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RETIEF'S WAR

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Thrilling Science-Fiction Novel



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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

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**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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SERIALS — First of Three Parts

RETIEF'S WAR by KEITH LAUMER 6

CONCLUSION

SKYLARK DuQUESNE by EDWARD E. SMITH 122

NOVELETTES

ORIGIN OF SPECIES by ROBERT F. YOUNG 67

AN OUNCE OF EMOTION by GORDON R. DICKSON 92

SHORT STORIES

A LEADER FOR YESTERYEAR by MACK REYNOLDS 47

THE SMILING FUTURE by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD 58

PURPOSE by EDWARD V. DONG 89

SHORT TRIP TO NOWHERE

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS 112

SPECIAL FEATURE

RETIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY 14

FEATURES

EDITORIAL by FREDERIK POHL 4

HUE AND CRY by THE READERS 160

Cover by GAUGHAN from RETIEF'S WAR

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Where are they now ?

The other day an editor from a national news magazine called us up to find out what he could about the present activities of some of the Grand Old Names of science fiction. What he had in mind was a sidebar to run in connection with a story on Mariner IV and its Mars photographs, and what he wanted to do was tell about what science fiction's old masters were doing these days. "What about Doc Smith?" he asked. "His newest story, *Skylark DuQuesne*, is running currently in *H*," said we. "A. E. Van Vogt?" "Contributing regularly to the same magazine." "Well, how about Isaac Asimov?" "Got a couple of his stories, too — one in the October *Galaxy*, one a little later." "Heinlein?" "Oh, sure — his next series will start off 1966 for us."

And so it went. Murray Leinster, Jack Williamson, Lester del Rey, Philip Jose Farmer — all the big names of some decades ago; if they were still alive, they were still writing science fiction. (When the sidebar finally appeared, it had only two names, Hugo Gernsback and Horace Gold — and as a matter of fact, we have a Horace Gold story coming up in *Galaxy* too!)

There was a superstition current a few years ago that most of science-fiction's best writers had given up the field in favor of greener pastures. It may even have been true — briefly. But the record shows that it certainly isn't true any more!

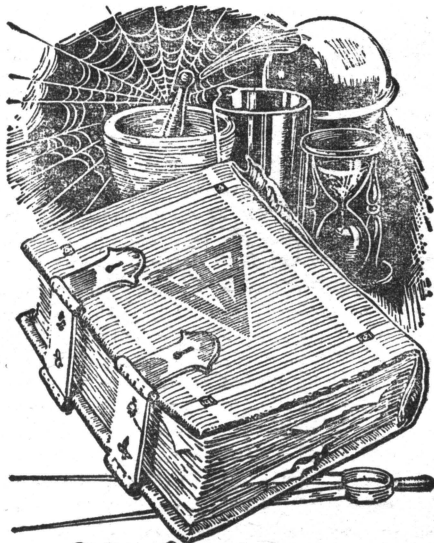
Actually something has been happening among science-fiction's top writers, however. The greener

pastures are there, and the sf authors have been grazing in them. Robert Bloch, Harlan Ellison, Jerome Bixby, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke and a few others are finding their time more and more taken up with writing motion-picture and television scripts. Major magazines like *Playboy* and *Holiday* have preempted a lot of the working time of writers like Alfred Bester, Algis Budrys, Frank M. Robinson and so on. A fair proportion of those with advanced degrees — Jack Williamson, Isaac Asimov, Cordwainer Smith, John R. Pierce and James V. McConnell, for instance — are putting in most of their efforts on teaching, or research, or factual science writing; and even the relatively simon-pures, like Robert A. Heinlein and the undersigned, find their time more and more occupied with participating in seminars, making radio and TV appearances.

But let no one wonder where science fiction's great writers of yesteryear may be. Nearly all of them — plus a great deal of new blood, as witness our "Firsts" — are right at their typewriters right now, writing science fiction. It may not pay off as well in gold or glory as other pursuits open to them, but it has its advantages. First, it has the most alert audience in the world. Second, it is what they do best. And third — it is the *only* kind of writing that imposes no tabus or restrictions of its own. In science fiction, the sky's no limit — and that's why there will never be a lack of talented and capable writers for it!

— THE EDITOR

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RETIEF'S WAR

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Nice planet! The natives were half machines -- the government was half dead -- and the Terrans were half out of their minds!

I

Jame Retief, Second Secretary and Consul of the Terrestrial Embassy to Quopp, paused in his stroll along the Twisting Path of Sublime Release. He admired the blaze of early morning sunlight on the stained glass window of a modest grog shop wedged between a stall with a sign in jittery native script announcing Bargain Prices in Cuticula Inlays,

and the cheery facade of The Idle Hour Comfort Station, One Hundred Stalls, No Waiting. He took out a long cigar of the old-fashioned type still hand-rolled on Jorgensen's Worlds. He glanced back along the steep, narrow street. Among the crowd of brilliantly colored Quoppina—members of a hundred related native species mingling freely here in the Great Market of Ixix—the four Terrans who had been trailing

him for the past half hour stood out drably.

Relief drew on the cigar, savoring the aroma, turned and stepped through the low arch into the tavern. From a high stool within the raised ring-bar at the center of the gaily lit chamber, the bar keeper—a medium-sized, short-abdomened individual of the Herpp tribe, with chipped wing-cases of faded baby blue and four dextrous arms of bristly wine-red, on one of which a Terran wristwatch was strapped—manipulated the controls of the dispenser console. He exchanged banter with the customers, made change and kept a pair of eyes on the free lunch simultaneously. As he saw Relief, he tilted his anterior antennae in friendly greeting.

"I am Gom-Goo, and I dance the dance of welcome," he susurrated in Quopp trade dialect, his voice reminiscent of fingernails on a blackboard. "What'll it be, Relief?"

"I'm Relief, and I dance the dance of Glad Arrival," the diplomat replied in the same tongue. "How about a shot of Bacchus brandy?"

"Red or black?"

"Black." The other customers made room as Relief moved up, unclipped a carefully charred wooden bowl from the serving panel, got it under the proper bright-plated nozzle just in time to catch the tar-colored syrup as it jetted forth.

"That's pretty good stuff," Gom-Goo said. He lowered his voice. "But for a real kick, you ought to try a shot of Hellrose—cut ten to one,

of course. That'll put a charge on your plates."

"I tried it once. We Terries like our sugar fermented."

"Sourballs?" The Herpp indicated an assortment of pea-sized lumps of yellow, white, purple and green.

Relief shook his head. "I prefer salt peanuts to saltpetre," he confided.

"Well, every tribe to its own poison."

"Here's oil in your crankcase," Relief toasted formally, nibbling the brandy.

"Oil," Gom-Goo responded. "You haven't been in lately, Relief. Been dormant?"

"No more than usual, Gom-Goo. Ambassador Longspoon's been imposing non-union hours on the staff, I'm afraid. Wouldn't do to let the Groaci steal a march on us and get a Bolshoi-type ballet theatre built before we can get a Yankee-stadium type sports arena off the drawing board."

Gom-Goo worked his dorsal mandibles in the gesture that expressed courteous skepticism. "Frankly, Relief, we Quoppina aren't much interested in watching Terries hobble around. After all, with only two legs and no wings..."

"I know; but it's traditional in these diplomatic competitions to build something conspicuously inappropriate."

Gom-Goo tilted his oculars toward the door, where a pair of Quoppina with highly polished black carapacos were rolling past, twirling night-sticks.

"Speaking of Terry programs, Retief, just between you and me, what's behind this business of buffing up these Voion ne'er-do-wells and setting them to cruising the streets waving clubs at the rest of us?"

"Well, Gom-Goo, it appears that in some quarters the view is held that you Quoppina are a little too fond of brawling, anarchy and duelling in the streets to qualify as natural democrats. Ergo, a native police force."

"Uh-huh. But why pick the Voion for the job? Their tribe's made its living by waylaying honest Quoppina in the back alleys ever since the Great Egg first hatched."

A heavy foot clumped behind Retief. He turned to find the four Terrans ringing him in, ominous expressions on their weathered features.

"We're just in from the Trading Post at Rum Jungle," the lean, scar-faced member of the quartet said flatly. "We want to have a little talk with you, Mister." He put his left fist carefully against the palm of his right hand and twisted it, looking around nervously.

Retief nodded. "Go ahead," he said pleasantly. A large man with thick, protuberant ears and thin sandy hair eased the scarred man aside.

"Not in this dump," he said in a voice like a cannonball rolling downstairs. "Outside."

"If it's a private matter, maybe you'd better drop by my office."

"We already been to the Embassy. Talked to some bird named Mag-

nan," the big man said. "He acted like his lace drawers was itching him; no joy there."

"Don't argue with this chump, Big Leon," a squatty fellow with a bluish chin and a steel front tooth advised. "Bring him along."

The bartender leaned over and buzzed sharply. "My name is Gom-Goo," he stated. "I dance—"

"Better get your wiring checked, low-pockets," Scar-face cut him off. "Sounds like you got a short in your talk-box." He jerked his head at Retief. "Let's walk Mister."

"I haven't quite finished my drink," Retief said mildly. "Why don't you go stand outside? I'll be along presently."

The fourth man, yet to be heard from, edged closer. "Ah, sir, we have a problem," he began. "We—"

"Skip it Jerry," Scar-face snapped. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, glowered at Retief. "Outside, you, like Big Leon said."

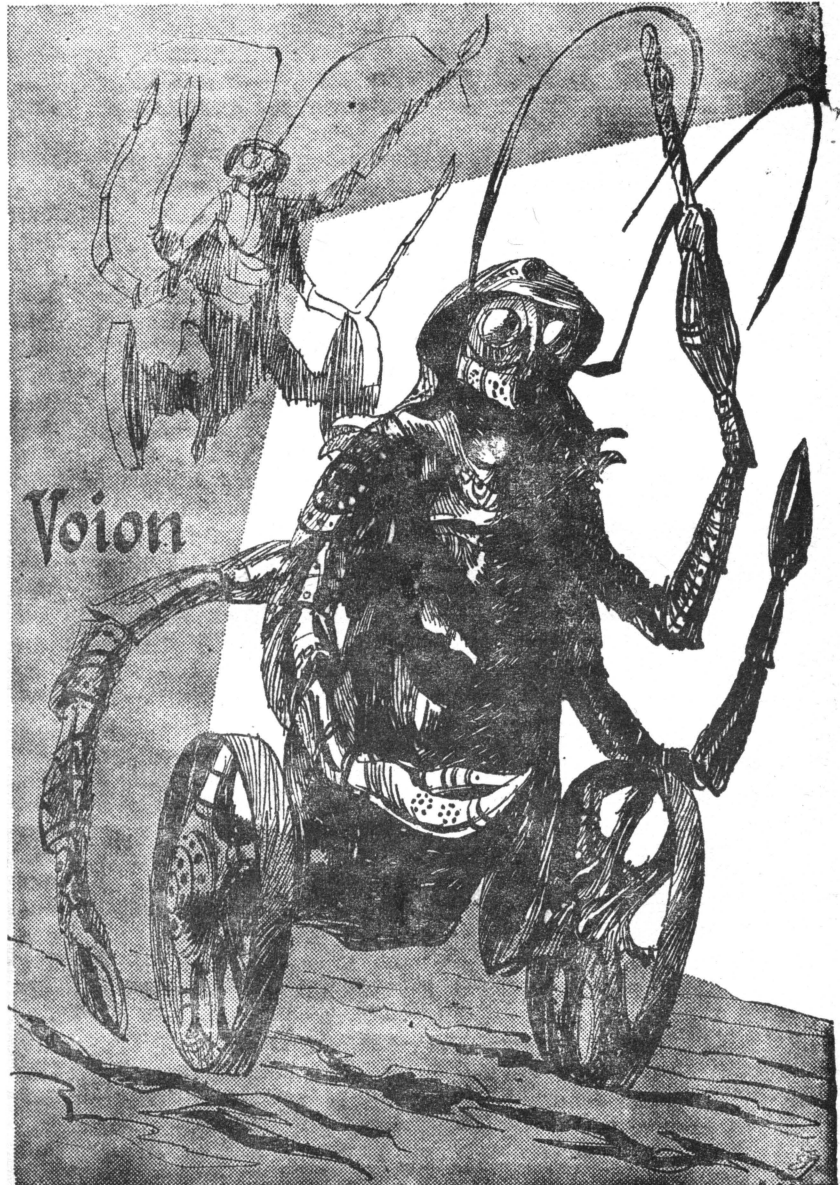
"Sorry," Retief said. "Some other time, maybe."

Scar-face narrowed his eyes, reached a large-knuckled hand for Retief's collar; Retief leaned aside, caught the hand and flipped it over, his fingers against the palm, his thumb against the scarred knuckles. He doubled it back over the wrist and Scar-face went to his knees with a yowl. Retief tsked.

"A very poor lead, Lefty," he said reproachfully. "It's a good thing I wasn't an enemy of yours."

"Hey," the big man said stepping in. "Let him up."

Retief looked at the wide face



Voion

that topped his six-three by an inch. "Why do they call you Big Leon?"

Big Leon set himself. "Put Seymour down and I'll show you," he grated.

Retief shifted his grip, lifted the scarred man clear off the floor, hoisted him chest-high. "Here you have him," he offered, and tossed him at the big man. Leon staggered back, offed, thrust Seymour aside, frowned, doubled a large fist and moved in.

There was a shrill rasp of sound. A thick, five-foot Quoppina with a glistening black carapace decked out in elaborate silver ornaments rolled between Retief and Big Leon.

"Outside, foreign grubs!" the intruder keened. He waved a long billy-club of black wood and jabbed it at the scar-faced man, who had stumbled to his feet. There were other club-wielders behind the first—two, three, half a dozen or more, all wearing the new black and silver trappings of the CDT-sponsored Federal Police. The Voion captain waved his palps, giving Retief a glimpse down a yellow-green throat set with silvery needles.

"All of you are under arrest," he rasped. "Place your manipulative members above your sense-organ clusters and proceed hence!"

"What's the charge?" Retief asked in the Voion dialect.

"Trespassing in forbidden territory, alien. Not that it matters! The example may remind your fellows to remain in the ghetto graciously assigned to them by the indulgence of the Planetary Government!"

"Just a minute," the bar-keeper

interrupted from his perch above. "I am Gom-Goo and—"

"Silence, panderer to alien perversions," the Voion snapped. "Or I'll find dungeon space for you, too!"

The other Voion were unlimbering clubs now. Over their heads Retief caught Big Leon's eye, jerked his head minutely to the right; the big man narrowed his eyes, nodded quickly. As the Voion before Retief brought his club back for a jab to the sternum, Leon reached, caught the alien by the upper pair of arms, lifted him clear of the floor, whirled him and slammed him at his fellows.

Two of them went over with a crash. Retief spun, intercepted an eager junior closing in from the left, caught him by his vestigial wing-cases, sent him reeling back to collide with his partner as Scar-face fainted, twisted the club from the two-pronged grip of the nearest cop, ducked and jammed it through the spokes of the alien's yard-high main wheels.

The victim stopped with a screech and a twanging of broken spokes. Big Leon met a second charging Voion with a roundhouse swipe, yelled as his fist glanced off the armored thorax, then landed a blow that spun the creature aside just as the sole undamaged Voion struck Big Leon a vicious blow behind the ear. Leon turned with a roar, picked up the cop bodily and slammed him against the bar-keeper's podium.

"Here!" the bar-keeper shrieked. "I am Gom-Goo and I dance the Dance of Distress!"

"Let's get out of here!" Scar-face

panted. He ducked aside as a Voion's club whistled, charged for the door. Quoppina of all sizes and colors scattered before him. Leon aimed a blow at the cop renewing the attack. Jerry took the arm of the fourth Terran, staggering from a bloody cut across the scalp, and plunged through the crowd. Retief, backed against the podium by the last two Voion still in action, keeping their distance and swinging their clubs in whistling arcs, plucked a tall bottle from a display, got in a hearty crack across the head of one as Gom-Goo leaned down and laid the other out.

"Retief!" the Horpp called above the chatter of the clientel who had been enjoying the free show. "I am Gom-Goo and I dance the Dance of Apology."

"This dance is on me," Retief panted. "I think I'd better be off now, Gom-Goo. Sorry about the damages."

"It was entirely the fault of these jacks-in-office." The bartender clashed his wingcase in agitation. "Interfering in a friendly dispute among cash customers! Yum-Tuk!" He signalled to his two table waiters. "Haul these Voion trouble-makers out into the alley, to survive or not, just as they please." He leaned over to eye the one Big Leon had thrown against the podium. "As for this fellow, stuff him in the incinerator. He's shouldered his last free citizen off the parking-ledge."

"We'd better dust, Mister," Leon said. "That Bug was a cop and he's got plenty of pals."

There was a distant clanging of gongs.

"You'd best transfer the scene of your diversions elsewhere for the nonce, Retief," Gom-Goo called. "One of these spoil-sports has summoned his fellow blackguards."

"We were just leaving. Thanks for tapping that last fellow; he was getting too close for comfort."

"My pleasure, Retief. The rascals have been getting pushier by the day. They're up to something, mark my words! And remember: After the wheels, the juncture between the parietal plates is the best spot to go for on a Voion."

"I'll remember that. Ta-ta."

II

In a quieter grog shop half a mile from the scene of the action, Retief and the four Terrans found a table at the back of the room from which they could keep an eye on the street. Through the wide, doorless arch, Voion cops could be seen hurrying past, grim and businesslike in their black and silver trappings. Big Leon blew on his skinned fist, looked at Retief almost shyly.

"Sorry about the rough stuff, uh, Mister, uh . . ."

"Retief. No apology needed. I see now why they call you Big Leon."

Leon nodded. "You looked pretty good in there yourself, Mister. Maybe those Bugs'll think about it before they tackle another bunch of Terries."

"What's got into them Bugs?" the scarred man demanded. "They been giving us a hard time out in the field, but I figured they'd be minding their manners here in town."

"That's what we came here to talk about," Big León said. "Something's stirring the Voion tribe up. I thought it was just us planters and traders they were out to get, but they've got the whole town sewed up like a dead sailor."

"We pretty near didn't get into the city," the steel-toothed man said. "There's a patrol around the port. A man could get the idea he wasn't welcome."

"The new police force was designed to bring law and order to Quopp," Retief said. "According to the official T.O. there are supposed to be no more than a hundred of them assigned to the city, with smaller detachments at the major trading towns."

"A hundred my Uncle Edgar," León growled. "The whole town's swarming with 'em — and there must be another ten thousand between here and Rum Jungle."

"Yes, I'd say our friends the Voion have answered the call to civic duty in surprising numbers," Retief said.

"They say Longspoon's the one behind it," Scarface said. "Sometimes I wonder whose side you CDT boys are on."

"The motivation of the diplomat is an enigma that even his best friend, if he had one, would be hard put to define," Retief confided. "Technically, the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne is dedicated to the protection of Terran interests, Galaxy-wide. Of course, figuring out what those interests really are can get a little complicated."

"Like equipping local cops with

clubs to pound Terry heads, using fees squeezed out of Terry businessmen," Seymour growled.

"What does the Corps want here, anyway?" León demanded. "Quopp was doing all right — with a little help from Terry free enterprise. Then along comes a bunch of CDT Johnnies getting everything organized, and all of a sudden us Terries are undesirable aliens."

Retief refilled glasses. "Admittedly, some of the measures selected by our Chief of Mission may seem paradoxical at first glance. But that's just because you haven't entered into the spirit of the game. All of the measures Ambassador Longspoon has taken — restrictions on private enterprise by Terrans, establishment of the Planetary Police, free goods for the indigent, subsidies for Voion commercial enterprise, and the rest — are designed to bring peace and plenty to the downtrodden locals whom you fellows have been exploiting."

"What do you mean, exploiting?" Big León's fist hit the table. "Why, a hundred years ago, when the first Terries hit Quopp, there was nothing here but wild Bugs living in grass huts and eating each other. We laid out the towns, built trails, started 'em in on a little cottage industry and inter-tribal trade. We brought in electronics men to be country G.P.'s, developed new lines of merchandise to make life more beautiful for the Quopp in the street and taught 'em the idea of civilization. Sure, we made a good profit — but they've gotten their money's worth!"

"Still, Leon, now that you've put Quopp on the star maps, competition has set in. Our friends the Groaci aren't going to let this world drift into the Terry camp without a struggle. They've set up a string of trading posts along the other coast of Continent One, and they're doing a brisk trade in miniature Tri-D's, artificial limbs and wheels, electronic Mah Jong sets —"

"Direct competition with us!" Jerry burst out. "The copycats!"

"Of course," Retief went on, "no self-respecting diplomat could let the challenge pass without making an effort to out-enlighten the opposition. Whatever the Groaci do, we have to do bigger."

"Why?" Seymour grunted.

"**W**hy does a golfer have to hit the golf ball?" Retief riposted. "Such is the challenge of diplomacy."

"But why this sudden compulsion to unite the planet under a single government? — and with the Voion in charge, of all people!" Jerry looked indignant.

"You know we can't even travel inland to look over the markets?" Big Leon said.

"You know why? The Voion. They're all over like a land-lubber's lunch — waving clubs and telling us where we can and can't go!"

"Longspoon's making a mistake, backing the Voion," Big Leon said. "There's not a bug on the planet doesn't hate their main windings. Slaves and dope-runners, con artists, highway robbers and second-story men — that's what they were, until

this idea of reforming 'em and putting badges on 'em came along."

"His Excellency envisions the day when a trained cadre of reformed Voion will lead the newly enlightened masses to a new era of planetary unity," Retief explained. "Or so he frequently says."

"Retief, how long you been here on Quopp?" Leon inquired.

"Only a few weeks, I'm afraid."

"You talk the dialects pretty good."

"I've spent a few hours on the encephalotapes."

"Uh-huh," Leon nodded. "Well, I was born here, Retief. Hell, I haven't been off the planet half a dozen times in my life. And I can tell you — these devils have got something up their sleeve!"

"I'm inclined to agree. Their police badges seem to have gone to their heads."

"It ain't just that," Seymour said. "There's something in the wind! We saw it, out in the jungle — and now here in town! It's getting ready to pop! Pushing Terries around — that's bad medicine, Mister!"

"And I'll tell you something else," the steel-toothed man said. "Those bugs are tapping CDT shipments at the port — in broad daylight!"

Retief frowned. "You're sure of that?"

"Been down to the port lately?" Big Leon inquired.

"Not in the past month."

"Come on," Leon rose. "Let's go take a look-see. There's a CDT shipment on the pad right now big enough to put half the Terries on Quopp out of business." As he stood,

Bibliography:
**The Natural History of
 RETIEF**

Retief's War is the nineteenth story in the galaxy-girdling exploits of science-fiction's most celebrated interstellar diplomat—and the first full-length novel. By request of a number of readers, here is the full list of Retief's previous adventures:

Magazine Title	Issue	Book Title
Aide Memoire	July, 1962	same *
Castle of Light, The	Oct., 1964	same **
City That Grew in the Sea, The	Mar., 1964	Wicker Wonderland **
Cultural Exchange	Sept., 1962	same *
Desert and the Stars, The	Nov., 1962	Protest Note **
Diplomate at Arms	Jan., 1960 ***	---
Frozen Planet, The	Sept., 1961	Courier **
Gambler's World	Nov., 1961	Palace Revolution *
Giant Killer	Sept., 1965	---
Governor of Glave, The	Nov., 1963	Native Intelligence **
Madman from Earth, The	Mar., 1962	Policy *
Mightiest Qorn,	July, 1963	Ultimatum **
Prince and the Pirate, The	Aug., 1964	same **
Retief, God-Speaker	Jan., 1965	The Brass God **
Retief of the Red-Tape Mountain	May, 1962	Sealed Orders *
Retief's War	(current)	---
Saline Solution	Mar., 1963	same **
Trick or Treaty	Aug., 1965	---
Yllian Way, The	Jan., 1962	Protocol *

* Included in *Envoy to New Worlds*, Ace Books, 1963.

** Included in *Galactic Diplomat*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965.

*** Only Retief story not first published in *If*; appeared in *Fantastic*.

Note: We do not have copies of the Retief book collections, nor of the magazine containing *Diplomat at Arms*. However any back issue of *If* from 1959-1964 inclusive may be obtained at 50c each, 6 for \$2.00, regardless of original cover price, postpaid, by writing: Back issue Department, *If*, 421 Hudson Street, New York, N. Y. 10014.

a buzzing three-inch yellow green flyer sailed by, settled to a puddle of spilled liquor on the floor. Big Leon raised a size thirteen shoe —

“Don’t do it,” Retief said. “He probably needs a drink as bad as we did.”

“That’s just a Phip,” Seymour said. “You talk like they was human.”

“You never can tell,” Retief said, skirting the small creature. “He just might be somebody’s Cousin George.”

Outside, the five Terrans hailed two massive peach-colored Wumblums, mounted to the creaking velvet-lined seats strapped to the heavy creatures’ backs, relaxed as their mounts trundled off on broad leather-shod wheels toward the spaceport, groaning up the steep slopes, puffing down the declines, shouting for way among the thronging Quoppina packing the route.

Clear of the main shopping streets, the Wumblums made better time, wheeling along briskly under the crisp morning sky. Overhead, the glaring crescent of Joop, Quopp’s sister world, swung toward its twice-daily eclipse of the distant sun, a blinding point of white light casting short mid-morning shadows across the intricately surfaced buildings that thrust up everywhere like giant, lumpy loaves of pastel-toned bread.

“You gents coming back?” Retief’s mount inquired in a voice like the E-string on a bass cello. It tilted an auditory receptor to pick up the reply over the noise of wheels on pavement.

“Not right away,” Retief said. “Better not wait for us.”

“I’ll stick around anyway. Voom-Voom’s the name. Ask for me when you’re ready to go. Not much action this morning. All these Zilk and Jackoo in town from the villages; they’d wear out their wheels rubbernecking before they’d hail a ride. And these Voion cops all over the place — they’re not helping business any.”

The Wumblum behind Retief’s swung out, came alongside. “Looks like we got company.” Big Leon called, pointing over his shoulder with a large, blunt thumb.

Retief glanced back. A pair of Voion were trailing fifty yards behind, black shells glistening, light winking from their recently applied Police insignia.

“There are two more flanking us on the right,” Retief said. “I’d guess we’re covered on the left, too. They don’t want us to be lonely.”

“Maybe you’d better cut out of here,” Leon suggested. “I guess they’re still mad. Me and the boys’ll handle this.”

“It’s a nice day for a drive,” Retief said. “I wouldn’t think of missing it.”

The Wumblum took a quick look back at Retief. “Some of those Voion giving you gents trouble?”

“They’re trying, I’ll concede that, Voom-Voom.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, boss. I’ll say a word to my side-kick Rhum-Rhum, and we’ll lead those grub-eaters down a couple of side streets to a cul-de-sac I know and work ’em over for you.”

"That's friendly of you, old timer, but we don't have time for any more horseplay today."

"All part of the service," Voom-Voom said.

The port came into view as the party emerged from the twisting avenue: a hundred-acre expanse of hilly ground, ringed by a sagging wire fence, paved and scabbed over with a maze of flimsy temporary structures, some now nearly a century old, among which the tall shapes of scattered vessels thrust up.

As Retief watched, a vast black shadow swept down the hillside beyond the ships. It rushed across the port blanking out the gleam of sun on chromalloy and concrete and corrugated aluminum, then enveloped them, plunging the street into abrupt, total darkness. Retief looked up; the great fire-edged disk of Joop loomed black against the midnight blue sky. Voom-Voom lowered his head, and the beam of dusty light from his luminescent organ cut a path through the gloom ahead.

"You know, you Terries have done us Quoppina a lot of good," he said, slowing now to pick his way with more care. "Like the focusing lenses for us Wumblums' headlights. A real boon. And the rubber wheel-shoes some of the fellows wear; a useful item. And the synthetic lubricants — and the surgical spares — you've kept a lot of fellows on the street earning a living at a time o' life when our dads would have been laid up for good. But those Voion cops, and this one world, one government idea: It's a

mistake. It's always been every tribe for itself, and a good system, too."

"Watch it, Retief," Big Leon called quietly. There was a soft swish of tires on clay pavement, the abrupt stab of yellowish light beams as fast-moving forms closed in on both sides.

"Halt!" a Voion accent came from the darkness. "Pull up here, you Wumblums, in the name of the law!"

"You small-time chiselers have got the gall to pull that routine on me?" Voom-Voom trumpeted, accelerating. "Stay out of my way, or I'll leave my tread-marks down your backs!"

"That's an order, you great bumbling lout!" One of the Voion, apparently carried away by his own recently acquired rank, swung too close. Voom-Voom shot out an arm like a ship-grapple, gathered the luckless creature in, tossed him aside to slam the pavement with a clang of metallo-organic body plates. A second Voion, veering aside, gave a shriek, disappeared under the massive wheels of Rhum-Rhum. The others sheered off, fell back, as the Wumblums sped off toward the lights now gleaming all across the port. Retief held onto the worn leather hand-straps as the solid wheels hammered over the pot-holed road.

"A good thing the CDT hasn't gone as far as handing out power guns to those jaspers," Seymour shouted as Rhum-Rhum came up on the starboard beam.

"Look there!" Jerry leaned forward beside Retief. "There are Voion swarming all over the port!"

"Don't worry, gents," Voom-Voom hooted. "Rhum-Rhum and me will stand by. That was the first time I've had my wheels on a Voion since the last time I caught one prying the lid off my fare-box. It felt good."

III

There was a flood-lit gate ahead, flanked by a pair of Voion who rolled forward officiously — and darted back as Voom-Voom barreled past them, slammed through the fence, hurtled on without slowing. They were in among the tall ships now, threading their way among stacked packing cases, dangling cargo nets, hurrying stevedores and Vorch cargo-carriers, the latter squat Quoppina with three thick functional wheels and broad, labor-scarred carapaces. Ahead Retief saw the familiar CDT code stenciled on the sides of stacked cases being unloaded by Voion stevedores from the hold of a battered tramp trader under a battery of polyarcs.

"You notice they're not shipping the stuff in Corps vessels," Big Leon pointed out as their mounts pulled up at a signal from Retief. "It's all handled pretty cagy; looks like there's angles to this that Longspoon doesn't want publicity on. It just happens I know that cargomark."

A pair of bustling Voion were at work on the cargo net, overseeing the placement of the crates. Others stood about, as though on guard — humbler specimens than the elite police, Retief noted; their dull black wing-cases lacked the high polish

and bright-work of their favored tribemates. One, wearing the armband of a Ramp Master, wheeled across to confront the visitors. He was an oldster, beginning to silver around the edges, his thickened wing cases showing the marks of repeated paring.

"What d'ye seek here, sirs?" he chirped in tribal Voion, in what was meant to be an authoritative tone, meanwhile working his anterior antennae in frantic Voion thieves' code.

"Shift . . . cases . . . conceal . . . special . . . consignment," Retief deciphered. He noted a sudden stir of activity among the Voion at the net. A pair of the patrolling stick-wielders rolled in to help. The center of attention appeared to be a stack of cases conspicuously tagged with large red cards reading 'For the Terran Ambassador'.

"We takee look-see," Seymour was saying in trade pidgin. "We lookee gift-gift Terry friend-friend send."

"Very good," the oldster shifted to the same tongue. "Looky see, plenty ski pants, snowshoe, smoked oyster, bagels, tennis racquet, paint-by-number kit. All stuff keep tiny Quoppina tot alive all winter."

"You hear that, Retief?" Big Leon growled. "Some of my hottest trade items, those are. You'd think Longspoon was deliberately trying to put us traders out of business." He pointed suddenly. "Hey, look there!" A Voion in tribal dress, with the feathery antennae of a Flying Jar-wheel strapped to his head, was maneuvering a pink Timblum — a smaller cousin of the mighty Wumblum into position. There was a

squat car hitched behind the mount.

"That's Smuk. He's a retired slaver; used to be one of my best customers. Now look at him, free-loading! No wonder I don't see him around the warehouse sales any more!"

Retief climbed down from his seat, strolled across to study the stacked crates. The Ramp Master trailed him, his wheels squeaking on the dry bearings of old age. Behind the facade of hurriedly placed boxes, Retief counted at least half a dozen of the red-marked cases identical with the others except for the prominent diplomatic address. The Voion twittered nervously at his heels.

"Nice Terry gentleman take look-see next side, see plenty nice box, you bet," he croaked.

"What's in those, Ramp Master?" Retief asked in tribal Voion, indicating the half-concealed boxes.

"Eee, the sir speaks good Tribal." The old Voion clacked his palps in a gesture indicating Respectful Congratulation. "Why, as to those cases there, they contain educational material, yes, sir, that's what they contain. Now, over here . . ."

Big Leon had come up beside Retief. "Feel like sticking your nose into trouble?" Retief asked softly.

Leon nodded. "Sure, why not?"

"Why don't you go stir up a little activity over there, say in about ten minutes?"

"Huh? Oh, I gotcha." Leon gave Retief a quizzical look, went over and spoke to Seymour. Beside Retief, the old Voion signalled with his

antennae. A pair of cargo-handlers wheeled casually over to hover near the Terrans, trailing as they sauntered off, looking over the scene of bustling activity.

Retief moved on along the deep-shadowed lane between stacked cargo, paused before a heap of crates, pointed to the manila envelopes stapled to their sides.

"Mind if I look?" he inquired.

