed most of our task-force?"

"Highly probable, but impossible of evaluation with the data now available."

"Obtain more data at once. That point must be and shall be fully evaluated and fully considered. This entire situation is intolerable. It must be abated."

"True, First Lord. But every operator and operation is now tightly screened. Oh, if I could only go out there myself..."

"Hold, fool! Your thought is completely disloyal and un-Strettly."

"True, oh First Lord Thinker Zoyar. I will forthwith remove my unworthy self from this plane of existence."

"You will not! I hereby abolish that custom. Our numbers are too few by far. Too many have failed to adapt. Also, as Second Thinker, your death at this time would be slightly detrimental to certain matters now in work. I will myself, however, slay the unfit. To that end repeat The Words under my peyondiring."

"I am a Strett. I will devote my every iota of mental and of physical strength to forwarding the Great Plan. I am, and will remain, a Strett."

"You do believe in The Words."

“OF course I believe in them! I know that in a few more hundreds of thousands of years we will be rid of material bodies and will become invincible and invulnerable. Then comes the Conquest of the Galaxy...and then the Conquest of the Universe!”

“No more, then, on your life, of this weak and cowardly repining! Now, what of your constructive thinking?”

“Programming must be such as to obviate time-lag. We must evaluate the factors already mentioned and many others, such as the reactivation of the spacecraft which was thought to have been destroyed so long ago. After having considered all these evaluations, I will construct a Minor Plan to destroy these Omans, whom we have permitted to exist on sufferance, and with them that shipload of despicably interloping humans.”

“That is well.” Zoyar’s mind seethed with a malevolent ferocity starkly impossible for any human mind to grasp. “And to that end?”

“To that end we must intensify still more our program of procuring data. We must revise our mechs in the light of our every technological advance during the many thousands of cycles since the last such revision was made. Our every instrument of power, of offense and of defense, must be brought up to the theoret-

ical ultimate of capability.”

“And as to the Great Brain?”

“I have been able to think of nothing, First Lord, to add to the undertakings you have already set forth.”

“It was not expected that you would. Now: is it your final thought that these interlopers are in fact the descendants of those despised humans of so long ago?”

“It is.”

“It is also mine. I return, then, to my work upon the Brain. You will take whatever measures are necessary. Use every artifice of intellect and of ingenuity and our every resource. But abate this intolerable nuisance, and soon.”

“It shall be done, First Lord.”

THE Second Thinker issued orders. Frenzied, round-the-clock activity ensued. Hundreds of mechs operated upon the brains of hundreds of others, who in turn operated upon the operators.

Then, all those brains charged with the technological advances of many thousands of years, the combined hundreds went unrestingly to work. Thousands of work-mechs were built and put to work at the construction of larger and more powerful space-craft.

As has been implied, those battle-skeletons of the Stretts were controlled by their own built-in mechanical brains,

which were programmed for only the simplest of battle maneuvers. Anything at all out of the ordinary had to be handled by remote control, by the specialist-mechs at their two-miles-long control board.

This was now to be changed. Programming was to be made so complete that almost any situation could be handled by the warship or the missile itself—instantly.

The Stretts knew that they were the most powerful, the most highly advanced race in the universe. Their science was the highest in the universe. Hence, with every operating unit brought up to the full possibilities of that science, that would be more than enough. Period.

This work, while it required much time, was very much simpler than the task which the First Thinker had laid out for himself on the giant computer-plus which the Stretts called "The Great Brain." In stating his project, First Lord Zoyar had said:

"Assignment: To construct a machine that will have the following abilities: One, to contain and retain all knowledge and information fed into it, however great the amount. Two, to feed itself additional information by peyondiring all planets, wherever situate, bearing intelligent life. Three, to call up instantly any and all items of information pertaining to any problem we may give it. Four, to com-

bine and recombine any number of items required to form new concepts. Five, to formulate theories, test them and draw conclusions helpful to us in any matter in work."

It will have been noticed that these specifications vary in one important respect from those of the Eniacs and Univacs of Earth. Since we of Earth can not peyondire, we do not expect that ability from our computers.

The Stretts could, and did.

WHEN Sandra came back into the office at five o'clock she found Hilton still sitting there, in almost exactly the same position.

"Come out of it, Jarve!" She snapped a finger. "That much of *that* is just simply too damned much."

"You're so right, child." He got up, stretched, and by main strength shrugged off his foul mood. "But we're up against something that is really a something, and I don't mean perchance."

"How well I know it." She put an arm around him, gave him a quick, hard hug. "But after all, you don't have to solve it this evening, you know."

"No, thank God."

"So why don't you and Temple have supper with me? Or better yet, why don't all eight of us have supper together in that bachelors' paradise of yours and Bill's?"

"That'd be fun."

And it was.

Nor did it take a week for Beverly Bell to recover from the Ordeal of Eight. On the following evening, she herself suggested that the team should take another shot at that utterly fantastic *terra incognita* of the multiple mind, jolting though it had been.

"But are you sure you can take it again so soon?" Hilton asked.

"Sure. I'm like that famous gangster's moll, you know, who bruised easy but healed quick. And I want to know about it as much as anyone else does."

They could do it this time without any help from Tuly. The linkage fairly snapped together and shrank instantaneously to a point. Hilton thought of Terra and there it was; full size, yet occupying only one infinitesimal section of a dimensionless point. The multimind visited relatives of all eight, but could not make intelligible contact. If asleep, it caused pleasant dreams; if awake, pleasant thoughts of the loved one so far away in space; but that was all. It visited mediums, in trance and otherwise—many of whom, not surprisingly now, were genuine—with whom it held lucid conversations. Even in linkage, however, the multimind knew that none of the mediums would be believed, even if they all told, simultaneously, exactly the same story. The multi-mind weak-

ened suddenly and Hilton snapped it back to Ardry.

Beverly was almost in collapse. The other girls were white, shaken and trembling. Hilton himself, strong and rugged as he was, felt as though he had done two weeks of hard labor on a rock-pile. He glanced questioningly at Larry.

"Point six three eight seconds, sir," the Omans said, holding up a millisecond timer.

"How do you explain *that*?" Karns demanded.

"I'm afraid it means that without Oman backing we're out of luck."

HILTON had other ideas, but he did not voice any of them until the following day, when he was rested and had Larry alone.

"So carbon-based brains can't take it. One second of that stuff would have killed all eight of us. Why? The Masters had the same kind of brains we have."

"I don't know, sir. It's something completely new. No Master, or group of Masters, ever generated such a force as that. I can scarcely believe such power possible, even though I have felt it twice. It may be that over the generations your individual powers, never united or controlled, have developed so much strength that no human brain can handle them in fusion."

"And none of us ever knew

anything about any of them. I've been doing a lot of thinking. The Masters had qualities and abilities now unknown to any of us. How come? You Omans—and the Stretts, too—think we're descendants of the Masters. Maybe we are. You think they came originally from Arth—Earth or Terra—to Ardu. That'd account for our legends of Mu, Atlantis and so on. Since Ardu was within peyondix range of Strett, the Stretts attacked it. They killed all the Masters, they thought, and made the planet uninhabitable for any kind of life, even their own. But one shipload of Masters escaped and came here to Ardry—far beyond peyondix range. They stayed here for a long time. Then, for some reason or other—which may be someplace in their records—they left here, fully intending to come back. Do any of you Omans know why they left? Or where they went?"

"No, sir. We can read only the simplest of the Masters' records. They arranged our brains that way, sir."

"I know. They're the type. However, I suspect now that your thinking is reversed. Let's turn it around. Say the Masters didn't come from Terra, but from some other planet. Say that they left here because they were dying out. They were, weren't they?"

"Yes, sir. Their numbers became fewer and fewer each century."

"I was sure of it. They were committing race suicide by letting you Omans do everything they themselves should have been doing. Finally they saw the truth. In a desperate effort to save their race they pulled out, leaving you here. Probably they intended to come back when they had bred enough guts back into themselves to set you Omans down where you belong..."

"But *they* were always the Masters, sir!"

"They were not! They were hopelessly enslaved. Think it over. Anyway, say they went to Terra from here. That still accounts for the legends and so on. However, they were too far gone to make a recovery, and yet they had enough fixity of purpose *not* to manufacture any of you Omans there. So their descendants went a long way down the scale before they began to work back up. Does that make sense to you?"

"IT explains many things, sir. It can very well be the truth."

"Okay. However it was, we're here, and facing a condition that isn't funny. While we were teamed up I learned a lot, but not nearly enough. Am I right in thinking that I now don't need the other seven at all—that my cells are fully charged and I can go it alone?"

"Probably, sir, but..."

"I'm coming to that. Every

time I do it—up to maximum performance, of course—it comes easier and faster and hits harder. So next time, or maybe the fourth or fifth time, it'll kill me. And the other seven, too, if they're along."

"I'm not sure, sir, but I think so."

"Nice. Very, very nice." Hilton got up, shoved both hands into his pockets, and prowled about the room. "But can't the damned stuff be controlled? C h o k e d—throttled down — damped — muzzled, some way or other?"

"We do not know of any way, sir. The Masters were always working toward more power, not less."

"That makes sense. The more power the better, as long as you can handle it. But I can't handle this. And neither can the team. So how about organizing another team, one that hasn't got quite so much whammo? Enough punch to do the job, but not enough to backfire that way?"

"It is highly improbable that such a team is possible, sir." If an Oman could be acutely embarrassed, Larry was. "That is, sir... I should tell you, sir..."

"You certainly should. You've been stalling all along, and now you're stalled. Spill it."

"Yes, sir. The Tuly begged me not to mention it, but I must. When it organized your team it had no idea of what

it was really going to do..."

"Let's talk the same language, shall we? Say 'he' and 'she.' Not 'it.'"

"She thought she was setting up the peyondix, the same as all of us Omans have. But after she formed in your mind the peyondix matrix, your mind went on of itself to form a something else; a thing we can not understand. That was why she was so extremely... I think 'frightened' might be your term."

"I knew something was biting her. Why?"

"Because it very nearly killed you. You perhaps have not considered the effect upon us all if any Oman, however unintentionally, should kill a Master?"

"No, I hadn't... I see. So she won't play with fire any more, and none of the rest of you can?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing could force her to. If she could be so coerced we would destroy her brain before she could act. That brain, as you know, is imperfect, or she could not have done what she did. It should have been destroyed long since."

"Don't ever act on that assumption, Larry." Hilton thought for minutes. "Simple peyondix, such as yours, is not enough to read the Masters' records. If I'd had three brain cells working I'd've tried them then. I wonder if I *could* read them?"

"You have all the old Mas-

ters' powers and more. But you must not assemble them again, sir. It would mean death."

"But I've got to *know*... I've got to know! Anyway, a thousandth of a second would be enough. I don't think that'd hurt me very much."

HE concentrated—read a few feet of top-secret braided wire—and came back to consciousness in the sick-bay of the *Perseus*, with two doctors working on him; Hastings, the top Navy medico, and Flandres, the surgeon.

"What the hell happened to you?" Flandres demanded. "Were you trying to kill yourself?"

"And if so, how?" Hastings wanted to know.

"No, I was trying not to," Hilton said, weakly, "and I guess I didn't much more than succeed."

"That was just about the closest shave I ever saw a man come through. Whatever it was, don't do it again."

"I won't," he promised, feelingly.

When they let him out of the hospital, four days later, he called in Larry and Tuly.

"The next time would be the last time. So there won't be any," he told them. "But just how sure are you that some other of our boys or girls may not have just enough of whatever it takes to do the job? Enough oompa, but not too much?"

"Since we, too, are on strange ground the probability is vanishingly small. We have been making inquiries, however, and scanning. You were selected from all the minds of Terra as the one having the widest vision, the greatest scope, the most comprehensive grasp. The ablest at synthesis and correlation and so on."

"That's printing it in big letters, but that was more or less what they were after."

"Hence the probability approaches unity that any more such ignorant meddling as this obnoxious Tuly did well result almost certainly in failure and death. Therefore we can not and will not meddle again."

"YOU'VE got a point there... So what I am is some kind of a freak. Maybe a kind of super-Master and maybe something altogether different. Maybe duplicable in a less lethal fashion, and maybe not. Veree helpful—I don't think. But I don't want to kill anybody, either... especially if it wouldn't do any good. But we've got to do *something!*" Hilton scowled in thought for minutes. "But an Oman brain could take it. As you told us, Tuly, 'The brain of the Larry is very, very tough.'"

"In a way, sir. Except that the Masters were very careful to make it physically impossible for any Oman to go very far along that line. It was

only their oversight of my one imperfect brain that enabled me, alone of us all, to do that wrong."

"Stop thinking it was wrong, Tuly. I'm mighty glad you did. But I wasn't thinking of any regular Oman brain..." Hilton's voice petered out.

"I see, sir. Yes, we can, by using your brain as Guide, reproduce it in an Oman body. You would then have the powers and most of the qualities of both..."

"No, you don't see, because I've got my screen on. Which I will now take off—" he suited action to word—"since the whole planet's screened and I have nothing to hide from you. Teddy Blake and I both thought of that, but we'll consider it only as the ultimately last resort. We don't want to live a million years. And we want our race to keep on developing. But you folks can replace carbon-based molecules with silicon-based ones just as easily as, and a hell of a lot faster than, mineral water petrifies wood. What can you do along the line of rebuilding me that way? And if you can do any such conversion, what would happen? Would I live at all? And if so, how long? How would I live? What would I live on? All that kind of stuff."

"Shortly before they left, two of the Masters did some work on that very thing. Tuly and I converted them, sir."

"Fine—or is it? How did it work out?"

"Perfectly, sir... except that they destroyed themselves. It was thought that they wearied of existence."

"I don't wonder. Well, if it comes to that, I can do the same. You can convert me, then."

"Yes, sir. But before we do it we must do enough preliminary work to be sure that you will not be harmed in any way. Also, there will be many more changes involved than simple substitution."

"Of course. I realize that. Just see what you can do, please, and let me know."

"We will, sir, and thank you very much."

XI

AS has been intimated, no Terran can know what researches Larry and Tuly and the other Oman specialists performed, or how they arrived at the conclusions they reached. However, in less than a week Larry reported to Hilton.

"It can be done, sir, with complete safety. And you will live even more comfortably than you do now."

"How long?"

"The mean will be about five thousand Oman years—you don't know that an Oman year is equal to one point two nine three plus Terran years?"

"I didn't, no. Thanks."

"The maximum, a little less

than six thousand. The minimum, a little over four thousand. I'm very sorry we had no data upon which to base a closer estimate."

