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**WORLDS OF**

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SEPTEMBER, 1965

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**ALL NEW  
STORIES**

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Cover by McKENNA from **MOON DUEL**

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# AIR and SPACE

**H**appen you don't sleep well at night, and provided you live somewhere in the more-or-less Eastern part of the United States, you may well find yourself listening to the radio between the hours of midnight and five A.M. What brightens the air at those hours over radio station WNBC in New York is an all-night talk show whose presiding genius is a man named Long John Nebel.

What Long John likes in guests for his radio program is the specialist in the far-out. One of the things he likes is science fiction, and he has had any number of science-fiction writers on the show at one time or another. Lester del Rey is a regular; so is Mike Girdsandsky (who has been writing those fascinating future-science articles for us in *Worlds of Tomorrow*); so, for that matter, is the undersigned. Others who have appeared with Long John are James Blish, Theodore Sturgeon, Harry Harrison, Sam Moskowitz, Mel Hunter, John Campbell, Isaac Asimov — well, the list could go on indefinitely, for John Nebel has filled a lot of air hours in the past decade.

It was on a Long John show a couple of years ago, as a matter of fact, that your editor made some remarks about flying saucers which attracted the attention of a man named George W. Earley.

George Earley is the Connecticut state representative for an organization called NICAP — National Investigating Committee for Aerial

Phenomena — and he called us up in some irritation. You don't accept the evidence for flying saucers, he charged; and we admitted that that was true enough; we weren't a bit convinced. But have you really made any sort of investigation? he asked. Have you really *looked* at the evidence? Or have you just made up your mind without giving the UFO-logists a fair chance?

We had to confess to Earley that he had called that one accurately. What he said was true. Everything we knew about Unidentified Flying Objects, contactees, space-people and so on could be put in a couple of newspaper headlines, because that essentially was where we'd got what little information we had. And when Earley pressed us we had to agree that this was not a particularly desirable way to make a decision.

So we promised to do better.

**T**hat was a little over a year ago. Since then, as time and opportunity permit, we have been repairing this obvious gap in our education as rapidly as we can.

It isn't as easy as you might think. To begin with, all saucerdom is divided into two parts. Part 1 might be called the NICAP wing of the movement, whose essential thesis is approximately as follows: "There have been over 6,000 reports of unidentified celestial objects in the past few years. They cannot all be mistakes or hoaxes. As a minimum, these facts demand a full-scale investigation by responsible authori-

ties, conducted in public and with no attempt to disguise or protect under the guise of military security their findings. As a maximum, we consider it beyond doubt that the Earth is being visited by creatures from another planet."

Part 2 is what are called the "contactees", and what *they* say is approximately this: "Earth has not only been visited from outer space, but many of us have talked with the spacemen, ridden in their strange saucer-shaped craft and learned from them many priceless secrets of science, technology and moral law — besides being given advance notice of the assassination of President Kennedy, the flareup of war in Vietnam and the success of our and the Russian space probes."

The NICAP group (which we are using in this sense to include a number of men and women who, for one reason or another, don't belong to NICAP — but do share with it the opinion that the general case is proved and certainly needs more investigation, without going along with the claims of the contactees) includes a lot of technical, scientific and professional people, and it goes to a lot of trouble to secure as much verification as it can for every report of UFO sightings. As a veteran of two such attempts ourselves, we can testify that this is pretty hard to do.

Consider, for example, the case of New Mexico State Patrolman Lonnie Zamora. About a year ago Zamora, patrolling the area south of the town of Socorro, New Mexico, radioed his headquarters that he had observed what looked like the landing of some sort of strange aircraft a few miles south of the town and was proceeding to investigate. His

desk sergeant dispatched another car, but by the time it got there there was nothing to be seen except Zamora himself, his car and certain marks in the ground. According to Zamora, the "aircraft" had been metallic, bright, fairly large and not like anything he had ever seen before. It seemed to land on four struts, and when it took off again it did so with the accompaniment of a bluish glow from underneath.

Although Socorro is ringed by radar (it is on the fringe of the White Sands Proving Ground and as well guarded as any place in the world against aerial intrusion), no trace of any aircraft had been detected by radar or by visual spotters. The marks on the ground consisted of four crude pits — approximately where Zamora stated the struts of the object had rested — and a greasewood bush that was in flames, presumably set alight by the "bluish glow" from under the object at takeoff.

Some weeks later we had occasion to be in New Mexico and, accompanied by Jack Williamson — known to his students at Eastern New Mexico Reserve University as Professor John Stewart Williamson, Ph.D., but to most of the rest of us as the author of scores of fine science-fiction stories over the past thirty-odd years — we made a side-trip of a couple of hundred miles to look over the Zamora sighting.

The physical evidence was just as it had been described. There were the four rough pits — since surrounded by heaps of pebbles by someone, presumably a UFOlogist desirous of keeping them from being trampled out of shape. There was the greasewood bush; it had grown new shoots, but it was still apparent

that it had been burned not long before. The site was down in a little arroyo. About forty feet away was the small mesa where Zamora had parked his police car and got out to investigate. From mesa to arroyo the line of sight was clear and the distance not much. Obviously there would have been no difficulty in seeing whatever was there, given a reliable witness.

The apparent next question was, was Zamora a reliable witness? According to the testimony of his sergeant, his fellow patrolmen and townspeople, there was no doubt at all. "If Lonnie said he saw something, he *saw* it. He might be mistaken, but he'd never lie." Was he likely to be mistaken? Not according to Professor Lincoln La Paz of the University of New Mexico, for whom Zamora had functioned as a volunteer meteorite spotter for years. Zamora was a trained observer, as well as a man possessed of the most towering reputation for honesty this writer can recall coming across in a long time.

Of course, in the long run this whole case rests on Zamora. The physical evidence was nothing—anybody could have jabbed a couple of holes in the desert; a match could have ignited the bush as easily as a "bluish glow". There were vague reports of other witnesses, but none that could be tracked down—at least one that Williamson and the undersigned concluded, rather definitely, never would be tracked down, because the geography of the case was such that we didn't believe he ever existed in the first place.

So where does that leave us?

About where we started, we're afraid . . . and that's the story

of the whole flying-saucer situation.

The contactees would say this is design on the part of the space people—they're just playing with us, you see. The NICAPers maintain that this is irrelevant. Never mind *why* it's so hard to get conclusive, irrefutable evidence of even one sighting—out of the endless thousands of reports—just concentrate on the number, the quality of the observers (many of them trained and of excellent repute) and the logic of the situation. Half of our physical laws rest on worse statistical evidence than the case for flying saucers, say the NICAP people.

Last year NICAP published a book called *The UFO Evidence*, which summarizes the circumstances surrounding 746 carefully selected sightings. Some are accompanied by photographic evidence. Many are supported by the testimony of astronomers, meteorologists, radar operators, airline pilots or others who are in a position to look at the sky with some expertise.

At about the same time, Donald H. Menzel, Director of the Harvard Observatory, and Lyle Boyd, contributor to this and many other science-fiction magazines over the years, published a book called *The World of the Flying Saucers*, in which they went over the evidence for a large selection of sightings and came to the conclusion that every one of them was explicable in terms of planets seen through a haze, odd cloud formations, weather balloons or other natural events.

So where does that leave us?

Still about where we started, we're afraid. But we're still checking. And it may be that we'll have something more definite to tell you one of these days.

—THE EDITOR

# UNDER TWO MOONS

by FREDERIK POHL

ILLUSTRATED BY WOOD

*She was beautiful. She told me  
she loved me. The only trouble  
was, she kept trying to kill me!*

## I

The bolt of flame from the gun hissed by, twenty millimeters from his nose.

There was silence, and then the door opened behind him. Light footsteps approached, muffled by the fine, deadly dust on the floor. Gull

craned to see the person approaching, but he was tied too tightly for that.

"You are most foolhardy, Meesta Gull," said the girl's soft voice. "I beg you, do not drop the fuse again or I must resort to more 'arsh methods." And from the corner of his eye Johan Gull saw her slim

figure swiftly stoop to recover the half-meter length of rubbery plastic fuse-cord.

As she attempted to jam it into his mouth again he jerked his head aside and managed to ask, "Why are you doing this?"

"Why?" There was the soft hint of a laugh in her voice. "Ah, why indeed!" She caught his head in the crook of an arm and, surprisingly strong, held it still. He felt the stiff strand thrust between his teeth, tasted again the acrid chemical flavor. When she had done the same thing before he had been able to spit the fuse out before she could ignite it. She did not chance his dropping it again; her flame-gun hissed, and the end of the fuse began to sizzle with a tiny green spark.

"I think," she whispered, "that it is because I love you, Meesta Gull." And he felt something like a quick touch of lips, a scent of perfume that carried even above the pyrotechnic reek of the sputtering fuse; and then the door closed softly and he was alone in the room that was about to become an enormous bomb.

The green halo hissed the length of the dangling fuse toward his lips. Johan Gull, estimating seconds by the beat of his pulse where his wrists were tied to the wall, timed its course at perhaps two millimeters a second. Say four minutes before it reached his lips.

He sighed. It was a nuisance to think of his career ending like this — a daring foray into enemy territory to break up a smuggling opera-

tion of the Black Hats . . . complete success, the ring destroyed, the dozen men in charge of it dead . . . and then to allow himself to be tricked by the one person who survived, a slip of a girl. If he had only not answered her cry for help!

But he had. And he had found himself trussed up in a karate grip, then tied to the wall. And now — he had four minutes of life, or actually a bit less, unless he thought of something rather quickly.

He could, of course, drop the fuse at any time before the spark touched his flesh and his instinctive reaction made him drop it. But the girl had said, and he had no reason to think that she lied, that the powdery dust she had spread about the floor was gunpowder. In the unconfined space of the room it would perhaps not explode; it might only flare up like the igniting of a gas jet; but it would kill Johan Gull nonetheless. Could he scrape a spot clean with his feet and drop the burning fuse there?

Experimentally he shifted position and tried. It was slow work. The floor was rough-cast cement and the tiny particles of explosive powder adhered like lint on wool. By arduous scraping with the side of his shoe Gull managed to get a six-inch square mostly free of the stuff. But it was not good enough, he saw. A pale powdery haze clung to the crevices. It was not much, but it was too much; it would take very little to flash and carry the spark of the fuse to the main mass; and two minutes were irretrievably gone.

Could he sneeze it out? It was



at least worth a try, he thought; but annoyingly his nose would not itch, there was no trace of nasal drip, all he managed to do was snort at the tiny green light and make it flare brighter for a moment. He redoubled his efforts to slip his wrists out of their bonds. The thing could be done, he discovered with tempered pleasure. The girl had tied him well; but she was only a girl and not strong enough, or cruel enough, to cut deeply into his wrists. The cord stretched slowly and minutely; he would be able to work himself free.

But not in four minutes. Still more certainly not in the minute or less that was all he had left. Already he could feel the heat of the glowing end of the fuse on his chin. He was forced to lean forward for fear of igniting his goatee, but soon it would be too close for that to help.

There really was only one thing to do, thought Johan Gull regretfully.

He nibbled the short remaining length of fuse up to his lips and, wincing from the pain but denying it control of his actions, chewed out the spark.

A quarter of an hour later he was free of his bonds and through the door.

The girl was long gone, of course. Spirited little devil. Gull wished her well; he bore her no animus for taking one round of The Game, wished only that he had been able to see her more clearly, for her voice was sweet. Perhaps they would meet again.

Rubbing his wrists, Gull looked

about the dingy shed in which he had been held captive. He knew this part of Marsport less well than almost any of the rest of the red planet, but recognized this rundown corridor as a slum. An uncollected trash basket kicked over on its side spewed refuse across the steel decking. On the black wall that had housed him some despairing wretch had scrawled, *We Are Property!* The air pressure was low, but it reeked of dirt, drugs and vice.

Gull shrugged, lighted a cigarette, turned his back on the room that had so nearly been his death trap and strode toward the sign marked *Subway*. He would be late, and Gull was a stickler for promptness. But he paused to glance back again, and thought of the girl who had trapped him. He had liked her voice. She had had a charming fragrance. It had been cool of her to have ignited the fuse while she was still in the room; he might have dropped it and then and there blown both of them halfway to Deimos. And she had said that she loved him.

## II

The entrance to Security lay through a barber shop. Gull hung his coat on a rack and sat back in the chair, musing about the adventure he had just had and wondering about the next to come. In the corridor outside a chanting mob of UFOlogists demanded equal rights for spacemen; Gull had nearly been caught in the marching front of their demonstration as he entered the shop.

He submitted to being lathered, shaved, talced and brushed, but the jacket he was helped into was not his own. His hand in the pocket closed over the familiar shape of the pencil-key. He let himself out the back way of the barber shop and opened the private door to .5's office.

"Sorry I'm late, sir," he apologized to the ancient, leathery figure with the hooded eyes behind the desk.

The Old Man's secretary, McIntyre, looked up from his eternal notebook. From the hooks and slants in that little leather-bound pad messages flew to every corner of the Solar System, alerting a battalion of Marines on Callisto, driving a Black Hat front into bankruptcy in Stuttgart, thrusting pawns against a raid on Darkside Mercury, throwing an agent to his death here on Mars. To McIntyre it was all the same. He was a dark young man who had never been known to show emotion. He said calmly, ".5 is a stickler for promptness, Gull."

Gull said, "I ran into difficulties. Something didn't want me to get here today, I'm afraid."

Was it his imagination, or did .5's imperturbable face show the vestige of a frown? McIntyre put down his pencil and regarded Gull thoughtfully. "I think," he said, "that you'd better tell .5 just what you mean by that."

"Oh, just that I had difficulties, sir." Quickly Gull sketched the events of the day. "Afraid I allowed myself to be decoyed. Shouldn't have, of course. But next thing you

know there was a flame-pencil in my ribs, I was tied up and a lighted fuse between my teeth. Quite unpleasant, as the floor was covered with gunpowder. I would have been here sooner, but I didn't quite trust myself to spit the fuse clear of the gunpowder."

Eyebrows raised, McIntyre glanced at .5, as if to find a sign on that stoic countenance. Then he rose deliberately, walked to a file, pulled out a sheaf of papers in a folder marked, *Gull, Johan, Personnel Records of*. He glanced through them thoughtfully.

"I see," he said at last. "Well, that's neither here nor there." He replaced the folder and sat beside Gull. "Johan," he said earnestly, ".5 wants me to caution you that your next assignment may mean unusual danger."

"Really, sir? Oh, delightful!"

"More than you think, perhaps," said McIntyre darkly. "It isn't merely our colleagues in the Black Hats this time. It's mob hysteria, at least. Perhaps something far more sinister. Something's up in Syrtis Major."

After fourteen years as an agent and innumerable hearings of those words, or of words very much like them, still a thrill tingled up the spine of Johan Gull. *Something's up in Syrtis Major* — or Lacus Solis. Or the Southern Ice Cap. And he would be off again, off in the gratification of that headiest of addictions, the pitting of one's wits and fine-trained body against the best the other side could come up with.

And they were resourceful devils,



he thought, with the journeyman's unselfish admiration for a skilled worker at his own trade. Time and again it had taken all he possessed to win through against their strength and tricks. And if .5 felt it necessary to caution him that this coming exploit would be trickier than usual, it would indeed be something to remember.

"Smashing," he cried. "Would you care to brief me on it?"

But McIntyre was shaking his head.

"If you'd managed to get here on schedule —" he said; and then, "As it is, .5 has some rather urgent callers due in, let me see, mark! Forty seconds."

"I see," said Johan Gull.

"However," McIntyre went on, "research has the whole picture for you. You'll draw whatever supplies are necessary in Supply. Then Travel & Transport can arrange for your travel and transport. Good-by, Gull."

"Right, sir," said Gull, memorizing his instructions. His lips moved for a second and he nodded. "Got it. So long, McIntyre. Good-by, sir." He did not wait for an answer. It was well known that .5 disliked wasting breath on trivia, above all on the conventional exchange of greetings and farewells and unmeant inquiries as to the unimportant aspects of one's health that passed for "politeness".

In the office these perfunctory pleasantries were skipped. Gull let himself out, his heart pounding in spite of himself, and started toward the Research office and a new job.

It was rather a nuisance, thought Gull as he lay sprawled in the barber's chair, to go again through the process of being lathered, shaved, talced and brushed. But it did have advantages. One advantage was that it gave one a moment to oneself now and then.

Johan Gull was a healthy young animal. He had an educated interest in food, drink and the attractions of women; a moment for reverie taken perforce, like this, was a luxury . . . the sort of luxury his active body was inclined to deny him when it had a choice. He dreamed away the moments, hardly hearing the barber-robot's taped drone — "How you think the Yanks gonna do? Say, you see this new *ragazz'* on the TV last night? Hoo!" — while his mind roamed the ochre wastes of Syrtis Major. He thought contentedly that he was ready for the assignment.

The jacket he was helped to put on bore on its cuff a quite unduplicable pattern of metal-linked lines and dots. Gull climbed the winding stairs down to the basement of the barber shop, held the sleeve to a scanning device and was admitted to the Research center.

Lights, sounds and activity smote his senses. He blinked, pausing on the threshold of the room as the great steel door swung soundlessly closed behind him.

As it never failed to do, the busy hum of Research thrilled him with a sense of the vast massive scope of Security's incredibly complex operations. The chamber was more than thirty meters across. It was in the form of an amphitheater, with cir-

cles of desks descending toward the great central dais. There on a pivot, its axis inclined an exact  $24^{\circ} 48'$  from the vertical, the great globe of Mars majestically turned, its cities and trafficways and canals etched out in colors that were softly glowing or startlingly bright. Here a rhythmic green flash pinpointed one of Security's agents on active duty. There a crimson warning signal winked the presence of a known enemy operative. Patches of blue and orange indicated areas of military buildup or of temporary calm; white flashes showed Black Hat strongpoints under surveillance; .5's own bases were gold.

Any Black Hat field man would gladly have paid his life, and a bit more, for five minutes inside the Research chamber. It was the most secret installation in all Security's vast net. In it, any of the three hundred trained technicians seated at their rows of desks on each step of the circle could look up and, in a moment, identify a trouble signal, record a "mission accomplished", demand and get a dossier on any adult Martian citizen or guest, or put into operation any of .5's magnificently daring ventures. And what was most impressive about it all, thought Gull, was that this infinitely detailed accumulation of expertise was duplicated in full in one other place—in the fecund convolutions of .5's busy brain.

Gull observed that the appropriate face of Mars was toward him now. He quickly sought the lines of the canals, followed them to Syrtis Major, paused and frowned.

The whole mass of the area was glowing with a pale lavender radiance.

Gull stood puzzled and faintly worried, until one of the girls at the circling desks rose and beckoned him. As he approached she sat down again and waved him to a chair. "Good afternoon, Mr. Gull," she said. "One moment until I get your account records."

Gull grinned, more amused than otherwise. "Oh, come off it, Gloria," he said easily. "I know I was a stinker last night. But let's not hold grudges."

She said stiffly, "Thank you for waiting, Mr. Gull. I have your records now."

Gull's smile did not fade; he had observed the faint softening of the corners of her mouth. "Then let's get to it," he said genially.

Her fingers had been busy on the console. A faxed sheet emerged from a slit on the lip of her desk and she read it carefully, nodding.

"Ah, yes. I thought so," said the girl. "It's that flying saucer affair in Syrtis Major."

Gull's smile vanished. He smote his brow. "Flying saucers! Of course." Comprehension overspread his face and he nodded. "Saw the lavender on the globe, of course, but I must admit that for the moment I forgot my color-coding. Couldn't remember that it meant flying saucers."

The girl was looking at him ruefully. "Oh, dear," she sighed. "Johan, you've just earned yourself a one-hour refresher. You know .5's

a stickler for keeping color-coding in your head."

Gull groaned, but she was adamant. "No use fighting it. It'll do you good, dear. Now about this flying saucer thing."

She glanced over the faxed sheet to refresh her memory, then spoke. "About two weeks ago," she said, "a couple of old mica prospectors reeled in off the desert with a story about having been captured by strange, god-like creatures who landed near their camp in a flying saucer. There's a transcript of their stories on this tape—" she took a spool from a drawer of her desk and handed it to Gull—"but essentially what it comes to is that they said these creatures are so far superior to humans that they consider us to be domesticated animals at best."

"Have the same feeling myself from time to time," said Gull, pocketing the spool.

"I know *that*, dear. Anyway, nobody paid much attention. Not even when the prospectors swore they'd been given the power of walking through fire without being burned, putting themselves into catalepsy, even levitating themselves. However, then they began doing it in front of witnesses." She took another spool of tape from her desk, then two more.

"This one's synoptic eye-witness accounts. This one's a report from Engineering on possible ways that these phenomena may have been faked. And this other one's a rebuttal from Unexplained Data, covering similar unexplained phenomena of the past forty-odd years."

"Keep an even balance, don't we?" grinned Gull, pocketing the spools.

"For God's sake, Johan, don't get them mixed up. Well, anyway. About half of Syrtis Major decided the prospectors were fakes and tried to lynch them. The other half decided they were saints, and began to worship them. There's a whole revivalist religion now. They think that the saucer people own us—"

"Oh, yes," said Gull. "I know about that part." Indeed, it was hard not to have seen some of their riotous, chanting mass meetings, to dodge their interminable parades or to have failed to observe the slogans they had painted all over Marsport Dome.

"Then you won't need these other tapes." Gloria sat back, frowning over her checklist. "Well, that's about it, th—"

A bright golden light flashed on the girl's desk.

In the middle of a word she stopped herself, picked up the scarlet hushphone marked *Direct* and listened. She nodded. "Right, sir," she said, replaced the phone, made a quick notation on the fax sheet before her and returned to Gull.

"—en," she finished. "Any questions?"

"I think not."

"Then here are your operating instructions, submarine reservations, identification papers and disguise kit." She handed him another reel of tape, a ticket envelope, a punch-coded card with a rather good likeness of an idealized Johan Gull on it and a bottle of hair color.

Gull accepted them and stowed them away. But he paused at the girl's desk, looking at her thoughtfully. "Say. Would you like me to take you home tonight?"

"Good heavens, no. I haven't forgiven you that much." She made two check marks on the fax sheet. "Anyway, you won't have time."

"Why do you say that? My submarine doesn't leave for four hours—"

She smiled. "That call was from .5's office."

Gull said gloomily. "Cripes. I suppose that means extra lines."

"Absolutely essential you complete two one-hour refresher courses before leaving," the girl quoted. "McIntyre was quite emphatic. Said to remind you that .5 was a stickler for maintaining high levels of training; half-trained agents jeopardize missions." Gull sighed but surrendered. No doubt .5 was right. "What's the score?" he asked.

"One hour in color-code recognition, but don't think I reported you. Probably .5's office was monitoring us. The other — let me see — oh, yes. Basic fuse-spitting, refresher course. Good luck, Johan. Drop me a card from Syrtis Major."

Gull kissed her lightly and left. He paused in the entranceway, studying his tickets and operating orders. He was faintly puzzled.

That in itself was all right. He remembered and liked the feeling. It was a good sign; it was the operations where one couldn't quite see the drift at first that often turned out to be the most exciting and re-

warding. Yet he wished he knew how this mission was going to be.

He turned his back on the flickering, darting lights that came from the great turning Martian globe and began to trudge up the stairs. All right so Syrtis Major had got the wind up. Mass hysteria, surely. In itself, that sort of thing was hardly worth Security's while to bother with. There was no sign of the opposition's fine Macchiavellian hand in it, less reason to believe that there would be real danger.

Yet McIntyre had warned of "unusual danger."

Surely he was wrong. Unless . . .

Unless, thought Johan Gull with a touch of wonder, as he sat back in the barber's chair and felt the warm lather gliding along his cheek, as the shoeshine robot waited to pull the lever that would drop him into the chute to Plans & Training . . . unless there really *were* people from flying saucers on Mars.

### III

Smells of fungi, smells of the sea. The tang of hot-running metal machinery and the reek of stale sewage. Johan Gull expanded his chest and sucked in the thousand fragrances of the Martian waterfront as he shouted: "Boy! My bags. To my cabin, chop-chop!"

He followed the lascar-robot at a slow self-satisfied pace, dropping ashes from his panatella, examining the fittings of the submarine with the knowing eye of the old Martian hand. He did indeed feel well pleased with himself.

In the role Costumery had set up for him, that of a well-to-do water merchant from the North Polar Ice Cap, he had arrived at the docks in a custom Caddy. He cast largesse to the winds, ordered up a fine brandy to his cabin and immediately plunged into a fresh-water bath. When you were playing a part, it was as well to play a wealthy one, he thought contentedly; and when he had luxuriated in his bath for fifteen minutes and felt the throb of the hydrojets announce the ship's getting under weigh, he emerged to dress and play his tapes with a light heart.

To all intents and purposes, Gull must have seemed the very archetype of a rich water vendor of substantial, but not yet debilitating, age. He sat at ease, listening to the tapes through a nearly invisible earplug and doing his nails. He did not touch the eye patch which gave his face distinction, nor did he glance toward the framed portrait of Abdul Gamal Nasser behind which, he rather thought, a hidden camera-eye was watching his every move. Let them damned well look. They could find nothing.

He sat up, stretched, yawned lighted an expensive Pittsburgh stogie, blew one perfect smoke ring and resumed his task.

The *T Coronae Borealis* was a fine old ship of the Finucane-American line. As a matter of fact Johan Gull had voyaged in her more than a time or two before, and he looked forward with considerable pleasure to his dinner that night at the captain's table, to a spot of gambling

in the card room, perhaps—who knew?—to a heady tete-a-tete with one of the lovely ladies he had observed as he boarded. The voyage to Heliopolis was sixteen hours by submarine, or just time enough for one's glands to catch up with the fact that one had changed one's mise-en-scene. Ballistic rockets, of course, would do it in fifty minutes. In Johan Gull's opinion, ballistic travel was for barbs. And he was grateful that Mars's atmosphere would not support that hideous compromise between grace and speed, the jet plane. No, thought Gull complacently. Of all the modes of transport he had sampled on six worlds and a hundred satellites, submarining through the Martian canals was the only one fit for a man of taste.

He snapped off the last of the tapes and considered his position. He heard with one ear the distant, feminine song of *T Coronae's* nuclear hydrojets. Reassuring. With every minute that passed they were two-fifths of a mile closer to the junction of four canals where Heliopolis, the Saigon of Syrtis Major, sat wickedly upon its web of waters and waited for its prey.

Gull wondered briefly what he would find there. And as he wondered, he smiled.

The knock on the door was firm without being peremptory. "Another brandy, sir?" called a voice from without.

"No, thank you, steward," said Gull. No Martian water vendor would arrive at dinner half slopped over. Neither would Gull—if not



because of the demands of his role, then because of the requirements of good manners to the handiwork of *T. Coronae's* master chef. Anyway, he observed by his wrist chronometer that it was time to think things over.

He reviewed what he had heard on the tapes.

Those two prospectors, he thought. Damned confusing thing.

Their names, he recalled, were Harry Rosencranz and Clarence T. Reik. He had checked their dossiers back to pre-emigration days. There had been nothing of interest there: Rosencranz an ex-unemployed plumber from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Reik a cashiered instructor in guerrilla tactics from the nearby Command & General Staff School. Like so many of Earth's castoffs, they had scraped together money to cover passage to Mars, and enough over to outfit one expedition. They had managed to subsist ever since on what scrubby topazes they could scratch out of the sands of the Great Northern Desert. With, thought Hull, no doubt a spot of smuggling to make ends meet. Duty-free Martian souvenirs into the city, and chicle for the natives out. So much for Harry Rosencranz and Clarence T. Reik, thought Gull, blowing gently on the second coat of polish and commencing to buff his nails to a soft gleam. But it was not who the prospectors were that mattered. It was what they had had to say . . . and above all, what they had done.

Gull paused and frowned.

There was something he could

not recognize in the atmosphere. A soft hint of fragrance—tantalizing—it strove to recall something to him, but he could not be sure what. A place? But what place? A girl?

He shook his head. There could be no girl here. He put the thought from his mind and returned to the two prospectors and their strange story.

Their testimony far outran the parameters of normal credibility. Gull could repeat the important parts of what they had said almost verbatim. Reik had been the more loquacious of the two—

Well, Harry was like cooking up our mulligan outside the tent when I thought I heard him yell something. I stuck—

Q. One minute, Mr. Reik. You couldn't hear what he said clearly?

A. Well, not what you'd call clearly. You see I had the TV sound up pretty loud. Can't hear much when you got the TV sound up pretty loud.

Q. Go on.

A. Well, I just reached out and turned off the set and stuck my neck out the flap. Geez! There it was. Big as life and twice as scary. It was a flying saucer, all right. It glowed with like a sort of pearly light that made you feel—I dunno how to say it, exactly—like, peaceful.

Q. Peaceful?

A. Not only that. *Good*. It made me sorry I was such a rat.

Q. Go on.

A. Well, anyway, after a minute

a door opened with like a kind of a musical note. F sharp, I'd say. Harry, he thought it was F natural. Well, we got to fighting over that, and then we looked up and there were these three, uh, creatures. Extraterrestrials, like. They told us they had long watched the bickerings and like that of Earthmen and they had come to bring us wisdom and peace. They had this sealed book that would make us one with the Higher Creation. So we took a couple—

Q. They gave you each one?

A. Oh, no. I mean, they didn't give them to us. They *sold* them to us. Twenty-five bucks apiece. We paid them in topazes.

Q. You each had to have a book?

A. Well, they only work for one person, see? I mean, if it's anybody else's book you can't see it. You can't even tell it's there.

Gull frowned. It would be sticky trying to learn much about the book if one couldn't see it. Still, even if the book itself were invisible, its effects were tangible indeed — or so said the account on the tapes. Reik had described his actions on entering Heliopolis:

Harry he lemme his switchblade. I stuck it right through my cheeks, here. I didn't bleed a drop, and then I kind of levitated myself, and after a while I did the Indian Rope Trick, except since I just had my good necktie for a rope I couldn't get far enough up to disappear. You have to get like seventy five per

cent of your body height up before you disappear.

Q. Could you disappear if you had a long enough rope?

A. Hell, yes. Only I won't. You get to a higher cycle of psychic Oneness like me and you don't kid around with that stuff any more.

Q. Did you do anything else?

A. Well, not till after dinner. Then I put myself in a cataleptic trance and went to sleep. I didn't do that any more after that, though. Catalepsy doesn't really rest you. I was beat all the next day, but I figured, what the hell. I was still only on page seven.

Gull sighed, relit his stogie and contemplated the shimmering perfection of his nails.

And at that moment his door-chime sounded. Through the open switch of the announcer-phone came a sound of terrified sobbing and the throaty, somehow familiar voice of a frightened girl:

"Please! Open the door quickly, I 'ave to see you. I beg you to 'urry, Meesta Gull!"

Gull froze. He realized at once that something was amiss, for the name on his travel documents was not Gull. Steadily he considered the implications of that fact.

*Someone knew his real identity.*

Gull called, "One moment." He was stalling for time, while his mind raced to cope with the problems that deduction entailed. If his identity were known, then security had been breached. If security were breached, then his mission was com-

promised. If his mission were compromised—

Gull grinned tightly, careless of the possible camera-eye that would even now be recording his every move. If his mission were compromised the only intelligent, safe, approved procedure would be to return to Marsport and give it up. And that, of course, was what Johan Gull would never do.

Carefully, quickly, he slid into his socks and slippers, blew on his nails to make sure they were dry and threw open the door, one hand close to the quick-draw pocket in his lounging robe where his gun awaited his need.

"Thank God," whispered the girl at the doorway. She was lovely. A slim young blonde. Blue eyes, in which a hint of recent tears stained the eyeshadow at the corners.

Courteously Gull bowed. "Come in," he said, closing the door behind her. "Sit down, if you will. Would you care for coffee? A drop of brandy? An ice cream?"

She shook her head and cried: "Meesta Gull, your life is in 'ideous danger!"

Gull stroked his goatee, his smile friendly and unconcerned. "Oh, come off it, my dear," he said. "You expect me to believe *that*?" And yet, he mused, she was really beautiful, no more than twenty-seven, no taller than five feet three.

And the tiny ridge at the hemline of her bodice showed that she carried a flame pencil.

"You must believe me! I 'ave taken a frightful chance to come 'ere!"

"Oh, yes, no doubt," he shrugged, gazing at her narrowly. It was her beauty that had struck him at first, but there were more urgent considerations about this girl than her charms. For one thing, what was that she carried? A huge bag, perhaps; it almost seemed large enough to be a suitcase. For another—

Gull's brows came together. There was something about her that touched a chord in his memory. Somewhere . . . sometime . . . he had seen that girl before. "Why do you come here with this fantastic story?" he demanded.

The girl began to weep. Great soft tears streamed down her face like summer raindrops on a pane. But she made no sound and her eyes were steady on his. "Meesta Gull," she said simply, "I come 'ere to save your life because I must. I love you."

"Hah!"

"But it is true," she insisted. "I love you more than life itself, Meesta Gull. More than my soul or my 'opes of 'Eaven. More even than my children — Kim, who is six; Marie Celeste, four; or little Patty." She drew out a photograph and handed it to him. It showed her in a plain knitted suit, with the three children grouped around a Christmas tree.

Gull softened slightly. "Nice-looking kids," he commented, returning the picture.

"Thank you."

"No, really. I mean it."

"You're being kind."

Gull started to reply, then stopped himself.

For he was falling into the oldest trap in the business. He was allowing his gentler emotions to interfere with the needs of the assignment. In this business there was no room for sentiment, Gull thought wryly. Better men than he had been taken in by the soft passions and had paid for it, in death, in torture, in dismemberment—worst of all, in the failure of a mission. "Hell with all that stuff," he said gruffly. "I still can't accept your story."

"You must! The Black 'Ats 'ave a plan to kill you!"

He shook his head. "I can't take a stranger's word for it."

The tears had stopped. She gazed at him for a long, opaque moment. Then she smiled tantalizingly.

"A stranger, Meesta Gull?"

"That's what I said."

"I see." She nodded gravely. "We 'ave never met, eh? And therefore I could not possibly know something about you—oh, something that perhaps is very private."

"What are you talking about? Get to the point!"

"Something," she continued, her eyes veiled but dancing with amusement, "that perhaps you 'ave told no one else. A—shall we say—a sore lip, Meesta Gull? Received, perhaps, in an alley in the Syrian quarter of Marsport?"

Gull was startled. "Really! Now, look. I—confound it, how could you possibly know about that? I've mentioned it to no one!"

She inclined her head, a tender and mocking gesture.

"But it's true! And there was no

one there at the time! Not a single living soul but myself and the woman who trapped me!"

The girl pursed her lips but did not speak. Her eyes spoke for her. They were impudent, laughing at him.

"Well, then!" he shouted. He was furious at himself. There had to be some rational explanation! Why had he let her catch him off-balance like this? It was a trick, of course. It could be no more than that. There were a thousand possible explanations of how she could have found out about it—"Well, then! How did you know?"

"Meesta Gull," she whispered soberly, "please trust me. I cannot tell you now. In precisely seven minutes—" she glanced at her watch—"an attempt will be made on your life."

"Rot!"

Her eyes flamed with sudden anger. "Idiot!" she blazed. "Oh, 'ow I 'ate your harrogance!"

Gull shrugged with dignity.

"Very well! Die, then, if you wish it. The Black 'Ats will kill you, but I will not die with you." And she began to take off her clothes.

Johan Gull stared. Then soberly, calmly he picked up his stogie, relit it and observed, "Your behavior is most inexplicable, my dear."

"Hah!" The girl stepped out of her dress, her lovely face bitter with anger and fear. A delicate scent of chypre improved the air.

"This tactics will get you nowhere," said Gull.

"Pah!" She touched the catch on her carrying case. It fell open and

a bright rubbery coverall fell out, with mask and stubby, bright tanks attached.

"Good heavens!" cried Gull, startled. "Is that a warmsuit? SCUBA gear?"

But the girl said only, "You 'ave four minutes left."

"You're carrying this rather far, you know. Even if there are Black Hats aboard, we can't leave the submarine underwater."

"Three minutes," said the girl calmly, wriggling into her suit. But she was wrong.

The submarine seemed to run into a brick wall in the water.

They were thrown against the forward wall, a Laocoon of lovely bare limbs and rubbery warmsuit and Gull entwined in the middle. A huge dull sound blossomed around them. Gull fought himself free.

The girl sat up, her face a mask of terror. "Oh, damn the damn thing," she cried, shaking her wrist, staring at her watch. "I must've forgot to set it. Too late, Meesta Gull! We 'ave been torpedoed!"

#### IV

The warbling *wheep-wheep* of alarm signals blended with a confused shouting from the steerage holds below. The cabin lighting flickered, went out, tried once more, failed and was replaced by the purplish argon glow of the standby system. A racking, shuddering crash announced the destruction of the nuclear reactor that fed the hydro-jets; somewhere, water was pouring in.

"Urry, Meesta Gull!" cried the girl.

"Of course," said Gull, courteously assisting her with the warmsuit. He patted her shoulder. "Not to worry, my dear. I owe you an apology, I expect. At a more propitious time —"

"Meesta Gull! The bulkheads 'ave been sabotaged!"

Gull smiled confidently and turned to his escape procedures. Now that it was a matter of instant action he was all right. His momentary uncertainty was behind him.

Coolly he reached into his pocket, unsnapped the little packet of micro-thin Standing Orders and scanned their titles. "Let me see, now. Checklist for air evacuation — no. Checklist for enemy attack, artillery. Checklist for enemy attack, ICBM. Checklist for —"

"Meesta Gull," she cried, with real fear in her voice. "Ave you forgotten that these waters are the 'abitat of the Martian piranha? You must 'urry!"

"Well, what the devil do you think I'm doing? Now be still; I have it here." And crossly Gull began to check off the items under *Submarine torpedoing, Martian canals*: Secret papers, maps, halazone tablets, passports, poison capsule, toothbrush, American Express card . . . with metronome precision he stowed them away and instantly donned his own SCUBA gear. "That's the lot," he announced, glancing distastefully at the dirty froth of water that was seeping under the door. "We might as well be off, then." He lowered the



SCUBA mask over his face — and raised it again at once, to fish out a packet of Kleenex in its waterproof packet and add it to his stores. "Sorry. Always get a sniffly nose when I'm torpedoed," he apologized, and flung open the door to the passageway.

A three-foot wall of water broke into the cabin, bearing with it a short-circuited purser-robot that hummed and crackled and twitched helplessly in a shower of golden sparks. "Outside, quick!" cried Gull, and led the way through the roiled, tumbling waters.

The brave old *T Coronae Borealis* had taken a mortal wound. Half wading, half swimming, they fought strongly against the fierce drive of inwelling waters toward an escape hatch. In the dim purple gleam of the standby circuits they could see little. But they could hear much — shouts, distant screams, the horrid sounds of a great ship breaking up.

There was nothing they could do. They were lucky to be able to escape themselves.

And then it was nothing; a few strong strokes upward, a minute of clawing through the gelid, fungal mass that prevented the canals' evaporation and had concealed their water from Earthly telescopes for a hundred years — and they were safe. Armed and armored in their SCUBA gear, they had no trouble with the piranhas.

Gull and the girl dragged themselves out on the bank of the sludgy canal and stared back at the waters, gasping for breath. There were ominous silent ripples and whorls. They

watched for long minutes. But no other head appeared to break the surface.

Gull's face was set in a mask of anger. "Poor devils," he allowed himself, no more.

But in his heart he was resolved. A hundred men, women and robots had perished in the torpedoing of the *T Coronae*. Someone would pay for it.

Across the burning ochre sands they marched . . . then trudged . . . then stumbled. The pitiless sun poured down on them.

"Meesta Gull," sobbed the girl. "It is 'ot."

"Courage," he said absently, concentrating on making one foot move, and then the other. They had many miles to go. Gull's maps had indicated a nearly direct route from the canal along the Sinus Sabaeus where the submarine was slowly beginning to rust, straight across the great hot sweep of Syrtis Major to Heliopolis. A direct route. But it was not an easy one.

Step, and step. Gull thought sardonically of the two prospectors who had come out of this desert to start all the trouble. When they entered Heliopolis it had been on a magic carpet that slid through Mars's thin air like a knife. Nice to have one now, he thought — though exhaustive tests had shown the carpet itself to be a discontinued Sears, Roebuck model from the looms of Grand Rapids. But somehow they had made it work —

He sighed and called a halt. The girl fell exhausted to the sands.

"Meesta Gull," she whispered, "I cannot go much farther."

"You must," he said simply. He fell to studying his maps, checking the line of sight to the distant hills that passed, on Mars, for mountains. "Right on," he murmured with satisfaction. "See here. Seven more miles west and we're in the Split Cliffs. Then bear left, and —"

"You are not 'uman! I must 'ave rest—water!"

Gull only shrugged. "Can't be helped, my dear. But at least the sun will be behind us, now. We can do it."

"No, no!"

"Yes," said Gull sharply. "Good God, woman! Do you want to be caught out here after dark?" He sneezed. "Excuse me," he said, fumbling a Kleenex out of the packet and wiping his nose.

"Five minutes," she begged.