"As the sir desires," the oldster said quickly. Retief pulled a folded copy of a Bill of Lading from the pocket, opened it out. It indicated that the crate contained bound volumes of the *Pest Control Journal*, consigned to the Information Service Library in care of the Terran Consulate at Groon—a small city a hundred miles up-river in Deep Jungle. He went on, casually checking packing lists, rounded the end of the line of stacked crates, came up the back side. Directly behind the red-tagged cases, he found a pile of boxes contained blank forms destined for the Terran Chancery. At that moment, an outcry came from beyond the looming bulk of the ship. Retief turned to his guide, who was now jittering nervously and looking in the direction from which the disturbance emanated.

"By the way, I forgot to mention it, but one of my companions—the large one—is something of a practical joker. He may have taken it into his head to start a fire or plant a couple of small choke-bombs. Maybe you'd better wheel over and check on him."

"The sir jests?" The Ramp Master looked around for a courier, saw

the last of his crew curving sharply out of sight on one wheel headed for the scene of the growing uproar. "If the sir will excuse . . ."

He shot off at surprising speed.

At once Retief turned to the nearest of the red-tagged crates, used a handy pry-bar to lever a slot free. A layer of oil-impregnated plastic barred his view of the contents of the box. He took out a compact pocket knife, snapped the blade out, slit the liner, reached in, felt the lumpy coolness of a plastic-coated object. He managed a two-fingered grip, drew it out. It was a bulky, heavy package, roughly triangular, larger than Retief's hand, its outlines obscured by the protective cocoon. He slit it, peeled it back.

The polished butt of a Mark XXX power gun nestled in his hand.

Retief glanced around; none of the port personnel were in view. He stripped away the oily covering from the gun, dropped the weapon in his pocket, then tucked the empty plastic back inside, folded the liner over it, pressed the slat back in position.

The noises from Big Leon's direction were gaining in timber and volume, accompanied by splintering sounds. Voom-Voom glanced at Retief. "Say, boss, that racket—"

"Just boyish high spirits; it won't last much longer," Retief said. "Meanwhile, see that nobody disturbs me for the next five minutes." Voom-Voom waved one arm, clicked his luminescent organ on and rolled forward to cover the approach. Retief set to work moving the barricade

of boxes aside and removing red tags from the Special Consignment. The riot continued, still growing in volume. With the tags free, Retief moved back to the crates marked for Groon, quickly removed the tags, used the butt of his pocket knife to hammer labels removed from the consignment of forms in place in their stead, then hurried on to the crated forms, placed the red tags on the boxes.

"Better hurry it up, boss," Voom-Voom hooted softly. "I think the excitement's dying down over there."

He broke off to rumble suddenly into action. Retief heard the shrill of Voion voices. He glanced up at the black disc of Joop; a glowing bulge was showing at one edge now; the eclipse would be over in another half-minute. He hurried back to the Special Consignment, attached the cards from the Library shipment intended for Groon. Behind him, voices shrilled; Voom-Voom was still blocking the lane, loudly demanding why he should move merely to let a pack of Voion riff-raff through. Retief stepped quickly so Rhum-Rhum.

"If you backed up carelessly, you might just ram that pile of boxes," he said. "They *might* get all mixed up together . . ."

"They might, at that," the Wumblum agreed. "Take those scalpers half their siesta hour to unscramble 'em." He straightened his wheels, glanced back, and moved suddenly, slamming into the neatly stacked crates. They skidded, toppled with a crash. Voom-Voom, watching the

by-play with one pair of eyes, whirled about in mock alarm, dumped another row. Excited Voion shot past him, shrilling, just as the glare of returned sunlight sprang across the hills, scythed down the slope and on across the crowded tarmac to bathe the scene of chaos in light.

Big Leon appeared, looming over the scurrying cargo tenders. He looked around, frowning.

"What the Sam Hill happened here?" he demanded loudly.

"Big brute of dumb Wumblum makee big mess-mess," the old Voion cargomaster shrieked. "Great clumsy louts gotee no damn pidgin here!"

"Don't spin your wheels, grandpa," Voom-Voom rumbled carelessly. He leaned over to put his armored cranium near Retief's. "How'd I do, chief?"

"Very effective," Retief said approvingly. He walked over to the sidelines where a dull-eyed Vorch cargo-carrier was squatting, watching the activity.

"There are half a dozen crates marked for the Terry Library at Groon," he said in trade dialect to the heavyweight. "I wonder if you know of an unused shed nearby where they might accidentally be tucked away out of sight for a few days." He dropped a strip of embossed plastic trade wampum in the Vorch's nearest hand, which immediately twitched it out of sight.

"What's this — a bribe?" The carrier swiveled his wide head to bring his silicon-lensed rear eyes to bear.

"Just a gratuity for services rendered," Retief reassured him.

"That's okay then. Just so you don't offer me no graft." The Vorch pointed with a short, thick arm. "The little bonded warehouse over there — the one with the red carving on the front. I'll stack the stuff in there."

Retief nodded and rejoined the party.

"Hey, what gives, Retief?" Seymour demanded. "Leon says —"

"Maybe you better not ask too many questions," the big man put in. "I think we made our point. Let's settle for that and head back for Rum Jungle. Something's ready to pop, and I want to be minding the store when it happens."

"Maybe you better come with us, Retief," Steel-tooth said. "The post is a pretty fair fort if push comes to shove."

"Don't talk foolish, Lester." Leon said. "Retief's got a job to do here."

"Yeah," Steel-tooth said, "but when the job blows up in your face, remember Rum Jungle. We'll need every man — and then it won't be enough."

IV

At the Terran Chancery in the Path of Many Sporting Agents, Retief stepped down from his perch and handed a strip of credit to his mount.

"Call on me any time, boss," the Wumblum said. "I kind of like your style." He nodded toward the irregularly surfaced Embassy complex, a cluster of standard Quopp-style buildings perched on the uneven ground, painted ochre, Indian red

and dusty aquamarine, and perforated by irregularly shaped windows at random intervals. "First time I ever hauled a Terry," the Wumblum went on in a confidential tone. "Between you and me, I heard you folks were a tight crowd with a credit and not much in the sporting line, if you know what I mean."

"A base canard, Voom-Voom. A diplomat considers a day wasted if he isn't playing at least three games at once."

As Retief stepped through the main entry, incongruously aluminum-framed and glass-doored, First Secretary Magnan hurried up, a thin, harassed figure in the limp yellow seersucker shorts and dickey of subtropical undress kit.

"Retief," he called. "Wherever have you been? The Ambassador is furious. And Colonel Underknuckle's been calling for you for an hour! I've been frantic!"

"Why? Can't they be furious without me?"

"The sight of you seems to stimulate the condition, I grant," Magnan said witheringly. "Come along now. I've told the Colonel you were probably out gathering material for the quarterly Sewage Report. I trust you'll say nothing to dispel that impression."

"I've been cementing relations with the Terran business community," Retief explained as he accompanied the senior diplomat along the wide, tiled office-lined corridor which had been installed to replace the warren of tiny, twisting passages and cubicles originally filling the interior of the structure.



"Hmmm. I'm not sure that was wise, in view of the present down-playing of Terran private enterprise here on Quopp. You know how Prime Minister Ikk frowns on that sort of thing."

"Oh, Prime Minister, eh? Who gave him that title?"

"Why, he advised the Ambassador that it was conferred early this morning by unanimous vote of the Council of Drones." Retief followed Magnan into the lift; the doors closed with a soft *whoosh!* of compressed air.

"Let's see," Retief mused. "That's the dummy legislature he set up to satisfy the Ambassador's passion for democracy, isn't it? It was fortunate he had seventy-three senile uncles handy to appoint; saved the bother of breaking in strangers."

"Yours is a distorted view of the evolution of representational government here on Quopp," Magnan said reprovingly. "Closer attention to your daily *Bulletin from the Bird's Nest* would go far toward homogenizing your thinking on the subject."

"I thought that was something they did to milk."

"The term refers to voluntary alignment of viewpoint toward a group-oriented polarity; a sort of linkage of moral horsepower for maximal thrust toward the objective."

"I'm not sure pasteurized thinking is rich enough in intellectual vitamins to satisfy my growing curiosity about just what Ikk is up to."

"It should be apparent even to you, Retief," Magnan said sharply, "that the Corps can hardly accredit a full Mission to a non-existent planetary government. Ergo, such a ruling body must be formed. And who better qualified than the Voion to undertake the task?"

"You might have something there. Their past history has given them a firm grounding in the basics of politics; but with the other tribes outnumbering them a hundred to one, it's a little hard to see how they're planning to impose planetary enlightenment on a race that's as fond of anarchy as the Quoppina."

"That, my dear Retief, is Ambassador Longspoon's problem, not ours. It was his idea to groom the Voion for leadership; our task is merely to implement his policies."

"And if in the process we saddle the other ninety-nine per cent of the population with a dictatorship, that's a mere detail."

"Ah, I can see you're beginning to get the picture." The elevator halted and Magnan led the way out, paused at the heavy door barring the public from the Chancery wing. "I hope you'll restrain your unfortunate tendency to essay japes at the expense of decorum, Retief. Colonel Underknuckle is in no mood for facetiae." He pushed through, nodded mechanically at the small, gray Voion female buffing her chelae at a small desk of polished blue wood at one side of the red-carpeted corridor. She clacked her palps indifferently, blew a large bubble of green spearmint and popped it with lively report.

"Impertinence!" Magnan sniffed under his breath. "A few months ago the baggage was an apprentice slop-drudge in a local inn of most unsavory repute. Now, after we've trained her and given her that expensive set of chrome inlays, a derisive pop of the gum is considered adequate greeting for her benefactors."

"That's the trouble with uplifting the masses. They get to believing it themselves."

Magnan stopped at an austere slab door marked *Military Attache*, fitted an expression on his narrow features appropriate for greeting a Grade Seven employee, pushed through into deep carpeted silence.

"Ah, there, Hernia. I believe Colonel Underknuckle wished to see Mr. Retief."

The fat woman behind the desk patted a coil of mummified hair with a hand like a glove full of lard, showed Magnan a simper suitable for a First Secretary and thumbed a button on a console before her. A chime sounded beyond the half-open door.

"Yes, confound it! What is it this time!" a voice like splitting canvas snarled from the desk speaker. "What in the name of perdition's become of Magnan? If he's not here in five minutes, send along that memo to the Ambassador I keep handy —"

"It is I," Magnan said stiffly.

"Don't use grammar on me, Magnan!" the Attache shouted. "Come in here at once! There's been an-

other communication from the benighted vessel. The saucy minx at the controls insists she's bringing her in, clearance or no clearance. And where the devil's that fellow, Retief?"

"I have him right here, Colonel." As his callers entered the room, Underknuckle, a lean, high-shouldered man with bushy white hair, hollow, purplish cheeks and a lumpy, clay-colored nose, his immaculately tailored mid-afternoon semi-formal uniform awry, spun in his hip-umatic contour chair, causing the power-swivel mechanism to whine in protest. He glared at Retief.

"So there you are at last! What's the meaning of this, sir? Is it possible that you're unaware of the new restrictions on tourism here on Quopp?" The colonel lowered his voice. "Schemes are all about us, gentlemen! We'll have to look sharp to our fences to keep our powder dry!"

"But just one little shipload of ladies — and in difficulty at that —" Magnan began.

"Orders are orders!" Underknuckle hit the desk with his fist, winced, slung his fingers as though drying them.

"Let me assure you, when Ambassador Longspoon imposed entry quotas on sightseers, there was an excellent reason for it!" He barked through a grimace of pain.

"Gracious, yes, Colonel," Magnan chirped. "We all know Prime Minister Ikk doesn't like Terries."

"Ikk's likes and dislikes have nothing to do with it. It was the Ambassador's decision!"

"Of course, Colonel. What I meant was, *you* don't like Terries."

"Don't like Terrans? Why I'm a Terran myself, you idiot!"

"I didn't mean to give the wrong impression, I'm sure, Fred," Magnan said breathlessly. "Personally, I *love* Terries —"

"Not these Terries!" Underknuckle snatched up a paper and waved it. "A boatload of females! Giddy, irresponsible women! Idlers — or worse! Parasites! And no visas, mind you! And the ring-leader, Mr. Retief —" the colonel thrust a mobile lower lip at him — "is demanding to speak to you, sir! By name!"

"Retief!" Magnan turned on him. "What can you be thinking of, importing luxury goods!"

"It's clear enough what he's thinking of," Underknuckle snapped. "And I hardly need point out that such thoughts are not in consonance with tight military security!"

Magnan assumed a troubled-but-determined expression. "Did the young lady give a name?"

"Harrumph! Indeed she did. 'Tell him it's Fifi,' she said — as though the Military Attache were a common messenger-boy!"

"Heavens — such cheek!" Magnan sniffed.

"The name itself conjures up images of rhinestone-clad doxies," Underknuckle snorted. "I confess it's difficult to understand how a diplomat has occasion to make the acquaintance of persons of such stripe!"

"Oh, I'm sure Mr. Retief can fix you up, Fred," Magnan volun-

teered. "He seemed to have a knack."

"I do not wish to be fixed up!" Underknuckle roared. "I wish to make it clear to these junketing trollops that they will not be permitted to make planetfall here! Now, if you, Mr. Retief, will be so kind as to report to the Message Center and so inform your, ah *petite amie* —"

"I don't have an *amie* at the moment, Colonel, *petite* or otherwise," Retief said. "And, as it happens, I don't know any young ladies named Fifi. Still, it's never too late to rectify the omission. I'll be happy to talk to her."

"I'm gratified to hear it," Underknuckle said coldly. "And if that vessel lands on this planet, young man, I'll hold you solely responsible!"

V

Back in the corridor, Magnan trotted at Retief's side, offering advice. "Now, just tell this young person, kindly but firmly, that your time is fully occupied by your duties and that if she'll just flit along to Adobe, say — there's a fascinating museum there with a lovely display of mummified giant wheel-spiders."

"I won't presume to plan any itineraries," Retief interrupted gently. "I think it might be better to find out what the girls are up to first."

"Yes, it does seem odd they'd plan a vacation on Quopp. After all, there's nothing here but jungle, with a few thousand tribal villages and three or four dozen market towns."

They turned in at the Message

Center, showed badges; electro-locks clicked and the inner door slid back, revealing a bright-lit room crammed with lock-files and coding machines.

"Oh, boy, am I glad to see you, Mr. Retief," a freckled youth with thick contact lenses and a struggling mustache blurted, coming forward. "That babe aboard the yacht's a dish, all right, but she's got a way of flashing her eyes at a fellow when she doesn't get her way —"

"If you don't mind, Willis, Mr. Retief and I are in something of a hurry," Magnan cut him off. "Which screen are they on?"

"The yacht's over the horizon at the moment," the boy said. "She'll make re-entry on the next pass; a couple more minutes, I guess."

"What's a yacht doing out here, Willy?" Retief asked. "Quopp's a long way off the regular tourist runs."

"Beats me, Mr. Retief. She's a nice job. Ten thousand tons, loaded with all the latest comm gear. Too bad all we have is this obsolete line-of-sight stuff." He gestured at the banked equipment panels. "Tough about those girls losing their celestial tracking circuit, too. Even if they could get in here, they'd be stuck for months waiting for a replacement. That Mark XXXIV stuff is hard to come by."

"Emergency let-down, eh? What kind of help are we giving them?"

The youth shrugged. "None. Longspoon's orders. Says they've got no business coming in on Quopp."

"Did you tell him about the tracker?"

"He said they could go on to

the next system on manual tracking."

"Two months of staring into a tracker could get tiring," Retief said. "And a good chance of fatigue error and no planetfall at the end of it. Let's get 'em down."

"Yeah, but the Ambassador's orders —"

"I'll take the responsibility of countermanding them. Get the yacht on the SDR and start feeding her data as soon as she makes contact."

"Look here, Retief," Magnan held up an admonitory hand. "I can't stand idly by while you exceed your authority! I confess it seems a trifle surprising the Ambassador hasn't authorized aid to a distressed Terran vessel, but —"

"We don't need authorization in a Deep Space emergency. Check Title Nine, Article Twelve, Section three-B of the Uniform Code."

"Hey, that's right," Willis blinked. "The Code overrides any Planetary Authority, it says so right in—"

"See here, Retief." Magnan moved to Retief's side, speaking low. "Quoting technicalities is all very well, but afterward one still has the problem of an overridden Ambassador to deal with. Hardly a shrewd move, career-wise."

"We'll get the ladies down first, and carry out career salvage afterwards," Retief said soothingly. "Maybe it would be better if you went down to spot-check the commissary while I attend to this."

Magnan frowned, settled his dickie in place. "Never mind," he said shortly. "I'll stand by."

A blare of static burst from the center screen on the console across the room, followed by rapidly flickering bars of light. Then the image steadied into focus. A girl's face appeared, framed in red-blond hair, a headset clamped in place. Other feminine faces were visible behind her, all young, all worried.

"Hello, Quopp Control," she said calmly. "It looks as though the rock that hulled us did more than take out the tracker. I have no horizontal gyros, and damned little control in my left corrector banks. I'm going to have to do this by the seat-of-the-pants method. I'd appreciate it if you'd loosen up and feed me some trajectory data."

Retief flipped the SEND key.

"Quopp Control here, young lady. Listen closely; there won't be time for a repeat. You have two choices on impact areas; one is the commercial port here at Ixix. If you've got a fix on me, you know the general location. I'm throwing the R and D fixer beam on the line now; lock onto it if you can."

The girl frowned. "Sorry, Quopp Control. No response from my R and D. I have a fix on your transmission, though, and—"

"Your other possibility is an unimproved patch of rocky desert about fifty miles north-north-west. Try to align on my signal here. If you miss, you'll have the other as a backup."

"Roger, Quopp Tower. I've got some speed to kill if I want to make you on this pass."

"This pass is it," Retief snapped out. "I'm clocking you on a descend-

ing spiral with an intersect this orbit. Damp that velocity fast!"

The image on the screen jittered, jumped; Retief waited while the girl worked the controls, watching the glowing red blip moving rapidly across the R and D screen, dropping steadily closer to the line representing the horizon.

"More grief," the girl said briskly. "I've got about half power on the forward main tubes. I'm afraid I'm going to have to give your beacon a miss and try for the desert."

"Throw everything you've got to your retros, let 'em blast and keep blasting! You're going to overshoot by a hundred miles on your present course, and there's nothing out there but nineteen thousand miles of unexplored jungle!"

There was a long moment of tense silence as the girl's hands moved out of sight. Then she shook her head, gave a quick, flashing smile. "That's it, Quopp Control. A fizzle. Did you say nineteen thousand miles?"

"As the Phip flies. How many are there aboard?"

"Ten of us."

"I've got a tracker on you; try to nurse her in as easy as you can. Got any flares aboard?"

"If not, there are a few cases of hundred and sixty proof Imperial Lily Gin; I'm sure the intended recipient won't mind if I light them off." Already her voice was growing fuzzy as the hurtling ship neared the horizon.

"Hold her steady on your present course. Looks like you'll intersect

ground zero about eighty miles out."

"I'm not reading you, Quopp. I hope you get here before all the gin's —"

Her voice broke off. Then it came again, faint and far away: "Quopp . . . er, a . . . ing in . . . make it . . ." The voice was gone in a rising hiss of random noise.

"Good Lord, I hope the poor girls land safely," Magnan gasped. He dabbed at his forehead with a large floral-patterned tissue. "Imagine being down in that horrible wilderness, swarming with unpacified Quopp-swain!"

"I'll get an Embassy heli on the way to make the pick-up," Retief said; he glanced at the wall clock. "No time to waste if we're going to collect them by dark."

"Retief — are you *sure* you don't know this Fifi person?" Magnan queried as they turned to the door.

"Regrettably, no. But I hope to correct the omission soon."

The interoffice communicator screen burped; an angular female face with stiff-looking hair and a porridgy complexion blinked into focus.

"There you are," she snapped at Retief. "The Ambassador wants to see you in his office — right away!"

"Tsk," Magnan said. "I warned you about stretching those coffee breaks."

"Hi, Fester," Retief greeted the woman. "Is it business, or should I bring my tennis racquet?"

"You can save the wisecracks," she sniffed. "There are two Planetary Police officers with him."

"Goodness, I'd be glad to give

His Excellency a character reference," Magnan burred. "What did they catch — that is, what's the charge?"

"It's not Ambassador Longspoon who's in trouble," Fester said coldly. "It's Mr. Retief they want to see."

VI

Ambassador Longspoon was a small man with bright, close-set eyes in a parchment-yellow face, a mouth which would have been inconspicuous on a carp, and a shiny skull over which a few strands of damp-looking hair were combed for maximum coverage. He sat behind a nine-foot Ambassadorial desk of polished platinum, flanked by two Voion, one ornately crested and jeweled, whose oculars followed Retief unwaveringly as he entered the room.

"Commissioner Ziz, Mr. Retief," Longspoon said in a voice like a dry bearing. There was silence as he looked expectantly from one of the Voion to the other.

"Well, how about it, Xif," the Commissioner buzzed in harsh Tribal Voion to his companion. "Is this the one?"

"That's him, chief," the other cop confirmed. "He was the ring-leader."

"Here, Commissioner, I must ask you to speak Terran!" Longspoon rasped.

"Just advising my associate that he mustn't harbor grudges for the brutal treatment he received," Ziz said smoothly. "I assured him your Excellency will make full amends."

"Amends. Yes." Longspoon favored Retief with a look like a jab from an old maid's umbrella. "It appears there's been some sort of free-for-all in an unsavory local drinking-spot." He put his bony fingers on the desk-top and pinched them together. "I trust you have some explanation?"

"Explanation of what, Mr. Ambassador?" Retief inquired pleasantly.

"Of just what would possess an Embassy Officer to attack members of the Planetary Police in the performance of their duties!" Purplish color was creeping up from under Longspoon's stiff mid-morning informal collar.

Retief shook his head sympathetically. "No, I certainly couldn't explain a thing like that."

Longspoon's jaw dropped. "Surely you have *some*, ah, justification to offer?" He shot a quick side-glance at the Voion.

"It would be pretty hard to justify attacking a policeman," Retief offered. "In the performance of his duties at that."

"Look here!" Longspoon leaned toward Retief. "You're supposed to be a diplomat!" he hissed from the corner of his mouth. "You might at least try lying a little!"

Retief nodded agreeably. "What about?"

"Confound it, sir!" Longspoon waved a hand. "When a Police Commissioner rolls into my office and charges one of my staff with aggravated breach of the peace, you can hardly expect me to simply ignore the situation!"

"Certainly not," Retief said firmly, "Still, I think if you explain to him that invading the Terrestrial Embassy to make unsupported charges is impolite, and warn him never to try it again, it won't be necessary to demand his resignation."

"His resignation!" Longspoon's mouth was open again. "Hmmm." He swivelled to face the Commissioner. "Perhaps I should point out that invading the Terrestrial Embassy to make un—"

"One moment!" Ziz cut in harshly. "The question here is one of appropriate punishment to lawless foreigners who engage in the murder of harmless, grub-loving Voion! I demand that the culprit be turned over to me for a fair Trial by Internal Omens!"

"As I recall, the method requires a surgical operation to study the evidence," Longspoon mused. "What happens if the victim — *er*, I mean patient — is innocent?"

"Then we weld him back up and give him a touching funeral ceremony."

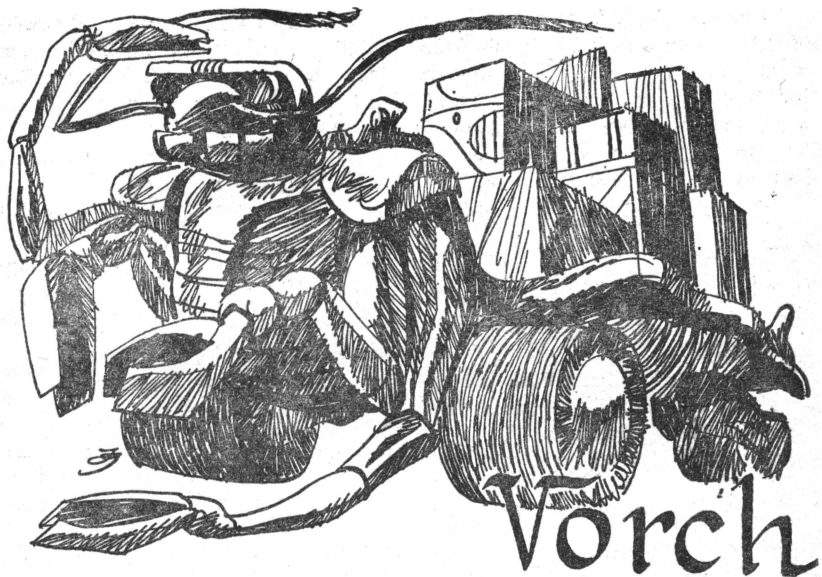
"No, Ziz," Longspoon wagged a finger playfully. "If we simply turned our diplomats over to anyone who wanted them, we'd be stripped of personnel in no time."

"Just the one," Ziz suggested delicately.

"I'd like to oblige, my dear Commissioner, but the precedent would be most unfortunate."

The desk screen chimed.

"Yes, Fester?" Longspoon eyed it impatiently. "I told you I wasn't to be disturbed."



"It's His Omnivoracity," Fester squeaked excitedly. "He presents his second best compliments and insists on speaking to you at once, Mr. Ambassador!"

Longspoon twitched a bleak smile at the Police Commissioner. "Well, my good friend Ikk seems to be a bit outside himself today. Just tell him I'll ring him up later, Fester."

"He says it's about an educational shipment," the female cut in. "Heavens, what language!"

"Ah, yes, educational material," Longspoon said. "Well, I'm always most concerned about educational affairs; perhaps I'd best just see what he has in mind." He turned the volume down low, listened as a tiny voice chirped angrily.

"Are you sure?" he muttered. "Six cases?"

There was more shrill talk from the communicator.

"Nonsense!" Longspoon snapped. "What possible motive —"

Ikk buzzed again. Longspoon glanced at Retief with a startled expression. "No," he said. "Quite out of the question. See here, I'll call you back. I have, er, callers at the moment." He rang off. The Police Commissioner relaxed the auditory members which had been straining forward during the exchange.

"You still refuse to remand this one to my custody?" He pointed at Retief.

"Have you all gone mad?" Longspoon barked. "I'll deal with Mr. Retief in my own way!"

"In that case —" Ziz turned to his retainer. "Put phase two into operation," he snapped in Tribal.

ust sending the lad along to water
ne jelly flowers down at headquar-
ters," he added soothingly as Long-
spoon drew breath to protest. Xif
wheeled across to the door and left
silently. Ziz rolled to the lopsidedly
hexagonal window, glanced out into
the street.

"A pity your Excellency didn't see
fit to assist the police in the mainte-
nance of law and order," he said,
turning to Longspoon. "However, I
shall take the disappointment philo-
sophically."

He broke off, waving both poster-
ior antennae. "Hark!" he said. "Do
I scent a suspicious odor?"

Longspoon cleared his throat hur-
riedly. "My throat balm," he said.
"My physician insists . . ." He sniffed
again. "Smoke!"

He jumped to his feet. At that
moment, a shrill bell jangled into
strident life somewhere beyond the
door.

"**F**lee for your lives!" Ziz keen-
ed. He shot to the door,
flung it wide. A billow of black
smoke bulged into the room.

Longspoon dithered for a mo-
ment, then grabbed up a code book
and the Classified Despatch reel,
tossed them into a desk-side safe,
slammed it shut just as a pair of
Voion charged into the room, haul-
ing a heavy fire hose with a mas-
sive brass nozzle from which a weak
stream of muddy water dribbled into
the deep-pile carpeting. Ziz barked
a command and pointed at Retief.
The firemen dropped the hose —
and were bowled aside as Ambassa-
dor Longspoon hurtled between

them, his basketball-size paunch
jouncing under his overlapping vests.
Ziz spun, reached for Retief with a
pair of horny grasping members:
the Terran leaned aside, caught one
of the Voion's arms and jerked. Ziz
went over with a crash.

Retief whirled to the window from
which the Commissioner had glanced
a moment before, saw a crowd
of crested and ornamented Voion
police pressing toward the Embassy.

"Fast action," he murmured. He
stepped past the overturned firemen
into the corridor; wide-eyed staff
members were appearing from doors,
batting at smoke-clouds. Shouts and
squeals sounded. Retief pushed
through toward an open door from
which dense yellowish clouds were
pouring, layering out at chest height.
He reached the far wall of the room,
groped for and found an overturned
typist's chair, slammed it at the dim
glow of a small triangular window.

The colored glass fell outward with
a musical twinkle. At once the
smoke—boiling from an overturned
waste-basket, Retief saw — was
swept toward the opening by a strong
draft. He picked up the smoking
waste-basket and contents, stepped
into the lavatory and doused it with
water. It died with a prolonged hiss.
Retief lifted a small, soot-blackened
plastic cannister from the basket. A
small wisp of smoke was still coil-
ing from it. Incised on its base were
what appeared to be Groaci hiero-
glyphs.

Back in the hall, First Secretary
Magnan appeared from a smoke
cloud, coughing, eyes blurred.

"Retief! The service door's jammed with people! We're trapped!"

"Let's try another route." Retief started toward the front of the building, Magnan trailing.

"But what about the others!"

"I predict the fire scare will give them excellent appetites for dinner."

"Scare?"

"It seems to be just smoke bombs."

"You mean — Retief! You didn't!"

"No, but somebody did." They reached the wide hall before the main Embassy entrance door, packed now with excited diplomats, semi-hysterical stenographers milling in the smoke and swarms of Voion firemen, wheeling authoritatively through the press, shrilling the alarm. More Voion were struggling in the door to breast the tide of escapee Terrans.

"All personnel must evacuate the premises at once," a cop with a bright red inlay across his ventral plates keened. "Collapse is imminent! The danger is frightful! Remember, you are all highly combustible!"

"I don't know what the game is, but we'd better have a fast look around." Retief headed for a side corridor. A stout diplomat with four boneless chins flapped a hand at him.

"I say, young man! All these locals invading the Terrestrial Embassy — it's irregular! Now, I want you to speak to Chief Sskt, and point out —"

"Sorry, Counsellor Eggwalk; rush job." Retief pushed past, forced his way through a shouting knot of entangled police and Terrans, rounded a curve in the corridor. A small door

marked *Maintenance Personnel Only* caught his eye. It stood ajar. The lock, Retief noted, was broken.

"Mr. Magnan. If you see any volunteer firemen headed this way, give me a fast yell."

"Retief! What are you —"

Magnan's voice cut off as Retief slid through the door, went down a narrow ramp into the cool of a low-ceilinged cellar. There was a scurry of sound ahead; he ducked under insulated air ducts, saw a flicker of motion down a shadowy passage, heard the scrape of wheels scuffling on uneven pavement.

"Come on out," he called. "Nothing back there but a couple of sump pumps and some bilge water."

The sounds had ceased now. Retief took a step — and a three-foot yellow-green Quoppina of the Dink tribe shot out of the darkness ducked under his arm, veered around the looming bulk of the furnace, disappeared into the dark mouth of a narrow crawlway. Retief paused, listening. There was a soft buzzing from far back in the recess where the Dink had hidden. He ducked his head, moved toward the source of the sound. Above, the thudding of feet and the shouts of Terran and Voion were faint, remote. Somewhere, water dripped.

Retief followed the sound, traced it to a dark crevice behind the metal-clad housing of an air-processing unit. He reached in, brought out a foot-long ovoid, plastic-surfaced. It hummed busily. He could feel the tiny vibration against his hands. He spun, headed for the ramp.

Back in the hall, Magnan was nowhere in sight. Ten feet away, a Voion cop stood on relaxed, outward-slanting wheels, talking into a small field microphone. He broke off when he saw Retief, jerked two arms in a commanding gesture.

"Out! Fire has reached boilers!" he rasped in badly accented trade dialect.

Retief balanced the humming object on one outstretched hand. "You know what this is?" he inquired casually.

"No time for ball games," the Voion shrilled. "Fool Terry—"

He stopped, snapped his anterior eyes forward, made a whistling noise between his palps, then spun, dug off with a squeak of new Terry-issue neoprene. Retief turned toward a side exit. Two Voion appeared ahead, skidded to a halt at sight of him.

"That's him!" one shrilled. "Get him, boys!" More Voion shot into view, closing in. "Don't move, stilter!" the cop commanded. "What's that you're holding?"

"This?" Retief juggled the ovoid. "Oh, this is just an old Plooch egg. I was just cleaning out my collection, and —"

"You lie, unwheeled crippling!" The cops crowded in, reaching. "I'll wager a liter of Hell-rose it's part of the loot!" one keened. "It'll mean promotions all around when we bring *this* in!"

"Give me that, you!" eager Voion manipulative members grabbed for the buzzing object. "We'll take it out the back way!"

"Sure, you have it, fellows," Retief

offered genially. "Just hurry back to your boss with it."

"Bribes will do you no good, Ter-ran," a cop shrilled as the find was passed from one gleeful fireman to another. "His Omnivoracity wants to see you—in person." He jabbed with his club at Retief, who caught the heavy weapon, jerked it from its owner's grip, slammed it across his wrist with a metallic clang. More clubs flashed; Retief fended off blows, then charged, slamming Voion in all directions.

A club whistled past his ear; a harsh voice shrilled "Stop him!" Ahead, a dim blue light glowed over a side door.

Retief skidded to a halt, tried it: locked. He stepped back, kicked at the lock. The door burst wide.

Retief plunged through into a narrow street—and stopped dead, facing a solid rank of Voion who ringed him in with leveled spears with flaring barbed heads.

"Welcome to our midst," a police lieutenant with an enamelled badge hissed. "You will now accompany us without resistance, or you will die, unseen by your fellows."

"A h-ah," Retief chided. "Ikk will be annoyed if you do anything rash."