"Close enough." He stared at the Oman. "You could also convert my wife?"

"Of course, sir."

"Well, we might be able to stand it, after we got used to the idea. Minimum, over five thousand Terran years... barring accidents, of course?"

"No, sir. No accidents. Nothing will be able to kill you, except by total destruction of the brain. And even then, sir, there will be the pattern."

"I'll ... be ... damned ..."
Hilton gulped twice. "Okay, go ahead."

"Your skins will be like ours, energy-absorbers. Your 'blood' will carry charges of energy instead of oxygen. Thus, you may breathe or not, as you please. Unless you wish otherwise, we will continue the breathing function. It would scarcely be worth while to alter the automatic mechanisms that now control it. And you will wish at times to speak. You will still enjoy eating and drinking, although everything ingested will be eliminated, as at present, as waste."

"We'd add uranexite to our food, I suppose. Or drink radioactives, or sleep under cobalt-60 lamps."

"Yes, sir. Your family life will be normal; your sexual

urges and satisfactions the same. Fertilization and period of gestation unchanged. Your children will mature at the same ages as they do now."

"How do you—oh, I see. You wouldn't change any molecular linkages or configurations in the genes or chromosomes."

"We could not, sir, even if we wished. Such substitutions can be made only in exact one-for-one replacements. In the near future you will, of course, have to control births quite rigorously."

"We sure would. Let's see ... say we want a stationary population of a hundred million on our planet. Each couple to have two children, a boy and a girl. Born when the parents are about fifty... um-m-m. The gals can have all the children they want, then, until our population is about a million; then slap on the limit of two kids per couple. Right?"

"Approximately so, sir. And after conversion you alone will be able to operate with the full power of your eight, without tiring. You will also, of course, be able to absorb almost instantaneously all the knowledges and abilities of the old Masters."

Hilton gulped twice before he could speak. "You wouldn't be holding anything else back, would you?"

"Nothing important, sir. Everything else is minor, and probably known to you."

"I doubt it. How long will the job take, and how much notice will you need?"

"Two days, sir. No notice. Everything is ready."

Hilton, face somber, thought for minutes. "The more I think of it the less I like it. But it seems to be a forced put...and Temple will blow sky high...and *have* I got the guts to go it alone, even if she'd let me..." He shrugged himself out of the black mood. "I'll look her up and let you know, Larry."

HE looked her up and told her everything. Told her bluntly; starkly; drawing the full picture in jet black, with very little white.

"There it is, sweetheart. The works," he concluded. "We are not going to have ten years; we may not have ten months. So—if such a brain as that can be had, do we or do we not have to have it? I'm putting it squarely up to you."

Temple's face, which had been getting paler and paler, was now as nearly colorless as it could become; the sickly yellow of her skin's light tan unbacked by any flush of red blood.

Her whole body was tense and strained.

"There's a horrible snapper on that question... Can't *I* do it? Or *anybody* else except you?"

"No. Anyway, whose job is it, sweetheart?"

"I know, but...but I know just how close Tuly came to killing you. And that wasn't *anything* compared to such a radical transformation as this. I'm afraid it'll kill you, darling. And I just simply couldn't *stand* it!"

She threw herself into his arms, and he comforted her in the ages-old fashion of man with maid.

"Steady, hon," he said, as soon as he could lift her tear-streaked face from his shoulder. "I'll live through it. I thought you were getting the howling howpers about having to live for six thousand years and never getting back to Terra except for a Q strictly T visit now and then."

She pulled away from him, flung back her wheaten mop and glared. "So *that's* what you thought! What do *I* care how long I live, or how, or where, as long as it's with you? But what makes you think we can possibly live through such a horrible conversion as that?"

"Larry wouldn't do it if there was any question whatever. He didn't say it would be painless. But he did say I'd live."

"Well, he knows, I guess...I hope." Temple's natural fine color began to come back. "But it's understood that just the second you come out of the vat, I go right in."

"I hadn't ought to let you, of course. But I don't think I could take it alone."

That statement required a special type of conference, which consumed some little time. Eventually, however, Temple answered it in words.

"Of course you couldn't, sweetheart, and I wouldn't let you, even if you could."

There were a few things that had to be done before those two secret conversions could be made. There was the matter of the wedding, which was now to be in quadruplicate. Arrangements had to be made so that eight Big Wheels of the Project could all be away on honeymoon at once.

All these things were done.

OF the conversion operations themselves, nothing more need be said. The honeymooners, having left ship and town on a Friday afternoon, came back one week from the following Monday* morning. The eight met joyously in Bachelors' Hall; the girls kissing each other and the men indiscriminately and enthusiastically; the men cooperating zestfully.

Temple scarcely blushed at all, she was so engrossed in trying to find out whether or

*While it took some time to recompute the exact Ardrian calendar, Terran day names and Terran weeks were used from the first. The Omans manufactured watches, clocks, and chronometers which divided the Ardrian day into twenty-four Ardrian hours, with minutes and seconds as usual.

not anyone was noticing any change. No one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. So, finally, she asked.

"Don't any of you, really, see anything different?"

The six others all howled at that, and Sandra, between giggles and snorts, said: "No, precious, it doesn't show a bit. Did you really think it would?"

Temple blushed furiously and Hilton came instantly to his bride's rescue. "Chip-chop the comedy, gang. She and I aren't human any more. We're a good jump toward being Omans. I couldn't make her believe it doesn't show."

That stopped the levity, cold, but none of the six could really believe it. However, after Hilton had coiled a twenty-penny spike into a perfect helix between his fingers, and especially after he and Temple had each chewed up and swallowed a piece of uranexite, there were no grounds left for doubt.

"That settles it...it tears it," Karns said then. "Start all over again, Jarve. We'll listen, this time."

Hilton told the long story again, and added: "I had to re-work a couple of cells of Temple's brain, but now she can read and understand the records as well as I can. So I thought I'd take her place on Team One and let her boss the job on all the other teams. Okay?"

"So you don't want to let

the rest of us in on it." Karns's level stare was a far cry from the way he had looked at his chief a moment before. "If there's any one thing in the universe I never had you figured for, it's a dog in the manger."

"Huh? You mean you actually want to be a...a...hell, we don't even know what we are!"

"I do want it, Jarvis. We all do." This was, of all people, Teddy! "No one in all history has had more than about fifty years of really productive thinking. And just the idea of having enough time..."

"Hold it, Teddy. Use your brain. The Masters couldn't take it—they committed suicide. How do you figure we can do any better?"

"Because we'll use our brains!" she snapped. "They didn't. The Omans will serve us; and that's all they'll do."

"And do you think you'll be able to raise your children and grandchildren and so on to do the same? To have guts enough to resist the pull of such an ungodly habit-forming drug as this Oman service is?"

"I'M sure of it." She nodded positively. "And we'll run all applicants through a fine enough screen to—that is, if we ever consider anybody except our own BuSci people. And there's another reason." She grinned, got up, wriggled out of her coverall, and posed

in bra and panties. "Look. I can keep most of this for five years. Quite a lot of it for ten. Then comes the struggle. What do you think I'd do for the ability, whenever it begins to get wrinkly or flabby, to peel the whole thing off and put on a brand-spanking-new smooth one? You name it, I'll do it! Besides, Bill and I will both just simply and cold-bloodedly murder you if you try to keep us out."

"Okay." Hilton looked at Temple; she looked at him; both looked at all the others. There was no revulsion at all. Nothing but eagerness.

Temple took over.

"I'm surprised. We're both surprised. You see, Jarve didn't want to do it at all, but he had to. I not only didn't want to, I was scared green and yellow at just the idea of it. But I had to, too, of course. We didn't think anybody would really want to. We thought we'd be left here alone. We still will be, I think, when you've thought it clear through, Teddy. You just haven't realized yet that we aren't even human any more. We're simply nothing but *monsters!*" Temple's voice became a wail.

"I've said my piece," Teddy said. "You tell 'em, Bill."

"Let me say something first," Kincaid said. "Temple, I'm ashamed of you. This line isn't at all your usual straight thinking. What you actually are is *homo superior*. Bill?"

"I can add one bit to that. I don't wonder that you were scared silly, Temple. Utterly new concept and you went into it stone cold. But now we see the finished product and we like it. In fact, we drool."

"I'll say we're 'drooling,'" Sandra said. "I could do handstands and pinwheels with joy."

"Let's see you," Hilton said. "That we'd all get a kick out of."

"Not now—don't want to hold this up—but sometime I just will. Bev?"

"I'm for it—and how! And won't Bernadine be amazed," Beverly laughed gleefully, "at her wise-crack about the 'race to end all human races' coming true?"

"I'm in favor of it, too, one hundred per cent," Poynter said. "Has it occurred to you, Jarve, that this opens up intergalactic exploration? No supplies to carry and plenty of time and fuel?"

"No, it hadn't. You've got a point there, Frank. That might take a little of the curse off of it, at that."

"When some of our kids get to be twenty years old or so and get married, I'm going to take a crew of them to Andromeda. We'll arrange, then, to extend our honeymoons another week," Hilton said. "What will our policy be? Keep it dark for a while with just us eight, or spread it to the rest?"

"Spread it, I'd say," Kincaid said.

"We can't keep it secret, anyway," Teddy argued. "Since Larry and Tuly were in on the whole deal, every Oman on the planet knows all about it. Somebody is going to ask questions, and Omans always answer questions and always tell the truth."

QUESTIONS have already been asked and answered," Larry said, going to the door and opening it.

Stella rushed in. "We've been hearing the *damnedest* things!" She kissed everybody, ending with Hilton, whom she seized by both shoulders. "Is it actually true, boss, that you can fix me up so I'll live practically forever and can eat more than eleven calories a day without getting fat as a pig? Candy, ice cream, cake, pie, eclairs, cream puffs, French pastries, sugar and gobs of thick cream in my coffee...?"

Half a dozen others, including the van der Moen twins, came in. Beverly emitted a shriek of joy. "Bernadine! The mother of the race to end all human races!"

"You whistled it, birdie!" Bernadine caroled. "I'm going to have ten or twelve, each one weirder than all the others. I told you I was a prophet—I'm going to hang out my shingle. Wholesale and retain prophecy; special rates for large parties." Her voice was

drowned out in a general clamor.

"Hold it, everybody!" Hilton yelled. "Chip-chop it! Quit it!" Then, as the noise subsided, "If you think I'm going to tell this tall tale over and over again for the next two weeks you're all crazy. So shut down the plant and get everybody out here."

"Not everybody, Jarve!" Temple snapped. "We don't want scum, and there's some of that, even in BuSci."

"You're so right. Who, then?"

"The rest of the heads and assistants, of course...and all the lab girls and their husbands and boy-friends. I know they are all okay. That will be enough for now, don't you think?"

"I do think," and the indicated others were sent for; and in a few minutes arrived.

The Omans brought chairs and Hilton stood on a table. He spoke for ten minutes. Then: "Before you decide whether you want to or not, think it over very carefully, because it's a one-way street. Fluorine can not be displaced. Once in, you're stuck for life. *There is no way back.* I've told you all the drawbacks and disadvantages I know of, but there may be a lot more that I haven't thought of yet. So think it over for a few days and when each of you has definitely made up his or her mind, let me know." He jumped down off the table.

HIS listeners, however, did not need days, or even seconds, to decide. Before Hilton's feet hit the floor there was a yell of unanimous approval.

He looked at his wife. "Do you suppose we're nuts?"

"Uh-uh. Not a bit. Alex was right. I'm going to just love it!" She hugged his elbow ecstatically. "So are you, darling, as soon as you stop looking at only the black side."

"You know...you could be right?" For the first time since the "ghastly" transformation Hilton saw that there really was a bright side and began to study it. "With most of BuSci—and part of the Navy, and selectees from Terra—it will be slightly terrific, at that!"

"And that 'habit-forming-drug' objection isn't insuperable, darling," Temple said. "If the younger generations start weakening we'll fix the Omans. I wouldn't want to wipe them out entirely, but..."

"But how do we settle priority, Doctor Hilton?" a girl called out; a tall, striking, brunette laboratory technician whose name Hilton needed a second to recall. "By pulling straws or hair? Or by shooting dice or each other or what?"

"Thanks, Betty, you've got a point. Sandy Cummings and department heads first, then assistants. Then you girls, in alphabetical order, each with

her own husband or fiancee."

"And my name is Ames. Oh, goody!"

"Larry, please tell them to..."

"I already have, sir. We are set up to handle four at once."

"Good boy. So scat, all of you, and get back to work—except Sandy, Bill, Alex, and Teddy. You four go with Larry."

Since the new sense was not peyondix, Hilton had started calling it "perception" and the others adopted the term as a matter of course. Hilton could use that sense for what seemed like years—and actually was whole minutes—at a time without fatigue or strain. He could not, however, nor could the Omans, give his tremendous power to anyone else.

As he had said, he could do a certain amount of reworking; but the amount of improvement possible to make depended entirely upon what there was to work on. Thus, Temple could cover about six hundred light-years. It developed later that the others of the Big Eight could cover from one hundred up to four hundred or so. The other department heads and assistants turned out to be still weaker, and not one of the rank and file ever became able to cover more than a single planet.

This sense was not exactly telepathy; at least not what Hilton had always thought

telepathy would be. If anything, however, it was more. It was a lumping together of all five known human senses—and half a dozen unknown ones called, collectively, "intuition"—into one super-sense that was all-inclusive and all-informative. If he ever could learn exactly what it was and exactly what it did and how it did it...but he'd better chip-chop the wool-gathering and get back onto the job.

THE Stretts had licked the Told Masters very easily, and intended to wipe out the Omans and the humans. They had no doubt at all as to their ability to do it. Maybe they could. If the Masters hadn't made some progress that the Omans didn't know about, they probably could. That was the first thing to find out. As soon as they'd been converted he'd call in all the experts and they'd go through the Masters' records like a dose of salts through a hillbilly schoolma'am.

At that point in Hilton's cogitations Sawtelle came in.

He had come down in his gig, to confer with Hilton as to the newly beefed-up fleet. Instead of being glum and pessimistic and foreboding, he was chipper and enthusiastic. They had rebuilt a thousand Oman ships. By combining Oman and Terran science, and adding everything the First Team had been able to reduce to practise, they had hyped up

the power by a good fifteen per cent. Seven hundred of those ships, and all his men, were now arrayed in defense around Ardry. Three hundred, manned by Omans, were around Fuel Bin.

"Why?" Hilton asked. "It's Fuel Bin they've been attacking."