Johan Gull looked at her thoughtfully, dabbing at his nose. He had not solved the mystery she presented. There was every reason to be on guard. Yet she had truly warned him of the torpedoing of the submarine, and surely she could be no threat to him out here, as piteously weakened as she was. He replaced his breathing guard and dropped the Kleenex to the ground. A moment later the empty pack followed. It had been the last.

But Gull merely scuffed sand over it with his foot and said nothing; no sense adding to her worries. He said chivalrously, "Oh, all right. And by the way, what's your name?"

She summoned up enough reserves

of strength to smile coquettishly. "Alessandra," she murmured.

Gull grinned and nudged her with his elbow. "Under the circumstances," he chuckled, "I think I'll call you Sandy, eh?"

"Don't jest, Meesta Gull! Even if we survive this trip, you 'ave still the Black 'Ats to face in "Eliopolis."

"I've faced them before, my dear. Not to worry."

"'Ave you seen what they can do now? With their creatures from outer space?"

"Well, now. But I'll think of something."

She looked at him for a long and thoughtful minute. Then she said, "I know you will, Meesta Gull. It is love that tells me so."

## V

Step, and step. In Mars's easy grasp a man can lift much, jump high. But to slog through desert sands is little easier than on Earth; the sliding grains underfoot rob him of strength and clutch at his stride. They were near exhaustion, Gull knew with clarity; and for the past half mile the girl had been calling to him.

Gull closed his ears to her. He kept his eyes on his own lengthening shadow before him, even when he heard her sobbing. They had no strength to spare for conversation.

"Meesta Gull," she whispered brokenly. "Wait, please."

He kept on grimly, head down, feet moving like pendulums.

"Meesta Gull! But I must ask you something."



Over his shoulder he murmured, "No time for that, old girl. Keep walking."

"But I 'ave to know."

"Oh, for God's sake," he said, and waited for her to catch up. "What is it now?"

"Only this, Meesta Gull. If we are heading west, why is the sun behind us?"

"Really, Sandy! I swear you have no consideration at all!"

"I am most sorry, Meesta Gull. I only asked."

"You only asked," he repeated bitterly. "You only asked! And now you know what I have to do? I have to stop and take out the maps and waste all kinds of time just to satisfy your damned curiosity. Of course we're heading west!"

"I really am very sorry."

"And the reason the sun's behind us—Well, if you knew geometry—Look here. I'll show you on the map."

She fell to the ground again as he pored over the charts, frowning at the horizon, returning to his grid lines. At length his expression cleared.

"I thought so," he said triumphantly. "Perfectly simple, my dear. Up you get."

With rough tenderness he helped her to her feet and set off again, smiling. She did not speak at first, but presently she ventured: "Meesta Gull, we are heading toward the sun now. And these seem to be our own footprints we are retracing."

Gull patted her good-humoredly. "Don't worry, Sandy."

"But, Meesta Gull—"

"Will you for God's sake shut up?" Confounded women, thought Gull. How they did go on! And he might have said something harsh to the poor girl, except that that occurred which drove all thoughts of compass headings from both their minds.

There was a terrible thunder of many hooves.

Alessandra whimpered and clutched his arm. Gull stopped short, waiting; and over a rise in the ochre sands came a monstrous gray-green creature with six legs. It was huge as an elephant and its look was deadly; and it bore a rider, a huge, manlike, green-skinned creature with four arms, holding a murderous-looking lance.

The thout, for such it was, skidded to a stop before them. Its monstrous rider dismounted with a single leap.

For an endless second the creature glared at them through narrowed, crimson eyes. Then it laughed with a sound of harsh and distant thunder.

"Ho!" it cried, tossing the lance away. "I won't need this for such as you! Prepare to defend yourself, Earthling—and know that you face the mightiest warrior of the dead sea bottoms, Tars Tarkas of Thark!"

The girl cried out in terror. Johan Gull gripped her shoulder, trying to will strength and courage into her.

It was damnably bad luck, he thought, that they should somehow have taken the wrong turn. Clearly they had blundered into pri-

vate property . . . and he had a rather good idea of just whose property they had blundered into.

He stepped forward and said, "Wait! I believe I can settle this to everybody's satisfaction. It's true that we don't have tickets, Tars Tarkas, but you see we were torpedoed in the Sinus Sabaeus and had no opportunity to pass the usual admission gate."

"Wretched Earthling!" roared the monster. "If I issue you tickets there is a ten per cent surcharge; I don't make Barsoomland policy, I only work here. What say you to that?"

"Done!" cried Gull, and amended it swiftly. "Provided you'll accept my American Express card—otherwise, you see, I have the devil of a time with the old expense account."

The creature bared yellow fangs in a great, silent laugh. But it interposed no objection, and the card was quickly validated by comparison with the Barsoomian's built-in magnetic file. Tars Tarkas nodded his enormous head, swiftly wrote them out two lavender slips and roared: "Here you are, sir. If you wish to exchange them for regular family-plan tickets at the gate there will be a small refund . . . I am assuming the lady is your wife," he twinkled. "And now, welcome to Barsoomland. Be sure to visit the Giant Sky Ride from the Twin Towers of Helium, in the base of which are several excellent restaurants where delicious sandwiches and beverages may be obtained at reasonable prices. Farewell!"

"I think not," said Gull at once. "Don't go. We need transportation."

"By the hour or contract price?" parried the Martian.

"Direct to Heliopolis. And no tricks," warned Gull. "I've taken this ride fifty times. I know what the meter should show."

Muttering to himself, the creature leaped up on his throat and allowed them to clamber behind. And they were off.

The motion of the thout was vaguely disconcerting to the sense of balance, like a well trained camel or a very clumsy horse. But it ate up the miles. And for a nominal fee Tars Tarkas consented to supply them with food and drink.

Gull ate quickly, glanced at the girl to make sure she was all right—which she was, though a trifle green and apparently not greatly interested in food—and set to work to question the Thark. "You've had some interesting goings-on," he yelled up toward the enormous head.

"It is even so, Earthling," tolled Tars Tarkas's great voice.

"Flying saucers and that sort of thing."

The bright red eyes regarded him. "Evil things!" roared the Thark somberly. "May Iss bear them away!"

"Oh, I certainly hope that too," agreed Gull. He was hanging on to the Barsoomian's back, his face at about the level of the creature's lower left-hand armpit, and carrying on a conversation presented difficulties. But he persevered. "Have you seen any of it yourself?" he

asked. "Psionics or any of that? UFOs? Little green monsters?"

"Watch your mouth!" cried the Barsoomian, enraged.

"No, no. *Little green monsters. Nothing personal.*"

The Thark glared at him with suspicion and hostility for a moment. Then the huge, reptilian face relaxed. The Thark muttered. "Not now. When we get to Heliopolis, go to the—"

The voice broke off. Tars Tarkas cocked a pointed ear, and stared about.

With a whirring, whining sound, something appeared over the dunes. The girl cried out and clutched at Gull, who had little comfort to give her. Whatever it was, it was not of this planet—or of any other that Johan Gull had ever seen. It had the shape of a flying saucer. It glittered in the blood-red, lowering sun, arrowing straight toward them. As it drew near they could see the markings on its stern:

U.F.O. Cumrovin 2nd  
Giant Rock, Earth

"Blood of Issus!" shouted the Barsoomian. "It's one of *them!*"

Tars Tarkas bellowed animal hatred to the dark Martian sky and raised his lance. Fierce white fires leaped from its tip—struck the alien vessel, clung and dropped away. The craft was unharmed.

It soared mockingly, tantalizingly overhead for a moment, seeming to dare them to fire on it again. Then a single needle of ruby light darted out of its side, reached down

and touched Tars Tarkas between his bright red eyes.

The Barsoomian seemed to explode.

The concussion flung them from the throat. Dazed, stunned, aching in every bone, Johan Gull managed to drag himself to his feet and look around.

The alien spacecraft was gone. The girl lay stunned and half-unconscious at his feet. Yards away Tars Tarkas was a giant mound of gray-green flesh and bright metal parts, writhing faintly.

Gull staggered over to the creature and cradled the ravaged head in his lap.

The scarlet eyes stared sightlessly into his. The ruin of a mouth opened.

"We . . . are property," whispered Tars Tarkas thickly, and died.

## VI

Once, when Johan Gull was very young, the newest and least reliable of cogs in Security's great machine, he had been assigned to Heliopolis to counter a Black Hat ploy. Or not quite that, he admitted; he had been sent to add a quite unimportant bit of information to the already huge store that the agent operating on the scene already had. He had envied that agent, had young Johan Gull. He had looked with jealous eyes about the bright, dizzying scenes of Heliopolis and dreamed of a time when he too might be a senior agent in charge, himself a major piece in the Game, squiring a lovely lady on an errand

of great consequence, in the teeth of dreadful danger.

All the fun of it was in the anticipation, he thought as they rode into Heliopolis lock on their battered boat, checked it at the Avis office and dismounted. If only Tars Tarkas had survived to tell what he knew!

But he had not; and Gull was uneasily aware that he knew no more now than when he left Marsport. Still, he thought, brightening, this was Heliopolis, the Saigon of Syrtis Major. He might get killed. He might not be able to protect this lovely and loving girl from mischance. He might even fail in his mission. But he was bound to have a hell of a time.

They found rooms at the Grand and parted to freshen up. Overhead the city's advertising display flashed on the thin, yellowish clouds of Mars, on, off—on, off:

### HELIOPOLIS

The Wickedest City in the Worlds  
Liquor \* Gambling \* Vice  
The Family That Plays Together  
Stays Together

And indeed, Gull saw, the pleasure-seekers who thronged the courses and the lobby of the Grand had often enough brought the kiddies. He watched them sentimentally as the bellthing trundled his luggage toward the elevators. It would be most pleasant to spend a holiday here, he thought, with someone you loved. With Alessandra, perhaps. Perhaps even with Kim, Marie Celeste and little Patty . . .

But he could not afford thoughts like that; and he quickly showered, shaved, put on a clean white suit and met the girl in the great gleaming cocktail lounge of the Grand.

"Ello, Meesta Gull," she said softly, her eyes dark and somehow laughing.

Gull regarded her thoughtfully. She was sight worth regarding, for the girl in the cocktail lounge was nothing like the bedraggled, terrified creature in the ochre sands. Her green-blue eyes were smoky with mystery. Her leongsam, deeply slit, revealed the gleam of a bronzed rounded thigh. A whisper of some provocative scent caressed him; but it was not her charms that had him bemused; it was something else. His eyes narrowed. Somewhere, he thought. Some time . . .

She laughed. "You are thoughtful," she said. "Will you 'ave a drink with me?"

"The pleasure is all mine," he said gallantly.

"Unless you have other plans?" she inquired. There was no doubt about it; she was poking fun at him.

He rose to her mood. "It's the least I could do, my dear—seeing you saved my life."

"Ah! Life." She glanced wryly at him from the corner of her eye. "What is it, this 'life' I 'ave saved? Can one taste it? Can one carry it to bed?"

Gull grinned. "Perhaps not, but I'm rather attached to mine." He ordered drinks, watched carefully while they were made, then nodded and raised his glass. "Of course," he

added, "I've saved your life too—I guess, let's see—oh, perhaps three times. From Tars Tarkas. From dying by thirst. From the saucer people. So you actually owe me about three to one, lifesaving-wise."

"Three to two, dear Meesta Gull," the girl whispered over the rim of her glass.

"Two? Oh, I think not. Just the torpedoing, really, and as a matter of fact I'm not sure you should get full credit for that. You *were* a little tardy there."

She shook her head. "Yes, the torpedoing—and something else. 'Ave you forgotten? The old warehouse? The — incident — which caused your sore lip?"

Gull stared at her, then brought his glass down with a crash. "Got it!" he shouted. "I remember now! . . . Oh, damn it, sorry," he went on, shaking his head. "It was on the tip of my tongue, but I've lost it. Sorry."

He stared at her moodily and drained his glass. "No matter. I'll think of it. I promise you that."

The girl laughed softly, then sobered. "Meanwhile," she said, "we 'ave some more important business 'ere." And she nodded toward the great crystal pane that opened on the thronged boulevards of Helipolis.

Gull followed the direction of her glance and saw at once what she meant. A demonstration was in progress. A hundred straggling, shouting marchers were carrying placards with as many harsh and doctrinaire slogans:

Let the Space People Save You!  
*We Are Property*

Why Is the Air Force Covering  
Up Sightings?

Gull said abruptly, "Let's take a look."

The girl rose without answering and together they walked out to the terrace. The shouts of the demonstrators smote them like a fist. Gull could barely distinguish the cadenced words in the roar of sound: "*Make . . . Mars . . . the tomb of skepticism,*" over and over in time to their march until it changed to "Welcome UFOs *now!* Welcome UFOs *now!*"

"They take it seriously," he murmured. Alessandra did not answer; he glanced at her, then followed the direction of her gaze. A man in stained coveralls, eyes fixed on them, was pushing his way in their direction through the crowd. He was tall, and not young. His face was lined with the ineradicable burn of a life spent on the Martian desert.

Gull stroked his goatee to hide a thrill of excitement that tingled through him. This could be it: The break he was looking for.

The man stopped just below them, looking up. "Hey, you!" he bawled. "You Gull?"

Gull shouted carefully, "That's my name, yes."

"Well, where the devil you been? We been waiting for you!" cried the man in irritable tones. He reached up, clutched at a carved projection on the face of the terrace, raised himself and swung to face the crowd. "Hey, everybody!" he shout-

ed. "That's the fella that thinks UFOs are phony! This way! You! Look here!"

Heads were beginning to turn. The ragged line of marchers slowed, Gull whispered to the girl, whose presence he could feel shivering beside him: "Careful! I don't know what he's going to do. If it looks like trouble—run!"

But he could not hear her answer, if she made one, for the man was turning back to him again. In the diminished sound of the street his raucous yell sounded clearly: "All right, Gull! You think our supranormal powers're all a lotta crud, see what you think of this!" And he made a snatching motion at what, as far as Gull could see, was empty air; caught something, squeezed it in his fist; turned toward Gull and threw it.

There was nothing in the man's hand.

But that nothing spun toward Gull like a pinwheeling comet, huge and bright and deadly; it hummed and sang shrilly of hate and destruction; it rocketed up toward him like an onrushing engine of destruction. And something in it sapped his will. He stood frozen, impotent to move.

Vaguely he felt a stir of motion beside him. Hazily he knew that the girl was thrusting at him, shouting at him, hurling him aside. Too late! The hurtling doom came up and struck him—just a corner brushing against his head as he fell—but enough; worlds crashed; hell-bombs roared in his skull; he dropped, away and away, endlessly down into . . . into . . . he could not see,

could not guess what it was; but it was filled with terror and pain and doom.

But then he was awake again, and the girl was weeping over him; he could feel her teardrops splashing on his face.

Gull coughed, gasped, clutched at his pounding skull and pushed himself erect. "What—What—"

"Oh, thank 'eaven! I was afraid 'Arry 'ad killed you!"

"Apparently not," he said dizzily; and then, "Harry who? How do you know who that fellow was?"

"What does it matter?" she cried. Bright tears hung unshed in her eyes.

"Well, it kind of matters to me," said Gull doubtfully, looking around. They were no longer on the terrace. Somehow she had lugged him back into the greater security of the cocktail lounge. A waiter was hanging over them, whirring in a worried key.

"Harry Rosencranz!" he cried suddenly. The girl nodded. "Sure! And he knew I was coming. Well, that tears it. My cover's blown for sure." He glared at the waiter and said, "Don't just stand there. Bring us a drink." The thing went away, warbling unhappily to itself. It had not been programmed for this sort of thing.

Indeed Gull needed a drink. The reality of supranormal powers was a phenomenon of a totally different kind than the contemplation of them at a distance. The tapes about Reik and his partner had been interesting; the reality was terrifying.

He seized the glass as soon as offered and drained it; and then he turned to Alessandra. "You've got some explaining to do," he said.

The tears were very near the surface now.

She waited.

"How did you know it was Rosencranz?" he demanded. "And the torpedoing—you knew about that. And don't think I've forgotten that we've met before . . . somewhere . . . don't worry, I'll think of where it was."

She inclined her head, hiding her face.

"You're working for someone, aren't you?" Her silence was answer enough. "A nice girl like you! How'd you get into this?" He shook his head, mystified.

"Ah, Meesta Gull," she said brokenly, "it's the old, old story. My 'usband—dead. My little ones—'ungry. And what could I do? And now they 'ave me in their power."

"Who?"

"The Black 'Ats, Meesta Gull. Yes, it is true. I am in the employ of your enemy."

"But damn it, girl! I mean, you said you loved me!"

"I do! Truly! Oh, 'ow I do!"

"Now, wait a minute. You can't love *me* and work for *them*," objected Gull.

"I can too! I do!"

"Prove it."

She flared, "'Appily! 'Ow?"

Gull signaled for another drink. He smiled at the girl quite fondly. "It's very simple," he said. "Just take me to your leader."

It took a bit of doing, but the girl did it. She returned from a series of cryptic telephone conversations and looked at Gull with great, fearful eyes. "I 'ave arranged it," she said somberly. "You will be allowed in. But to get out again—"

Gull laughed and patted her hand. He was not worried.

Still, he admitted to himself a little later, things *could* get a bit difficult. Security precautions for the Black Hats were in no way less stringent than those of Gull's own headquarters in Marsport. He allowed himself to be seated in a reclining chair while a gnomelike old dentist drilled a totally unneeded filling into a previously healthy tooth; and when he rose, the exit through which he left the office brought him to a long, dark tunnel underground.

The girl was waiting there silently to conduct him to his destination. She placed a finger across her lips and led him away. "Wait a minute," Gull whispered fiercely, looking about. For there were interesting things here. Off the corridor were smaller chambers and secondary tunnels filled with all sorts of objects shadowy and objects small. Gull wanted very much to get a look at them. Those tiny disjointed doll-shapes! what were they? And the great gleaming disk section beyond?

But the girl was pleading, and Gull allowed himself to be led away.

She conducted him to a door. "Be careful," she whispered. And she was gone, and Gull was face

to face with the chief of the Black Hats in Heliopolis.

He was a tall, saturnine man. He sat at a desk that reflected gold and green lights into his face, from signals that Gull could not see. "Oodgay eveningway," he said urbanely. "Ah, I see you are perplexed. Perhaps you do not speak Solex Mal."

"Afraid not. English, French, Cretan Linear B, Old Ganymedan's about the lot."

"No matter. I am familiar with your tongue as we speak it all the time on Clarion." He leaned forward suddenly. Gull stiffened; but it was only to hand him a calling card. It glittered with evil silver fires, and it read:

T. Perlman  
*Clarion*

"Clarion's a planet? I never heard of it."

Perlman shrugged. Obviously what Gull had heard of did not matter. He said, "You are a troublemaker, Mr. Gull. We space people do not tolerate troublemakers for long."

"As to that," said Gull, stroking his goatee. "it seems to me you had a couple of shots at doing something about it. And I'm still here."

"Oh, no, Mr. Gull," said Perlman earnestly. "Those were only warnings. Their purpose was only to point out to you that it is not advisable to cause us any trouble. You have not as yet done so. of course. If you do—" He smiled.

"You don't scare me."

"No, Mr. Gull?"

"Well, I mean, not much anyway. I've been lots more scared than this."

"How interesting," Perlman said politely.

"And anyway, I have my job to do and I'm going to do it."

Perlman pursed his lips and whispered into a microphone on his desk. There was a stirring of draperies at the back of the room. It was shadowed there; Gull could see no details.

But he had a moment's impression of a face looking out at him, a great, sad, mindless long face with teeth like a horse and an air of infinite menace; and then it was gone. He cried, "You're up to some trick!"

Perlman smirked knowingly.

"It won't do you any good! You think you know so much."

"Ah, if only I did, Mr. Gull! There are forces in this universe which even we of Clarion have not yet understood. The straight-line mystery, to name one. The Father's plan."

Gull took a deep breath and carefully, inconspicuously, released it. He was doing no good here. And meanwhile there were matters just outside this room that urgently required investigation — and attention. He said steadily, "I'm going to go now, Mr. Perlman. If you try to stop me I'll shoot you."

Perlman looked at him with an expression that suspended judgment for a moment. Then it came to a conclusion and broke into a shout of laughter. "Ho!" he choked. "Hah! Oh, Mr. Gull, how delicious to think





WOOD

you will be allowed to leave. As we say in Solex Mal, otway ustcray!"

Gull did not answer. He merely moved slightly, and into his hand leaped the concealed 3.15-picometer heat gun.

Perlman's expression changed from fire to ice.

"I'll leave you now," said Gull. "Next time you have a visitor, search his goatee too, won't you?"

Ice were Perlman's eyes. Icy was the stare that followed Gull out the door.

But he was not safe yet, not while the horse-faced killer was presumably lurking somewhere about. The girl appeared silently and put her hand in his.

Gull gestured silence and strained his hearing. These tunnels were so dark; there were so many cul-de-sacs where an assassin could hide —

"Listen," he hissed. "Hear it? There!"

From the shadows, distant but approaching, came the sound of an uneven step. Tap, *clop*. Tap, *clop*.

The girl frowned. "A man with one leg?" she guessed.

"No, no! Can't you recognize it? It's a normal man — *but with one shoe hanging loose.*"

She caught her breath. "Oh!"

"That's right," said Gull somberly, "the old shoelace trick. And I haven't time to deal with him now. Can you draw him off?"

She said steadily, "If I 'ave to, I can."

"Good. Just give me five minutes. I want to look around and — effect some changes, I think." He listened,

the step was closer now. He whispered, "Tall, long-faced man with big teeth. I think that's him. Know him?"

"Certainly, dear Meesta Gull. Clarence T. Reik. 'E's a killer."

Gull grinned tautly; he had thought as much. The partner of Harry Rosencranz, of course; one had attacked him at the hotel, the other was stalking him with a sharpened shoelace in the warrens under the city. "Go along with you then," he ordered. "There's a good girl. Remember, five minutes."

He felt the quick brush of her lips against his cheek. "Give me 'alf a minute," she said. "Then, dear Meesta Gull, *run.*"

And she sprang one way, he another. The approaching tap, *clop* paused a split-second's hesitation.

Then it was going after her, its tempo rapid now, its sound as deadly as the irritable rattle of a basking snake.

Gull had his five minutes. He only prayed that it had not been bought at a higher price than he wanted to pay.

There in the Black Hat warrens under Heliopolis Johan Gull fulfilled the trust .5 placed in him. He had only moments. Moments would be enough. For almost at once he knew. And he leaned against the nitered stone walls of the catacomb, marveling at the depth and daring of the Black Hat plan. Before him a chamber of headless, limbless mannikins awaited programming and assembly. They were green and tiny. In another chamber six flying sau-

cers stood in proud array. Each of them held a ring of leather-cushioned seats. Behind him was a vast hall where signpainters had left their handiwork for the moment: *Read the OAH SPE Bible*, cried one sign; *Five Minutes for \$5*. And another clamored, *Welcome to UFOland*.

Gull nodded in unwilling tribute. The Black Hats had planned well . . .

A sound of light, running footsteps brought him back to reality. The pale shadow of the girl raced toward him. "Well done!" he whispered, urging her on. "Just one more time around and I'll be through."

"It's 'ot work, dear Meesta Gull," she laughed, but she obeyed. He froze until she was out of sight, and the lumbering dark figure that followed her. And then he set to work.

When she came by again he was ready.

Quickly he leaped to the center of the corridor, gestured her to safety. She concealed herself in a doorway, panting, her eyes large but unafraid. And the pounding, deadly sound of her pursuer grew louder.

Fourteen semester hours of karate, a seminar in *le savate* and a pair of brass knuckles. All came to the aid of Johan Gull in that moment, and he had need of them. He propelled himself out of the shadows feet first, directly into the belly of the huge, long-faced man who was shambling down the dimly lit corridor. The man's eyes were dull but his great yellowed teeth were bared in a grin as he moved ferally along the stone floor, a thin, lethal wand in one hand, dangerous, ready.

Ready for a fleeing victim. Not ready for Johan Gull.

For Gull came in *under* the deadly needle. Even as he was plunging into the man's solar plexus he was reaching up with one hand, twisting around with the other. It was no contest. Gull broke the weapon-bearing arm between wrist and elbow, butted the man into paralysis, kicked him in the skull as he fell, snatched the weapon and was away, the girl trailing behind him.

"Hurry!" he called. "If he comes to, they'll box us in here!" As he ran he worked one tip of the stiffened shoelace. Ingenious! Twisted one way, it slipped into limpness; twisted the other, it extended itself to become a deadly weapon. Gull chuckled and cast it away. Up the stairs they ran and through the cover dentist's office. The gnomelike dentist squalled in surprise and ran at them with a carbide drill, hissing hatred; but Gull chopped him down with the flat of a hand. They were free.

And the final battle was about to be fought.

## VIII

"You 'ave a plan, Meesta Gull?"

"Of course." He glanced about warily. No Black Hats were in sight as he led her through the bright, opulent doors of the Helio-polis Casino.

"You are going to fight them single-'anded?"

"Fight? My dear girl! Who said anything about fighting?" The chef

de chambre was bowing, smiling, welcoming them in.

"But — But — But if you do not fight them, dear Meesta Gull, then 'ow will you proceed?"

Gull grinned tautly and led her to the bar, from which he could observe everything that was going on. He said only, "Money. No more questions now, there's a good girl."

He called for wine and glanced warily about. The Casino was host that night, as it was every night, to a gay and glittering crowd. Behind potted lichens a string trio sawed away at Boccherini and Bach, while the wealthiest and most fashionable of nine planets strolled and laughed and gamed away fortunes. Gull sipped his wine and stroked his goatee, his eyes alert. Now, if he had gauged his man aright . . . if he had assessed the strategy that would win correctly . . .

It could all be very easy, he thought, pleased. And he could enjoy a very pleasant half hour's entertainment into the bargain.

Gull smiled and stroked the girl's hand. She responded with a swift look of trust and love. In the glowing silky fabric of the dress he had commandeered for her she was a tasty morsel, he thought. Once this Black Hat ploy had been countered, there might be time for more light-hearted pursuits —

"Attend!" she whispered sharply.

Gull turned slowly. So near his elbow as to be almost touching stood the tall, saturnine figure of Perlman. They stood for a moment in a tension of locked energies, eyes gazing into eyes. Then Perlman nodded

urbanely and turned away. Gull heard him whisper to a passing houseman, "Atthay's the erkjay."

Gull leaned to the girl. "I don't speak Solex Mal," he said softly. "You'll have to translate for me."

She replied faithfully, "E just identified you to the 'ouseman."

He gave her an imperceptible nod and followed Perlman with his eyes. The Black Hat did not look toward Gull again. Smiling, exchanging a word now and then with the other guests, he was moving steadily toward the gaming tables. Gull allowed himself to draw one deep breath of satisfaction.

Score one for his deduction! Perlman was going to play.

He nodded to the girl and began to drift toward the tables himself. Give it time, he counseled himself. There's no hurry. Let it build. You were right this far, you'll be right again.

"Believe I'll play a bit," he said loudly. "Won't you sit here and watch, my dear?"

Silently the girl took a seat beside him at the table. Casually — but feeling, and relishing, the cold gambling tinge that spread upward from the pit in his stomach, inflaming his nerves, speeding the flow of his blood in his veins — Gull gestured to the croupier and began to play.

He did not look across the table at the polite, assured face of Perlman. He did not need to. This game had only two players — or only two that mattered. As he took the dice for his first turn, Gull reflected with comfort and satisfaction that soon there would be only one.

Half an hour later he was all but broke.

Across the table Perlman's expression had broadened from polite interest, through amusement to downright contempt. Gull's own face wore a frown; his hands shook, angering him; he felt the first cold pricklings of fear.

Confound the man, thought Gull, his luck is fantastic! If indeed it was luck. But no, he told himself angrily, he could not cop out so cozily; the tables were honest. Face truth: He had simply run up against a superb gambler.

"Hell of a time for it to happen," he grumbled.

The girl leaned closer. "Pardon? You spoke?"

"No, no," Gull said irritably, "I — uh, was just thinking out loud. Listen. You got any money on you?"

She said doubtfully, "Perhaps . . . a little bit . . ."

"Give it to me," he demanded. "No! Under the table. I don't want everybody to see." But it was too late; across the table Perlman had not missed the little byplay. He was almost laughing openly now as he completed his turn and passed the dice to Gull.

Gull felt himself breathing hard. He accepted the thin sheaf of bills from the girl, glanced at it quickly. Not much! Not much at all for what he had to do. He could stretch it out, make it last — but for how long? And with the game running against him . . .

Silently Gull cursed and studied the table. Before him the wealth of an empire was piled in diamond

chips and ruby, in pucks of glittering emerald and disks of glowing gold.

Politely the croupier said, "It is your play, m'sieur."

"Sure, sure." But still Gull hesitated. To gain time he tossed the girl's wad down before the croupier and demanded it be exchanged for chips.

Across the table Perlman's look was no longer either amusement or contempt. It was triumph.

Gull took a deep breath. This was more than a game, he reminded himself. It was the careful carrying out of a thoughtfully conceived strategy. Had he lost sight of that?

Once again in control of himself, he took out a cigarette and lighted it. He tipped the gleaming, flat lighter and glanced, as though bored, at its polished side.

Tiny in the reflection he could see the moving, bright figures in the room, the gorgeously dressed women, the distinguished men. But some were not so distinguished. Some were lurking in the draperies, behind the potted lichens. A great pale creature with teeth like a horse, eyes like a dim-brained cat. Another with the mahogany face of a prospector off the Martian plains. And others.

Perlman's men had come to join him. The moment was ready for the taking.

Abruptly Johan Gull grinned. Risk it all! Win or lose! Let the game decide the victor — either he would clean out Perlman here and now, and starve out his larger game for lack of the cash to carry it through, or he himself would lose.

He said the croupier, "Keep the chips. Take these too." And he pushed over all his slim remaining stack.

"You wish to build, m'sieur?" it asked politely.

"Exactly. A hotel, if you please. On the—" Gull hesitated, but not out of doubt; his pause was only to observe the effect on Perlman—"yes, that's right. On the Boardwalk."

And Gull threw the dice.

Time froze for him. It was not a frightening thing; he was calm, confident, at ease. The world of events and sensation seemed to offer itself to him for the tasting—the distant shout of the UFO demonstrators in the streets—*poor fools! I wonder what they'll do when they find they've been duped; Alessandra's perfumed breath tickling his ear—sweet, charming girl; the look of threat and anger on Perlman's face; the stir of ominous movement in the draperies. Gull absorbed and accepted all of it, the sounds and scents, the bright moving figures and the glitter of wealth and power, the hope of victory and the risks. But he did not fear the risks. He saw Ventnor Avenue and Marvin Gardens looming ahead of his piece on the board and smiled. He was certain the dice were with him.*

And when the spots came up he seemed hardly to glance at them; he moved his counter with a steady hand, four, five, eight places; came to rest on "Chance", selected a card from the stack, turned it over and scanned its message.

He looked up into the hating eyes of Perlman. "Imagine," he breathed. "I appear to have won second prize in a beauty contest. You'll have to give me fifteen dollars."

And Perlman's poise broke. Snarling, he pushed across the chips, snatched the dice from Gull and contemptuously flung them down. The glittering cubes rattled and spun. Gull did not have to look at the board; the position was engraved on his brain. A five would put Perlman on Park Place, with four houses: damaging, but not deadly. An eight or higher would carry him safely to "Go" and beyond, passing the zone of danger and replenishing his bankroll. But a seven . . . Ah, a seven! The Boardwalk, with a hotel! And the first die had already come to rest, displaying a four.

The second stopped.

There was a gasp from the glittering crowd as three bright pips turned upward to the light.

Gull glanced down at the dice, then across at Perlman. "How unfortunate," he murmured politely, extending a hand to Perlman—and only Perlman could see the bright, deadly little muzzle that pointed out of it toward him. "You seem to have landed on my property. I'm afraid you've lost the game."

— And he was up and out of his chair, standing clear, as the pencil of flame from the shelter of the draperies bit through the smoky air where his head had just been.

"Down!" he shouted to the girl and snapped a shot at Rosencranz; heard that man's bellow of pain and saw, out of the corner of his eye,

that the girl had disobeyed his order; she had drawn a weapon of her own and was trading shot for shot with the Black Hats that ringed the room. "Idiot!" Gull cried, but his heart exulted *Good girl!* even as he was turning to blast the next Black Hat. There were nine of them, all armed, all drawing their weapons or, like Rosencranz, having fired them already. It was not an equal contest. Five shots from Gull, five from the girl — she missed one — and all the Black Hats were on the floor, writhing or very still. All but one. Perlman! Whirling back to face him, Gull found he was gone.

But he couldn't be far. Gull caught the flicker of motion in the gaping crowd at the door that showed where he had gone, and followed. At the entrance Gull caught a glimpse of him and fired; at the corner, plunging through a knot of milling, excited UFOlogists, Gull saw him again — almost too late. Coolly and cleverly Perlman had waited him out, his own weapon drawn now. The blast sliced across the side of Gull's head like a blow from a cleaver; stunned, hurting, Gull drove himself on.

And as Perlman, gaping incredulously, turned belatedly to flee again, he tripped, and stumbled, and Gull was on him. His head was roaring, his hold on consciousness precarious; but he pinned Perlman's arms in a desperate flurry of strength and panted, "That's enough! Give it up or I'll burn your head off." The trapped man surged up but Gull withstood it and cried: "Stop! I want to take you back to .5

alive — don't make me kill you!" The Black Hat spat one angry sentence; Gull gasped and recoiled; Perlman grabbed for the weapon, they struggled —

A bright line of flame leaped from the gun to Perlman's forehead; and in that moment the leader of the Black Hats in Heliopolis ceased to be.

Waves of blackness swept over Johan Gull. He fell back into emptiness just as the girl came running up, dropped to the ground beside him, sobbing, "Johan! My dear, dear Meesta Gull;"

Hurt and almost out he managed to grin up at her. "Cash in my chips for me," he gasped. "We've won the game!"

## IX

And then it was roses, roses all the way. The local Bureau Chief appeared and efficiently arranged for medical attention, fresh clothes and a drink. The girl stayed beside him while Gull dictated a report and demanded immediate reservations back to Marsport — for *two*, he specified fiercely. They were produced, and by the time they disembarked and headed for the War Room Gull was nearly his old self. He was admitted at once to .5's office, and recognized it as a mark of signal favor when the girl was allowed in with him.

They stood there, proud and silent, in the presence of .5 and his secretary, and Gull's hand was firm on the girl's. What a thoroughbred she was, he thought admiringly, not-

ing from the corner of his eye how her gaze took in every feature of the room so few persons had ever seen; how she studied .5's somber expression and hooded eyes, but did not quail before them; how patiently and confidently she waited for McIntyre to leave off writing in his notebook and speak to them. She would be a fit wife for him, thought Johan Gull with quiet certainty; and she would make a fine agent for Security. And so would Kim, and Marie Celeste, and little Patty. A very successful mission all around, thought Gull cheerfully, thinking of the wad of bills that Perlman's losses had put into his wallet.

"When you're *quite* ready, Gull," said McIntyre.

Gull jumped. "Oh, sorry," he said. "Excuse me, sir," he added to .5, whose expression showed no particular resentment at being kept waiting while one of his agents was wool-gathering, merely the usual patient weariness. "I guess you want a report."

".5 has already seen your report," McIntyre reproved him. "He is a little concerned about your failure to obey standing orders, of course. A live captive is worth a lot more than a dead loser."

"Well, yes, I know that's right. But —" Gull hesitated.

"Well?"

Gull flushed and turned to .5 himself. "You see, sir, it was something Perlman *said*. Nasty sort of remark. Cheap. Just what you'd expect, from — Anyway, sir, it was about you. He said —" Gull swallowed, feeling self-conscious and

stupid. The warm pressure of the girl's hand showed him her sympathy, but he still felt like twelve kinds of a fool bringing it up.

"Gull! Spit it out before .5 loses his patience!"

Gull shrugged, looked his chief in the eye and said rapidly, "Perlman said you've been dead since '97, sir." And he waited for the blow to fall.

Surprisingly, it did not. .5 merely continued to look at him, silently, levelly, appraisingly. There was not even a hint of surprise in his expression. At length McIntyre laughed one sharp, desiccated sort of laugh and Gull turned gratefully toward him, glad to be taken off the hook. "Nonsense, of course, McIntyre," he said. "I really hated to have to say it."

But McIntyre was raising a hand, chuckling in a sort of painful way, as though laughter hurt him. "Never mind, Gull," he said. "After all, you're not expected to evaluate information. Just go on and do your job. And now, .5 had best be left alone for a while; there are other matters concerning us, you know."

And, very grateful to have it happen, Gull found himself and the girl outside. He discovered he was sweating. "Whew," he exclaimed. "Wouldn't want to go through *that* again. And now, my dear, I suggest a drink — thereafter a wedding — then a honeymoon. Not necessarily in that order."

"Gladly, dearest Meesta Gull!" she cried. "And I don't give a 'ang about the order!"

END



# MOON DUEL

by FRITZ LEIBER

*Out there on the face of  
the moon was his enemy —  
and also his only friend!*

**F**irst hint I had we'd been spotted by a crusoe was a little *tick* coming to my moonsuit from the miniradar Pete and I were gaily heaving into position near the east end of Gioja crater to scan for wrecks, trash, and nodules of raw metal.

Then came a *whish* which cut off the instant Pete's hand lost contact with the squat instrument. His gauntlet, silvery in the raw low polar sunlight, drew away very slowly, as if he'd grown faintly disgusted with our activity. My gaze kept on turning to see the whole shimmering back of his helmet blown off in a gorgeous sickening brain-fog and blood-mist that was already falling in the vacuum as fine red snow.

A loud *tock* then and glove-sting as the crusoe's second slug hit the miniradar, but my gaze had gone back to the direction Pete had been facing when he bought it—in time to see the green needle-flash of the crusoe's gun in a notch in Gioja's low wall, where the black of the shadowed rock met the gem-like starfields along a jagged border. I unslung my Swift\* as I dodged a long step to the side and squeezed off three shots. The first two shells must have traveled a touch too high, but the third made a beautiful fleeting violet globe at the base of

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\* All-purpose vacuum rifle named for the .22 cartridge which as early as 1940 was being produced by Winchester, Remington, and Norma with factory loads giving it a muzzle velocity of 4,140 feet, almost a mile, a second.

the notch. I didn't show me a figure, whole or shattered, silvery or otherwise, on the wall or atop it, but then some crusoes are camouflaged like chameleons and most of them move very fast.

Pete's suit was still falling slowly and stiffly forward. Three dozen yards beyond was a wide black fissure, though exactly how wide I couldn't tell because much of the opposite lip merged into the shadow of the wall. I scooted toward it like a rat toward a hole. On my third step, I caught up Pete by his tool belt and oxy tube while his falling front was still inches away from the powdered pumice, and I heaved him along with me. Some slow or overdrilled part of my brain hadn't yet accepted he was dead.

When I began to skim forward, inches above the ground myself, kicking back against rocky outcrops thrusting up through the dust—it was like fin-swimming. The crusoe couldn't have been expecting this nut stunt, by which I at least avoided the dreamy sitting-duck slowness of safer, higher-bounding moon-running, for there was a green flash behind me and hurtled dust faintly pittered my soles and seat. He hadn't been leading his target enough. Also, I knew now he had shells as well as slugs.

I was diving over the lip three seconds after skoot-off when Pete's boot caught solidly against a last hooky outcrop. The something in my brain was still stubborn, for I clutched him like clamps, which made me swing around with a jerk.

But even that was lucky, for a bright globe two yards through winked on five yards ahead like a mammoth firefly's flash, but not quite as gentle, for the invisible rarified explosion-front hit me hard enough to boom my suit and make the air inside slap me. Now I knew he had metal-proximity fuses on some of his shells too—they must be very good at mini-stuff on his home planet.

The tail of the pale green flash showed me the fissure's bottom a hundred yards straight below and all dust, as 90 percent of them are—pray God the dust was deep. I had time to thumb Extreme Emergency to the ship for it to relay automatically to Circumluna. Then the lip had cut me off from the ship and I had lazily fallen out of the glare into the blessed blackness, the dial lights in my helmet already snapped off—even they might make enough glow for the crusoe to aim by. The slug had switched off Pete's.

Ten, twelve seconds to fall and the opposite lip wasn't cutting off the notched crater wall. I could feel the crusoe's gun trailing me down—he'd know moon-G, sticky old 5-foot. I could feel his tentacle or finger or claw or ameboid bump tightening on the trigger or button or what. I shoved Pete away from me, parallel to the fissure wall, as hard as I could. Three more seconds, four, and my suit boomed again and I was walloped as another green flash showed me the smooth-sifted floor moving up and beginning to hurry a little. This flash was a

hemisphere, not a globe—it had burst against the wall—but if there were any rock fragments they missed me. And it exactly bisected the straight line between me and Pete's silvery coffin. The crusoe knew his gun and his Luna—I really admired him, even if my shove had pushed Pete and me, action and reaction, just enough out of the target path. Then the fissure lip had cut the notch and I was readying to land like a three-legged crab, my Swift reslung, my free hand on my belted dust-shoes.

**E**leven seconds' fall on Luna is not much more than two on earth, but either are enough to build up a velocity of over 50 feet a second. The dust jarred me hard, but thank God there were no reefs in it. It covered at least all the limbs and front of me, including my helmet-front—my dial lights, snapped on again, showed a grayness fine-grained as flour.