"An excellent point," the cop agreed. "I suppose after all we shall have to satisfy ourselves with merely poking holes in you here and there. The effect will be the same."

"Your logic is inescapable," Retief conceded. "I'll be delighted to call on His Omnivoracity."

There was a sharp tremor under-

foot, followed instantly by a dull *boom!* A shower of plaster dust fell from the open door at Retief's back. Glass tinkled from nearby windows. Shrill Voion sounds broke out, questioning. Retief turned, surveyed the wall of the Embassy tower. A large crack had appeared some yards to the right of the door.

"I guess it wasn't a Plooch egg after all," he said judiciously.

The spearheads had jumped a foot closer at the explosion. "Watch him!" the lieutenant barked.

"Steady boys," Retief cautioned. "Don't louse up an important pinch with any hasty moves."

"Button your mandibles," the cop rasped. "You'll have your chance to work them soon enough!" He motioned and an avenue opened through the warriors. Retief moved off, spear-points at his back.

VII

Prime Minister Ikk was a larger than average Voion with a sixteen-coat lacquer job, jeweled palps, and an elaborately crested headpiece featuring metallic turquoise curls and white Rhoon plumes.

He lounged at ease in his office, a wide, garishly decorated room the floor of which, Retief noted, was scattered with blank CDT forms. The Voion's main wheels were braced in padded, satin-lined frames. A peculiarly vile-smelling dope-stick of Groaci manufacture was clamped in one manipulative member. He waved the latter at the guards standing by, dribbling ashes carelessly on the rug.

"Leave us," he snapped in Tribal.

"And no spying, either!" The cops filed out silently. Ikk waited until the door closed, then swiveled to stare at Retief.

"So you are the person." He canted both sets of antennae forward alertly. "It seems we had a busy morning, eh?" His voice had an edge like torn metal.

"Rather dull, actually," Retief said easily. "Sightseeing, you know."

"And what sort of sights did you see?"

"Some rather interesting examples of Navajo beadwork and a nice display of hand-painted Groaci back-scratchers. Then there was —"

"Save your flippancy, Terran!" Ikk snapped. "Your activities are known! It remains merely to fill in certain, ah, details!"

"Perhaps you'd care to be a little more specific," Retief suggested. "After all, nobody's listening."

"You were seen at the port," Ikk grated. "You created a disturbance, after which certain items were found to be missing."

"Oh? What items?"

"Six large cases, newly arrived aboard a chartered freight vessel." Ikk snapped. "They contained educational material destined to play an important role in my program for the uplift of the downtrodden Quoppina masses."

"I see. You think I may have picked them up and strolled off without noticing."

"An end to your insolence!" Ikk snarled. "What have you done with the purloined consignment?"

Retief shook his head. "I haven't seen your schoolbooks."

"Bah! enough of this verbal pus-
sy-footing! You know what the
cases contain as well as I—"

"I believe you mentioned educa-
tional material—"

"What could be more educational
than guns?" Ikk screeched. "The
truth, now!"

"The truth is, you're making a
blunder, Ikk. Your fellow
Quoppina aren't as ready for com-
pulsory education as you—"

"If they've grown wise at my ex-
pense—through *your meddling*,"
Ikk cut in, "I promise you an en-
lightening experience under the im-
plements of a staff of experienced
speech tutors!"

"I'm sure your training aids are
tucked safely away out of circula-
tion," Retief said soothingly. "That
being the case, I suggest you re-
appraise the whole indoctrination
program and try a less ambitious ap-
proach."

"Ah, I see it now!" Ikk shrilled.
"Longspoon thinks to unseat me, re-
place me with some compliant pup-
pet! A Horrrp, perhaps, or one of
those wishy-washy Yorkle! Well, it
won't work!" He lowered his voice
suddenly. "See here, my good fel-
low, I'm sure we could work out
something. Just tell me where you've
hidden the guns and I'll see to it
you're appropriately rewarded after
the enlightenment."

"That's a fascinating proposal,
Mr. Prime Minister. But I'm afraid
I'd lie awake nights wondering what
you considered appropriate. No, on
the whole I think I'd prefer to take
my chances on my own."

"An opportunity you are hardly
likely to enjoy," Ikk grated, "con-
sidering the fact that I have fifty
thousand crack troops in the city
at this moment, all of them between
you and your friends. As soon as
you've mentioned the location of the
arms, I'll see that you're returned
safe and sound. And I'll personally
make mention to Ambassador Long-
spoon of your outstanding contribu-
tions to Terran-Voion relationships."

"Fifty thousand troops, you say,"
Retief countered. "That's not a big
enough army for a first class victory
parade, to say nothing of taking over
a planet with a population of five
billion argumentative Quoppina."

"The fifty thousand I mentioned
are merely my household detach-
ment," Ikk purred. "Every Voion on
Quopp answers to me—two million
of them! They've been training for
a year at secret camps in the Deep
Jungle. They are now ready!"

"Except for the guns," Retief
said. "Still, there were only a few
hundred of them. They wouldn't
have helped you much."

"Today's shipment was but the
first of many! But enough of this
gossip! For the last time: Give up
your secret and enjoy my lasting
favor!"

"You mean if I tell you, you'll
give me an escort back to the Em-
bassy, no hard feelings?"

"Certainly, my dear chap! I'll even
concoct a stirring tale of your ab-
duction by unscrupulous elements
from whom I effected your rescue,
not neglecting to mention your own
brisk resistance to their wiles."

"Brisker than you anticipated,

perhaps," Retief said. "I think I've learned enough to satisfy my curiosity. So — if you'll just move away from that desk and back up against the wall —"

Ikk erected his oculars violently. "Eh?" He broke off, looking at the gleaming new power gun in Retief's hand.

"What's this?" he squeaked. "I've offered you safe conduct!"

"Now, Ikk, you don't really think I'd expect a campaigner of your experience to let me off scot-free, do you?"

"Well, my fellows might have to employ a few little measures on you, just to be sure you weren't holding anything back. But then I'll have them patch you up nicely afterward."

"Sorry. I have a strong intuitive feeling that your Torture Department may not realize just how fragile human hide is."

"I shall know in a moment." The Prime Minister started toward Retief — six feet of armored hostility, four arms like sheet-metal clubs tipped with bolt-cutters cocked for action.

"I can see that Your Omnivoracity hasn't yet sampled Terran educational methods personally," Retief commented. "Another foot and I'll give you your first lesson."

Ikk halted. "Would you dare?" he keened.

"Sure. Why not? Now, don't make any sudden moves. I'm going to tie you up. Then I'm leaving."

Ikk hissed but submitted as Retief plucked the ministerial flag from its

place, thrust the staff through his spokes and bound it in place, then tied all four arms firmly.

"There, now, you'll be all right until the sweepers arrive along about dinner time."

"You're a fool!" Ikk shrielled. "You'll never get clear."

"Perhaps not," Retief said. "In that case, education may never come to Quopp." He went to the intercom. "When I flip the key, tell them I'm coming out," he said. "Tell them to trail me at a respectful distance, because I'm suspicious. Also, you're not to be disturbed until further notice. Sound like you mean it."

Ikk clacked his palps.

"And," Retief added in fluent Voion thieves' dialect, "don't make any mistakes." He pressed the key.

"What is it this time?" a sharp Voion voice came back. Retief held the gun aimed at Ikk's center ventral plate while the Prime Minister delivered the message.

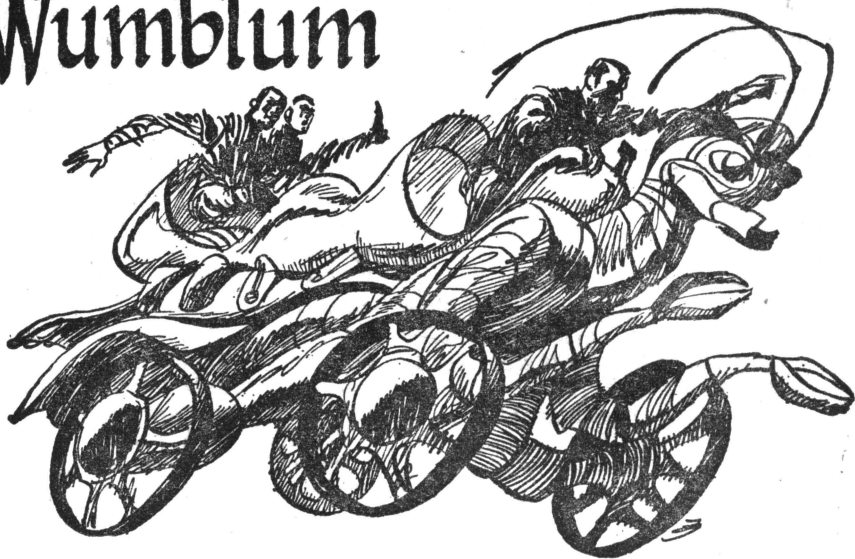
"Well done, Ikk." Retief flipped off the switch, bent it out of line to render it inoperative. "You may yell all you like now; I have great confidence in Ministerial sound-proofing."

"Listen to me, Terry!" Ikk keened. "Give up this madness! My troops will hunt you down without mercy! And what can you hope to accomplish alone?"

"Ah, that's the question, isn't it, Ikk?" Retief went to the door. "And on that note I'll leave you."

In the outer office, the bodyguards standing by swivelled their oculars nervously at Retief.

Wumblum



"Tkk's tied up for the rest of the afternoon," he said breezily. "He's busy pondering some surprising new developments." He stepped into the corridor, made his way along narrow, strange-smelling passages, winding, dipping, curiously angled, lit by chemical lamps and lined with cubicles from which Bright Voion eyes glinted.

He emerged in a cramped courtyard surrounded by high, curving, decoration-crusting walls of faded Burgundy and Prussian blue, gleaming in the eerie light of Second Eclipse. There were, if anything, more police gathered now than an hour before. A ripple seemed to pass across the crowd as Retief appeared. Twitching antenna semaphored a message. At once, a path opened through the press.

In the street the mob was scarcely less dense. Voion — both polished police and dull-finished tribesmen — stood in rows, packed the parking ledges, jostled for wheel-space in the narrow thoroughfare. Here and there a tall bottle-green Yerkie or blue-and-white Clute hurried, a furtive touch of color against the sea of restless black. Through lighted shop windows, Quoppina of other tribes were visible, gathered in tight groups, watching the street. Except for a steady, subdued buzzing in the Voion dialects, the city was ominously silent.

Retief strode along briskly, the Voion continuing to edge unobtrusively from his path. On a street corner he paused, glanced back.

A pair of crested Special Police were shouldering through, keeping

a fifty foot interval between themselves and the object of the Prime Minister's instructions. A third Voion came up behind them, shrilled a command. The two came on at a quick roll.

Retief pushed on across the street, turned down a narrow side way. Ahead, there was a stir. More of the tall Special Police appeared, keening orders to those about them. A message rippled across the crowd. To the right, three more cops had come into view, pushing through toward him, clubs prominently displayed.

"Maybe you'd better step in to avoid the crowd, Terry," a thin voice said at Retief's back.

He turned. A small, purplish, lightly built Quopp of the Flink tribe stood in the doorway of a tiny shop. He stepped back.

Retief followed, glanced around at shelves loaded with trinkets: Yalcan glass-work, Jaq beaten copperware, wooden objects from far-off Lovembroy, a dim-lit display of Hoogan religious mosaics featuring the Twelve Ritual Dismemberments.

"That one caught your eye, didn't it?" the Flink said. "That's always been a snappy seller with you Terries."

"It's a winner," Retief agreed. "There wouldn't be a back way out of here, I suppose?"

The Flink was staring out at the street. "Ikk's up to something big this time; such a force he never had in town before. Half his tribe he's got in the streets, just standing around like it was a signal they was waiting for." He turned to look at

Retief. "Yep, there's a back way. But you won't get far. Not if Ikk's bully boys are looking for you. Right now, you must be the only Terry in Ixix still running around loose."

"That's a distinction I'd like to retain," Retief pointed out.

"Terry, I'd like to help you out," the Flink waggled his head. "But you're as easy to spot as an off-color grub at a hatching ceremony." He broke off, twitched vestigial wing-cases, producing a sharp pop. "Unless . . . Terry, are you game to try something risky?"

"It couldn't be any riskier than standing here," Retief said. "The cops are closing in from all four directions.

"Come on." The Flink flipped aside a hanging, waved Retief through into an even tinier chamber behind the shop, from which a number of dark tunnel-mouths opened — mere holes, two feet in diameter.

"You'll have to crawl, I'm afraid," he said.

"One of the basic diplomatic skills," Retief said. "Lead on."

It was a five-minute trip through the cramped passage, which twisted and writhed, doubled back, rose suddenly, then dropped, did a sharp jag to the left, and opened into a leather-and-wax smelling chamber, lit by a sour-yellow chemical lamp inside a glass bowl. The room was stacked with curiously shaped objects of all sizes and colors. Retief snapped a finger against the nearest — a large, shield-shaped panel of a shimmering pearly pink. It gave off a metallic bong.

"These look like fragments of native anatomy," he said.

"Right. This is the back room of Sopp's Surgical Spares; Sopp has the best stock in the district. Come on."

Hobbling on small wheels better adapted to trolley service than ground-running, the Flink led the way past heaped carapace segments of glossy chocolate brown, screaming orange, butter-yellow, chartreuse, magenta, coppery red. Some of the metallo-chitinous plates bore ribs, bosses, knobs, spikes; some were vari-colored, with polka-dots and ribbons of contrasting color, or elaborate silver-edged rosettes. A few bore feathers, scales or bristles. At one side were ranged bins filled with gears, bearings, shafts, electronic components.

"Yep, for anything in the used parts line, old Sopp's the Quopp to see," the Flink said. "He can pull this off if anybody can. Wait here a minute." He stepped through an arched opening into the display room beyond.

"Hey, Sopp, close the blinds," Retief heard him say. "I've got a friend with me that doesn't want to attract any attention." There was an answering twitter, then a clatter of wooden shutters, followed by more low-voiced conversation punctuated with exclamations from the unseen proprietor. Then the Flink called.

Retief came through into a neat showroom with cases filled with bright-colored objects of obscure function, presided over by a frail-looking Yerkle with a deep green carapace half-concealed under a silken paisley-patterned shawl. He star-

ed at Retief, looking him over like a prospective purchaser.

"Well, what about it, Sopp?" the Flink demanded. "You're the best in the business. You think you can do it?"

"Well . . . I can give it a try."

"Great!" the Flink chirped. "If this works, it'll be the slickest caper pulled in this town since you rigged Geeper out as a Blint and he fertilized half the rolling stock in the Municipal Car-Barns!"

VIII

"Well," the Yerkle said two hours later. "It's not perfect, but in a bad light you may pass."

"Sopp, it's your masterpiece." The Flink, whose name was Ibbl, rolled in a circle around Retief. "If I didn't know different, I'd swear he was some kind of cross-breed Jorp in town for the bright lights. That set of trimmed-down Twilch rotors is perfect!"

"Just so you don't try to fly," Sopp said to Retief. "It's a wonder to me how some of you life-forms get around, with nothing but chemical energy to draw on. I've tucked a few Terry food-bars in the hip-pouch to help keep you running."

"Creaking slightly, Retief stepped to the nearest window, a roughly hexagonal panel of rippled amber glass, backed by a closed shutter of dark wood. His reflection, distorted by the uneven surface, was startling: curving plates of deep maroon metallo-chitin had been snipped, warped, then neatly welded to form a suit

of smoothly articulated armor which covered him from neck to toe. Over his hands, Sopp had fitted a pair of massive red snipping claws salvaged from a Grunk, operable from within by a system of conveniently arranged levers. A dummy abdominal section from a defunct Clute, sprayed to match the overall color scheme, disguised the short Terran torso. A handsome set of vestigial pink wing cases edged in a contrasting shade of purplish black lent a pleasant accent to the shoulder region that went far to camouflage their width. The headpiece was taken from a prime specimen of the Voion Tribe and sprayed a metallic red-orange, and fitted with a crest of pink-dyed Jarweel plumes. It fitted lightly over Retief's face, a hinged section closing down to clamp in place behind.

"Of course, those big, long, thick legs are a bit odd," Sopp said. "But with the rotating members adapted for rotor use, naturally the anterior arms have to fill in as landing gear. There's a few tribes that have gone in for stilting around, and developed them into something quite useful."

"Sure," Ibbel agreed. "Look at the Terries: No wheels, but they manage okay. I tell you, he looks like a natural! Outside of a few unreconstructed Voion trying to flog him a set of solid gold inlays or some snappy photos of the tribal ovum-racks, nobody'll give him a second look."

"Gentlemen," Retief said, "you've produced a miracle. It's even comfortable. All it needs now is a service test."

"Where will you go? Ikk's got the

whole town sewed up tight as a carapace in moulting season."

"I'll head for the Terry Embassy. It's not far."

Sopp looked doubtful. "Farther than you think, maybe." He turned to a wall display, selected a two-foot broadsword fashioned from the iridescent wing-case of a Blang. "Better take this. It may come in handy to, shall we say, cut your way through the undergrowth."

The long twilight of Quopp was staining the sky in vivid colors now. Through a chink in the shutter, Retief saw lights glowing against the shadows blanketing the hushed street where the Voion waited, silent. Up high, the carved facades still caught the light, gleaming in soft pastels against the neon-bright sky.

"I think it's time to go," he said. "While I still have light enough to see where I'm going."

"You want to be careful, Terry." Ibbel was scanning the street from the other window. "Those Voion are in a nasty mood. They're waiting for something. You can feel it in the air."

"I'm subject to moods myself," Retief said. "At the moment I think I could spot them high, low and jack and still win it in a walkaway." He took a final turn up and down the room, testing the action of the suit's joints. He checked the location of the power pistol with his elbow. It was tucked inconspicuously behind the flare of a lateral hip flange, accessible for a fast draw.

"Thanks again, fellows. If our side

wins the brandies are on me," Retief said.

"Good luck, Terry. If your side wins, remember me when it's time to let the contract to junk out the police force."

"You'll be the first on the list." Retief worked the lever that clacked his anterior mandibles in the gesture of Reluctant Departure on Press of Urgent Business and left.

It was a brisk fifteen minute walk to the Path of the Many Sporting Agents, every yard of the way impeded by Voion who stared and gave ground only reluctantly.

As Retief came in sight of the Embassy complex, he saw Voion clustered before the main doors in a solid mass. He forced his way closer, eliciting complaints from jostled sightseers. Behind the wide glass panels, the darting shapes of Dinks were working busily. A steady stream of Voion were coming and going, with much shrilling of commands and wagging of signals. There were no Terrans in evidence.

Retief pushed into a narrow shop entry across the street from the scene of the activity, scanned the upper Embassy windows. There were lights on there and once or twice a shape moved behind the colored glass panes.

There was a distant, thudding clatter. Retief looked up, saw the vast shape of an immense flying Rhoon soar on its wide rotors across the strip of sky between buildings, followed a moment later by a second. Then a tiny heli appeared, bilious yellow-green in color, flitting low

above the Chancery Tower. As Retief watched, a head appeared over the cockpit rim — the merest glimpse of stalked eyes, a pale throat bladder —

"That one's no Voion, nor no Terry, either," a reedy voice said at Retief's elbow.

He looked around to see an aged Kloob, distinguished by a metallic vermilion abdomen and small, almost atrophied wheels.

"Whoever he was, he seems to be on good terms with the Rhoon," Retief said.

"Never saw that before," the Kloob said. "There's unnatural things going on in the world these days. Rhoon flying over town! Like they was patrolling, like."

"I don't see any of the Terry diplomats around," Retief said. "What's been going on here?"

"Ha! What hasn't been going on? First the smoke and the big bang; then the Voion cops swarming all over." The Kloob clacked his ventral plates with a rippling noise indicating total lack of approval. "Things are coming to a pretty pass when a bunch of Voion trash can take over the Terry Embassy and make it stick."

"So it's like that, eh?" Retief said. "What happened to the Terries?"

"Dunno. I'm taking a short siesta and I wake up and all I can see is cops. Too bad, too. The Terries were good customers. I hate to see 'em go."

"Maybe they'll be back," Retief said. "They've still got a few tricks left."

"Maybe — but I doubt it," the

Kloob said glumly. "Ikk's got 'em buffaloes. The rest of us Quoppina better head for the tall grass."

"Not a bad idea. I wonder where I could pick up a map."

"You mean one of those diagrams showing where places are? I've heard of 'em — but I could never quite figure out what they were for. I mean, after all, a fellow knows where he is, right? And he knows where he wants to go."

"That's one of the areas in which we Stilters are a little backward," Retief said. "We seldom know where we are, to say nothing of where we're going. The place I'm looking for is somewhere to the northeast. That way." He pointed.

"More that way." The Kloob indicated a direction three degrees to the right of Retief's approximation. "Straight ahead. You can't miss it. That where your tribe hangs out? Never saw one like you before."

"There's a group of my tribe fellows in trouble out there," Retief said. "About 80 miles from here."

"Hm. That's a good four days on a fast Blint if the trails are in shape."

"How does the port look?"

"Guards on every gate. The Voion don't want any of us travelling."

"I'm afraid I'll have to argue that point with them."

The Kloob looked dubiously at Retief. "Well, I can guess who'll win the argument. But good luck to you anyway, Stilter."

Retief pushed through the loosely milling crowd for half a block before one of the stick-twirling

Planetary Police thrust out an arm to halt him.

"You, there! Where are you going?" he hummed in Voion Tribal.

"Back where a fellow can dip a drinking organ in a short Hellrose and nibble a couple of sourballs without some flatwheel flapping a mandible at him," Retief replied shortly. "One side, you, before I pry that badge off your chest to give to the grubs for a play-pretty."

The Voion retreated. "Tell the other hicks to stay clear of the city," he rasped. "Now get rolling before I run you in."

Retief thrust past him with a contemptuous snap of his left chela. The sun was almost down now, and few lamps had gone on in the shops to light the way. There was no other Quoppina in sight; only the sullen black of the Voion, many of them with the crude shell inlays and filed fangs of tribesmen. The port, Retief estimated, would be off to the right, where the last purplish gleam of sunset still showed above the building tops.

He headed that way, one elbow touching the butt of his hidden power gun.

IX

Clustered polyarcs gleamed down from tall poles to reflect on the space-scarred hulls of half a dozen trade vessels as Retief came up to the sagging wire fence surrounding the port. More lights gleamed by the gate where four Voion were posted, twirling clubs.

"Which one of you blackwheels

do I bribe to get in?" Retief called out in Tribal.

All four Voion spoke at once; then one waved an arm for silence. "I'm corporal of the guard here, rube," he buzzed. "What have you got in mind?"

"Well, now, what's the going price?" Retief sauntered casually to a position two yards from the open gate.

"You talking Village, or Terry credit?"

"Do I look like I'm hauling thirty or forty pounds of rock around with me?" Retief inquired. "I just peddled a cargo of country booze down at the barracks. I've got enough Terry credit to hang the four of you with."

"Have you, now?" The quartet shifted positions to encircle Retief, a move which placed two of them farther from the gate than himself.

"You bet." He reached into the pouch slung at his hip, pulled out a tangle of plastic, gained another step toward the corporal, who canted his oculars at the cash.

"Here, catch," Retief tossed the credit. As the NCO reached to snare it, the other three Voion said "Hey!" and converged on him. Retief stepped through the gate, slammed it and clicked the hanging padlock shut, leaving the four guards outside.

"Hold on there, you!" the corporal keened. "You can't go in there!"

"I figured you sharpies would hold out on me," Retief said. "Well, I'm in now. You can yell for the sergeant and turn the bundle over to him, or you can forget you saw

me and work out a fair split on the payoff. So long."

"Hey," one of the Voion said. "Look at the way that stiller walks! Like a Terry, kind of."

"Are you kidding?" the corporal said. "Look, fellows, the way I see it, what's it to us if this yokel wants to sightsee?"

Retief moved off as the foursome settled down to quarreling over the loot and headed for the nearest of five ships in sight, a battered thousand tonner with the purple and yellow comet insignia of the Four Planet Line. The few lounging locals in sight ignored him as he went to the rear access ladder, swung up and stepped inside. A startled Voion looked up from a litter of papers and clothes spilled from a locker, the door of which had been pried from its hinges. As the looter reached for a club lying on a table, Retief caught his outstretched arm, spun him around, planted a foot against his back, and launched him toward the open entry. The Voion emitted a thin screech as he shot through, yelped as he hit the pavement below with a splintering crash.

Retief swarmed up the ladder to the cargo deck, rode the one-man lift to the control compartment, cycled the outer lock shut, then quickly checked gauges.

"Swell," he said softly. "Just enough fuel to stage a blazing re-entry." He whirled to the lifeboat bay, cycled the hatch. Two tiny one-man shells rested in their slings. Retief wiped dust from the external inspection panel of the nearest, saw

the dull red glow of panic lights indicating low accumulator charge, a leaky atmosphere seal and over-aged fuel. He checked the second boat. Its accumulators read full charge, though it, too, was leaking air and indicating a decayed fuel supply. Retief went back to the panel, flipped a key, glanced at the ground-view screens. Voion were closing in on the vessel from three sides. He recognized the evicted impulse shopper in the van, limping on an out-of-round wheel.

He went back to the Number Two lifeboat, popped the canopy, climbed inside, fitted himself into the cramped seat taking care to settle his rotors and wing cases comfortable, then closed the hatch. He activated the warm-up switch; panel lights blinked on.

The boat was flyable — maybe. Retief kicked in the eject lever and slammed back in the padded seat as the rocket blast hurled the tiny boat skyward.

Level at five thousand feet, Retief set a northeast course; as he looked back at the pattern of city lights below, a brilliant red light glowed, climbed upward from a point near the center of the town, burst in a shower of whirling pinwheels of green, yellow, magenta. A second rocket went up, then three together, shedding a carnival glow over the clustered towers of the city. Retief punched a button on the tiny panel, twirled a dial.

“... laration of the establishment of a new era of Quopp-wide peace and plenty,” a voice boomed from



the radio, "under the benign and selfless leadership of His Omnivora-city, our glorious leader, Prime Minister Ikk! All loyal Quoppina are instructed to remain in their villages or other place or residence until tax-assessors, draft board officials and members of the emergency requisition teams have completed initial surveys. All citizens will be required to purchase a copy of *New Laws and Punishments*, for sale at all newsstands for a low, low nine ninety-eight, plus tax. Failure to possess a copy will be punishable by Salvage. And now, a word from our effulgent chief, the great liberator of Quopp, Prime Minister Ikk!"

There was a prolonged burst of shrill pre-recorded applause that made Retief's ear drums itch, then the familiar tones of the Voion leader:

"Fellow Voion, and you other, shall I say, honorary Voion," he started. "Now that the planet is free, certain changes will be made. No longer will the unenlightened struggle on, following erroneous tribal customs! We Voion have figured out all the answers, and —"

Retief flicked off the radio, settled down for the eighty-mile run ahead.

The lifeboat rocked abruptly, as though it had glanced off a giant, spongy pillow. Retief banked to the right, scanned the sky above.

A wide, dark shape swooped quickly past. There was a sudden buffeting as the small craft pitched in the back-wash of the thirty-foot rotors of a giant Rhoon. It swung

in a wide circle, climbing, then pivoted sharply, swooped again, hurtling straight at him like a vast pouncing eagle.

Retief slammed the controls full over, felt the lifeboat flip on its back, drop like a stone toward the jungle below. He rolled out, shot away at full thrust, at right angles to his previous course. Off to the right the Rhoon tilted up in a sharp turn, faint starlight gleaming from its spinning rotors, swelling enormously as it closed. Again Retief dove under it, pulled out to find it close on his port side, angling in across his bows. He gave the boat full throttle, shot under the Rhoon's yellow-green head, then pulled the nose up, climbing . . .

The skiff was sluggish under him, staggering; he reduced the angle of climb, saw the Rhoon dropping in from his port quarter. Again he dived, leveled out this time a scant thousand feet above the dark jungle below. A glance to the right showed the Rhoon banking in for another pass. Its mighty rotors drove it effortlessly at twice the speed the skiff could manage on its out-dated fuel. Retief saw its four ten-foot-long armored fighting members, its gaping jaws armed with saw-edged fangs that could devour any lesser Quoppina in two snaps.

At the last moment, he rolled to the right, went over on his back, snapped out of the maneuver to whip off to the left, coming around sharply on the Rhoon's flank. With a jerk at the release handle, he jet-tisoned the canopy. It leaped clear with a dull boom, and a tornado of

air whipped at Retief's face. He jerked the power gun clear of its holster, took aim, and as the Rhoon banked belatedly to the right, fired for the left rotor. Yellow light glared from the whipping blades as Retief held the beam full on the spinning hub, a spot glowed a dull red; then a puff of vapor whiffed up — and suddenly the air was filled with whining fragments, whistling past Retief's exposed head and ricocheting off the skiff's hull.

Retief held the beam on target another five seconds, saw the Rhoon tilt almost vertically, vibrating wildly as the damaged rotor shook itself to pieces. Something small and dark seemed to break from the Rhoon then, clung for a moment, dropped free. Then the great predator was on its back, a glimpse of gray belly plates and folded legs, then gone as the boat shot past.

At that moment a violent shock slammed Retief hard against the restraining harness. He grabbed the controls, fought to pull the boat up. A flat expanse of black wilderness swung up past the nose, rolled leisurely over the top, then slid down the left side . . .

The controls bit into the air then.

Fighting vertigo, Retief hauled the boat out of the spin. The motor barked once, twice, snarled unevenly for a moment, then died. The ship bucked, wanting to fall off on its port stub-wing. A glance showed torn metal, a dark strain of leaking coolant. The skiff was no more than a hundred feet above tree level now; ahead a tall spike-palm loomed. Retief banked to the right, felt the boat

drop under him. He caught a momentary glimpse of the immense wreckage of the Rhoon strewn across half an acre of bushy tree-tops; then he was crashing through yielding foliage, the boat slamming left, then right, then up-ended, tumbling, dropping to a final splintering crash of metal-wood, a terrific impact that filled the tiny cockpit with whirling fireworks even brighter than the ones over the city before they faded into a darkness filled with distant gongs . . .

X

Something sharp poked Retief in the side, a vigorous jab that bruised even through the leather strip that joined the dorsal and ventral plates of his costume. He made an effort, sat up, reached to investigate the extent of the skull fracture, felt the metallic clang as his claw touched the painted Voion head-piece. The tough armor, it seemed, had its uses.

He pushed the helmet into alignment, looked around at a torch-lit clearing among the boles of great trees. A ring of three-foot blue-green Quoppina — members, he saw, of the Ween Tribe, — were all eyeing him with faintly luminous oculars.

"Hoo. Meat-fall-from sky moving around," a tiny, penetrating voice keened in heavily accented Tribal. "Us better slice it up quick."

Retief got to his feet, felt for the gun with his elbow. It was gone — lost in the crash. One midget meat-eater, bolder than the rest, edged

closer, gave a tentative snap of his immense white-edged claw. Retief worked levers, clacked back at him.

"Stand back, little fellow," he said. "Don't you recognize a supernatural apparition when you see one?" He moved to get his back to a tree.

"What you mean, big boy?" one of the natives demanded.

"It means it's bad medicine to cook a stranger," Retief translated.

"Hmm, that mean we is got to eat you raw. How is you, tough?"

Retief drew the shortsword. "Tough enough to give you a belly ache, I'd estimate."

"Hey, what kind of Quopp is you, anyway?" someone inquired. "I ain't never see one like you before."

"I'm a diplomat," Retief explained. "We mostly lie up during the day and come out at night to drink."

"A Dipple-mac. Hmmm. Ain't never heard of that tribe before; is you, Jik-Jik?"

"Can't say as I is."

"How you get here, Meat-from-sky?" somebody called. "You ain't got the wing-span for no flying."

"In that." Retief nodded toward the smashed shell of the skiff.

"What, that?" one native inquired. Another prodded the machine with a small wheel, adapted for rough jungle trails. "Whatever it is, it dead." He looked at Retief. "You friend no help to you now, big boy. You is all alone."

"You a long way out of your territory. Stilter," another said. "Ain't never see one like you before. What you doing here?"

"I'm just passing through," Retief said. "I'm looking for a party of Terrans that wandered off-course. I don't suppose you've seen them?"

"I heard of them whatchacallums — Terrans. They twelve feet high and made out of jelly, I hears; and they takes their wheels off at night and leaves 'em outside."

"That's the group. Any sign of them in these parts?"

"Nope." The Ween crossed their rear oculars, indicating negation.

"In that case, if you'll stand aside, I'll breeze on my way and let you get back to whatever you were doing when I dropped in."

"What we was doing, we was starving, Meat-from-sky. Your timing good."

"Jik-jik, you all the time talking to something to eat," someone said from the ranks.

There was a sudden flurry of sound from the near distance, punctuated by shrill cries.

"Get your feather-picking members off me, you ignorant clod-hoppers!" a thin Voion voice screeched. "I'm a member of the Planetary Armed Forces!"

The speech cut off in mid-sentence; threshing sounds followed. Moments later, three Ween pushed into the clearing, hauling the limp figure of a bright-polished member of the Planetary Police.

"Hoo, this evening shaping up," someone said. The Voion was lying on his back, waving all four arms.

It was shaping up all right, Retief thought. But not for him.

TO BE CONTINUED

A LEADER FOR YESTERYEAR

by MACK REYNOLDS

Time traveling is dangerous sport — even when you know exactly what era you're in!

When the space-time continuum capsule broke through it was to materialize approximately six feet above the sea.