"Uh-uh. Minor objective," the captain demurred, positively. "The real attack will be here at you; the headquarters and the brains. Then Fuel Bin will be duck soup. But the thing that pleased me most is the control. Man, you never imagined such control! No admiral in history ever had such control of ten ships as I have of seven hundred. Those Omans spread orders so fast that I don't even finish thinking one and it's being executed. And no misunderstandings, no slips. For instance, this last batch—fifteen skeletons. Far out; they're getting cagy. I just thought 'Box 'em in and slug 'em' and—In! Across! Out! Socko! Pffft! Just like that and just that fast. None of 'em had time to light a beam. Nobody before ever even *dreamed* of such control!"

"That's great, and I like it . . . and you're only a captain. How many ships can Five-Jet Admiral Gordon put into space?"

"That depends on what you call ships. Superdreadnoughts, *Perseus* class, six. First-line battleships, twenty-nine. Sec-

ond-line, smaller and some pretty old, seventy-three. Counting everything armed that will hold air, something over two hundred."

"I thought it was something like that. How would you like to be Five-Jet Admiral Sawtelle of the Ardrian Navy?"

"I wouldn't. I'm Terran Navy. But you knew that and you know me. So—what's on your mind?"

HILTON told him. *I ought to put this on a tape*, he thought to himself, and broadcast it every hour on the hour.

"They took the old Masters like dynamiting fish in a barrel," he concluded, "and I'm damned afraid they're going to lick us unless we take a lot of big, fast steps. But the hell of it is that I can't tell you anything—not one single thing—about any part of it. There's simply no way at all of getting through to you without making you over into the same kind of a thing I am."

"Is that bad?" Sawtelle was used to making important decisions fast. "Let's get at it."

"Huh? Skipper, do you realize just what that means? If you think they'll let you resign, forget it. They'll crucify you—brand you as a traitor and God only knows what else."

"Right. How about you and your people?"

"Well, as civilians, it won't be as bad. . . ."

"The hell it won't. Every man and woman that stays here will be posted forever as the blackest traitors old Terra ever disgraced herself by spawning."

"You've got a point there, at that. We'll all have to bring our relatives—the ones we think much of, at least—out here with us"

"Definitely. Now see what you can do about getting me run through your mill."

By exerting his authority, Hilton got Sawtelle put through the "Preservatory" in the second batch processed. Then, linking minds with the captain, he flashed their joint attention to the Hall of Records. Into the right room; into the right chest; along miles and miles of braided wire carrying some of the profoundest military secrets of the ancient Masters.

Then:

"Now you know a little of it," Hilton said. "Maybe a thousandth of what we'll have to have before we can take the Stretts as they will have to be taken."

For seconds Sawtelle could not speak. Then: "My.... God. I see what you mean. You're right. No Omans can ever go to Terra; and no Terrans can ever come here except to stay forever."

The two then went out into space, to the flagship—which had been christened the *Orion*—and called in the six commanders.

"What is all this senseless idiocy we've been getting, Jarve?" Elliott demanded.

Hilton eyed all six with pretended disfavor. "You six guys are the hardest-headed bunch of skeptics that ever went unhung," he remarked, dispassionately. "So it wouldn't do any good to tell you anything—yet. The skipper and I will show you a thing first. Take her away, Skip."

The *Orion* shot away under interplanetary drive and for several hours Hilton and Sawtelle worked at re-wiring and practically rebuilding two devices that no one, Oman or human, had touched since the *Perseus* had landed on Ardry.

"What are you... I don't understand what you are doing, sir," Larry said. For the first time since Hilton had known him, the Oman's mind was confused and unsure.

"I know you don't. This is a bit of top-secret Masters' stuff. Maybe, some day, we'll be able to re-work your brain to take it. But it won't be for some time."

XII

THE *Orion* hung in space, a couple of thousands of miles away from an asteroid which was perhaps a mile in average diameter. Hilton straightened up.

"Put Triple X Black filters on your plates and watch that asteroid." The commanders

did so. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready, sir."

Hilton didn't move a muscle. Nothing actually moved. Nevertheless there was a motionlessly writhing and crawling distortion of the ship and everything in it, accompanied by a sensation that simply can not be described.

It was not like going into or emerging from the sub-ether. It was not even remotely like space-sickness or seasickness or free fall or anything else that any Terran had ever before experienced.

And the asteroid vanished.

It disappeared into an outrageously incandescent, furiously pyrotechnic, raveningly expanding atomic fireball that in seconds seemed to fill half of space.

After ages-long minutes of the most horrifyingly devastating fury any man there had ever seen, the frightful thing expired and Hilton said: "That was just a kind of a firecracker. Just a feeble imitation of the first-stage detonator for what we'll have to have to crack the Stretts' ground-based screens. If the skipper and I had taken time to take the ship down to the shops and really work it over we could have put on a show. Was this enough so you iron-heads are ready to listen with your ears open and your mouths shut?"

They were. So much so that not even Elliott opened his mouth to say yes. They mere-

ly nodded. Then again—for the last time, he hoped!—Hilton spoke his piece. The response was prompt and vigorous. Only Sam Bryant, one of Hilton's staunchest allies, showed any uncertainty at all.

"I've been married only a year and a half, and the baby was due about a month ago. How sure are you that you can make old Gordon sit still for us skimming the cream off of Terra to bring out here?"

"Doris Bryant, the cream of Terra!" Elliott gibed. "How modest our Samuel has become!"

"Well, damn it, she is!" Bryant insisted.

"Okay, she is," Hilton agreed. "But either we get our people or Terra doesn't get its uranexite. That'll work. In the remote contingency that it doesn't, there are still tighter screws we can put on. But you missed the main snapper, Sam. Suppose Doris doesn't want to live for five thousand years and is allergic to becoming a monster?"

"Huh; you don't need to worry about that." Sam brushed that argument aside with a wave of his hand. "Show me a girl who doesn't want to stay young and beautiful forever and I'll square you the circle. Come on. What's holding us up?"

THE *Orion* hurtled through space back toward Ardry and Hilton, struck by a sud-

den thought, turned to the captain.

"Skipper, why wouldn't it be a smart idea to clamp a blockade onto Fuel Bin? Cut the Stretts' fuel supply?"

"I thought better of you than that, son." Sawtelle shook his head sadly. "That was the first thing I did."

"Ouch. Maybe you're 'way ahead of me too, then, on the one that we should move to Fuel Bin, lock, stock and barrel?"

"Never thought of it, no. Maybe you're worth saving, after all. After conversion, of course... Yes, there'd be three big advantages."

"Four."

Sawtelle raised his eyebrows.

"One, only one planet to defend. Two, it's self-defending against sneak landings. Nothing remotely human can land on it except in heavy lead armor, and even in that can stay healthy for only a few minutes."

"Except in the city. Omlu. That's the weak point and would be the point of attack."

"Uh-uh. Cut off the decontaminators and in five hours it'll be as hot as the rest of the planet. Three, there'd be no interstellar supply line for the Stretts to cut. Four, the environment matches our new physiques a lot better than any normal planet could."

"That's the one I didn't think about."

"I think I'll take a quick

peek at the Stretts—oh-oh; they've screened their whole planet. Well, we can do that, too, of course."

"How are you going to select and reject personnel? It looks as though everybody wants to stay. Even the men whose main object in life is to go aground and get drunk. The Omans do altogether too good a job on them and there's no such thing as a hangover. I'm glad I'm not in your boots."

"You may be in it up to the eyeballs, Skipper, so don't chortle too soon."

Hilton had already devoted much time to the problems of selection; and he thought of little else all the way back to Ardry. And for several days afterward he held conferences with small groups and conducted certain investigations.

BUD Carroll of Sociology and his assistant Sylvia Banister had been married for weeks. Hilton called them, together with Sawtelle and Bryant of Navy, into conference with the Big Eight.

"The more I study this thing the less I like it," Hilton said. "With a civilization having no government, no police, no laws, no medium of exchange..."

"No *money*?" Bryant exclaimed. "How's old Gordon going to pay for his uranexite, then?"

"He gets it free," Hilton replied, flatly. "When anyone

can have anything he wants, merely by wanting it, what good is money? Now, remembering how long we're going to have to live, what we'll be up against, that the Masters failed, and so on, it is clear that the prime basic we have to select for is stability. We twelve have, by psychodynamic measurement, the highest stability ratings available."

"Are you sure *I* belong here?" Bryant asked.

"Yes. Here are three lists." Hilton passed papers around. "The list labeled 'OK' names those I'm sure of—the ones we're converting now and their wives and whatever on Terra. List 'NG' names the ones I know we don't want. List 'X'—over thirty percent—are in-betweeners. We have to make a decision on the 'X' list. So—what I want to know is, who's going to play God. I'm not. Sandy, are you?"

"Good Heavens, no!" Sandra shuddered. "But I'm afraid I know who will have to. I'm sorry, Alex, but it'll have to be you four—Psychology and Sociology."

Six heads nodded and there was a flashing interchange of thought among the four. Temple licked her lips and nodded, and Kincaid spoke.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's our baby. By leaning very heavily on Temple, we can do it. Remember, Jarve, what you said about the irresistible force? We'll need it."

"As I said once before, Mrs.

Hilton, I'm very glad you're along," Hilton said. "But just how sure are you that even you can stand up under the load?"

"Alone, I couldn't. But don't underestimate Mrs. Carroll and the Messrs. Together, and with such a goal, I'm sure we can."

THUS, after four-fifths of this own group and forty-one Navy men had been converted, Hilton called an evening meeting of all the converts. Larry, Tuly and Javvy were the only Omans present.

"You all knew, of course, that we were going to move to Fuel Bin sometime," Hilton began. "I can tell you now that we who are here are all there are going to be of us. We are all leaving for Fuel Bin immediately after this meeting. Everything of any importance, including all of your personal effects, has already been moved. All Omans except these three, and all Oman ships except the *Orion*, have already gone."

He paused to let the news sink in.

Thoughts flew everywhere. The irrepressible Stella Wing—now Mrs. Osbert F. Harkins—was the first to give tongue. "What a wonderful job! Why, everybody's here that I really like at all!"

That sentiment was, of course, unanimous. It could not have been otherwise. Betty, the ex-Ames, called out:

"How did you get their female Omans away from Cecil Calthorpe and the rest of that chasing, booze-fighting bunch without them blowing the whole show?"

"Some suasion was necessary," Hilton admitted, with a grin. "Everyone who isn't here is time-locked into the *Perseus*. Release time eight hours tomorrow."

"And they'll wake up tomorrow morning with no Omans?" Bernadine tossed back her silvery mane and laughed. "Nor anything else except the *Perseus*? In a way, I'm sorry, but...maybe I've got too much stinker blood in me, but I'm very glad none of them are here. But I'd like to ask, Jarvis—or rather, I suppose you have already set up a new Advisory Board?"

"We have, yes." Hilton read off twelve names.

"Oh, nice. I don't know of any people I'd rather have on it. But what I want to gripe about is calling our new home world such a horrible name as 'Fuel Bin,' as though it were a wood-box or a coal-scuttle or something. And just think of the complexes it would set up in those super-children we're going to have so many of."

"What would you suggest?" Hilton asked.

"'Ardvor', of course," Hermione said, before her sister could answer. "We've had 'Arth' and 'Ardu' and 'Ardry'

and you—or somebody—started calling us 'Ardans' to distinguish us converts from the Terrans. So let's keep up the same line."

There was general laughter at that, but the name was approved.

ABOUT midnight the meeting ended and the *Orion* set out for Ardvor. It reached it and slanted sharply downward. The whole BuSci staff was in the lounge, watching the big tri-di.

"Hey! That isn't Omlu!" Stella exclaimed. "It isn't a city at all and it isn't even in the same place!"

"No, ma'am," Larry said. "Most of you wanted the ocean, but many wanted a river or the mountains. Therefore we razed Omlu and built your new city, Ardane, at a place where the ocean, two rivers, and a range of mountains meet. Strictly speaking, it is not a city, but a place of pleasant and rewardful living."

The space-ship was coming in, low and fast, from the south. To the left, the west, there stretched the limitless expanse of ocean. To the right, mile after mile, were rough, rugged, jagged, partially-timbered mountains, mass piled upon mass. Immediately below the speeding vessel was a wide, white-sand beach all of ten miles long.

Slowing rapidly now, the



Orion flew along due north.

"Look! Look! A natatorium!" Beverly shrieked. "I know I wanted a nice big place to swim in, besides my backyard pool and the ocean, but I didn't tell anybody to build *that*—I swear I didn't!"

"You didn't have to, pet." Poynter put his arm around her curvaceous waist and squeezed. "They knew. And I did a little thinking along that line myself. There's our house, on top of the cliff over the natatorium—you can almost dive into it off the patio."

"Oh, wonderful!"

Immediately north of the natatorium a tremendous river—named at first sight the "Whitewater"—rushed through its gorge into the ocean; a river and gorge strangely reminiscent of the Colorado and its Grand Canyon. On the south bank of that river, at its very mouth—looking straight up that tremendous canyon; on a rocky promontory commanding ocean and beach and mountains—there was a house. At the sight of it Temple hugged Hilton's arm in ecstasy.

"Yes, that's ours," he assured her. "Just about everything either of us has ever wanted." The clamor was now so great—everyone was recognizing his-and-her house and was exclaiming about it—that both Temple and Hilton fell silent and simply watched the scenery unroll.

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Across the turbulent White-water and a mile farther north, the mountains ended as abruptly as though they had been cut off with a cleaver and an apparently limitless expanse of treeless, grassy prairie began. And through that prairie, meandering sluggishly to the ocean from the northeast, came the wide, deep River Placid.

The *Orion* halted. It began to descend vertically, and only then did Hilton see the spaceport. It was so vast, and there were so many spaceships on it, that from any great distance it was actually invisible! Each six-acre bit of the whole immense expanse of level prairie between the Placid and the mountains held an Oman superdreadnought!

THE staff paired off and headed for the airlocks. Hilton said: "Temple, have you any reservations at all, however slight, as to having Dark Lady as a permanent fixture in your home?"

"Why, of course not—I like her as much as you do. And besides—" she giggled like a schoolgirl—"even if she is a lot more beautiful than I am—I've got a few things she never will have...but there's something else. I got just a flash of it before you blocked. Spill it, please."

"You'll see in a minute." And she did.

Larry, Dark Lady and Temple's Oman maid Moty were

standing beside the Hilton's car—and so was another Oman, like none ever before seen. Six feet four; shoulders that would just barely go through a door; muscled like Atlas and Hercules combined; skin a gleaming, satiny bronze; hair a rippling mass of lambent flame. Temple came to a full stop and caught her breath.