The stuff resisted like flour, too, as I unbelted my dust-shoes. Using them for a purchase, I pulled my other arm and helmet-front free. The stars looked good, even gray-dusted. With a hand on each shoe, I dragged out my legs and, balancing gingerly on the slithery stuff, got each of my feet snapped to a shoe. Then I raised up and switched on my headlight. I hated that. I no more wanted to do it than a hunted animal wants to break twigs or show itself on the skyline, but I knew I had exactly as long to find cover as it would take the crusoe to lope from the notch to the

opposite lip of the fissure. Most of them lope very fast, they're that keen on killing.

*Well, we started the killing, I reminded myself. This time I'm the quarry.*

My searchlight made a perverse point of hitting Pete's shimmering casket, spread-eagled, seven-eighths submerged, like a man floating on his back. I swung the beam steadily. The opposite wall was smooth except for a few ledges and cracks and there wasn't any overhang to give a man below cover from someone on top.

But a section of the wall on my side, not fifty yards away, was hugely pocked with holes and half-bubbles where the primeval lava had foamed high and big against the feeble plucking of lunar gravity. I aimed myself at the center of that section and started out. I switched off my headlight and guided myself by the wide band of starfields.

You walk dust-shoes with much the same vertical lift and low methodical forward swing as snowshoes. It was nostalgic, but hunted animals have no time for memory-delicatessen.

Suddenly there was more and redder brightness overhead than the stars. A narrow ribbon of rock along the top of the opposite wall was glaringly bathed in orange, while the rim peaks beyond glowed faintly, like smoldering volcanoes. Light from the orange ribbon bounced down into my fissure, caroming back and forth between the walls until I could dimly see again the holes I was headed for.

The crusoe had popped our ship — both tanks, close together, so that the sun-warmed gasses, exploding out into each other, burned like a hundred torches. The oxy-aniline lasted until I reached the holes. I crawled through the biggest. The fading glow dimly and fleetingly showed a rock-bubble twelve feet across with another hole at the back of it. The stuff looked black, felt rough yet diamond-hard. I risked a look behind me.

The ribbon glow was darkest red — the skeleton of our ship still aglow. The ribbon flashed green in the middle — a tiny venomous dagger — and then a huge pale green firefly winked where Pete lay. He'd saved me a fourth time.

I had barely pushed sideways back when there was another of those winks just outside my hole, this one glaringly bright, its front walloping me. I heard through the rock faint *tings* of fragments of Pete's suit hitting the wall, but they may have been only residual ringings, from the nearer blast, in my suit or ears.

I scrambled through the back door in the bubble into a space which I made out by crawling to be a second bubble, resembling the first even to having a back door. I went through that third hole and turned around and rested my Swift's muzzle on the rough-scooped threshold. Since the crusoe lived around here, he'd know the territory better wherever I went. Why retreat farther and get lost? My dial lights showed that about a minute and a half had gone by since Pete bought it. Also, I wasn't losing pressure and I

had oxy and heat for four hours — Circumluna would be able to deliver a rescue force in half that time, if my message had got through and if the crusoe didn't scupper them too. Then I got goosy again about the glow of the dial lights and snapped them off. I started to change position and was suddenly afraid the crusoe might already be trailing me by my transmitted sounds through the rock, and right away I held stock still and started to listen for *him*.

No light, no sound, a ghost-fingered gravity—it was like being tested for sanity-span in an anechoic chamber. Almost at once dizziness and the sensory mirages started to come, swimming in blue and burnt and moaning from the peripheries of my senses — even waiting in ambush for a crusoe wouldn't stop them; I guess I wanted them to come. So though straining every sense against the crusoe's approach, I had at last to start thinking about him.

It's strange that men should have looked at the moon for millennia and never guessed it was exactly what it looked like: a pale marble graveyard for living dead men, a Dry Tortuga of space where the silver ships from a million worlds marooned their mutineers, their recalcitrants, their criminals, their lunatics. Not on fertile warm-blanketed earth with its quaint adolescent race, which such beings might harm, but on the great silver rock of earth's satellite, to drag out their solitary furious lives, each with his

suit and gun and lonely hut or hole, living by recycling his wastes; recycling, too, the bitter angers and hates and delusions which had brought him there. As many as a thousand of them, enough to mine the moon for meals and fuel-gases and to reconquer space and perhaps become masters of earth—had they chosen to cooperate. But their refusal to cooperate was the very thing for which they'd been marooned, and besides that they were of a half thousand different galactic breeds. And so although they had some sort of electronic or psionic or what-not grapevine—at least what happened to one maroon became swiftly known to the others—each of them remained a solitary Friday-less Robinson Crusoe, hence the name.

I risked flashing my time dial. Only another thirty seconds gone. At this rate it would take an eternity for the two hours to pass before I could expect aid *if* my call had got through, while the crusoe—As my senses screwed themselves tighter to their task, my thoughts went whirling off again.

Earthmen shot down the first crusoe they met—in a moment of fumbling panic and against all their training. Ever since then the crusoes have shot first, or tried to, ignoring our belated efforts to communicate.

I brooded for what I thought was a very short while about the age-old problem of a universal galactic code, yet when I flashed my time dial again, seventy minutes had gone somewhere.

That really froze me. He'd had time to stalk and kill me a dozen times—he'd had time to go home and fetch his dogs!—my senses couldn't be *that* good protection with my mind away. Why even now, straining them in my fear, all I got was my own personal static: I heard my heart pounding, my blood roaring, I think for a bit I heard the Brownian movement of the air molecules against my eardrums.

What I hadn't been doing, I told myself, was thinking about the crusoe in a systematic way.

He had a gun like mine and at least three sorts of ammo.

He'd made it from notch to fissure-lip in forty seconds or less—he must be a fast looper, whatever number feet; he might well have a jet unit.

And he'd shot at the miniradar ahead of me. Had he thought it a communicator?—a weapon?—*or some sort of robot as dangerous as a man...*?

My heart had quieted, my ears had stopped roaring, and in that instant I heard through the rock the faintest *scratching*.

*Scratch-scratch, scratch-scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch* it went, each time a little louder.

I flipped on my searchlight and there coming toward me across the floor of the bubble outside mine was a silver spider as wide as a platter with four opalescent eyes and a green-banded body. Its hanging jaws were like inward-curving notched scissor blades.

I fired by automatism as I fell back. The spider's bubble was filled

with violet glare instantly followed by green. I was twice walloped by explosion-fronts and knocked down.

That hardly slowed me a second. The same flashes had shown me a hole in the top of my bubble and as soon as I'd scrambled to my feet I leaped toward it.

I did remember to leap gently. My right hand caught the black rim of the hole and it didn't break off and I drew myself up into the black bubble above. It had no hole in the top, but two high ones in the sides, and I went through the higher one.

I kept on that way. The great igneous bubbles were almost uniform. I always took the highest exit. Once I got inside a bubble with no exit and had to backtrack. After that I scanned first. I kept my searchlight on.

I'd gone through seven or seventeen bubbles before I could start to think about what had happened.

That spider had almost certainly not been my crusoe — or else there was a troop of them dragging a rifle like an artillery piece. And it hadn't likely been an hitherto-unknown, theoretically impossible, live vacuum-arthropod — or else the exotic biologists were in for a great surprise and I'd been right to wet my pants. No, it had most likely been a tracking or tracking-and-attack robot of some sort. Eight legs are a useful number, likewise eight hands. Were the jaws for cutting through suit armor? Maybe it was a robot pet for a lonely being. Here, Spid!

The second explosion? Either the

crusoe had fired into the chamber from the other side, or else the spider had carried a bomb to explode when it touched me. Fine use to make of a pet! I giggled. I was relieved, I guess, to think it likely that the spider had been "only" a robot.

Just then — I was in the ninth or nineteenth bubble — the inside of my helmet misted over everywhere. I was panting and sweating and my dehumidifier had overloaded. It was as if I were in a real peasouper of a fog. I could barely make out the black loom of the wall behind me. I switched out my headlight. My time dial showed seventy-two minutes gone. I switched it off and then I did a queer thing.

I leaned back very carefully until as much of my suit as possible touched rock. Then I measuredly thumped the rock ten times with the butt of my Swift and held very still.

Starting with ten would mean we were using the decimal system. Of course there were other possibilities, but . . .

Very faintly, coming at the same rate as mine, I heard six thuds.

What constant started with six? If he'd started with three, I'd have given him one, and so on through a few more places of pi. Or if with one, I'd have given him four — and then started to worry about the third and fourth places in the square root of two. I might take his signal for the beginning of a series with the interval of minus four and rap him back two, but then how could he rap me minus two? Oh why

hadn't I simply started rapping out primes? Of course all the integers, in fact all the real numbers, from thirty seven through forty one had square roots beginning with six, but which one...?

Suddenly I heard a scratching...

My searchbeam was on again, my helmet had unmisted, my present bubble was empty.

Just the same I scuttled out of it, still trending upward where I could. But now the holes wouldn't trend that way. They kept going two down for one up and the lines of bubbles zigzagged. I wanted to go back, but then I might hear the scratching. Once the bubbles started getting smaller. It was like being in solid black suds. I lost any sense of direction. I began to lose the sense of up-down. What's moon-gravity to the numbness of psychosis? I kept my searchlight on although I was sure the glow it made must reach ten bubbles away. I looked all around every bubble before I entered it, especially the overhang just above the entry hole.

Every once in a while I would hear somebody saying Six! Six? Six! like that and then very rapidly seven - eight - nine - five - four - three two one - naught. How would you rap naught in the decimal system? That one I finally solved: you'd rap ten.

Finally I came into a bubble that had a side-hole four feet across and edged at the top with diamonds. Very fancy. Was this the Spider Princess' boudoir? There was also a top hole but I didn't bother with

that — it had no decor. I switched off my searchlight and looked out the window without exposing my head. The diamonds were stars. After a bit I made out what I took to be the opposite lip of the fissure I'd first dove in, only about one hundred feet above me. The rim-wall beyond looked vaguely familiar, though I wasn't sure about the notch. My time dial said one hundred eighteen minutes gone as I switched it off. Almost time to start hoping for rescue. Oh great! — with their ship a sitting duck for the crusoe they wouldn't be expecting. I hadn't signaled a word besides Extreme Emergency.

I moved forward and sat in the window, one leg outside, my Swift under my left arm. I plucked a flash-grenade set for five seconds from my belt, pulled the fuse and tossed it across the fissure, almost hard enough to reach the opposite wall.

I looked down, my Swift swinging like my gaze.

The fissure lit up like a boulevard. Across from me I knew the flare was dropping dreamily, but I wasn't looking that way. Right below me, two hundred feet down, I saw a transparent helmet with something green and round and crested inside and with shoulders under it.

Just then I heard the *scratching* again, quite close.

I fired at once. My shell made a violet burst and raised a fountain of dust twenty feet from the crusoe. I scrambled back into my bubble, switching on my search-

light. Another spider was coming in on the opposite side, its legs moving fast. I jumped for the top-hole and grabbed its rim with my free hand. I'd have dropped my Swift if I'd needed my other hand, but I didn't. As I pulled myself up and through, I looked down and saw the spider straight below me eyeing me with its uptilted opalescent eyes and doubling its silver legs. Then it straightened its legs and sprang up toward me, not very fast but enough against Luna's feeble gravitational tug to put it into this upper room with me. I knew it mustn't touch me and I mustn't touch it by batting at it. I had started to shift the explosive shell in my gun for a slug, and its green-banded body was growing larger, when there was a green blast in the window below and its explosion-front, *booming* my suit a little, knocked the spider aside and out of sight before it made it through the trap door of my new bubble. Yet the spider didn't explode, if that was what had happened to the first one; at any rate there was no second green flash.

My new bubble had a top hole too and I went through it the same way I had the last. The next five bubbles were just the same too. I told myself that my routine was getting to be like that of a circus acrobat—except who stages shows inside black solidity?—except the gods maybe with the dreams they send us. The lava should be transparent, so the rim-wall peaks could admire.

At the same time I was thinking

how if the biped humanoid shape is a good one for medium-size creatures on any planet, why so the spider shape is a good one for tiny creatures and apt to turn up anywhere and be copied in robots too.

The top hole in the sixth bubble showed me the stars. while one half of its rim shone white with sunlight.

Panting, I lay back against the rock. I switched off my searchlight. I didn't hear any scratching.

The stars. The stars were energy. They filled the universe with light, except for hidey holes and shadows here and there.

Then the number came to me. With the butt of my Swift I rapped out five. No answer. No scratching either. I rapped out five again.

Then the answer came, ever so faintly. Five knocked back at me.

Six five five—Planck's Constant, the invariant quantum of energy. Oh, it should be to the minus 29th power, of course, but I couldn't think how to rap that and, besides, the basic integers were all that mattered.

I heard the *scratching*...

**I** sprang and caught the rim and lifted myself into the glaring sunlight...and stopped with my body midway.

Facing me a hundred feet away, midway through another top-hole—he must have come very swiftly by another branch of the bubble ladder—he'd know the swiftest ones—was my green-crested crusoe. His face had a third eye where a man's



nose would be, which with his crest made him look like a creature of mythology. We were holding our guns vertically.

We looked like two of the damned, half out of their holes in the floor of Dante's hell.

I climbed very slowly out of my hole, still pointing my gun toward the zenith. So did he.

We held very still for a moment. Then with his gun butt he rapped out ten. I could both see and also hear it through the rock.

I rapped out three. Then, as if the black bubble-world were one level of existence and this another, I wondered why we were going through this rigamarole. We each knew the other had a suit and a gun (and a lonely hole?) and so we knew we were both intelligent and knew math. So why was our rapping so precious?

He raised his gun—I think to rap out one, to start off pi.

But I'll never be sure, for just then there were two violet bursts, close together, against the fissure-wall, quite close to him.

He started to swing the muzzle of his gun toward me. At least I think he did. He must know violet was the color of my explosions. I know I thought someone on my side was shooting. And I must have thought he was going to shoot me—because a violet dagger leaped from my Swift's muzzle and I felt its sharp recoil and then there was a violet globe where he was standing

and moments later some fragment *twinged* lightly against my chest—a playful ironic tap.

He was blown apart pretty thoroughly, all his constants scattered, including—I'm sure—Planck's.

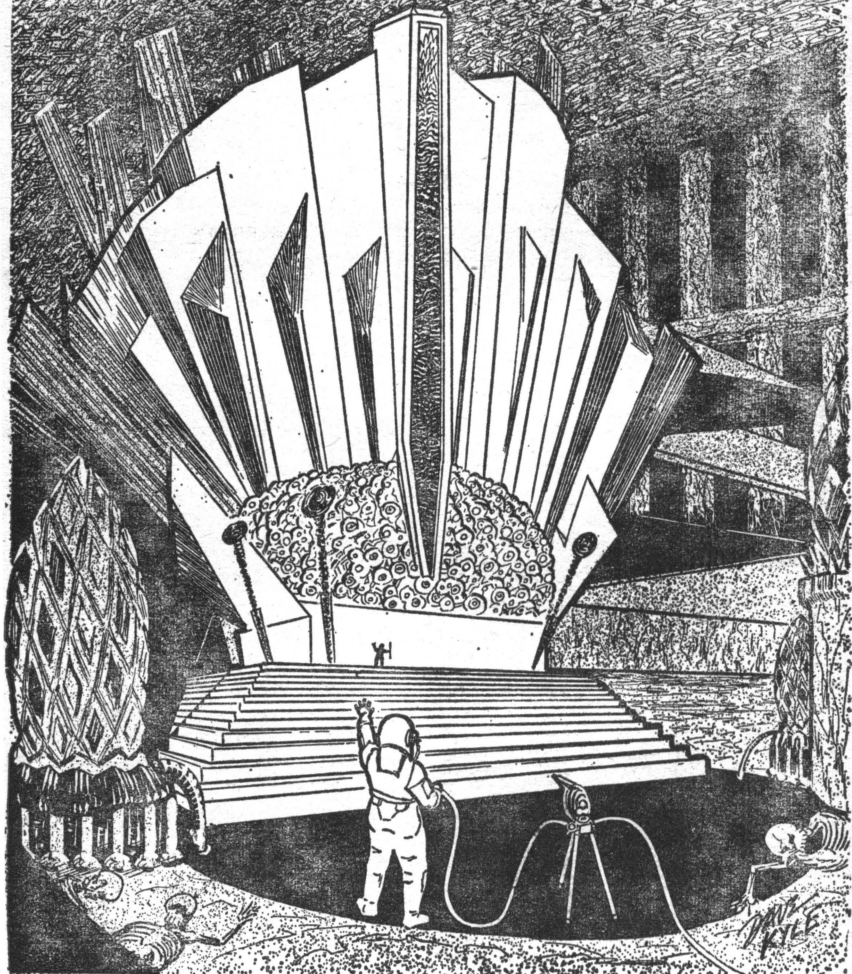
**I**t was another half hour before the rescue ship from Circumluna landed. I spent it looking at earth low on the horizon and watching around for the spider, but I never saw it. The rescue party never found it either, though they made quite a hunt—with me helping after I'd rested a bit and had my batteries and oxy replenished. Either its power went off when its master died, or it was set to "freeze" then, or most likely go into a "hide" behavior pattern. Likely it's still out there waiting for an incautious earthman, like a rattlesnake in the desert or an old, forgotten land mine.

I also figured out, while waiting in Gioja crater, there near the north pole on the edge of Shackleton crater, the only explanation I've ever been able to make, though it's something of a whopper, of the two violet flashes which ended my little mathematical friendship-chant with the crusoe. They were the first two shells I squeezed off at him—the ones that skimmed the notch. They had the velocity to orbit Luna and the time they took—two hours and five minutes—was right enough.

Oh, the consequences of our past actions!  
END



# THE PLANET

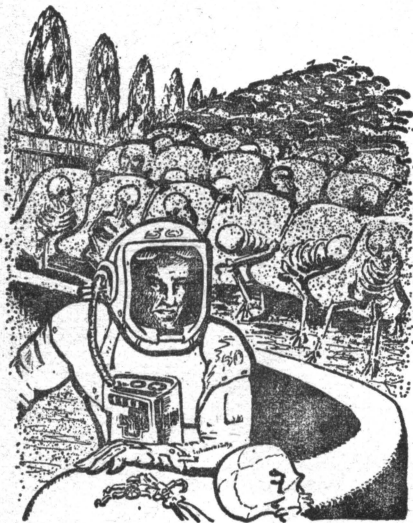


# PLAYER

by E. CLAYTON McCARTY

*The planet was made for a race not human. Humanity could only live on it by paying its price!*

Illustrated by KYLE



OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION FORM XB 3205:  
Sub-departments to Galactic Development Commission

ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT: Paleontology — Archeology, Planetary Survey

SUBJECT: Tentative report, Explorer II, assignment 128, 5 January, 2083 through 19 September, 2083

POINTS COVERED: Preliminary investigation of planet designated S-60, reported by Scout Ship Ceres as bearing signs of a lost civilization, deaths of expedition members

ORIGINATING OFFICER: C. D. Maxwell, research assistant

**I**t is tempting to read time backwards and come up with something like, "The moment I stepped aboard the ship I knew our expedition was doomed." To stuff one's ego as a critic of the past is easier than as a creator of moments yet to come.

The nearest to any precognition I can claim is a muddled unhappy impression after meeting Director Litzanov, first his high-pitched nasal voice carried to me on chill winds, and second, his words. "You are younger than Banning led me to expect, Doctor Maxwell. I assume he can still select a capable representative in his field, but you look like an undergraduate."

Next he indicated my guitar on the luggage cart. "Do you make noise with that in addition to the piano Banning mentioned? Wouldn't a reference library of micro-books make better use of your space allotment?"

But my colleagues didn't think so. Soon after *Explorer II* lifted into space they gathered regularly in the crowded little ward room to ask for music. Litzanov never attended.

I caught Jim Larsen, our geologist, watching me quizzically after one of those dogged pass-throughs. My face must have sagged like an old time astronaut's at five G's because Jim chuckled. "What has he got against music?" I growled.

"You're dealing with someone completely tone-deaf," Jim answered. "Also, sound in measured tempo sends him into a frenzy."

Looking backward I might have picked up another foreshadowing hint of trouble. They hauled a stowaway from a supply locker, probably the first in space travel history, a scrawny kid of fifteen. I heard Larsen's incredulous exclamation, "So Binky finally made it!"

Commander Jacobs muttered, "He made it all right. Somebody should have clobbered him the first day he wandered on the base."

Jim gave me the score. "Binky's a deaf-mute. Father was one of the early explorer pilots—died young from radiation. A lot of those early spacers' kids didn't get born right."

And the captain growled, "It's a hell of a problem to have on your back for the next ten months. I can message the mother, but—" He roared at the crew members. "Get the boy for'ard."

I didn't like the way they yanked Binky to his feet. The men were surly after the commander's angry lecture and not inclined to handle the stowaway with gentleness. To see a dog kicked makes me soft-headed: I stuck my neck out. "Why not turn him over to me? I'll see that he stays out of your way."

Litzanov's dry nasality echoed down the passageway. "I suggest that you do not add responsibilities which might interfere with efficiency of your work, Doctor Maxwell. This problem does not concern the research party."

Temper boils when somebody tries to push me around, and needs an effort to choke down. I tramped on my impulse to answer and dropped an arm across Binky's shoulders.

Even old hands on *Explorer II* had never seen anything like the planet we were assigned to examine. When we broke out into normal space-time it revolved there on the black canvas of an endless cosmos like a bright light—not blindingly sharp as a sun, but radiating a pale violet nimbus which lent a deceptive transparency to the sphere, as if the molten sheen of its heart rock somehow found a way to the surface. Everyone who could crowd to a viewport stayed there, fascinated. Magnifications showed the most completely landscaped areas any of us had ever seen, as if the entire planet had come under one central plan of formal gardening—park regions of deliberately designed wildness, shaded roadways laid out specifically for appearance of their patterned crossings from the air, buildings whose shapes, colors and spacing upon the land brought a pleasurable response aesthetically.

Massive mountain ranges topped by cliffs of a quartz-like stone stretched across the world, all with a north-south orientation, so that during approach orbit we seemed to be peering at a globe upon which longitudinal lines had been traced in relief. From these came the shimmering aura of the planet.

By conduction of volcanic incandescence deep in its interior? By absorption and reflection from its sun? We never became certain. Due to this luminescence the night side only subdued daylight and tinged it with a deeper violet cast, so that there was never complete darkness.

“Those cliffs must be gigantic

crystal formations,” Jim Larsen muttered. “What else could explain the way light appears to be conducted through them?”

We touched down upon a dead world. Nothing about the pleasant meadow where we landed should have given such an impression, but it lurked there like an infusion of the peculiar psychic miasma which permeates the air of a cemetery. Warmth of late spring should have sent men, long imprisoned within a claustrophobic capsule, to cavorting wildly across lush grass flats, but even the most insensitive stepped off our landing stage as if he were entering a cathedral. We stood, and looked silently, and knew that the race which had built so wonderfully had ceased to exist.

There was no bird song, no thin sibilance of insects, no whirr of wind, no distant voice of animal or man. And yet I sensed something all around me, almost as if it were sound, not recognizable to ears, however, as resonance. To my musician's acuteness it seemed to possess pitch, though I could not have argued that point successfully. Jim Larsen was inclined to think it a psychological response to a strange environment.

I tried to find words for describing the phenomenon as it affected me. In the day's warmth I thought of it as a pitch far above the ability of human ears to respond. When night touched us it seemed something below the threshold of hearing, frequencies below the deepest notes of a river beating itself to froth against the walls of a gorge.

below the darkness of a dream. And yet I had not been aware of when that change in pitch occurred — if it had.

## II

I discovered then why I had seen Director Litzanov on the news screens so frequently; he was not unacquainted with the persuasive powers of personal publicity. He deserved accolades; he knew his own field and could perform in it with distinction. But like most administrators he actively spread his own image and the more spectacular aspects of his accomplishments, omitting by purposeful oversight anything which might remind the public that his newsworthy activities depended upon cooperative investigation by many trained minds supplying pieces for the mosaic in which he could center himself.

And so our first project for the day was a picture. "We must make certain that what we do here, gentlemen," he said, "is preserved for all time in an adequate record."

And so our party's photographer rehearsed us until he was satisfied with the mimed spontaneity of first setting foot upon a strange world, then shot the picture — to be shown eventually upon Earth's video screens: explorers disembarking from the star ship, turning to await our leader, his appearance in the open hatch, a sweep of his arm toward distance, our faces swivelling to follow the gesture, a camera pan to glimpses of alien buildings over distant tree tops — structures actual-

ly hidden by those trees but which would be photographed from another viewpoint and spliced into the completed film. Voices and incidental sound would be dubbed in later.

I felt an idol of my innocent days shatter; I had seen this basic sequence often on video during my undergraduate years, stirring then my imagination and determination to become worthy of a place on Director Litzanov's staff. He had seemed the epitome of the glamorous research-scholar to my worshipping young soul. Now was the day of awakening to the shams which dramatize man's accomplishments. I vowed that if ever I advanced to leadership of my peers I would accept it as a trust rather than an elevation. In cynical moments since I have wondered if I would remember that vow.

We traversed the woodlands and came upon a wide thoroughfare. From its end paths ascended by steep ramps a series of increasingly higher terraces forming a mile long pyramidal base for a magnificent collection of tall structures located in the center of an extensive valley between two high ridges of white and rose colored stone. It was the consensus of the party that this complex must be the planet's governing center or cultural mecca.

Seen from the perspective of ground level they were stunning buildings, towers and buttresses of the white and rose quartz-like rock, wall slabs of a many-hued plastic so hard that time had neither dulled its polish nor chipped its surface.

It was a shining aggregation of five architectural wonders, one at each of the major points of the compass and one in the center. An arcade of pointed arches built from the same rosy crystalline rock joined the four outer buildings to form a ring enclosing the fifth structure in its middle.

We stood in a great concourse surrounding the pyramid. From this circle twelve spacious avenues radiated, ending at the inner ring of another extensive pavement curving about the pyramid a dozen miles away. This second parkway formed a circumference from which three hundred and sixty roadways spread to girdle the planet and return again at points exactly opposite on the circle from their start.

Jim Larsen was whispering, "Marvelous engineering! Daring planners!" And I nodded, unable to look away from grass covered slopes that once had been clipped lawns sweeping upward to terrace after terrace, each paved by the mottled plastic material and balustrated with the strange white stone. Like giant steps they led to a truncated top where the buildings carried the pyramid's natural slope to its vertex. I felt that I looked at a gigantic fountain whose jets were in the sky.

Here Litzanov arranged another picture, a low-angle shot picking him up in the close foreground against a backdrop of the pyramid as he commented upon the architectural miracle to his chief scientists, then a fade-out with them admiring the beauty he indicated.

Jim Larsen grumbled with mild amusement, "I suppose these phony interludes advance the cause among people back on Earth who pay our salaries and grants, but what a waste of time."

I laughed. "It gave Binky and me time to touch this venerable relic. Tap the carved rock in that balustrade lightly."

"Why?" But he snapped a finger against the railing and turned to stare at me, then back to repeat the feather-weight thump. "You wouldn't try to fool me into believing a flick of one finger could start vibrations through solid rock, would you?"

"Did I suggest that it would?"

"No," he admitted.

I said, "I still don't really believe I felt anything, but after seeing Binky react, then watching you go through the same experience — well, what did happen?"

Instead of answering he struck the post a strong blow, keeping finger tips of his left hand on the rock to sense any effect.

"Feel anything?" I asked, and he shook his head.

I scrounged a steel bar from a crew man and swung at the baluster. Jim laughed. "This rock is absolutely dead. I couldn't feel a single shiver."

Without any real purpose I flicked my finger against it and saw Larsen jerk his hand away. then touch his finger tips back to the stone. "Do that again," he muttered.

I placed my fingers beside his and repeated the light tap. We both looked at each other, neither willing to believe there had been a tremor.

Jim grunted, "We're a couple of yahoos fooling ourselves."

"You think we're being victimized by a little mental suggestion?"

"Let's say we don't believe anything yet and high-tail it after the others." But I heard him mumbling, "If a finger tap can start vibrations, then a crowbar should have made the thing ring like a bell."

That worried me too. And I stewed over why a race would desert a world so beautifully designed.

But we found those suppositions were false. Binky discovered the inhabitants. Ranging ahead like a wild colt he blundered into them near the top terrace and rushed back to us, pointing. Many were mummified; some were fragments, powdering bones, skulls that crumbled from countless seasons deterioration when touched—hundreds grouped on the last slope—then through the arcade's delicate arches to sight of an amphitheatre within, and thousands of grinning skulls, weathered remnants of the creators of this beauty.

They lay in orderly rows as they had sat, centuries ago, attending some spectacle in that tremendous outdoor theatre where a blue-violet sky made fragile silhouettes of the surrounding arches and curved overhead into a vaulted roof that seemed as substantial as plastic, as near as a ceiling, and as far as infinity. And from where we stood at the circling line of rosy-white arcade the amphitheatre bowl spread before us, completely surrounding the high-reaching central building, its far side

dim in heavy violet of the atmosphere—acres of beautifully wrought seats cast from plastic, shining with a gloss that made them seem installations of only days ago rather than aged by unnumbered centuries. And on each seat, or spilled to the aisle in front of it, pitiful pieces of what was once life.

I heard myself saying, "They must not have known death was approaching, even when it struck."

"Wiped out in a single instant," Jim mused, "while they watched some kind of performance."

I agreed. "There is no indication of panic. Skeletons that have not broken apart, or bodies which mummified, are all in seated postures."

And that was as far as we could go on speculation.

There is no need to list the routines of prying into a dead civilization's hidden mysteries. On any site, if it has been covered by drifting debris of time, one digs—and lifts more shovels of dirt than treasure. When time neglects to spread a wind-borne or alluvial blanket upon the remains, then come monotonous days of measuring, charting, photographing. Scouts, criss-crossing the planet in skimmers, reported that conditions everywhere apparently were the same as we found them here. Evidently each inhabitant on the hapless globe had died at the same instant, without enough warning to cause him to look up from whatever task engaged him at his moment of destiny.

"Radiation of some sort?" Jim and I asked each other repeatedly. The other always replied, "None that



man knows could do it without disturbing the population enough to leave signs of terror."

**W**ork began to concentrate in the four structures at the pyramid's corners, for three were discovered to be museums and libraries, and the fourth certainly was an administration center. Tremendous window spaces pierced their walls. It was assumed by most that no window enclosures had been intended, but Jim Larsen became curious about grooves in the stone bordering these openings and drifts of finely pulverized metal caught in angles scattering winds could not reach.

One evening he walked from the expedition's laboratory and announced, "That powder is glass, so disintegrated that only chemical tests could indicate what it had been."

And later he told me, "I cannot understand what sort of force reduced it to absolute powder. Broken pieces I could accept, even down to microscopic size, but powder—"

And throughout those busy days I found myself listening to the sound I had sensed on our landing day, cadences not heard but felt, as if barely penetrating to me from another world.

I had one day of unbelievable bliss. Our photographer caught me. "Something I saw yesterday would interest you, Chuck," he said, "their museum of musical instruments."

My walk to that wing packed excitement not experienced since my first Christmas tree. Even though I had turned to science from my early

dreams of becoming a concert pianist, music still remains a haven into which I retire for peace and refreshment of mind and soul. And here lay the musical history of an alien race, complete. I rushed through the aisles like a typical tourist anxious to see it all in ten glances. Then I started classifying methodically.

As it had been with us, music evidently began on this world with log drums and simple pipes of reeds. I found primitive ancestors of stringed instruments, though empty centuries had removed, for the present, identification of what substance had been their strings. I surmised gut.

It is awesome and strange how powerful the physical forces of these things we call planets, suns, galaxies, universes loom in determining the patterns of things, even those items formed by minds and fingers of living creators. The fact frightens me at times; I wonder if I might not be, after all, nothing but a marionette dangling on pieces of thread. Separated by the mysterious limitlessness of space, light years of distance, and millennia of time, my people and this alien civilization produced essentially the same devices for making sweet sounds.

Oh, there were some differences, but I could recognize horns and woodwinds, and the strings and percussions. Windowless ages had rotted earlier groups whose basic substance was wood. However, as I worked into periods of metal I found better preservation. Some responded to my attempts to blow them, causing me to abandon systematic classification for the bal-

ance of the afternoon while I tried one after another. I had fun making Earthside music on alien horns. Some fingered instruments, resembling our own recorders, did not give back interval patterns exactly like those of Earth's music. I saw a fascinating avenue of research opening for me, studying the scales of this dead race.

**R**eed instruments were unplayable until I reached a section displaying the final era in development of this alien art. There woods and metals had given way to various forms of plastic. Surprisingly, their reeds were also of molded material and still marvelously flexible. And I thanked all the powers for the thoroughness of my conservatory training; I still possessed enough background to bring harmonious sound from the throats of these alien substitutes for clarinets and oboes and bassoons. They were strangely mellow, with astonishing sweetness and resonance and astounding amplification, much stronger than Earthside woodwinds.

Then I came upon the ultimate forms of their drums, what we would have called tympani. I thought they were mock-ups, for their kettles appeared to be the rosy white stone which had mystified Jim Larsen and me on the terraces. Drum heads were fashioned from sheets of the same rock, cut so thin that light cast shadows through it. From idle curiosity I thumped one slightly and jerked back in surprise at the thunderous tone which answered. One after another I touched them and

got responses no percussion man in an Earthside orchestra could have achieved through his sticks. I discovered their uncanny flexibility—shattering explosiveness from light finger taps, thrumming resonantly when the touch was soft and quick, a lingering echo if my fingers rested an instant, and low vibrations which were indescribable and disturbing when I alternately pressed and released the stone diaphragm.

I could not resist sending out sonorously rolling patterns into the soft summer air, following them with whispering pulsations, building chords on drums tuned to different frequencies. And echoes suddenly surged back from the white cliffs miles across the valley, doubling the rhythms of my drums. I reacted with ecstatic excitement to the power of these instruments. Then I heard a shrill scream behind me.

"Stop! Stop your nonsense!" Director Litzanov was shouting. He leaned against an arch, exhausted from running.

I asked, "What is the matter?" and found strong projection necessary for drum thunder still rode the air around us.

Gasping breaths shook him. "Doctor Maxwell, this behavior is incomprehensible to me."

I grinned sheepishly. "Got carried away, I guess. But look at this room. One whole segment of that vanished society complete for us to study."

"You are not accomplishing that purpose by spending precious time at noise making, sir."

"We can hear those instruments

as the aliens heard them," I protested. "It's a treasure find!"

"We are concerned with a descriptive record of this people, Doctor Maxwell, not with becoming one of them."

I bumbled along, forgetting his irrational attitude toward music. "If we are lucky enough to find samples of their music scores we can bring their compositions to life again with their own instruments. The chord structures and melodies of a civilization make almost perfect mirrors to the cultural and psychic attitudes of its members."

"The pranks you are indulging in cause distracting annoyance to those of my team who try to work," he snapped and turned away.

I called sharply, "Doctor Litzanov, are you allowing some phobia to blind you to the value of this find?"

He left without comment.

Throughout our wrangle echoes still pounded back from both sides of the valley. Their sound reverberated more than an hour, merging finally and becoming lost in that strange vibration which had poured itself through me from my first moments on this world. I was too angry then to wonder at noise continuing so long after its initial impulses had been given. A musical note is simply a wave of physical energy which must subside in seconds by reason of having no generating agent to keep the level of its force constant. Even an echo cannot extend its life beyond another moment.

Morning brought regret for my impromptu drum concert; Litzanov blocked further exploration into alien music.

"My assistant will finish that wing, Doctor Maxwell," he told me. "The work is simple classification; it would be a waste of talent to burden you with trivia and routine."

I shrugged.

"Since we feel the central structure on this pyramid is religious in nature, significance of murals which cover its interior has become important. You will contribute to our studies if you determine whether any allegorical meaning resides in the pictures."

There was nothing to do but shoulder my camera, take up my sketching pad, and go, with faithful Binky trotting along.

In the amphitheatre surrounding the temple, ghosts walked with us down the aisles. I felt no shame acknowledging a grisly shiver when I turned at the front, for enough mummified figures remained upright in those seats to create illusions of a vast audience watching me, alien dead come to stare through empty eye sockets. I moved into the central building irrationally feeling that a hundred thousand spectators saw through its walls and counted my steps.

Outside brilliant sunlight spread sharply clear, showing little of the amber of Earth's Sol; inside violet tinted the air to gossamer unreality. cursory examination had shown this central temple to be a tower, nearly two hundred feet square at the base, tapering slightly until its height

broke out above that of the four corner buildings. From there it slanted to complete the great pyramid's tip. An entrance corridor opened from each side.

**W**ith my deaf-mute shadow I traversed one of these passages and stepped into fantastic beauty. We saw before us a spacious round hall whose walls glowed with the murals I had come to study. Unearthly richness of reds and purples and blues, crackling golds and greens pounced upon me. Somehow light lay behind the pictures, deepening perspectives so that to look at a painting was to see far into a three-dimensional illusion.

I said, "Binky, we've wandered into fairyland," and felt him clinging to me.

Hardly an inch of that interior was free from the radiance of those murals. My eyes followed up, past tier on tier of rose suffused white stone balconies, two hundred feet, to a canopy of delicate rose and white lace intricately carved from crystalline rock. I stared, mind seething, wondering at the apparent strength of it, for stone tendrils completely spanned the hall's hundred foot spread. Through its interstices I saw other sheets of delicate carving hung above that.

Darkness should have drowned us at the bottom of this enormous circular well, for nowhere could I find a window in its smooth sides, nor detect artificial light. Yet every inch of the vault was flooded with violettinged brightness which seemed to be daylight conducted through the

huge crystals of stone from which the building was constructed. There was no effect of transparency in the walls. Light apparently flowed downward in the hearts of their prismatic structure, to be diffused throughout the shaft.

When one pauses in the midst of any enclosed space possessing colossal dimensions there is a constant stir of sound, like the surging whisper heard in a sea shell held close to the ear. This I thought was present. I accepted it as a familiar phenomenon until trained musician's perceptions told me there was no echo in this hall. Instead, that worrisome almost-sound of the planet vibrated through its vast emptiness, amplified until it seemed on the point of touching human ears with a definite note. I strained to hear it, but could not, quite. It floated about me like the memory of an unresolved chord, a maddening repetition of something incomplete and waiting interminably, suspended for the balance of time.

Ramps led from balcony to balcony, and I called, "Come on Binky. Let's look at those carvings on the ceiling," loudly, to wake up echoes and reduce the eeriness of this hall to noises that were normal and acceptable. No echo responded.

Two hundred feet is a long climb, taxing to the breath, but from the topmost balcony I could look down upon the filigreed canopy. An incredible expanse of stone openwork, carved into slender tendrils vining and twisting about each other, reached out in whorls and spirals covering that entire ceiling space, and at no

point were they any larger than my wrists. Between the delicate designs I could see the floor's violet dimness as if from a mountain top. Just above me a second stone fretwork spanned the titanic hall, and three more were suspended above that, with dark roughness of the true ceiling showing beyond. I grew dizzy staring through fairy-like sheets of rose and white filigree, wondering how they could have managed to hang there unknown centuries without shattering.

#### IV

Evening is a thinking time. In its quieting coolness I poured impressions of the temple into Jim Larsen's patient ears. We watched a falling sun go through unfamiliar color stages, from blue-white through greens toward a deep gentian, finally to lose itself in purple afterglow. Then, as if crawling darkness, stalking that fleeing disk, had activated relays across the planet, the violet nimbus became visible, wavering like a ghostly phosphorescent mist from the gigantic pale mountain ridges, and the strange not-sound slipped back into insistent prominence, a spooky night-time song too deep for our ears.

"Why would those aliens erect a massive building to enclose just one room whose diameter is not more than a hundred feet?"

Jim's eyes twinkled. "Are you implying that Earth has never had its big-little men who have piled up imposing heaps of stone and mortar for their own glorification?"

I shrugged. "I'm not ready to accept that hypothesis. Explain, with your geologist's wisdom, how those stupendous stone filigrees hang without collapsing under their own weight; more than two-thirds of the rock is chiseled away. They seem as fragile as sugar candy lace. What is their use?"

"For the tensile strength of the rock I have no answer. But you evidently believe they are meant for more than ornament, don't you?"

"A hunch. Here's another oddity: the interior walls do not parallel the outsides of the building. They show a slight S-curve. If you look downward through the stone filigree you get an impression of being suspended inside a monstrous horn or bell."

George Pell, our semantics man strolled up the hill slope and asked, "May I join the company of gentlemen and scholars?"

We made room for him and told him the gist of our discussion. I added, "I'm afraid Litzanov won't like what I think I'm finding in those murals."

That brought Larsen out of deep thought. "How's that?"

"They have an eerie beauty, Jim. Their colors are transparent and extremely rich. But wait until the director knows that the subject matter of every one is music — those aliens listening or participating with trance-like ecstasy, sometimes portraits of musicians with zealous stares of prophets, and a few paintings emphasizing orchestral instruments against a swirling background of color. He's certain to throw me in the brig; I've bugged him enough

with my guitar and those drums yesterday."