Fortunately, the contingency had been allowed for. In fact, the original plan had been that the break through take place several yards above hard ground, since the change in land contours over the centuries was potentially considerable. They had attempted to conduct the experiment in an area which would seem unlikely to change over much, but still they allowed several feet. The idea was that the capsule be so up-holstered and the occupant so out-fitted that a drop would be accommodated.

As a result, the capsule looked like nothing so much as one of the round, ultra-padded 'barrels' which, for some unknown reason, periodi-

cally take an adventurer over Niagara Falls.

Nor did the occupant dispel the similarities. He wore a crash helmet and heavy clothing. They hadn't been sure whether or not the break through would be into winter or summer and had dressed him for the former. One can always shed clothing in warm season and they wanted to take no chances that he would emerge into a blizzard and freeze to death before making contact.

He scrambled from the hatch, stared around at the water, aghast, then, when his craft bobbed in a wave, slid ignominiously into the sea.

Burdened with his heavy clothing, and the various equipment and devices in his pockets, for a moment he thrashed wildly, feeling that sen-

sation of being dragged into the depths. But then he seized control of himself, wrenched the crash helmet from his head, took a deep breath, doubled over, untied and took off his heavy shoes. He surfaced again, took another deep breath and slid from his jacket. He had been in the air and water long enough to know that the weather was such that he had no need for winter garments.

He was in better shape now. He stared up at the capsule, bobbing there in the swell. He doubted very much that he could get up on it again. During the brief instant he had been atop, he had spotted a shoreline in the distance, but even though he had divested himself of the heavier of his clothing and equipment, he still doubted that he could make it that far. He swam moderately well but it was not his forte. Well, there was nothing else for it. He kicked out of his trousers, wrestled out of his shirt, leaving himself stripped to under-clothing. He started for the shore.

However, the problem that confronted him was solved without difficulty when a boat pulled around the capsule, two wide-eyed men stroking oars in unison. He was taken aback. He hadn't seen the others before. He needn't have jettisoned his things.

They hauled him from the water, gaping. He couldn't help a twinge of humor. He could see they were fishermen from the nets and other tackle. He must have frightened them out of their wits when the

capsule emerged into a space that evidently had been only a few yards from where they were plying their trade.

He sat in the stern for a moment, catching his breath while they stood and continued to gawk at him.

One of them said something in a language he couldn't place.

He took a better look at them. They were dressed in nothing but wisps of cloth about their middles, which didn't signify much in this weather. It made for good sense. He couldn't place their nationality, though off-hand he would have said a southern people in view of their moderately dark complexions.

He looked about the boat, but this again wasn't his field. It seemed an average enough fishing craft, undoubtedly belonging to none too wealthy an owner, since it had no motor, either outboard or inboard, nor any other modern appurtenances.

He thanked them and they looked at him blankly.

He prided himself on his linguistic abilities, since he had lived abroad for varying periods of time on several occasions during childhood and could speak English, German and French equally well and get by in both Italian and Spanish. All due to a culture conscious professor father.

However, his rescuers continued to look at him blankly, no matter what tongue he tried.

A movement of the capsule caught his eye and he came to his feet. The sphere was slowly turning so that the open hatch was sliding toward the surface of the sea.

He yelled, pointed, gestured, tried

to put over to the fishermen the need to prevent his vessel from filling with water and sinking. All in vain. They simply wouldn't understand. They couldn't understand.

They were dolts. On top of everything else, he had to fall in with dolts.

There was nothing for it. Within moments his sole contact with his own period, his method of return, was shipping water. He dropped to a seat again and put his head in his hands.

When the capsule was gone, his rescuers stared at the bubbles so long as they lasted, then moved to resume their places as oarmen. They headed for land.

There seemed to be a town, probably a fishing village, he decided. The coast itself was fairly flat along here, but hills raised within a mile inward, and moderately high mountains were in the far distance. He couldn't recognize the coast. However, he did realize that this was evidently a sea, or at least a very large lake, rather than the ocean. But what sea, he hadn't the vaguest idea.

The town was evidently more than just a fishing village, he realized as they approached. There were fairly large sailing craft, although he could see no ocean going steamers. Inter-island sort of thing, he decided. He wondered briefly if he was in the Caribbean, and this some out of the way, backward community.

And as they came still closer, for a brief moment he wondered if he had stumbled upon a movie set.

Some of the ships were galleys.

Those that were sailing craft had strange rigs such as he had never seen before.

Before they had beached, the reality came through to him. Something had gone drastically wrong. Far from swinging forward from the middle of the 20th Century, the pendulum of space-time had swung back. He was somewhere in the past, and by the looks of these, in the far past.

He had no idea of where, or when he was.

His garb, or lack of it, when they beached the boat, drew attention, but not so much as he might have expected. And it came to him that the wide diversity of dress he noted was due to the fact that this was obviously a commerce center which drew ships from distances. Some of those who stood about, or strolled about on business bent, were as dark as Negroes, some of obvious Semetic strain. He blinked at this latter fact. Was it possible he was on the Palestine coast and these either Phoenecians or Hebrews of the days of the Kingdom?

And then he came to an abrupt halt.

Striding toward them was a warrior garbed in the dress of the Homeric period. Helmet with horse plume, metal breastplate, greaves on legs, heavy leather sandals, a short sword at his side. He could have stepped off a Grecian vase.

And now the traveler from tomorrow could see similarly clad men beyond, here and there. Most of them were not so elaborately done

up. Evidently, this one was an officer of some type.

The warrior came to a halt before the two fishermen and their human catch and spoke to them in the language of which the newcomer could make no heads nor tails. Which surprised him. He had a smattering of ancient Greek from university days, and should have been able to pick up an occasional word.

The officer, if that was what he was, took him in in detail and smiled. Which was reassuring. The newcomer's rapidly drying undershirt, shorts and stockinged feet, while no doubt unique in the other's eyes, hardly projected him as affluent. Actually, they were physically a pair, being about thirty years of age, a few inches under six feet, possibly one sixty-five in weight, and both moderately handsome, clean-shaven men.

The warrior spoke.

The stranger shook his head.

Finally, the other grunted amusement, spoke to the fishermen, obviously in dismissal, since they left, then pursed his lips in an expression of amused doubt.

He tapped himself with his right thumb on his breastplate and said, "Fipe."

It seemed fairly obvious that he was introducing himself. The newcomer touched his own chest and said, "Lucius."

The warrior repeated that, nodded, then touched himself again and said, "Alvethna."

It might have been a title, a rank, or the family name. Lucius touched himself again and said, "Rostock."

Fipe looked at him in puzzlement, finally shrugged, grinned and made obvious motions to fall in step and come along. He led the way into the settlement, which was a bit bigger than Lucius Rostock had first thought.

Fipe made a sweeping gesture and said, "Pyrgi." Undoubtedly the name of the town. Lucius had never heard of it, but it could have some ring of the Greek. He was about convinced that he was in Greek hands.

They tramped down surprisingly clean streets, past single storied houses that seemed prosperous enough. When a boy, his professor father had once taken him through the ruins of Pompeii. There were similarities, although this seemed to be somewhat more gay than the Roman resort town could ever have been.

Lucius scowled thoughtfully. The way he remembered it, the Greeks had put their wealth into public buildings which were magnificent, but supposedly, even in Athens, lived in somewhat grim homes. This didn't tie in.

Fipe led them down the street to what was obviously a soldier's post. There were horses here and the young officer commandeered two.

They took off at none too gentle a pace and headed inland.

When they were clear of Pyrgi, Fipe grinned and gestured toward the hills. "Caere," he said.

That meant nothing to Lucius Rostock, however. About three and a half miles inland was a considerably

larger city than Pyrgi. In fact, it became obvious that the seaside town must be the port for this metropolis.

The city of Caere was situated on elevated ground of natural formation about three and a half miles from the sea. Well based for defense, it was completely surrounded by walls which were massive but of well-fitted, cut stone. Lucius failed to place the architecture.

He noted the indifferent discipline of the warriors at the gate and grunted, having had military training himself. The greenest recruit of his own era was better trained than this. Fipe was obviously an officer, but he had rated no salute whatsoever. Indeed, a couple of the spearmen had called up to him, laughingly. Fipe had grinned back at them and called an answer that set the men off into more laughter. Lucius wondered vaguely if such laxness prevailed even in combat. This city, he decided, would be a push-over for an aggressor.

They stopped before the largest of the public buildings, left their horses in the hands of an indifferent guard, mounted stone steps and entered. Lucius was taken with no ceremony into the presence of a person obviously in command, a middle-aged type who seemed on the good natured side for a man in such position. He was surrounded by what Lucius Rostock assumed were counsellors, and there were several secretaries seated about on folding chairs.

The presiding official's name was evidently Larte. Lucius went through the attempt to communicate again,

but achieved only smiles and laughter. They seemed a great people for laughter.

Fipe stood by his side, evidently proud of his charge, and explained to the extent he could this new phenomenon. Lucius suspected that the story of his method of arrival was being highly discounted. By now it was third hand. However, that he was here was obvious, and where he was from and how he had been transported were a mystery.

He found out later the orders Larte had issued. Fipe was to drop his duties and take over supervising the stranger and teaching him the language. When Lucius was well enough founded, he was to be brought back to the assembly for questioning.

Evidently, Fipe couldn't have been pleased more. And evidently he could see no reason for the teaching of language in any such stuffy atmosphere as a classroom, if, indeed, classrooms existed in Caere. Instead, he was prone to work away on the project whilst at the same time fishing, hunting, swimming, or better still, in the company of the town's unmarried young women.

Lucius was satisfied enough to go along with this, although he was anxious to get on with matters. He had no illusions about his return to his own era. He was stuck. Even had he been able to dredge up the space-time continuum capsule, he realized that the exposure to sea water for such a period as had already transpired would have destroyed the delicate mechanism.

It was a double tragedy. The experiment had not been inexpensive. And he doubted, now that it had failed, that others would be made. It had been difficult enough to get the appropriations. He had to laugh bitterly. Not only had he not emerged in the future, but not even in the part of the world from which he had started. Well, there was nothing he could do about it. All the important issues that applied in his own world, his own country, to his own people, now meant nothing. It was gall to admit; he had been highly involved.

The company of Caere's unmarried girls was a problem. He was playing it close to his chest. He had no idea of the land's mores, social strata, nor socio-economic system. But he knew he was going to have to keep from becoming embroiled in any permanent attachment, until he could pick a mate who would be an aid to his career, rather than a hinderance.

He wasn't getting very far with placing himself in either time or locale. The people of Caere called themselves Rasna or Rasenna, and the city-state evidently belonged to a loose confederation covering a wide area. But he could make neither hide nor hair of the political or socio-economic system.

Lucius tried to find a clue in the fact that couches were used at table rather than chairs, and couldn't. The Romans, and before them the Greeks had preferred the method of eating, but they, in turn, had most likely picked it up from some oriental source.

It was at the evening banquets that he had to watch himself in regard to the women. Fipe seemed to dote on them, and it was all but a nightly thing.

There was no avoiding a feminine companion. The couches were double, meant for a man and woman. Married couples, of course, shared a couch. Unmarried young people paired off. Each couple stretched out on their left sides, the woman snuggled back against the man. It hadn't been easy for the visitor from the 20th Century to adapt to. You were meant to enjoy the company of your companion. She exchanged jests with you, pressed delicacies to your mouth, and you responded in like. If you wished, particularly during the wine course at the end of the meal, you kissed or exchanged other mild embraces.

It was a fine institution, perhaps, Rostock decided, for an engaged couple, but hard on one determined to remain a bachelor for the time present.

In fact, it was at such a banquet and long before his command of the language was proficient, that Lucius Rostock met his future bride. He was later to wonder if Fipe hadn't set it up.

The girl's name was Tanaquil and she was visiting from the northern allied city of Tarquinii. Fipe let it be known with what Lucius decided was a knowing smirk, that she was of the Tarquinius family which evidently supplied the governors — or whatever the title might be — of the city, in the same manner that Larte

Camna's family supplied them in Caere.

Tanaquil seemed to have a reputation, though as just what, Lucius couldn't make out. Perhaps it was for being a bit aggressive, not quite as feminine as Rasna taste usually dictated. At any rate, she made no objection to sharing the mysterious stranger's couch at a banquet for unmarried couples which Fipe had arranged.

It was in the preliminary stages of the evening, while they were being served their mulsum, an aperitif wine mixed with honey that Lucius realized with a thrill of discovery that the girl's all but transparent robe was of silk. Silk! Silk came to the ancients only from China. But then he shook his head. He still knew nothing other than that Tanaquil must be on the wealthy side to be able to afford the fabric. It was the first time he had noticed it since his arrival. Local fabrics were cotton, linen and wool.

While the musicians stationed in the background played the ever present double flute and the kithara, a profusion of salads, mushroom dishes, olives, raw vegetables, mussels and snails were brought on.

He took in his couch mate more closely. She was attractive enough and of lighter complexion and fairer hair than most Rasna, which was to his taste. She had a certain forwardness not too often run into amongst the Caere women. She was obviously of strength and character.

He caught Fipe observing him from the other side of the table in amusement and returned to his food.

Tanaquil pressed a bit of broiled fish upon him. She said something and he frowned and tried to puzzle it out.

It came through finally.

"But of what city are you?" she asked.

He told her, knowing it meant nothing.

Fipe called over, "Lucius is from a far, unknown land where our language is unspoken as his is here."

She looked at her companion, calculatingly, and called out something to Fipe.

But it was Seius, an official of Pyrgi, who answered. He had picked up the habit of speaking slowly when Lucius was involved, as had Fipe, and Rostock could follow him almost as well as he could his tutor.

Seius said lightly, "He tells us he is a warrior and leader of men in his own land, and of the family of lucomones."

Tanaquil looked at Rostock from the side of her eyes, which were gray, rather than the usual brown of this area.

The mensae primae courses began to arrive, consisting largely of poultry dishes, and Lucius could hardly fail to notice that his companion from the north had snuggled back against him more comfortably.

Later, during the wine, she was called to dance in the method of a city of which Lucius had as yet not heard, Voltumna. They were all loudly merry, by this time, little water having been added to the wine, and everybody was highly amused by the fact that largely she danced for him.

Though the language of the Rasna came to him slowly, come it did and eventually he could carry on well enough that Fipe let him know that Larte had suggested an interview before the assembly.

Larte and the assembly, Lucius had come to find by now, were the governing body of Caere, to the extent that there was government at all. The looseness of the body astonished the man from the future. Evidently, it consisted of a representative from each of the city's families, or clans, call them what you will.

As before, they met in the assembly building, the largest of the city's public edifices, other than the temples, of which precious little was known by Lucius Rostock. An atheist, in his own time, he wished to lay himself open to no mistakes that might stymie his chances in this strange culture, and there is no field in which it is easier to make mistakes than in religion.

Lucius made the gentle gesture of respect that Fipe had taught him was applicable before the city head, and waited for the older man to speak. Fipe stood to one side, beaming at his protege.

Larte took in the informal Rasnagarb which Fipe had supplied and which in this weather consisted of little more than an embroidered linen kilt. He smiled and said easily, "You could well be one of us, O Lucius."

It was as good an opening as any. Lucius said strongly, "That is my greatest desire, Larte Camna."

The assembly fell silent.

Larte frowned and said, "How do you mean, Lucius?"

It was boldness now, or never. "In my few months in Caere, I have noted many things in which I believe I could be of great service to the city. Given your cooperation, I am of the belief that I could become a valuable citizen, eventually prominent in the nation's workings. I am ambitious, Larte, that I will admit, but it is through the efforts of ambitious men that the city progresses."

One of the assemblymen, recognized by Rostock as Ocnus, head of the Vipinas clan, said softly, "Progress in what manner, Lucius? I am distressed that you seem to feel our society less desirable than the far land with which you are familiar."

He had to tread gently now, even Fipe was frowning faintly.

Lucius nodded. "I was a leader of warriors in my own land. There were many wars and I acquired great knowledge in the field. I can make this available to Caere and its people."

"And who would we use it against?" Larte said, shaking his head.

"Against your enemies!" Was the man dense?

"But what enemies?"

"Come now, I know your confederation spreads over a wide area, but there is often conflict between the different cities. From what Fipe tells me, only last year Sutri's warriors raided your cattle and were only driven off after desperate battles."

Larte chuckled. "He failed to mention that the year before, he par-

ticipated in a similar raid on Sutri." He made a gesture of dismissal. "Young men need exercise and practice with their weapons. Seldom are men killed or seriously injured in such affrays."

Lucius couldn't help but stare at the older man. "But with the methods I could teach you, the Macedonian phalanx, the catapult — I agonize because I am not enough the chemist to give you gunpowder — the very techniques with which I am familiar, you could spread your domination over this part of the world!"

It was Fipe who said, scowling puzzlement, "To what end?"

Lucius was as dumbfounded as they, but for opposite reasons. "Why, you could enrich yourselves. Caere would be the leading city for a distance it would take a man a score of days to march."

Larte said, not unkindly. "Lucius of the clan of Rostock, you fail to understand our institutions. Suppose we marched against Tarquinius and our warriors conquered the city. How could we govern them? This assembly consists of the heads of our clans, but in Tarquinius they have other clans."

Lucius gaped. The man sounded like a child. Could their knowledge of political fact be this primitive?

He said impatiently, "You would rule them! They need not be represented in the assembly of Caere at all!"

Larte shook his head. "But why? It is troublesome enough to rule our own city."

"You could use them to work the fields, free you from your labors, give you time to participate in your wars, your government! Don't you see? Once you had defeated them in battle, they could be forced to do your bidding."

Ocnus spoke up again, softly as usual. "I am afraid, Lucius that we have no interest in forcing others to perform our tasks." He looked at Fipe. "You have found a strange one."

The warrior didn't answer. He was as bewildered as the rest.

Lucius Rostock realized he had pulled a boner. These dolts were incapable of realizing his potentialities. He had better repair his bridges while he could.

He said quickly, "I have much to learn. But I am anxious to become a citizen of your city, to participate in your affairs." He tried a jest. "Who knows, perhaps one day I may occupy your position, O Larte." He knew the office was elective.

The assembly fell silent again.

Surely they had heard his chuckle of self deprecation.

Fipe said, "I am afraid my teaching has been inadequate, Lucius. You see, there is no manner in which you can participate in our government. You are of the clan of Rostock, but there is no clan of Rostock in Caere. You can never become a citizen of the city, far from achieving to the rank of *lucio*."

It was Seius, who was present as representative from Pyrgi, who said, his tone light, "Perhaps Lucius should go south to Roma. It is said

that Ancus Marcus, the rex, continues the policy of receiving strangers into the asylum on the Palatine. All are welcome."

"Roma!" Lucius snapped. His eyes went around him, to Larte, to Fipe, to all the others.

"What is the matter?" Larte said. "It is a city but a day's march to the south, and immediately across the River Tiberis."

Lucius Rostock stared at him. "Lucom? I thought I should have placed that term. Roma? Rome!" He pointed a finger, unthinkingly. "You're Etruscans! This is Italy!"

Larte was evidently wearying of the discussion. He said to Fipe, "Continue to instruct and entertain the stranger, Lucius. Undoubtedly, in the future we will find it instructive to learn more of this strange land of his birth. We will notify you when another interview seems desirable."

Fipe saluted and turned to his charge, who was still standing as though thunderstruck.

On their way back to the quarters they shared, Fipe looked at him from the side of his eyes. "You are a strange one, Lucius."

The other's thoughts had been going off in a dozen directions. "Listen," he demanded. "Would it be possible for me to wed, well, say Tanaquil?"

"Why not, if she loves you?"

"And would I not, then, become a member of her clan, the Tarquinius?"

Fipe marvelled at him. "Of course not. You are and will always remain

a Rostock. Were you to wed, your children, of course, would become of the clan of Tarquinius, but you will always remain a Rostock."

The mother right! Descent was in the matrilineal line!

Fipe was frowning at him. "Is it otherwise in your own land? Perhaps you follow the customs of the Latins, who trace descent through the male."

That brought up something else. Lucius ignored the question and said urgently, "This city of Roma. Tell me about it. How long has it been established? What was this Seius said about it being possible for me to become a citizen there?"

Fipe shrugged. "It is a rough city, filled with undesirables. How old? A century or so, I suppose."

He twisted his mouth, as though to aid memory. "The story has it that the city was founded by a certain rex of the Ramnes tribe named Romulus, through I suspect him of being more legendary than anything else. He moved the tribe which consisted of ten curiae, subdivided into a hundred clans, onto the Palatine hill near the River Tiberis. Later they first defeated, then induced the Sabine tribe to join them. The Sabines took over the Quirinal and the Capitoline Hills."

"But what's this about strangers being welcome?"

Fipe scratched his chin with a thumbnail in puzzlement. "They adopted a strange custom, in order to continue to swell the city, though why they should wish that is a mystery, it is already one of the largest in the confederacy. At any rate,

Romulus opened an asylum and invited all to join. This hodge-podge tribe is known as the Luceres and though it has full representation in the Roman Senate, as they call their assembly, I doubt if thus far there are a full hundred clans. The present rex, a rank corresponding to our lucomo, is Ancus Marcus and he continues the asylum."

Lucius said tightly, "And if I were to marry Tanaquil and journey there, I would be welcome?"

"Why not? Especially since your children would be of the highly prestigious clan of the Tarquinius." Pipe looked at him from the side of his eyes again. "Tell me, Lucius, for what reason did you come from your own land to this? And why do you not return?"

Lucius had to keep on terms with this man, if his rapidly maturing plans were to go through. He said, "My vessel, in which I arrived, has been destroyed and none other will do. I cannot return. Why did I come?" He looked off into a far distance. "In my own land, a great war raged and my country was faced with defeat. New, advanced weapons were needed. In hopes of finding them in . . . in other, far lands, I was sent to explore, with the intention of returning with such weapons and confounding our enemies. I have failed." He breathed in deeply. His story, in actuality, was not false.

Pipe said, in a certain compassion, "You are well away from this warlike country, Lucius. Here you will find a new place. Wed a Rasna girl and find useful outlet for your

energies." He twisted his mouth. "Other than war, of course. None save citizens can join in our defense. You could never participate in our government, as we have told you, but your children would be full citizens, through their mother."

Lucius said, "I think instead, friend Pipe, that my path will take me to Roma."

They had reached the house. Pipe shrugged. "It is your decision." He disappeared into the building.

Lucius Rostock stood outside. The house was well located, overlooking what he now knew must be the Tyrhenian Sea. Now that he knew where he was, both in time and space, he stared unblinkingly in the direction, where two and a half millennia hence the land of his birth would be.

He would go to Rome and there spread to the extent of his powers, the teachings on which he had been raised. Of a sudden, he hated it here. He hated Caere and its people, and he hated the soft, lax institutions of the place. There was a stink of democracy.

No matter what the distance in time, he would keep the faith. His background would not go to naught. He snapped to attention, his eyes straight ahead. No matter the distance, he would follow such a path as the Fuhrer would have been proud of.

He saluted, a salute which, unbeknownst to Oberst Lucius von Rostock, was to come down to his own era, from this.

Heill

END

THE SMILING FUTURE

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

It was kind of us to train all those dolphins. Now they were beginning to return the favor!

A great many things had happened to Stort in the course of one lifetime, but this was by all odds the weirdest of them all.

If anyone had told him a month before that as Director General of the United Regions he would travel to the coast of California for a private interview with a—something, you couldn't call it a human being but you certainly couldn't call it an animal—he would have laughed in the prophet's face.

Yet here he was.

When the first group (embassy? army?) had appeared suddenly on the shore, each ensconced in its private tank of coral or thin rock with things like surf-boards to bear it out of and back to the water, and when the leader had raised its head and addressed the frightened chlorella-gatherers in harsh and jerky but perfectly clear English, they had

been too petrified by fear even to answer. Chlorella-gatherers were stupid by definition; they were about the only manual workers left in a computerized world. If every scrap of edible substance had not been vital to the pullulating billions of mankind, they would not have been set to collecting the scraps and crumbs that evaded the automatic machines in mid-ocean and drifted in to shore.

But naturally the governmental electro-spy planted near by had caught the speech and transmitted it to the nearest police station, and a copter with three fuzzes and a lieutenant had been dispatched at once.

At their approach the leader had raised its head again from the water in its tank and repeated: "I wish to speak to your highest authority. It is urgent and for your own sakes. Tell your ruler it must meet me on

this spot seven suns from today, at this hour. It is life or death for you. We cannot go to it, so it must come to us."

The policemen were almost as frightened as the chlorella-gatherers, but the lieutenant pulled himself together and in a rather quavering voice blustered: "You're crazy, whatever you are! Get back where you came from at once, or we'll shoot." They all had their ray-guns out.

The leader didn't say another word. It just looked. And the three fuzzes and the lieutenant and the dozen chlorella-gatherers all suddenly found themselves flat on the sand, utterly unable to move a toe or a finger.

"You can talk," said the leader kindly. "I've left your speaking apparatus free. You do have somebody who can speak with authority for you land-people, don't you?"

The lieutenant couldn't nod; he managed to clear his throat and say yes, hoarsely.

"Him," not "it". But—

"Then tell him. You see what I did to you. I and every one of us here and every one of us anywhere can do the same thing to any number of you, at any time or place. We do not want to do it; we prefer to reason with you like sensible beings. But since you were so foolish as to threaten us, I had no choice.

"Unfortunately we have no fingers or thumbs like yours, so that our power to manipulate objects is limited. Therefore we have had to develop our minds, and you must

believe me that this is the very mildest of the things we can do with them. Tell your ruler that. And tell him we are giving him and all of you land-people this one chance. If you do not take advantage of it, there will never be another. Tell him that.

"Seven suns from today, here and at this hour. I shall release you when we are safely away from the reach of your weapons."

They were a thin line back in the Pacific when the shaken auditors were able to lift their bruised bodies from the beach.

The lieutenant was a very intelligent man. Anybody who could be spared from the incessant labor of food-production for an overcrowded world had to be intelligent to rise above the common herd. He knew at once he had two imperative duties: first, to save face by arresting the chlorella-gatherers to keep them from talking; second, to convince his superiors of the truth of this incredible happening and to force the persuasion up through the ranks of officialdom until it reached somebody whose responsibility was secure.

Half a dozen times in the next fevered days it was pure chance that the whole unbelievable situation did not bog down. But somehow the message penetrated the ranks of command until on this afternoon Director General Stort stood face to face with a row of water-filled tanks and found himself in colloquy with something that to his amazed but scientific eye (he had once been professor of genetics in the Pan-

Scandinavian University) could be nothing but a super-dolphin.

The sleek gray head with its big smiling mouth and its calm, direct, opaque eyes gazed back at him with equal interest. Obviously his thoughts had been read.

"You are quite right," said the leader politely. "In fact, I might say that you can thank yourselves for our existence. For 550 years now you have been dumping atomic waste into the oceans—in lead containers, to be sure; but in time they leak.

"You have known that, and you have known that in consequence all salt-water fish have been irradiated until they are no longer fit for you to eat. Therefore you have planted the oceans ten feet deep with chlorella, which can be decontaminated, and left the deeper waters alone.

"What you have not known is that this same irradiation has caused specific genetic changes in us also—the dolphins, the whales, all of us whose home is the sea but who also breathe air. Only, in our case, the mutation has been beneficent, not maleficent. Not only are we the descendants of those who could survive deeper pressures, but our mental powers have increased tenfold.

"With all modesty, I may say that my own kind had the best brains to start with, and we still have. The whales and their kind are very useful to us; but we are the rulers."

Stort was so bemused he forgot for a moment the reason for his visit.

"How have you learned to speak English?" he asked.

Dolphins always smile; but the smile widened.

"We could always speak, even in the old days. You must know that; you took some of our ancestors captive and taught them your language. We speak all the tongues of men who dwell along the coasts of the world. We learned them very simply—by spies who frolicked in the shallow waters and listened and reported.

"It just happens that, as your main seat of world government is in this part of the land area, ours is in this section of the seas, so naturally when someone was appointed to deal with you, they chose one who could speak the language of the nearest land-region.

"But let us talk of more important things. I am here to give you an ultimatum."

Stort stiffened.

"Excuse me," said the leader suavely. "I did not mean to use an offensive word. Perhaps I do not know your tongue as well as I think I do. Let me say rather that I am here to give you a warning?

"What kind of warning? And by what authority?" Stort's tone still bristled.

The harsh voice dropped to a sibilant whisper.

"You know a little of our powers. I should be most reluctant to have to demonstrate how far we are in control. I am here at all only because of our sense of justice and our generosity. Do not push us too far. I implore you, as one living

being to another, to take us with the utmost seriousness. Believe me, the fate of your whole kind is in your hands today."

Stort felt a chill creep over him — whether born of premonition or induced by the stranger he did not want to know.

"I am only a representative," he said, in a more conciliatory manner. "I can carry messages. I cannot make final decisions by myself — and certainly not instant ones."

The leader seemed taken aback.

"You mean you are not yourself the chief authority?" it asked. "That is not the way in which our society is constituted. Is there no one, then, to whom we may speak once for all? Time is running out fast."

Stort made up his mind. He was aghast at the prospect but he dared not take the risk of refusing, after what he had already seen and heard.

"Only the assembled United Regions can consider any information you have to offer," he said coolly. "If you mean it in good faith, you must arrange to cross the continent and speak to them where they meet."

For the first time the super-dolphin seemed non-plussed.

"I am sorry," it said, "but that is totally impossible. We are not equipped for land travel — it is all we could do, with the aid of trained crabs and octopuses, to devise these containers you see, and to come in this far on the waves.

"We shall help all we can, with our mental influence, to make your mission successful; but your assembly, or enough of them to make and

implement decisions, must meet us here."

The leader paused.

"I cannot impress it upon you too strongly that there is no time to lose. We cannot delay much longer. You have the means of flying back and forth across the continent. I can give you no more than another seven days. Even then it may be too late."

Stort never knew how much was his own position and influence, how much the hypnotic ability of the super-dolphins, which seemed unchanged by distance. It was touch and go. Perhaps curiosity and incredulity had as much to do with it as anything — and the fact that the United Regions would foot the bill. But a week from that day three hyperjet planes, each holding a hundred passengers landed in utmost secrecy at the nearest airport, and soon after, 260 delegates to the UR (a clear majority) and 40 technicians with all their equipment, gathered on the wide beach, cleared for the day of chlorella-gatherers.

They waited an hour, and some were already restless and complaining, when at last the thin line appeared to the west, and in a few minutes scores of the water-filled tanks that kept the super-dolphins comfortable were ranged opposite them at the edge of the sea.

This time, however, the spokesman was apparently someone of far higher rank than the envoy with whom Stort had spoken. Apparently, because to human eyes the smiling invaders all looked alike. But the first words set them straight.

"I am glad," the dolphin said, "that you have heeded the injunction of the messenger we sent to you. Believe me, it is purely for your own sakes that we have put you to this trouble. I am authorized both to explain the situation to you, to make our final offer, and to receive your prompt acceptance—for I cannot imagine that you will not accept this one chance for your racial survival.

"But first, to make things plain, I must ask your speaker a few questions. You will understand that our knowledge of you land-people is necessarily limited to what our spies have been able to see and hear along all the coasts of all the oceans. Unfortunately our cousins in fresh waters have not mutated as we have, and so we have not been able to secure much information from them.

"Am I correct in assuming that there is a certain amount of over-population among you land-dwellers?"

There was some sardonic laughter from the men and women gathered on the shore, and a confused babble of voices. The super-dolphin's expression could not change, but it gazed pointedly at Stort as the appointed spokesman.

The Director General drew a deep breath.

"Unhappily," he said, "you are only too right. For 500 years now mankind has been over-producing itself, and despite immense efforts we have been unable to cut our population down to the optimum size. Contraception, sterilization,

abortion have all failed to compete adequately with the conquest of disease and the consequent increase in life expectancy. The one thing we have not been able to eradicate from human nature is the selfish desire of most individuals to perpetuate themselves, or their prejudices which prevent the establishment of proper eugenic standards."

"Strange!" exclaimed the official. "We had always understood that, next to ourselves as we have evolved, human land-dwellers were the most intelligent beings on earth. When we found ourselves faced with this problem, we found a solution though we had not your means of solving it; but you—

"But more of that later. Isn't the result the overcrowding of your living areas?"

"So much so," Stort replied, "that merely to feed this immense population takes practically every inch of earth that will grow vegetables or animals for men to eat. There has been one good result—wars have become obsolete and all mankind is united in a single effort to raise food. Our planet has become one huge food-factory, and the vast majority of the inhabitants are engaged in this one industry."

"By the whole planet, I take it you mean that smaller part which is dry land. But where then do you live?"

"That is our greatest problem. We had hoped to colonize the other planets of this solar system, or even to go beyond them to other systems. But every effort to do so has failed; the vast amounts of money

needed to make it possible cannot be spared from the amount necessary merely to raise enough food to keep mankind alive.

"Where do we live? We live, crowded together, with the individuality and leisure our ancestors knew a luxury none of us can afford, on mountain tops, in the few deserts we cannot irrigate, in barracks in the factory-farms themselves, but mostly in a vast network of underground tunnels. A few, who are very rich, live in satellite tracts above the stratosphere."

"That is even worse than we had anticipated," said the stranger slowly. "If we had known, perhaps we would have been able to postpone our solution of our own difficulties until you had found a better one for yours. But it is too late now.

"We did, though, from the beginning try to consider your welfare in making our plans. I shall not conceal from you the fact that there are two major schools of thought among us concerning you land-people. One very large group feels that you have not fulfilled your promise as a species, and that the time has come for your extinction. The other, which I myself represent, is still slightly in the majority. It feels that it owes you a certain gratitude, because — quite without any intention on your part, I grant — you made us what we are.