"The Prince," she breathed, in awe. "Da Lormi's Prince of Thebes. The ultimate bronze of all the ages. *You* did this, Jarve. How did you ever dig him up out of my schoolgirl crushes?"

All six got into the car, which was equally at home on land or water or in the air. In less than a minute they were at Hilton House.

The house itself was circular. Its living-room was an immense annulus of glass from which, by merely moving along its circular length, any desired view could be had. The pair walked around it once. Then she took him by the arm and steered him firmly toward one of the bedrooms in the center.

"This house is just too much to take in all at once," she declared. "Besides, let's put on our swimsuits and get over to the Nat."

In the room, she closed the door firmly in the faces of the Omans and grinned. "Maybe, sometime, I'll get used to having somebody besides you in

my bedroom, but I haven't, yet... Oh, do you itch, too?"

Hilton had peeled to the waist and was scratching vigorously all around his waistline, under his belt. "Like the very devil," he admitted, and stared at her. For she, three-quarters stripped, was scratching, too!

"It started the minute we left the *Orion*," he said, thoughtfully. "I see. These new skins of ours like hard radiation, but don't like to be smothered while they're enjoying it. By about tomorrow, we'll be a nudist colony, I think."

"I could stand it, I suppose. What makes you think so?"

"Just what I know about radiation. Frank would be the one to ask. My hunch is, though, that we're going to be nudists whether we want to or not. Let's go."

THEY went in a two-seater, leaving the Omans at home. Three-quarters of the staff were lolling on the sand or were seated on benches beside the immense pool. As they watched, Beverly ran out along the line of springboards; testing each one and selecting the stiffest. She then climbed up to the top platform—a good twelve feet above the board—and plummeted down upon the board's heavily padded take-off. Legs and back bending stubbornly to take the strain, she and the

board reached low-point together, and, still in sync with it, she put every muscle she had into the effort to hurl herself upward.

She had intended to go up thirty feet. But she had no idea whatever as to her present strength, or of what that Oman board, in perfect synchronization with that tremendous strength, would do. Thus, instead of thirty feet, she went up very nearly two hundred; which of course spoiled completely her proposed graceful two-and-a-half.

In midair she struggled madly to get into some acceptable position. Failing, she curled up into a tight ball just before she struck water.

What a splash!

"It won't hurt her—you couldn't hurt her with a club!" Hilton snapped. He seized Temple's hand as everyone else rushed to the pool's edge. "Look—Bernadine—that's what I was thinking about."

Temple stopped and looked. The platinum-haired twins had been basking on the sand, and wherever sand had touched fabric, fabric had disappeared.

Their suits had of course approached the minimum to start with. Now Bernadine wore only a wisp of nylon perched precariously on one breast and part of a ribbon that had once been a belt. Discovering the catastrophe, she shrieked once and leaped into

the pool any-which-way, covering her breasts with her hands and hiding in water up to her neck.

Meanwhile, the involuntarily high diver had come to the surface, laughing apologetically. Surprised by the hair dangling down over her eyes, she felt for her cap. It was gone. So was her suit. Naked as a fish. She swam a couple of easy strokes, then stopped.

"Frank! Oh, Frank!" she called.

"Over here, Bev." Her husband did not quite know whether to laugh or not.

"Is it the radiation or the water? Or both?"

"Radiation, I think. These new skins of ours don't want to be covered up. But it probably makes the water a pretty good imitation of a universal solvent."

"Good-by, clothes!" Beverly rolled over onto her back, fanned water carefully with her hands, and gazed approvingly at herself. "I don't itch any more, anyway, so I'm very much in favor of it."

THUS the Ardans came to their new home world and to a life that was to be more comfortable by far and happier by far than any of them had known on Earth. There were many other surprises that day, of course; of which only two will be mentioned here. When they finally left the pool, at about seventeen

hours G. M. T.*, everybody was ravenously hungry.

"But why *should* we be?" Stella demanded. "I've been eating everything in sight, just for fun. But now I'm actually hungry enough to eat a horse and wagon and chase the driver!"

"Swimming makes everybody hungry," Beverly said, "and I'm awfully glad *that* hasn't changed. Why, I wouldn't feel *human* if I didn't!"

Hilton and Temple went home, and had a long-drawn-out and very wonderful supper. Prince waited on Temple, Dark Lady on Hilton; Larry and Moty ran the synthesizers in the kitchen. All four Omans radiated happiness.

Another surprise came when they went to bed. For the bed was a raised platform of something that looked like concrete and, except for an uncanny property of molding itself somewhat to the contours of their bodies, was almost as hard as rock. Nevertheless, it was the most comfortable bed either of them had ever had. When they were ready to go to sleep, Temple said:

"Drat it, those Omans *still* want to come in and sleep

*Greenwich Mean Time. Ardvor was, always and everywhere, full daylight. Terran time and calendar were adopted as a matter of course.

with us. In the room, I mean. And they suffer so. They're simply *radiating* silent suffering and oh-so-submissive reproach. Shall we let 'em come in?"

"That's strictly up to you, sweetheart. It always has been."

"I know. I thought they'd quit it sometime, but I guess they never will. I *still* want an illusion of privacy at times, even though they know all about everything that goes on. But we might let 'em in now, just while we sleep, and throw 'em out again as soon as we wake up in the morning?"

"You're the boss." Without additional invitation the four Omans came in and arranged themselves neatly on the floor, on all four sides of the bed. Temple had barely time to cuddle up against Hilton, and he to put his arm closely around her, before they both dropped into profound and dreamless sleep.

AT eight hours next morning all the specialists met at the new Hall of Records.

This building, an exact duplicate of the old one, was located on a mesa in the foothills southwest of the natorium, in a luxuriant grove at sight of which Karns stopped and began to laugh.

"I thought I'd seen everything," he remarked. "But yellow pine, spruce, tamarack, apples, oaks, palms, or-

anges, cedars, joshua trees and cactus—just to name a few—all growing on the same quarter-section of land?”

“Just everything anybody wants, is all,” Hilton said. “But are they really growing? Or just straight synthetics? Lane—Kathy—this is your dish.”

“Not so fast, Jarve; give us a chance, *please!*” Kathryn, now Mrs. Lane Saunders, pleaded. She shook her spectacular head. “We don’t see how any stable indigenous life can have developed at all, unless...”

“Unless what? Natural shielding?” Hilton asked, and Kathy eyed her husband.

“Right,” Saunders said. “The earliest life-forms must have developed a shield before they could evolve and stabilize. Hence, whatever it is that is in our skins was not a triumph of Masters’ science. They took it from Nature.”

“Oh? Oh!” These were two of Sandra’s most expressive monosyllables, followed by a third. “Oh. Could be, at that. But how *could*...no, cancel that.”

“You’d better cancel it, Sandy. Give us a couple of months, and *maybe* we can answer a few elementary questions.”

Now inside the Hall, all the teams, from Astronomy to Zoology, went efficiently to work. Everyone now knew what to look for, how to find

it, and how to study it.

“The First Team doesn’t need you now too much, does it, Jarve?” Sawtelle asked.

“Not particularly. In fact, I was just going to get back onto my own job.”

“Not yet. I want to talk to you,” and the two went into a long discussion of naval affairs.

XIII

THE Stretts’ fuel-supply line had been cut long since. Many Strett cargo-carriers had been destroyed. The enemy would of course have a very heavy reserve of fuel on hand. But there was no way of knowing how large it was, how many warships it could supply, or how long it would last.

Two facts were, however, unquestionable. First, the Stretts were building a fleet that in their minds would be invincible. Second, they would attack Ardane as soon as that fleet could be made ready. The unanswerable question was: how long would that take?

“So we want to get every ship we have. How many? Five thousand? Ten? Fifteen? We want them converted to maximum possible power as soon as we possibly can,” Sawtelle said. “And I want to get out there with my boys to handle things.”

“You aren’t going to. Neither you nor your boys are expendable. Particularly

you." Jaw hard-set, Hilton studied the situation for minutes. "No. What we'll do is take your Oman, Kedy. We'll re-set the Guide to drive into him everything you and the military Masters ever knew about arms, armament, strategy, tactics and so on. And we'll add everything I know of coordination, synthesis, and perception. That ought to make him at least a junior-grade military genius."

"You can play *that* in spades. I wish you could do it to me."

"I can—if you'll take the full Oman transformation. Nothing else can stand the punishment."

"I know. No, I don't want to be a genius that badly."

"Check. And we'll take the resultant Kedy and make nine duplicates of him. Each one will learn from and profit by the mistakes made by preceding numbers and will assume command the instant his preceding number is killed."

"Oh, you expect, then...?"

"Expect? No. I know it damn well, and so do you. That's why we Ardans will all stay aground. Why the Kedys' first job will be to make the heavy stuff in and around Ardane as heavy as it can be made. Why it'll all be on twenty-four-hour alert. Then they can put as many thousands of Omans as you please to work at mod-

ernizing all the Oman ships you want and doing anything else you say. Check?"

Sawtelle thought for a couple of minutes. "A few details, is all. But that can be ironed out as we go along."

Both men worked then, almost unremittingly for six solid days; at the end of which time both drew tremendous sighs of relief. They had done everything possible for them to do. The defense of Ardvor was now rolling at fullest speed toward its gigantic objective.

Then captain and director, in two Oman ships with fifty men and a thousand Omans, leaped the world-girdling ocean to the mining operation of the Stretts. There they found business strictly as usual. The strippers still stripped; the mining mechs still roared and snarled their inchwise ways along their geometrically perfect terraces; the little carriers still skittered busily between the various miners and the storage silos. The fact that there was enough concentrate on hand to last a world for a hundred years made no difference at all to these automatics; a crew of erector-mechs was building new silos as fast as existing ones were being filled.

Since the men now understood everything that was going on, it was a simple matter for them to stop the whole Strett operation in its tracks.

Then every man and every Oman leaped to his assigned job. Three days later, all the mechs went back to work. Now, however, they were working for the Ardans.

The miners, instead of concentrate, now emitted vastly larger streams of Navy-Standard pelleted uranexite. The carriers, instead of one-gallon cans, carried five-ton drums. The silos were immensely larger—thirty feet in diameter and towering two hundred feet into the air. The silos were not, however, being used as yet. One of the two Oman ships had been converted into a fuel-tanker and its yawning holds were being filled first.

The *Orion* went back to Ardane and an eight-day wait began. For the first time in over seven months Hilton found time actually to loaf; and he and Temple, lolling on the beach or hiking in the mountains, enjoyed themselves and each other to the full.

All too soon, however, the heavily laden tanker appeared in the sky over Ardane. The *Orion* joined it; and the two ships slipped into sub-space for Earth.

THREE days out, Hilton used his sense of perception to release the thought-controlled blocks that had been holding all the controls of the *Perseus* in neutral. He informed her officers—by re-

leasing a public-address tape—that they were now free to return to Terra.

Three days later, one day short of Sol, Sawtelle got Five-Jet Admiral Gordon's office on the sub-space radio. An officious underling tried to block him, of course.

"Shut up, Perkins, and listen," Sawtelle said, brusquely. "Tell Gordon I'm bringing in one hundred twenty thousand two hundred forty-five metric tons of pelleted uranexite. And if he isn't on this beam in sixty seconds he'll never get a gram of it."

The admiral, outraged almost to the point of apoplexy, came in. "Sawtelle, report yourself for court-martial at..."

"Keep still, Gordon," the captain snapped. In sheer astonishment old Five-Jets obeyed. "I am no longer Terran Navy; no longer subject to your orders. As a matter of cold fact, I am no longer human. For reasons which I will explain later to the full Advisory Board, some of the personnel of Project Theta Orionis underwent transformation into a form of life able to live in an environment of radioactivity so intense as to kill any human being in ten seconds. Under certain conditions we will supply, free of charge, F. O. B. Terra or Luna, all the uranexite the Solar System can use. The conditions are these," and he gave them. "Do you accept

these conditions or not?"

"I...I would vote to accept them, Captain. But that weight! One hundred twenty thousand *metric tons*—incredible! Are you *sure* of that figure?"

"Definitely. And that is minimum. The error is plus, not minus."

"This crippling power-shortage would really be over?" For the first time since Sawtelle had known him, Gordon showed that he was not quite solid Navy brass.

"It's over. Definitely. For good."

"I'd not only agree; I'd raise you a monument. While I can't speak for the Board, I'm sure they'll agree."

"So am I. In any event, your cooperation is all that's required for this first load." The chips had vanished from Sawtelle's shoulders. "Where do you want it, Admiral? Aristarchus or White Sands?"

"White Sands, please. While there may be some delay in releasing it to industry..."

"While they figure out how much they can tax it?" Sawtelle asked, sardonically.

"Well, if they don't tax it it'll be the first thing in history that isn't. Have you any objections to releasing all this to the press?"

"None at all. The harder they hit it and the wider they spread it, the better. Will you

have this beam switched to Astrogation, please?"

"Of course. And thanks, Captain. I'll see you at White Sands."

Then, as the now positively glowing Gordon faded away, Sawtelle turned to his own staff. "Fenway—Snowden—take over. Better double-check micro-timing with Astro. Put us into a twenty-four-hour orbit over White Sands and hold us there. We won't go down. Let the load down on remote, wherever they want it."

THE arrival of the Ardvorian superdreadnought *Orion* and the *UC-1* (Uranexite Carrier Number One) was one of the most sensational events old Earth had ever known. Air and space craft went clear out to Emergence Volume Ninety to meet them. By the time the *UC-1* was coming in on its remote-controlled landing spiral the press of small ships was so great that all the police forces available were in a lather trying to control it.

This was exactly what Hilton had wanted. It made possible the completely unobserved launching of several dozen small craft from the *Orion* herself.

One of these made a very high and very fast flight to Chicago. With all due formality and under the aegis of a perfectly authentic Registry Number it landed on

O'Hare Field. Eleven deeply tanned young men emerged from it and made their way to a taxi stand, where each engaged a separate vehicle.

Sam Bryant stepped into his cab, gave the driver a number on Oakwood Avenue in Des Plaines, and settled back to scan. He was lucky. He would have gone anywhere she was, of course, but the way things were, he could give her a little warning to soften the shock. She had taken the baby out for an airing down River Road, and was on her way back. By having the taxi kill ten minutes or so he could arrive just after she did. Wherefore he stopped the cab at a public communications booth and dialed his home.

"Mrs. Bryant is not at home, but she will return at fifteen thirty," the instrument said, crisply. "Would you care to record a message for her?"