George Pell grunted. "Hum-m-m! I'm intrigued. We've made progress into their written language, even though its basis is awfully foreign to Earthside concepts of linguistics. By coincidence you may have supplied us with a new key. A wild symbol had us stopped because in one context it apparently stood for diety, in others meaning like noise, or hidden things. Perhaps I should assume that their god and mysteries of his cult, and music with its creating instruments are all synonymous."

I handed him a paper. "Can you translate this? It's an inscription I copied from a block of white rock in the center of the temple floor."

Pell studied it, then offered me three choices:

Enter (meekly? humbly?) the (first room?) in the house of God (music?)

Tread (joyfully? willingly?) the (long journey? high road?) through the house of God

Seek (with pleasure?) the (happiness? divine experience?) in the (sound? house?) of music

After breakfast I tried to sneak out of camp with my guitar and, of course, blundered into the director's sight. He stood talking to Commander Jacobs, and his eyes followed me across the clearing. At every step I expected his nasal voice to call, "Doctor Maxwell, what are you doing with that contraption?" And I tried to formulate in my mind an answer to give him, feeling nakedly foolish when I realized how silly I would sound saying, "I just wondered if that pretty stone fretwork up there in the temple ceiling

could be some kind of resonator, and I aim to play a little tune for it."

But Litzanov had his mind on instructions to Jacobs, who was to take *Explorer II* off into space this morning for a week's reconnaissance around the planetary system. I did not feel secure, though, until I reached the temple and stood with my guitar by the white slab to pluck one string at a time and listen for response from the grids of scintillating filigree above me.

I didn't know what I expected to hear — possibly an echo. However, arpeggios, chords, key changes all left them dead. Then suddenly, in the midst of discouragement, my ears caught the faintest whisper, as if a puff of wind had blown through the intertwining stone to leave them trembling. Binky stared nervously upwards, and I wondered if he had felt what I heard — or imagined.

I concentrated then on the key which produced this effect, trying all its chords, major and minor in all inversions. Finally, as the minor sweetness of the seventh chord on the dominant rang out, a shudder slipped through the lacey stonework overhead.

I repeated it with increasing volume, and response was unmistakable, a thin tinkling that grew into an intermittent hum, as if the spiralling stone were loathe to arouse itself. Then the full sound of my chord took shape along the interconnecting tendrils, swelling steadily until the whole hall resounded like the inside of a bell.

The chord still thrummed up there

after I stopped playing, singing with that aching need of the seventh chord to be resolved. Then Binky's frightened stare and a sweep of chilled air behind me brought me whirling around.

The stone slab, so solidly planted on that temple floor, was sinking slowly, its noise drowned by haunting clamor of music from the whorls of rock in the ceiling. Binky clutched my arm. Together we watched the white block come to rest, sloping into a recess below.

I don't know what I expected to find underneath — certainly not the very ordinary-looking room which presented itself. And I don't remember a single premonition that the slab might rise automatically to its original position, trapping us in the vault. Violet brightness filtered down through crystalline rock, lighting that room, so Binky and I walked down the ramp.

We half slid into a square room, carved out of the white rock that was the temple's foundation. Not until Binky and I crossed to center did we discover the occupants sitting side by side, grinning death in their faces, three leather-hard mummies who had kept watch for endless centuries, empty eye sockets directed toward a large plastic cube which had concealed them from me. In the subdued violet glow their countenances seemed sardonic, as if frozen at the moment of grim laughter.

The multitudinous dead on this planet had left our party relatively unaffected; remoteness of centuries

precluded personal identification with this alien charnel house. Now, in the dimness, facing these three, with the plaintive repetitions of my unresolved seventh chord crying among those fantastic grids, I suddenly found those people were no longer strangers. I became vitally concerned over their destruction, and for the first time felt apprehensive for my own safety.

Then — I was hearing music, a far-off horn call, sustained and mellow. Gradually soft thrumming whispered under that persistent note, sound I had got from tympani in the museum. My eyes caught a jerk of Binky's hand; I knew the source. A recording instrument filled that cube near the alien dead; Binky had moved a knob projecting from it. Even so, my ears located the tune as singing from the grids in the great hall above us.

Woodwinds added dulcet voices to the insistent horn note, racing in barely audible chromatics around it; string sections came in to deepen the harmony, sweeping it toward the bass until all low-voiced instruments of the orchestra had joined in a tremendous chord, held seemingly for eternity. When my ears felt ready to burst under the thunderous weight of its crescendo a lilting song, thin sweetness hauntingly filled with strange intervals of the aliens, crooned in the grid, modulating an infinite longing, non-human in sound, into a brilliant soaring surge of extreme joy. Here was a legacy from a dead orchestra on a dead world playing with an effect that seemed to possess physical life.

Two hours I sat in that dim vault, enthralled by the hypnotic sonority of that symphony, until finally the knob Binky had pulled clicked back to its original position and no more sound fed into the stone grids. Yet, harmonies of the climactic phrases continued to roar along its maze of twisting crystal vines like turbulence through a thunderhead. I became certain now that this temple had been constructed as a gigantic resonance chamber. The enormity of the idea left me shaken.

After Binky and I walked through the amphitheatre's lifeless audience and passed the circling arches, sound ceased to ring from the temple. Instead, with some shock, I heard the complete symphony again, its melodies clear and unmuddled, winging toward me from far-off cliffs bordering both sides of our valley—rose white rocks lifting their voices to replay what had thundered from the crypt under that temple.

## V

Camp was chaotic. Research team and maintenance crew faced the ridges like zombies. Larsen sailed in like a projectile on his skimmer to relate how white cliffs out where he conducted his geologic survey suddenly made music.

I told them of the room underneath the temple, but Jim insisted, "I heard no sound from the pyramid. Listen; the tunes are from the mountains."

"Nevertheless," I repeated, "their origin is a four foot plastic cube under the temple. What we're catch-

ing now is some sort of echo effect."

Jim shook his head. "Not an echo."

The white cliffs continued to throw that entire symphonic marvel over the miles throughout much of the night. Like one suffering unbearable pain Litzanov prowled until its cadences merged into the almost-sound during bleak hours before dawn.

Squinting under sharpness of morning light he summoned me, his smile sour, his eyes haunted. "Life has concocted a devilish joke on me. Doctor Pell has found evidence that a significant part of this planet's social structure was based upon a racket cult. I shall be working with you today."

The semanticist called from the breakfast table, "Its priesthood is involved in musical experiencing, Chuck, with rank or sacredness dependent upon ability to create greater complexities of composition. Their language is still so damned vague that I've just skimmed the surface."

Jim Larsen joined us on the course. "I want to find out why I heard that music as if the mountain ledges originated the tunes."

"Do you have any theories?" I asked.

He shrugged. "The crystalline structure of this planet's rock must conduct sound with unbelievable efficiency. Frequencies evidently travel through it thousands of times farther than through the atmosphere, probably several circuits of the globe before any major damping occurs, and every time they reach the sur-



face on one of those cliffs their vibrations are transmitted again into the air."

"You are implying this whole planet is a transmitting and gigantic resonating device," I said.

"Any other explanation?"

Litzanov muttered, "Not this side of hell."

Again I faced the huge slab with my guitar, posing for the inevitable motion picture sequence. Director Litzanov's pantomime called attention to importance of the filigreed stonework overhead, and instructed me to play. He awaited my music tensely, as if fearing blows from a whip. Involuntarily, hands covered his ears when my chord aroused reluctant stone tendrils and the rock started to sink. He was on the slab before it came to rest, in haste to run from twanging resonances battering the main chamber.

"That much hatred of music is neurotic," I shouted to Jim Larsen, and saw him shrug. But I found it possible to pity Litzanov as I watched his cringing anticipation of every booming accent.

Binky headed for the plastic cube facing the mummified aliens, to pull the knob which touched off last evening's concert. Litzanov cried, "Stop him!" I did, barely.

The director spoke thickly. "I am resigned to necessity for some of this devilish noise, but I hope we can undertake our study with as little of it as possible. Now, Doctor Pell, you formulated theories of a rigid priesthood caste, with possible deification of this organized racket

people call music. We'll follow your lead temporarily."

Pell answered, "If I'm right we should find a series of rooms, each with a barrier or sign permitting access only to specific ranks in the cult's hierarchy."

I located an arched corridor which led us down to a lower level. There we discovered the second room. As Pell predicted, an inscription was carved over its arch.

"These symbols are tricky," Pell said, "but roughly it dedicates this crypt to someone who apparently brought his people to blessed communion with their god by creating more melodious music."

Although the compartment was four square, buttress-like sections jutted from its walls and pointed toward the same kind of plastic cube Binky and I had found above. Again three age-dried husks of the ill-fated race faced it.

Uneasiness nagged as I listened to my seventh chord chiming through the grids of the colossal hall two levels above us. The peak of its sound had been reached, and the chord was now diminishing. Litzanov was saying, "Doctor Maxwell, you will oblige me and our colleagues by keeping that deaf-mute's hands from this recording device. I should appreciate an opportunity to examine this chamber in silence."

I voiced my vague apprehensions. "We'll need to pull that lever for our own safety, Doctor Litzanov."

He stared. "Why?"

"That rock on the temple floor opened at the sound of music. I am sure it will trap us down here the

moment my guitar chord ceases to vibrate through that grid."

"Then suppose you walk back up there periodically and renew the noise with your tinkling gadget. At least that won't make us endure hours of punishment while this infernal music machine runs through its repertoire."

I obeyed unhappily. Non-musical people do not understand the peculiar torture an unresolved chord inflicts, especially that leading tone of the seventh. It sings with an unearthly sweetness but must modulate quickly or it becomes an unending wail of loneliness and futility.

When I returned to the tomb-like depths I found Larsen and George Pell in excited discussion before another carved inscription between two buttresses. Oblivious, Litzanov pattered with the three mummies, measuring and writing meticulously.

"It's another dedication," grunted Pell. "Names another person whose music took his race farther toward divinity."

"Shouldn't they mark an entrance into still another dungeon if your theory concerning the priesthood holds up?" I asked. I reached to feel the wall. Jim said, "That's one gigantic crystal without a crack. Evidently this room is the end of the line."

"It can't be," George argued, "unless my translations are all wrong." And he sketched quickly a picture of the time-dusted dead he had gleaned from their records.

Beauty had evidently been their

creed — benevolence in their weather, graciousness in their living, splendor in the purple phosphorescence which streamed from their mountain tops and kept night away from them.

"There should be four of these rooms," Pell said, "dug at successive levels deeper under the temple. Each vault apparently represented in time the accession of a new high priest and was created to preserve his inaugural composition, the result of a life-time of struggle to purify himself and lead his people into a state of oneness with their god — indicated in their documents by the same symbol which denoted harmonious sound. Evidently more crypts would have honeycombed the pyramid's heart if catastrophe had not struck.

"The latest written records talk of preparations to crown a new high priest, culminating in a planet-wide festival at which his inaugural symphonic composition would first be played. I found descriptions of dignitaries to attend its premiere in the amphitheatre, and instructions for all the world's inhabitants to cease activity and listen when its divine harmonies sang to them from the ridges of crystalline stone. I found no accounts of the festival, nor of any events after it."

I said, "You are intimating that whatever tragedy blotted out life here struck on that evening of celebration."

George nodded. "Presumably."

They called Litzanov into the discussion. I'm afraid malice prompted a suggestion I made. "The

temple hall up there seemed to be the end of the line until I tried my guitar. Wouldn't the next logical step require us to assume the music cube over there is triggered to open a hidden doorway into room number three?"

The director stared malevolently at me. "We'll try that twinging thing of yours. I am not willing to stand more racket than your guitar can make."

I protested. "A door would have been tuned to definite harmonic progressions recorded in that cube. I doubt we could ever find the combination on my guitar."

"Chuck is probably right," Jim remarked.

Litzanov moaned with exasperation. "I suppose thoroughness demands that we pull the damned lever—since we'll not be able to force a way to whatever might lie behind that wall until *Explorer* returns and we can get blasting equipment from her. Time's too limited for that, whatever the cost in jangled nerves. Go ahead."

I moved the knob with undue alacrity.

Music traced tentative paths across the delicate filigree and sang into the temple's resonating bell shape, seeming innocuous. Richly harmonized melody in the string sections ranged through strange intervals of the alien's scale, a simple song theme, a tiny bit sad, slightly lonely, a little lazy, but filled with subtle undercurrents of reflective joy hinting of visions beyond present moments.

As the music swelled toward

climactic measures other instruments caught the tune and began its development. Then suddenly sound was in those triangular buttresses jutting from the walls of our crypt, giving depth to what issued from the grids far above the dungeons, enriching total effects of the symphony in the manner that addition of many more instruments to each section of an orchestra heightens its tonal impact.

Binky reached for me. "You can't hear it, can you, Binky?" I asked aloud, and realized what had disturbed him; I was feeling this music as well as taking its impressions through normal paths of the ears. Definite energy waves whipped nerves throughout my body to thousands of infinitesimal movements I could not localize, as if the sound had become a physical force battling with light blows aimed from those buttresses.

A glance at Larsen and Pell told me the same phenomenon affected them.

I worried about Litzanov; he would be demoralized, hating this music rather than becoming caught up in it aesthetically.

Then I forgot them, becoming increasingly disoriented with almost painful harmonies reaching and awakening my senses, one at a time. I heard more dimly specific melodies with their unbelievable arabesques racing upward until they swept beyond the limits of my ears than sank into the narrow band of sound possible for human senses to distinguish, then soared again, leaving me in an agonized straining to follow.

I saw nothing but grayness and darker shadows now. Impressions of release from restraint of walls stole through me, as if I were delivered from my body, ecstatically free, afraid to see too deeply into darkness lurking just beyond the cocoon of music. A forest's dampness touched me. I smelled pungence of pines and dank decay of fallen needles. I felt sharply chilled, as though the fogs of Carmel had swirled over me. I was tossed in the wild surf that pounded those beaches. I drifted like a gray mist among their stunted trees — and felt small and alone.

No concept of time was left in me. Judging from the symphony released yesterday by Binky's fingers, we passed at least two hours in trance-like enslavement to esoteric harmonies. Without knowledge of when it came about, I found myself again recognizing colleagues in the room. Larsen and Pell stood dazed, staring down where a square of floor had sunk to reveal a ramp leading to a lower level in this pyramid. I realized only soaring aftertones of that hypnotic composition now muttered in those fantastic grids hanging in the tower. I remembered Litzanov and saw him on one knee, clawing at a buttress for support.

The others came to help me ease him down. The man's appearance frightened me. His face showed a bloodless gray, and he drew breath with labored gulps. Nevertheless he sat up after some moments and spoke, barely above a whisper. "This is hellish torture."

"We'll do a quick survey of the

next crypt below and let you rest here," suggested Jim.

We called the medic over from the museum and left Litzanov with him, then filed down the ramp. A labyrinth enfolded us, alight with violet-tinged brightness filtering through its convolutions. Instead of hollowing a conventional vault ancient artisans had carved rock out to leave a replica of the titanic filigreed canopies which spanned the temple's ceiling. Centered and joined to the twisting stone vines sat the familiar plastic cube and three time-embalmed custodians. More carved symbols above a slight concavity faced us from one side of the crypt.

"That will be as you predicted. George," Larsen muttered, "room number four."

"With maybe the greatest of all the symphonies recorded in its cube," I added.

"Music its audience never heard through," Pell commented.

Intense exhilaration gripped me; tunes of the past hours sang in my head. Yet I felt cold, debilitated, as if recovering from fever. Even so, I saw with unnatural clarity, like the blind rediscovering a wondrous world. "I want to hear that symphony," I announced. "We've got to go into that room."

Jim agreed. "It's a rugged experience to take on two such concerts in succession, but I'm with you."

"Let's persuade the director to go on back to camp first." Pell's voice was unsteady. "I think I would

follow him and leave the field to you fellows if I didn't hope solutions to the puzzle of this dead world might lie in that vault. A day on the rack would have been less painful than what that music did to me."

We started to the ramp. Jim was saying, "There's no doubt; each of these rooms has been dug deeper into the heart rock of this planet and modified, evidently with advanced understanding of using the resonating characteristics of this planet. The whole globe definitely possesses hair-trigger sensitivity to vibration."

I broke in. "The strange almost-sound I hear constantly?"

"Waves set up in the rock by wind currents and changes in atmospheric temperature."

We met our director on the ramp, walking unsteadily down, using the medic's arm for support.

Larsen protested, "You're in no condition to continue without a rest." The medic muttered, "Hope you're better at persuading than I was." And Litzanov shook loose from the doctor like a wilful kid, repeating, "We'll finish this job now. I don't intend to stretch my endurance over any more days." He headed for the recorder cube and its guardian mummies, deaf to argument. The medic gave up. "I've given him tranquilizers. Maybe that will carry him through."

Jim asked, "Was it his heart?" And the medic shook his head. "Looked like it at first, but I heard no indications of it. Exhaustion—hypertension, maybe."

In spite of illness Litzanov arranged another picture before proceeding, pantomiming pointing out to us the cube, iridescent whorls of fretwork, indicating carved symbols betraying the fourth entrance to be opened by final chords of music we intended to activate in this room.

None of the director's construction of his public image was as crass as my description sounds. He simply contrived to be the center of any discovery, and made certain the scene was preserved for Earth viewing. Senior members of our research team accepted the situation, some because they loved their work more than lime-light, some because a seat by his throne insured a share of the gravy. His name weighed heavily with those who hired and fired on Earth and sat in high posts because they could find men like Litzanov, willing and skilled in manipulation of men's destinies, to help inflate their balloons. The cynical question to ask it: are these titled few aware of creating this breed of learned leeches upon whose offal they feed, or is there such confusion in their administrative minds that they truly accept a notion that they are capable of standing high above the crowd without crawling up on the shoulders of others?

## VI

Litzanov became physically smaller as he faced the moment when we must activate the music cube. He knew we held in our hands the most spectacular find in man's history of exploration, and to have

credit for it printed by his name in *Who's Who* and other vanity mirrors he had to make his investigation personally. To relinquish completion of its examination to someone else was to risk having the title and claim for the entire project upon a rival's page of fame. And if Pell had not read the alien records rightly, and there happened to be a fifth—or sixth or seventh—room, each also must be entered by the sound-tortured director to preserve his image for posterity and his right to title of discovery.

Fear clouded his eyes, but he brusksly nodded permission to pull the lever.

We felt the initial tones rather than heard them, like the lowest pedal notes on a gigantic organ.

I knew there was sound because my whole body responded to the lift and fall of long slow waves. I sensed tremendous amplification of the music, its energy sucking my breath as if I faced a hurricane. Pressure built up on my ear drums, bringing excru-

ciating pain even after I covered the orifices with my palms. I felt vibration through the flesh of my hands as they pressed against my ears, and a steadily increasing warmth as if a fever were growing in me. I knew there were extremely high frequencies pouring through me, how high I had no sensory equipment capable of telling.

Then sound within the range of perception came into the composition, harmony with timbre and resonance so piercing that it closed my throat, changed the heart beats at will, caused tears to flow against effort to gain control of emotional reflexes. This was something so far beyond the orchestral piece which had struck Litzanov down that I worried and tried to focus enough to see him. A shadowy impression of him prone on the floor was all I could catch, and all the attention I could spare him.

Thunderous chords suddenly beat at me with the force of tornadic wind, slamming me against the cube.

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And just as unexpectedly, ringing melody superceded and lifted me into wild ecstasy, higher and higher until I thought its insistent tune could tear me to bits. And as quickly, the music dropped me into hells where sound became demons with needle-sharp claws. I felt responses from areas of my body I had never been aware of; every individual atom oscillated in cumulative multiplication of movement accompanied by the generation of unbearable heat. Blood was streaming from my nose. I clung to the plastic cube which had unleashed this fiendish torture, with no strength left. And paradoxically, through the pain and fever I was flooded with singing tunes so compelling that I cried aloud and screamed with the emotional surge of their beauty.

Then suddenly I experienced the tearing strike of a heart pain; it ripped through my chest in nightmare spasms, like the crushing strides of Death. Destruction was here for all of us unless the music could be stopped — perhaps too late even now. I tried to concentrate, to hold consciousness and reach the knob. It was only a foot or two from my hand. Between increasing lightning thrusts of chest pain and irregular racing of heart beat that stopped my breath, I struggled to slide toward it, but I think only my fingers moved.

In flashes of lucidity I had impressions of Binky rushing about the room, running to look into my face, fading into nothingness when pains slashed at me. Once I saw

his hand on mine, but could not feel its touch, nor ask his help. Then redness blinded me, and I knew capillaries in my eyes had burst. And after that came darkness.

It seemed to me that something had been tugging at me throughout all eternal time. A roughness moved under me in jerks. I could see dimly. I couldn't hear.

Fear of drawing breath followed, with automatically a frightened catch to keep it shallow, expecting pain to strike. Hurt did sit like a crushing weight upon my chest, but only a shadow of its remembered self. Then it was Binky's face over me, recognizable, and mind and eyes cleared enough to see gem-like colors of the temple walls, and to realize he had probably dragged me up those ramps from the death crypts beneath. But I could neither hear nor move. He disappeared, then grayness took me again.

I have no memory of being transported to camp. *Explorer II* returned next day from its investigation of the near planets, and we were all taken aboard. That part was dreamlike. We had been many days in space before I could assimilate details from Commander Jacobs.

They think Binky dragged us all out of that hellish trap, one at a time. The music had struck those at camp also, but not so lethally. Coming from the white cliffs it had evidently lost enough of its intensity during transit through underground rock. However, many hours had elapsed before anyone had strength to hunt for us at the temple.

They found me dazed and incoherent. Pell, Litzanov, and the medic were dead. Jim Larsen is still in a state of shock, hardly rousing when he is moved, but expected to recover. Binky apparently had not been affected beyond extreme nervousness and unpredictably irrational actions since. And sometimes, as I sit up in my hospital bed dictating this report, I think he hears sounds from my mouth, dimly, and I wonder if the strength of that demon music found a way into dormant nerves of his ears and stirred them to half life.

And between the surges of thankfulness that Fate placed Binky under my care on *Explorer II*, I wonder about that planet, with its beautiful empurpled ghost aura, so many years across black space, carrying its millions of dead ceaselessly in orbit around a blue-white sun which cannot warm them back to life. I wonder that the excess of anything, even beauty, can become the executioner of its seeker.

And I am caught in its net. The planet's music sings through my inner ear the moment my mind is released from necessity to deal with routines. Irresistible compulsions will drive me to study it, for it is composition so grand that a Beethoven of Earth seems nothing but a tinkling contriver of popular tunes. I shiver at once with apprehensions and the desire to hear that symphony we did not play, imprisoned in the fourth plastic cube, the glory of sound which killed its world.

There will be another expedition to finish studies we left undone there, for man cannot bear not to know. I want to be a part of it. During the restless hours which fill my nights I think in circles—surely a way can be found to filter that sound so I can listen in safety, or shut it out if necessary. Perhaps this is a death wish, but, God help me, I will not rest until I've tried to hear it, for the memory of that alien music is a demon of exquisite beauty, and I am hag-ridden. **END**

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# M'LORD IS THE SHEPHERD

by WALT & LEIGH RICHMOND

*Ever speculate why you aren't smarter than you are? Here's why—and what to do about it!*

M'Lord received the message on Moonbase One with a feeling of complete dismay. Why, this species was 50,000 to 100,000 of their years from the type of development Galactic Central was asking for!

Yet the message was specific. The Korm'aans according to present calculations by Computer Center, would begin a sweep through this spiral arm of the Galaxy, and Galactic Central would need a developed people as an ally.

Get them into condition to receive Galactics without fear in 200 of their years? Capable of offering their resources freely? Capable of assistant labor? Capable of being an ally, however weak?

Forced stimulation was one thing, and he'd watched it tried. It could

work, though normally it simply killed off the stimulated species.

"The greater good for all the peoples of the Galaxy demands that we take a chance on sacrificing this species," the message added, a sop to his conscience, since the message was an order, not a request. "We will then have either an ally of a weak but unhampering variety, or a planet of the proper Z characteristics returned to the primitive form from which we can operate unhampered by a developing and possibly resentful native intelligence."

The methods were left to him. By all the ramblets of knowledge of all Computer Center! What stimulus could you apply to a species barely into their iron age to get them to an intelligence level where they could even stay out from underfoot in a

mere 200 years? Especially when each member of that species required a full one-tenth of that time to develop to the stage of species-maturity; and the useful life-span of individual members was a possible 30 of those years?

Obviously, it would have to be a nerve-stimulus. And just as obviously it would have to be broadcast to affect the entire species.

Electronic, of course. But they weren't even capable of electricity yet, much less electronics. That, in the normal sequence-pattern that their development showed, would be at least 5,000 of their years in their future. And you couldn't introduce a broadcast electronic stimulus from within the culture immediately. Even with only 200 years available. That would be sure death, though Galactic Central did say they'd as soon have the planet returned to the primitive . . .

**N**o. The stimulus would have to be confined to wires so that it could spread slowly, and so that it would act as a stimulus only when a member of the species was within a few miles of the wires. Too abrupt an introduction of a stimulus would be surely fatal, and Central had specified an attempt to develop these creatures.

These sheep. And I, their shepherd, must take a chance on ruining the flock that shows such promise; that I have spent my career in nurturing! He knew a moment's sadness before he set himself to the task at hand.

Very well. The best stimulus, of

course, was the 60 cycle alternating current; and it must be introduced in such a way that it would grow through the culture, until finally each member of the species—at least the major groups—were subject to the nerve-impact most of the time. But also in such a way that it was possible to escape from it. This would give the most aware a chance to withdraw occasionally and give their nerves a rest.

You couldn't introduce the stimulus from within directly as AC current at 60 cycles. Best to introduce the battery and let them play with direct current for a matter of—say 50 to 75 of their years. There would be no stimulation there, and Galactic Central might consider the time wasted, but you had to give a species time to play with and prepare for the type of battering ram that was inherent in being subjected to a constant 60 cycle nerve-system joltingly playing upon them whenever they were within appreciable distance of wires carrying the frequency, if you planned to see that those wires webbed the culture almost inescapably.

With a sound that might have been translated as a sigh, M'Lord summoned his teslars.

**T**he full 75-year interval since the introduction of the battery on Alterra had passed, and M'Lord realized with some disquiet that he now had no further excuse for delaying the introduction of alternating current.

The species had done well; had taken the new 'toy' handed them so

unobtrusively, and made it their very own. They had examined its possibilities with, actually, more keenness than even he, who had devoted his entire working period to their care, had expected. And just the introduction of the battery itself must have had a stimulating affect on the creature—or perhaps his teslars had dropped a few unauthorized hints—for still on his own, the creature had jumped from the iron age to steam, smelting, telegraphy—Really remarkable!

M'Lord was proud of the Alterrans.

Yet he was probably to be the instrument of their destruction, he knew. Galactic Central was getting far too impatient for him to dally longer. The stimulus itself must be applied. And under that stimulus, the nervous systems of Alterrans would either respond with a surge that would take them far beyond their ability to cope with themselves; or those nervous systems would wither completely, leaving the Alterran an animal subject to his environment. If that occurred, he would be shortly wiped out, for in developing his ability to alter his environment to his needs, the creature had sacrificed his ability to survive as an animal.

However, the computers still extrapolated from Korm'aan strategy the probability of a move into this spiral arm, and the greater good...

M'Lord summoned his chief teslar.

This job must be handled delicately and the chief teslar would undertake it himself.

A quarter century more was gone on Alterra, and still the necessary alternating current had been introduced only as a potential. The potential was strong. The ground work had been well laid. But the first of the two centuries was passed, and the Alterran was still within his normal framework—slightly altered; slightly advanced; but still essentially the same creature, with no potential of the necessary drastic change. And with these slow-but-surer methods, the overall webbing of this culture with the wire that would carry the drastically-effective 60 cycle alternating current wouldn't be accomplished for another quarter century!

M'Lord had reason to worry. The species might be his charge, but Central was beginning to bring pressure, and the Galaxy was Central's charge.

When the signal interrupted M'Lord he brushed the communicator with an unusually brusque come-in response.

"Chief teslar reporting, sir."

M'Lord visuated his chief. Remarkable how the make-up fitted. "Even I wouldn't know you from an Alterran," he grumphed.

"Sir, the Alterrans themselves have barely noted even my presence," his teslar communicated proudly. "I could not avoid being noted to a slight extent, or being credited with some developments. But only the brightest of this species even remembers my presence."

"You've done a careful job, teslar, but a remarkably slow one," M'Lord causticked. "So slow that it will be a

predictable 25 of their years before results begin to show."

"Sir, May I be allowed free saying?"

"Speak."

"We have miscomputed them in including too large a resistance-to-development factor, sir. They are self-stimulating to a degree I had not thought possible. We have noted their violent reactions against progress, and the force with which individuals with new ideas have been put down, and developments refuted. But we have failed to note equally the force with which those new ideas and developments are put up. As they say on Alterra, it takes two to make a battle.

"Again, we have noted the negative resistance factors that culminate in wars; but have failed to note the equally strong positive factors that cause them. And while we've watched the wars, we've failed to notice that individual arguments and group arguments are almost a way of life with this species! They argue. How they argue! Self-generated arguments at the individual, the group, and the cultural-center level, a constant . . . Because of this, our applied stimulus might work out as a release on their self-stimulus, both positive and negative, and act as an addition rather than as a basic! So much so that I—Sir, complete free saying and no retribution?"

M'Lord visuated the teslar fiercely. "You're bordering on ultimate insubordination already! But yes, free saying and no retribution."

"Sir, I altered the concept to a

degree. I—as the Alterrans would say it—hedged your bets. I have arranged that one major portion of their culture only, the strongest, shall get the full 60-cycle stimulus. In the remainder of their centers I have introduced the probability of the far lesser stimulus of 50 cycles."

"You dared!"

"Sir, we have not sampled their brain recordings for quite a period, and the patterns have advanced. The 60-cycle may be too strong, even for the period of time allowed, 75 of their years under stimulus; at least 50 of their years under a complete webbing of the carrying wire."

M'Lord leaned back. His own sympathies were with this species, although it was a weakness he could not admit. Yet, perhaps . . .

"No retribution," he said, "for altering the plan. And it is possible that you have introduced a better potential. However . . . however, if the course of events does not justify . . ."

"Yes, M'Lord."

But even his chief teslar's re-estimate proved to have been made with too large a negative factor.

Within ten Alterran years a sketchy, initial wire webbing was in place in most of the planet's major centers, and the effects were astoundingly immediate. Within 20 Alterran years there was little of the culture that was not heavily webbed, and it was glaringly apparent that there was no danger whatsoever that the creatures' nervous systems would succumb to the impact. Not only the 60-cycle subjects, but even those subjected only to 50-cycle stimula-

tion were now reacting with impossible leaps in technologies, analyses, and computational abilities. The life span of the individual to as much as a normal 65 to 75 years; while the maturity span, formerly an optimum 30 exclusive of senility, now included an average 50 of their years.

The effects were so nearly immediate and so completely unpredicted that recordings were rushed regularly by special transport to the computer at Galactic Central, which began altering its entire series of time-potential-probability sequences to include the new time-potentials now being demonstrated. Galactic Central sent special observer crews.

Yet the third decade following the initial introduction of the potential stimulus had nearly passed before the final factor fell into place that required reclassification of the species.

Unemotionally, the computer removed Alterrans from the classification: "Sheep; to be coddled for potential slave-service to the Galactic peoples;" to the classification: "Predator."

Almost as the reclassification was made, a command directive went by emergency beam to Moonbase One.

"Alterran development must be reversed immediately," the directive read. "Apply stupidifiers. These must be introduced at once. If possible, impose from within. If necessary, emergency action may be taken and stupidifiers imposed from without. This species is a greater hazard than Korm'aan. No time can be wasted."

M'Lord acted at once. Ultra-high-frequency radiation on a broadcast basis was indicated. Immediately. But, yes, it could be introduced from within with no time wasted. Low frequency broadcasts had already been developed by the species as an entertainment medium; and a war was making on the planet, so that a means of detecting enemy craft with high-frequency-radiation bombardment, which would hit the creatures as well as the targets, was a natural.

The low frequency, long wave length entertainment broadcasts had had little if any effect on the nervous systems of the Alterrans, although the waves of radiation passed through their bodies as consistently as they did through the instruments built to receive them. Those long, looping wavelengths were far too large to be, at any point, contained within the body, and neither were they attuned to the body's own frequencies. Therefore they left no input signal with the body's nerve systems.

Quite the contrary would be true of the ultra-high-frequency, ultra-short-wave-radar broadcasts as they filled the atmosphere with their signals. These wave lengths were short enough that each wave would be contained in microsecond intervals, complete within the nervous system; and whether or not they attuned the bodies own systems, they would leave an impulse on the nerves — an impulse towards unspecified action, so that the nerves would tense of action, and be unable to direct the tension and so relieve

It. Again and again and again the ghost impulses would bombard the nervous systems, and the systems would alert. Alert — tensions — no translation; alert — tension — no translation — and no relief. Nervous breakdown was inevitable. Nervous breakdown and complete myasthenia.

Radar was introduced within less than one-half an Alterran year, on a formula his teslar had left sleeping as a precaution. The effects were, again, immediate, but the development failed to slow.

Within two years it was apparent that radar would not be sufficient. The radar bombardment was constant; the myasthenia general throughout the species; but Alterran development barely relaxed its headlong pace, much less reversed.

"They should be worn out — completely frazzled — on the way to primitive conditions — in a state of breakdown as a species! There's a proportion of breakdown, but only a proportion — and they're carrying that proportion and still heading into space!" M'Lord's chief teslar was as drawn and whorled as his master.

"Apply hypnosis." M'Lord's communication was firm with a conviction and an authority he no longer felt.

"Hypnosis, sir, requires the centering of each individual's attention. That is an individualized process, sir."

"So?"

"So it cannot be imposed from without! And there is no time to develop it from within the culture!"

"Radar was developed by this species in time-elements measurable in increments of their years."

"But this must be individualized, so that each member of the species is subjected . . ."

"These creatures are on their way into space, in a condition of destructive-compulsion unknown in the Galaxy. You will find a method!"

"Perhaps —" The chief teslar was hesitant. "Perhaps, then, a major hypnotic is justified? A complete stupidifier? One that centers each individual's attention on a pattern of lights flickering at a pulse frequency near enough that of a main brave wave frequency to capture and alter the brain wave rhythm? But that would be catastrophic, sir!"

His master groused angrily, as much distressed as the teslar. "It must be so!" he affirmed.

The teslar bowed his head. "I grieve with you, sir, if you will so permit me." Then he unslouched and communicated firmly. "We will introduce an instrument for screening transmitted entertainment in the home. It can be set to a flicker-rate near one of the creature's main brain-cycle patterns so that, watching it, he will unconsciously match the brain cycle to the flicker-rate and will become hypnotized. This will be easy, sir, in the areas where we have introduced 60-cycle electric currents. This cycle frequency is nearly a divisive of their major brain pattern. However, in the 50-cycle areas — well, the hypnotic effect will not necessarily be as great, but the stimulation here has not been as great either, and the stupidifying

effect of the applied hypnotic need not be as strong."

The initial development of optarad required a period of several Alterran years, while Galactic Central altered its plans for containing the spiral arm of the Galaxy from defense against the Korm'aan to defense against the new species. Plans were sufficiently detailed to include methods for enlisting the Korm'aan in common cause against the Alterrans.

Then optarad was in production, the screen-frequency of its light-pulse set at a rhythm very near the dominant brain-wave of the species.

The introduction was highly successful. Within a decade the daily habit of attention-centering on the instrument was nearly as broadly spread as the use of electricity.

The hypnotic stupidifier was at work, aided and abetted by the nerve-frazzling broadcast of the ultra-high-frequency radar signals.

Relaxing for the first time in 157 Alterran years, M'Lord waited for the commendation he felt sure would be forthcoming from Galactic Center. Radar had had around 20 Alterran years to take effect; the new optarad hypnotic frequencies had been played into the eyes of a vast majority of the leading Alterran creatures for five or more of those years.

"My poor sheep," he thought regretfully to himself. "We turned you into predators, and must now put

you to sleep. Yet — perhaps I may find a way that you be allowed to safely graze; content and peaceful at last."

The entry-port signal blinked, and M'Lord brushed the 'come-in' response with a sigh.

"Chief teslar reporting, sir."

M'Lord visuated his chief, who seemed rather excited. "Well?" he grumphed.

"Sir, the hypnosis is not sufficient. Sir, it is numbing their brain centers — but the brain capacity seems to be far larger than was indicated by the small portion they were using. As one area of each brain weakens, the stronger of the creatures adapt by putting another unused portion of brain into service to replace it. At the same time the weaker are reduced to apathy so that they are no longer in the way. These creatures, sir, are heading into space in spite of the hypnosis! Sir, our predictions fail by a factor of..."

The communicator blinked the red emergency, and M'Lord watched his own nerve ends flare as he pushed the "here; begin" button. The communication spat out:

"All plans whorled. Computer predicts these beings will have Galactic Mastership within approximately 500 Galactic years. The Korm'aan have made common cause with us, and you now serve as ambassador to both. Entreat for us free living and no retribution..."

END



# GIANT KILLER

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*When the CDT carries the Earthmen's Burden to the lesser breeds without the law — Retief will put it down!*

## I

As Retief paid off his canal barge and stepped up on the jetty, Second Secretary Magnan pushed his way through the throng at the wharf entrance to the Royal Enclosure, his narrow face flushed with exertion. "There you are!" he cried. "I've been searching everywhere! Ambassador Splitwhistle will be furious!"

"What's that on your head?" Retief eyed a half-inflated bladder of a sour yellow color which lolled over Magnan's left ear.

Magnan rolled an eye up at the vari-colored cluster which bobbed with each movement, dragged feathers wagging and lengths of dirty string swaying, the entire assembly secure under his chin by a stained pink ribbon.

"Why, that's my ceremonial Rock-



amorra headdress. Here." He fumbled in his violet afternoon tormal cutaway, brought out a bundle of puckered balloons and feathers, offered it. "This one's for you: you'd better slip into it at once. I'm afraid a couple of the plumes are bent."

"Where's the Ambassador?" Retief interrupted. "There's something I have to tell him."

"There are a number of things you'll be expected to tell him!" Magnan snapped. "Including why you're half an hour late for the Credentials ceremony!"

"Oh oh; there he goes with the staff, headed for the temple. Excuse me, Mr. Magnan." Retief pushed off through the crowd, made his way to the wide doorless entry to a high, blocky structure at the end of the courtyard. A long-legged, short-bodied neckless local, with immense flat feet, wearing an elaborate set of ruffles and holding a pike, waved him through. The Ambassador and his four staff members were grouped in the gloom a few yards distant, before a gaudy backdrop of luminous plastic in slime green, dyspepsia yellow and cirrhotic pink.

"... classic diplomatic coup," Splitwhistle was saying. "I should like to see the look on the faces of our Groaci colleagues when they learn we've stolen a march on them!"

"Mr. Ambassador," Retief started.

Splitwhistle spun, stared for an instant at a point just above Retief's belt-buckle, then tilted his spherical bald head back, gazed up at his junior.

"I've warned you about pussy-

footing, Retief!" he yelled. "When you're around me, stamp your feet when you walk!"

"Mr. Ambassador, I'd like —"

Splitwhistle raised a small, plump-fingered hand. "Spare me a catalogue of your likes and dislikes, Mr. Retief! The ceremony is about to begin." He turned to include a wider audience. "Gentlemen, I trust you all observed my handling of protocol since our arrival here on Rockamorra this morning. Scarcely six hours, and we're about to become the first diplomatic mission ever to be accredited to this world! A world, I need not remind you, with a reputation for vigorous commercial activity and hostility to diplomats; and yet I —"

"Before this goes any farther, Mr. Ambassador—" Retief cut in, "I think—"

"May I remind you, sir!" Splitwhistle shrilled. "I am talking! About a subject of vast importance, namely myself! Er, my contribution, that is, to diplomatic history."

A pair of robed Rockamorrans bustled up, waving elaborate candelabra which emitted a pungent odor and clouds of red and green smoke. They struck poses before Splitwhistle, intoned resonant ritual phrases in sonorous tones, then stepped back. One pointed a thin, multi-jointed webbed digit at Retief, made a sound like a saw-blade dragged across a base viol string.

"Where's your headdress, Retief?" Splitwhistle hissed.

"I don't have one. What I wanted to tell you —"

"Get one instantly! And take your

place in my entourage!" The Ambassador moved off at the heels of the local officials. Magnan, rushing up at that moment, waved the bladders excitedly.

"Don't bother inflating it, just get it on!"

"Never mind that," Retief said. "I won't be needing it."

"What do you mean? We all have to wear them."

"Not me. I won't be taking part in the ceremony; and I advise—"

"Crass insubordination!" Magnan gasped, and rushed off in Splitwhistle's wake as large bouncers moved in to bar Retief's path.

**I**t was a colorful ceremony, involving a vigorous symbolic beating of the diplomats with real laths, immersion in a pond which, to judge from Magnan's nose when he surfaced, was considerably chiller than the bracing morning air, and finishing off with a brisk run around the compound — ten laps — during which the panting Terrans were spurred to creditable efforts by quirt-wielding native dignitaries loping along behind them. Retief, observing the activities from a position among the curious at the sidelines, won ten credits in local currency on Splitwhistle, whose form he had correctly judged superior to that of his staff.