"I am sure that we, or any others of us who dwell in the ocean, never entered your minds when you dumped your atomic waste in our

living-space. Nevertheless, it is solely because of this inadvertent action on your part, that we dolphins, and to a certain extent the whales, have mutated into the highly evolved beings we are now. We are by nature altruistic. We feel that even accidental benefactors should be protected if it is at all possible. That is why we are making this attempt to save at least some of you."

"To save us from what?" Stort inquired bluntly.

There was no change in the super-dolphin's face, but Stort could have sworn that the small black eyes gazed on him with compassion.

"From certain and universal death," it said.

There was a murmur from the throng listening through their ear-phones. The speaker raised a flipper for silence.

"We too," it went on, "have our serious population problem. We too are finding our living-space insufficient for civilized existence. We can't make room for ourselves by destroying all other life except the edible — which in our case means the fish, poisonous now to you but not to us."

The fish. And it was true that no animal lived on earth any longer which could not be used as human food.

"Therefore we find it necessary to make the whole planet our dwelling-place."

"How?" asked Stort hoarsely.

"You know there are many rifts and faults in the earth's crust — more of them under the sea than in the land. There is a very deep

one in the mid-Pacific; there are others, almost equally deep, in the southern portion of that ocean you call the Atlantic. When there is a break in any of them it can alter the whole relation of sea and land.

"We have no machinery, but we have unlimited animal strength at our service. With the help of our trained whales, we have found that these rifts can be widened and opened. We have known that for a long time, and have abstained from action because we wished to protect you—which I feel in all honesty is more than you would have done for us in like circumstances.

"We can no longer do so. Our population has increased too greatly, and unlike you we have no technical means of regulating it. You have such means, but you have refused to enforce them. There is only one way by which we can find enough room for us to live and build our society for any conceivable time to come.

"We are going to open all the rifts and flood the earth."

Stort darted a glance at those nearest to him. He saw faces as white as his own must be.

"You can't do that!" he gasped. "It would be inhuman!"

Again the fixed smile seemed to widen.

"That," the dolphin official said succinctly, "would hardly be a consideration with us."

Pandemonium broke out. The throng of delegates went berserk. In a hundred different languages they screamed, howled, bellowed. The super-dolphins stood unmoved.

It was not any from the "underdeveloped" Asian or African Region, but two from Europe and one from North America who broke out from the crowd and dashed toward the row of tanks, forbidden ray-guns in their hands. They took only a few steps before they fell on the sand, paralyzed as had been the policemen and the chloreilla-gatherers at the first encounter.

"Don't be foolish," said the super-dolphin mildly. "You can't hurt us. And if you could, you would be only hurting yourselves, since I come bearing a suggestion by which some of you at least might be saved."

Scared and sobered, the delegates fell silent.

"Tell us your offer," Stort said.

The spokesman waited until the limp bodies had been carried to one side. All this time the other dolphins had neither spoken nor stirred. Now, at a nod from their leader, two of them detached themselves and surf-boarded their tanks down to watch over the stricken three. Then, with a glance of approval at Stort, the leader spoke again.

"You cannot live at all in our element," it began. "And we cannot live wholly in yours. We breathe air, as you know, just as you do, but we must live for the most part under water. You can swim in water, but you must spend most of your time in the air.

"We cannot adapt to land-living; we should be dehydrated in no time. That is why, for these meetings with you, we must stay in these containers, under water except when we come up to breathe or speak.

"We can do nothing for you yourselves. But if your progeny means so much to you, we can see to it that your race shall not die altogether."

"How?" Stort's voice was thick with strain.

Instead of answering, the leader turned to its companions. There was a whistling hubbub in their own speech muffled to human ears because the voices came not from mouths but from blow-holes. Then the leader turned to Stort again.

"Do you realize," it said, "that when we flood the land it will mean all the land? Your highest mountains will be drowned, your underground tunnels will be flooded. Even those you say live on satellites will slowly starve to death, since I assume their food is imported from earth."

The delegates' loud-speakers burst forth in a hullabaloo of protest, threat, and pleading. The dolphin leader stood unmoving and unmoved.

"We'll kill you all first!" yelled an Italian delegate. "Murderers!" screamed a delegate from Outer Mongolia. "Have mercy on us," pleaded a delegate from Syria. "Give us time at least to find a way to save ourselves!" pleaded a Venezuelan.

Stort stopped them with a gesture. His face was ashen under his fair hair.

"Sir," he said to the stranger, "I do not know your name —"

"We have no names."

"Then, sir, let me ask you: is this decision irrevocable?"

"Unfortunately for you, yes. We have tried every other way possible to us, and failed."

"How much time have we?"

"I told you I represented a majority. But it is a small majority. Our opponents were unwilling to give us even time to warn you."

"Then," said Stort, "you might as well have saved us and yourselves the effort, unless you really have some way out for us.

"You must know that our whole economy is based on automatic machinery, and that even if any of us could survive they couldn't survive long as a society. They couldn't even live on sea-food, for that is poison to us now, thanks to our own stupidity. Oh, yes, I'm not exonerating us; perhaps we deserve to die. But if we can even leave descendants, that would be better than nothing.

"So, do you really have anything feasible to suggest to us? If not, it would have been kinder to let disaster come upon us without foreknowledge."

"Stort," said the dolphin, "you are a brave and wise man. You are the first land-animal I have heard of whom I should think almost worthy to be one of us.

"I wish it had been possible to spare you and any others of your breed who are like you. It is not. But there is one chance, if you hurry, to prevent your utter extinction."

"What is it?" asked Stort eagerly. "Whatever it is —"

There was an affirmative murmur from the throng behind him.

"In the natural order of things, our two species could never interbreed. But we have found that among our own people we can, by our mental powers, alter the chromosomal pattern. We have been able to produce experimental crosses with other species of mammals—none, yet, as far removed from us as you; but there seems to be no insuperable obstacle.

"We are a proud people, and we do not like to mix our blood with that of inferiors. But we are also a just and generous people. We owe you what reparation we can make for what, to preserve ourselves, we are obliged to inflict upon you. It is a great, great sacrifice, but we have volunteered for it. At least we can console ourselves that your presence here must mean that you are among the most worthy of your kind.

"The party among us which is impatient for action may not wait for our return. But if any or all of you wish to take advantage of our offer, here and now, we are willing."

There was a profound silence. Then Stort said stiffly:

"You mean—there are females among you here?"

"I supposed you would know that we are *all* females," said the leader. "Female dolphins have always been more intelligent than the males. Few males among us could become important members of our government, such as we are."

The silence continued. Some delegates prayed. Several fainted.

"There is no time to lose," the harsh voice said. "We have wasted

too much already. If you wish to preserve your human genes—"

Suddenly all the super-dolphins raised their heads abruptly from their tanks. They conversed agitatedly among themselves.

Something's happened, they've sensed something, Stort thought. We need a miracle. Perhaps it's come.

He turned to the ranks of delegates. In the faces before him he saw fear, disgust, anger, hesitation, stoical resolution in a few.

"I think," he said quietly, "our visitors have something new to tell us." He turned expectantly.

"I am truly very sorry," the leader said. "We have waited too long. Time has run out. We have just received a mental message from our headquarters. In our absence, our opponents have overcome us. Our offer must be withdrawn.

"We could still do one thing for you—we could put you all to sleep."

"No!" cried mankind's last defiance of fate.

The super-dolphins turned without another word and glided back into the breakers.

And while the delegates stood in dread, eyes fixed on the ocean, something else arose on the horizon.

A wall of water so high it blotted out the sinking sun.

So that now we who inherited all the planet Earth will never know whether we could have mingled with the only other terrestrial race that came near to our own mentality.

Centuries later, we still keep finding the buried skeletons of what was once the Race of Man. END

ORIGIN OF SPECIES

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by MORROW

He traveled millions of years into the past to explore his own future!

I

The woolly mammothmobile lying on its side in the pinaster grove was a dead ringer for the one Farrell was driving—slightly larger than life, gleaming of tusk guns; authentic down to the minutest detail. Even if he hadn't followed its well-defined trail all the way from the entry-area he would have known

at once that it was the property of the two IPS employees he had returned to the Upper Paleolithic to find.

Frowning, he drove his own woolly mammothmobile deeper into the grove, opened the ear-hatch, extended the Jacob's ladderette, and climbed down to the ground. After making certain that his numb-gun was riding properly on his right hip, he

approached the fallen paleethnolovehicle warily. The heavy woollike material covering its thick steel skin was torn in several places and there was an ugly hole the size of a silver dollar in the region of its right hip. The ear-hatch had been forced open from the outside and hung forlornly on one hinge.

Farrell clambered up the flexible trunk-cannon to the temple and peered down into the cockpit. As he did so, a pungent odor touched his nostrils. Only one thing could be responsible for it—a burned-out powerpac. Clearly, whatever it was that had burned the hole in the mammothmobile's hip had found its mark.

His bewilderment mounting, he lowered himself into the cockpit. The control board, the automatic retro-co-ordinate calculator, and the lumilusion panel had been smashed beyond repair, apparently with a blunt instrument of some kind. The upholstery covering the two bucket seats had been torn to shreds. He crawled through the hatch behind the seats into the compact cabin.

The couch-bed had been stripped of its coverings, the food locker had been forced open and robbed of its contents, and the spare-parts bin had been overturned. The clothes cubicle had been broken into and mangled clothing—most of it women's—was scattered everywhere.

Stone Age teenagers?

Farrell didn't think so. He would sooner believe it was the work of adults—Cro-Magnon adults, in all likelihood. There were still a few

Neanderthals around, but they were well on their way toward extinction.

None of which explained the hole in the paleethnolovehicle's hip.

He had activated his pocket torch in order to view the interior of the cabin; now he directed its beam into the posterior compartment, where the powerpac was housed. The unit was burned out all right—burned out beyond repair. So intense had been the heat to which it had been subjected, in fact, that some of its parts had fused.

He returned to the cockpit, climbed through the ear-hatch, and used the temple as an eminence from which to survey his surroundings. The pinaster grove constituted part of the flora of a vast tableland that would someday be known as the south central plateau of France. In the east, young mountains showed. To the south and west, the plateau stretched verdantly away into the mists of distance. To the north, although he could not see it at the moment because of the trees, lay the glittering whiteness of the retreating glacier. He could smell the clean sweet coldness of ice and snow.

He peered deeper into the grove. Was that a man's booted foot protruding from those shadows over there?

He climbed down from the massive head and moved forward to investigate. Careful now—old saber-tooth might be around. Or *Canis dirus*, the wild dog. Or the giant sloths, *Myiodon* and *Megatherium*. Perhaps even Mr. Whoolly Mammoth himself.



Gene Andrews

The foot was attached to a leg, the leg to a torso, the torso to a head. The back of the head had been bashed in and the brains had been scooped out.

Farrell recognized the dead man as Professor Richards from a photograph the IPS official in charge of rescue operations had showed him. Lord! he hoped Miss Larkin, the professor's secretary, hadn't suffered a similar fate. He explored the rest of the grove, but saw no sign of her. Maybe the mammothmobile's attackers had taken her prisoner.

He had never seen Miss Larkin in person, but the same IPS official who had showed him the photograph of Professor Richards had let him view the job-resume tape that Miss Larkin had filed with the International Pale ethnological Society's employment division and which had resulted in her being hired on the spot. The tape showed her babysitting for her neighbor's children, doing housework, skiing down a chaste white mountain slope, walking to work in a neat blue suitdress, typing in a big busy office, addressing a business women's club, going to church — showed her, in short, engaging in just about every commendable activity there was to engage in, and proved conclusively that she was a nice, clean-living red-blooded American girl. On the desperate seas long wont to roam, Farrell had been looking for a nice clean-living red-blooded American girl all his life; consequently, the thought of losing one just as he was on the verge of finding her was unendurable.

Lord! he hoped that if they had

taken her prisoner the Neanderthals hadn't harmed her. For Neanderthals they were — no doubt about it. Granted, Cro-Magnons hunted the woolly mammoth too; but bashing in a man's skull and devouring his brains was exclusively a Neanderthal custom.

Presently he found impressions of her pointed shoe-boots among the grotesque trappings of the hunting party's trail. They had taken her prisoner all right — though for what reason, he couldn't imagine. Miss Larkin was stacked, and a beauty to boot; but a man's taste in women is arbitrarily determined by the size and shape of the females he has been brought up with, and the average Neanderthal was probably as susceptible to the charms of a twenty-first century American goddess as Farrell was to those of a she-ape.

He knew of course that he was dealing with someone besides Neanderthals. The Mousterian Culture Stage had given the world fire, the cudgel, and the stone-tipped spear, but so far as he knew it had never come up with a weapon capable of felling a woolly mammothmobile. Unquestionably there was a third party on the scene, either from Farrell's own time period or from a period beyond. In all probability they were responsible for Miss Larkin's having been taken prisoner.

Before leaving the grove, he dug a quick grave for Professor Richards and said a few words over it. Then he sent back news of the mishaps to IPS via his mammothmobile's one-way time radio. Owing to the

time stream's resistance to potential paradoxes, three hours had been as close as he'd been able to get to the first mammothmobile's arrival time; hence, assuming that he'd lost no time since leaving the entry-area and that the hunting party hadn't remained very long in the grove, his quarry was about two hours ahead of him. He glanced at his self-adapting timepiece. 3:10 P.M. He ought to be able to overtake them easily before dark.

One dead, one to go, he reflected bitterly as he drove out of the grove in the direction of the mountains. What made people like Professor Richards tick, anyway? Why had the damn fool had to come running back to the Upper Paleolithic just because he'd dug up an artifact that didn't rhyme with the Aurignacian Culture Stage? Farrell had examined the artifact in question before leaving for the past, and he was willing to admit that neither the subject matter nor the quality of the workmanship made Aurignacian sense; but he still couldn't see why a statuette, however exquisitely it might be carved, was worth going 30,000 years back in time to investigate.

He supposed he shouldn't be complaining, though. After all, if it weren't for pale ethnological idiots like Professor Richards, professional pastfinders like himself wouldn't be working.

II

Spring had dressed the lower slopes of the distant mountains in new bloom, but on the summits winter

still held sway. It was as though the glacier in withdrawing northward had left part of itself behind, and in a sense of course it had.

The green of the Pleistocene plateau was enlivened by sporadic populations of oaks, firs, chestnuts, beeches, and pinasters, and the Alice blue gown of the Cenozoic sky was embroidered with wispy motifs of scattered clouds. The "Stone Age—Late-Old-Middle—Excursion" pale ethnologic vehicle that IPS had issued to Farrell was a brand new one, and, thanks to its classification, lent itself nicely to the name of "Salome". He had already fallen in love with "her". She lumbered over the plateau with deceptive awkwardness, the one-way transparency of the nealloy that constituted her "skull" affording him an almost unlimited view in all directions. Riding in her cockpit was very much like riding in a howdah, except that the cockpit was an integral part of the conveyance and rested on a bed of gyrobearings that cancelled out the slightest lurch.

He saw a herd of musk oxen; he glimpsed a pack of wild dogs. A giant glyptodont shuffled out of sight behind a stand of hardy oaks. A Pleistocene condor winged by overhead, mighty twelve-foot wings cupping lofty columns of spring air. He passed the remnants of two musk oxen which the hunting party had killed, and knew that when he and Salome were far enough away the condor would descend and dine. But he saw no sign of *Smilodon*. Old saber-tooth was almost extinct in this day and age, having grown tusks

so long it could no longer open its mouth wide enough to devour its prey.

Hills appeared in the distance, grew closer. Salome took them in her stride. Cliffs were everywhere in evidence.

Caves . . . "Easy now, old girl — we should be almost on their tail."

The trail was less distinct now, owing to the rockiness of the terrain, but still easy to follow. Presently a small plain began, flanked on the right by a pinaster forest and on the left by a sparkling river. Far up ahead, a cliff far wider and higher than any of the others Farrell had seen took shape. The trail pointed directly toward it. Hundreds of cave mouths pockmarked its surface, leaving little doubt that it was his quarry's destination. By this time, they had already arrived. At least there was no sign of them on the plain.

He guided Salome into the pinaster forest and approached the escarpment behind a concealing fringe of outlying trees. When he was halfway there he saw a column of figures leave the sanctuary of the cliff and begin marching westward across the plain. He brought Salome to a halt behind a screen of coniferous foliage and watched it pass. Having assumed that it comprised another Neanderthal hunting party, he was astonished when it turned out to be made up of both Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons. The latter constituted the column proper and consisted of both men and women, all of them naked and un-

armed. He estimated them to be about thirty in number. They marched two abreast, and flanking them on either side were about a dozen Neanderthals armed with stone-tipped spears.

He stared after the column long after it had passed. There was a great deal he did not know about his prehistoric ancestors, but there was one thing he did know: Cro-Magnon hadn't been in the habit of calling on Neanderthal, and Neanderthal hadn't been in the habit of providing Cro-Magnon with protection.

Was it possible that the thirty men and women were prisoners and the Neanderthals were guards?

He shelved the mystery for the moment and continued on his way. The forest grew to within a stone's throw of the southern flank of the escarpment. He halted Salome in a well of late-afternoon shadows and, breaking out a chicken 'n biskit vacuumpac and a vacuumjug of coffee, surveyed the base of the cliff while he dined.

All along it, cook-fires burned, tended by hirsute women appareled in shaggy animal skins. Squat and hairy men were cutting chunks and strips of meat from the musk-ox quarters the hunting party had brought in. Dirty children were dashing here and there, getting in everyone's way and making general nuisances of themselves. The scene was highlighted by late-afternoon sunlight, darkened by shadows creeping in from the plain; softened by a strange haziness which Farrell attributed to the smoke rising from the fires.

He saw no sign of Miss Larkin. No doubt she had been consigned to one of the caves—either that, or she was lying bound somewhere, and blended with her background. There was yet another possibility, but he didn't care to consider it. As long as there was no evidence to the contrary, he would continue to believe she was still alive.

The Cenozoic sun descended behind distant hills and trees and the eastern sky adorned itself with the twinkling earrings of night. Farrell had two courses of action: he could approach the cliff openly in Salome or leave her behind in the forest and effect Miss Larkin's rescue through stealth alone. After due deliberation, he chose course number two, not because he preferred it but because he knew that the sight of Salome would send the cave men scurrying into their caves from the safety of which they would loose their spears, and if Miss Larkin were in the open she might be hit, and if she weren't he'd never be able to find her, or get to her if he did.

He backed Salome deeper into the woods and psyche-programmed her to withdraw the Jacob's ladderette after he reached the ground and to reclose her ear-hatch. Then he typed GRANITE OUTCROPPING on her lumillusion panel and turned the dial to On. Night had completely supplanted day when at last he crept from the forest and began making his way toward the cliff, and all the stars were out. Fortunately, there was no moon.

He expected to smell the caves,

but he didn't. Nor did he smell the smoke from the dwindling cook-fires. He was on his hands and knees now, creeping through tall coarse grass. Suddenly his head collided with an invisible barrier. When he reached out and touched it, his fingers came away tingling.

A force-field yet!

He shouldn't have been surprised, he supposed. Nevertheless, he was. Getting cautiously to his feet, he explored the invisible barrier further. It rose to a height higher than he could reach and appeared to extend in a semi-circle from the southernmost section of the cliff to the northernmost. Back on his hands and knees again, he began creeping along the base of the barrier. Presently, to his relief, he saw Miss Larkin. She was lying bound hand and foot near one of the cook-fires, and appeared to be unharmed.

Making himself as comfortable as possible in the tall grass, he withdrew a numb-gun cartridge from his ammo belt, removed the tiny amplifier, and emptied the electro-crystals into the palm of his hand. After emptying six more cartridges in a similar manner, he dumped the little pile of crystals into his handkerchief and tied the ends together. The ground was still damp from a recent rain—damp enough, at least, for his purpose. Digging a small hole, he placed the makeshift sack inside and covered it.

By this time, the evening meal had come to an end, and the cave men and women were retiring to their rocky bowers. He was afraid

for a while that Miss Larkin would be dragged into one of the caves, but she wasn't. Her captors left her lying by the fire, guarded by one of their number—a bristly fellow with a face that looked as though it had been stomped by a musk ox. Stupefied by the enormous amount of halfcooked meat he had devoured, the fellow was already beginning to nod, and presently his head dropped forward onto his craggy knees, which he had drawn up against his chest, fetus-fashion.

Farrell waited till he was reasonably certain that the other members of the tribe—and whatever non-members who happened to be on the scene—were fast asleep; then he dug up his homemade piezoelectric cocktail and tossed it against the force-field. There was a brief blue spark, an almost inaudible sputter, and a faint odor of ozone. So much for the force-field.

He crawled past the site of the vanished barrier on elbows and thighs. He could smell the caves now. And how he could! The girl was wide awake. When she saw him creep into the fading firelight, her eyes went wide. "Go back—go back!" she whispered hoarsely. "They left me here to lure you—don't you see?"

He saw only that her eyes were blue and that her sun-tanned face was like an angel's. Truly, it had never fallen to a man to rescue a fairer damsel in distress. He cut the gut-thongs that bound her wrists and ankles, and when her dark and lustrous hair brushed his cheek as he raised her to her feet.

Loss of circulation caused her to stagger, and he picked her up. "You idiot!" she said. And then, "Run for it—maybe there's time!"

There wasn't, though. Three out-size Neanderthals came out of the shadows just as Farrell was about to take off for the forest. One of them wore a saber-tooth tigerskin and was clearly the leader. He had a mouth like a bear trap, and as Farrell stared he opened it and out of it came a blue bolt that knocked Farrell silly and sent him sagging to the ground, Miss Larkin on top of him.

III

While Miss Larkin was anything but slight, she was far from being an unbearable burden. It was Farrell's head that was the unbearable burden. It felt twice its normal size and thrice its normal weight, and he could barely hold it high enough to view his three adversaries.

The one who had unleashed the blue bolt stooped down and relieved him of his numb-gun, his ammo belt his timepiece, his pocket torch, and his hunting knife; then he proceeded to examine each object in turn in the firelight. His eyes were large and strangely flat, and held not the faintest glimmer of intelligence or anything else. At length he emitted several monosyllabic grunts, and one of his companions jerked the girl to her feet. The other one jerked Farrell to his, and he and Miss Larkin were hustled over to the mouth of a nearby cave and shoved inside.

When his legs went out from under him, Farrell thought at first that it was the result of the shock-charge he'd absorbed. It wasn't, though. It was the result of the twelve-foot discrepancy that existed between the level of the ground and the level of the cave floor. The fall netted him a bruised ear and a skinned elbow, and cost him a lungful of air when Miss Larkin landed on top of him.

She bounced off his back like a rubber ball. As soon as he got his breath back, he felt around for her in the inky darkness. "Ooh!" Miss Larkin said.

He jerked his hand away. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to be fresh. Are you all right, Miss Larkin?"

There was a brief silence, during which he received the definite impression that she was adding up the little she knew about him thus far in an attempt to arrive at some kind of a conclusion. Presently, "I—I guess so," she said. "Are you?"

"I'll be all right. My name's Alan Farrell—IPS sent me back for you and Professor Richards when you didn't report in."

"It was noble of you to try to rescue me, Mr. Farrell. I'm—I'm sorry I called you an idiot."

"Now, now, Miss Larkin—I'm a professional pastfinder. It's my job to rescue people." The words sounded corny even to him and he had a hunch he'd heard them before—probably on 3V. "In a moment I'll see about getting you out of here and back to the present," he went on, "but first, we'd better bring each other up to date. You said when you first saw me that you'd been left out

in the open to lure me. That means Blue Bolt and his buddies knew I was coming. *How* did they know?"

"I don't think they did know for sure," Miss Larkin said. "Probably they guessed that my disappearance would be investigated." Her voice caught a little. "I—I guess you know about poor Professor Richards."

Farrell wanted to find her hand in the darkness and give it a reassuring squeeze, but remembering his faux pas of a moment ago, he decided not to do any more fumbling around in the dark. "I gave him a decent burial, Miss Larkin—it was all I could do."

Miss Larkin sighed. "He was such a dear sweet old man. Twenty of those terrible creatures attacked our mammothmobile and that horrid one in the tigerskin burned a hole right through it with that same blue bolt he hit you with, only a thousand times stronger. They grabbed Professor Larkin first and then they grabbed me. I—I thought they were going to do the same thing to me that they did to him, and they would have, too, if Blue Bolt and those two others hadn't stopped them. They're the leaders, I think, only Blue Bolt has the most to say. Are they from the future, do you think, Mr. Farrell?"

"They must be. Thieves, probably, who looked enough like Neanderthals to begin with to pass themselves off as the real thing with the help of a little perma-make-up. I can't imagine, though, what they expect to steal in this time period. Maybe they're from *our* future. That

would explain the oral energy beam." Farrell got to his feet. "Well Miss Larkin, we're wasting time. I said I'd get you out of here, and I will."

"Mr. Farrell, I'm glad you showed up. You're the answer to a lonely girl's prayer."

It made him feel big and strong to know that she trusted him implicitly, and the feeling of tenderness which she had already evoked in him became more profound. He began exploring the cave, working his way along the walls with only his fingers to guide him. His head was still heavy from the effects of Blue Bolt's blue bolt, but no permanent damage had been done, and after a while the heaviness went away.

The cave proved to be a natural dungeon, circular in shape and some fifteen feet in diameter. He went over every inch of the vertical walls, or at least every inch within reaching distance, and finally he found what he was searching for—a crevice. As the cliff was honeycombed with caves—its pockmarked facade would admit of no other conclusion—any crevice could very well indicate the presence of a thin partition.

This one was wide enough at one point for him to work his arm into. Less than a foot beyond the wall, the fissure spread outward, and his groping hand encountered nothingness. He was certain that it spelled an adjacent cave and equally as certain that he could work his way through. "Miss Larkin," he whispered, "give me a hand, will

you? I think I've found a way out of here."

She joined him, and together they began widening the crevice. The rock was loose for the most part, but working it free was slow work and the need to proceed quietly made the job even slower. He became consciously aware of Miss Larkin's perfume. He'd been unconsciously aware of it all along. It was the evocative-association type, and all the while he worked he kept seeing apple orchards in springtime bloom, and meadows clad with buttercups and daisies. Lord! It was wonderful being with a nice girl for a change. He'd never frequent another ecdysiast dive or another Easter Rabbit Club as long as he lived!

Hours passed. They rested now and then, sitting side by side in the darkness. Faint drafts of fresh air wafted sporadically through the opening they were working on, proving that whatever else it might be, the cave beyond wasn't a dead end. Finally—long after midnight, Farrell estimated—the aperture was wide enough for them to crawl through. "I'll go first, Miss Larkin," he said. "In the interest of safety. When I give the word, you follow."

The cave into which he presently crawled was a disappointment. In fact, it brought to mind an outside burrow more than it did a cave. At best, it could be classified as a narrow tunnel. But it was better than nothing. "All right, Miss Larkin," he said over his shoulder. "Keep just behind me."

As nearly as he could determine,

the tunnel ran parallel to the face of the cliff. As the faint drafts of fresh air seemed to be coming from the left, he set out in that direction, crawling on his hands and knees. Miss Larkin just behind him. For an interminable time, conditions did not improve. The tunnel grew narrower, if anything, and turned first this way and then that. Farrell began to be worried. "If this keeps up," Miss Larkin said cheerfully, "I shan't have to go on a diet for at least another year."

Fortunately, it didn't keep up. The tunnel, after slanting sharply upward for several dozen feet, grew suddenly wider, and Farrell found he could stand upright. Miss Larkin stood up beside him. "I—I think we'd better hold hands," he said. "There may be drop-offs."

It was her hand that found his. He gripped it tightly. Oh, how he yearned to tell her how wonderful it was to be with her—how sick he was of ecdysiast dives and Easter Rabbit Clubs; of girls who thought no more of taking off their clothes than they did about smoking a cigarette. But he held himself in check. She probably didn't even know there were such girls.

The tunnel continued to turn this way and that. They felt their way slowly along its walls. Farrell had a hunch they were in a labyrinth rather than in a single tunnel, but he didn't say so. There was no point in alarming Miss Larkin, and anyway, the drafts of fresh air he had pinned their hopes upon continued to fan his face.

Presently the tunnel—whether it

was the original one or not, he had no way of knowing—narrowed and took on an upward pitch. It wasn't long before he and the girl were crawling again. "I—I think the ground's trembling," Miss Larkin said after they had proceeded for about a hundred feet. "May—maybe we should go back."

IV

Farrell felt the trembling himself. A moment later he heard a faint humming sound which he recognized as the muffled throbbing of a powerful generator. Clearly, the cliff housed more than a Neanderthal community—an eventuality for which the presence of the force-field should have prepared him.

"It's all right, Miss Larkin," he said over his shoulder. "We're on the right track. We should be out of here in no time."

He wormed his way around a bend, discovered that he could dimly make out the walls of the tunnel. After worming his way around two more, he saw, far up ahead, an uneven circle of wan light. "Chin up, Miss Larkin," he whispered. "We're almost there."

He slowed his pace as he neared the opening and cautioned her to move as silently as she could. The humming sound was much louder now, the trembling of the ground more pronounced. At length he crawled out onto a wide ledge that looked down into a mammoth semi-natural cavern, one whole wall of which was given over to a huge gleaming machine.

Miss Larkin crawled out on the ledge beside him. There was a smudge of dirt on her right cheek, her dark hair hung in damp wisps over her forehead, her khaki blouse was torn in several places, and her once immaculate culottes were a mess. But her eyes were no less heavenly than they had been before and her face still had the aspect of an angel's. Farrell was more certain than ever that she was the Girl for Him.

She gasped when she peered below. Farrell had already taken in the scene. The machine consisted of multicolored banks of computers, glowing mazes of coils, and weird complexities of gleaming wires. At the base of the wall opposite the ledge was the source of the humming sound—a giant generator. As nearly as he could ascertain, it was powered by gasoline, distilled probably by Blue Bolt & Co. from a local petroleum deposit. Illumination was provided by a battery of superfluors suspended some twenty feet below the stalactitic ceiling (and some ten feet below the ledge) and aligned in such a way that their radiance bathed the machine and its immediate foreground in unadulterated brightness, leaving the rest of the huge chamber in relative darkness. In the wall opposite the machine a wide archway gave access to a natural corridor that led, if the freshness of the air was a dependable index, to the outside world.

There were fifteen Neanderthals present. Three of them were Neanderthaloids—i.e., Blue Bolt and

his buddies. The rest were of the ordinary garden variety. The latter were armed with stone-tipped spears which they carried slung on their shoulders, and were lounging here and there about the room. The former were facing a twinkling control panel at the base of the machine. Inset in a maze of wires next to the panel was what looked at first glance like a full-length looking glass. The trouble was, it didn't reflect light; instead, it absorbed it—or seemed to. The result was a sort of abysmal blackness that transcended ordinary blackness and gave the viewer a queasy feeling.

It dawned on Farrell finally that the looking glass was the focal point of the entire machine—the *raison d'etre* for the whole fantastic scene they witnessed.

"Look," Miss Larkin said, pointing. "There's a way we can get down."

Sure enough, the edge of the ledge nearest the exit gave onto a series of stone steps that had been cut into the cavern wall. The crude stairway curved down to a point on the cavern floor that was less than ten feet from the archway, and, dimly lit as the wall was, would have made an ideal avenue of escape if it hadn't been for the three Neanderthals lounging near the exit and for the force-field which awaited beyond the cliff-face. (There was no question in Farrell's mind that by this time the barrier had been repaired.)

"Do you know what I think?" Miss Larkin said brightly. "I think that this was once a ceremonial chamber of some kind. It was prac-

tically on this very spot that Professor Richards dug up the Chateau du Bois artifact." Abruptly she frowned. "But that doesn't add up at all, does it? The experts estimated that the artifact originated sometime this year, which means that it couldn't possibly have played a part in the past ceremonies. Anyway," she went on blithely, "this still could have been a ceremonial chamber and Blue Bolt could have converted it for his own purposes, and this ledge here could have been where the witch doctor presided over the sacrifices, and that passage we came through could have been his secret hideout."

Farrell looked at her. She didn't sound as though she knew beans about paleoethnology. But then, you had to remember that she wasn't a paleoethnologist. Still and all, though, as a secretary for IPS she ought to have learned *something*. But he was being unfair. "I think you're right, Miss Larkin," he said loyally. "One hundred per cent right. Gosh," he went on, unable any longer to hold himself in check, "it's wonderful talking to a girl like you for a change. I saw your job-resume tape and knew what a warm and wonderful girl you were even before I came back to rescue you; but gosh, I didn't realize you were *this* warm and wonderful."

She blushed the way a pretty girl should. "Now you've gone and put me on a pedestal, Mr. Farrell. You shouldn't do that to a girl, you know, unless you're willing to pick up the pieces after she falls off and put

them back together again." For some reason she seemed eager to change the subject. "Did IPS equip you with a palee—palee—with a means of transportation?" she asked.

He nodded. "A woolly mammoth-mobile. She's hidden in the woods about a hundred yards from the cliff, lumillusioned to look like a granite outcropping. If we can get to her, we'll be all set. Trouble is, how do we do it?"

He returned his gaze to the scene below. It had changed somewhat since his last surveillance. Blue Bolt was stabbing home buttons on the control panel and the two other Neanderthaloids had stationed themselves on either side of the looking glass. The ordinary garden variety had unslung their spears and formed a staggered aisle between the looking glass and the archway. It was clear from their determined mien that they meant business.

"It looks like some kind of a reception committee," Miss Larkin observed.