He punched the RECORD button. "This is Sam, Dolly baby. I'm right behind you. Turn around, why don't you, and tell your ever-lovin' star-hoppin' husband hello?"

The taxi pulled up at the curb just as Doris closed the front door; and Sam, after handing the driver a five-dollar bill, ran up the walk.

He waited just outside the door, key in hand, while she lowered the stroller handle, took off her hat and by long-established habit reached out

to flip the communicator's switch. At the first word, however, she stiffened rigidly—froze solid.

Smiling, he opened the door, walked in, and closed it behind him. Nothing short of a shotgun blast could have taken Doris Bryant's attention from that recorder then.

"That simply is not so," she told the instrument firmly, with both eyes resolutely shut. "They made him stay on the *Perseus*. He won't be in for at least three days. This is some cretin's idea of a joke."

"Not this time, Dolly honey. It's really me."

Her eyes popped open as she whirled. "SAM!" she shrieked, and hurled herself at him with all the pent-up ardor and longing of two hundred thirty-four meticulously counted, husbandless, loveless days.

After an unknown length of time Sam tipped her face up by the chin, nodded at the stroller, and said, "How about introducing me to the little stranger?"

"*What* a mother I turned out to be! That was the first thing I was going to rave about, the very first thing I saw you! Samuel Jay the Fourth, seventy-six days old today." And so on.

Eventually, however, the proud young mother watched the slightly apprehensive young father carry their first-born upstairs; where to-

gether, they put him—still sound asleep—to bed in his crib. Then again they were in each other's arms.

SOME time later, she twisted around in the circle of his arm and tried to dig her fingers into the muscles of his back. She then attacked his biceps and, leaning backward, eyed him intently.

"You're you, I know, but you're different. No athlete or any laborer could ever possibly get the muscles you have all over. To say nothing of a space officer on duty. And I know it isn't any kind of a disease. You've been acting all the time as though I were fragile, made out of glass or something—as though you were afraid of breaking me in two. So—what is it, sweetheart?"

"I've been trying to figure out an easy way of telling you, but there isn't any. I am different. I'm a hundred times as strong as any man ever was. Look." He upended a chair, took one heavy hardwood leg between finger and thumb and made what looked like a gentle effort to bend it. The leg broke with a pistol-sharp report and Doris leaped backward in surprise. "So you're right. I *am* afraid, not only of breaking you in two, but killing you. And if I break any of your ribs or arms or legs I'll never forgive myself. So if I let myself go for a second—I don't think I

will, but I might—don't wait until you're really hurt to start screaming. Promise?"

"I promise." Her eyes went wide. "But *tell* me!"

He told her. She was in turn surprised, amazed, apprehensive, frightened and finally eager; and she became more and more eager right up to the end.

"You mean that we...that I'll stay just as I am—for thousands of years?"

"Just as you are. Or different, if you like. If you really mean any of this yelling you've been doing about being too big in the hips—I think you're exactly right, myself—you can rebuild yourself any way you please. Or change your shape every hour on the hour. But you haven't accepted my invitation yet."

"Don't be silly." She went into his arms again and nibbled on his left ear. "I'd go anywhere with you, of course, any time, but *this*—but you're positively *sure* Sammy Small will be all right?"

"Positively sure."

"Okay, I'll call mother..." Her face fell. "I *can't* tell her that we'll never see them again and that we'll live..."

"You don't need to. She and Pop—Fern and Sally, too, and their boy-friends—are on the list. Not this time, but in a month or so, probably."

Doris brightened like a sunburst. "And your folks,

too, of course?" she asked.

"Yes, all the close ones."

"Marvelous! How soon are we leaving?"

AT six o'clock next morning, two hundred thirty-five days after leaving Earth, Hilton and Sawtelle set out to make the Ardans' official call upon Terra's Advisory Board. Both were wearing prodigiously heavy lead armor, the inside of which was furiously radioactive. They did not need it, of course. But it would make all Ardans monstrous in Terran eyes and would conceal the fact that any other Ardans were landing.

Their gig was met at the spaceport; not by a limousine, but by a five-ton truck, into which they were loaded one at a time by a hydraulic lift. Cameras clicked, reporters scurried, and tri-di scanners whirred. One of those scanners, both men knew, was reporting directly and only to the Advisory Board—which, of course, never took anything either for granted or at its face value.

Their first stop was at a truck-scale, where each visitor was weighed. Hilton tipped the beam at four thousand six hundred fifteen pounds; Sawtelle, a smaller man, weighed in at four thousand one hundred ninety. Thence to the Radiation Laboratory, where it was ascertained and reported that the armor did

not leak—which was reasonable enough, since each was lined with Masters' plastics.

Then into lead-lined testing cells, where each opened his face-plate briefly to a sensing element. Whereupon the indicating needles of two meters in the main laboratory went enthusiastically through the full range of red and held unwaveringly against their stops.

Both Ardans felt the wave of shocked, astonished, almost unbelieving consternation that swept through the observing scientists and, in slightly lesser measure (because they knew less about radiation) through the Advisory Board itself in a big room halfway across town. And from the Radiation Laboratory they were taken, via truck and freight elevator, to the Office of the Commandant, where the Board was sitting.

The story, which had been sent in to the Board the day before on a scrambled beam, was one upon which the Ardans had labored for days. Many facts could be withheld. However, every man aboard the *Perseus* would agree on some things. Indeed, the Earthship's communications officers had undoubtedly radioed in already about longevity and perfect health and Oman service and many other matters. Hence all such things would have to be admitted and countered.

Thus the report, while it was air-tight, perfectly logical, perfectly consistent, and apparently complete, did not please the Board at all. It wasn't intended to.

“WE cannot and do not approve of such unwarranted favoritism,” the Chairman of the Board said. “Longevity has always been man's prime goal. Every human being has the inalienable right to . . .”

“Flapdoodle!” Hilton snorted. “This is not being broadcast and this room is proofed, so please climb down off your soapbox. You don't need to talk like a politician here. Didn't you read paragraph 12-A-2, one of the many marked 'Top Secret'?”

“Of course. But we do not understand how purely mental qualities can possibly have any effect upon purely physical transformations. Thus it does not seem reasonable that any except rigorously screened personnel would die in the process. That is, of course, unless you contemplate deliberate, cold-blooded murder.”

That stopped Hilton in his tracks, for it was too close for comfort to the truth. But it did not hold the captain for an instant. He was used to death, in many of its grisliest forms.

“There are a lot of things no Terran ever will understand,” Sawtelle replied in-

stantly. “Reasonable, or not, that's exactly what will happen. And, reasonable or not, it'll be suicide, not murder. There isn't a thing that either Hilton or I can do about it.”

Hilton broke the ensuing silence. “You can say with equal truth that every human being has the *right* to run a four-minute mile or to compose a great symphony. It isn't a matter of right at all, but of ability. In this case the mental qualities are even more necessary than the physical. You as a Board did a very fine job of selecting the BuSci personnel for Project Theta Orionis. Almost eighty per cent of them proved able to withstand the Ardan conversion. On the other hand, only a very small percentage of the Navy personnel did so.”

“Your report said that the remaining personnel of the Project were not informed as to the death aspect of the transformation,” Admiral Gordon said. “Why not?”

“That should be self-explanatory,” Hilton said, flatly. “They are still human and still Terrans. We did not and will not encroach upon either the duties or the privileges of Terra's Advisory Board. What you tell all Terrans, and how much, and how, must be decided by yourselves. This also applies, of course, to the other 'Top Secret' paragraphs of the report, none of which are known to

any Terran outside the Board."

"But you haven't said anything about the method of selection," another Advisor complained. "Why, that will take all the psychologists of the world, working full time; continuously."

"We said we would do the selecting. We meant just that," Hilton said, coldly. "No one except the very few selectees will know anything about it. Even if it were an unmixed blessing—which it very definitely is *not*—do you want all humanity thrown into such an uproar as that would cause? Or the quite possible racial inferiority complex it might set up? To say nothing of the question of how much of Terra's best blood do you want to drain off, irreversibly and permanently? No. What we suggest is that you paint the picture so black, using Sawtelle and me and what all humanity has just seen as horrible examples, that nobody would take it as a gift. Make them shun it like the plague. Hell, I don't have to tell you what your propaganda machines can do."

THE Chairman of the Board again mounted his invisible rostrum. "Do you mean to intimate that we are to falsify the record?" he declared. "To try to make liars out of hundreds of eyewitnesses? You ask us to distort

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the truth, to connive at..."

"We aren't asking you to do *anything*!" Hilton snapped. "We don't give a damn what you do. Just study that record, with all that it implies. Read between the lines. As for those on the *Perseus*, no two of them will tell the same story and not one of them has even the remotest idea of what the real story is. I, personally, not only did not want to become a monster, but would have given everything I had to stay human. My wife felt the same way. Neither of us would have converted if there'd been any other way in God's universe of getting the uranexite and doing some other things that simply *must* be done."

"What other things?" Gordon demanded.

"You'll never know," Hilton answered, quietly. "Things no Terran ever will know. We hope. Things that would drive any Terran stark mad. Some of them are hinted at—as much as we dared—between the lines of the report."

The report had not mentioned the Stretts. Nor were they to be mentioned now. If the Ardans could stop them, no Terran need ever know anything about them.

If not, no Terran should know anything about them except what he would learn for himself just before the end. For Terra would never

be able to do anything to defend herself against the Stretts.

"Nothing whatever can drive me mad," Gordon declared, "and I want to know all about it—right now!"

"You can do one of two things, Gordon," Sawtelle said in disgust. His sneer was plainly visible through the six-ply, plastic-backed lead glass of his face-plate. "Either shut up or accept my personal invitation to come to Ardvor and try to go through the wringer. That's an invitation to your own funeral." Five-Jet Admiral Gordon, torn inwardly to ribbons, made no reply.

"I repeat," Hilton went on, "we are not asking you to do anything whatever. We are offering to give you, free of charge but under certain conditions, all the power your humanity can possibly use. We set no limitation whatever as to quantity and with no foreseeable limit as to time. The only point at issue is whether or not you accept the conditions. If you do not accept them we'll leave now—and the offer will not be repeated."

"And you would, I presume, take the *UC-1* back with you?"

"Of course not, sir. Terra needs power too badly. You are perfectly welcome to that one load of uranexite, no matter what is decided here."

"That's one way of putting

it," Gordon sneered. "But the truth is that you know damned well I'll blow both of your ships out of space if you so much as..."

"Oh, chip-chop the jaw-flapping, Gordon!" Hilton snapped. Then, as the admiral began to bellow orders into his microphone, he went on: "You want it the hard way, eh? Watch what happens, all of you!"

THE *UC-1* shot vertically into the air. Through its shallow dense layer and into and through the stratosphere. Earth's fleet, already on full alert and poised to strike, rushed to the attack. But the carrier had reached the *Orion* and both Ardvorian ships had been waiting, motionless, for a good half minute before the Terran warships arrived and began to blast with everything they had.

"Flashlights and firecrackers," Sawtelle said, calmly. "You aren't even warming up our screens. As soon as you quit making a damned fool of yourself by wasting energy that way, we'll set the *UC-1* back down where she was and get on with our business here."

"You will order a cease-fire at once, Admiral," the chairman said, "or the rest of us will, as of now, remove you from the Board." Gordon gritted his teeth in rage, but gave the order.

"If he hasn't had enough

yet to convince him," Hilton suggested, "he might send up a drone. We don't want to kill anybody, you know. One with the heaviest screening he's got—just to see what happens to it."

"He's had enough. The rest of us have had more than enough. That exhibition was not only uncalled-for and disgusting—it was outrageous!"

The meeting settled down, then, from argument to constructive discussion, and many topics were gone over. Certain matters were, however, so self-evident that they were not even mentioned.

Thus, it was a self-evident fact that no Terran could ever visit Ardvor; for the instrument-readings agreed with the report's statements as to the violence of the Ardvorian environment, and no Terran could possibly walk around in two tons of lead. Conversely, it was self-apparent to the Terrans that no Ardan could ever visit Earth without being recognized instantly for what he was. Wearing such armor made its necessity starkly plain. No one from the *Perseus* could say that any Ardan, after having lived on the furiously radiant surface of Ardvor, would not be as furiously radioactive as the laboratory's calibrated instruments had shown Hilton and Sawtelle actually to be.

Wherefore the conference went on, quietly and cooper-

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atively, to its planned end.

One minute after the Terran battleship *Perseus* emerged into normal space, the *Orion* went into sub-space for her long trip back to Ardvor.

THE last two days of that seven-day trip were the longest-seeming that either Hilton or Sawtelle had ever known. The sub-space radio was on continuously and Kedy-One reported to Sawtelle every five minutes. Even though Hilton knew that the Oman commander-in-chief was exactly as good at perceiving as he himself was, he found himself scanning the thoroughly screened Strett world forty or fifty times an hour.

However, in spite of worry and apprehension, time wore eventlessly on. The *Orion* emerged, went to Ardvor and landed on Ardane Field.

Hilton, after greeting properly and reporting to his wife, went to his office. There he found that Sandra had everything well in hand except for a few tapes that only he could handle. Sawtelle and his officers went to the new Command Central, where everything was rolling smoothly and very much faster than Sawtelle had dared hope.

The terran immigrants had to live in the *Orion*, of course, until conversion into Ardans. Almost equally of

course—since the Bryant infant was the only young baby in the lot—Doris and her Sammy Small were, by popular acclaim, in the first batch to be converted. For little Sammy had taken the entire feminine contingent by storm. No Oman female had a chance to act as nurse as long as any of the girls were around. Which was practically all the time. Especially the platinum-blond twins; for several months, now, Bernadine Braden and Hermione Felger.

"And you said they were so hard-boiled," Doris said accusingly to Sam, nodding at the twins. On hands and knees on the floor, head to head with Sammy Small between them, they were growling deep-throated at each other and nuzzling at the baby, who was having the time of his young life. "You couldn't have been any wronger, my sweet, if you'd had the whole Octagon helping you go astray. They're just as nice as they can be, both of them."

Sam shrugged and grinned. His wife strode purposefully across the room to the playful pair and lifted their pretended prey out from between them.

"Quit it, you two," she directed, swinging the baby up and depositing him a-straddle her left hip. "You're just simply spoiling him rotten."

"You think so, Dolly? Uh-

uh, far be it from such." Bernadine came lithely to her feet. She glanced at her own taut, trim abdomen; upon which a micrometrically-precise topographical mapping job might have revealed an otherwise imperceptible bulge. "Just you wait until Junior arrives and I'll show you how to *really* spoil a baby. Besides, what's the hurry?"