Amid a tolling of deep-toned gongs, the Rockamorran officials herded the wheezing Terrans together and read off a long speech from a scroll. Then a small local stepped forward, bearing a six-foot sword on a purple velvet cushion

lettered **MOTHER** — a Terran import, Retief noted.

A tall Rockamorran in mauve and puce vestments strode up to Splitwhistle and picked up the sword. The Ambassador backed a step, said, "Look here, my good man—" and was prodded back into line. The sword-handler solemnly hung a beaded baldric over the stout diplomat's shoulderless frame and attached the scabbard to it.

Then the locals fell silent, staring at Splitwhistle expectantly.

"Magnan, you're protocol officer. What am I supposed to do now?" the Ambassador muttered from the corner of his mouth.

"Why, I'd suggest that Your Excellency just sort of, ah, bow and then we all turn and leave, before they think up any more tortures."

"All right, men: all together," Mr. Splitwhistle whispered hoarsely. "About face."

Magnan yelled as the two-yard long cutlass connected solidly with his shin as the group turned; then they strode away, the Ambassador in the lead, drawn up to his full five feet, with the sword cutting a trail in the dust behind him. There was a happy mutter from the locals, then a swelling shout of joy; eager hands clapped the Terrans on the back, offered them sulphurette dope-sticks, proffered flasks of green liquid as the ceremony broke up into mutual rejoicing.

Retief made his way through the press, intercepted Splitwhistle as he pushed through.

"Well, Retief!" the Ambassador barked. "Absented yourself from the



proceedings, I noted! Having sulked in your quarters during the voyage out, you now boycott official functions! I'll see you in my office as soon as I've seen to the safe-keeping of this handsome ceremonial weapon I've been awarded."

"That's what I wanted to tell you, Mr. Ambassador. It's not ceremonial. You're expected to use it."

"What? Me use this?" Splitwhistle smiled sourly. "I shall hang it on the wall as a symbol —"

"Possibly later, sir," Retief cut in. "Today you have a job to do with it."

"A job?"

"I think you misunderstand the nature of the ceremony. The Rockamorrans don't know anything about diplomacy. They thought you came here to help them —"

"As indeed we did," Splitwhistle snorted. "Now if you'll stand aside —"

"—so they're expecting you to make good on your promise. Now."

"Promise? What promise?" Splitwhistle asked.

"That's what the ceremony was all about. The Rockamorrans are in trouble, but you've promised to get them out of it."

"I've already planned an economic survey —"

"That won't do the job, Mr. Ambassador. There's a ninty foot dinosaur named Crunderthush loose in the area."

"Dinosaur?" Splitwhistle's voice rose to a squeak.

Retief nodded. "And you've just sworn to kill him before sundown tomorrow."

"Look here, Retief," First Secretary Whaffle said into the silence. "How is it you appear to understand the proceedings, conducted as they were in the barbaric local patois?"

"I didn't. They talked too fast. But I picked up a smattering of the language studying tapes on the way out, and I had a nice chat with the boatman."

"I dispatched you to arrange for lodging and servants, not natter with low-caste locals!" Splitwhistle chirped.

"I had to do a little nattering in order to rent rooms. The locals don't understand sign language —"

"Impertinence, Mr. Retief? You may consider yourself under suspension!"

A group of Rockamorran officials had gathered, a column of pikemen behind them, stolid and menacing in green scaled breast-plates and greaves.

"Ah — before you confine yourself to quarters," Splitwhistle added, "just tell these chaps we won't be available for monster-killing. However, I think I can promise them a nice little Information Service Library, well stocked with the latest CDT pamphlets —"

One of the Rockamorrans stepped forward, ducked his head, addressed the Ambassador:

"Honorable sir, I have pleasure of to be Haccop, interpretator of Terry mouth-noise learn from plenty Jap-anee, Dutch, Indian, and Hebrew Terry trader. We had nice chin-chin

via telescreen before you-chap hit beach."

"Ah, to be sure! Pity you weren't standing by during the ceremony. Now we'll get to the bottom of this nonsense!" Splitwhistle shot Retief a withering look. "I have heard . . . ah . . . rumors, to the affect that there's some sort of, ha ha, dinosaur roaming the countryside —"

"Yes, yes, excellent sir! Damn decent you-chap come along us."

Splitwhistle frowned. "Perhaps I'd better clarify our position, just in case there was any confusion in translation. I am, of course, accredited as Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to your government, with full authority to—"

"Hukk! With title like that, how can you miss?" Haccop exulted. "You want few our boys along for pick up pieces? Or you handle Crunderthush alone, catch more glory?"

"Here, I'm a diplomat! My offer was to assist your poor backward nation!"

"Sure. Swell gesture of interplanetary chumship."

"Just a moment!" Splitwhistle thrust out his lower lip, pointing a finger heavenward.

"I deal in words and paper, sir, not deeds! That is, I am empowered to promise you anything I deem appropriate, but the actual performance is up to lesser persons."

Haccop arranged his wide features in what was obviously a frown. "Around this end galaxy, chum say, chum do."

"Surely. And I'll speak to Sector HQ early next month when my vessel returns; I imagine something can be arranged."

"Crunderthush on rampage *now!* No catchem wait next month! You owner genuine Japanese-made sword; you use!"

Splitwhistle's chins quivered. "Sir! You forget yourself! I am the Terrestrial Ambassador, not a confounded exterminator service!"

"You-chap violate Rockamorran tradition number six-oh-two, passed two hours ago by Council of Honorable Dotards!"

Splitwhistle unbuckled the sword, tossed it aside. Retief lunged, caught it before it hit the dirt, handed it to Haccop. Arms folded, the Ambassador glared at the Rockamorran.

"Let me state unequivocally, at once, that I have no intention of attacking a dinosaur!"

Haccop's face fell — an effect like a mud-pack slipping. "Is final decision?"

"Indeed so, sir!"

The Rockamorran turned, spoke to the pikemen in glottal Rockamorran; they closed in, nudged Splitwhistle and the four diplomats who had participated in the oath-taking ceremony.

"Here, what's going on?" the Ambassador yelped.

"It seems they're taking you away to the local lockup, sir," Retief said.

"They can't do this to me! And why aren't you included?"

"I didn't take the oath."

"You-chap move along," Haccop

said. "Rockamorran got no time be patience with oath-busters."

"H-how long will we be incarcerated?" Whaffle asked.

"One day," Haccop said.

"Well, that's not too bad, Your Excellency," Magnan pointed out. "We can spend the time figuring out an alibi — I mean, of course, composing a dispatch to Sector Headquarters explaining how this is really a sort of diplomatic victory, in reverse —"

"Tomorrow, my good man," Splitwhistle barked at Haccop, "I can assure you I shall take drastic steps."

"Have honor of to doubt that, faithless one," Haccop said. "Pretty neat trick take steps with head off."

### III

Splitwhistle glared at Retief through the barred windows of his cell.

"I hold you fully responsible, sir, for not warning me of this barbaric custom! I trust you've established communication with the Corps Transport and ordered their return?"

"I'm afraid not. The local transmitter doesn't have the range."

"Are you out of your mind? That means . . ." Splitwhistle sagged against the bars. "Retief," he whispered. "They'll lop our heads off."

A squad of Rockamorran pikemen rounded a corner, marched up to the Terrans' cell.

"Well, you-chap ready to take part in execution?"

"Just a minute," Retief said. "They promised to kill Crunderthush by sundown tomorrow. That's still a full day away."

"True. But always have head-cutting after lunch; pack in better house that way, at one credit per ticket."

Retief shook his head. "Highly illegal procedure. Killing off a few diplomats is perfectly understandable, but it has to be done in accordance with protocol or you'll have a squadron of Peace Enforcers in here revising Rockamorran traditions before you can say 'interference with internal affairs'."

"Hmmm. You might have a point there. Okay, we hold off until tomorrow night. Have torch-light execution, very colorful."

"Retief!" Magnan gasped, pushing up against the bars beside Splitwhistle. "Isn't there some way to prevent this ghastly miscarriage of justice?"

"Only way, you-chap change mind, kill Crunderthush," Haccop said cheerfully.

Retief looked thoughtful. "Do the Ambassador and these other gentlemen have to do the job personally?"

"Posilutely! Can't have every Tom, George and Meyer getting into act. After all, killers of Crunderthush not only national heroes, win plenty refrigerator and green stamps too!"

"How about it, sir?" Whaffle said. "Have a go, eh? Not much to lose . . ."

"How? I can't kill the beast by firing off a dispatch!"

"Maybe we could dig a hole and let him fall in."

"Do you have any idea what size excavation would be required to inconvenience a ninety-foot behemoth, you idiot!"



"Suppose the Ambassador had a little help. Would that be cricket?"

Haccop cocked his wide head. "Is good questioning; have to check with Ministry of Tradition on that point."

"I'd love to help, of course," Magnan said brightly. "It's just that I have this cough—"

"Yes, kaff kaff," Whaffle said. "Must be the damp air, all these confounded canals —"

"Will you let them out of the cell to scout the area and plan some strategy for the kill?" Retief asked.

Haccop shook his head. "Nix. Oath-breakers incarcerated by order of Big Shots. Release also have to clear through same. But glad to check up after nap-time."

"When will that be?"

"Nap over late tomorrow afternoon; maybe Midget - with - shiny-head and pals have just time turn trick before deadline."

"How can we kill a dinosaur while we're locked in here?" Splitwhistle demanded.

"Should have think of this before break oath," Haccop said briskly. "Interesting problem. Interesting see how comes out."

Outside, Retief drew Haccop aside. "I don't suppose there's any objections to my taking a look around? I'd like to see what this monster looks like."

"Sure. Do what you like, no charge for look at Crunderthush, see free any time — just so you got money pay way."

"I see. I don't suppose you'd lend me an official guide?"

"Correct. Rockamorran great tightwad, don't lend nothing, especially to foreigner."

"All I have is pocket change. I don't suppose you'd cash a check?"

"Hey, you skillful guesser, Terry!"

"I can see it's going to be a bit difficult to get around, without funds."

"Very shrewd analysis of situation."

"Perhaps you'd advise me how I could earn some cash in a hurry."

"Oh-oh, guess wrong that time, spoil record. Better find answer, though. You run out of cash, you automatically slave."

"I get the feeling you don't much care whether this menace is removed or not."

"Is correct assumption. Big tourist drawing card. Also more fun this way, have something to bet on. Odds ten to one against Terries."

"Meanwhile, he goes on eating people."

"Sure, few peasants get devour, but so long Crunderthush avoid eat me, is no scales off my sitz-plats, in word of immortal bard."

"Shakespeare?"

"No, Egbert Hiesenwhacker, early Terran trader introduce cards and dice to Rockamorra."

"Cards and dice, eh?"

"Sure; you like play? Come on, have fun, forget troubles, help kill time up to big affair tomorrow."

"That's a good idea, Haccop; lead the way..."

It was dawn when Retief emerged from the Rockamorran gambling hall; Haccop followed him at the



end of a light chain attached to a steel ring riveted to his ankle, carrying a large basket of Rockamorran currency.

"Hey, Retief-master, lousy trick fill up when I got three ladies of ill repute —"

"I warned you about those inside straights, Haccop. Now tell me something. All that information the boys gave me about Crunderthush's habits: was that all the straight dope?"

"Sure, Retief-master. Pukka information."

"All right, next stop the Ministry of Tradition. Lead on, Haccop."

An hour later, Retief emerged from the Ministry, frowning.

"It's not the best deal in the world, Haccop, but I suppose it's better than nothing."

"Should have offered bigger bribes, boss."

"I'm on a tight budget. Still, I think we have a fighting chance. I'm going to need a heli and a good pair of binoculars. See to it at once, and meet me at the Grand Canal in half an hour."

"Boss, why worry about small-timers back in hoosegow? Look, I got plan. We be partners, you deal and I circulate around behind opposition and signal with trick sunglasses —"

"We can discuss business later. Get going, before I report you to the Slave Relations Board for insubordination."

"Sure, chief, chop-chop!" Haccop set off at a lope, and Retief headed directly for the nearest sporting-goods shop.

Half an hour later, Haccop dropped a second-hand float-mounted heli in beside the quay where Retief waited beside a heap of goods, waved cheerfully from the cockpit. Retief caught the mooring rope, pulled the light machine close, handed in his purchases and boarded.

"They say Crunderthush is foraging a mile or two east of town. Let's buzz over that way and size him up."

The heli lifted above the fern-like palms; beat its way across the gleaming pattern of canals and dome-shaped dwellings of Rockamorra City, gaining altitude; beyond the tilled paddies at the edge of the town a vast swamp stretched to distant smudges of jungle.

"That's him, boss!" Haccop called, pointing. Retief used the binoculars, picked out a towering shape almost invisible among the tall trees growing in clumps in the shallow water.

"He's big, all, right. But he seems to be eating tree-tops. I thought he was a meat-eater."

"Sure, meat-eater, master. Dumb peasant climb tree get away, Crunderthush not have to bend neck."

The heli approached the browsing dinosaur at three hundred feet, circled him while Retief observed. The giant saurian, annoyed by the buzzing interloper, raised his great-jawed head, emitted a bellow like a blast on a giant tuba. Retief caught a vivid glimpse of a purple throat wide enough to drive a ground-car through, studded with fangs like stalactites in a cave.

"Friendly looking fellow. Is it possible to predict his course?"

"Maybe. Crunderthush always take it easy, graze village over pretty good before move on to next. About done here, I estimation. By lunchtime start toward next stop, half mile south."

"Let's cruise over that way."

Haccop dropped the heli to a fifty-foot altitude, buzzed across the flat water, leaving behind a pattern of blast-ripples, bending the scattered reeds in the wind of its passage.

"How deep is the water here?" Retief called.

"Knee-deep at low tide."

"When's low tide?"

"Hour before sunset tonight."

"What's the bottom like?"

"Exquisite soft mud. Hey, master, you like go down scroonch around in mud awhile? Is good for what ails you."

"Sorry, we Terries aren't amphibians, Haccop."

"Oops, big excuses, chief. Not mean draw attention to racial deficiencies."

"Will Crunderthush follow a straight course across the swamp?"

The heli was over the mud walls of the next village now. Retief could see the inhabitants going about their business as usual, apparently undisturbed by their position next on the menu.

"No telling, boss. Might get distracted by juicy fisherman or un-wary swimming party."

"Can we hire boats down there, and a few helpers?"

"Retief-master, you got enough

cash to hire whole town." He sighed. "That pot before last: I never figured you for eagles back to back —"

"No post-mortems," Retief admonished. "Land there, in the market-place."

Haccop dropped the flier in, grinned at the quick gathering crowd of curious locals.

"I tell hicks go away, give Retief-boss room walk around, do little shopping?" he suggested.

"Absolutely not; we're going to need them. Listen carefully, Haccop; here's the plan that I have in mind . . ."

It was late afternoon when Retief, wet and plastered to the hips with black mud, signaled to Haccop to land at the northernmost point of the village, a narrow finger of land edged by a baked mud retaining wall. Half a mile away, wading ponderously across the shallows, Crunderthush rumbled softly to himself.

"That sound carried well across the water," Retief commented. "It sounds as though he's right on top of us."

"And will be, plenty chop-chop," Haccop pointed out. "Retief-master think rope across water make big fella fall down?" The Rockamorran waved a hand at the taut one-inch nylon cable stretched two feet above the surface of the water across the oncoming monster's path.

"He won't get that far, if everything works out all right. How much time do we have? Another hour?" Retief asked.

"Crunderthush stopping now to scratch."

V

Retief observed the dinosaur sinking to his haunches, bringing up a massive hind leg to rake at the armored hide with two-foot talons, amid a prodigious splashing. "Maybe have hour, hour and half before dinner-time," Haccop concluded judiciously.

"Okay, let's get moving! Get the hauling crew over here on the double. Have them attach a line to the center of the cable, and winch it this way until they can hook it over the trigger."

He pointed over toward a heavy timber construction consisting of an eighteen-inch pile projecting a yard from the ground with a toggle mounted atop it.

"Retief-chief, humble slave bushed from all day stringing wires to trees."

"We'll be through pretty soon. How's the axe-crew doing with that pole?"

"Top hole, sahib. Pretty near got nice point on one end, notch on other."

"Get it set up here as soon as they're finished. Prop it in the two forked saplings the boys are supposed to set in the bottom out there."

"Too many thing do all one time," Haccop complained. "Bwana Retief have strange hobby."

"I'm taking the heli into town. I'll be back in half an hour, have everything ready just the way I explained it, or it won't be just Terry heads rolling around here," Retief warned.

The great pale sun of Rockamorra with its tiny blue-white companion was just sinking in a glory of purple and old rose as Retief returned to ground the heli at the village.

"Ohio, Retief-san!" Haccop called. "All set, accordingly to plan! Now we hit trail, plenty quick! Crunderthush too close for maximizing adjustment!"

"Look at the creature!" Whaffle quavered, descending from the heli. "As big as a Yill Joss-palace — and coming this way!"

"Why have you brought us here, Retief?" Splitwhistle demanded, his jowls paler than usual. "I prefer beheading to serving as hors d'oeuvre to that leviathan!"

"It's quite simple, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said soothingly, leading the stout diplomat across to where Haccop stood beaming beside the completed apparatus. "You merely use this mallet to hit the trigger. This releases the cable, which drives the lance —"

"R-R-R-R-Retief! Are you unaware that — that —"

"I know. He looks pretty big at a hundred yards, doesn't he, Mr. Magnan? But he moves slowly. We have plenty of time."

"We? Why include *us* in this mad venture?" Ambassador Splitwhistle demanded.

"You heard what Haccop said, sir. You gentlemen have to personally kill the creature. I think I have it arranged so that —"

"Oh-oh, Master!" Haccop pointed.



"Look like distraction! Couple drunks going fishing!"

Retief followed the Rockamorran's gaze, saw a dugout pushing off with two staggering locals singing gaily as they took up paddles, steered for deep water on a course that would take them within fifty feet of the dinosaur.

"Try to stop them, Haccop! If he changes course now, we're out of luck!"

Haccop splashed out a few yards into the mud, floundering, cupped his hands and bellowed. The fishermen saw him, waved cheerfully, kept going.

"No use, boss!" Haccop waded back to shore. "Look, better you and me make tracks, hit town farther up archipelago. Swell floating crap game going—"

"Mr. Ambassador, stand by!" Retief snapped. "When I give the word, hit that trigger, and not a second before!" He sprinted to the small wharf nearby, jumped into a tethered boat, slipped the painter, poled quickly out toward the Crunderthush. The monster was poised now, mouth open, gazing toward the fishermen. He emitted a rumbling growl, turned ponderously, took a step to intercept them. Retief, cutting in front of the dinosaur, waved his paddle and shouted. The giant reptile hesitated, turned to stare at Retief, rumbled again. Then, at a burst of song from the happy anglers, swung back their way.

Retief stopped, plucked a rusty fishing-weight from the bottom of his skiff, hurled it at Crunderthush. It struck the immense leathery chest

with a resounding whop! at which the monster paused in mid-swing, brought its left eye to bear on Retief. It stared, cocked its head to bring the right eye into play, then, its tiny mind made up, raised a huge foot from the mud with a sucking sound, started for Retief.

He eased the boat back with quick strokes of the paddle. The dinosaur, tantalized by the receding prey, lunged, gained thirty feet, sending up a swell which rocked the tiny craft violently. Retief grabbed for balance, and accidentally dropped the paddle.

"Retief-boss!" Haccop boomed. "This not time to goof!"

"Somebody do something!" Magnan's voice wailed.

"He'll be devoured!" Whaffle yelped.

The dinosaur lunged again. His power-shovel jaws gaped, snapped to with a clash of razor-edged crockery a yard short of the boat. Retief, standing in the stern, gauged the range, then turned and raised an arm, brought it down in a chopping motion.

"Let her go, Mr. Ambassador!" he called, and dived over the side of the boat.

Splitwhistle, standing transfixed by the trigger apparatus of the over-size arbalest, gaped as Crunderthush raised his long neck twenty feet above the water, streaming mud, emitted an ear-splitting screech, and struck at Retief, swimming for shore. At the last instant, Retief twisted, kicked off to the left. The monster, confused, raised his

head for another look; his eye fell on the diplomats on shore, now only fifty feet distant. At his glance, Splitwhistle dropped the heavy mallet, turned and sprinted for the heli. Four others gave sharp cries and wheeled to follow. As the stout mission chief bounded past Secretary Magnan he tripped, dived face-down in the soft dirt.

The mallet skidded aside. Magnan sprang for it, caught it on the second bounce, leaped to the trigger, and brought the hammer down in an overarm swing—

There was a deep, musical *boing!* The sharpened twelve-foot hardwood pole leaped forward as the taut nylon sprang outward.

Crunderthush, just gathering himself for the final satisfying snap at the morsel in the water before him, rocked back as the lance buried half its length full in his chest. Retief surfaced in time to see the dinosaur totter, fall sideways with a tremendous splash that swamped the sea wall, sent a tide of mud and blood-stained water washing around the frantic Terrans fighting for position at the heli hatch. Splitwhistle sat up sputtering as the flood receded from his position. Magnan sat down hard, fumbled out a hanky, watching the stricken monster kicking spasmodically. Haccop whooped delightedly, plunged into the water to assist Retief ashore.

"Nice going! *Siki*. Plenty meat here for barbecue for whole town! Dandy substitute event for disappointment of not to see Terry head-chopping after all!" Haccop said, delighted.

Dabbing at his mud-caked shirt-front, Ambassador Splitwhistle nodded curtly at Retief.

"Having gotten me into this awkward situation, young man, I'm glad to see that you carried on to rectify matters. Naturally, I could have extricated myself and my staff at any time, merely by a skillful word in the right quarter, but I felt it would be valuable experience for you to work this out for yourself."

"Hey, Retief-master, I form Terries up in column of ducks, go get fitted for leg-irons?"

"No, I don't think that will be necessary, Haccop."

"What's that? Leg irons?" Splitwhistle choked. "See here, you nincompoop, I've slain your monster, as required by your barbaric code! Now I demand —"

"Slave no demand nothing," Haccop said. "Slave hold mouth right, work hard, hope for escape beating."

The Ambassador whirled on Retief. "What, may I ask, is the meaning of the idiot's drivelling?"

"Well, Mr. Ambassador, the Rockamorrans have very rigid rules about this sort of thing. However, I managed to work out a deal with them. Ordinarily, you couldn't have any assistance with your promise."

"Assistance? I seem to recall that you were disporting yourself in the swamp yonder when I — er, ah — a member of my staff, that is — dispatched the brute!"

"True. But the Rockamorrans seem to think I had something to do with it. Under the circumstances

they agreed to commute your sentence to slavery for life."

"Slavery!"

"Fortunately, I was able to buy an option on your contracts — provided you still had heads —"

"Buy up . . . ? Well, in that case, my boy, I suppose I can overlook the irregularity. If you'll just run along and see to my baggage —"

"I'm afraid it's not quite that simple, sir. You see, I still have to pay your upkeep. And since I've spent all my money buying you —"

Splitwhistle sputtered.

"— I've had to hire you out to earn enough to cover living expenses until the ship gets back."

"But — but — that will be weeks —"

"Okay, Terries; I, Haccop, am slave foreman. First job, strip out blubber from dead monster. Good job, take maybe two weeks, keep you in ration with maybe little left over for pack of Camels once a week."

"But — but — Retief! What will you be doing in the meantime?"

"Haccop tells me there's another dinosaur operating a few miles east. If I can bag it, that will give you another two weeks work after this job's finished. With a little luck, I can keep you going until the ship arrives."

"Hey, Retief." Haccop came close, whispered behind his hand. "Maybe better bring thin-face slave name Magnan along you, me. Got idea Midget-with-bad-temper hold grudge, Magnan trip him and make him lose number one position in dash for heli."

"Good idea, Haccop, bring him along."

Two hours later, Retief, Haccop and Magnan, bathed and clad in new Rockamorran hose and doublets, sat on a tiled roof terrace, dining on a delicately spiced casserole of white fish and sea vegetables. The view out over the town and the water to the east was superb; the brilliant light of the three moons showed the silvery waterways, the island villages and, distantly, the great hulk of the dead dinosaur, its four legs in the air, and four tiny figures crawling over it like fleas. Their arms, wielding machetes, could be clearly discerned.

"Retief, no time linger over succulent native dishes," Haccop said. "Plenty big game of Red Eye just getting under way at Tavern of Golden Ale Keg."

"Don't rush me, Haccop. Order us a second round of drinks — but none for Mr. Magnan. He doesn't indulge. The Ambassador doesn't approve of booze."

Magnan blinked at him thoughtfully.

"Ah, Retief, knowing your skill with the pasteboards and the, er, galloping dominoes, why couldn't you secure sufficient capital to provision Ambassador Splitwhistle and the others without the necessity for their stripping all that blubber?"

Retief sampled the fresh drink the waiter put before him, nodded appreciatively.

"Mr. Magnan, the ship won't arrive for at least six weeks, possibly longer. Would you recommend that a non-accredited diplomat with Ambassador Splitwhistle's personality be permitted to run loose among the Rockamorrans for that length of time?"

Magnan looked grave, swallowed hard. "I see what you mean, Retief. But if he finds out, he'll be quite furious."

"I don't intend to burden him with the knowledge, Mr. Magnan. Do you?"

Magnan pursed his lips. "No," he said. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him, eh?" He managed a tentative smile. "Speaking of which, I think I'll have that drink after all."

END

## Next Month in *If* . . .

These extra pages in *If* are giving us a chance to do some things that would have been out of the question before. Next month we complete Doc Smith's great *Skylark DuQuesne* serial . . . and we bring the first installment of another serial that's been asked for for a long time. More and more letters have been coming in demanding that we give Retief a chance to spread himself in a novel. We aim to please — and so does Keith Laumer — and next month we start *Retief's War*. Even for Retief, the planet he has taken on this time is pretty wild and woolly. Its inhabitants are half-animal and half-machine; its social structure is — well — chaotic; and its perils are extreme. *Retief's War*. Next month. Don't miss it.

# Alien Artifact

by DANNIE PLACHTA

*There was something strange  
about the alien ship — and  
not just about its origin!*

The patrol craft *Solar Sea* was no more than a billion miles beyond the orbit of Pluto, when the radar chief signalled the captain's cabin. The captain, walking briskly, acknowledged the call with a groping hand at the night stand. "Captain here. Good morning!"

"Radar, sir. Chief reporting."

"What have you got?" the captain asked.

"A big blip sir. Projected intersection at about a hundred thousand miles. Presently about one hundred forty thousand. Solid as a rock, sir."

The captain fumbled again about the night stand, and squinting his eyes at the sudden light, rolled out

of bed. "Keep on it. I'll be bridge-side when I've dressed."

It was somewhat less than five minutes later that the captain stood with the radar chief, looking down at the circle of dim light that held its own universe of minute pseudo-stars and vaguely glowing gas clouds. "Big and solid," commented the chief.

"Very big and very solid," said the captain, with no trace of excitement.

"Randy says projected intersection now at approximately twenty thousand miles, Captain," reported the man at the computer control board. Like all the newer patrol



craft, the *Solar Sea* had the latest in compact computer systems — one of the hyper-efficient Random-Series Portables. To the officers and crew of the *Solar Sea*, it was “Randy,” and the ubiquitous “Randy only knows!” was a favorite in the ship’s complement of assorted oaths and wisecracks.

“Order Randy three-quarter deceleration, and stand by for full stop,” called the captain from his position at the radar scope.

The programmer at the computer board responded with an “Aye, aye, sir,” and the ship shuddered as it braked. After an unsteady moment in which the captain held tightly to the hand rail surrounding the radar scope, he took the four strides necessary to put him alongside the programmer’s chair. “Randy’s scanning, sir,” said the programmer. “Nothing yet.”

After two full minutes of deceleration, a small green light winked on the board. “Here it comes, Captain . . . Randy says alloy construction . . . *alloy construction*, Captain . . . no functioning power source detectable . . . *alien artifact!*”

“Tell Randy to get the hell out of here! Full power and general alarm!” The captain grabbed at a hand rail, and another shock quaked through the ship.

They had tried every means of remote communication at their disposal. There was not the slightest indication of awareness or acknowledgement from the alien craft. Even the nuclear flares failed to bring a

response. Randy’s scanning reports were consistent: “No significant emission of any type detectable . . . Course unaltered . . . Disposition unchanged.”

So the captain and a dozen volunteers boarded the space skiff, to fall in a long arc toward the alien. “If anything happens to us, or even the *Solar Sea*,” reasoned the captain, “at least Randy’s log-tapes will have been monitored at the base. And we’ll have the portable TV units along. They’ll know as much as we did.”

Final attempts at communication from the closely orbiting skiff failed to produce a reaction, and the pilot brought the small boat alongside the huge alien craft. The pilot remained at the controls as the rest of the group, led by the captain, suited-up and exited.

After pounding on the outer wall of the otherwise silent hull for what seemed to the captain like a reasonable period of time, the expedition prepared an entranceway with the frank utilization of a small bomb. “At least they’ll know we’re here,” explained the captain.

“I hope we picked a good spot,” volunteered one of the men.

“Hope it isn’t the ladies’ powder room,” cracked another crewman, floating at the rear of the group.

“Leave your suits on at all times, stay close, and keep your TV units sweeping your immediate area,” commanded the captain, as he ducked into the still aperture. The rest of the party followed quickly, the last man waving toward the cockpit of the drifting skiff.

The ship was huge, with rooms to match. The explorers wandered along for hours, never stopping for more than a few seconds, until they realized that they had covered it all. The cartographer, consulting his portable equipment and sketching as he went along, informed the captain of this soon after they had passed the point at which they had entered. The group halted for a conference.

"All of these rooms are exceedingly large and open," suggested one of the crew, "and it would be difficult to stay concealed . . . unless they are very small."

"Considering the size of the compartments and equipment we've seen, I would consider creatures smaller than ourselves unlikely aboard this craft," replied the captain, glancing quickly about. "I can only conclude, with very minor reservations, that we are the only living things aboard. This is, I very strongly suspect, a derelict."

At the captain's order, they left for what the cartographer assured them was the center of the ship. It was decidedly the largest room aboard, and the captain felt that it should be the first area to be more carefully investigated.

As they began a detailed search, one of the crewmen approached the captain. "Sir, perhaps no one was ever aboard. This may have been a sort of gigantic robot probe," he theorized.

That theory was abandoned a moment later when several of the crew discovered the large plastic-like sheets. There were, they found,

thousands of them in what looked like filing drawers along the expansive walls. They were quickly identified as very detailed charts on maps of entire solar systems, as well as individual stars and planets of all sizes.

"Why this one resembles our own planetary system," indicated the captain, "and there's earth, I think."

They marvelled at the thin plates, poking and waving their TV cameras at the intricate markings. "Let Randy have a good look," said the captain, "perhaps we can get a rough translation."

"This must be their chart room," someone decided, and the others agreed.

"They had a sense of direction," concluded the captain, as he prepared to return to his ship.

In his cabin near the bow of the *Solar Sea*, the captain sat on the edge of his bed, or "bunk," as he preferred to call it, and wrote meticulously into his diary, or "log", as he preferred to call it, of the extraordinary events of the past few hours. He paused to reconsider a particularly colorful phrase, when the sound of a signal bell impelled him to reach out for a switch on the night stand. "Captain here. What have you got?"

"Computation, sir. Chief reporting."

"Well, did Randy have any luck with a translation from those maps?"

"We have a preliminary report, sir. And, Captain, Randy says they aren't maps. They're blueprints."

END

# GREE'S DAMNED ONES

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by GIUNTA

*Steve Duke had fought on a thousand outlandish battlegrounds — but never against weapons as strange as these!*

## I

The ship, a converted Scout Tender, was crammed with supplies, equipment, and a draft of one hundred malassorted and sullen slave Techs — mostly Gjiss, with a scattering of Sabrils, B'lant, and humans. None of them, except Steve Duke, had even an inkling of their destination.

They'd made several null-hops and now, judging by the way the hull

thrummed, were dropping through atmosphere. The viewscreens weren't on; this bunch didn't rate privileges.

The PA crackled and spewed orders. "All slave Ratings except Ship's Personnel muster for disembarkation!" Steve picked up his duffelbag and went with the rest. They formed ranks before an airlock, with the subdued muttering which was all they dared. Six slave Gunners, heavy beamers ready, watched them disinterestedly. The

ship hung for a moment, then touched down with a mild jar.

A screen glowed and the face of the ship's commander — one of the Overseer race — appeared, wearing just the right combination of disdain and compassion. "Slaves, each one of you has failed Gree in some way. You deserve only the most degrading labor, or to be live targets in training; and to die without His blessing and without hope of resurrection. But as Gree is a merciful master, He is giving you a chance to redeem yourselves.

"This planet is formidable, and there is something here of great importance. What you are to do here will be worthy of any warrior. Those of you who die will die as heroes, with full forgiveness. Those who live will be given tests, and may regain their former statuses.

"You will disembark now, and meet your new Overseers."

Or, as Steve translated inwardly, these slaves — disgraced, denounced some of them brainwashed or even brainburned, simmering with resentment that cried for a target — would be the advance skirmishers, entirely expendable. None of them (except him) really had much reason to live.

The night air was warm and dry. The Base was similar to many he'd seen — a solid periphery of buildings, their outward walls forming a line of defense, with the landing field and other important functions inside — but it differed in being eggshaped rather than circular. Outside the big end of it, curv-

ing in a protective arc, was a very strong, high wall of logs, braced in such a way that Steve guessed it must be double, with a rock or dirt fill between. Other sides of the Base were not this protected. He didn't understand what threat might come from one direction only.

He moved as far as he dared from the landing-lights and looked up at the sky. Sentry globes moved a hundred feet above, but there were no stars. The sky must be completely overcast.

An Overseer called, "Four ranks! Highest ratings in front!" Automatically, Steve stepped forward. Gunner, Third Grade, was the highest rank a slave could hold. He'd earned that legitimately once (though not, of course, under the false identity he wore now).

They were counted again and marched toward the barracks. As they moved clear of the ship Steve suddenly saw a moon, small or distant, but bright, with clear markings. The sky was *not* overcast. He took his eyes from the moon lest an Overseer notice his interest. According to his scant information, they'd been headed somewhere near the center of the galaxy. The sky should be rich with stars.

Before getting bunks, they had to file one at a time through an Inquisition Booth. This was the first big hurdle.

He stepped in, suddenly perspiring. There was a pause — longer than normal, he thought — then the voice of all Booths, deep, paternal, with a hint of warning, said, "What are your name and number?"

The old emotions stirred in Steve. He fought them down; to let them seize him would be fatal. He forced himself to say, "Dunnek. 552 05 8691." As the Booth fed that through its circuits, checking for any prior data, he concentrated hard on the words, "I'm in a Booth. I'm in a Booth." He fancied he could feel the stir in his brain, as the delicately implanted metal molecules shunted nerve currents, blocked off memory trunks, controlled body responses. The fear subsided but a sullen resentment grew. He strove to keep other thoughts away.

The Booth said, "We have not received data on you, Dunnek. Why are you in disgrace?"

His voice was thick with the artificial resentment. "I failed to protect a shrine of Gree."

There was another pause while the Booth's sensors probed at him. Then, "Where did this happen?"

"Garlock One." That was where Steve's side had captured the real Dunnek.

The Booth said, "We have data on Garlock One. But there is more in your heart than guilt. You had better tell us what it is."

He wiped his hands on his uniform. His next words might get him summarily liquidated. "The Overseers failed too. I fled when they fled. Yet I was punished and they were not."

He sat, mentally cringing. But the Booth answered sooner than he expected. "You are wrong. Why do you say the Overseers were not punished?"

"Well... they went freely, without anyone guarding them. They even kept their weapons."

Now he did have a long wait. He knew that Overseers operated the Booths, aided by computers and memory banks. Would they consider him too rebellious to live? Or find some flaw in his story?

Finally the Booth said, "You are a very impertinent slave. For this alone, you deserve the punishment you've received. Know, slave, that Gree himself dealt with the Overseers who failed him. Who are you, to question?" A pause. "Since you are in your present situation, you will not be punished further; but your impertinence will be noted. You had best think deeply about your sins."

Incredibly, the exit opened. He walked out, shaking a little and slightly dizzy from the unnatural things that still flowed in his veins. But his superiors had been right. In this case, sullenness pleased the Overseers.

## II

How much so, he discovered the next morning. They put him in charge of a troop of thirty-seven.

They lifted him in an aircar to hover over the Base while they aimed a telescope toward some mountains to the east. These weren't isolated peaks; lower chains led off to either side, but these were much higher, and snow-capped. When he put his eye to the scope he saw a section of a slope below the snowline. The Overseer said, "Do you see

that cliff-face in the center of the field?"

The scope had shifted a bit. He located the cliff. "Yes, sir." He took his eye from the instrument and looked at the mountains. They must be sixty or seventy miles away, but the air was clear, and he finally saw the cliff naked-eye. It must be big, to be visible at all. Below it was a wide band of forest, almost black in the distance. He traced out a waterway that pointed more or less at the cliff. The Overseer said, "Seen enough?"

"I think so, sir."

"All right. You're to take your troop and find a way on foot to that cliff. For various reasons we can't show our technology over or near those mountains. You'll have primitive weapons; iron, but below the gunpowder stage. You'll wear primitive clothes. For part of the way you'll have a radio transmitter, disguised as something else. Beam it only toward this Base. Our answers will come by relay from those lower mountains to the right, so they won't be beamed wrong either. When we can't reach you any more, you're to get reports to us as long as you can. After that you're to use your best judgment, but try to survive and bring back a final report. It doesn't matter how many of your troop you lose. Do you understand?"

After a moment, Steve said, "Yes, sir."

The Overseer said, "You'll meet some odd things along the way. Be cautious, but observe them carefully and report. You'll have to live

mostly off the land; we can't send flyers to supply you. Incidentally, you are one of four Sorties, and what you report may help others. Unless you have questions, that is all."

The sun was hot, but bearable. They wore or carried garments of leather and some animal wool coarsely woven. Their buskins were thick soled. They had bows and arrows and crude hand-axes, ropes, water-bags, rough blankets. There were flints for striking fire, salt for the meat they'd kill. The transmitter — carried by a Communications Tech, Second Grade, named Vay — was built into one of the bows.

Steve was the only Third Grader, and there were only two other Gunners, both Seconds, and both of the race called Sabrils. Like all Gree's humanoids except humans and B'lant, they were better at executing orders than at thinking for themselves. Not that they were stupid; they just weren't leaders. As Sabrils went, Keerno and Hurogil were good troopers. Keerno was the taller, and instantly distinguishable from Hurogil because one cheek and one side of the jaw were flesh transplants, and much lighter than the blue-black of his skin elsewhere. Hurogil had a few scars of his own, and an uneven gait from some injury. Even he was over six feet, with narrow sloping shoulders and a slender, though wiry, build. Their eyes were wide and narrow, with yellow irises that made some people uncomfortable. Their mouths were thin-lipped and turned down at the



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corners. Their ears were pointed and hung back and down. They sweated like fury in the sun, and needed lots of water.

Vay was the only other Second in the troop. All the others were Firsts (which meant they'd at least completed Hive-world training in arms, tactics and survival) and were all Gjiss, like Vay. They were among the more human-looking of Gree slaves, but they looked like squat, very hairy, very muscular humans. Their planet had high gravity so they were fine porters, though not fast afoot. They tended to be morose rather than sullen.

All, of course, spoke B'lant and English in addition to their own languages. Those two were required.

He took Keerno and three Gjiss for an advance guard. The rest came in a body, surrounding Vay. Steve put a ridge between the Sortie and Base as soon as he could, to test his communications. He went back and looked at Vay questioningly. The Gjiss said, "Ve got gon-dac, Gunner."

Steve took the disguised transmitter. "Base, this is Sortie Four. Four One speaking. We do not have line-of sight. The ridge between us looks like sandstone. There are a few small holes in it that look like bullet-holes but could belong to insects. There are insects about. There's some very thin desert growth, like lichens. I've seen a few animals about the size of my hand, catching insects. They look like six-legged starfish but seem to have internal skeletons. There are a few

small birds or large insects whose wings move fast enough to hum. I'm starting up a wadi that has low bushes in it. Report ends. Four One."

The answer came back, faint and squeaky. "Four One, give us a short carrier wave every half hour, even if you have no report. End. Base."

The wadi was from fifty to a hundred yards wide, sandy, twisting between low hills, with vertical banks up to ten or twelve feet in places. The plants were green enough to prove subsurface water. They were the height of a man, squat, with twisting branches and thick-set small round leaves. The small flying things fed on the leaves, and he took time to study one. It was odd. The oval bodies were the size of a man's thumb, with stubby, leathery wings set on each side. There seemed to be no head or tail — each end of the body was a large faceted eye, with a short flap over it that might be an eye-shade or an auxiliary wing. There were no legs, but the wings were prehensile, and on the underside of the body were two orifices that served as suction cups and mouths.

He hadn't seen any other birds.

A couple of hours up the wadi they began to cross patches of grass, where pools probably lasted into the spring. Not long after that they saw their first animals grazing.