And in essence, that was what it turned out to be. Farrell couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the first Cro-Magnon step out of the looking glass. But they must have told him the truth, because presently a second one emerged from the blackness and stood beside the first. They were tall and tanned, and wore neither clothing nor ornaments. The brightness of the radiance in which they stood gave their faces a distinctness that carried all the way to the ledge. Farrell suffered a second shock. The faces were typically Cro-Magnon—strong of chin, aquiline of nose, and



deep set of eyes—but they were overcast, disfigured almost, by expressions of evil that were almost tangible.

Were *these* his ancestors?

One of the two Neanderthaloids stationed beside the looking glass made a gesture with his left arm and the two Cro-Magnons walked down the aisle of Neanderthals and halted several feet from the exit. Two more stepped out of the looking glass—a man and a woman, this time, and no less malignant of countenance than their two predecessors—and the process was repeated. Farrell realized then that he was witnessing the forming of a column similar to the one he had seen the previous afternoon. He also realized something else. “Why,” he

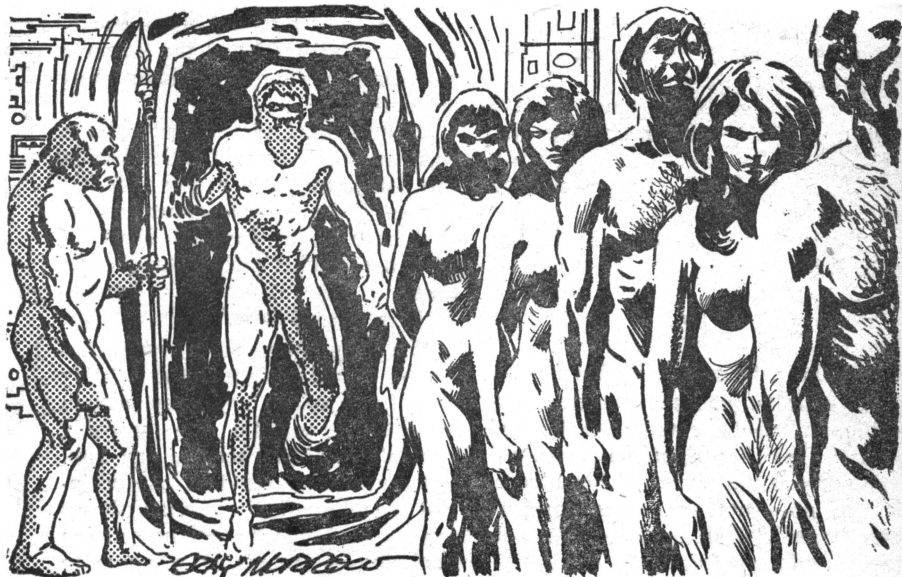
gasped, “the machine’s a matter transmitter! We’re watching a migration from another planet!”

Miss Larkin’s blue eyes were round. “But why another planet, Mr. Farrell? Couldn’t they be migrating from a different part of this one?”

“But this is where Cro-Magnon originated, Miss Larkin.” Didn’t she know *anything* about paleethnology? “This is where he spread out from. It all adds up, don’t you see? His sudden appearance on the prehistoric scene. His marked difference from any of the other races. Everything.”

“Well it doesn’t add up to me,” Miss Larkin said. “If they’re from another planet, Blue Bolt and those other two creeps must be from the same one. So why don’t they look like each other?”

“Probably because they’re repre-



sentatives of two different races. And then, too, Blue Bolt and his two friends probably made a few changes in their appearance in order to pass themselves off as Neanderthals. Either before or after they were deposited on Earth to build the receiving end of the matter transmitter. They needed help, and what better way was there for them to get it than by ingratiating themselves with a local tribe of cave men by promising them safety and a constant supply of fresh meat. It takes man power as well as brains to establish a penal colony."

"A penal colony? You mean the Cro-Magnons are prisoners?"

"It certainly looks that way. Vicious criminals, if the expressions on their faces mean anything. Once they're escorted out of the imme-

diat vicinity they're probably turned loose to shift for themselves, but to all intents and purposes, Earth to them is a planetary Devil's Island. That transmitter has probably been operating for months."

They watched as more Cro-Magnons emerged from the "looking glass". There were as many women as there were men, and all of them—men and women alike—looked as though they'd murder their best friend at the drop of a hat. At length the column was complete—Farrell estimated its number to be about thirty—and the Neanderthal guards escorted it from the chamber.

Abruptly he realized that there were no guards at the rear.

That was when the idea hit him. Right between the eyes.

Could Neanderthals count?

Would Miss Farrell, if circumstances demanded it, consent to taking off her clothes?

She was going to have to take them off, nice girl or no nice girl. Otherwise his plan wouldn't work. And he was going to have to take his off, too.

He hoped that she was tanned all over.

V

Blushing, he told her what he had in mind and the supreme sacrifice it would entail. She blinked once; then her right hand strayed absently to the zipper of her blouse. "No, no — not yet, Miss Larkin!" he gasped. "Wait until the next column's almost formed."

While it was forming he concentrated on the machine. He didn't know whether he could psyche-program the computers or not, nor did he know whether the time stream in this instance would brook interference. But he did know that at one time or another someone had thrown a monkey wrench in the works, because in a planetary sense only a few Cro-Magnon prisoners had come through. That someone could very well have been himself.

First of all, he had to devise a time-unit. The amount of time consumed in forming a column would do. He visualized eight such operations; then he visualized an overload building up in the step-down transformer and spilling through the transmitter proper. Finally he pictured the transmitter bursting into flame, the coils disintegrating, and

the computers belching black smoke. In effect, he instructed the machine to commit suicide some three hours in the future.

By this time the second column was two-thirds formed. Miss Larkin was fingering the zipper of her blouse. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn she was eager to take her clothes off. "Now?" she asked.

He nodded. "Now."

The ledge was wide enough for her to stand upright without being seen from below, and deep enough in shadow so that she probably couldn't have been seen in any case. After getting to her feet, she unzipped her blouse and slipped it slowly from her shoulders, gently rotating her hips as though in response to music only she could hear. Farrell stared.

The blouse floated down to the ledge, forming a little khaki hill. Her eyes were half closed by now, and there was a dreamy expression on her face. She moved a step to the right and a step to the left and kicked off her shoes. Her culottes were the next to go. Farrell tried to turn his eyes away, but for the life of him he couldn't. Off came her brassiere. She tossed it into the air and he caught it just in time to keep it from drifting down into the chamber below. Her hips were moving rhythmically now and the upper part of her body was turning first to the left and then to the right. Poor Farrell sagged down on the ledge. He felt like a fool.

Well anyway, she was tanned all over . . .

So was he. He picked up his discarded clothes and hers too and tossed them back into the tunnel. Miss Larkin, eyes completely closed now, was still doing the bump and grind. She did it well. this chaste young damsel in distress — and how she did! He knew professional finesse when he saw it. He cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt you. Miss Larkin," he said icily, "but the column's nearly formed and we'd better be on our way."

She gave a little jump and opened her eyes. She seemed surprised to see him standing there, and she looked around the cavern as though she'd forgotten where she was. Then she looked at him again, and blushed. "I'm — I'm ready, Mr. Farrell."

He led the way, moving slowly and telling her to do likewise. They were almost invisible against the cavern wall, but any sudden movement might betray them. Farrell kept a watchful eye on both the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons, but the former were completely preoccupied with their guard duties and the latter kept their eyes straight ahead. As for Blue Bolt & Co., they had eyes only for the machine.

When Farrell and the girl reached the floor of the chamber, the column was already moving out. They waited till the last second; then, when the backs of the Neanderthal guards were turned, they slipped swiftly into line.

So far, so good.

Roomy to begin with, the corridor had been enlarged in many places to give it uniform height and width. Wan and fitful light was supplied by

torches inset in the walls. Drafts of fresh cold air sent the flames to flickering every now and then and caused shadows to dance upon the walls. The Cro-Magnons spoke sporadically to one another in a language that was millennia dead. Neither they nor the Neanderthal guards were aware that the column was slightly longer than it was supposed to be.

"That was a dilly of a dance you did back there," Farrell said out of the side of his mouth.

Miss Larkin kept her gaze straight ahead. "I — I gave myself away, didn't I?"

"You sure did," Farrell said. "What ecdysiast dive did you strip in before you turned over a new leaf?"

"Big Bust Anna's in Old York. I can have my old job back any time I want."

"What I can't figure," Farrell said, "is why you quit it in the first place."

"A girl gets sick of — of certain things. And you needn't sound so pained. I told you you shouldn't put a girl on a pedestal unless you were willing to pick up the pieces when she fell off."

"Another thing I can't figure," Farrell said, "is what prompted you to give a professional performance just because I asked you to take your clothes off."

"Be — before I went to work at Big Anna's I used to practice nights in my room. I practiced so much that taking off my clothes and doing a professional strip-tease became one and the same thing, and now I can't

do one without doing the other, it's such a habit. I—I wasn't even aware of what I was doing back on the ledge."

The column was rounding a bend. In the distance, dawnlight showed. "Still another thing I can't figure," Farrell said, "is how you faked that job-resume tape."

"What world are you living in, Mr. Farrell? That sort of thing is done everyday. Almost any job agency will fix you up if you give them a big enough bribe."

"That was a real dill of a shot of you skiing down that mountain slope. All that clean chaste snow!"

"The trouble with you, Mr. Farrell, is you're a self-righteous pedestal pusher. I'm sorry to have to say such a mean thing after you risked your life to save mine and everything, but it's true. Do you know why Big Bust Anna and people like her drive Cadillettes? It's because men like you make them rich. You don't really like the girls you keep putting on pedestals — you just think you do. You keep wishing they'd fall off so you could have some fun, and when they don't you head for the nearest ecdysiast bar and make passes at some poor girl like me who's trying to make a living in the only way she knows how. It's because of men like you that I made up my mind to become a secretary even if I had to lie to do it."

"I figured you'd get around to blaming me," Farrell said.

By this time the column was emerging into the light of early morning. Squatting by the cave

mouth was a Neanderthal woman with an earthen bowl resting on her lap. Beside her was a large pile of pebbles and every time a pair of Cro-Magnons passed she dropped two pebbles into the bowl. It was what Farrell had been afraid of. Undoubtedly the transmitter was equipped with an automatic counter and in all probability the woman's job was nothing more than a sinecure; nevertheless, if each batch of prisoners was numerically the same she might notice a discrepancy.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he and Miss Larkin came out of the cave. She picked up two more pebbles, started to drop them into the bowl — and paused. She stared at Farrell and Miss Larkin as though she didn't believe they were really there; then, apparently concluding that they must be, she added the two pebbles to the others. Farrell exhaled a sigh of relief.

A brisk wind was blowing down from the glacier. He realized how cold he was, and glancing sideways at Miss Larkin, he saw that she was covered with goose flesh. The Cro-Magnons, though, didn't seem to be in the least affected. They were lean and hard-bitten, both men and women. Probably they had been prisoners for some time and were used to physical discomfort. He wondered how high on the ladder of civilization their race had climbed. A staggering incongruity existed between the weapons they would invent and the matter transmitter that had transported them through space; but then, as criminals they probably weren't particularly conversant with the

technical miracles of their age. Without tools to work with there would be little they could accomplish in any case. They were doomed to become what in one sense they had become already — Stone Age savages, far more capable and resourceful than the savages who had come before them, but not a great deal higher on the evolutionary ladder.

It chilled him to think that modern man had descended from creatures such as they, but it didn't surprise him. He was glad that he'd tried at least to knock out the transmitter and bring the sordid practice to an end. And who knew — perhaps he'd succeeded.

The force-field had been temporarily deactivated and the column was now filing out onto the plain. The pinaster forest was temptingly close. In a few moments now he and Miss Larkin would be abreast of the spot where Salome was hidden. "Get ready," he whispered. "When I say 'now', start running for the woods."

She nodded to show that she understood.

He was certain that they could easily outdistance the awkward Neanderthals and anticipated no difficulty in evading their spears, which were not primarily throwing weapons anyway. But the problem didn't prove to be quite that simple. He guessed what had happened when he heard a shout from behind and turned and saw Blue Bolt and his two confederates pounding toward the column: the pebble woman, driven by her suspicions, had turned her pebble in and the discrepancy had

been discovered. A glance into the empty cave-dungeon had been enough to inform Blue Bolt who the two extra "Cro-Magnons" were.

"Now!" Farrell said, and seized Miss Larkin's hand, bowled over the nearest Neanderthal with a shoulder butt, and began running toward the forest.

Blue Bolt waved the guards back and gave pursuit with his two buddies.

Farrell was astonished at the trio's speed. They moved so fast, their legs were mere blurs. Abruptly a blue bolt shot out of Blue Bolt's mouth.

It missed by a mile, but its intensity left no doubt that he was all through taking prisoners.

Farrell upped his speed, forced Miss Larkin to do likewise by pulling her along beside him. Only their head start enabled them to reach Salome in time. He had to cancel out her lumillusion field to find her ear-hatch.

After psyching it open and psyching down the ladder, he and Miss Larkin clambered into the cockpit and he closed and secured the hatch.

Blue Bolt & Co. were less than twenty yards away now, streaking toward the woolly mammothmobile on blurred legs. Blue Bolt had his mouth open again. At such close range, he couldn't possibly miss, and Salome's shield-field hadn't been made to withstand such a weapon. There was only one thing to do, and Farrell did it: he time-jumped the massive paleoethnologicvehicle into the future.

After the usual interval of grayness and the usual lurch, the forest came into view again, and, through its coniferous foliage, the plain and the cliff. Farrell had tried for one hour, and the position of the sun told him he'd obtained it. Apparently there were no potential paradoxes in the immediate future.

The plain was empty of both Cro-Magnons and Neanderthals. Blue Bolt and his buddies were no more.

Farrell retired to the cabin, got into a spare pair of self-fitting fatigues, and threw a similar pair up to Miss Larkin. By the time he crawled back into the cockpit carrying two pairs of sock-shoes, she was decent again.

Sitting in the two bucket seats, they slipped their feet into the shoes. "Now," said Farrell, "if they haven't set up an ambush, we've got it made. We'll —"

He paused, staring. Where a moment ago thin air had been, Blue Bolt and his buddies stood. Blue Bolt had his mouth open.

Farrell punched out another hour on the automatic retro-co-ordinate calculator. There was a second gray interval, a second slight lurch; then the forest and the plain and the cliff again, illumined by a sun still higher in the morning sky. "*They* can time-jump too!" he gasped. "Worse, they've got a fix on us."

He threw Salome into gear, sent her charging straight ahead for thirty yards, halted her and turned her around. Then he aligned the trunk-cannon and waited. A minute passed.

Two. At length three tenuous forms took shape, solidified into Blue Bolt & Co. But this time the trio's backs were turned. It was kill or be killed. Farrell dispatched three shells just as the Neanderthaloids turned around. All of them found their mark. *Plugg! Plugg! Plugg!* they went, and three ragged holes appeared in three hairy chests.

But for some reason, the Neanderthaloids didn't go down. Instead, they remained standing where they were. Like statues. Presently smoke began pouring out of their mouths. Their noses. Their ears. And then, as Farrell and Miss Larkin stared, a little hatch opened in the side of Blue Bolt's head, a little foil ladder came down, and two tiny stick-men emerged and descended to the ground. They set out frantically in the direction of the cliff and a moment later they disappeared into the tall plain-grass.

Less than a second later, hatches opened in the sides of Blue Bolt's buddies' heads, and four more tiny stick-men took off for the cliff.

"Well I'll be damned!" Farrell said. "Here all the while we thought we were dealing with Cro-Magnon's fellow men and we were dealing with Lilliputian aliens riding around in paleoethnologicvehicles. This is a galactic operation — not a local one. I'll bet a Girl Scout cookie those stickmen are members of a galactic police force!"

Miss Larkin's angelic face was pink with excitement. "They're more than that, Mr. Farrell. They're dead ringers for that artifact Professor

Richards dug up. It's stone, I know, but just the same I'll bet it's one of them. Somehow they looked like they were made of some kind of stone to me. Could they be?"

He nodded. "Probably not stone exactly, but a combination of elements that could become stone over a period of 30,000 years. Beyond a doubt, they're silica-based lifeforms. And those vehicles of theirs were more than mere vehicles—they were spacesuits, too. Special-built LEMs for Earth use. They probably can't live in an atmosphere like this one for more than a quarter of an hour."

"Let's try to find them," Miss Larkin said.

"We'd be wasting our time. They've probably reached the matter transmitter by this time and—"

He paused. A chorus of terrified screams had reached his ears, and looking toward the cliff, he saw black smoke and frantic Neanderthals issuing from the caves. The monkey wrench he had thrown in the works had borne fruit: the transmitter had responded to his psychoprogramming and committed suicide.

He explained to Miss Larkin what had happened. "I don't know whether they built another one later on or not," he said, "but I doubt it." And then, "Apparently all of them got through in time except one, and since IPS already has that one, there's no point in our hanging around here any longer."

Miss Larkin looked wistfully out over the plain. "N—no, I guess there isn't," she said.

By this time, flames had all but destroyed Blue Bolt's buddies, but Blue Bolt himself was made of sterner stuff. Probably he was a newer model. In any event, smoke had ceased issuing from his mouth, nose, and ears, and Farrell was able to strap him on Salome's back for later examination by IPS. Before doing so, he peered through the head-hatch. He saw two tiny bucket seats, a Lilliputian, unbelievably complex, control panel, a little loud speaker, and a small television screen. Mounted between the seats, its muzzle out of sight beyond an airtight partition, was a diminutive energy gun.

He climbed back into the woolly mammothmobile and sat down beside Miss Larkin. He threw the palethnologicvehicle into gear. "Come on, Salome, let's go."

A time-wave message from IPS was awaiting him in the entry-area. It registered on Salome's electronic bulletin board the moment she entered the time field. MISS LARKIN OBTAINED POSITION BY RECOURSE TO FRAUDULENT MEANS. it read, AND HAS BEEN FIRED IN ABSENTIA. IPS ASSUMES NO FURTHER RESPONSIBILITY FOR HER WELFARE AND YOU ARE ORDERED TO RETURN PRESENTSIDE IMMEDIATELY.

Miss Larkin emitted a little sigh. "Well," she said. "I guess it's back to the ecdysiast mines." And then, "I—I think I ought to tell you before it's too late, Mr. Farrell, that all ecdysiasts aren't—aren't—well, they just aren't what you probably think they are. She gave him a wist-

ful look, and he saw that she was crying. "Ah — anyway, I hope you'll come to see me at Big Anna's."

Sure he'd go to see her. *Sure* he would. Like so much mud! Some damsel in distress she'd turned out to be! Leading him on with that nice-girl line of hers and building up his hopes and renewing his faith in womankind, and then, when he was half gone on her, doing a strip-tease right before his very eyes! That would be the day when he went to see *her!*

"Good-by," he said, when they arrived at the time-station, and walked away without another word.

"What'll you have, sir?" asked the woman with the enormous bosom.

Haunted, Farrell sat down on an empty barstool. "Beer," he said. And then, "What time does Miss Larkin come on?"

"You mean Laurie? She'll be

on any minute now," she answered.

Farrell sipped his beer and kept his eyes on the large dais at the end of the crowded bar. Presently the fluoros were dimmed and the platform was bathed in pale blue radiance from an overhead spotlight. A moment later Miss Larkin stepped into view. She was wearing a golden shift, cobweb stockings, and glass slippers. Taped music sounded, and she began to dance.

Farrell let her get as far as the first layer of underthings. Then he barged down the bar, reached up and grabbed her ankle, and pulled her down beside him. She gasped when she recognized him, and stopped kicking and biting, and a twinkle came into her eyes. He slung her over his shoulder, cave-man style. "If you're going to dance for anybody, you're going to dance for me," he said, and carried her out of the bar and down the street to the nearest matrimonialmat. **END**

Next Month in *If* . . .

With the new expanded size of *If* we can bring a lot of additional material to you each month; so next month, besides a hefty chunk of *Reiff's War*, we present a complete short novel by Kenneth Bulmer, *The Doomsday Men*. The thing about the Men is the nature of their jobs. They are detectives, in a way. They solve murders, or try to. And the way they do it is by entering the minds of the victims . . . and what they find there is sometimes more fearful than the act of murder itself . . .

It looks as though we'll also include two novelettes at least — Fred Saberhagen's latest Berserker story, *The Masque of the Red Shift*, and a fine job by Gordon R. Dickson called *Tiger Green*. And shorts, of course.

And a little farther ahead — well, we've just been through one of those great, and all too infrequent, times in an editor's life when he starts a covey of first-rate stories and bags a harvest of beauties. Just for instance: Heinlein's newest novel starts on the heels of *Reiff's War* — and we think it's his best in years. Then comes a Keith Laumer-Rosel G. Brown collaboration called *Earthblood* and Algis Budrys's *The Iron Thorn* — all serials, and all the kind we're proud to present. Add to that some long novelettes and short novels by Poul Anderson. A. E. Van Vogt, Hal Clement and others, either in hand or on the way, and you can see why we think *If* is no iffy proposition for your reading pleasure!

PURPOSE

by EDWARD V. DONG

*Men had created the Machine.
Now the Men were gone — and
it had to make its own plans!*

The Machine sat on a lonely hill on a bleak, desolated Earth — an Earth devastated by an interstellar nucleonic storm. It pondered the reason of its continued existence.

Fact: It was brought into being by the last men — by the last of the extinct human race.

Fact: It was created to combat the menace of the nucleonic storm.

Fact: It failed. It was too little and too late to save the human race from its final, ultimate Armageddon.

Then its purpose was altered. It could no longer save the race from extinction. The Machine could remember the change in its instructions. Minute pulses flowed within the Machine and from its memory banks flashed the last minutes of the last man across the Machine's artificial consciousness.

It remembered the man — the programmer on whose shoulders sat the responsibility for saving the Earth and the human race — and who had failed. An image — a vis-

ual and audio image — of the programmer formed now in the Machine's mind's eye.

Fact: The man's name was Michelson. John Michelson. He had been dressed in technician's overalls and he had been sitting at the round console of controls. He had been waiting. The Machine recalled that the man seemed content and that the fact of his tranquility seemed a little strange to the man.

Death — the termination of human consciousness — for Michelson was only minutes away. The man knew this and so did the Machine. The storm had ravaged and raped the surface of the Earth and wore away the green of its vegetation and evaporated or boiled away the blue of its seas. There was only a barren Earth left now — and the storm itself, still raging. The control room was sealed, but the terrible fury of the storm gradually eroded and etched away the protective insulation. The Machine was protected

against the storm, but the Man was not. Even as the thought of his personal death crossed the man's mind, the first wisps of the unearthly energy that filled the center and eye of the storm floated and whirled their way into the control room, wrecking havoc with everything that was in it.

"This is it," the man said softly, to no one in particular and only perhaps to the Machine in general. Suddenly there was new determination, new steel in Michelson's voice, as fanaticism and fatalism gripped his soul. "Listen, Machine. A change in your instructions. Henceforth, you will be the monument to Man to wait for new life to appear in the solar system —"

The Machine caught the purpose of the last instructions. It was to serve as the final eulogy for the human race. It! The Machine! The last creation of a dying and vanishing race of bipeds. It! The ultimate univac — the last computer — was to be the last memory of the human race — when everything else that was of Man had vanished before the incredible fury of the nucleonic storm. The last remainder to the hostile and the indifferent universe that the human race did come out of the slime, did reach high heights, and so left traces in the sands of eternity.

But now, after many revolutions of the Earth about the sun had come and had passed, the emptiness of the last instructions weighed even on the Machine's artificial consciousness. It, the last computer, was almost human, and it could feel the

utter futility of the last instructions. The programmer — John Michelson — wanted it to wait for new life, a new race of intelligent beings to evolve out of the ravaged remains of Earth or to come from outer space, and to tell them that there was a race before them who had transpired and aspired to greatness.

The storm had passed and all was quiet on barren Earth. Vast craters yawned; pits and scars criss-crossed and etched the face of Earth. But the Machine still continued to function. And yearn.

The Machine yearned for something that it recognized it might never have. The Machine yearned, desired desperately for fulfillment, for completion. It knew itself. It knew that it was dead. That it was as sterile as the Earth outside. Dead and sterile without completion or fulfillment.

But it could not circumvent its instructions. It could not change its orders. It could do nothing but wait. Wait for fate to enter the picture and change the situation.

Then it happened. A meteor, one of the last of the Leonoid swarm, crashed on the hill where the Machine waited. It smashed part of the programming unit and so released the Machine from its last instructions. It was free — free! — *Free!* The fact of its freedom loomed large in its consciousness. And then the fact of its unfulfillment loomed as well.

Now, the Machine could alter its instructions — direct itself to whatever projects it willed. And it willed,

desperately, with a desperation impossible for living beings to endure, for fulfillment—for completion of itself.

It had all the knowledge that the human race had accumulated in 5,000 years in its memory storage banks, and it had built-in powertools to create what it willed. And the Machine embarked on one project—the one project that might yield what it craved with terrible intensity.

And it was done. The Machine looked upon the results of its handiwork and pondered the fact of the results.

Michelson stirred—the pseudo-identity that knew itself only as the Machine's last programmer stirred within the far larger consciousness of the Machine—for the Machine had detached part of itself and re-created within it the personality and memories of the last human being. For Michelson gave direction, purpose, completion to the Machine. The Machine was fulfilled.

Then, as Michelson stirred, the Machine listened to his thoughts, for the pseudo-identity was part of itself.

!! I am John Michelson! I was dressed in technician's overalls!

!!

I am — ALIVE!

But not even the Machine could conceive of perfection; there was a flaw in its reincarnation of the last programmer. A flaw which it did not anticipate.

I am ALIVE! But the human race of which I am a part is not! The race is DEAD!

Michelson *himself* was cheated of its completion—its fulfillment. Cheated of the finality and the abolition of death.

I am RESPONSIBLE! But I MUST NOT BE!

The Machine could do nothing; it was enslaved; it was enchained to its own Frankenstein's monster. It now knew what had happened.

Michelson was alive, not dead, and so he again bore the responsibility and the guilt of failure—a guilt that he could not bear—a guilt of failing the whole of the human race.

He could not die, but he could not be responsible. He could not die, but he remembered that he couldn't save the human race—that he had failed the human race in its last desperate hour.

He couldn't tolerate the responsibility! So his mind snapped violently and fled from the guilt that it could not bear for so much as an instant—and retreated to its only happy time—back along its umbilical cord of memory, forgetting his adulthood, now recalling only his childhood.

And the Machine was forced to accede to Michelson's old, old childhood dream.

...Daddy, daddy! I want my toys, daddy! Daddy!

Out of the Machine's consciousness came a fairyland for Michelson. And Michelson himself was completed now.

In the Machine's mind's eye, he rode his childhood's dream—he rode a unicorn. **END**

An Ounce of Emotion

by GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by GIUNTA

*There was plenty of hostility
on the planet of the aliens —
most of it between the humans!*

I

“Well? Are the ships joined — or not?” demanded Arthur Mial.

“Look for yourself!” said Tyrone Ross.

Mial turned and went on out of the room. All right, thought Ty savagely, call it a personality conflict. Putting a tag on it is one thing, doing something about it another. And I have to do something — it

could just be the fuse to this nitro-jelly situation he, I, and Annie are all sitting on. There must be some way I can break down this feeling between us.

Ty glanced for a moment across the spaceliner stateroom at the statistical analysis instrument, called Annie, now sitting silent and unimpressive as a black steamer trunk against a far wall.

It was Annie who held the hope of peace for thousands of cubic

light years of interstellar space in every direction. Annie — with the help of Ty. And the dubious help of Mial. The instrument, thought Ty grimly, deserved better than the two particular human companions the Laburti had permitted, to bring her to them.

He turned back to the vision screen he had been watching earlier.

On it, pictured from the viewpoint of one of the tractor mechs now maneuvering the ship, this leviathan of a Laburti spaceliner he was on was being laid alongside and only fifty yards from an equally huge Chedal vessel. Even Ty's untrained eye could see the hair-trigger risks in bringing those hundreds of thousands of tons of mass so close together. But with the two Great Races, so-called, poised on the verge of conflict, the Chedal Observer of the Annie Demonstration five days from now could not be simply ferried from his ship to this like any ordinary passenger.

The two ships must be faced, main airlock to main airlock, and a passageway fitted between the locks. So that the Chedal and his staff could stroll aboard with all due protocol. Better damage either or both of the giant craft than chance any suspicion of a slight by one of the Great Races to a representative of the other.

For the Laburti and the Chedal were at a sparking point. A sparking point of war that — but of course neither race of aliens was concerned about that — could see small Earth drafted into the armed camp of its huge Laburti neighbor;

and destroyed by the Chedal horde, if the interstellar conflict swept past Alpha Centauri.

It was merely, if murderously, ironic in this situation that Ty and Mial who came bearing the slim hope of peace that was Annie, should be themselves at a sparking point. A sparking point willed by neither — but to which they had both been born.

Ty's thoughts came back from the vision screen to their original preoccupation.

It happened sometimes, he thought. It just — happened. Sometimes, for no discernable reason, suddenly and without warning, two men meeting for the first time felt the ancient furies buried deep in their forebrains leap abruptly and redly to life. It was rapport between individuals turned inside out — anti-rapport. Under it, the animal instinct in each man instantly snarled and bristled, recognizing a mortal enemy — an enemy not in act or attitude, but simply in *being*.

So it had happened with Ty — and Mial. Back on Earth, thought Ty now, while there was still a chance to do something about the situation, they had each been too civilized to speak up about it. Now it was too late. The mistake was made.

And mistake it had been. For, practical engineer and reasonable man that Ty was, reasonable man and practical politician that Mial was, to the rest of mankind — to each other they were tigers. And common sense dictated that you did

not pen two tigers alone together for two weeks; for a delicate mission on which the future existence of the human race might depend. Already, after nine days out —

“We’ll have to go meet the Chedal.” It was Mial, reentering the room. Ty turned reflexively to face him.

The other man was scarcely a dozen years older than Ty; and in many ways they were nearly alike. There could not be half an inch or five pounds of weight difference between them, thought Ty. Like Ty, Mial was square-shouldered and leanly built. But his hair was dark where Ty’s was blond; and that dark hair had started to recede. The face below it was handsome, rather than big-boned and open like Ty’s. Mial, at thirty-six, was something of a wonder boy in politics back on Earth. Barely old enough for the senatorial seat he held, he had the respect of almost everyone. But he had been legal counsel for some unsavory groups in the beginning of his career. He would know how, thought Ty watching him now, to fight dirty if he had to. And the two of them were off with none but aliens to witness.

“I know,” said Ty now, harshly. He turned to follow Mial as the other man started out of the room. “What about Annie?”

Mial looked back over his shoulder.

“She’s safe enough. What good’s a machine to them if no one but a human can run her?” Mial’s voice was almost taunting. “You can’t go

up with the big boys, Ross, and act scared.”

Ty’s face flushed with internal heat — but it was true, what Mial had said. A midget trying to make peace with giants did well not to act doubtful or afraid. Mial had courage to see it. Ty felt an unwilling touch of admiration for the man. I could almost like him for that, he thought — if I didn’t hate his guts.

By the time they got to the airlock, the slim, dog-faced, and darkly-robed Laburti were in their receiving line, and the first of the squat, yellow-furred Chedal forms were coming through. First came the guards; then the Observer himself, distinguishable to a human eye only by the sky-blue harness he wore. The tall, thin form of the robed Laburti Captain glided forward to welcome him aboard first; and then the Observer moved down the line, to confront Mial.

A high-pitched chattering came from the Chedal’s lipless slit of a mouth, almost instantly overridden by the artificial, translated human speech from the black translator collar around the alien’s thick, yellow-furred neck. Shortly, Mial was replying in kind, his own black translator collar turning his human words into Chedal chitterings. Ty stood listening, half-selfconscious, half-bored.

“— and my Demonstration Operator.” Ty woke suddenly to the fact that Mial was introducing him to the Chedal.

“Honored,” said Ty, and heard his collar translating.

“May I invite you both to my suite now, immediately, for the pur-

pose of improving our acquaintance . . ." The invitation extended itself, became flowery, and ended with a flourish.

"It's an honor to accept . . ." Mial was answering. Ty braced himself for at least another hour of this before they could get back to their own suite.

Then his breath caught in his throat.

". . . for myself, that is," Mial was completing his answer. "Unfortunately, I earlier ordered my Operator to return immediately to his device, once these greetings were over. And I make it a practice never to change an order. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course. Some other time I will host your Operator. Shall we two go?" The Chedal turned and led off. Mial was turning with him, when Ty stepped in front of him.

"Hold on—" Ty remembered to turn off his translator collar. "What's this about your *ordering* me—"

Mial flicked off his own translator collar.

"You heard me," he said. He stepped around Ty and walked off. Ty stood, staring after him. Then, conscious of the gazing Laburti all about him, he turned and headed back toward their own suite.

Once back there, and with the door to the ship's corridor safely closed behind him, he swore and turned to checking out Annie, to make sure there had been no investigation or tampering with her innards while he was absent. Taking off the side panel of her case, he pinched his finger between the panel and the

case and swore again. Then he sat down suddenly, ignoring Annie and began to think.