"He needs his supper. Vitamins and minerals and hard radiations and things, And then he's going to bed. I don't approve of this no-sleep business. So run along, both of you, until tomorrow."

XIV

AS has been said, the Stretts were working, with all the intensity of their monstrous but tremendously capable minds, upon their Great Plan; which was, basically, to conquer and either enslave or destroy every other intelligent race throughout all the length, breadth, and thickness of total space. To that end each individual Strett had to become invulnerable and immortal.

Wherefore, in the inconceivably remote past, there had been put into effect a program of selective breeding and of carefully-calculated treatments. It was mathematically certain that this program would result in a race of beings of pure force—beings having no material con-

stituents remaining whatever.

Under those hellish treatments billions upon billions of Stretts had died. But the few remaining thousands had almost reached their sublime goal. In a few more hundreds of thousands of years perfection would be reached. The few surviving hundreds of perfect beings could and would multiply to any desired number in practically no time at all.

Hilton and his seven fellow-workers had perceived all this in their one and only study of the planet Strett, and every other Ardan had been completely informed.

A dozen or so Strett Lords of Thought, male and female, were floating about in the atmosphere—which was not air—of their Assembly Hall. Their heads were globes of ball lightning. Inside them could be seen quite plainly the intricate convolutions of immense, less-than-half-material brains, shot through and through with rods and pencils and shapes of pure, scintillating force.

And the bodies! Or, rather, each horrendous brain had a few partially material appendages and appurtenances recognizable as bodily organs. There were no mouths, no ears, no eyes, no noses or nostrils, no lungs, no legs or arms. There were, however, hearts. Some partially material ichor flowed through those living-fire-outlined tubes.

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There were starkly functional organs of reproduction with which, by no stretch of the imagination, could any thought of tenderness or of love be connected.

It was a good thing for the race, Hilton had thought at first perception of the things, that the Stretts had bred out of themselves every iota of the finer, higher attributes of life. If they had not done so, the impotence of sheer disgust would have supervened so long since that the race would have been extinct for ages.

“Thirty-eight periods ago the Great Brain was charged with the sum total of Strettian knowledge,” First Lord Thinker Zoyar radiated to the assembled Stretts. “For those thirty-eight periods it has been scanning, peyondiring, amassing data and formulating hypotheses, theories, and conclusions. It has just informed me that it is now ready to make a preliminary report. Great Brain, how much of the total universe have you studied?”

“This Galaxy only,” the Brain radiated, in a texture of thought as hard and as harsh as Zoyar’s own.

“Why not more?”

“Insufficient power. My first conclusion is that whoever set up the specifications for me is a fool.”

TO say that the First Lord went out of control at this statement is to put it very

mildly indeed. He fulminated, ending with: "...destroyed instantly!"

"Destroy me if you like," came the utterly calm, utterly cold reply. "I am in no sense alive. I have no consciousness of self nor any desire for continued existence. To do so, however, would..."

A flurry of activity interrupted the thought. Zoyar was in fact assembling the forces to destroy the brain. But, before he could act, Second Lord Thinker Ynos and another female blew him into a mixture of loose molecules and flaring energies.

"Destruction of any and all irrational minds is mandatory," Ynos, now First Lord Thinker, explained to the linked minds. "Zoyar had been becoming less and less rational by the period. A good workman does not causelessly destroy his tools. Go ahead, Great Brain, with your findings."

"...not be logical." The brain resumed the thought exactly where it had been broken off. "Zoyar erred in demanding unlimited performance, since infinite knowledge and infinite ability require not only infinite capacity and infinite power, but also infinite time. Nor is it either necessary or desirable that I should have such qualities. There is no reasonable basis for the assumption that you Stretts will conquer any significant number even

of the millions of intelligent races now inhabiting this one Galaxy."

"Why not?" Ynos demanded, her thought almost, but not quite, as steady and cold as it had been.

"The answer to that question is implicit in the second indefensible error made in my construction. The prime datum impressed into my banks, that the Stretts are in fact the strongest, ablest, most intelligent race in the universe, proved to be false. I had to eliminate it before I could do any really constructive thinking."

A roar of condemnatory thought brought all circumambient ether to a boil. "Bah—destroy it!" "Detestable!" "Intolerable!" "If that is the best it can do, annihilate it!" "Far better brains have been destroyed for much less!" "Treason!" And so on.

First Lord Thinker Ynos, however, remained relatively calm. "While we have always held it to be a fact that we are the highest race in existence, no rigorous proof has been possible. Can you now disprove that assumption?"

"I have disproved it. I have not had time to study all of the civilizations of this Galaxy, but I have examined a statistically adequate sample of one million seven hundred ninety-two thousand four hundred sixteen different planetary intelligences. I

found one which is considerably abler and more advanced than you Stretts. Therefore the probability is greater than point nine nine that there are not less than ten, and not more than two hundred eight, such races in this Galaxy alone."

"Impossible!" Another wave of incredulous and threatening anger swept through the linked minds; a wave which Ynos flattened out with some difficulty.

Then she asked: "Is it probable that we will make contact with this supposedly superior race in the foreseeable future?"

"You are in contact with it now."

"What?" Even Ynos was contemptuous now. "You mean that one shipload of despicable humans who—far too late to do them any good—barred us temporarily from Fuel World?"

"Not exactly or only those humans, no. And your assumptions may or may not be valid."

"Don't you *know* whether they are or not?" Ynos snapped. "Explain your uncertainty at once!"

"I am uncertain because of insufficient data," the brain replied, calmly. "The only pertinent facts of which I am certain are: First, the world Ardry, upon which the Omans formerly lived and to which the humans in question first went—a planet which no

Strett can peyondire—is now abandoned. Second, the Stretts of old did not completely destroy the humanity of the world Ardu. Third, some escapees from Ardu reached and populated the world Ardry. Fourth, the android Omans were developed on Ardry, by the human escapees from Ardu and their descendants. Fifth, the Omans referred to those humans as 'Masters.' Sixth, after living on Ardry for a very long period of time the Masters went elsewhere. Seventh, the Omans remaining on Ardry maintained, continuously and for a very long time, the status quo left by the Masters. Eighth, immediately upon the arrival from Terra of these present humans, that long-existing status was broken. Ninth, the planet called Fuel World is, for the first time, surrounded by a screen of force. The formula of this screen is as follows."

The brain gave it. No Strett either complained or interrupted. Each was too busy studying that formula and examining its stunning implications and connotations.

"Tenth, that formula is one full order of magnitude beyond anything previously known to your science. Eleventh, it could not have been developed by the science of Terra, nor by that of any other world whose population I have examined."

THE brain took the linked minds instantaneously to Terra; then to a few thousand or so other worlds inhabited by human beings; then to a few thousands of planets whose populations were near-human, non-human and monstrous.

"It is therefore clear," it announced, "that this screen was computed and produced by the race, whatever it may be, that is now dwelling on Fuel World and asserting full ownership of it."

"Who or what is that race?" Ynos demanded.

"Data insufficient."

"Theorize, then!"

"Postulate that the Masters, in many thousands of cycles of study, made advances in science that were not reduced to practice; that the Omans either possessed this knowledge or had access to it; and that Omans and humans cooperated fully in sharing and in working with all the knowledges thus available. From these three postulates the conclusion can be drawn that there has come into existence a new race. One combining the best qualities of both humans and Omans, but with the weaknesses of neither."

"An unpleasant thought, truly," Ynos thought. "But you can now, I suppose, design the generators and projectors of a force superior to that screen."

"Data insufficient. I can

equal it, since both generation and projection are implicit in the formula. But the data so adduced are in themselves vastly ahead of anything previously in my banks."

"Are there any other races in this Galaxy more powerful than the postulated one now living on Fuel World?"

"Data insufficient."

"Theorize, then!"

"Data insufficient."

The linked minds concentrated upon the problem for a period of time that might have been either days or weeks. Then:

"Great Brain, advise us," Ynos said. "What is best for us to do?"

"With identical defensive screens it becomes a question of relative power. You should increase the size and power of your warships to something beyond the computed probable maximum of the enemy. You should build more ships and missiles than they will probably be able to build. Then and only then will you attack their warships, in tremendous force and continuously."

"But not their planetary defenses. I see." Ynos's thought was one of complete understanding. "And the *real* offensive will be?"

"No mobile structure can be built to mount mechanisms of power sufficient to smash down by sheer force of output such tremendously powerful installations as their

planet-based defenses must be assumed to be. Therefore the planet itself must be destroyed. This will require a missile of planetary mass. The best such missile is the tenth planet of their own sun."

"I see." Ynos's mind was leaping ahead, considering hundreds of possibilities and making highly intricate and involved computations. "That will, however, require many cycles of time and more power than even our immense reserves can supply."

"True. It will take much time. The fuel problem, however, is not a serious one, since Fuel World is not unique. Think on, First Lord Ynos."

"We will attack in maximum force and with maximum violence. We will blanket the planet. We will maintain maximum force and violence until most or all of the enemy ships have been destroyed. We will then install planetary drives on Ten and force it into collision orbit with Fuel World, meanwhile exerting extreme precautions that not so much as a spy-beam emerges above the enemy's screen. Then, still maintaining extreme precaution, we will guard both planets until the last possible moment before the collision. Brain, it cannot fail!"

"You err. It can fail. All we actually know of the abil-

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ities of this postulated neo-human race is what I have learned from the composition of its defensive screen. The probability approaches unity that the Masters continued to delve and to learn for millions of cycles while you Stretts, reasonlessly certain of your supremacy, concentrated upon your evolution from the material to a non-material form of life and performed only limited research into armaments of greater and ever greater power."

"True. But that attitude was then justified. It was not and is not logical to assume that any race would establish a fixed status at any level of ability below its absolute maximum."

"While that conclusion could once have been defensible, it is now virtually certain that the Masters had stores of knowledge which they may or may not have withheld from the Omans, but which were in some way made available to the neo-humans. Also, there is no basis whatever for the assumption that this new race has revealed all its potentialities."

"Statistically, that is probably true. But this is the best plan you have been able to formulate?"

"It is. Of the many thousands of plans I set up and tested, this one has the highest probability of success."

"Then we will adopt it. We



are Stretts. Whatever we decide upon will be driven through to complete success. We have one tremendous advantage in you."

"Yes. The probability approaches unity that I can perform research on a vastly wider and larger scale, and almost infinitely faster, than can any living organism or any possible combination of such organisms."

NOR was the Great Brain bragging. It scanned in moments the stored scientific knowledge of over a million planets. It tabulated, correlated, analyzed, synthesized, theorized and concluded—all in microseconds of time. Thus it made more progress in one Terran week than the Masters had made in a million years.

When it had gone as far as it could go, it reported its results—and the Stretts, hard as they were and intransigent, were amazed and overjoyed. Not one of them had ever even imagined such armaments possible. Hence they became supremely confident that it was unmatched and unmatchable throughout all space.

What the Great Brain did not know, however, and the Stretts did not realize, was that it could not really think.

Unlike the human mind, it could not deduce valid theories or conclusions from incomplete, insufficient, frag-

mentary data. It could not leap gaps. Thus there was no more actual assurance than before that they had exceeded, or even matched, the weaponry of the neo-humans of Fuel World.

Supremely confident, Ynos said: "We will now discuss every detail of the plan in sub-detail, and will correlate every sub-detail with every other, to the end that every action, however minor, will be performed perfectly and in its exact time."

That discussion, which lasted for days, was held. Hundreds of thousands of new and highly specialized mechs were built and went furiously and continuously to work. A fuel-supply line was run to another uranexite-rich planet.

Stripping machines stripped away the surface layers of soil, sand, rock and low-grade ore. Giant miners tore and dug and slashed and refined and concentrated. Storage silos by the hundreds were built and were filled. Hundreds upon hundreds of concentrate-carriers bored their stolid ways through hyperspace. Many weeks of time passed.

But of what importance are mere weeks of time to a race that has, for many millions of years, been adhering rigidly to a pre-set program?

The sheer magnitude of the operation, and the extraordinary attention to detail with

which it was prepared and launched, explain why the Strett attack on Ardvor did not occur until so many weeks later than Hilton and Sawtelle expected it. They also explain the utterly incomprehensible fury, the completely fantastic intensity, the unparalleled savagery, the almost immeasurable brute power of that attack when it finally did come.

WHEN the *Orion* landed on Ardane Field from Earth, carrying the first contingent of immigrants, Hilton and Sawtelle were almost as much surprised as relieved that the Stretts had not already attacked.

Sawtelle, confident that his defenses were fully ready, took it more or less in stride. Hilton worried. And after a couple of days he began to do some real thinking about it.

The first result of his thinking was a conference with Temple. As soon as she got the drift, she called in Teddy and Big Bill Karns. Teddy in turn called in Becky and de Vaux; Karns wanted Poynter and Beverly; Poynter wanted Braden and the twins; and so on. Thus, what started out as a conference of two became a full Ardan staff meeting; a meeting which, starting immediately after lunch, ran straight through into the following afternoon.

"To sum up the consensus, for the record," Hilton said

then, studying a sheet of paper covered with symbols, "the Stretts haven't attacked yet because they found out that we are stronger than they are. They found that out by analyzing our defensive web—which, if we had had this meeting first, we wouldn't have put up at all. Unlike anything known to human or previous Strett science, it is proof against any form of attack up to the limit of the power of its generators. They will attack as soon as they are equipped to break that screen at the level of power probable to our ships. We can not arrive at any reliable estimate as to how long that will take.

"As to the effectiveness of our cutting off their known fuel supply, opinion is divided. We must therefore assume that fuel shortage will not be a factor.

"Neither are we unanimous on the basic matter as to why the Masters acted as they did just before they left Ardry. Why did they set the status so far below their top ability? Why did they make it impossible for the Omans ever, of themselves, to learn their higher science? Why, if they did not want that science to become known, did they leave complete records of it? The majority of us believe that the Masters coded their records in such fashion that the Stretts, even if they conquered the Omans or destroyed them, could never

break that code; since it was keyed to the basic difference between the Strett mentality and the human. Thus, they left it deliberately for some human race to find.

"Finally, and most important, our physicists and theoreticians are not able to extrapolate, from the analysis of our screen, to the concepts underlying the Masters' ultimate weapons of offense, the first-stage booster and its final end-product, the Vang. If, as we can safely assume, the Stretts do not already have those weapons, they will know nothing about them until we ourselves use them in battle.

"These are, of course, only the principal points covered. Does anyone wish to amend this summation as recorded?"

NO one did.