Steve was with the advance guard again, and he was moving cautiously to the middle of the wadi to see around a turn. The animals saw him as he saw them.



They were quadruped, thin-bodied and long-legged, and with very long necks that were now held straight up in alarm. They had no horns, but the feet were clawed, not hoofed, and the teeth were big, if flat. He judged the animal weighed three hundred pounds. It had more hair than he expected to see in a desert.

Several of the big males took a few steps forward. They didn't seem on the point of charging, but they weren't giving ground. He said quietly to the Sortie, who'd stopped when he had and were still out of the animals' sight, "Grazing animals, but big. Ready with arrows. Four of you climb out on that side and go fifty yards upstream. Hit one of these males that are facing me, without warning. One'll do it."

Five minutes later, four arrows flashed in the sun. The chosen male bleated and leaped high. He came down running, but his legs collapsed and he went sprawling and kicking. The herd broke and galloped up-wadi without any more delay, bleating softly. As they went clouds of the flying things rose from the bushes, circled, and settled back.

The carcass seemed to be normal protein, so Steve chewed a bit of it, raw, while it was being butchered. The taste was reassuring. Something else wasn't, though: a swarm of the flying things circled and hovered, turning their big eyes at the Sortie. Now and then a few of them would take a bee-line up the wadi out of sight. The way they acted reminded Steve of mechanical fly-eyes.

Later, he reported that to Base. "Ah," the reply came, in an Overseer's voice. "We had not seen that before. We have dissected the things, and they are organic, but the form is peculiar. You are observant, Gunner. I shall follow your progress with interest. By the way, I am your own Overseer."

Steve acknowledged as simply as possible. The last thing he wanted was close attention from an Overseer.

There were tracks of more animals, several kinds, but he saw only one new creature during the afternoon: a very slender, timid thing about eight inches high that looked as nearly canine as feline. It ate the starfish-things that ate insects. It hunted singly.

He made camp in the middle of a wide spot, openly, with several fires; but put out sentries to lie quiet under the brush in case anything tried to sneak in. The Gjiss were in better spirits, eating huge chunks of the meat, which was good except that the brushwood fire gave it a faint taste of creosote. Keerno and Hurogil were their taciturn selves. Steve stretched out on his blanket under a bush to let his tired muscles relax, but something was tugging at the edge of his mind. He napped briefly, and took a turn on watch. Then, later, when all the fires but one had been allowed to die, he remembered.

He looked around to make sure no one was too close, then reached casually and put the tips of three fingers behind his left ear. He felt

for slight bumps and pressed them; the middle one first, then the lower, then the upper. He lay for a few minutes. A slight dizziness came, and a quickening of the pulse. Then it was as if a faint voice whispered to him: "Colonel Duke: by now you've passed the Booths and are ready to know. The operation you've been smuggled into is somewhere inside a cloud nebula that is very dense and has some peculiar properties. We have never been able to null into it.

"Gree has heard rumors of a very ancient weapon depository there, guarded by unknown sciences. Your job is double: to see what is happening, and to send us a locator as soon as you can. You have this locator. It has been built into the small projector you carry, which shows human females dancing in the nude. In this case, your erotic tastes are useful. It will still project, and will appear to be nothing else barring very close examination, but it is also a pair of devices. When you are able, turn it on and off five times, quickly, then break it in two. One half will null to where we can find it and trace it back. Keep the other half. When we null a fleet in and begin the attack, step on it or otherwise crush it, and it will pinpoint you for us.

"Good luck. We will replace the projector for you, with new pictures.

"This implant in your brain will dissolve beyond trace within an hour. There are no other implants."

Steve swore under his breath. The projector was in his personal ditty-bag at the Base.

It must have been near morning when a faint sound woke him. He twisted onto his belly, in position to get up fast, and listened. Something was coming down the wadi, making swishing sounds in the brush. The small moon was still up, but it only seemed to make the wadi darker. He wondered if he ought to douse the fire. He heard others stirring and decided not to give an alarm yet.

The thing was coming slowly and steadily, as nearly as he could judge, and in a straight line, making no effort to avoid the brush. It was near one side of the wadi, and, if he could judge, now about fifty yards up it. He heard the hum of small wings as the fly-eyes were disturbed from their roosts. Still no other sound. He wondered if the thing could be a very persistent small whirlwind.

Then he heard one of his sentries on that side mutter something in Gjiss and move from his hiding spot. He caught the word, "Gree." The thing, whatever it was, came on steadily. He was sure now it was no animal. He heaved himself to his feet. "Hurogil! Take charge here. Guards! Come with me!" He groped for one of the torches stacked ready; thrust it into the fire until it flared. He grabbed a hand-axe. The two Gjiss on fire-guard had torches now, and followed him. He held the torch high with one hand, and saw the sentry, feet planted wide, staring into the darkness. He was muttering again.

Then Steve was within a few yards of him, but blocked by a thick clump of brush. "Stand aside!" he ordered the sentry, "Let's get a look at it!"

The sentry ignored him. The bush he was facing shook, mildly, and something drifted out. It was barely visible in the torchlight, hardly bigger than a grape, black, a slightly flattened sphere, tumbling slowly as it drifted. It was at chest height and moving horizontally or nearly so.

The sentry reached out to take the thing. Steve, suddenly guessing what would happen, shouted at him, but the hand was already closed around the object. The hand moved back. The Gjiss grunted in surprise, flexed his arm muscles, then gasped and jerked his hand away. Steve saw the object touch his chest. The sentry screamed and threw himself down. Steve saw the object drifting on, bloody now, in the same slow trajectory. He yelled, "Hurogil! Take care of this man," turned to see Hurogil start toward him, then himself turned to follow the strange missile.

He could have followed it even without the three torches, by its progress through the brush. He caught up to it and followed as closely as the brush would allow. It was, he saw, aimed slightly downward, so it would hit the ground sooner or later.

But before it did, the wadi turned, and it pushed into a bank. There was a puff of dust and a small hole where it went in. He could hear it grinding through the sand-

stone. Finally it stopped or got too far to hear.

Steve listened a minute, then told his two Gjiss, "Go back and get Vay here, fast. Tell Hurogil to break camp and move down here."

The thing took some digging to find. It had penetrated nearly twenty feet, and didn't show a scratch. The sentry who'd tried to stop it was dead, of bleeding, not poison.

Steve reported to Base and was told to stand by. Meanwhile, he made a few experiments.

Eventually the Overseer answered. "Tell me the details, Gunner."

Steve described the events, then added, "It's as if the stuff had tremendous mass but very little susceptibility to gravity. By getting an axehead under it and lifting, you can eventually get it rising. It keeps rising unless you stop it. We almost lost it once. But if you get it hanging perfectly still, beside something so you can measure, it begins to fall very slowly after a while. If you hit it—"

The Overseer interrupted, "We've studied the objects, Gunner. What we want to know, among other things, is where they start from and how they are accelerated even to a low speed."

Steve felt his face grow warm. "If I'd known about them I might have saved a man."

The Overseer said casually, "He died for Gree, Gunner."

Steve controlled himself. "Yes, sir. I suppose I can expect more of them?"

"I'm sure you can. Sortie One reports a man dead, too. They had him on watch on top of a knoll, at night, which was a very foolish thing."

He got the dead Tech buried, and left the black pellet on the grave. It wasn't very practical to take it along. He wondered if, and how, he could take one with him, assuming he ever got away from here. His superiors would want to see it.

As they advanced they met more of the things, sometimes coming down at sharper angles, but not much sharper. He was doing well, so far as casualties were concerned—the other three Sorties reported a total of seven so far. Probably he was better protected, in the wadi.

As it happened, his second casualty came when they had to leave the wadi to detour around the first marshy spot. It wasn't one of the black pellets.

They'd been following the edge, and came to a small dry wash that joined the wadi. The bottom was covered with spiney six-inch grass. Steve and his advance group stopped at the edge before stepping down. Steve saw nothing in the grass but small insects. There were a few of the fly-eyes humming over it. Up the dry wash a mile or so, there was a herd of the grazing animals he'd met before.

He poised to step down, but before he did one of the Gjiss hopped down into the grass. The humanoid let out a peculiar sound, then screamed. He tried to jump,

fell clumsily, screamed again. He squirmed as if he were stuck on a bed of nails. He raised his head and Steve saw droplets of blood all over one side. The Gjiss stared up at him for a moment, then fainted. Others ran forward. "Stand back!" Steve ordered. "Get some rope and a hand-axe up here!"

He got the axe head wedge under the victim's belt, and they hauled him out by that. Grassblades stuck out all over him, and there were punctures where others had pulled free. He was obviously dying, probably of the punctures in his head. Steve took hold of one of the grassblades and pulled gently. It wouldn't come out. It wasn't rigid. He pulled harder, steadily, and eventually it came out slowly. When it did, it wanted to keep on going. The top of it did, at least; the rest trailed in the air. Blood ran down it and formed a drop, but didn't fall off. Steve let it go.

He jabbed the flat of the axe down at the grass and it was like hitting concrete. He noticed now that while some of the grassblades bent in the breeze, others were perfectly still. He pulled one of those out—slowly—and got it suspended in the air before him. He gave a sudden jerk and the grass came away, leaving a small black nodule hanging in the air.

He pushed at it with the axehead so it would drift to the ground, then walked to the dead Gjiss and looked at the soles of his buskins. They were punctured in dozens of spots, and grass was wedged in some of the holes.

When he reported, the Overseer listened carefully and complimented him. Then he said, "Gunner, this will be our last transmission to you; you're getting too close to the mountains. You are to keep sending reports direct until you're near the forest. You must leave the transmitter with some Techs, and send reports back to them to transmit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Steve tried not to sound ironic.

"Fine, then. Good luck, Gunner."

Steve handed Vay the transmitter and started toward a small knoll to look around. He thought he'd stay near here for a few days, studying things, before he went on.

#### IV

He learned that not all of the spiney grass was deadly. When it was first sprouting, it didn't have the black nodules in it. While the nodules grew and ripened (if that was the right word) the grazing animals, and other animals, knew to avoid it. Later, it got rid of the nodules, and that process was interesting. When the grass began to turn brown, each stalk developed a gas pressure, swelling to three times its diameter. Gradually, the nodule yielded. It had only an inch to go to the top of the stalk, but when it got there it was rising two or three feet a minute. It kept rising. Some patches sent up a real hail of the things. He could imagine what it would be like for a bird — or an aircar — to fly into it. The latter, though, if it had a good hull

and moved very slowly, should survive.

He watched the large animals grazing in a ripe patch that had lost its nodules. They moved their feet very slowly and carefully, as if there might be a few nodules left. A man could do the same thing, he reflected, if he had the right kind of shoes.

One night as he lay awake it occurred to him that the nodules might have something to do with the unnatural cloud nebula. That, of course, was what hid the stars here, and made it so difficult to null in. Why wasn't this sun at least a little haloed? Maybe its radiant pressure had cleared a sphere around it and its planets. If so, Gree had somehow learned the coordinates to null in.

He wondered about the nodules that rose from the grass. If they kept going beyond the atmosphere, they'd make it impossible to null in. And if they didn't, they must come down again.

He tried not to imagine one of them drifting down, gently as a tiny black snowflake — and gently sinking through his head. Maybe, he told himself, the stuff gradually sublimed or disintegrated.

But if you could work the stuff — and get a strong gun-barrel and a real driving charge behind it — what a bullet it would make!

The wadi became a creek in the foothills, and two days up that was the edge of the forest. Steve found a campsite behind a hill, established Vay there, and led the

first patrol out. By the time they reached the trees, they'd seen two more of the grape-sized black pellets

The dominant kind of tree wasn't over a hundred feet tall, but it spread sideways half again that. Its bark was in overlapping scales, each six inches in diameter, deep brown. Scales lay about as if they shed individually. The base of the trunk was a system of big splayed-out roots, with grass and underbrush between them. At thirty feet or so from the ground, the trunk split into a dozen or more big limbs, some of them horizontal. From these, twigs sprayed out, supporting needlelike foliage. Here and there, vines hung to the ground. The trees didn't crowd each other, so the trunks were widely spaced, but undergrowth filled most of the space. There were game trails, and a variety of tracks. He heard bird-calls deeper in the forest. Not far from him, one of the frail quadrupeds he'd seen catching the starfish-things trotted into sight, saw him, and went up a treetrunk. More feline than canine, then. There were a few of the fly-eyes, into everything as always.

A treetrunk nearby had a hole through it, quite fresh, as if a long auger had come through. He knew what had done that. The scales on both sides were pierced neatly. He found other holes, some nearly grown shut. Evidently the trees were used to being pierced.

He wasn't inclined to take the patrol in at once, so he took them up the higher of the two hills

bracketing the creek they'd come up, until he found a tree at the edge of the forest where he could spend a few hours now and then, just watching. Then he turned back to camp.

The hill muffled the forest sounds that night, but there were animal calls, and once something screamed and thrashed about heavily. He didn't like the prospect of penetrating this forest with only primitive weapons. He was sure, though, there'd be no way around it.

**I**t was two days before he actually saw the pellet thrower at work. He'd spotted a source; two pellets had come from a thicket within sight of his tree. All he saw was a gentle motion, then the pellets drifted out, horizontally, diverging just a few degrees. Then, late in the afternoon, one of the small frail quadrupeds came sneaking by the thicket, pausing to raise its big ears, turn its head, and listen. It went on out of sight.

A minute later another animal appeared, evidently trailing the other. This seemed to be of a related species, but it was three times the height and anything but frail. It stopped beside a thicket to listen and sniff the ground, then started across the small natural clearing.

Suddenly there was motion all around it. Things like flexible broom-handles came swinging from the brush in an odd slow motion, blocking the several ways out of the spot. They reached straightness and continued to bend the opposite way,

like springs very heavily weighted. Without seeing, Steve guessed there'd be other bars — more slender, maybe — in the brush, to form a complete fence.

The beast, after a second's crouch, whirled, saw that it was surrounded, and hurled itself at what looked like the weakest spot. It squalled and bounced back. It bit at itself once, then leaped to bat with its paws at the broomsticks, which were still flexing slowly. Then it sprang back to the center of its prison and crouched, panting. Steve saw blood drip.

At half a dozen points around the prison, things moved slowly. Steve got a good look at one. It was like a three-foot length of heavy plank grown over with bark. It too flexed like a spring, but only moved through a very short arc, staying nearly vertical. As it passed its deadpoint and began to slow, black pellets drifted from it. More came from the other directions, criss-crossing. The beast whirled, seeking a way out, then sprang in the direction it had come. It screamed as it hit the first pellets; contorted in mid-air, fell and hit the ground writhing. There were pellets at low level too. It bit at itself mindlessly, then collapsed and lay shuddering a moment before it went limp. Steve saw pellets emerge from it and sail away or plow leisurely into the ground, driving before them fur and blood and bits of bone.

Now a thing like a tentacle snaked from somewhere. It poised above the carcass, nosed down delicately, and forced its point in.

A tremor, as if of ecstasy, ran along it.

Steve pushed down his revulsion and watched. The thing probed about inside the animal, apparently consuming bone and all, for the carcass gradually shrank like an emptying bag. At sundown he left. The cage was still in place — to keep out marauders, perhaps — and the tentacle was still feeding.

He spent most of the night planning. They'd have to locate a number of the things for study. That could be done, maybe, with long slender poles. If a pole hit a slender stalk that didn't move, they had something. Too, knowing what to look for, they could spot the plank-like catapults. And they could capture some of the grazing animals alive; force them into the traps and study the things. He didn't like that idea much, but it was better than sacrificing humanoids through ignorance.

## V

After two weeks he had enough data to compose a report. He included: "The shoots that form the cage can move enough in two seconds to stop a humanoid. The cage is only thirty feet in diameter at most; so one man might get free if he moved fast. But a group of men would get in each others' way. We'll have to travel in groups because of large carnivores.

"It's possible to sate the things. After feeding, a plant is inert for at least twelve days; we haven't had time to check longer.

"They apparently don't need animal protein to survive individually, but it's connected with reproduction. After feeding, a plant produces seeds the size of a man's fist, with small black pellets in them for carrying power when they're catapulted. If a seed hits a tree, it falls to the ground while the pellet keeps going.

"This is intelligently planned. Making the meat-eating part of reproduction prevents the plants evolving away from it.

"I think we can clear a way through by driving animals ahead of us, and otherwise locating the plants. I'm leaving Vay and eight Techs here with the transmitter. Probably we'll be able to relay a few reports back once we're through. Later, on higher ground, we'll build campfires where you can see them with a telescope so you'll at least know where we are. No doubt there'll be other defenses, and they'll probably be more subtle.

"Report ends. Four One."

Eighteen days later, he stood at the upper edge of the forest. Within it they'd buried Keerno and two Gjiss. Two more Gjiss had been dragged away by carnivores. A group was headed back through with a report for Vay to send, and escorting various wounded. Steve, Hurogil, and the thirteen Gjiss with them all had cuts or bad bruises, but none incapacitating. Now they faced something like ten miles of mild slopes covered with the spiny grass. In places, the black hail floated up from it.

The plan he had was simple.

They had a section of tree-trunk, over a yard in diameter, about five feet long, peeled and made as cylindrical as possible. There were holes for spokes to give more leverage, and wedges to jam behind it if it started to roll back. They were going to roll it through the grass, slowly, to clear a path. Also, each of them had oval slabs of thick wood to wear like snowshoes, in case the roller left a few nodules hanging. Steve had tested those before thinking of the roller, but the grass was irregular enough to make a man's balance insecure. Nobody wanted to fall.

In the first few hours they collected new cuts, until they learned what to watch for. After that, it was just hard tedious work. Food was no problem—the swath stayed open behind them, so they could walk back and hunt at the edge of the forest.

They pushed and pried at the roller for five days. Toward the end it was very hard to move because the circumference was impregnated with nodules. But on the sixth day they were clear of the grass, with not more than five miles of rocky ground between them and the cliff. From here, the cliff-face looked very even and almost vertical. Steve said, "An hour's rest. Then we'll try to make it before night."

It turned out harder than that. There were stretches of jumbled rock, and crevices. They finally camped in one of those, a mile from the cliff. For the sake of morale, Steve risked a fire. He was pretty sure that if anything intelligent



lurked above, it was aware of them by now; anyway, as tired and sore as he was, he didn't like the prospect of a cold night.

At daylight he bundled himself as warmly as practical and went scouting with two Gjiss. Looking back the way they'd come through the grass, the forest seemed ludicrously close. He couldn't see beyond the forest, because a mist hung over it.

He turned, and was looking at the cliff when he heard humanoid voices somewhere to his right. He gestured a warning to the Gjiss, and pointed to the gap between two large rocks. He led the way carefully to where the voices sounded near, then motioned the two to wait, bows ready, while he peered into the open.

There were a B'lant and two Gjiss with their backs to him, looking at the cliff. To their right, in cover similar to his own, were several more Gjiss. Obviously they were supposed to be guarding the trio's backs, but they hadn't seen Steve yet. They looked cold and miserable.

The B'lant was lightly dressed, his thick gray skin adequate for colder weather than this. He had bandages around his left biceps and left calf. He and the Gjiss were carrying bows, waterbags, and not much else.

Steve, unable to resist grinning, stepped into the open and said in his perfect B'lant, "I could have mowed you down with one sweep of a laser. Which Sortie are you?"

They spun, the B'lant reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. One glimpse of his blunt-featured, high-cheekboned face, and Steve's own hand flashed uselessly to his waist. A block of ice seemed suddenly to form in his stomach.

But the B'lant's eyes showed no recognition. They were a little off-focus, dull, vaguely troubled. His voice was slower than Steve remembered it, and slurred. "We are Sortie Two. My name is . . . Fazzool. Do you have any food? I need none yet, but my Gjiss . . ." his words faded away.

Steve let out his breath. Slowly, his shock turned to anger. Brainburned! They'd brainburned Fazzool; who — Newly shocked, Steve fought for self control. It hadn't been *he* — not Steve Duke — who'd been comrade to Fazzool. If that other called Jen had lived in Steve's skull, shared the same body, it hadn't been Steve's choice. Steve should be hoping the brainburning was thorough. If it weren't — if Fazzool could remember, ever — he'd remember that a comrade called Jen had betrayed Gree; had twice tried to kill Fazzool, twice left him for dead.

He controlled his face. "We've got meat." It occurred to him he'd better have Fazzool where he could watch him. "We're Sortie Four. My name's Dunnek. Shall we join forces? There's nothing in the orders against it."

Fazzool was looking at him with puzzlement.

Finally he said, "Yes. Nothing . . . in the orders."

Two hours later, as they started toward the cliff, Fazzool's mind was clearer. Steve kept out of his line of vision as much as he could.

Before they reached the cliff, Steve became aware of a slight veiling before it. He stopped walking. Fazzool stopped too, turned and gave him a look. "I zink," he said in English, "zat will be more of ze black stuff."

Steve nodded, stalling for time. One of them ought to reconnoiter, while the other stayed in command; but he didn't want to leave Fazzool in that position. He was relieved when the B'lant said, "Wiz my zick skin, it is best I go first."

An hour later the B'lant waved him forward. Steve left Hurogil with most of the Gjiss. When he reached Fazzool, the B'lant was standing at the edge of a deep chasm with water in it. The chasm was too straight, running out of sight in either direction, to be natural. It was possibly a quarter mile across, and the walls weren't far from vertical, except where rock had fallen away. The water was several hundred feet below, and looked deep. From a strip of it, about a third of the width, along the middle, rose the faint veiling. Steve didn't doubt it was more of the black stuff, though he was too far to see individual particles. They might be dust, or half an inch in diameter.

Fazzool said, "What do you zink is at ze bottom?"

Steve shrugged. "Water-weeds, maybe, producing nodules like the grass. Though I don't know whether

the damned stuff floats or not." He pondered, and realized he didn't know much about the actual mechanism of buoyancy.

He looked up at the cliff. It was continuous with the chasm wall; merely a mountain that had been sliced through. He found he wanted very much to know what was beyond. He doubted there'd be any end to the chasm. "A circular moat," he said half-absently, "around a stronghold." He faced the B'lant. "Our orders say to go to the cliff. We're close; but maybe we should actually cross this thing, if it's possible. Would you be willing to try?"

Fazzool's eyes looked clear now. He chuckled. "Willing? Is zere any zing zat you and I, Jen—" He gasped, and his face contorted with agony. Brainstorming guarded proscribed memories brutally. He stood panting for a minute, then recovered enough to say, "Now why did I... call you zat?" His eyes were dull.

Steve struggled with his own face. Finally he shrugged. "My name's Dunnek." So the burning *wasn't* thorough enough. He found himself trembling a little. It seemed a terrible injustice that he should have to try a third time to kill Fazzool. And it would be an even worse injustice if he succeeded. He controlled his voice and said, "Maybe a raft could cross, if it were thick enough and we could get it down to water level."

Fazzool was obviously struggling to think. "How did you . . . get zrough ze grass?"



GIUNTA-65  
ONES

Steve told him. Fazzool pondered, and finally nodded. "Zat has ze advantage zat you can go back to hunt. Zat is why you had meat... And we can get lumber. But my way has more to do wiz zis moat here. I chopped some big zick planks, and we just laid zem gently on ze grass and kept leap-frogging zem. I zink if we make ze right kind of raft, zis black stuff will not come zrough, but will just push it up a little."

Steve frowned over that. "Maybe. But still, how do we get it down to the water? And how'd we get up the other —" He broke off, startled. "Why, of course! We put some of the stuff under the raft, and drift across up here!"

## VI

They needed little extra lumber, with the planks Fazzool had and with Steve's roller. After a little discussion, they realized they couldn't bind the raft together with ropes, because the rising particles might cut them; so it had to be done with pegs, which was tedious.

Gathering the black material was simple. If you just dropped a plank on top of the grass, with the right force, the nodules penetrated. Then, very slowly, you could pull it away and force it down somewhere else. As a plank became impregnated, it got hard to move, and to stop once it was moving, but that was just a matter of muscle and patience. The Gjiss were happy to be supplying that, with plenty of meat and animal skins for warmth.

The finished raft was over two feet thick (with six inches of virgin, or at least unimpregnated, wood on top), about twelve feet long, eight feet wide. The width, Steve admitted to himself, was a concession to preconceived ideas of stability. A few inches in from the edge, a handrail ran all around, a foot above the deck. It began to look like something.

A launching-course was ready: a stretch of rock slanting up gently to the lip of the chasm, smoothed and filled, to as perfect a plane as possible. The rollers were ready too; the hardest, straightest tree-limbs available.

It took a day and part of a night to get the raft into position, with rollers under it and stakes behind it to keep it from rolling back, before morning.

Steve knew he was laying up trouble (if he ever got back to Base) by going alone with Fazzool. But Fazzool wasn't protesting, and everyone else here was outranked.

They seated themselves, Fazzool in front, and made sure the things they were taking were secure. The launching crew threw their weight against the raft, grunting with effort. Nothing happened at first, of course. They continued to strain, cursing in Gjiss. Fazzool chuckled.

A roller creaked.

In twenty minutes Steve thought he could feel motion. An hour more the Gjiss strained, muscles bulging, new shifts taking over periodically. The rollers were definitely turning now. Hurogil put a new

one at the front. It was two hours more before they neared the edge of the chasm, moving perhaps twenty feet a minute. A roller at the front dropped free, into a rack put there to catch it. Another plunked on top of it. Steve had to control his instincts now, as the nose of the raft poked out over the abyss. Fazzool turned to grin at him.

The end of the raft parted from the last roller and now they would have to jump if they changed their minds. Then it was too far for that. Steve looked over the edge at the dark water. It was many minutes before he could really convince himself they weren't going to fall.

He thought of 'magic carpets'. He would almost rather have depended upon magic than upon this.

As they neared the middle, he could see that the rising pellets were the size of peas, but fewer than he'd expected. They rose very slowly. He felt the first jar as one hit the raft. It was mild, but that the raft transmitted the jar at all was disturbing. They came steadily after that. There was a splintering sound; the first audible one.

The front end of the raft began to tilt upward, very slowly. That went on even after the rear of the raft was in the curtain too; and would until they emerged. He felt his weight shift backward, and felt with his foot for the rail there. A hatchet slid, startling him, but it was tied on. The tilt was at least fifteen degrees now; they'd started with less than five. He saw Fazzool's left foot feel about, find the tied hatchet and brace against it. The

B'lant was clinging to the front rail, too. Steve grew really concerned. They were still in the curtain and the tilt was thirty degrees or more. He tried not to think what it would be like if they tilted to vertical and beyond.

But then they nosed out of the curtain, and soon he could feel the tilt reverse. The last few thus sounded at his end of the raft, then they were clear. But there was another worry — they'd gained considerable upward drift, and were going to clear the opposite side by two hundred feet or more. The cliff, ahead and to their right, seemed to sink slowly, as it approached. They passed the face and were still rising faster than the land beneath them. It was too far to jump, even from the end of their ropes if they tossed them over. For all he knew, they'd rise until the air was too thin to breathe. Already, it was chill as the sun sank lower behind them. Night came on. He moved up beside Fazzool and they tried to see the ground ahead. The small moon rose, but wasn't much help.

But the raft was heavy; and even with the added pellets imbedded in it by the curtain, it eventually began to sink. Their nose was tilted slightly downward now. They tried to guess whether they'd reach the snowline.

They fell short of it. They stepped off the raft just before it touched, their arms burdened with what they could hold. The raft bumped gently, then proceeded to grind itself deliberately into kindling. Steve

stepped back from the flying splinters. A few logs off the top broke free and skidded away, but the rest thrust on into the growing pile. After that was over, he could still hear the black stuff pushing deeper into the rock.

Fazzool's voice was amused in the dark. "Ziss will make a fine bonfire. Shall we light it now?"

Steve said, "It's a temptation. But let's get away from here instead, before something comes to investigate."

They lugged what they'd salvaged back downslope and found a passably sheltered place to spend what was left of the night. Steve hoped Hurogil's further experiments, after watching the crossing, would show some inspiration. It hadn't occurred to anybody that the raft would be a total loss so far as returning was concerned.

The morning sunlight was dazzling on the snowy peaks, which looked only four or five miles away. The two climbed the nearest prominence to look around.

The chasm, and the forest beyond it, were in clear sight. He wondered whether they should hike back to the cliff and signal Hurogil at once, or do a little exploring first. Before he mentioned that to Fazzool, he saw six or seven of the fly-eyes going over, headed east. He pointed. "I've already reported they come from this direction. I'm for following right now." Fazzool agreed.

Among the things they'd brought were two pairs of the foot-slabs, which now turned out to be usable,

but just barely, as snow-shoes. Certainly, they couldn't do much hiking on them.

They trudged up the first snow-covered ridge, the top of which temporarily hid the peaks beyond. Steve kept watching Fazzool unobtrusively. Soon, he must decide what to do. He couldn't wait; they — or he — would have to get back and show himself to Hurogil, or the Sabril might decide they'd been killed, and not wait for them.

He decided to wait until they turned back.

They crossed the top of the ridge and he stopped, staring down and to his right, then went prone on the snow. Fazzool wriggled forward beside him. It was too circular a basin to be natural; and the bottom was too level. The warmth that kept it green must be artificial too.

It was perhaps two miles across, and a thousand feet deep. The slopes were covered with snow to about two-thirds the way down. Below that, bare rock showed some erosion. There was a mound in the center, and that was eroded too. There seemed to be only one kind of shrubs, green and fairly dense, but too irregular for recent cultivation. There was healthy-looking grass, not the spiny kind, he thought.

Fazzool said, "Nobody home for a long time, I zink. I also zink it could be a trap."

"Maybe," Steve said. "But I'll bet this is where the fly-eyes come. And I'll bet there's a ring of these places around the peaks, if the others haven't stopped working. Anyway,

it would be a hard climb back out again." He was thinking something else. A blow on the head, and let the body slide down . . . No; too conspicuous here; Gree might have flyers over before long. Some crevice on the way back.

He squirmed back from the hedge and automatically looked around before getting up. He saw something against one of the white peaks. Dots; in a line, seeming to rise from the mountainside. He grunted a warning to Fazzool, and let his mind race over the way behind them. No cover near enough. He watched the dots begin to scatter in all directions, including this. It would have to be the basin, and fast.

He got some bad bumps sliding down, and again envied Fazzool his tough hide. They got to the first bushes and he looked back. The sun, at its present angle, didn't make their trail too conspicuous.

They separated until they could just keep track of each other, and crawled under bushes. Minutes passed. Steve got out some cooked meat and chewed on it; swigged water. They'd have to stay here until dark, at least, if they weren't discovered before. While he had the chance, he noticed the fly-eyes in the shrubs around him. They had some kind of symbiosis with the plants, as he'd begun to guess. There were immature ones attached to (maybe growing out of) twigs, matured ones leaving and others coming to attach themselves. In the grass were dead ones, with some-

GREE'S DAMNED ONES

thing like ants working on them. Whoever had set this up had been thorough. They reproduced here — that kept them coming back — and they even died here, to provide fertilizer. He was sure they brought some kind of visual impressions, whether anyone ever read them any more or not. There was no telling how long the thing had been self-perpetuating. Mechanical weapons could rust or wear out, or be ruined by earthquakes, or lose their charges. An ecology like this might go on doing its job for eons. He was pretty sure it wasn't intended for a system of defense — what defense couldn't be breached? — but for an alarm.

The chances were that the objects rising from the mountain meant the alarm had been heard. But they still didn't necessarily know anyone had crossed the moat.

He wasn't surprised, though, when a number of the objects ringed the basin and descended into it. They were a little bigger than Gree sentry globes. He lay perfectly still, but they set up a search pattern and nosed him out quickly. One hovered and incinerated a small circle of ground a few feet from him.

There was no use pretending he didn't get the message. He crawled out and stood up, feeling more disgust than anything else. He'd just gotten too used to his luck, and stretched it too far. Interrogation was the least he could expect; vivisection the worst. Fortunately, he could tell all he knew about Gree and enjoy it.

They let the globes herd them toward the mound in the center.

When they were near it and enringed by the globes, dirt broke upward from the top of the mound and a humanoid figure appeared, obviously supported and protected by some kind of a field. Steve gasped and had to fight panic and the old feel of guilt; the residue of old conditioning. Fazzool gave a choked cry and dropped to his knees, covering his face.

The figure was that of Gree.

## VII

He was able to put down the old conditioning and look at the humanoid. He still had plenty to worry about. The Gree figure he'd seen — once — had been a fraud; a semi-living body in which a non-organic entity disguised itself. That was designed to produce love and awe in slaves. His mind stumbled over various possibilities. Had this whole thing been a fraud, to dig out traitors or spies? But this humanoid was studying him with curiosity rather than anger or triumph. And he wasn't gotten up like Gree. He wore a simple overall garment, without the Gree insignia of four verticals and a horizontal to represent a hand. None of the precious-metal cloth, the whiter-than-white scarf at the throat. The beard was more practicably trimmed. The hair was the same; curly, black with a few white strands; but the two six-inch blunt ended horns that rose from it were not inlaid with gems. A sudden

thought struck him. Maybe this was the Old Race! Maybe Gree had simply adopted the form, for its obvious impressiveness. It was impressive.

Fazzool was huddled, shaking, muttering thickly, "Gree lives! Gree lives!" Steve knew the agony.

A second figure, much like the first, rose from the mound. Steve looked for a minute, and an explosive laugh burst from him. He reached out and roughly pulled Fazzool's head up. "Look, old comrade! It'll hurt, but look!"

Fazzool resisted, but finally opened his eyes. He tensed and made a move as if to get up, but knelt there, trembling. "Two? Two? I — I'm insane! I ought to be —" A spasm took him. When it abated, he got slowly to his feet and faced Steve. He looked murderous. "So. Yes; I remember." He moved suddenly toward Steve, knife flashing. Steve hurled himself aside. But another spasm seized the B'lant and he collapsed, moaning. Globes move he collapsed, moaning.

The two figures on the mound were watching with puzzled looks. The voice of one came to him faintly, "They thought we were gods. But what happened?"

It took a moment to register with Steve that he *understood* the words. He stood a moment, completely bewildered. That language — allowing for difference in vocal equipment — that language, he knew as well as B'lant or English. Excitement surged through him. He took a step forward, remembered the



globes, and stopped. He raised his voice. "We're not primitives! I don't serve Gree. I'm here as a spy for the Birds of Effogus!"

They looked as astounded as he must have a moment before. The one who'd spoke gestured, and the globes urged Steve forward. "The Birds of Effogus? What is Gree?"

"An empire," Steve said, "trying to enslave the whole galaxy. The rulers are from outside. They're non-organic. The Birds of Effogus are resisting. Most of my race is enslaved, but the Birds rescued my own ancestors, and I fight with them. And—"

The spokesman interrupted. "The Birds are *fighting*? They've—have they taken up science again? Military science?"

"Why . . . yes."

The spokesman sighed. "I'm sorry to hear their philosophy has bumped into the facts of nature. Though my branch of the race predicted it."

Steve said, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

The humanoid looked at him for a moment. "Don't you know the name of this planet and the star it circles?"

"No."

The humanoid said, "This was Effogus."

Steve was much annoyed that he got so little chance to talk to his custodians. They lent him tapes to keep himself occupied, and fed him well, but the waiting was almost unbearable.

Finally they took him to see the spokesman again, in an office one

wall of which was an image of the galaxy, seen from outside. It made him nervous.

The humanoid noticed, and smiled. "We'll deliver you home. Your friend had better go separately, by the way. He's well and we've straightened him out, but it'll take time for him to forgive you."

Steve said uncomfortably, "Yes. I, er, had to do it."

"We understand."

There was a silence which Steve couldn't stand long. "Well . . . will you be helping us against Gree?"

The other shook his head. "I'm afraid not. We're no longer of your galaxy, and there are considerations I can't discuss. We can't even give you weapons."

Steve scowled, but could hardly argue. "At least, I hope you won't let Gree have Effogus!"

"We won't let Gree have it, or take anything useful away with him, or find it again. There's not much there in the way of weapons. It's a portal and a warning system; also a decoy. We *do* keep some watch on your galaxy." He stood up. "I'm afraid we'll have to say good-by now; your transportation is waiting." He smiled, a little mischievously. "I have been authorized to give you one thing. If the Birds have really given up their Dionysian dreams, they'll learn things from it that will have military uses." He extended a small package.

"Well . . . I don't know what to say, except thanks. What is it?"

"Certainly. It's grass seed. You're acquainted with this particular kind of grass."

END

# SKYLARK

# DuQUESNE

by EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

Illustrated by MORROW

*Across the universe the great clouds  
of galaxies trembled — echoing the  
strife that raged between two men!*

The revolution on the planet Ray-See-Nee was over and Richard Seaton, disguised under the identity of Ky-El Mokak, was ready to take the one tactical move for which all the effort and struggle on the planet had been only the preliminaries. But first he needed to know what had happened to his shipmates and friends; he had been busy

enough fighting his own fights and taking his own prisoners to have temporarily lost sight of them.

Wherefore, in Ray-See-Nee's palatial Capitol Building, in the Room of State — which, except for the absence of an actual throne, was in effect a throne-room — Seaton turned his prisoner over to a guard and rounded up his own crew, so

## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE —

The deadliest enemies in the universe are Richard Seaton and Marc C. DuQuesne . . . but they have patched together their feud in order to join forces against strange enemies from another galaxy.

Seaton enters the partnership with open eyes. He knows that Blackie DuQuesne is his enemy. But he also knows that, next to Seaton himself, DuQuesne is the ablest human being alive—and his brains and fighting fury will be needed. DuQuesne, on the other hand, had lost to Seaton too many times to risk a move against him now—until he has made sure of having every advantage he can get. It is not morality that keeps him from an attempt to stab Seaton in the back. It is pure prudence.

But when he meets the race called the Jelmi, and learns from them the secret of the "gizmo"—the fourth-dimensional translator which permits him to strike anywhere in the universe without warning—he decides that the advantages are with him. Six hired gunmen are dispatched through the eerie realm of the fourth dimension into Seaton's spaceship, the *Skylark*, with orders to gun down Seaton and his five associates.

They fail; but in failing they warn Seaton that DuQuesne has pulled a doublecross. Now Seaton's enemies are multiplied. Not only the strange winged-lizard-like creatures called the Lurdi, not only the beings whose life goes on in an atmosphere of pure halogenous gases, the Chlorans—but DuQuesne, more powerful than ever—and more determined. For DuQuesne possesses every secret of weapon and strategy known to Seaton himself—and he is coldly determined to use them all, to win a universe for his empire!

that they could look each other over and compare notes.

Sitar, limping badly but with fur coat still glossily immaculate, proudly displayed a left leg bandaged from the knee all the way up. "A slash from here, clear down to there." The Osnomian princess ran a fore-finger along a line six or seven inches long. "And a bullet right through there. That was the

*gaudiest* fight I was ever in in my whole life!"

Dunark, whose right arm was in a sling, spoke up. "She got that slash saving my life. I'd just taken this one through the shoulder—" he pointed — "and was paralyzed for a second. So she kicked her leg up in the way — while she was flipping a gun around to blow this guy apart, you know — so his knife

went into her leg instead of my neck."

"Yes, but go on and tell them about how many times you—" Sitar began.

"Sh-h-h-h," Dunark said, and she subsided. "Maybe some day we'll write a book. How about you, Mart? I notice you've been standing up all the time."

"I'll be standing up or lying on my face for a while, I guess."

"But that wouldn't account for the cane," Seaton objected. "Come clean, guy."

"One through the hip—thigh, rather, low down—no bones broken."

Shiro, who had a broken arm, would not talk at first, but they finally got the story out of him. His last opponent had been just too big and too strong and too well trained to be easy meat, but Shiro had finally got him with a leg-lock around the neck. "But how about you, Dick?" Shiro asked. "Whoever wrapped you up must get hospital supplies at wholesale."

Seaton grinned. "She had only one patient." He told his own story, then went on, "Since we can all walk, let's go over and see what they're finding out."

Ree-Toe Prenk had said that he wanted all thirty-one of the department heads taken alive if possible; but he had known that it would not be possible. He was surprised and highly pleased, in fact, that only six of the High Exalted had been killed or had taken their own lives.

There is no need to go into the details of that questioning. Seaton

took no part in any of it; nor did any of his group. He did not offer to help and Prenk did not ask him.

Nor is it necessary to describe the operation outside the palace. The rebels had learned much from their previous failure, and they now had all the arms, ammunition and supplies they needed. Thus, before sunset that day, every known quisling had been shot and every suspect was under surveillance. Premier Ree-Toe Prenk sat firmly in the Capitol City's saddle; and whoever controlled that city always controlled the world.

**H**ours before control was assured, however, Prenk called Seaton. "About the daily report to Chioran headquarters that is due in half an hour," the new Premier said. "I am wondering if you have any ideas. Our ordinary reports are not dangerous to make, since they are made to underlings whose only interest in the human race is to encode and file our reports properly. But, since their automatic instruments have recorded much of this change of government, it will have to be reported in detail. And a Great One, or even a Greater Great One, may become interested, in which case the reporter's mind may be searched." Prenk looked thoughtful, then shook his head. "There's no use trying to gloss it over. In an event like this the Greatest Great One himself will very probably become interested and the reporter will die on the spot. In any case, even with an ordinary Great One, his mind will be shattered for life."