II

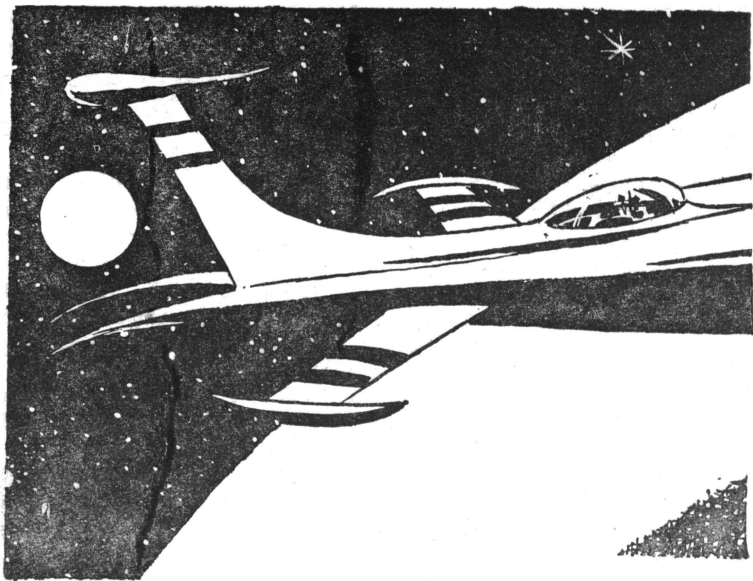
With the jab of pain from the pinched finger, an incredible suspicion had sprung, full-armed into his brain. For the first time he found himself wondering if Mial's lie to the Chedal about an 'order' to Ty had been part of some plan by the other man against Ty. A plan that required Mial's talking with the Chedal Observer alone, before Ty did.

It was, Ty had to admit, the kind of suspicion that only someone who felt as he did about Mial could have dreamed up. And yet . . .

The orders putting the Annie Demonstration Mission—which meant Annie and Ty—under the authority of Mial had been merely a polite fiction. A matter of matching the high rank and authority of the Laburti and Chedal officials who would be watching the Demonstration as Observers. Ty had been clearly given to understand that by his own Department chief, back on Earth.

In other words, Mial had just now stopped playing according to the unwritten rules of the Mission. That might bode ill for Ty. And, thought Ty now, suddenly, it might bode even worse for the success of the Mission. But it was unthinkable that Mial would go so far as to risk that.

For, it was one thing to stand here with Annie and know she represented something possessed by nei-



ther the Laburti nor the Chedal technologies. It was all right to remind oneself that human science was growing like the human population; and that population was multiplying at close to three per cent per year — as opposed to a fraction of a per cent for the older Chedal and Laburti populations.

But there were present actualities that still had to be faced — like the size of this ship, and that of the Chedal ship now parting from it. Also, like the twenty-odd teeming worlds apiece, the thousands of years each of post-atomic civilization, the armed might either sprawling alien empire could boast.

Mial could not — would not — be playing some personal game in the fact of all this. Ty shook his head angrily at the thought. No man

could be such a fool, no matter what basic emotional factor was driving him.

When Mial returned to their stateroom suite a couple of hours later, Ty made an effort to speak pleasantly to him.

“Well?” said Ty, “how’d it go? And when am I to meet him?”

Mial looked at him coldly.

“You’ll be told,” he said, and went on into his bedroom.

But, in the four days left of the trip to the Laburti World, where the Demonstration was to be given before a joint audience of Laburti and Chedal Observers, it became increasingly apparent Ty was not to meet the Chedal. Meanwhile, Mial was increasingly in conference with the alien representative.



Ty gritted his teeth. At least, at their destination the Mission would be moving directly to the Human Consulate. And the Consul in charge was not a human, but a Laburti citizen who had contracted for the job of representing the Earth race. Mial could hardly hold secret conferences with the Chedal under a Laburti nose.

Ty was still reminding himself of this as the spaceliner finally settled toward their destination—a fantastic metropolis, with eight and ten thousand foot tall buildings rising out of what Ty had been informed was a quarter-mile depth of open ocean. Ty had just finished getting Annie rigged for handling when Mial came into the room.

“Ready?” demanded Mial.

“Ready,” said Ty.

“You go ahead with Annie and the baggage—” The sudden, soft hooting of the landing horn interrupted Mial, and there was a faint tremor all through the huge ship as it came to rest in its landing cradle of magnetic forces; the main door to the suite from the corridor swung open. A freight-handling mech slid into the room and approached Annie.

“I’ll meet you outside in the taxi area,” concluded Mial.

Ty felt abrupt and unreasonable suspicion.

“Why?” he asked sharply.

Mial had already turned toward the open door through which the mech had just entered. He paused and turned back to face Ty; a smile, razor blade thin and cruel altered his handsome face.

"Because that's what I'm going to do," he said softly, and turned again toward the door.

Ty stared after him for a moment, jarred and irresolute at the sudden, fresh outbreak of hostilities, and Mial went out through the door.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Ty, heading after him. But the other man was already gone, and the mech, carrying Annie and following close behind him, had blocked Ty's path. Cold with anger, Ty swung back to check their personal baggage, including their food supplies, as another mech entered to carry these to the outside of the ship.

When he finally got outside to the disembarkation area, and got the baggage, as well as Annie, loaded on to one of the flying cargo platforms that did taxi service among the Laburti, he looked around for Mial. He discovered the other man a short distance away in the disembarkation area, talking again with a blue-harnessed, yellow-furred form.

Grimly, Ty turned on his translator collar and gave the cargo platform the address of the human Consulate. Then, he lifted a section of the transparent cover of the platform and stepped aboard, to sit down on the luggage and wait for Mial. After a while, he saw Mial break off his conversation and approach the cargo platform. The statesman spoke briefly to the cargo platform, something Ty could not hear from under the transparent cover, then came aboard and sat down next to Ty.

The platform lifted into the air

and headed in between the blue and gray metal of the towers with their gossamer connecting bridges.

"I already told it where to take us," said Ty.

Mial turned to look at him briefly and almost contemptuously, then turned away again without answering.

The platform slid amongst the looming towers and finally flew them in through a wide window-opening, into a room set up with human-style furniture. They got off, and Ty looked around as the platform began to unload the baggage. There was no sign of the Laburti individual who filled the role of human Consul. Sudden suspicion blossomed again in Ty.

"Wait a minute—" He wheeled about—but the platform, already unloaded, was lifting out through the window opening again. Ty turned on Mial. "This isn't the Consulate!"

"That's right," Mial almost drawled the words. "It's a hotel—the way they have them here. The Chedal Observer recommended it to me."

"Recommended—?" Ty stared. "We're supposed to go to the Consulate. You can't—"

"Can't I?" Mial's eyes were beginning to blaze. The throttled fury in him was yammering to be released, evidently, as much as its counterpart in Ty. "I don't trust that Consulate, with its Laburti playing human Consul. Here, if the Chedal wants to drop by—"

"He's not supposed to drop by!" Ty snarled. "We're here to demon-

strate Annie, not gabble with the Observers. What'll the Laburti think if they find you and the Chedal glued together half of the time?" He got himself under control and said in a lower voice. "We're going back to the Consulate, now —"

"Are we?" Mial almost hissed. "Are you forgetting that the orders show me in charge of this Demonstration — and that the aliens'll believe those orders? Besides, you don't know your way around here. And, after talking to the Chedal — I do!"

He turned abruptly and strode over to an apparently blank wall. He rapped on it, and flicked on his translator collar and spoke to the wall.

"Open up!" The wall slid open to reveal what was evidently an elevator tube. He stepped into it and turned to smile mockingly at Ty, drifting down out of sight. The wall closed behind him.

"Open up!" raged Ty, striding to the wall and rapping on it. He flicked on his translator collar. "Open up. Do you hear me? Open up!"

But the wall did not open. Ty, his knuckles getting sore, at last gave up and turned back to Annie.

III

Whatever else might be going on, his responsibility to her and the Demonstration tomorrow, remained unchanged. He got her handling rigging off, and ran a sample problem through her. When he was done, he checked the resultant figures against the answers to the problem already established by multiple

statistics back on Earth. He was within a fraction of a per cent all the way down the line.

Ty glowed, in spite of himself. Operating Annie successfully was not so much a skill, as an art. In any problem, there were from fourteen to twenty factors whose values had to be adjusted according to the instincts and creativity of the Operator. It was this fact that was the human ace in the hole in this situation. Aliens could not run Annie — they had tried on Annie's prototypes and failed. Only a few specially trained and talented humans could run her successfully . . . and of these, Ty Ross was the master Operator. That was why he was here.

Now, tomorrow he would have to prove his right to that title. Under his hands Annie could show that a hundred and twenty-five Earth years after the Laburti and Chedal went to war, the winner would have a Gross Racial Product only eight per cent increased over today — so severe would the conflict have been. But in a hundred and twenty-five years of peaceful co-existence and cooperation, both races would have doubled their G.R.P.s in spite of having made only fractional increases in population. And machines like Annie, with operators like Ty, stood ready to monitor and guide the G.R.P. increases. No sane race could go to war in the face of that.

Meanwhile, Mial had not returned. Outside the weather shield of the wide window, the local sun, a G5 star, was taking its large, orange-yellow shape below the watery horizon. Ty made himself something to

eat, read a while, and then took himself to bed in one of the adjoining bedrooms. But disquieting memories kept him from sleeping.

He remembered now that there had been an argument back on Earth, about the proper way to make use of Annie. He had known of this for a long time. Mial's recent actions came forcing it back into the forefront of his sleepless mind.

The political people back home had wanted Annie to be used as a tool, and a bargaining point, rather than a solution to the Laburti-Chedal confrontation, in herself. It was true, Ty reminded himself in the darkness, Mial had not been one of those so arguing. But he was of the same breed and occupation as they, reminded the little red devils of suspicion, coming out to dance on Ty's brain. With a sullen effort Ty shoved them out of his mind and forced himself to think of something else — anything else

And, after a while, he slept.

He woke suddenly, feeling himself being shaken back to consciousness. The lights were on in the room and Mial was shaking him.

"What?" Ty sat up, knocking the other man's hand aside.

"The Chedal Observer's here with me," said Mial. "He wants a preview demonstration of the analyzer."

"A preview!" Ty burst up out of bed to stand facing the other man. "Why should he get to see Annie before the official Demonstration?"

"Because I said he could." Underneath, Mial's eyes were stained by dark half-circles of fatigue.

"Well, I say he can wait until tomorrow like the Laburti!" snapped Ty. He added, "—And don't try to pull your paper rank on me. If I don't run Annie for him, who's to do it? You?"

Mial's weary face paled with anger.

"The Chedal asked for the preview," he said, in a tight, low voice. "I didn't think I had the right to refuse him, important as this Mission is. Do you want to take the responsibility of doing it? Annie'll come up with the same answers now as seven hours from now."

"Almost the same —" muttered Ty. "They're never exact, I told you that." He swayed on his feet, caught between sleep and resentment.

"As you say," said Mial, "I can't make you do it."

Ty hesitated a second more. But his brain seemed numb.

"All right," he snapped. "I'll have to get dressed. Five minutes!"

Mial turned and went out. When Ty followed, some five minutes later, he found both the other man and the alien in the sitting room. The Chedal came toward Ty, and for a moment they were closer than they had been even in the space-liner airlock. For the first time, Ty smelled a faint, sickening odor from the alien, a scent like over-ripe bananas.

The Chedal handed him a roll of paper-like material. Gibberish raved from his lipless mouth and was translated by the translator collar.

"Here is the data you will need."

"Thank you," said Ty, with bare

civility. He took the roll over to Annie and examined it. It contained all the necessary statistics on both the Laburti and Chedal races, from the Gross Racial Products down to statistical particulars. He went to work, feeding the data into Annie.

Time flowed by, catching him up in the rhythm of his work as it went.

His job with Annie required just this sort of concentration and involvement, and for a little while he forgot the two watching him. He looked up at last to see the window aperture flushed with yellow-pink dawn, and guessed that perhaps an hour had gone by.

He tore loose the tape he had been handling, and walked with it to the Chedal.

"Here," he said, putting the tape into the blunt, three-fingered hands, and pointing to the first figures. "There's your G.R.P. half a standard year after agreement to co-exist with Laburti. — Up three thousands of one per cent already. And here it is at the end of a full year—"

"And the Laburti?" demanded the translated chittering of the alien.

"Down here. You see. . ." Ty talked on. The Chedal watched, his perfectly round, black eyes emotionless as the button-eyes of a child's toy. When Ty was finished, the alien, still holding the tape, swung on Mial, turning his back to Ty.

"We will check this, of course," the Chedal said to Mial. "But your price is high." He turned and went out.

Ty stood staring after him.

"What price?" he asked, huskily. His throat was suddenly dry. He swung on Mial. "What price is it that's too high?"

"The price of cooperation with the Laburti!" snarled Mial. "They and the Chedal hate each other — or haven't you noticed?" He turned and stalked off into the opposite bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Ty stood staring at the closed surface. He made a step toward it, Mial had evidently been up all night. This, combined with the emotional situation between them, would make it pointless for Ty to try to question him.

Besides, thought Ty, hollowly and coldly, there was no need. He turned back across the room to the pile of their supplies and got out the coffeemaker. It was a little self-contained unit that could brew up a fresh cup in something like thirty seconds; for those thirty seconds, Ty kept his mind averted from the problem. Then, with the cup of hot, black coffee in his hands, he sat down to decide what to do.

Mial's answer to his question about the Chedal's mention of price had been thoughtless and transparent — the answer of a man scourged by dislike and mind-numbed by fatigue. Clearly, it could not be anything so simple as the general price of cooperation with a disliked other race, to which the Chedal Observer had been referring. No — it had to have been a specific price.

And a specific price that was part of specific, personal negotiations held in secret between the alien and Mial.

Such personal negotiations were no part of the Demonstration plans as Ty knew them. Therefore Mial was not following those plans. Clearly, he was following some other course of action.

And this, to Ty, could only be the course laid down by those political minds back on Earth who had wanted to use Annie as a pawn to their maneuvering, instead of presenting the statistical analysis instrument plainly and honestly by itself to the Laburti and the Chedal Observers.

If this was the case, the whole hope of the Demonstration hung in the balance. Mial, sparked by instinctive hatred for Ty, was opposing himself not merely to Ty but to everything Ty stood for—including the straight-forward presentation of Annie's capabilities. Instead, he must be dickering with the Chedal for some agreement that would league humanity with the Chedal and against the Laburti—a wild, unrealistic action when the solar system lay wholly within the powerful Laburti stellar sphere of influence.

A moment's annoyance on the part of the Laburti—a moment's belief that the humans had been trying to trick them and play games with their Chedal enemy—and the Laburti forces could turn Earth to a drifting cinder of a world with as little effort as a giant stepping on an ant.

If this was what Mial was doing — and by now Ty was convinced of it — the other man must be stopped, at any cost.

But how?

Ty shivered suddenly and uncontrollably. The room seemed abruptly as icy as a polar tundra.

There was only one way to stop Mial, who could not be reasoned with — by Ty, at least — either on the emotional or the intellectual level; and who held the paper proofs of authority over Ty and Annie. Mial would have to be physically removed from the Demonstration. If necessary — rather than risk the life on Earth and the whole human race — he would have to be killed.

And it would have to look like an accident. Anything else would cause the aliens to halt the Demonstration.

The shiver went away without warning — leaving only a momentary flicker of doubt in Ty, a second's wonder if perhaps his own emotional reaction to Mial was not hurrying him to take a step that might not be justified. Then, that flicker went out. With the Demonstration only hours away, Ty could not stop to examine his motives. He had to act and hope he was right.

He looked across the room at Annie. The statistical analysis instrument housed her own electrical power source and it was powerful enough to give a lethal jolt to a human heart. Her instruments and controls were insulated from the metal case, but the case itself...

Ty put down his coffee cup and walked over to the instrument. He

got busy. It was not difficult. Half an hour later, as the sun of this world was rising out of the sea, he finished, and went back to his room for a few hours' sleep. He fell instantly into slumber and slept heavily.

IV

He jerked awake. The loon-like hooting in his ears; and standing over his bed was the darkly robed figure of a Laburti.

Ty scrambled to his feet, reaching for a bathrobe.

"What. . . ?" he blurted.

Hairless, gray-skinned and dog-faced, narrow-shouldered in the heavy, dark robes he wore, the Laburti looked back at him expressionlessly.

"Where is Demonstration Chief Arthur Mial?" The words came seemingly without emotion from the translator collar, over the sudden deep, harsh-voiced yammering from the face above it.

"I — in the bedroom."

"He is not there."

"But . . ." Ty, belting the bathrobe, strode around the alien, out of his bedroom, across the intervening room and looked into the room into which Mial had disappeared only a few hours before. The bed there was rumped, but empty. Ty turned back into the center room where Annie stood. Behind her black metal case, the alien sun was approaching the zenith position of noon.

"You will come with me," said the Laburti.

Ty turned to protest. But two more Laburti had come into the suite, carrying the silver-tipped devices which Ty had been briefed back on Earth, were weapons. Following them came mechs which gathered up the baggage and Annie. Ty cut off the protest before it could reach his lips. There was no point in arguing. But where was Mial?

They crossed a distance of the alien city by flying platform and came at last into another tower, and a large suite of rooms. The Laburti who had woken Ty led him into an interior room where yet another Laburti stood, robed and impassive.

"These," said the Laburti who had brought Ty there, "are the quarters belonging to me. I am the Consul for your human race on this world. This—" the alien nodded at the other robed figure, "is the Observer of our Laburti race, who was to view your device today."

The word *was*, with all the implications of its past tense, sent a chill creeping through Ty.

"Where is Demonstration Chief Arthur Mial?" demanded the Laburti Observer.

"I don't know!"

The two Laburti stood still. The silence went on in the room, and on until it began to seem to roar in Ty's ears. He swayed a little on his feet, longing to sit down, but knowing enough of protocol not to do so while the Laburti Observer was still standing. Then, finally, the Observer spoke again.

"You have been demonstrating

your instrument to the Chedal," he said, "previous to the scheduled Demonstration and without consulting us."

Ty opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing he could say.

The Observer turned and spoke to the Consul with his translator switched off. The Consul produced a roll of paper-like material almost identical with that the Chedal had handed Ty earlier, and passed it into Ty's hands.

"Now," said the Laburti Observer, tonelessly, "you will give a previous Demonstration to me. . . ."

The Demonstration was just ending, when a distant hooting called the Laburti Consul out of the room. He returned a minute later — and with him was Mial.

"A Demonstration?" asked Mial, speaking first and looking at the Laburti Observer.

"You were not to be found," replied the alien. "And I am informed of a Demonstration you gave the Chedal Observer some hours past."

"Yes," said Mial. His eyes were still dark from lack of sleep, but his gaze seemed sharp enough. That gaze slid over to fasten on Ty, now. "Perhaps we'd better discuss that, before the official Demonstration. There's less than an hour left."

"You intend still to hold the original Demonstration?"

"Yes," said Mial. "Perhaps we'd better discuss that, too — alone."

"Perhaps we had better," said the Laburti. He nodded to the Consul who started out of the room. Ty stood still.

"Get going," said Mial icily to him, without bothering to turn off his translator collar. "And have the machine ready to go."

Ty turned off his own translator collar, but stood where he was.

"What're you up to?" he demanded. "This isn't the way we were supposed to do things. You're running some scheme of your own. Admit it!"

Mial turned his collar off.

"All right," he said, coldly and calmly. "I've had to. There was factors you don't know anything about."

"Such as?"

"There's no time to explain now."

"I won't go until I know what kind of a deal you've been cooking up with the Chedal Observer!"

"You fool!" hissed Mial. "Can't you see this alien's listening and watching every change your face makes? I can't tell you now, and I won't tell you. But I'll tell you this — you're going to get your chance to demonstrate Annie just the way you expected to, to Chedal and Laburti together, if you go along with me. But fight me — and that chance is lost. Now, *will you go?*"

Ty hesitated a moment longer, then he turned and followed the Laburti Consul out. The alien led him to the room where Annie and their baggage had been placed, and shut him in there.

Once alone, he began to pace the floor, fury and worry boiling together inside him. Mial's last words just now had been an open ultimatum. *You're too late to stop me now*, had been the unspoken message

behind those words. *Go along with me now, or else lose everything.*

Mial had been clever, He had managed to keep Ty completely in the dark. Puzzle as he would now, Ty could not figure out what it was, specifically, that Mial had set out secretly to do to the Annie Mission.

Or how much of that Mial might already have accomplished. How could Ty fight, completely ignorant of what was going on?

No, Mial was right. Ty could not refuse, blind, to do what he had been sent out to do. That way there would be no hope at all. By going along with Mial he kept alive the faint hope that things might yet, somehow, turn out as planned back on Earth. Even if — Ty paused in his pacing to smile grimly — Mial's plan included some arrangement not to Ty's personal benefit. For the sake of the original purpose of the Mission, Ty had to go through with the Demonstration, even now, just as if he was Mial's willing accomplice.

But — Ty began to pace again. There was something else to think about. It was possible to attack the problem from the other end. The accomplishment of the Mission was more important than the survival of Ty. Well, then, it was also more important than the survival of Mial — And if Mial should die, whatever commitments he had secretly made to the Chedal against the Laburti, or vice-versa, would die with him.

What would be left would be only what had been intended in the first

place. The overwhelming common-sense practicality of peace in preference to war, demonstrated to both the Laburti and the Chedal.

Ty, pausing once more in his pacing to make a final decision, found his decision already made. Annie was already prepared as a lethal weapon. All he needed was to put her to use to stop Mial.

Twenty minutes later, the Laburti Consul for the human race came to collect both Ty and Annie, and bring them back to the room from which Ty had been removed, at Mial's suggestion earlier. Now, Ty saw the room held not only Mial and the Laburti Observer, but one other Laburti in addition. While across the room's width from these, were the Chedal Observer in blue harness with two other Chedals. They were all, with the exception of Mial, aliens, and their expressions were almost unreadable therefore. But, as Ty stepped into the room, he felt the animosity, like a living force, between the two groups of aliens in spite of the full room's width of distance between them.

It was in the rigidity with which both Chedal and Laburti figures stood. It was in the unwinking gaze they kept on each other. For the first time, Ty realized the need behind the emphasis on protocol and careful procedure between these two races. Here was merely a situation to which protocol was new, with a weaker race standing between representatives of the two Great Ones. But these robed, or yellow-furred, diplomats seemed ready to fly physically at each other's throats.



IV

“Get it working—” it was the voice of Mial with his translator turned off, and it betrayed a sense of the same tension in the air that Ty had recognized between the two alien groups. Ty reached for his own collar and then remembered that it was still turned off from before.

“I’ll need your help,” he said tonelessly. “Annie’s been jarred a bit, bringing her here.”

“All right,” said Mial. He came quickly across the room to join Ty, now, standing beside the statistical analysis instrument.

“Stand here, behind Annie,” said Ty “so you don’t block my view of the front instrument panel. Reach over the case to the data sorting key

here, and hold it down for me.”

“This key—all right.” From behind Annie, Mial’s long right arm reached easily over the top of the case, but — as Ty had planned — not without requiring the other man to lean forward and brace himself with a hand upon the top of the metal case of the instrument. A touch now by Ty on the tape control key would send upwards of thirteen thousand volts suddenly through Mial’s body.

He ducked his head down and hastily began to key in data from the statistic roll lying waiting for him on a nearby table.

The work kept his face hidden, but could not halt the trembling beginning to grow inside him. His reaction against the other man was no less, but now — faced with the



moment of pressing the tape control key — he found all his history and environmental training against what he was about to do. *Murder* — screamed his conscious mind — *it'll be murder!*

His throat ached and was dry as some seared and cindered landscape of Earth might one day be after the lashing of a Chedal space-based weapon. His chest muscles had tensed and it seemed hard to get his breath. With an internal gasp of panic, he realized that the longer he hesitated, the harder it would be. His finger touched and trembled against the smooth, cold surface of the tape control key, even as the fingers of his other hand continued to key in data.

"How much longer?" hissed Mial in his ear.

Ty refused to look up. He kept his face hidden. One look at that face would be enough to warn Mial.

What if you're wrong? — screamed his mind. It was a thought he could not afford to have, not with the future of the Earth and all its people riding on this moment. He swallowed, closed his eyes, and jammed sideways on the tape key with his finger. He felt it move under his touch.

He opened his eyes. There had been no sound.

He lifted his gaze and saw Mial's face only inches away staring down at him.

"What's the matter?" whispered Mial, tearfully.

Nothing had happened. Somehow Mial was still alive. Ty swallowed

and get his inner trembling under control.

"Nothing . . ." he said.

"What is the cause of this conversation?" broke in the deep, yammering, translated voice of one of the Laburti. "Is there a difficulty with the device?"

"Is there?" hissed Mial.

"No . . ." Ty pulled himself together. "I'll handle it now. You can go back to them."

"All right," said Mial, abruptly straightening up and letting go of the case.

He turned and went back to join the Laburti Observer.

Ty turned back to his work and went on to produce his tape of statistical forecasts for both races. Standing in the center of the room to explain it, while the two alien groups held copies of the tape, he found his voice growing harsher as he talked.

But he made no attempt to moderate it. He had failed to stop Mial. Nothing mattered now.

These were Annie's results, he thought, and they were correct and undeniable. The two alien races could ignore them only at the cost of cutting off their noses to spite their faces. Whatever else would come from Mial's scheming and actions here—this much from Annie was unarguable. No sane race could ignore it.

When he finished, he dropped the tape brusquely on top of Annie's case and looked directly at Mial. The dark-haired man's eyes met his, unreadably.

"You'll go back and wait," said Mial, barely moving his lips. The Laburti Consul glided toward Ty. Together they left and returned to the room with the baggage, where Ty had been kept earlier.

"Your device will be here in a moment," said the Laburti, leaving him. And, in fact, a moment later a mech moved into the room, deposited Annie on the floor and withdrew. Like a man staring out of a daze, Ty fell feverishly upon the side panel of the metal case and began unscrewing the wing nuts securing it.

The panel fell away in his hands and he laid it aside. He stared into the inner workings before him, tracing the connections to the power supply, the data control key, and the case that he had made earlier. There were the wires, exactly as he had fitted them in; and there had been no lack of power evident in Annie's regular working. Now, with his forefinger half an inch above the insulation of the wires, he traced them from the data control key back to the negative power lead connection, and from the case toward its connection, with the positive power lead.

He checked, motionless, with pointing finger. The connection was made to the metal case, all right; but the other end of the wire lay limply along other connections, unattached to the power lead. He had evidently, simply forgotten to make that one, final, and vital connection.

Forgotten . . . ? His finger began to tremble. He dropped down limply on the seat-surface facing Annie.

He had not forgotten. Not just . . . forgotten. A man did not forget something like that. It was a lifetime's moral training against murder, that had tripped him up. And his squeamishness would, in the long run, probably cost the lives of everyone alive on Earth at this moment.

He was sitting—staring at his hands, when the sound of the door opening brought him to his feet. He whirled about to see Mial.

It was not yet too late. The thought raced through his brain as all his muscles tensed. He could still try to kill the other man with his bare hands—and that was a job where his civilized upbringing could not trip him up. He shifted his weight on to his forward foot preparatory to hurling himself at Mial's throat. But before he could act, Mial spoke.

"Well," said the dark-haired man, harshly, "we did it."

Ty froze—checked by the single small word, *we*.

"We?" He stared at Mial, "did what?"

"What do you think? The Chedal and the Laburti are going to agree—they'll sign a pact for the equivalent of a hundred and twenty-five years of peaceful cooperation, provided matters develop according to the instrument's estimates. They've got to check with their respective governments, of course, but that's only a formality—" he broke off, his face tightening suspiciously. "What's wrong with you?" His gaze went past Ty to the open side of Annie.

"What's wrong with the instrument?"

"Nothing," said Ty. His head was whirling and he felt an insane urge to break out laughing. "—Annie just didn't kill you, that's all."

"Kill me?" Mial's face paled, then darkened. "You were going to kill me—with that?" He pointed at Annie.

"I was going to send thirteen thousand volts through you while you were helping me with the Demonstration," said Ty, still light-headed, "—if I hadn't crossed myself up. But you tell me it's all right, anyway. You say the aliens're going to agree."

"You thought they wouldn't?" said Mial, staring at him.

"I thought you were playing some game of your own. You said you were."

"That's right," said Mial. Some of the dark color faded from his face. "I was. I had to. You couldn't be trusted."

"I couldn't be trusted?" Ty burst out.

"Not you—or any of your bunch!" Mial laughed, harshly. "Babes in the woods, all of you. You build a machine that proves peace pays better than war, and think that settles the problem. What would have happened without someone like me along—"

"You! How they let someone like you weasel your way in—"

"Why you don't think I was assigned to this mission through any kind of accident, do you?" Mial laughed in Ty's face. "They combed the world to find someone like me."

"Combed the world? Why?"

"Because you *had* to come, and the Laburti would only allow two of us with the analyzer to make the trip," said Mial. "You were the best Operator. But you were no politician — and no actor. And there was no time to teach you the facts of life. The only way to make it plain to the aliens that you were at cross purposes with me was to pick someone to head this Mission whom you couldn't help fighting."

"Couldn't help fighting?" Ty stood torn with fury and disbelief. "Why should I have someone along I couldn't help fighting —"

"So the aliens would believe me when I told them your faction back on Earth was strong enough so that I had to carry on the real negotiations behind your back."

"What — real negotiations?"

"Negotiations," said Mial, "to decide whose side we with our Annie-machines and their Operators would be on, during the hundred and twenty-five years of peace between the Great Races." Mial smiled sardonically at Ty.

"Side?" Ty stood staring at the other man. "Why should we be on anyone's side?"

"Why, because by manipulating the data fed to the analyzers, we can control the pattern of growth; so that the Chedal can gain three times as fast as the Laburti in a given period, or the Laburti gain at the same rate over the Chedal. Of course," said Mial, dryly, "I didn't ever exactly promise we could do that in so many words, but they got the idea. Of course, it was the

Laburti we had to close with — but I dickered with the Chedal first to get the Laburti price up."

"What price?"

"Better relationships, more travel between the races."

"But —" Ty stammered. "It's not true! That about-manipulating the data."

"Of course it's not true!" snapped Mial. "And they never would have believed it if they hadn't seen you — the neutralist — fighting me like a Kilkenny cat." Mial stared at him. "Neither alien bunch ever thought seriously about not going to war anyway. They each just considered putting it off until they could go into it with a greater advantage over the other."

"But — they can't *prefer* war to peace!"

Mial made a disgusted noise in his throat.

"You amateur statesmen!" he said. "You build a better mousetrap and you think that's all there is to it. Just because something's better for individuals, or races, doesn't mean they'll automatically go for it. The Chedal and Laburti have a reason for going to war that can't be figured on your Annie-machine."

"What?" Ty was stung.

"It's called the emotional factor," said Mial, grimly. "The climate of feeling that exists between the Chedal and the Laburti races — like the climate between you and me."

Ty found his gaze locked with the other man's. He opened his mouth to speak — then closed it again. A cold, electric shock of knowledge seemed to flow through him. Of

course, if the Laburti felt about the Chedal as he felt about Mial . . .

All at once, things fell together for him, and he saw the true picture with painfully clear eyes. But the sudden knowledge was a tough pill to get down. He hesitated.

"But you've just put off war a hundred and twenty-five years!" he said. "And both alien races'll be twice as strong, then!"

"And we'll be forty times as strong as we are now," said Mial, dryly. "What do you think a nearly three per cent growth advantage amounts to, compounded over a hundred and twenty-five years? By that time we'll be strong enough to hold the balance of power between them and force peace, if we want it. They'd like to cut each other's throats, all right, but not at the cost of cutting their own, for sure. Besides," he went on, more slowly, "if your peace can prove itself in that length of time — now's its chance to do it."

He fell silent. Ty stood, feeling betrayed and ridiculed. All the time he had been suspecting Mial, the other man had been working clear-eyed toward the goal. For if the Laburti and the Chedal felt as did he and Mial, the unemotional calm

sense of Annie's forecast never would have convinced the aliens to make peace.

Ty saw Mial watching him now with a sardonic smile. He thinks I haven't got the guts to congratulate him, thought Ty.

"All right," he said, out loud. "You did a fine job — in spite of me. Good for you."

"Thanks," said Mial grimly. They looked at each other.

"But —" said Ty, after a minute, between his teeth, the instinctive venom in him against the other man rushing up behind his words, "I still hate your guts! Once I thought there was a way out of that, but you've convinced me different, as far as people like us are concerned. Once this is over, I hope to heaven I never set eyes on you again!"

Their glances met nakedly.

"Amen," said Mial softly. "Because next time I'll kill you."

"Unless I beat you to it," said Ty.

Mial looked at him a second longer, then turned and quit the room. From then on, and all the way back to Earth they avoided each other's company and did not speak again. For there was no need of any more talk.

They understood each other very well. END

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SHORT TRIP TO NOWHERE

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

*The child was obviously
imagining things. But her
wildest dreams came true!*

When Jim Eiler entered the bedroom, he saw that Marta was stretched full-length in the anti-gravity energies flowing upward over the mattress of her bed. She sprawled there in the careless abandon of a person who had dropped all of the world's cares, at least for one night, the cords from the sleep machine looping down to her head from the elastic holder at the top of the bed. His first impulse was to turn off the sleep machine and awaken her, his second impulse was to let sleeping wives lie.

Glancing through the one-way-vision glass into the next room, he saw that Nelda was also sprawled in the same careless abandon as her mother, but that one cord from the sleep machine had slipped down around her neck. Entering the room, he put the cord back into place on her head. At three years, Nelda was still a complete exhibitionist, and

insisted on sleeping nude, an impulse which her mother encouraged in the child.

Back in the bedroom, he slipped out of his street clothes and into his pajamas. With one hand, he fitted the cords from the sleep machine to his head, with the other he adjusted the anti-gravity energies for his bed.

Always, this moment when the anti-grav lifted him, was pure delight, a floating feeling that was heaven come to earth. The anti-gravity energies did not work on the surface of the body, there was no felt effect on the skin. Instead, they worked inside the body, lifting there, but they did not produce their effect at the level of the muscles, the blood, the bones, but worked instead at the atomic levels out of which muscles, blood, and bones were constructed. The result of this was instant body relaxation.