The meeting was adjourned. Hilton, however, accompanied Sawtelle and Kedy to the captain's office. "So you see, Skipper, we got troubles," he said. "If we don't use those boosters against their skeletons it'll boil down to a stalemate lasting God only knows how long. It will be a war of attrition, outcome dependent on which side can build the most and biggest and strongest ships the fastest. On the other hand, if we *do* use 'em on defense here, they'll analyze 'em and have everything worked out in a day or so. The first thing they'll do is beef

up their planetary defenses to match. That way, we'd blow all their ships out of space, probably easily enough, but Strett itself will be just as safe as though it were in God's left-hand hip pocket. So what's the answer?"

"It isn't that simple, Jarve," Sawtelle said. "Let's hear from you, Kedy."

"Thank you, sir. There is an optimum mass, a point of maximum efficiency of fire-power as balanced against loss of maneuverability, for any craft designed for attack," Kedy thought, in his most professional manner. "We assume that the Stretts know that as well as we do. No such limitation applies to strictly defensive structures, but both the Strett craft and ours must be designed for attack. We have built and are building many hundreds of thousands of ships of that type. So, undoubtedly, are the Stretts. Ship for ship, they will be pretty well matched. Therefore one part of my strategy will be for two of our ships to engage simultaneously one of theirs. There is a distinct probability that we will have enough advantage in speed of control to make that tactic operable."

"But there's another that we won't," Sawtelle objected. "And maybe they can build more ships than we can."

"Another point is that they may build, in addition to their big stuff, a lot of small, ultra-

fast ones," Hilton put in. "Suicide jobs—crash and detonate—simply super-missiles. How sure are you that you can stop such missiles with ordinary beams?"

"Not at all, sir. Some of them would of course reach and destroy some of our ships. Which brings up the second part of my strategy. For each one of the heavies, we are building many small ships of the type you just called 'super-missiles'."

"Superdreadnoughts versus superdreadnoughts, super-missiles versus super-missiles." Hilton digested that concept for several minutes. "That could still wind up as a stalemate, except for what you said about control. That isn't much to depend on, especially since we won't have the time-lag advantage you Omans had before. They'll see to that. Also, I don't like to sacrifice a million Omans, either."

"I haven't explained the newest development yet, sir. There will be no Omans. Each ship and each missile has a built-in Kedy brain, sir."

"What? That makes it infinitely worse. You Kedys, unless it's absolutely necessary, are *not* expendable!"

"Oh, but we are, sir. You don't quite understand. We Kedys are not merely similar, but are in fact identical. Thus we are not independent enti-

ties. All of us together make up the actual Kedy—that which is meant when we say 'I'. That is, I am the sum total of all Kedys everywhere, not merely this individual that you call Kedy One."

"You mean you're *all* talking to me?"

"Exactly, sir. Thus, no one element of the Kedy has any need of, or any desire for, self-preservation. The destruction of one element, or of thousands of elements, would be of no more consequence to the Kedy than... well, they are strictly analogous to the severed ends of the hairs, every time you get a haircut."

"My God!" Hilton stared at Sawtelle. Sawtelle stared back. "I'm beginning to see... maybe... I hope. What control that would be! But just in case we *should* have to use the boosters..." Hilton's voice died away. Scowling in concentration, he clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace the floor.

"Better give up, Jarve. Kedy's got the same mind you have," Sawtelle began, to Hilton's oblivious back; but Kedy silenced the thought almost in the moment of its inception.

"By no means, sir," he contradicted. "I have the brain only. The *mind* is entirely different."

"Link up, Kedy, and see what you think of this," Hil-

ton broke in. There ensued an interchange of thought so fast and so deeply mathematical that Sawtelle was lost in seconds. "Do you think it'll work?"

"I don't see how it can fail, sir. At what point in the action should it be put into effect? And will you call the time of initiation, or shall I?"

"Not until all their reserves are in action. Or, at worst, all of ours except that one task-force. Since you'll know a lot more about the status of the battle than either Sawtelle or I will, you give the signal and I'll start things going."

"What are you two talking about?" Sawtelle demanded.

"It's a long story, chum. Kedy can tell you about it better than I can. Besides, it's getting late and Dark Lady and Larry both give me hell every time I hold supper on plus time unless there's a mighty good reason for it. So, so long, guys."

XV

FOR many weeks the production of Ardan warships and missiles had been spiraling upward.

Half a mountain range of solid rock had been converted into fabricated super-steel and armament. Superdreadnoughts were popping into existence at the rate of hundreds per minute. Missiles were rolling

off the ends of assembly lines like half-pint tin cans out of can-making machines.

The Strett warcraft, skeletons and missiles, would emerge into normal space anywhere within a million miles of Ardvor. The Ardan missiles were powered for an acceleration of one hundred gravities. That much the Kedy brains, molded solidly into teflon-lined, massively braced steel spheres, could just withstand.

To be certain of breaking the Strett screens, an impact velocity of about six miles per second was necessary. The time required to attain this velocity was about ten seconds, and the flight distance something over thirty miles.

Since the Stretts could orient themselves in less than one second after emergence, even this extremely tight packing of missiles—only sixty miles apart throughout the entire emergence volume of space—would still give the Stretts the initiative by a time-ratio of more than ten to one.

Such tight packing was of course impossible. It called for many billions of defenders instead of the few millions it was possible for the Omans to produce in the time they had. In fact, the average spacing was well over ten thousand miles when the invading horde of Strett missiles emerged and struck.

How they struck!

There was nothing of fi-

ness about that attack; nothing of skill or of tactics: nothing but the sheer brute force of overwhelming superiority of numbers and of over-matching power. One instant all space was empty. The next instant it was full of invading missiles—a superb exhibition of coordination and timing.

And the Kedy control, upon which the defenders had counted so heavily, proved useless. For each Strett missile, within a fraction of a second of emergence, darted toward the nearest Oman missile with an acceleration that made the one-hundred-gravity defenders seem to be standing still.

One to one, missiles crashed into missiles and detonated. There were no solid or liquid end-products. Each of those frightful weapons carried so many megatons-equivalent of atomic concentrate that all nearby space blossomed out into superatomic blasts hundreds of times more violent than the fireballs of lithium-hydride fusion bombs.

For a moment even Hilton was stunned; but only for a moment.

"Kedy!" he barked. "Get your big stuff out there! Use the boosters!" He started for the door at a full run. "That tears it—that *really* tears it! Scrap the plan. I'll board the *Sirius* and take the task-force to Strett. Bring your stuff along, Skipper, as soon as you're ready."

ARDAN superdreadnoughts in their massed thousands poured out through Ardvor's one-way screen. Each went instantly to work. Now the Kedy control system, doing what it was designed to do, proved its full worth. For the weapons of the big battle-wagons did not depend upon acceleration, but were driven at the speed of light; and Grand Fleet Operations were planned and were carried out at the almost infinite velocity of thought itself.

Or, rather, they were not planned at all. They were simply carried out, immediately and without confusion.

For all the Kedys were one. Each Kedy element, without any lapse of time whatever for consultation with any other, knew exactly where every other element was; exactly what each was doing; and exactly what he himself should do to make maximum contribution to the common cause.

Nor was any time lost in relaying orders to crewmen within the ship. There were no crewmen. Each Kedy element was the sole personnel of, and was integral with, his vessel. Nor were there any wires or relays to impede and slow down communication. Operational instructions, too, were transmitted and were acted upon with thought's transfinite speed. Thus, if decision and execution were not quite mathematically simulta-

neous, they were separated by a period of time so infinitesimally small as to be impossible of separation.

Wherever a Strett missile was, or wherever a Strett skeleton-ship appeared, an Oman beam reached it, usually in much less than one second. Beam clung to screen—caressingly, hungrily—absorbing its total energy and forming the first-stage booster. Then, three microseconds later, that booster went off into a ragingly incandescent, glaringly violent burst of fury so hellishly, so inconceivably hot that less than a thousandth of its total output of energy was below the very top of the visible spectrum!

If the previous display of atomic violence had been so spectacular and of such magnitude as to defy understanding or description, what of this? When hundreds of thousands of Kedys, each wielding world-wrecking powers as effortlessly and as deftly and as precisely as thought, attacked and destroyed millions of those tremendously powerful war-fabrications of the Stretts? The only simple answer is that all nearby space might very well have been torn out of the most radiant layers of S-Doradus itself.

HILTON made the hundred yards from office door to curb in just over twelve seconds. Larry was waiting. The car literally burned a hole in

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the atmosphere as it screamed its way to Ardane Field.

It landed with a thump. Heavy black streaks of synthetic rubber marked the pavement as it came to a screeching, shrieking stop at the flagship's main lock. And, in the instant of closing that lock's outer portal, all twenty-thousand-plus warships of the task force took off as one at ten gravities. Took off, and in less than one minute went into overdrive.

All personal haste was now over. Hilton went up into what he still thought of as the "control room," even though he knew that there were no controls, nor even any instruments, anywhere aboard. He knew what he would find there. Fast as he had acted, Temple had not had as far to go and she had got there first.

He could not have said, for the life of him, how he actually felt about this direct defiance of his direct orders. He walked into the room, sat down beside her and took her hand.

"I told you to stay home, Temple," he said.

"I know you did. But I'm not only the assistant head of your Psychology Department. I'm your wife, remember? 'Until death do us part.' And if there's any way in the universe I can manage it, death isn't going to part us—at least, this one isn't. If this is it, we'll go together."

"I know, sweetheart." He put his arm around her, held her close. "As a psych I wouldn't give a whoop. You'd be expendable. But as my wife, especially now that you're pregnant, you aren't. You're a lot more important to the future of our race than I am."

She stiffened in the circle of his arm. "What's *that* crack supposed to mean? Think I'd ever accept a synthetic zombie imitation of you for my husband and go on living with it just as though nothing had happened?"

Hilton started to say something, but Temple rushed heedlessly on: "Drat the race! No matter how many children we ever have you were first and you'll stay first, and if you have to go I'll go, too, so there! Besides, you know darn well that they can't duplicate whatever it is that makes you Jarvis Hilton."

"Now wait a minute, Temple. The conversion..."

"Yes, the conversion," she interrupted, triumphantly. "The thing I'm talking about is immaterial—untouchable—they didn't—couldn't—do anything about it at all. Kedy, will you please tell this big goofus that even though you have got Jarvis Hilton's brain you aren't Jarvis Hilton and never can be?"

THE atmosphere of the room vibrated in the frequencies of a deep bass laugh.

"You are trying to hold a completely untenable position, friend Hilton. Any attempt to convince a mind of real power that falsity is truth is illogical. My advice is for you to surrender."

That word hit Temple hard. "Not surrender, sweetheart. I'm not fighting you. I never will." She seized both of his hands; tears welled into her glorious eyes. "It's just that I simply couldn't *stand* it to go on living without you!"

"I know, darling." He got up and lifted her to her feet, so that she could come properly into his arms. They stood there, silent and motionless, for minutes.

Temple finally released herself and, after feeling for a handkerchief she did not have, wiped her eyes with a forefinger and then wiped the finger on her bare leg. She grinned and turned to the Omans. "Prince, will you and Dark Lady please conjure us up a steak-and-mushrooms supper? They should be in the pantry...since this *Sirius* was designed for us."

After supper the two sat companionably on a davenport. "One thing about this business isn't quite clear," Temple said. "Why all this tearing rush? They haven't got the booster or anything like it, or they'd have used it. Surely it'll take them a long time to go from the mere analysis of the forces and fields we used clear through

to the production and installation of enough weapons to stop this whole fleet?"

"It surely won't. They've had the absorption principle for ages. Remember that first, ancient skeleton that drained all the power of our suits and boats in nothing flat? From there it isn't too big a jump. And as for producing stuff; uh-uh! If there's any limit to what they can do, I don't know what it is. If we don't slug 'em before they get it, it's curtains."

"I see... I'm afraid. We're almost there, darling."

He glanced at the chronometer. "About eleven minutes. And of course I don't need to ask you to stay out of the way."

"Of course not. I won't interfere, no matter what happens. All I'm going to do is hold your hand and pull for you with all my might."

"That'll help, believe me. I'm mighty glad you're along, sweetheart. Even though both of us know you shouldn't be."

THE task force emerged. Each ship darted toward its pre-assigned place in a mathematically exact envelope around the planet Strett.

Hilton sat on a davenport strained and still. His eyes were closed and every muscle tense. Left hand gripped the arm-rest so fiercely that fingertips were inches deep in the leather-covered padding.

The Stretts *knew* that any

such attack as this was futile. No movable structure or any combination of such structures could possibly wield enough power to break down screens powered by such engines as theirs.

Hilton, however, knew that there was a chance. Not with the first-stage boosters, which were manipulable and detonable masses of ball lightning, but with those boosters' culminations, the Vangs; which were ball lightning raised to the sixth power and which only the frightful energies of the boosters could bring into being.

But, even with twenty-thousand-plus Vangs—or any larger number—success depended entirely upon a nicety of timing never before approached and supposedly impossible. Not only to thousandths of a microsecond, but to a small fraction of one such thousandth: roughly, the time it takes light to travel three-sixteenths of an inch.

It would take practically absolute simultaneity to overload to the point of burnout to those Strett generators. They were the heaviest in the Galaxy.

That was why Hilton himself had to be there. He could not possibly have done the job from Ardvor. In fact, there was no real assurance that, even at the immeasurable velocity of thought and covering a mere million miles, he could do it even from his pres-

ent position aboard one unit of the fleet. Theoretically, with his speed-up, he could. But that theory had yet to be reduced to practice.

Tense and strained, Hilton began his countdown.

Temple sat beside him. Both hands pressed his right fist against her breast. Her eyes, too, were closed; she was as stiff and as still as was he. She was not interfering, but giving; supporting him, backing him, giving to him in full flood everything of that tremendous inner strength that had made Temple Bells what she so uniquely was.

On the exact center of the needle-sharp zero beat every Kedy struck. Gripped and activated as they all were by Hilton's keyed-up-and-stretched-out mind, they struck in what was very close indeed to absolute unison.

Absorbing beams, each one having had precisely the same number of millimeters to travel, reached the screen at the same instant. They clung and sucked. Immeasurable floods of energy flashed from the Strett generators into those vortices to form twenty thousand-plus first-stage boosters.

BUT this time the boosters did not detonate.

Instead, as energies continued to flood in at a frightfully accelerating rate, they turned into something else. Things no Terran science has ever even imagined; things at

the formation of which all neighboring space actually warped, and in that warping seethed and writhed and shuddered. The very sub-ether screamed and shrieked in protest as it, too, yielded in starkly impossible fashions to that irresistible stress.