"I see," Seaton said. "I didn't think of it, but I'm not surprised. We've tangled with Chlorans before. But cheer up; I've got news for you. I locked eyes with their Supreme Great One . . ."

"You didn't!" Prenk broke in, in amazement. "You actually did?"

"I actually did, and I knocked him — it? — loose from his teeth." Regretfully Seaton added, "But we can't make a battle out of this." He scowled in concentration for a minute, then went on, "Okay, there's more than one way to stuff a goose. I'll make the report. Let's go."

Wherefore, twenty-five minutes later, Seaton sat at an ultra-communicator panel in Communications, ready to flip a switch.

The reporter whose shift it was stood off to one side, out of the cone of vision of the screen. Crane sat — gingerly, sidewise, and on a soft pillow — well within the cone of visibility of the screen, at what looked like an ordinary communications panel, but was in fact a battery of all the analytical instruments known to the science of Norlamin.

"But, Your Exalted," said the highly nervous reporter. "I'm very glad indeed, that you're doing this instead of me, but won't they notice that it isn't me? And probably do something about it?"

"I'm sure they won't." Seaton had already considered the point. "I doubt very much, in view of their contempt for other races, if they ever bother to differentiate between any one human being and any other one. Like us and beetles."

The reporter breathed relief. "They probably don't, sir, at that. They *don't* seem to pay any attention to us as individuals."

Seaton braced himself and, exactly on the tick of time, flipped the switch. Knowing that the amoeboids could assume any physical form they pleased and a matter of course assumed the form most suitable for the job, he was not surprised to see that the filing clerk looked like an overgrown centipede with a hundred or so long, flexible tentacles ending in three-fingered "hands" — a dozen or so of which were manipulating the gadgetry of a weirdly complex instrument-panel. He was somewhat surprised, however, in spite of what he had been told, that the thing did not develop an eye and look at him; did not even direct a thought at him. Instead:

"I am ready, slave," a deep bass voice rolled from the speaker, in the language of Prenk's planet Ray-See-Nee. "Start the tape."

Seaton pressed a button; the tape began to travel through the sender. For perhaps five minutes nothing happened. Then the sender stopped and a deeper, heavier voice came from the speaker: a voice directed at the filing clerk, but using Ray-seenese . . .

*Why?* Seaton wondered to himself. *Oh, I see. Soften 'em up. Scare the pants off of 'em, then put on the screws.*

"Yield, clerk," the new voice said.

"I yield with pleasure, O Great One," the clerk replied, and went rigidly motionless; not moving a finger or a foot.



GRAY MORROW

"It pleases me to study this matter myself," the giant voice went on as though the clerk had not spoken. "While slight, the possibility does exist that some of these verminous creatures have dared to plot against the Race Supreme. If this is merely another squabble among themselves for place it is of no interest; but if there is any trace of non-submission, vermin and city will cease to exist. I shall learn the deepest truth. They can make lying tapes, but no entity of this or of any other galaxy can lie to a Great One mind to mind."

While the Great One talked, the picture on the screen began to change. The clerk began to fade out and something else began to thicken in. And Seaton, knowing what was coming, set himself in earnest and brought into play that part of his multi-compartmented mind that was the contribution of Drasnik, the First of Psychology of Norlamin.

This coming interview, he knew, must be vastly different from his meeting with the Supreme Great One of Chlora One. That had been a wide-open, hammer-and-tongs battle; a battle of sheer power of mind. Here it would have to be a matter of delicacy of control; of precision and of nicety and of skill as well as of power. He would have to play his mind as exactly and as subtly as Dorothy played her Stradivarius, for if the monster came to suspect any iota of the truth all hell would be out for noon with no pitch hot.

The screen cleared and Seaton saw what he had known he would see;

a large, flatly ellipsoidal mass of something that was not quite a jelly nor quite a solid; a monstrosity through whose transparent outer membrane there was visible, a large, intricately convoluted brain. As Seaton looked at the thing it developed an immense eye, from which there poured directly into Seaton's brain a beam of mental energy, so incredibly powerful as to be almost tangible physically.

Braced as he was, every element of the man's mind quivered under the impact of that callously hard-driven probe; but by exerting all his tremendous mental might he took it. More, he was able to hold his Drasnik-taught defenses so tightly as to reveal only and precisely what the Great One expected to find — utter helplessness and abject submission.

That probe was not designed to kill. Or rather, the Great One did not care in the least whether it killed or not. It was intended to elicit the complete truth; and from any ordinary human mind it did.

"Can you lie to me, slave?" That tremendous voice resounded throughout every chamber of Seaton's mind. "Or withhold from me any iota of the truth?"

"I cannot lie to you, O Great One; nor withhold from you any iota, however small, of the truth." This took everything of camouflage and of defensive screen Seaton had; but he managed to reveal no sign at all of any of it.

"How much do you personally know, not of the details of the *coup d'etat* itself, but of the motivation underlying it?"

"Everything, O Great One, since I was Premier Ree-Toe Prenk's right-hand man," and Seaton reported the exact truth of Prenk's motivation and planning.

The Great One's probe vanished, the screen went dark, and the sender resumed its sending.

"Huh!" Seaton wiped his sweating face with his handkerchief. "This dope isn't of any interest, clerk old boy, so just file it away and forget it," His Nibs says. It's a good thing he was after Prenk's motivation, not mine. If he'd really bored in after mine I don't know whether I could have kept things all nice and peaceful or not. I knew I'd been nudged, believe you me."

"I believe you," Crane said, looking into his friend's eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?" And:

The reporter goggled in awe. "And you can still talk intelligently, sir?"

"Yeah." Seaton answered both questions at once, but did not elaborate. "What did you get, Mart? Anything?"

"I learned where it is," said Crane. Nothing else.

Small reward for weeks of effort and risk of life . . . and yet it was for that the entire campaign on the planet Ray-See-Nee had been waged! The whole operation had been designed to get that one fact. A people had been given new hope; some hundreds had lost their lives; many thousands had received scars they would bear a long time; a regime had been deposed and a new one put in power.

But these were only by-products, only the small change of a victory

which justified all of Seaton's efforts . . . and would have its consequences in every part of the Universe, for incalculable times to come!

## XIX

### Llanzlan Mergon

Ray-See-Nee's new department heads, in their meeting with Premier Ree-Toe Prenk in the Room of State, were in unanimous agreement that everything was under control. Some quislings and recalctrants had been shot and a few more would probably have to be. That was only to be expected. Yes, since all of the new incumbents had been jumped many grades in status and in authority and in salary, there was and would continue to be a certain amount of jealousy; but that was not of very much importance. The jealous ones would either accept the facts of life or be shot. Period.

After the meeting was over Kay-Lee Barlo came up to Seaton. She now bore herself as though she had been born an Exalted; her ex-boss' pistol swung jauntily at one very female hip as she walked. As she came up to him and took both his hands in hers, standing so close to him that her upstanding, outstanding hair-do almost tickled his nose, it became evident that her weapon had been fired quite recently. She wore no perfume, and the faint but unmistakable acrid odor of burned smokeless powder still clung to her hair.

"Oh, Ky-El!" she exclaimed, equal to equal now. "I'll simply *never* be



able to thank you enough. Nor will all Ray-See-Nee. This world will be an entirely different place to live on hereafter."

"I sincerely hope so, Kay-Lee." Seaton smiled into the girl's eager, expressive face. "Ray-See-Nee is lucky to have had as strong, able and just a man as Ree-Toe Prenk to take over."

"As you said a while back, 'You can say *that* again.' He's all of that. What he's done already is marvelous. But everyone knows — he does, too, he's put you up on a pedestal a mile high — that it's you who put him in the saddle. That's what I wanted mostly to tell you. Also, I wanted to ask you —" she paused and flushed slightly — "you'll forget, won't you please, what I said about that louse's brains? I didn't mean that, really; I'm not the type to cherish a grudge like *that*. I was a little . . . well, I'd been a little put out with him, just before you came in." With which masterpiece of understatement she gave his hands another vigorous, friendly squeeze and, swinging around, walked hip-wiggling out of the room.

She thereupon took certain steps and performed certain actions which would have astonished Seaton very much, had he known about them. But he did not — until much later.

Prenk came up to the Skylarkers a few minutes later. He shook hands with each of the off-worlders; thanked them in rounded phrases. "I would like very much to have you stay here indefinitely, friends," he concluded, "but I know of course that that is impossible. If all the

resources of the world could be devoted to the project and if all our technical men could work on it undetected for a year, we could not build anything able to withstand those Chlorans' beams."

"We can't either. Not here," Seaton said. "That's why we have to go; but we'll be back. I don't know when; but we'll be back some day."

"I'm sure you will: and may Great My-Ko-Ta ward you and cherish you as you build."

Back on what was left of their worldlet, now reconditioned to the extent that it was not likely to fall apart on the spot, and out in deep space once more, the Skylarkers began efficiently and expertly to put the pieces of their victory together.

They had located the Enemy. They even had an operating covert base in Chloran territory, to which they could return at any time. They had weapons which, in theory at least, could cope with anything the Chlorans were likely to own.

Yet Seaton fretted. The weapons were there, but his control was not adequate; the weapons had outgrown the control. Dealing with Chlorans was touchy business. You wanted all the space you could get between you and them. Yet, at any operating range which even Seaton, to say nothing of Crane and the others, considered safe, their striking power was simply too erratic to depend on.

"It's a bust," Seaton said gloomily. "Course, if worst came to worst I could go back to undercover methods. Smuggle in a bomb, maybe —

just to throw their main centers off balance while the rest of you hit them with all we've got. I could stow away aboard one of those ore-scows taking the booty off Ray-See-Nee easily enough —"

"You talk like a man with a paper nose." Dorothy scoffed. "I have a picture of *that* expedition — of you in armor, with air-tanks strapped on your back and lugging an underwater camera or projector around. Un-noticed . . . I don't think."

And Dunark added, "And since you haven't got any idea of what to look for, you'd have to lug around a full analysynth set-up. A couple of tons of stuff. Uh-uh."

Seaton grinned, unperturbed. "That's what I was coming to. Getting in would be easy, but doing anything wouldn't. And neither would getting out. But Mart, we've chopped one horn off of the dilemma, but we haven't even touched the other. We've got to master that fourth-dimension rig; and we're not even close. It's a matter of *kind*, not merely of degree."

"I can't see that. If so, we could not have warded off their attack at all."

"Oh, I didn't mean the energies themselves; it's the control of that much stuff. Synchronization, phasing in, combination, and so forth. Getting such stuff as that closely enough together and *holding* it closely enough together. Look, Mart. This bit that we've got left of the *Valeron* is stuffed with machinery practically to the skin. She's so small, relatively, that you wouldn't think there'd be any trouble meshing in

machines from various parts of her. But there is. Plenty. It never showed up before because we never had to use a fraction of our total power before, but it showed up plenty back there. My beam was loose as ashes, and I've figured out why.

"Sixth-order stuff moves as many times faster than light as light does faster than a snail — maybe more. But it still takes a little time to get from one machine to another, inside even as small a globe as this is. See?"

Crane frowned in thought. "I see. I also see what the difficulties would be in anything large enough and strong enough to attack the Chlorans. It would mean timing each generator and each element of each projector; and each with a permissible variation of an infinitesimal fraction of a microsecond. That, of course, means Rovol and Caslor."

"I suppose it does . . . unless we can figure out an easier, faster way . . . I don't know whether the Chlorans have got anything like that or not, but they've got *something*. There ought to be some way of snitching it off of them."

"Why must they have?" Dunark demanded. "It's probably just a matter of size. They have a whole planet to fortify. Dozens of 'em if they want to. So it doesn't have to be a matter of refinement at all. Just brutal, piled up, overwhelming power."

"Could be," Seaton agreed. "If so, we can't match it, since the *Valeron* was as big as she could be and still have a factor of safety of two point two." He paused in thought, then went on, "But with such refine-

ment, we could take a planet, no matter how loaded it was . . . I think. So maybe we'd better take off for Norlamin, at that."

"One thing we should do first, perhaps," Dorothy suggested. "Find out what that DuQuesne really did. He has me worried."

"Maybe we should, at that," Seaton agreed. "I'd forgotten all about the big black ape."

**I**t was easy enough to find the line along which DuQuesne had traveled; the plug-chart was proof that he had not lied about that. They reached without incident the neighborhood of the point DuQuesne had marked on the chart. Seaton sent out a working projection of the device that, by intercepting and amplifying light-waves traversing open space, enabled him actually to see events that had happened in the not-too distant past.

He found the scene he wanted. He studied it, analyzed and recorded it. Then:

"He lied to me almost a hundred and eighty degrees," Seaton said. "That beam came from that galaxy over there." He jerked a thumb. "The alien who bothered him was in that galaxy. That much I'll buy. But it doesn't make sense that he'd go there. That alien was nobody he wanted to monkey with, that's for dead sure. So where did he meet the Jelmi, if not in that galaxy?"

"On the moon, perhaps," Margaret said.

"Possibly. I'll compute it . . . no, the timing isn't right—" Seaton thought for a moment—"but there's

no use guessing. That galaxy may be the first place to look for sign; but I'll bet my case buck it'll be a long, cold hunt. I'd like awfully well to have that gizmo—flip bombs past the Chlorans' screens and walls with it . . ."

"From a distance greater than *their* working range?" Crane asked.

"That's so, too . . . or maybeso, at that, chum. Who knows *what* you can do through the fourth? But it looks as though our best bet is to beat it to Norlamin, rebuild this wreck, and tear into that business of refinement of synchronization. So say you all?"

So said they all and Seaton, flipping on full-power sixth-order drive, set course for Norlamin

**A**s the student will be aware, the events in this climactic struggle between the arch-enemies, Seaton and DuQuesne, were at this point reaching an area of maximum tension. It is curious to reflect that the outer symptom of this internal disruptive stress was, in the case of nearly every major component of the events to come, a psychological state of either satisfied achievement, or contented decision, or calm resignation. It is as though each of the major operatives were suffering from a universe-wide sense of false tranquility. On Ray-See-Nee, the new government felt its problems were behind it and only a period of solid, rewarding rebuilding lay ahead. (Although Kay-Lee Barlo had taken certain prudent precautions against this hope being illusory—as we shall see.) The Chlorans, proud and

scornful in their absolute supremacy, had no hint that Seaton or anyone else was making or even proposed to make any effective moves against them. The Fenachrone, such few weary survivors as remained of them, had given themselves over to — not despair, no; but a proud acceptance of the fact that they were doomed.

There was in fact no tranquility in store for any of them! But they had not yet found that out.

Meanwhile the Jelmi, for example, were just beginning to feel the first itch of new challenges. In their big new space-rover, the *Mallidaxian*, Savant Tammon was as nearly perfectly happy as it is possible for a human or humanoid to be. He had made the greatest breakthrough of his career; perhaps the greatest breakthrough of all history. Exploring its many ramifications and determining its many as yet unsuspected possibilities would keep him busy for the rest of his life. Wherefore he was working fourteen or fifteen hours every day and reveling in every minute of it. He hummed happily to himself; occasionally he burst into song—in a voice that was decidedly not of grand-operatic quality.

He had enlarged his private laboratory by tearing out four store-rooms adjoining it; and the whole immense room was stacked to the ceiling with new apparatus and equipment. He was standing on a narrow catwalk, rubbing his bristly chin with the back of his hand as he wondered where he could put another two-ton tool, when Mergon

and Luloy came swinging in; hand in hand as usual. Vastly different from Tammon, Mergon was not at all happy about the *status quo*.

"Listen, Tam!" he burst out. "I've been yapping at you for a week and a half for a decision and your time is up as of right *now*. If you don't pull your head out of the fourth dimension and make it right now I'll do it myself and to hell with you and your authority as Captain-Commander."

"Huh? What? Time? Decision? What decision?" It was plain that the old savant had no idea at all of what his first assistant was so wrought up about.

"You set course for Mallidax and said we were going back to Mallidax. That's sheer idiocy and you know it. Of all places in the charted universe we should *not* go to, Mallidax is top and prime. We're too close for comfort already. Even though Klazmon must have lost us back there in Sol's system, he certainly picked us up again long ago and he'd give both wings and all his teeth for half the stuff you have here," and Mergon waved both arms indicatively around the jam-packed room.

"Oh?" Tammon gazed owlishly at the pair. "There was some talk . . . but why should I care where we go? This is the merest trifle, Mergon, and this work is *important*. You will attend to all such matters, Mergon. Do not bother me with trivia any more," and Tammon cut communications with them as definitely as though he had thrown a switch.

Mergon shrugged his shoulders and Luloy giggled. "You're it, boy. That's what you get for sticking your neck out. All hail our new Captain-Commander!"

"Well, *somebody* had to. All our necks would have been in slings in another week. So pass the word, will you, and I'll skip up to the control room and change course."

Luloy spread the word; which was received with acclaim. Practically everybody aboard who was anybody agreed with Sennlloy when she said, "It's high time *somebody* took over and Merg's undoubtedly the best man for the job. Tammy's a nice old dear, but ever since he got bitten by that fourth-dimension germ he hasn't known what month it is or which way is up or within forty million parsecs of where he is in space."

"You see, Merg?" Luloy crowed, when it became evident that the shift in command was heartily approved. "I wouldn't even dream of ever saying 'I told you so', but I said at the first meeting that you should be Captain-Commander, and now everybody thinks so, almost."

"Yeah, almost," he agreed; not at all enthusiastically. "Everybody except the half-wits. Pass the buck. Let George do it. Nobody with a brain firing on three barrels wants the job."

"Why, that isn't so, Merg. You *know* it isn't!" she protested, indignantly.

"Well, *I* don't want it," he broke in, "but since Tamm wished it onto me I'll take a crack at it."

The *Mallidaxian*, swinging wide and braking down, hard, skirted the outermost edge of the Realm; the edge farthest away from Llurdi-ax. Mergon did not approach or signal to any planet of the Jelmi. Instead, he picked out an uninhabited Tellus-type planet four solar systems away from the Border and landed on it. And there, under cover of the super-dreadnaught's mighty defensive screens and with Captain-Commander Mergon tensely on watch, the engineers and scientists disembarked, set up their high-order projectors, and went furiously to work building an enormous and enormously powerful dome.

The work went on uninterruptedly, day after day; for so many days that both Mergon and Luloy became concerned — the girl very highly so. "Do you suppose we've figured wrong?" she asked.

Mergon frowned. "I can't be sure, of course, but I don't think so. Pure logic, remember. Everything we've done has been designed to keep Klazmon guessing. Off balance. He's fortified Llurdi-ax, that's sure, but we don't know how heavily and we can't find out." He paused.

"Without using the gizmo, which of course is out," said Luloy.

"Check. We haven't sent any spy-rays or anything else. They wouldn't have got us anything. But he certainly expected us to try. He'll think we don't care . . . which as a matter of fact, we don't . . . too much. It's almost a mathematical certainty that we can handle anything he can throw at us as of now. But if we give him time enough to build

more really big stuff it'll be just too bad."

"And the horrible old monster is probably doing just exactly that," Luloy said.

"I wouldn't wonder. But we can finish the dome before he can build enough stuff, and he can't let that happen. Especially since we're not interfering with his prying and spying, but are treating him with the same contempt he used to treat us. That'll bother him no end. Burn him up! Also . . . remember that stuff in the dome that no Llurd can possibly understand."

Luloy laughed. "Because it isn't anything whatever, really, except Llurd-bait? I'm scared that maybe they will understand it yet—even though I'm sure they won't."

"They can't. Their minds won't stretch that far in that direction," Mergon said positively. "They knew we made a breakthrough, so they'll know that what they see is only a fraction of what the thing really is; and that'll scare 'em. As much as Llurdi can be scared, that is. Which isn't very much. So Klazmon will do something before our dome is finished. As I read the tea-leaves, he'll have to."

"But just suppose he doesn't take the bait?"

"Then we'll have to take the initiative. I don't want to—it'd weaken our bargaining position tremendously—but I will if I have to."

He did not have to. His analysis of the Llurdan mentality and temperament had been accurate.

Four full days before the sched-

uled date of completion of the dome, Klazmon's full working projection appeared in the *Mallidaxian's* control room. Mergon had detected its coming, but had done nothing to interfere with it. The Llurd quite obviously intended parley, not violence.

"Hail, brother Llanzlan, Klazmon of the Llurdi," Mergon greeted his visitor quietly, but in the phraseology of one ruler greeting another on the basis of unquestionable equality. "Is there perhaps some service that I, Llanzlan Mergon of the Realm of the Jelmi, may perform for you and thus place you in my debt?"

This, to a human dictator, would have been effrontery intolerable; but Mergon had been pretty sure that it would have little or no effect, emotionally, upon Klazmon. Nor did it; to all seeming it had no effect at all. The Llurd merely said, "You wish me to believe that you Jelmi have made a breakthrough sufficiently important to justify the establishment of an independent but coexistent Realm of the Jelmi."

This was in no sense a question; it was a flat statement. Mergon had been eminently correct in his assumption that he would not have to draw the Llurd a blueprint. Mergon quirked an eyebrow at Luloy, who pressed the button that signaled all the savants in the dome to drop their tools and dash back into the ship.

"That is correct," Mergon said.

Klazmon's projection remained motionless and silent; both Jelmi could almost perceive the Llurd's thoughts. And Mergon, who had



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tracked the Llurd's thoughts so unerringly so far, was practically certain that he was still on track.

Klazmon did not actually know whether the Jelmi had made a breakthrough or not. The Jelmi intended to make him believe that they had, and that breakthrough was something that made them either invulnerable or invincible, or both. Any of those matters or assumptions could be either true or false. One of them, the question of invulnerability, could be and should be tested without delay. If they were in fact invulnerable, no possible attack could harm them. If they were not invulnerable they were bluffing and lying and should therefore be eliminated.

Wherefore Mergon was not surprised when Klazmon's projection vanished without having said another word — nor when, an instant after that vanishment, the *Mallidaxian's* mighty defensive screens flared white.

They did not even pause at the yellow or the yellow-white, but went directly to the blinding white; to the degree of radiance at which the vessel's spare began automatically to cut in — spare after spare after spare.

After staring in silence for two long minutes, Mergon said, "We figured their most probable maximum offense and applied a factor of safety of three — and look at 'em!"

White-faced, Luloy licked her lips. "Mighty Llenderllon!" she cried. "How can they possibly deliver such an attack 'way out here?"

Then Mergon picked up his microphone and said, "Our screens are still holding and they're protecting the dome; but we're going to need a lot more defense. So go back out there, please, and give me everything you can."

He then sat back and stared tight-jawed at the ever-climbing needles of his meters and at the unchanging blinding-white brilliance of his vessel's screens.

## XX

### The Geas

As the Llurd's attack mounted to higher and ever higher plateaus of fury, Mergon slid along his bench to his fourth-dimensional controls and there appeared on the floor beside him a lithium-hydride fusion bomb, armed and ready.

He stared at it, his jaw-muscles tightening into lumps. Luloy stared at the thing, too, and her face became even paler than it had been.

"But could you, Merg?" she asked, through stiff lips. "I . . . I mean, you couldn't, possibly . . . could you?"

"I don't know," he said harshly, scarcely separating locked teeth. "I may have to whether I can or not. We had a factor of safety of three. Two point nine of them are in now and the last tenth is starting up. The dome can't put out more than that."

"I know! But if we blow the llanzlanate up, won't they kill all the Jelmi of all our worlds and start breeding a more tractable race of slaves?"



"That's the way I read it. In that case we eight hundred could get away clean and start a better civilization somewhere out of range."

She shuddered. "In that case would life be worth living?"

"It's a tough decision to make . . . since the alternative could be for us to kill all the Lurdi."

"Oh, *no!*" she cried. "But don't you think, Merg, that he'll cooperate? They're absolutely logical, you know."

"Maybe. In one way I think so, but I simply can't see any absolute ruler making such an abject surrender. However, we've got to decide right now and we'll have to stick to our decision—we both know that he can't be bluffed. If it comes right down to it we can do one of three things. First, commit suicide for our whole eight hundred by not touching the bomb off. Second, wipe them out. Third, let them wipe out all Jelmi except us. What's your vote?"

"Llenderllon help me! Put that way, there's—*oh, look!*" she screamed, in a miraculously changed tone of voice. "The master-meter! It's slowing down! *It's going to stop!*" She uttered an ear-splitting shriek of pure joy and hurled herself into her husband's arms.

"It's stabilized, for a fact," Mergon said, after their emotions had subsided to something approaching normal. "He's throwing everything he's got at us. We're holding him, but just barely, so the question is—"

"One thing first," she broke in. "My vote. I hate to say it, but we *can't* let them kill our race."

He put his arm around her and squeezed. "That's what I was sure you'd say. The question now is, how long do we let him stew in his own juice before we skip over there and talk peace terms?"

"*Not* long enough to let him build more generators than we can to fry us with," she replied, promptly if a bit unclearly. "One day? Half a day? A quarter?"

"But long enough to let him know he's licked," Mergon said. "I'd say one full day would be just about right. So let's go get us some sleep."

"*Sleep!* Llenderllon's eyeballs! Can you even *think* of such a thing as *sleep* after all *this*?"

"Certainly I can. So can you—you're all frazzled out. Come on girl, we're hitting the sheets."

"Why, I won't be able to sleep a *wink* until this is all over!"

But she was wrong; in ten minutes they were both sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

Twelve hours later she came suddenly awake, rolled over toward him, and shook him vigorously by the shoulder. "Wake up, you!"

He grumbled something and tried to pull away from her grip.

She shook him again. "Wake up, you great big oaf! Suppose that beast Klazmon has got more generators built and our screens are all failing?"

He opened one eye. "If they fail, sweet, we won't know a thing about it." He opened the other eye and, three-quarters awake now, went on, "Do you think I'm running this ship

single-handed? What do you think the other officers are for?"

"But they aren't *you*," she declared, with completely feminine illogic where her husband was concerned. "So hurry up and get up and we'll go see for ourselves."

"Okay, but not 'til after breakfast, if I have to smack you down. So punch us up a gallon of coffee, huh? And a couple slabs of ham and six or eight eggs? Then we'll go see."

They ate and went and saw. The screens still flared at the same blinding white, but there were no signs of overloading or of failure. They could, the Third Officer bragged, keep it up for years. Everything was under control.

"You hope," Mergon said — but not to the officer. He said that under his breath as he and Luloy turned away toward their own station.

Much to Mergon's relief, nothing happened during the rest of the day, and at the end of the twenty-fourth hour he sent the actual bomb and working projections of himself and Luloy into the llanzlanate. Into the llanzlan's private study, where Klazmon was hard at work.

It was an immense room, and one in which a good anthropologist could have worked delightedly for weeks. The floor was bare, hard, smooth-polished; fantastically inlaid in metal and colored quartz and turquoise and jade. The pictures — framed mostly in extruded stainless steel — portrayed scenes (?) and things (?) and events (?) never perceived by any Earthly sense and starkly incomprehensible to any Earthly mind. The furniture was . . . "weird" is

the only possible one-word description. Every detail of the room proclaimed that here was the private retreat of a highly talented and very eminent member of a culture that was old, wide and high.

"Hail, Llanzlan Klazmon," Mergon said quietly, conversationally. "You will examine this bomb, please, to make sure that, unlike us two, it is actual and practical."

The Llurd's eyes had bulged a little and the tip of his tail had twitched slightly at the apparition. That was all. He picked up an instrument with a binocular eyepiece, peered through it for a couple of seconds, and put it down. "It is actual and practical," he agreed.

Whatever emotions may have been surging through the llanzlan's mind, his control was superb. He did not ask them how they had done it, or why, or any other question. After the event he knew much and could guess more — and he was perhaps the starkest realist of the most starkly realistic race of intelligent beings yet known to live.

"You realize, of course, that we do not intend to fire it except as the ultimately last resort."

"I do now."

"Ah, yes. Our conduct throughout has surprised you; especially that we did not counterattack."

"If not exactly surprised, at least did not anticipate that Jelmi would or could act with practically Llurd-an logic," the Llurd conceded.

"We can. And when we think it best, we do. We suggest that you cut off your attack. We will then

put on air-suits and return here in person, to discuss recent developments as reasoning and logical entities should."

The Llurd was fast on the uptake. He knew that, given time, he could crush this threat; but he knew that he would not have the time. He could see ahead as well as Mergon could to the total destruction of two hundred forty more planets. Wherefore he barked a couple of syllables at a com and the furiously incandescent screens of the *Mallidaxian* went cold and dark.

Jelmi and bomb disappeared. Mergon and Luloy donned gas-tight, self-contained, plastic-helmeted coveralls and reappeared in the Llanzlan's study. Klazmon seated them courteously in two Jelman easy-chairs—which looked atrociously out of place in that room—and the peace conference, which was to last for days, began.

"First," the llanzlan said, "this breakthrough that you have accomplished. At what stage in the negotiations do you propose to give me the complete technical specifications of it."

"Now," Mergon said, and a yard-high stack of tapes appeared on the floor beside the Llurd's desk. It was the entire specs and description of the fourth-dimensional translator. Nothing was omitted or obscured.

"Oh? I see. There is, then, much work yet to be done on it. Work that only you Jelmi can do."

"That is true, as you will learn from those tapes. Now," said Mergon, settling down to the bargaining session, "first, we have shown you

that Jelmi capable of doing genius-type work cannot be coerced into doing it. Second, the fact is that it is psychologically impossible for us to do such work under coercion. Third, we believe firmly that free and independent Jelmi can coexist with the Llurdi. Fourth, we believe equally firmly that for the best good of both races they should so coexist . . ."

And at that first day's end, after supper, Luloy said, "Merg, I simply would not have believed it. Ever. I'm not sure I really believe it now. But you know I almost like—I actually *admire* that horrible monster in some ways!"

Seaton called Rovol of Rays, on Norlamin, as soon as he could reach him. He told him the story of what he had done on Ray-See-Nee, and what he hoped to gain by it, in detail, then went on to ask his help on the control of the fourth-dimensional translator. "You see, Rovol, at perfect sync it would—theoretically—take zero power. I don't expect the unattainable ideal, of course—" he winked at Dorothy—"just close enough so we can pack enough stuff into the *Valeron* to handle everything they can throw at us and still have enough left over to fight back with."

"Ah, youth, a fascinating problem indeed. I will begin work on it at once, and will call in certain others in whose provinces some aspects of it lie. By the time you arrive here we will perhaps have determined whether or not any solution is at present possible."

"What?" Seaton yelled. "Why—I thought—surely—" he almost stuttered. "I thought you'd have it done by then—maybe be sending it out to meet us, even."

The old Normalinian's paternalistically forbearing sigh was highly expressive. "Still the heedless, thoughtless youth, in spite of all our teachings. You have not studied the problem yourself at all."

"Well, not very much, I admit."

"I advise you to do so. If you devote to it every period of labor between now and your arrival here you may perhaps be able to talk about it intelligently," and Rovol cut com.

Dorothy whistled. She didn't whistle very often, but she could do it very expressively.

"Yeah," Seaton said, ruefully. "And the old boy wasn't kidding, either."

"Not having a sense of humor, he can't kid. He really slapped you on the wrist, friend. But why would it be such a horrible job to sync a few generators in?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out." He went, worked for four solid hours with the Brain, and came back wearing a sheepish grin. "It's true," he reported. "I knew it'd be tricky, but I had no idea. You have to work intelligently, manipulably and reproducibly in time units of three times ten to the minus twenty-eighth of a second—the time it takes light to travel a billionth of a billionth of a centimeter."

"Hush. You don't expect me to understand that, do you?"

"I'll say I don't. I don't expect to

even really understand it myself."

Seaton did not work on the problem every day until arrival, but he worked on it for over a hundred hours—enough so that he began to realize how difficult it was.

The *Skylark of Valeron* entered the Green System, approached Normalin, and went into orbit around it. The travelers boarded a shuttle, which thereupon began to slide down a landing-beam toward Rovol's private dock.

The little craft settled gently into a neoprene-lined cup. The visitors disembarked and walked down a short flight of metallic steps, at the foot of which the ancient, white-bearded sage was waiting for them. He greeted them warmly—for a Normalinian—and led them through the "garden" toward the metal-and-quartz palace that was his home.

"Oh, Dick, isn't it *wonderful!*" Dorothy pressed his arm against her side. "It's so much like Orion's and yet so different . . ."

And it was both. The acreage of velvet-short, springy grass was about the same as that upon which they had landed so long before. The imperishable-metal statuary was similar. Here also were the beds of spectacular flowers and the hedges and sculptured masses of gorgeously vari-colored plant life. The tapestry wall, however—composed of millions upon millions of independently moving, flashing, self-luminous jewels of all the colors of the rainbow—ran for a good three hundred yards beside the walk. It was evident that the women of the Rovol had been working on it for hundreds

of centuries instead of for mere hundreds of years. Instead of being only form and color, as was the wall of the Orlon, it was well along toward portraying the entire history of the Family Rovol.

Rovol wanted to entertain his guests instead of work, but Seaton objected. "Shame on you, Rovol. The Period of Labor is just starting, and remember how you fellows used to bat my ears down about there being definite and non-interchangeable times for work and for play and so forth?"

"That is of course true, youth," Rovol agreed, equably enough. "I should not have entertained the idea for a moment. My companion will welcome the ladies and show them to your apartments. We will proceed at once to the Area of Experiment," and he called an aircar by fingering a stud at his belt.

"I've been studying, as you suggested," Seaton said then. "Can the thing be solved? The more I worked on it the more dubious I got."

"Yes, but the application of its solution will be neither easy nor simple." The aircar settled gently to the walk a few yards ahead of the party and Rovol and Seaton boarded it; Rovol still talking. "But you will be delighted to know that, thanks to your gift of the metal of power, what would have been a work of lifetimes can very probably be accomplished in a few mere years."

Seaton was not delighted. Knowing what Rovol could mean by the word "few", he was appalled; but there was nothing whatever he could do to speed things up.

He spent a couple of weeks rebuilding the *Skylark of Valeron*—with batteries of offensive and defensive weaponry where single machines had been—then stood around and watched the Normalinians work. And as day followed day without anything being accomplished he became more and more tense and impatient. He concealed his feelings perfectly, he thought; but he should have known that he could hide nothing from the extremely percipient mind of the girl who was in every respect his other half.

"Dick, you've been jittering like a witch," she said one evening, "about something I can't see any reason for. But you have a reason, or you wouldn't be doing it. So break down and tell me."

"I can't, confound it. I know I'm always in a rush to get a thing done, but not like this. I'm all of a twitter inside. I can't sleep . . ."

Dorothy snickered. "You can't? If what you were doing last night wasn't sleeping it was the most reasonable facsimile thereof I've ever seen. Or heard."

"Not like I ought to, I mean. Nightmares. Devils all the time sticking me with pitchforks. Do you believe in hunches?"

"No," she said, promptly. "I never had any. Not a one."

"I never did, either, and if this is one I never want to have another. But it could be a hunch that we ought to be investigating that alien galaxy of DuQuesne's. Whatever it is, I want to go somewhere and I haven't the faintest idea where."

"Oh? Listen!" Dorothy's eyes

widened. "I'll bet you're getting an answer to that message we sent out!"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. Can't be. Telepathy has got to be something you can understand."

"Who besides you ever said it would have to be telepathy? And who knows what telepathy would have to be like? Come on, let's go tell Martin and Peggy!"

"Huh?" he yelped. "Tell M. Reynolds Crane, the hardest-boiled skeptic that ever went unhung, that I want to go skyshooting to hellan-gone off into the wild blue yonder just because I've got an itch that I can't scratch?"

"Why not?" She looked him steadily in the eye. "We're exploring *terra incognita*, Dick. How much do you really know about that mind of yours, the way it is now?"

"Okay. Maybe they'll buy it; you did. Let's go."

They were; and, a little to Seaton's surprise, Crane agreed with Dorothy. So did Margaret. Hence three hours later, the big sky-rover was on her way.

Four days out, however, Seaton said, "This isn't the answer. I don't think. The itch is still there. So what?"

There was silence for a couple of minutes, then Dorothy chuckled suddenly. Sobering quickly, she said, with a perfectly straight face, "I'll bet it's that new department head girl-friend of yours, Dick; the pistol-packing mama with the wiggle. She wants to see the big, bold, handsome Earthman again. And if it is, I'll scratch . . ."

Seaton jumped almost out of his

chair. "You're not kidding. half as much as you think you are, pet. That crack took a good scratch at exactly where it itches." He put on his remote-control helmet and changed course. "And that helps still more." He thought for minutes, then shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm not getting a thing . . . not anything more at all. How many of you remember either Ree-Toe Prenk or the girl well enough to picture either of them accurately in your minds?"

They all remembered one or both of the Rayseenians.

"Okay. This'll sound silly. It *is* silly, for all the tea in China, but let's try something. All join hands, picture either or both of them, and think at them as hard as we can. The thought is simply 'we're coming.' Okay?"

More than half sheepishly, they tried it—and it worked. At least Seaton said, "Well, it worked, I guess. Anyway, for the first time in weeks, it's gone. But I didn't get a thing. Nothing whatever. Not even a hint either that we were being paged or that our reply was being received. Did any of you?"

None of them had.

"Huh!" Seaton snorted. "If this is telepathy they can keep it—I'll take Morse's original telegraph!"

A week or so after the *Skylark of Valeron* left the neighborhood of Ray-See-Nee, that planet's new government began to have trouble. Ree-Toe Prenk had said and had believed that whoever controlled the capital controlled the world, but that

was not true in his case. It had always been true previously because the incoming powers had always been of the same corrupt-to-the-core stripe as those who were ousted—and when corruption has been the way of life for generations it is deep-rooted indeed.

There were, of course, other factors behind the unrest. But neither Prenk nor any other human knew about them—then.

All the district bosses had always gone along with the Big Boss as a matter of course. Not one of them cared a whit who ran the world, as long as his own privileges and perquisites and powers and takes were not affected. Prenk, however, was strictly honest and strictly just. If he should succeed in taking over Ray-See-Nee's government in full, every crook and boodler on the planet would lose everything he had; possibly even his life. Thus, while the new Premier held the capital—in a rapidly deteriorating grip—his influence outside that city's limits varied inversely as about the fourth power of the distance.

This resistance, while actual enough, was in no sense overt. Every order was ostensibly obeyed to the letter; but everything deteriorated at an accelerating rate and Prenk could do nothing whatever about it. Whenever and wherever Prenk was not looking, business went on as usual—gambling, drugs, prostitution, crime and protection—but he could not prove any of it. Neither uniformed police nor detectives could find anything much amiss. They made arrests, but no suspect was

ever convicted. The prosecution's cases were weak. The juries brought in verdicts of "innocent", usually without leaving the box.

Even when, in desperation, Prenk went—supposedly top-secretly—to an outlying city, fully prepared to stage a questioning that would have made Torquemada blush, he did nothing and he learned nothing. Every person on his list had vanished tracelessly and every present incumbent had abundant proof of innocence. Nor did any of them know why they had been promoted so suddenly. They were just lucky, they guessed.

It was indeed baffling. It would have been less so if Prenk had had any notion of the universe-wide stir of mighty events just beginning to bubble—if he had been able, as we are now able, to fit together all these patchwork stories into one nearly Norlaminian fabric of universal history.

But he wasn't—and, for his peace of mind, perhaps that was just as well!

Premier Ree-Toe Prenk sat at his desk in the Room of State. Kay-Lee Barlo, shapely legs crossed and pistol at hip, sat at his left. Sy-By Takeel, the new Captain-General of the Guard, stood at ease at his right.

"Whoever is doing this is a smooth, shrewd operator," Prenk said. "So much so that you two are the only people I can trust. And I don't suppose either of you will ever be approached. Probably neither of you would be bought even if you offered

yourselves ever so deftly for sale.”

“I wouldn’t be, certainly,” Takeel said. “Captains-General of mercenaries don’t sell out. I wouldn’t answer for any of my lieutenants, though, if there’s loot to be had. There is here, I take it?”

“Unlimited quantities, apparently. So you, too, are subject to assassination?”

The soldier shrugged. “Oh, yes, it’s an occupational hazard. How about you, Exalted Barlo? No chance either, I’d say?”

“None at all. My stand is too well known. Half my people would stab me in the back if they dared to and they all look me in the eye and lie in their Mi-Ko-Ta-cursed teeth. I wish Ky-El Mokak and his people would get back here quick,” Takeel said wistfully.

“So do I,” Prenk said, glumly. “But even if we had a sixth-order tightbeamer and could use it, we haven’t the slightest idea of where he came from or where he went to.”

“That’s true.” She nibbled at her lip. “But listen. I’m a psychic. It runs in the women of some families, you know, being . . . well, what most people call witches, kind of. My talent isn’t fully developed yet, but mother and I together could witch-wish at him to come back here as fast as he can and I’m sure he would.”

The soldier’s face showed quite plainly what he thought of the idea, but Prenk nodded—if more than somewhat dubiously. “I’ve heard of that ‘witch-wishing’ business, and that it sometimes works. So go home right now and get at it, Kay-Lee,

and give it everything you and your mother both can put out.”

Kay-Lee went home forthwith and went into executive session with her mother; a handsome, black-haired woman of forty-odd. “And I have positive identification,” the girl concluded. “His blood was all over the place—positively *quarts* of it—and I saved some just in case.” And, of course, she had—prudently, wisely and, as it turned out, luckily for all concerned!

The older woman’s face cleared. “That’s good. Without a positive, I’m afraid it would be hopeless at what the distance probably is by this time. Run and get the witch-holly, dear, while I fix the incense.”

They each ate seven ritually preserved witch-holly berries and inhaled seven deep drafts of aromatic smoke. While they were waiting for the powerful drugs to take effect, Kay-Lee asked, “How much of this rigamarole is chemistry, do you suppose, mother, and how much is just hocus-pocus?”

“No one knows. Some day, whatever it is that we have will be recognized as having existence and will be really studied. Until then, all we can do is follow the ancient ritual.”

“I think I’ll talk to Ky-El about it. But listen. Witches with any claim at all to decency simply don’t put geases on people. But what if he’s so far away that we can’t reach him any other way?”

The older woman frowned, then said, “In that case, my dear, we’ll never, *never* tell anyone a thing about it.”



## Re-Seating of the Premier

As the *Skylark of Valeron* approached Galaxy DW-427-LU, Dorothy said, "Dick, I suppose it's occurred to you more than once that I'm not much of a woman."

"You aren't? I'd say you'd do until the real thing showed up." Seaton, who had been thinking of the problem of synchronization instead of his wife, changed voice instantly when he really looked at her and saw what a black mood she was in. "You're the universe's best, is all, ace. I knew you were feeling a little low in your mind, but not . . . listen, sweetheart. What could possibly make you think you aren't the absolute top?"

She did not answer the question. Instead, "What do you think you're going to get into this time?"

"Nothing much, I'm sure. Prenk's probably running out of ammunition. We can make more in five minutes than he can in five years."

"I'm sure that isn't it. You're going into personal danger again and I'll be expected to sit up here in the *Skylark* eating my heart out wondering if you're alive or dead. You don't see Sitar going through that with Dunark."

"Wait up, sweetheart. Mores and customs, remember?"

"Mores and customs be damned! Do you remember exactly what Sitar said and exactly how she said it? Did it sound like mores and customs to you? Was there any element whatever of suttee in it?"

"But listen, Dottie—" He took her gently in his arms.

"You listen!" she rushed on. "If he dies she doesn't want to keep on living and she won't. And she doesn't care who knows it. Maybe it started that way—society's sanction—but that was her personal profession of faith. And I feel the same way. If you die I don't want to keep on living and won't. So next time I'm going with you."

Being an American male, he could not accept that without an argument. "But there's Dickie," he said.

"There are also her three children on Osnome. I learned something from her about what the basic, rock-bottom attitude of a woman toward her man ought to be. Even from little Lotus. She's no bigger than a minute and a half, but what did *she* do? So while we're having this moment of truth let's be rock-bottom honest with each other for the first time in our lives instead of mouthing the platitudes of our society. I'm not a story-book mother, Dick. If it ever comes right down to a choice, you know how I'll decide—and how long it will take!"

Seaton could not get in touch with Ree-Toe Prenk, of course, until the *Valeron* was actually inside Galaxy DW-427-LU; but as soon as communication could be established Kay-Lee Barlo asked eagerly, "You *did* get our thought, then, Ky-El? Mother's and mine? We didn't feel that we were quite reaching you."

"Not exactly," Seaton replied. "I didn't get any real thought at all; just a feeling that I ought to be

going *somewhere* that bothered me no end until I headed this way. But since it was you people calling, I'm mighty glad I got what little I did."

The *Skylark* went into orbit around Ray-See-Nee and the Skylarkers climbed into a landing-craft that Seaton had designed and built specifically for the occasion. It was a miniature battleship—one of the deadliest fighting ships of its size and heft ever built. And this time the whole party was heavily armed. Dunark and Sitar were in full Osnomian panoply of war. Dorothy wore a pair of her long-barrelled .38 target pistols in leg-holsters under her bouffant skirt. Even little Lotus wore two .25 automatics. "I don't know whether I can hit anybody with one of these or not," she had said while Dorothy was rigging her. "I'd much rather work hand to hand. But if they're too far away to get at I can at least make a lot of noise and *look* like I'm doing something."

They were met at the spaceport by two platoons of the Premier's Guard, led by Captain-General Sy-BY Takeel himself. They were guarded like visiting royalty from the spaceport to the Capitol Building and up into the Room of State, where they were greeted with informal cordiality by Prenk and by Kay-Lee, who was now an Exalted of the Thirty-Fifth, besides being First Deputy Premier.

Prenk seated his guests, not on stools in front of and below his throne-like desk, but at a long conference table with Seaton at its head. The two lieutenants posted guards

outside the two immense doors at the far end of the vast room and stationed the rest of their men in position to cover both entrances. Takeel, with velvet slippers over his field-boots, stood on Prenk's desk, commanding the entire room, with a machine-gun-like weapon cradled expertly and accustomedly in the crook of his left arm.

"Are things this bad?" Seaton asked. "I knew it was tough when you told us to come loaded for bear—but *this*?"

"They're exactly this bad. These two—" Prenk jerked a thumb at Kay-Lee and at Takeel—"are the only two people on this whole world that I know I can trust. Until quite recently I was sure I held the city—but now I'm not at all sure of holding even this building. I can only hope that you're not too late. I'll tell you what the situation is; then you will tell me, please, if there is anything you can do about it."

He talked for twelve minutes. Then:

"P-s-s-s-st!" Kay-Lee hissed. "Danger! Coming—nearing us—fast! I can feel it—taste it—smell it! Get ready quick!" She sprang to her feet, drew her pistol, and arranged a dozen clips of cartridges meticulously on the table in front of her.

The Osnomians' chairs crashed backward, their heavy coats flew off, and they stood tensely ready, machine pistols in all four hands. And, seconds later, the other Skylarkers were on their feet and ready too. The Captain-General had not heard the low-voiced warning, but

he had seen the action and that was enough. Trigger-nerved Dunark's chair had no sooner struck the floor on its first bounce than Takeel was going into his shooting stance, with his weapon flipping around into firing position as though it were sliding in a greased groove; the while glaring ferociously at his senior lieutenant—who thereupon began to have an acute attack of the jitters.

**I**t was the commander's savage motion, actually, that ruined the attackers' split-second schedule. For, at a certain second, the two lieutenants were to shoot their captain; then to shoot Prenk and Kay-Lee Barlo; and then, as the attack proper was launched, they were to kill as many of their own men as they could. Thus, knowing what a savage performer the Captain-General was with his atrocious weapon, their hands were forced; they had to act a couple of seconds too soon. They tried—but with two short bursts so close together as to be practically one, Takeel cut them down. Cut them both almost literally in two.

Thus, when the two great doors were blasted simultaneously down and the attackers stormed in with guns ablaze, they did not find a half-dead and completely demoralized Guard and a group of surprised visitors. Instead:

The mercenaries were neither dead nor demoralized. They knew exactly what to do and were doing it. Dunark and Sitar had the fire-power of half a company of trained troops and were using it to the fullest full.

The Captain-General, from his coign of vantage atop the desk, was spraying both entrances with bullets like a gardener watering two flowerbeds with a hose. Kay-Lee was throwing lead almost as fast as Takeel was; changing magazines with such fluent speed and precision as to miss scarcely a shot. Dorothy, nostrils flaring and violet eyes blazing, was shooting as steadily and as accurately as though she were out on the range marking up another possible. Even tiny Lotus, with one of her .25's clutched in both hands, was shooting as fast as she could pull the trigger.

It was Seaton, however, who ended the battle. He waited long enough to be absolutely sure of what was going on, then fired twice with his left-hand magnum—through the doorways, high over the heads of the attackers, far down the corridors.

There were two terrific explosions; followed by one long rumbling crash as that whole section of the building either went somewhere else or collapsed into rubble. Falling and flying masonry and steel and razor-edged shards of structural glass killed almost everyone outside the heavily reenforced wall of the Room of State. The shock-waves of the blasts, raging through the doorways, killed half of the enemy massed there and blew the others half the length of the room. And, continuing on with rapidly decreasing force, knocked most of the Skylarkers flat and blew the Captain-General off of the desk and clear back against the wall.

“Sangram's head!” that worthy

yelled, scrambling to his feet with machine-gun again—or still? He had not for an instant lost control of *that!*—at the ready. “What in Jap-nok’s rankest hell was that?”

“X-plosive shell,” Seaton said, his voice as hard as his eyes. “This time I came loaded for bear. Now we’ll mop up and find out what’s been going on. I gather, sir, that your two platoon leaders were in on it?”

“Yes. It’s a shame I had to kill ‘em without asking ‘em a few questions.” He did not explain that he had had neither the time in which nor the weapon with which merely to wound them seriously enough so that neither of them could fight back with any sort of weapon. There was no need.

“That won’t make too much difference.” Seaton looked around; first at his own crew and then at the guards, half of whom were down. Medics and first-aid men were rushing in to work on them. He looked again, more closely, at his people and at Prenk and Kay-Lee. Not one of them, apparently, had even been scratched.

That, however, was logical. The mercenaries were hard-trained fighting men, shooting was their business. Hence the attackers’ orders had been to shoot the guards first, and there had been no time to evaluate the actual situation and to change the plan of attack. Hence, as far as anyone knew, not a single bullet had been aimed at the far end of the room.

Seaton took a pair of headsets out of his pocket and applied one

of them, first to one of the two lieutenants’ heads, then to the other.

“Uh-huh,” he grunted then. “That ape didn’t know too much, but this one was going to be the new captain-general. I suppose you’ve got a recorder, Ree-Toe?”

“I’ll get it, sir!” Kay-Lee exclaimed; and Prenk, eyes bulging, gasped:

“Don’t tell me you can read a dead brain, sir!”

“Oh, yes. They keep their charges, sometimes for days.” Kay-Lee handed Seaton a microphone then, and he spoke into it for ten minutes—the while three Rayseenian faces went through gamuts of emotion; each culminating in the same expression of joyous satisfaction.

When Seaton paused for breath Prenk said in awe, “That machine is certainly a something . . . I don’t suppose . . .” He stopped.

“I do suppose, yes. I’ll give you a few sets, with blueprints, and show you how they work,” and Seaton went on with his reading.

A few minutes later he cut off the mike and said, “That ape over there,” he pointed, “is one of the Big Wheels. Have someone latch on to him, Ree-Toe; we’ll read him next. He’s one you’ll be really interested in, so I’ll hook you up in parallel with me so you can get everything he knows into your own brain.” He took a third headset from his pocket and began to adjust its settings, going on, “It takes a different set-up . . . so . . . and goes on your head so.”

“That ape” was a fattish, sallow-faced man of fifty, who had been



directing operations from outside the room and had intended to stay outside it until everything was secure within. He had been blown into the room and halfway along its length by the force of the blasts. He was pretty badly smashed up, but he was beginning to regain consciousness and was weakly trying to get to his feet.

This unlucky wight was a mine of information indeed, but Prenk stopped the mining operation after only a couple of minutes of digging.

"Sy-By," he said. "Two more of your officers you can shoot." he gave two names. "Then come back here with some men you think you can trust and we'll test 'em to make sure. By that time I'll have a list of people for you to round up and bring in for examination."

There is no need to follow any farther the Premier's progress in cleaning up his planet. In fact, only one more incident that occurred there is of interest here—one that occurred while Seaton and Dorothy were getting ready for bed in one of the suites of honor. She put both arms around him suddenly; he pressed her close.

"Dick, I belonged there. Beside you. Every fiber of my being belonged there. That was *exactly* where I belonged."

"I know you did, sweet. I'll have to admit it. But . . ."

She put her hand over his mouth. "But nothing, my dearest. No buts. I've killed rats and rattlesnakes, and that wasn't any different. Not a bit different in any way."

Of the more than five thousand Fenachrone who had left their noisome home planet in Sleemet's flagship, almost seven hundred had died and more were dying.

It was not that the Lurdi were physically cruel to them or abused them in any way. They didn't. Nor were they kind; they were conspicuously and insultingly neutral and indifferent to them. Conspicuous and insulting, that is, to the hypersensitive minds of the captives. In their own minds, the Lurdi were acting strictly according to logic. Every item of the subjects' environment duplicated precisely its twin on the subjects' home world. What more could logically be done? Nothing.

The Lurdi observed the mental anguish of the Fenachrone, of course, and recorded their emotions quite accurately, but with no emotional reactions whatever of their own. Practically all emotions were either illogical or unsane, or both.

To the illogical and unsane Fenachrone, however—physically, mentally, intellectually and psychologically—the situation was intolerable; one that simply could not be endured.

They were proud, haughty, intolerant; their race had always been so. Since time immemorial it had been bred into their innermost consciousnesses that they were the RACE SUPREME—destined unquestionably to be the absolute rulers of all things living or yet to live throughout all the transfinite reaches of the Cosmic All.

Holding this belief with every fiber of their beings, they had been

plunged instantly into a condition of complete, utter helplessness.

Their vessel could not fight. While it was intact except for its tail-section and its power-pods, its every offensive projector was burned out; useless. Nor could they fight personally, either physically or mentally. Their physical strength, enormous as it was, was of no avail against tractors and pressors of pure force; their hardest-driven hypnotic glares were of no avail against the completely logical, completely matter-of-fact minds of the Llurdi.

Most galling condition of all, the Fenachrone were not treated as enemies; nor as menaces or threats; nor even as intelligent entities whose knowledges and abilities might be worthy of notice. These things were observed and recorded, to be sure, but only as component parts of a newly discovered class of objects, the Fenachrone; a class of objects that happened to be alive. The Fenachrone were neither more nor less noteworthy than were birds or barnacles.

Sleemet, no longer young and perhaps the proudest and most intractable and most intransigent of the lot, could not endure that treatment very long; but he did not bend. The old adage "Where there's life there's hope," simply is not true where such as the Llurdi and the Fenachrone are concerned. Sleemet lost all hope and broke; broke almost completely down.

He stopped eating. That did not bother the Llurdi in any way. Why should it? They were neither squeamish nor humane, any more

than they were cruel or vindictive. The fact that certain of these creatures stopped taking nourishment under certain conditions was merely a datum to be observed and recorded.

But since Sleemet was big and strong, even for a Fenachrone, and had previously eaten very well indeed, it took him a long time to die. And as he weakened—as the bindings between flesh and spirit loosened more and ever more—he regressed more and ever more back into the youth of his race. Back and back. Still farther back; back into its very childhood; back to a time when his remote ancestors ate their meat alive and communicated with each other, sometimes by grunts and gestures, but more often by means of a purely mental faculty that was later to evolve into the power of ocular hypnosis.

Half conscious or less of his surroundings but knowing well that death was very near, Sleemet half-consciously sent out his race's age-old mental message-in-extremity of the dying.

**M**arc C. DuQuesne knew vastly more about the Fenachrone than did any other man alive, not excluding Richard Seaton. He and Seaton were, as far as is known, the only two men ever to meet Fenachrone mind to mind and live through the experience; but DuQuesne had been in thought-helmet contact with a Fenachrone much longer and much more intimately and very much more interestedly than Seaton ever had—because of

the tremendous intrinsic differences between the personalities of the two men.

Seaton, after having crippled a war-vessel of the Fenachrone, had pinned its captain against a wall with so many beams of force that he could not move his head and could scarcely move any other part of his monstrous body. Then, by means of a pair of thought-helmets, he had taken what of that captain's knowledge he wanted. He had, however, handled that horribly unhuman brain very gingerly. He had merely read certain parts of it, as one reads an encyclopedia; at no time had his mind become *en rapport* with that of the monster. In fact, he had said to Crane:

"I'd hate to have much of that brain in my own skull — afraid I'd bite myself. I'm just going to look . . . and when I see something I want I'll grab it and put it into my own brain."

DuQuesne, however, in examining a navigating engineer of that monstrous race, had felt no such revulsion, contrariwise — although possibly not quite consciously — he had admired certain traits of Fenachrone character so much that he had gone *en rapport* with that engineer's mind practically cell to cell; with the result that he had emerged from that mental union as nearly a Fenachrone himself as a human being could very well become.

Wherefore, as DuQuesne in his flying-planetoid-base approached the point of its course nearest to the planet Llurdiax, he began to feel the thinnest possible tendril of thought

trying to make contact with one of the deepest chambers of his mind. He stiffened; shutting it off by using automatically an ability that he had not known consciously that he had. He relaxed; and, all interest now, tuned his mind to that feeler of thought, began to pull it in, and stopped — and the contact released a flood of Fenachrone knowledge completely new to him.

A Fenachrone, dying somewhere, wanted . . . wanted what? Not help, exactly. Notice? Attention? To give something? DuQuesne was not enough of a Fenachrone to translate that one thought even approximately, and he was not interested enough to waste any time on it. It had something to do with the good of the race; that was close enough.

DuQuesne, frowning a little, sat back in his bucket seat and thought. He had supposed that the Fenachrone were all dead . . . but it made sense that Seaton couldn't have killed *all* of a space-faring race, at that. But so what? He didn't care how many Fenachrone died. But a lot of their stuff was really good, and he certainly hadn't got it all yet, by any means; it might be smart to listen to what the dying monster had to say — especially since he, DuQuesne, was getting pretty close to the home grounds of Klazmon the Llurd.

Wherefore DuQuesne opened his mental shield: and, since his mind was still tuned precisely to the questing wave and since the *DQ* was now practically as close to Llurdiax as it would get on course 255U, he re-



ceived a burst of thought that jarred him to the very teeth.

It is amazing how much information can be carried by a Fenachrone-compressed burst of thought. It was fortunate for DuQuesne that he had the purely Fenachrone abilities to decompress it, to spread it out and analyze it, and later, to absorb it fully.

The salient points, however, were pellucidly clear. The dying monster was First Scientist Fleet Admiral Sleemet; and he and more than four thousand other Fenachrone were helpless captives of and were being studied to death by Llurdan scientists under the personal direction of Llanzlan Klazmon.

Realizing instantly what that meant — Klazmon would be out here in seconds with a probe, if nothing stronger — DuQuesne slammed on full-coverage screens at full power, thus sealing his entire worldlet bottle-tight against any and every spy-ray, beam, probe, band, zone of force and/or order of force that he knew anything about. Since this included everything he had known before this trip began, plus everything he had learned from Freemind One and from the Jelmi and from Klazmon himself, he was grimly certain that he was just as safe as though he were in God's hip pocket from any possible form of three-dimensional observation or attack.

Cutting in his fourth-dimensional gizmo — how glad he was that he had studied it so long and so intensively that he knew more about it than its inventors did! — he flipped what he called its "eye" into the

Fenachrone Reservation or distant Llurdiax. He seized Sleemet, bed and all, in a wrapping of force and deposited the bundle gently on the floor of the *DQ's* control room, practically at his, DuQuesne's feet. Fenachrone could breathe Earth air for hours without appreciable damage — they had proved that often enough — and if he decided to keep any of them alive he'd make them some air they liked better.

Second, he brought over a doctor, complete with kit and instruments and supplies; and third, the Fenachrone equivalent of a registered nurse.

"You, doctor!" DuQuesne snapped, in Fenachronian. "I don't know whether this spineless weakling is too far gone to save or not. Or whether he is worth saving or not. But since he was actually in charge of your expedition-to-preserve-the-race I will listen to what he has to say instead of blasting him out of hand. So give him a shot of the strongest stuff you have — or is he in greater need of food than of stimulant?"

DuQuesne did not know whether the doctor would cooperate with a human being or not. But he did — whether from lack of spirit of his own or from desire to save his chief, DuQuesne did not care enough to ask.

"Both," the doctor said, "but nourishment first, by all means. Intravenous, nurse, please," and doctor and nurse went to work with the skill and precision of their highly trained crafts.

And, somewhat to DuQuesne's

surprise, Sleemet began immediately to rally; and in three-quarters of an hour he had regained full consciousness.

“You spineless worm!” DuQuesne shot at the erstwhile invalid, in true Fenachrone tone and spirit. “You gutless wonder! You pusillanimous weakling, you sniveling coward! Is it the act of a noble of the Fenachrone to give up, to yield supinely, to surrender ignominiously to a fate however malign while a spark of life endures?”

Sleemet was scarcely stirred by this vicious castigation. He raised dull eyes—eyes shockingly lifeless to anyone who had ever seen the ruby-lighted, flame-shot wells of vibrant force that normal Fenachrone eyes were—and said lifelessly, “There is a point, the certainty of death, at which struggle becomes negative instead of positive. It merely prolongs the agony. Having passed that point, I die.”

“There is no such point, idiot, while life lasts! Do I look like Klazmon of Llurdiax?”

“No, but death is no less certain at your hands than at his.”

“Why should it be, stupid?” and DuQuesne’s sneer was extra-high-voltage stuff, even for Doctor Marc C. DuQuesne.

Now was the crucial moment. IF he could take all those Fenachrone over, and IF he could control them after they got back to normal, *what* a crew they would make! He stared contemptuously at the ex-admiral and went on:

“Whether or not you and your four thousand die in the near future is up to you. While I do not have to have a crew, I can use one efficiently for a few weeks. If you choose to work with me I will, at the end of that time, give you a duplicate of your original spaceship and will see to it that you are allowed to resume your journey wherever you wish.”

“Sir, the Fenachrone do not . . .” the doctor began stiffly.

“Shut up, you poor, dumb clown!” DuQuesne snapped. “Haven’t you learned *anything*? That instead of being the strongest race in space you are one of the weakest? You have one choice merely—cooperate or die. And that is not yours, but Sleemet’s. Sleemet?”

“But how do I know that if . . .”

“If you have any part of a brain, fool, use it! What matters it to me whether Fenachrone live or die? I’m not asking you anything; I’m telling you under what conditions I will save your lives. If you want to argue the matter I’ll put you three—and the bed—back where you were and be on my way. Which do you prefer?”

Sleemet had learned something. He had been beaten down flat enough so that he could learn something—and he realized that he had much to learn from any race who could do what his rescuer had just done.

“We will work with you,” Sleemet said. “You will, I trust, instruct us concerning how you liberated us three and propose to liberate the others?”

“I can’t. It was fourth-dimension-

al translation." DuQuesne lied blandly. "Did you ever try to explain the color 'blue' to a man born blind? No scientist of your race will be able to understand either the theory or the mechanics of fourth dimensional translation for something like eleven hundred thousand of your years."

## XXII

### DuQuesne and Sleemet

En route to the galaxy in which DuQuesne's aliens supposedly lived, Dorothy said, "Say Dick. I forgot to ask you something. What did you ever find out about that thought business of Kay-Lee's?"

"Huh?" Seaton was surprised. "What was there to find out? How are you going to explain the mechanism of thought — by unscrewing the inscrutable? She said, and I quote, 'We didn't feel that we were quite reaching you,' unquote. So it was she and Ree-Toe Prenk. Obviously. Holding hands or something — across a Ouija board or some other focusing device, probably. Staring into each other's eyes to link minds and direct the thought."

"But they *did* hit you with something," she insisted, "and it bothers me. They can do it and we can't."

"No sweat, pet. That isn't a circumstance to what you do every time you think at a controller to order up a meal or whatever. How do you do that? Different people, different abilities, is all. Anyway, Earth mediums have done that kind of thing for ages. If you're really

interested, you can take some time off and learn it, next time we're on Ray-See-Nee. But for right now, my red-headed beauty, we've got something besides that kind of monkey-business to worry about."

"That's right, we have," and Dorothy forgot the minor matter in thinking of the major. "Those aliens. Have you and Martin figured out a *modus operandi*?"

"More or less. Go in openly, like tourists, but with everything we've got not only on the trips but hyped up to as nearly absolutely instantaneous reactivity as the Brain can possibly get it."

Both DuQuesne's *DQ* and Seaton's *Skylark of Valeron* were within range of Llurdiax. DuQuesne, however, as has been said, was covering up as tightly as he could. Everything that could be muzzled or muffled was muzzled or muffled, and he was traveling comparatively slowly, so as to put out the minimum of detectable high-order emanation. Furthermore, his screens were shoved out to such a tremendous distance, and were being varied so rapidly and so radically in shape, that no real pattern existed to be read. The *DQ* was not undetectable, of course, but it would have taken a great deal of highly specialized observation and analysis to find her.

The *Skylark of Valeron*, on the other hand, was coming in wide open: "Like a tourist", as Seaton had told Dorothy the plan was to do.

In the llanzlanate on Llurdiax, therefore, an observer alerted Klaz-

mon, who flew immediately to his master-control panel. He checked the figures the observer had given him, and was as nearly appalled as a Llurd could become. An artificial structure of that size and mass — it was certainly not a natural planetoid — had never even been thought of by any builder of record. He measured its acceleration — the *Valeron* was still braking down at max — and his eyes bulged. That thing, tremendous as it was, had the power-to-mass ratio of a speedster! In spite of its immense size it was actually an inter-galactic flyer!

He launched a probe, as he had done so many times before — but with entirely unexpected results.

The stranger's guardian screens were a hundred times as reactive as any known to Llurdan science. He was not allowed time for even the briefest of mental contacts or for any real observation at all. So infinitesimal had been the instant usable time that only one fact was clear. The entities in that mobile monstrosity were — positively — Jelmooids.

Not true Jelmi, certainly. He knew all about the Jelmi. Those tapes bore unmistakable internal evidence of being true and complete records and there was no hint anywhere in them of anything like this. If not the Jelmi, who? Ah, yes, the Fenachrone, whose fleet . . . no, Sleemet knew nothing of such a construction . . . and he was not exactly of the same race . . . ah, yes, that one much larger ship that had escaped. The probability was high that its one occupant belonged to precisely

the same Jelmoid race as did the personnel of this planetoid. The escaped one had reported Klazmon's cursory investigation as an attack. It was a virtual certainty, therefore, that this was a battleship of that race, heading for Llurdiax to . . . to what? To investigate merely? No.

Nor merely to parley. They had made no attempt whatever to communicate. (It did not occur to Klazmon, then or ever, that his own fiercely driven probe could not possibly have been taken for an attempt at communication. He had fully intended to communicate, as soon as he had seized the mind of whoever was in command of the strange spacecraft.) And now, with the stranger's incredible full-coverage screen in operation, communication was and would remain impossible.

But he had data sufficient for action. These Jelmooids, like all others he knew, were rabidly anti-social, illogical, unreasoning, unsane and insane. They were — definitely — surplus population.

So thinking, Llanlzlan Klazmon launched his attack.

As the *Skylark* entered that enigmatic galaxy, Seaton was not in his home, with only a remote-control helmet with which to work. He was in the control room itself, at the base of the Brain, with the tremendously complex-master-control itself surrounding his head. Thus he was attuned to and in instantaneous contact with every activated cell of that gigantic Brain. It was ready to receive and to act upon with the transfinite speed of thought any or-

der that Seaton would think. Nor would any such action interfere in any way with the automatics that Seaton had already set up.

"I'm going to stay here all day," Seaton said, "and all night tonight, too, if necessary."

But he did not have to stay there even all day. In less than four hours the llanzlan drove his probe and Seaton probed practically instantaneously back. And since Seaton's hyped-up screens were a hundred times faster than the Llurd's, Seaton "saw" a hundred times as much as Klazmon did. He saw the city Llurdias in all its seat-of-empire pride and glory. He perceived its mile-wide girdle of fortresses. He perceived the llanzlanate; understood its functions and purposes. He entered the Hall of Computation and examined minutely the beings and the machines at work there.

How could all this be? Because the speed of thought, if not absolutely infinite, is at least transfinite; immeasurable to man. And the *Valeron's* inorganic brain and Seaton's organic one were, absolutely and super-intimately, the two component parts of one incredibly able, efficient and proficient whole.

Thus, when the alien's attack was launched in all its fury and almost all of the *Valeron's* mighty defensive engines went simultaneously into automatic action, the coded chirpings that the Brain employed to summon human help did not sound: that Brain's builder, fellow, boss, and perfect complement was already on the job.

And thus, since no warning had

been given, the other Skylarkers were surprised when Seaton called them all down into the control room.

They were even more surprised when they saw how white and strained his face was.

"This may become verree unfunny," he said. "Tsa good thing I muscled her up or we'd be losing some skin and some of our defense. As it is, we're holding 'em 'and we've got a few megas in reserve. Not enough to be really happy about, but some. And we're building more, of course. *However*, that ape down there has undoubtedly got a lot of stuff otherwheres on the planet that he can hook in pretty fast, so whatever we're going to do we'd better do right now."

"They didn't try to communicate at all?" Crane asked. "Strange for a race of such obviously high attainments."

"Not a lick," Seaton said, flatly. "Just a probe; the hardest and sharpest probe I ever saw. When I blocked it — *Whammo!*"

"You probed, too, of course," Dorothy said. "What did you find out? Are they really monstrous, as DuQuesne said, out purely to kill?"

"Just that. He wasn't lying a nickel's worth on that. His Nibs down there had already decided that we were surplus population and should be eliminated, and he set right out to do it. So, unless some of you have some mighty valid reasons not to, I'm going to try my damndest to eliminate him, right now."

"We *could* run, I suppose," Margaret suggested — but not at all enthusiastically.

"I doubt it. Not without letting him burn us down to basketball size, like the Chlorans did. He undoubtedly let us get this close on purpose so we couldn't."

Since no one else said anything, Seaton energized everything of offense he had. He tuned it as precisely as he possibly could. He assembled it into the tightest, solidest, hardest beam he could possibly build. Then, involuntarily tensing his muscles and hunching his back, he drove the whole gigantic thing squarely at where he knew the llanzlante was.

The Llurd's outer screen scarcely flickered as it went black in nothing flat of time. The intermediate screen held for eighty-three hundredths of a second. Then the practically irresistible force of that beam met the practically immovable object that was Klazmon's last line of defense. And as it clawed and bit and tore and smashed in ultra-pyrotechnic ferocity, solar-like flares of raw energy erupted from the area of contact and the very ether writhed and seethed and warped under the intolerable stresses of the utterly incomprehensible forces there at grips.

This went on . . . and on . . . and on.

Even to Seaton, who knew only that he was up against an enemy nearly as potent as the Chlorans, the

full import of the enormous struggle of energies then being waged was far from clear. We can wonder now, and ask ourselves what the fate of the universe might have been if the *Skylark's* Norlaminian designers had skimped on a course of screens, or overlooked a detail of defense. Surely its consequences would have been cataclysmic! Not only to Seaton and his Skylarker, watching grim-faced as their gauges revealed the enormous flow of destructive forces battling each other to annihilation for countless parsecs in every direction. Not only to the Jelmi, or the Ray-See-Neese, or the Norlaminians, or Earth itself . . . but to countless generations yet unborn, on planets not yet discovered . . .

But they held.

And after ten endless minutes of such terrible gouts and blasts of destruction as no planet could endure for a moment, Seaton heard a voice speak to him.

He had never heard it before, but it said in good American English: "Good morning, my friends. Or perhaps, by your clocks, it is good afternoon? I am the Llanzlan Mergon of Jelm, and I perceive that you are under attack by our old acquaintances, the Llurdi. You, I am sure, are the Seatons and the Cranes, about whom we heard so much on Earth, but whom we were not able to find."

TO BE CONCLUDED



## The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet . . .

Dear Editor:

I expect you'll get a fairly large amount of correspondence about Mr. R. Milton's letter concerning Esperanto; the issue seems to be one in which a large number of people are interested (as both John Campbell and Willy Ley have found out in the past).

I agree with Mr. Milton wholeheartedly. One of the problems to which he refers, that of the ordinary non-English-speaker who has studied English being too timid or embarrassed to use it in front of a native English-speaker, is well known to me from personal experience. My wife, who comes from Mexico City, had a year of English in high school and in addition has lived in the U.S.A. for two years. One would think that after that much time she would be fairly confident, but actually she has that same problem attributed by Mr. Milton to so many other people. If this is the case with someone who has used only English for the last two years (and who in addition is a bright girl with something of a head for languages), consider the poor

European student who has studied English for four or five years, five to ten hours a week, and can now read a technical paper in the language — but has never really had occasion to speak it.

I also agree with Mr. Milton's proposed solution to the problem. Esperanto was constructed with two basic ideas in mind: facility and beauty. Those who have studied its history will tell you that it is a work more of art than of science — although what is art but a science of esthetics?

It might take two or three minutes to learn the full conjugation of an Esperanto verb. What other language can even come close to that? As to the nouns and adjectives — put together, they might take thirty seconds; try learning how to decline all English nouns, singular or plural, nominative and genitive, in thirty seconds. Or thirty hours.

Esperanto has its own literature, original as well as translated; and its own speaking population; and the governments of several countries consider it worthy of government-subsidized magazines. It seems to

be catching on all over the world now. Even in the United States there is at least one school system in which it is taught in all (24) schools.—Donald J. Harlow, College View Apartments B-15-C, College Station, Texas.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

There are many things that can be said about *If* that would be improving, but I will limit most of this letter to some complaints that I have been saving up for some time now.

The first one concerns the printing of your magazine (here I must also include *Galaxy* and *Worlds of Tomorrow*). Many of the pages have been over-inked so that they are difficult to read.

Number two: the paper you have been using is very poor. Some of the issues I have from early in the fifties are in better shape than those of only three or four years of age.

Finally: although readers are continually writing in and gushing about the quality of the artwork of your covers, I have to disagree. Looking through all the back issues of your magazines, I found only one that is really good and that possesses a feeling outside of the text it illustrates. I'm speaking of the cover by McKenna on the June, 1963, issue of *Galaxy*, depicting a ruined spaceship against the background of a spiral galaxy.

I will cease my disapprobations here and try to put down some of the conflagration I have started by saying that I buy and read all three of your publications, and especially enjoy *If* . . . for the quality of the paper stories are printed on has little to do with their merit. But when the stories *are* so good, it is all the more important that one be

able to preserve them in readable condition.

Robert A. Heinlein should be out with a new one sometime soon—he usually gets out two new books each year. I'd certainly like to see *If* get it.—James M. Gale, 2609 Portland Avenue, Charlotte 7, North Carolina.

• We like a letter like this; it gives us something to sink our teeth into. First about the printing and production: we've had some difficulties along that line, but we hope to improve things shortly. About the covers: There's an interesting thing about that cover you mention. We thought it was great too. Everybody in the office who saw it agreed it was a fine job—which seldom happens. Nearly every reader who has commented on covers in the past year or two has mentioned it as one they liked. There is no doubt that in terms of expressed opinion it was one of the most popular covers we've ever run . . . and yet (we'll let you in on a trade secret) it had the worst sale of any issue over a three-year period. If you know why, please tell us—we don't. But one thing we do know, and that is that the covers that people *like* are not necessarily the covers that make them *buy*. And of course if we have to choose between one or the other—there's no choice!

Yes, we'd like to see us have Robert Heinlein's new book for you too. There is one, as you deduce, and we hope to have it; but there are a few problems. One is that at present the manuscript runs about as long as three ordinary science-fiction novels!—*Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Since I now count 18 rejection



slips from *If*, I figure an easy way to get published is to write a letter to *Hue & Cry*. There are two things I want to say to reader David Lyon. As a high-school student, I resent being compared with "beer slops". Among high-school students science fiction—*not* monster stories!—is greatly loved. After all, what other genre has produced anything to compare with *Canticle for Leibowitz*? Secondly, the story Mr. Lyon was looking for is *The Silk and the Song*.

Congrats on the long-awaited *Sky-lark DuQuesne*! It's as good as the three previous Skylarks; maybe better. Looking forward to the next two installments.—S. Alan Simon, 27 Garland Drive, Eggertsville, New York 14226.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I've a few money-making suggestions for you.

Firstly, why not sell enlarged—say, 8 x 12—color reproductions of your covers, suitable for framing, minus the print, of course.

Secondly, so far as I know, no one has ever printed a science-fiction fan's calendar. It should be an easy enough matter to print one with a cover or interior illustration for each month. Possibly an almanac calendar showing the birthdays of top-notch science-fiction writers.

Thirdly, you could sell binders for storing back issues of *If*, *Galaxy* and *Worlds of Tomorrow*. H. L. Gold used to do that when he was editor, didn't he? Maybe these ideas don't hold water, but if they do you're welcome to them.—Brian Baldwin, 212 Harding Road, Chattanooga 15, Texas.

• Matter of fact, we have thought about a calendar from time to time.

Wonder how many would be interested.—*Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

You were right: *The Killing Machine* was a good story, maybe somewhat better than *Starchild*.

I'm not sure, but I think you've set a record of some kind with five excellent issues in a row, from cover to editorial—including the stories. Keep it up!

Why not try to squeeze a story out of Harlan Ellison? His type of writing fits your magazine to a T, and you'll have some one to compete with Keith Laumer to see who can kill the most people in one story.—A. J. Spegel, 221 Anderson Road, Linwood, Michigan.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I am not a habitual writer of letters to sf magazines even though I am a habitual reader . . . but the moon is full . . .

I personally am unconcerned about the demise of *Outer Limits* and its ilk on television. Television is a medium particularly unsuited to the freedom that science fiction demands and would not know what to do with that freedom even if it had it. I understand, though, that an sf show called *Lost in Space* will be on one of the networks next season, so video sf is not dead.

I was skeptical about the new Skylark story; I don't like to admit it, but I could never get too excited over either the Lensman or Skylark stories. Nevertheless, Part I of *Sky-lark DuQuesne* does have a certain something . . . It also has Doc Smith's ridiculous conversation. Every time Dick Seaton opens his mouth I wince.

Concerning book reviews: I be-

long to that breed of neurotics that enjoys reading book reviews. Algis Budrys in *Galaxy* is good but not long enough for my taste. There must be somebody you could get for *If*.

James H. Schmitz is becoming one of the most ubiquitous names in magazine science fiction. His stories keep you reading, but after you've finished you wish you hadn't wasted the time. Maybe he should go into television.—Ed Brenner, 30 Richmond Street, Brooklyn, New York 11208.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I just finished reading Robert F. Young's *When Time Was Young* in the December issue of your magazine. For the most part the sf stories I have read involving paleontology have testified to a certain amount of research on the part of the author. Mr. Young's story (possibly though up while escorting two small children through a natural history museum) bespeaks no such effort. May I suggest some study of the temporal and geographic ranges of the genre whose names he throws about with such authority

One thing to be said in Mr. Young's favor. At least he didn't clutter the Upper Cretaceous landscape with *Lepidodenarons*, *seed ferns* and *Calamites*. This is not the case with your cover artist, who has some pretty un-Cretaceous plants in the background and has put three toes on the *Tyrannosaurus*' two large front feet.—Bonnie Dalzell, Student Paleontologist, University of California at Berkeley, 2001 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

With all this fuss about sf on

TV, I don't think anybody's been considering the reporting of space flights. I urge all fans to write to the network news sections calling for a science-fiction writer to be present at coverage of future launches. It would, I think, make the commentary much more interesting . . . and might bring a few more converts around to sf.

Anybody interested in forming a club of young science-fiction fans is urged to write either to me or Sheridan Simon, 27 Garland Drive, Eggertsville, New York 14226.

Finally, when is C. C. MacApp going to write a sequel to *Under the Gaddyl*, in the April, 1964, issue of *Worlds of Tomorrow*?—James Edward Turner, P. O. Box 161, Pilot Knob, Missouri, 63663.

• Matter of fact, we requested permission once to view a manned launching and were turned down flat. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration appears to feel that the less truck they have with science fiction, the more easily they'll be able to get crazy appropriations from congressmen who may be a little suspicious of all this crazy space business in the first place. We have an idea that the TV networks would have the same reaction . . . but it's a good idea anyway!

That winds us up for another month. All you fellows who have been writing in demanding a Retief novel—don't forget we've got one starting next month!

This month's "First"—i. e., first story publication for another new science-fiction writer—is Dannie Plachta's *Alien Artifact*. We have one of these every issue, you know. Maybe one of these days it'll be yours . . .

*The Editor*

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Frankly, we don't think so. We think they'll be better!

*Baby Is Three*  
Theodore Sturgeon

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Lost C'Mell*  
Cordwainer Smith

*The Big Time*  
Fritz Leiber

*The Caves of Steel*  
Isaac Asimov

*Day After Doomsday*  
Poul Anderson

*The Demolished Man*  
Alfred Bester

*Do I Wake or Dream?*  
Frank Herbert

*The Dragon Masters*  
Jack Vance

*The Fireman  
(Fahrenheit 451)*  
Ray Bradbury

*Gravy Planet  
(The Space Merchants)*  
Pohl & Kornbluth

*Here Gather the Stars  
(Way Station)*  
Clifford D. Simak

*Home from the Shore*  
Gordon R. Dickson

*Hot Planet*  
Hal Clement

*King of the City*  
Keith Laumer

*Mindswap*  
Robert Sheckley

*Med Ship Man*  
Murray Leinster

*The Men in the Walls*  
William Tenn

*The Old Die Rich*  
H. L. Gold

*The Puppet Masters*  
Robert A. Heinlein

*Surface Tension*  
James Blish

*The Visitor at the Zoo*  
Damon Knight

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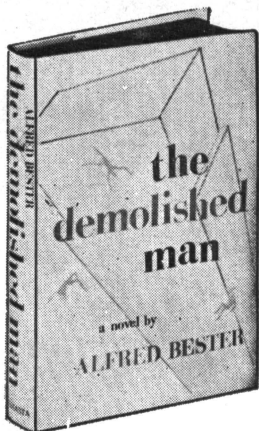
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