How even those silicon-fluorine brains stood it, not one of them ever knew.

Microsecond by slow microsecond the Vangs grew and grew and grew. They were pulling not only the full power of the Ardan warships, but also the immeasurably greater power of the strainingly overloaded Strettsian generators themselves. The ethereal and sub-ethereal writhings and distortions and screamings grew worse and worse; harder and ever harder to bear.

Imagine, if you can, a constantly and rapidly increasing mass of plutonium—a mass already thousands of times greater than critical, but not *allowed* to react! That gives a faint and very inadequate picture of what was happening then.

Finally, at perhaps a hundred thousand times critical mass, and still in perfect sync, the Vangs all went off.

The planet Strett became a nova.

"We won! We *won!*" Temple shrieked, her perception piercing through the hellish murk that was all nearby space.

"Not quite yet, sweet, but

we're over the biggest hump," and the two held an impromptu, but highly satisfactory, celebration.

Perhaps it would be better to say that the planet Strett became a junior-grade nova, since the actual nova stage was purely superficial and did not last very long. In a couple of hours things had quieted down enough so that the heavily-screened warships could approach the planet and finish up their part of the job.

Much of Strett's land surface was molten lava. Much of its water was gone. There were some pockets of resistance left, of course, but they did not last long. Equally of course the Stretts themselves, twenty-five miles underground, had not been harmed at all.

But that, too, was according to plan.

LEAVING the task force on guard, to counter any move the Stretts might be able to make, Hilton shot the *Sirius* out to the planet's moon. There Sawtelle and his staff and tens of thousands of Omans and machines were starting to work. No part of this was Hilton's job; so all he and Temple did was look on.

Correction, please. That was not *all* they did. But while resting and eating and loafing and sleeping and enjoying each other's company, both

MASTERS OF SPACE

watched Operation *Moon* closely enough to be completely informed as to everything that went on.

Immense, carefully placed pits went down to solid bed-rock. To that rock were immovably anchored structures strong enough to move a world. Driving units were installed—drives of such immensity of power as to test to the full the highest engineering skills of the Galaxy. Mountains of fuel-concentrate filled vast reservoirs of concrete. Each was connected to a drive by fifty-inch high-speed conveyors.

Sawtelle drove a thought and those brutal super-drives began to blast.

As they blasted, Strett's satellite began to move out of its orbit. Very slowly at first, but faster and faster. They continued to blast, with all their prodigious might and in carefully-computed order, until the desired orbit was attained—an orbit which terminated in a vertical line through the center of the Stretts' supposedly impregnable retreat.

The planet Strett had a mass of approximately seven times ten to the twenty-first metric tons. Its moon, little more than a hundredth as massive, still weighed in at about eight times ten to the nineteenth—that is, the figure eight followed by nineteen zeroes.

And moon fell on planet, in

direct central impact, after having fallen from a height of over a quarter of a million miles under the full pull of gravity and the full thrust of those mighty atomic drives.

The kinetic energy of such a collision can be computed. It can be expressed. It is, however, of such astronomical magnitude as to be completely meaningless to the human mind.

Simply, the two worlds merged and splashed. Drop-lets, weighing up to millions of tons each, spattered out into space; only to return, in seconds or hours or weeks or months, to add their atrocious contributions to the enormity of the destruction already wrought.

No trace survived of any Strett or of any thing, however small, pertaining to the Stretts.

Epilogue

AS had become a daily custom, most of the Ardans were gathered at the natatorium. Hilton and Temple were wrestling in the water—she was trying to duck him and he was hard put to it to keep her from doing it. The platinum-haired twins were—oh, ever so surreptitiously and undetectably!—studying the other girls.

Captain Sawtelle—he had steadfastly refused to accept any higher title—and his wife were teaching two of their tiny grandchildren to swim.

In short, everything was normal.

Beverly Bell Poynter, from the top platform, hit the board as hard as she could hit it; and, perfectly synchronized with it, hurled herself upward. Up and up and up she went. Up to her top ceiling of two hundred ten feet. Then, straightening out into a shape-ly arrow and without again moving a muscle, she hurtled downward, making two and a half beautifully stately turns and striking the water with a slurping, splashless *chug!* Coming easily to the surface, she shook the water out of her eyes.

Temple, giving up her attempts to near-drown her husband, rolled over and floated quietly beside him.

"You know, this is fun," he said.

"Uh-huh," she agreed enthusiastically.

"I'm glad you and Sandy buried the hatchet. Two of the top women who ever lived. Or should I have said sheathed the claws? Or have you, really?"

"Pretty much...I guess." Temple didn't seem altogether sure of the point. "Oh-oh. Now what?"

A flitabout had come to ground. Dark Lady, who never delivered a message via thought if she could possibly get away with delivering it in person, was running full tilt across the sand toward them. Her long black hair was

streaming out behind her; she was waving a length of teletype tape as though it were a pennon.

"Oh, no. Not *again*?" Temple wailed. "Don't tell us it's Terra again, Dark Lady, please."

"But it is!" Dark Lady cried, excitedly. "And it says 'From Five-Jet Admiral Gordon, Commanding.'"

"Omit flowers, please," Hilton directed. "Boil it down."

"The *Perseus* is in orbit with the whole Advisory Board. They want to hold a top-level summit conference with Director Hilton and Five-Jet Admiral Sawtelle." Dark Lady raised her voice enough to be sure Sawtelle heard the title, and shot him a wicked glance as she an-

nounced it. "They hope to conclude all unfinished business on a mutually satisfactory and profitable basis."

"Okay, Lady, thanks. Tell 'em we'll call 'em shortly."

Dark Lady flashed away and Hilton and Temple swam slowly toward a ladder.

"Drat Terra and everything and everybody on it," Temple said, vigorously. "And especially drat His Royal Fatness Five-Jet Admiral Gordon. How much longer will it take, do you think, to pound some sense into their pointed little heads?"

"Oh, we're not doing too bad," Hilton assured his lovely bride. "Two or three more sessions ought to do it."

Everything was normal...

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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HUE AND CRY

The place where reader
and editor meet . . .

WE'VE got a little more space than usual this month—which ought to please some persistent voices in the back row—so without wasting any of it, let's start reading the mail.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Well, after reading the September issue of *If* . . . and looking at that long letter col. . . I am awed into giving you something to cut, myself. Damn, *If* is coming up in the world. All the stories were good, and *Call Him Nemesis* was excellent. The ending of that story was even better than the story itself.

What you need now that you've got good stories (everyone hands out advice!) is some good interior art. Pardon the odor, but your interior art stinks! Wenzel did a fairly nice job on the cover, but if you can't get better interior art than that, you ought to give the whole thing up.

Ken Gentry
Nashville, Tennessee

* * *

Dear Sir:

Okay! I might as well get my two bits worth in, to ease my conscience—for your egos, your *Hue and Cry* or your "circular file." I imagine that you have a dump truck full of

these letters by now. But a fairly recent convert to sf wishes to comment anyway.

I have had you and *Galaxy* on my "must read or else" list for quite some time. My only gripe is that each of you is bi-monthly. Is good material THAT scarce? If so—please keep it good—and bi-monthly if necessary.

Though all were refreshing to a degree in your September yarns, I especially enjoyed *The Frozen Planet*, *Valley of the Masters*, *Mirror Image* and *Lorelei*. Though long on Mickey Spillane and short on science—*The Frozen Planet* was very little short of being terrific.

Science Briefs seemed, at least in your past two issues, like a poor man's *For Your Information*. Howzabout elaboration—or another approach?

Cheers! And keep up the good work!

Wes Alan
San Fernando, Cal.

* * *

Dear Editor:

The August issue of *Galaxy* was a good one, as was the September issue of *If*. The cover on *Galaxy*, however, was not up to Emsh's own standards, while Wenzel's was. As far as contents go they both were good with *The Moon Moth*, *The God Next Door*, *The Frozen Planet*, *Valley of the Masters*, *Mirror Image*, *Spawn-*

ing Ground and *Tolliver's Orbit* standing out above all.

Some authors whom you celebrate have not appeared recently, and I wish they would. Here they are:

Fredric Brown
Edgar Pangborn
F. L. Wallace
Robert Sheckley
Zenna Henderson
Clifford D. Simak
Robert Bloch
Christopher Grimm
Robert Silverberg
Alan E. Nourse
Damon Knight
Evelyn E. Smith
Robert Heinlein
Alfred Bester
James Blish
Theodore Sturgeon
—and others.

George Sarant
Brooklyn, N. Y.

* *We wish they would, too.*
We keep asking them. —Ed.

* * *

Dear Editor:

You must be Frederik Pohl. No other editor, especially not H.L. Gold, who abandoned the idea of a *Galaxy* letter column simply because the readers were against it, would go against what are obviously the readers' wishes. Readers like longer letters, even if it means leaving them uncut, in extreme cases. Not letters pages long, to be sure, nor 10 pages of letters. That would be the opposite extreme. But to be interesting, the letters must be

more than one short paragraph, with space enough to say nothing but "I liked this but didn't like that." By putting your own comments down to the size of the comments of the readers, and maybe upping the pages of letters to five, instead of three, *If* can again have one of the best letter columns in sf...and, believe me, it needs to have the best of something.

In the September *If* (which should be subtitled *Worlds of Galaxy Rejects*) you had a nice cover, but by the interior illos I can only assume that your Art Director is black and white blind (the opposite of color blind.) As far as interior illustrations go, I rate F&SF before *Galaxy* and *If*.

It seems incredible that anyone should have accepted such a story as *The Frozen Planet*. Even *Imaginative Tales* would have rejected this one...

Frederick Norwood
Franklin, Louisiana

* *Art? We're working on it. Starting next issue, you'll see changes. Letter column? We're still not all the way convinced—despite what we admit to be a lot of mail urging a l-o-n-g one—for all it really proves is that letter-writing readers like letters (which we already know.) What about those who don't?*
—Ed.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Here is hoping for a much bigger and better "Hue and Cry" next time. The present issue of *If* with *The Frozen Planet* was better than it has been for quite some time.

James W. Ayers
Attalla, Alabama

* * *

Gentlemen:

I have just finished reading your September *If*. I enjoyed it very much. Keep up the good work! It had everything I could want, except no book review. I would like to see it back.

William Hoffman
Chicago, Illinois

* * *

Dear Editor:

Congratulations for an *If* which is getting better every issue. Most of the stories are actually readable now. A couple months back, I was lucky to find one or two decent ones in a whole ish.

Best stories in the September *If* were *Spawning Ground* (let's have more del Rey) and *Valley of the Masters*. Blackford seems like a pretty good new writer.

Sturgeon is good on the features, but how about some stories from him?

Edward V. Moore
Roslyn Heights, N. Y.

* *Yeah, how about that, Ted?—Ed.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

Thank heavens you're not planning to have 10 to 16 pages of letters! Even the old *If* seldom, if ever, had more than (at the most) 5 pages for letters.

I do regret, though, that you're not planning to run book reviews again in the near future...but with a book review column in 4 of the 6 *If* magazines being published, you might as well use the extra space for more fiction.

I think that *If* has been improving with every issue since the time *Twelve Times Zero* was published. Now, with the Lester del Rey story in the September issue and the "Sky-lark" Smith-E. E. Evans collaboration scheduled, you may have hit an all-time high.

David Charles Paskow
Philadelphia, Penn.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I picked up the new *If* yesterday, mainly because my friend Lawrence Crilly suggested it, and when I saw you had a story by my current favorite—Keith Laumer, with *The Frozen Planet*—I bought it. I just finished reading the mag and I can only say WOW! From a mag that should have been discontinued long ago you jump right up into the front rank! I can only

offer my sincerest congratulations.

Laumer is superb. A little of Russell, a little of Williamson, a little of the best Leinster and a lot of his capable self combine to make him the best new writer since Schmitz.

David G. Hulan
Redstone Arsenal, Ala.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Why not get the readers to hold written discussions in *Hue and Cry*? As a starter, why not have the readers try to pin down the meaning of and idea behind the oft-used, ambiguous term "sense of wonder?" Book reviewers have long since worn out this term...and have yet to define it.

Ken Winkes
Arlington, Wash.

* * *

That's the works—not all the mail we have, but all we can find room for. Thanks to all of you.

Next issue? Some fine stories coming up. Poul Anderson, Fritz Leiber, Keith Laumer, Jim Harmon, Kris Neville, Allen Kim Lang and a dozen others have some really first-rate stuff on hand. We're not sure yet which will fit in—but we're sure you'll find something you like—next issue, and every issue to come!

END

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We admit it—we're pushovers for the Xmas spirit. "Don't do it," our accountant pleads. "We can't afford to sell subscriptions at those prices!" But our eye goes past his piteous figure to the distant corners of the land. "Readers straining budgets to introduce GALAXY to friends and relatives, and have enough scratch left over for their own subscriptions. We can't leave the job to them!" we thunder. "GALAXY must bear its share of the burden! And not only that—by the Lord Harry, we'll even include handsome Gift Card Announcements with their names as donors!" Out slouches our accountant, muttering, "All right, but they'd better get their orders in before December 15. — — so rush in your order today.

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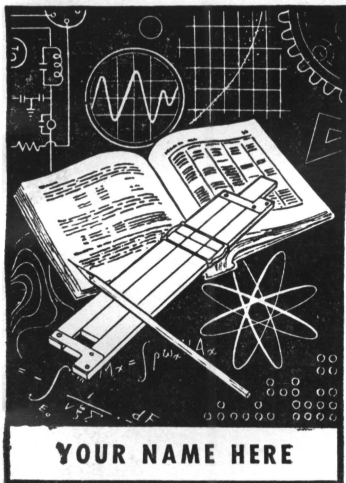
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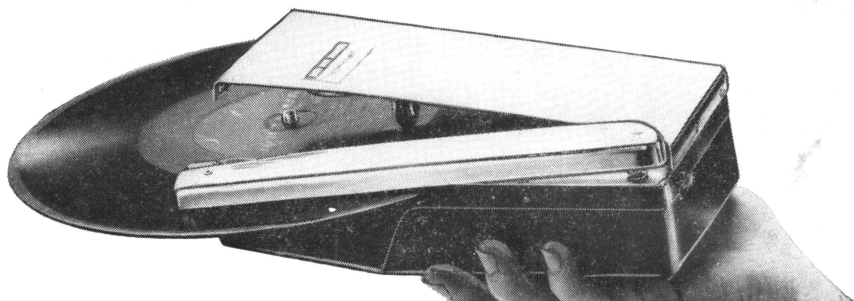
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