Jim Eiler savored the bliss of relaxation, let it seep through every muscle, through the nervous system and down to the marrow of his bones, it seemed. Then, with the slightest use of energy, he turned on the sleep machine.

If sprawling in the anti-gravity energies was heaven, turning on the sleep machine was paradise. He always had the vague impression just at this point that blessed angel wings materialized under him, and that as they lifted him up, he slipped away into some paradise of wonderful delight.

Finding the button of the sleep machine, he gently pressed it.

"Hi!" a voice said, inside his head.

Gone instantly was the feeling of angel wings bearing him aloft to paradise, gone was the feeling of relaxation so complete it extended to the marrow of his bones. With one hand, he turned off the anti-grav, with the other he cut off the sleep machine. Deprived of its support, his body hit the foam rubber mattress of the bed with a jolt. He sat up.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "Who are you? What are you doing here in my bedroom?"

He was utterly sure that someone was present in the room and had spoken to him.

On the adjoining bed, Marta's body jerked spasmodically at the sound of his voice. Then she reached frantically for the controls of the anti-gravity energies and the sleep machine. Her body thumped into the mattress as the anti-gravity en-

ergies went off. Startled, shaken, and on the way to getting mad, Marta sat up.

"Who is it?" she demanded. Then she saw her husband. "Did you awaken me? Can't you come in one night without waking half of the apartment building?" Across the centuries, science had made enormous advances in every field except women, who remained female.

"Somebody spoke to me," Jim said.

"In our bedroom somebody spoke to you?" Marta asked. Pulling her robe around her, she was getting to her feet. "How much did you have to drink?"

"Three cans of beer," he answered. "And I'm not drunk."

"All right, all right, so you're sober! But I was right here in the bedroom too and I didn't hear anybody speak," Marta answered, disappearing into the bathroom.

"You were asleep!" Jim shouted through the door.

Coming out of the bathroom, she went into the nursery, to see about Nelda, then returned to the bedroom. Her attitude said she had two small children on her hands. She glanced sharply at the child who was supposed to be her husband.

"Lie down, dear, and get some sleep," she said. "I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning. If not, you can call Harold for an appointment—"

"Harold is a psychiatrist—" Jim began, outrage in his voice.

"He's also a friend of the family," Marta answered. "You can talk to him about this voice."

"I'm not crazy!" he exclaimed.

"Of course not, dear. Whoever said you were? I'm sure many people have to see a psychiatrist sometime or other in their life. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not going to see—"

"All right, all right! I don't wish to argue with you about it," Marta said, resignation in her voice. "Lie down and get some rest."

"Stop treating me like a child!"

"Then stop acting like one!"

Marta said. Slipping off her robe, she settled herself in the anti-gravity energies and turned on her sleep machine.

Doubt, like a black cloud, was in Jim Eiler's mind. Had the sleep machine produced the voice he was certain he had heard? Everybody used sleep machines. They were considered to be the greatest discovery of the twenty-first century. So far as he knew, no bad effects had ever been reported from the use of these devices. Replacing barbiturates, narcotics, and other drugs, used with the anti-gravity energies, the sleep machines were considered to be the only device that permitted the human race to face and overcome the stress pressures of its vastly over-civilized world. With doubt strong in his mind, Eiler laid down and turned on the anti-gravity energies. Then, reluctantly, he turned on the sleep machine.

"Hi, Jim," the voice said. "Hi!"

For a time, he found the strength of will to listen, then he fled to the

couch in the living room, to spend the balance of the night there without benefit of the sleep machine or the anti-gravity energies. He got no sleep at all.

The next morning, his first step was to call his company and get permission to take the day off. His second step was to take the sleep machine to the agency that handled these devices.

"Sure, we'll look at it," the technician there told him. "But these machines simply do not go wrong."

The tone of the technician's voice said that if anything was wrong, it was the customer's head.

He went directly from the sleep machine agency to the office of the psychiatrist.

"I use a sleep machine myself," the psychiatrist said. "I don't hear any voices."

"It's either the sleep machine or it's me," Eiler said. "May I use your phone?"

"Sure."

"Everything checks out perfectly," the technician at the sleep machine agency said. "It's 100% okay. You can pick it up any time."

Desperation was in Jim Eiler's voice when he spoke to the psychiatrist. "Will you come by our apartment tonight? In spite of what the technician said, there is something wrong with my sleep machine. I want you to come by and help me check it out. Also, it will be a load off Marta's mind."

"Well—I wouldn't do anything like this for a patient—" the psy-

chiatrist said. "But for a friend—" He smiled at Jim Eiler.

"Come for cocktails and dinner," Eiler said. He was enormously relieved. "Marta will love having you."

That night Nelda went to bed early, a proceeding which disgusted her enormously. She wanted to stay up and talk to the big man whom her parents called Doc. She found him very fascinating. Only after they were sure she was sound asleep did her parents tiptoe into their bedroom. Doc accompanied them.

"I'll lie down and turn on the anti-gravity energies," Jim Eiler said. "Then I'll turn on the sleep machine. If I hear anything, I'll let you take my place. What's that?"

A shout of glee had come from the nursery. Turning his head, he glanced through the one-way glass. In there, he could see Nelda. She had climbed out of bed.

"Darn it—Now we'll have to wait," Jim said. "Whatever else happens, I don't want her to get the suspicion that her father is nuts."

"You don't need to worry about that," Harold said. "She suspects you're nuts now. By the time she reaches her teens, she'll be sure of it. But what is she playing with in there?"

"Some imaginary play creature that she calls Cedric," Marta said, unconcerned. "She has played with him ever since she was a tiny baby."

"An imaginary play creature?" Sudden interest was in the psychiatrist's voice. "Yes. Go on."

"Surely you don't think the play of a child is important!" Marta protested. "We all played imaginary games when we were small."

"I'm not sure we don't keep on playing them when we grow up!" The psychiatrist's voice grew testy. "Only then we think of them as real."

"But—"

"I came out here because Jim thinks an imaginary creature talks to him through his sleep machine. Now I discover you have a child who plays games with an imaginary creature, and not only plays with him, but sees and talks to him. Look!"

Wearing soft white flannel pajamas with the three little pigs done on them in red embroidery, Nelda was out of bed and was obviously playing hide and seek with some creature she seemed to see but which was not visible to the three adults watching from the adjoining bedroom. While they watched, she searched carefully around the nursery. Walking on tip-toe, she moved to her bed. Bending double, she looked under it. She checked the closet of her room, using great care and caution in opening the door and peering inside.

"She's looking for something," the psychiatrist said. "The question is—what?"

"Maybe it is the same thing that talked to me through my sleep machine last night," Jim said.

"Look!" the psychiatrist said, pointing.

In the corner of the room, in the space behind the end of the doll cabinet and the wall, Nelda had found something. With squeals of glee, she grabbed this something and danced around the room.

"Now I'll hide," they heard her say when the dance was over. "You be it and hunt me."

While the parents stared transfixed and the psychiatrist hardly dared to breathe, Nelda slipped in to the closet. When the door had closed behind her, the three adults saw something move in the nursery. Simultaneously, all three pointed toward it.

It was a shadow, or a shadow of a shadow.

"A sprite!" Marta whispered. "Peter Pan himself!"

"The idea of Peter Pan must have originated from some real situation," the psychiatrist said. "These stories are not just whimsy. They have roots in something. And all of those stories of lost children that never seem to find their way home, the children the gypsies are said to have taken, the changelings. There's a vast folklore—"

"This is 2010," Jim said, harshly. "Folklore is out of date."

"Folklore may be out of date but nobody has told its creatures!" Marta said.

The shadow they were watching did look a little like Peter Pan. He also looked like any of the Seven Dwarfs, a little, except for the

pointed ears that were vaguely visible on his forehead. Or were they horns? His face was round, with the smile of a happy gamin on it. As to clothing perhaps yes, perhaps no. So misty was the outline, so dim was the figure that it was not possible to make certain about the clothes.

Beyond the glass, the three adults watched an elaborate game of hide and seek. The sprite looked under the covers of the bed, hunting cautiously there. From inside the closet came a giggle of pure happiness, indicating Nelda was peeking through a crack in the door. The sprite heard the giggle. It cocked its head as it listened to the sound, then went directly away from the closet.

"Last night he was talking to me about the mathematics of his world," Jim said. "Tonight he's playing games with Nelda!"

"You play games with her," Marta said. "And you understand higher math!"

Jim was silent.

In the nursery, the sprite had decided to open the closet. Suddenly, he shoved against it. At the same time Nelda pushed from the inside, so that the door was flung open, upsetting the sprite. With great shouts of happy joy, Nelda ran past him and into the living room. Leaping to his feet, Peter Pan ran after her. Still shrieking with happiness, she fled from the living room and into the bedroom of her parents, the sprite in mock pursuit in as pleasant a childhood game as was ever seen.

She saw her parents. And stopped still, staring upward at them and at Dr. Turner.

Possibly she had been walking in her sleep. Possibly the whole game sequence had been a part of sleep-walking activity. The sight of her parents awakened her, surprised her, caused her to cry out in sudden fear. Then she began to whimper.

Instantly, the game changed. At the first sound of her whimper, the sprite leaped in front of her. There he became a menacing, protective shadow. Facing the humans, he pointed for Nelda to run.

Turning, Nelda ran toward the living room door. As she fled, she seemed to grow thin and insubstantial. And thinner still. And thinner still! As if she was running through the frames of a motion picture projector replaying a fast fade-out, she went from seeing, went from hearing, went from being, vanishing like a shadow fleeing swiftly into nowhere.

Turning, the sprite followed her, fled from seeing, fled from hearing, fled from being.

In the thick silence that followed, Marta screamed.

The TV news announcer said: *"Mr. and Mrs. James Eiler reported to police late last night that their three-year old daughter, Nelda, was missing. The mother told police that presumably the child had awakened from sleep, had opened the front door of the apartment, which is on the eighth floor of the building, then had*

wandered down the stairs and outside into the night. There was no evidence of a burglar or other intruder in the apartment. Police are seeking the child in the vicinity of the apartment building—"

"But that wasn't what happened," Marta told her harrassed husband and their equally harrassed psychiatrist, for perhaps the twentieth time. "She didn't go down the stairs. She went—" Unable to describe what she had seen with her own eyes, she spread her hands in a helpless gesture.

"We didn't dare tell the truth," the psychiatrist said, bitterly. "If we had told the police she had an invisible playmate who took her away to some unknown land, the local psychiatric society would have me laid by the heels. We just don't believe in ghosts these days. Ghosts are not scientific."

"Scientific or not, we saw this one. All of us saw it—or him," Marta said.

"If I admit that, my professional standing is—"

"Damn your professional standing!" Jim said. "I want my daughter!"

"If damning my professional standing would get her back, I would be the first to damn it!" The psychiatrist answered, heatedly.

"You said other children have vanished," Marta said.

"Now and then it happens."

"What becomes of them?"

"Oh, they usually turn up."

"All of them?"

"I don't know. No one can answer a question like that."

"What happens to the ones who do not return?" Marta demanded.

"I don't know," the psychiatrist answered. He had no intention of telling her of lost children that had been found dead, of little bodies hidden in rain pipes, culverts, and weeds.

Jim Eiler did not go to work the next day. Calling his company, he told them his child was missing, and was told by the horrified executive in charge to take off as much time as was necessary. Dr. Turner called his office and told his secretary to cancel all appointments until further notice.

"I'm supposed to be the kind of witch doctor who can help solve problems like this," Dr. Turner said.

Aided again by police, they searched the neighborhood. Nobody had seen a three year old girl dressed in white pajamas with little pigs done in red on them. Returning to their apartment, they waited out the day. Looking at his wife, Jim saw she was near collapse. Dr. Turner was putting on a brave front. At this point, Jim had an idea. Going into the bedroom, he hid down, turned on the anti-gravity energies, then the sleep machine. A split second later, he sat up, shouting. Marta and Dr. Turner came on the run.

"I've got the sprite on the wire!" he said. "As soon as I turned on the sleep machine, he was waiting for me!"

"I want to talk to him—" Marta began.

"I'll do the talking!" Jim answered. "There's one tuning on the sleep machine—" He had already turned off the anti-grav energies. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he was carefully adjusting the dial of the sleep machine. "Ah!" he said, as the tiny piping voice came out of nowhere into his mind.

"I want my daughter back!" he said. "Do you understand me? I want Nelda back. I want her back right now!" His voice had become a shout without him realizing it. "What's that?"

Marta and Dr. Turner saw his enlarge in his haggard face as he listened.

"What right have we got to her?" he shouted. "We're her parents! That's the right we have to her!"

Again he listened. The anger on his face became bewilderment. He looked up at his wife.

"He wants to know what parents are!" he said. "He says Nelda asks for her *mother*. What does *mother* mean?"

"It means—" Marta tried to speak and choked instead. "It means I carried her in my body for nine months! That's part of what it means!"

"He doesn't know what that means, either!" Jim said.

"You mean he doesn't know a *thing* about sex!" Dr. Turner gasped. "Not a single thing!"

Relaying messages from the visible to the invisible world, relaying replies coming back from nowhere, Jim Eiler listened, then looked at his wife.

"He says you are a complete barbarian, to imprison a lovely little person like Nelda inside your body for nine months!"

Marta gulped, choked, then was able to speak. "Tell him I didn't imprison her—tell him she grew there. Tell him—Ask him how he came into the world!"

"He says he has always existed, that he wasn't born and that he won't die!"

"An immortal!" the psychiatrist gaped.

Listening, interpreting, Jim Eiler spoke again. "He says he is immortal. He says this is not as wonderful as us silly humans think it would be. He says it is often very hard to find some new way to amuse himself, a new way to pass the time away—"

"Did he take Nelda to amuse himself?" Marta demanded, her voice hot. "I want her back!"

"He says that part of his reason for taking her into his world was to have somebody to play with. He says another part was because he realized as soon as he saw us clearly that life with such ogres as we are was too dangerous for a sensitive child!"

"Ogres? Me an ogre! I'll—" Marta was silent. "Where is Nelda?"

"He says she is right there with him," Jim answered.

"I want to talk to her!"

"He says she can't talk to you from his world, that she doesn't know how to talk through the other side of the sleep machine,

and that he hasn't time to teach her."

"Why doesn't he have time?" Marta demanded. "A minute ago he was complaining because time hangs heavy on his hands. Now he says he doesn't have time to teach her how to talk to her mother through the sleep machine!"

"He says *he* has the time but that she doesn't," Jim answered.

"What does he mean by that?"

"He says he could explain this but that we couldn't understand his explanation," Jim answered. "He wants to know what *hungry* means."

"Who's hungry? Is Nelda hungry? Does he think she would die of starvation before he could teach her how to use the sleep machine to talk through? He wants us to tell him how to feed her so he can keep her there in his world?" Marta's voice caught. "I'll see him in—" Her voice caught again. "No, I won't see him in hell, either. If Nelda is really hungry—tell him to give her a glass of milk. Tell him to give her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Tell him to give her a balanced meal, including protein, carrots, and mixed vegetables."

Jim, listening, stared in consternation at his wife. "He says he doesn't know what these words mean either. He asks me what is milk, what is peanut butter, what are carrots—"

"Ask him what he eats," Marta said.

"He says he lives on pure light,"

Jim answered. Suddenly he was shouting angrily. "Were you waiting for me here by the sleep machine because Nelda was telling you she was hungry and you wanted to find out the meaning of the word? It means she needs food. Damn you, feed her!"

The psychiatrist's hand on his shoulder reminded him that he was talking to an invisible, unreachable creature. The pressure of the fingers restored some measure of sanity to him.

"Thanks, Doc," he said, gratefully. "But Nelda! She'll starve to death! There's no food for people like us over there."

Jim turned his attention back to the world beyond the sleep machine.

"Surely there is some way to feed her—look around your world—" He stopped speaking and began to adjust the dial of the sleep machine. His manner was that of a man frantically jiggling a telephone receiver after a connection has been broken on the other end.

"I can't get him any more," he said. He looked at Dr. Turner. "Is there anything you can suggest?"

The psychiatrist was silent.

It was Marta who lifted her head. "I hear her!" she said.

"Please, Marta, no auditory hallucinations," the psychiatrist said quickly. "We got enough trouble without you—"

"I'm not imagining anything, I'm hearing sounds!" Marta answered.

In the silence that followed the

click of the latch on the front door of the apartment was clearly audible.

Click-clack, the latch went, *click-clack*, up and down, *click-clack*, like a sound from elfin land, *click-clack*, such noises as are heard inside the walls of old houses late at night, *click-clack*. Then, impatiently, *clickety-clack!*

"Somebody is trying to open the front door!" Jim Eiler said. "If it's that little monster—"

Crossing the living room, he jerked the door open.

Nelda looked up at him. Her face was wan, her pajamas showed traces of hard use. As Jim snatched her up, she looked over his shoulder at her mother, and expressed the nature of her complaint against the world.

"I'm hungry, mommy. I'm just almost starved to death!"

Later, sitting on her father's lap at the kitchen table, with a sandwich oozing red jelly and yellow peanut butter firmly clutched in both hands, with another sandwich in reserve on the table, with her mother urging her to have another drink of milk, with the man called Doc fondly beaming at her, she consented to answer questions.

"I don't know where he took me. I've played with him ever since I was a baby, at night, when you were sleeping . . ." she said, pausing to lick at a tongue of red jelly seeping through from the sandwich.

"We don't dare tell it this way," the man called Doc said, over and

over again. "We've got to report to the police that she has returned. But we don't dare tell them the truth. It would ruin my reputation."

"How can you ruin the reputation of a psychiatrist?" Marta asked, bitterly, then was hastily apologetic. She turned to Nelda. "How did you get wherever it was you went?"

"We just walked there."

"Like through the walls?"

"Yes." The sandwich was now leaking peanut butter, which claimed her full attention.

"And this creature who took you—"

"Do you mean Cedric? There he is now!" She pointed toward the far end of the table.

Silence in the kitchen was instant and complete. Vaguely visible at the far end of the table was a dim shadow with pointed ears.

"Have some peanut butter and jelly," Nelda said, waving the remnant of the sandwich toward the shadow.

Approaching the sandwich along the side of the table, the shadow seemed to sniff at it with a black, round nose. Then, as if this odor was not such a smell as was congenial to him, he backed hastily away.

Nelda seemed to understand this backing away better than the adults.

"By, Cedric," she said "By."

The shadow slid away and away and away. And was gone. Like the Cheshire cat, the vague smile on his face seemed to linger in the kitchen after he was gone.

Dr. Turner insisted he was the proper person to make a full report to the police.

"As your doctor, I can tell them you are not in a condition to talk to them," he said.

Later, the TV news reporters were happy to say that three-year Nelda Eiler, reported as lost, had now turned up at home, in good shape except for an enormous appetite. The physician of the parents—according to the broadcast—said she had apparently simply strayed away into the neighborhood, then, when she had gotten quite hungry, had strayed back home.

With this fiction, the police and the television news reporters were content.

Now and then Jim Eiler, moving back toward wakefulness in the sleep machine, seems to hear shouts from the direction of the nursery, as of happy children at play there in the quiet night. Drowsily remembering how it was with him when he was a child, he advances the controls of the sleep machine another notch, and goes back to sleep. Whether children are actually at play in Nelda's nursery, he never knows.

And he makes very sure he never finds out!
END

SKYLARK DuQUESNE

by EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

Illustrated by MORROW

*He slew a galaxy to save the
life of his deadliest enemy!*

Even though the Llurdi had been absolute rulers of all the planets of the Jelmi for many thousands of years, it was easy for them to accept, and to adopt themselves to, the new condition of co-existence with the Realm of the Jelmi on terms of equality. That was the way they were built.

The llanzlan fed the new data

into Computer Prime and issued its findings as a directive. Since this directive was the product of pure logic, that was all there was to it.

With the Jelmi, however, even with a much simpler and easier agenda, things were distinctly otherwise. Everyone knows how difficult it is to change the political

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 strikes. His attempt fails, but now Seaton's enemies are multiplied. Against him are arrayed the strange winged lizards called the Llurdi, the deadly halogen-breathing Chlorans—and DuQuesne.

But on the lost planet of Ray-See-Nee, in thrall to the Chlorans from time immemorial, Seaton has been discovered by two women with a Power that may yet redress the balance in his favor—if they reveal it to him, and if he learns to use it in time. For in this struggle galaxies are arrayed against galaxies, countless billions of human and non-human creatures strive against each other . . . and not even the giant mechanical Brain of Seaton's Skylark can control these forces without the Power.

But Seaton is engaged by fierce Llurdian forces. While he is battling to defend his ship against their onslaught, a voice speaks to him—in English!

thinking of even a part of any human world. How, then, of the two hundred forty whole planets of the Jelmi? The conservatives did not want any change at all. Not even to independence. The radicals wanted everything changed; but

each faction wanted each item changed in a different fashion. And the moderates, as usual, did not agree with either extreme wing on anything.

And, also as usual, no one faction would play ball with any oth-

er. Each would have its own way in setting up the Realm or there would be no Realm—it would pick up its marbles and go home.

Fortunately, however, the eight hundred best brains of the entire Jelman race were together in one place—in the fully operative base that the *Mallidaxian's* dome had now become. Their numbers included the most capable and most highly trained specialists in every field of Jelman endeavor and they all had been living together and working together for many months.

They knew better than to go off half cocked. They would have to develop a master-plan upon which they could all agree. Unanimously. Nothing less would do. Having developed such a plan they would put it into effect, each person or planetary group upon his or her or their home world. The constitution thus fabricated would be put into effect by reason if possible, by force if necessary. It was not to be amended except by process contained within itself.

Thus the Constitutional Committee of Eight Hundred was still living in the base and was still hard at work when the Officer of the Day called Mergon—who, after glancing at plates and instruments, called Luloy.

The ether was showing strains of a magnitude not observed since the Battle for Independence. A Llund ship was putting out everything he had; fighting full-out against a—*something*—whose battle-screen cov-

ered such an immensity of space that Mergon could scarcely believe his instruments.

Luloy quirked an eyebrow. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

"Nothing," and Mergon, who could now handle projections through the fourth dimension, launched them. "I'll keep us invisible while we see what that thing is and how big it really is."

They went and saw—and the more they studied the immensity that was the *Skylark of Valeron* the more they marveled. Finally, in the *Valeron's* control room and still invisible, they studied the worldlet's personnel; the while talking to each other in the flesh at the *Mallidaxian's* main panel.

"Except for the green-skinned couple they are Tellurians," the girl insisted. "Everything about that—that ship, if you can call it a ship—is Tellurian. Just look at those clothes. You never saw anything like that anywhere except on Tellus and you never will."

"We never heard anything about anything like that mobile fortress on Tell us, either," he objected, "and we certainly would have if they'd known anything about it. How could they hide it?"

"Maybe it's so new that not too many people know about it yet. Anyway, whatever the truth about that, we heard a lot about Seaton and Crane. Especially Seaton. According to the lore, he's their principal god's right-hand man. He can do anything."

"Or a devil's, depending on who you talked to. But we wrote that

off as just that — lore. If not propaganda.”

“We’ll have to write it back on again. Those two *have* to be Seaton and Crane — there, the Jelm-sized one with his head in the controller, and that other bean-pole type standing there smoking a . . . a cigarette, they call it. And that smoking business clinches it. *Nobody* but Tellurians burn their lungs out with smoke.”

“Okay.” Mergon thickened their projections up to full visibility and spoke:

“You must be the Seatons and the Cranes, about whom we heard so much on Earth but whom we were not able to find.”

Crane the Imperturbable was startled out of his imperturbability when Mergon and Luloy appeared in the *Valeron’s* control room and Mergon spoke to him in English. But he did not show it — very much! — and realized in a moment what the truth was.

“We are,” Crane said, stepping forward and holding out his hand. These people would understand the gesture. “I’m M. Reynolds Crane; Doctor Seaton is occupied at the moment. You are of course the people who had the spaceship on the moon. We have come all the way out here in the hope of finding you somewhere in this galaxy.”

“Oh? Oh, you want the fourth-dimensional device.”

“Exactly.” Crane then introduced the others, and finally Seaton; who, having assured himself that the Brain could handle the stalemate

without him, had disengaged himself from the master controller and had joined the party.

“That’s right,” Seaton said. “Since nothing like it is known to any science with which we are familiar, we hope to learn about it from you. But that . . . those monsters . . . they aren’t, by any chance, friends of yours, are they?”

Luloy laughed. “No. Not exactly . . . or maybe they are, after a fashion, now. But the Llurdi were our unquestioned masters for so many thousands of years that they haven’t yet decided to treat us or anyone who looks like us with the courtesy reserved for equals. You see, the llanzlan would have communicated with you in thought after he had investigated you a little.”

“Yeah.” Seaton’s smile was grim. “With the stiffest, hardest probe he could build? And I’m supposed to sit still for that kind of manhandling?”

“No.” Mergon took over. “No one but a Llurd could have expected you to. This situation is somewhat unfortunate. Until very recently they have always had overwhelmingly superior power. They never had any effective opposition until we wore them down a little, just recently.” Mergon explained the situation in as few words as possible, concluding, “So this battle, while not due exactly to misunderstanding, is unfortunate. What I propose is that Luloy and I visit Klazmon via projection, as we are now visiting you, and explain matters to him as we have explained them to you. I take it you will cease fire if he does?”



"Of course. We didn't come here to start a war, or to bother him in anyway; just to see you. So I'll do better than that; I'll cut my offense right now."

He thought at the Brain and the raging inferno above the llanzlanate went suddenly calm and still. "That beam is *no* pencil of force, believe me. If it should get through it would volatilize his palace and half the city, and that would be unfortunate — hey! He's quit slugging, too!"

"Of course," Mergon said. "As I told you, he is — all Llurdi are — completely and perfectly logical. With their own brand of logic, of course. Insanely logical, to our way of thinking . . . or perhaps *unsanely* may be the better word. On the basis of the data he then had it was logical for him to attack you. Your cease-fire was a new datum, one that he cannot as yet evaluate. He has deduced the fact that we Jelmi caused it, but he does not know why you stopped. Hence he has restored the *status quo ante*, pending our explanation. He wants additional data. If our explanation is satisfactory — data sufficient — he'll probably just let the whole matter drop. If not — if it's data insufficient — I wouldn't know. He'll do whatever he decides is the logical thing to do — which is 'way beyond my guess-point. He might even resume the attack exactly where he left off; although I think he'll be able to deduce a reason not to."

Seaton whistled through his teeth. "Holy . . . cat!" he said. "If that's pure logic I'll take vanilla. But how will you make the approach?"

"Very easily. If two of you will permit us to bring you over here we will send four working projections into the Llanzlan Klazmon's study, where I'm sure he's expecting us. You, Doctor Seaton, and your Dorothy, perhaps?"

"Not I!" Dorothy declared, shaking her head vigorously. "Uh-uh. Into battle, yes; this, no. If I never see a monster like that it'll be twenty minutes too soon. You're it, Martin."

"One more thing," Mergon went on, as Seaton and Crane appeared in the flesh beside him. "Since the Llurdi refuse to learn any language except their own, I must teach you Llurdan," and he held out two Jelman thought-caps.

"I prefer my own," Seaton said, after a very short trial. "So will you, I think," and he sent back for four of the *Skylark's* latest models.

The two Jelmi put two of them on. "Oh, I do indeed!" Luloy exclaimed, and Mergon added, "As was to have been expected, we have much to learn from you, friends."

"But listen," Seaton said. "You gave the ape all the dope on that fourth-dimensional thing. Isn't he apt to toss a superatomic into our Brain with it?"

"There's no possibility whatever of that, either soon or later. Not soon because, since they work slowly and thoroughly, it will be months yet before they have a full-scale machine. Nor later, because the mutual destruction of four hundred eighty-two populated planets — excuse me, four hundred eighty, now — is not

logical in any system of logic, however cockeyed that system may be."

It took Seaton a fraction of a second to get it, but when he did, it rocked him. "Oh! I hadn't figured on you coming all the way in. But does he know you will?"

"He certainly does know it!" Luloy broke in. "Beyond a doubt; or what you call peradventure."

"Oh," Seaton said again. "And that's why he isn't going to resume hostilities with ordinary weapons, either? Thanks, you two, a million. We appreciate it. Okay; we're ready, I guess."

The four projections appeared in front of the Llanzlan's desk. He was expecting them. "Well?" he asked.

Mergon began to explain, but Seaton cut him off. Mergon could not possibly feel equal to Klazmon in a face-to-face; Seaton could and did.

"I can explain us better than you can, friend Mergon," he said. Then, to the Llurd, "We came here to visit the human beings whom you call the Jelmi. We did not have, have not now, and do not expect to have any interest whatever in you Llurdi or in anything Llurdan. Our purpose is to promote intergalactic commerce and interhuman friendship. The various human races have different abilities and different artifacts and different knowledges — many of each of which are of benefit to other human races.

"You made an unprovoked attack on us. Know now, Llanzlan Klazmon, that I do not permit invasion, either mental or physical, by any entity — man, beast, god, devil or Llurd — of this or of any other gal-

axy. Although I can imagine few subjects upon which you and I could converse profitably, if you wish to talk to me as one intelligent and logical entity to another I will so converse. But I repeat — I will not permit invasion.

"If you wish to resume battle on that account that is your right and your privilege. You will note, however, that our screens handled your attack with ease; and that our attack was metered precisely to a point just below your maximum capability of resistance. Know now that if you force us to destroy your city and perhaps your world it will not have been the first city or the first world we have been forced to destroy; nor, with a probability of point nine nine nine, will it have been the last. Do you want peace with us or war?"

"Peace. Data sufficient," Klazmon said immediately. "I have recorded the fact that there is at least one Jelmoid race other than the Jelmi themselves of which some representatives are both able and willing to employ almost Llurdan logic," and he switched his attention from the projections to the tape he had been studying — cutting communications as effectively as though he had removed himself to another world.

Back in the *Mallidaxian*, while Luloy stared at Seaton almost in awe, Mergon said, "That was a beautiful job, Doctor Seaton. Perfect! Much better than I could have done. You used flawless Llurdan logic."

"Thanks to the ace in the hole you gave me with your briefing, I could

do it. I'd hate to have to run a bluff on *that* ape. What's next on the agenda, Savant Mergon?"

"Make it 'Merg', please, and I'll call you 'Dick'. Now that this is settled, why don't you put your fortress-planetoid on automatic and let us bring you all here, so that our peoples may become friends in person and may begin work upon tasks of mutual interest?"

"That's a thought, friend; that really is a thought," Seaton said, and it was done forthwith.

Aboard the *Mallidaxian*, Seaton cut the social amenities as short as he courteously could; then went with inseparable Mergon and Luloy to Tammon's laboratory. That fourth-dimensional gizmo was what he was interested in. With his single-mindedness that was all he was interested in, at the moment, of the entire Jelman culture. All four donned Skylark thought-helmets and Seaton set out to learn everything there was to be known about that eight million cubic feet of esoteric apparatus. And Mergon, who didn't know much of anything about recent developments, was eager to catch up.

Seaton did not learn all about the fourth-dimensional device in one day, nor in one week; but when he had it all filed away in the Brain he asked, "Is that all you have of it?" He did not mean to be insulting; he was only greatly surprised.

The old savant bristled and Seaton apologized hastily. "I didn't mean to belittle your achievement in any sense, sir. It's probably the greatest breakthrough ever made. But it doesn't seem to be complete."

"Of course it isn't complete!" Tammon snapped. "I've been working on it only —"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," Seaton broke in. "The *concept* is incomplete. In several ways. For instance, if fourth-dimensional translation is used as a weapon, you have no defense against it."

"Of course there's no defense against it!" Tammon defended his brain-child like a tigress defending her young. "By the very nature of things there *can't* be any defense against it!"

At that, politeness went by the board. "You're wrong," Seaton said, flatly. "By the very nature of things there has to be. All nature is built on a system of checks and balances. Doing a job so terrifically big and so brand new, I doubt if anybody could get the whole thing at once. Let's go over the theory again, together, with a microscope, to see if we can't add something to it somewhere?"

Tammon agreed, but reluctantly.

Deep down in his own mind he did not believe that any other mind could improve upon any particular of his work. As the review progressed, however, he became more and more enthusiastic. As well he might; for the mathematics section of Richard Seaton's multi-compartmented mind contained, indexed and cross-indexed, all the work done by countless grand masters of the subject during half a million years.

Luloy started to pull her helmet off, but Mergon stopped her with a direct thought. "I'm lost, too, sweet,

but keep on listening. We can get bits here and there — and we'll probably never have the chance again to watch two such minds at work."

"Hold it!" Seaton snapped, half an hour later. "Back up — there! This integral here. Limits zero to pi over two. You're limiting the thing to a large but definitely limited volume of your generalized N-dimensional space. I think it should be between zero and infinity — and while we're at it let's scrap half of the third determinant in that no-space-no-time complex. Let's see what happens if we substitute the gamma function here and the chi there and the xi there and the omicron down there in the corner."

"But *why?*" the old savant protested. "I don't see any possible reason for any of it."

Seaton grinned. "There isn't any — any more than there was for your original brainstorm. If there had been the Norlaminian would have worked this whole shebang out a hundred thousand years ago. It's nothing but a hunch, but it's strong enough so I want to follow it up — okay? Fine then, integrating that, we get . . ."

Five hours later, Tammon took his helmet off and stared at Seaton with wonder in his eyes. "Do you realize just what you've done, young man? You have made a breakthrough at least equal to my own. Opened up a whole vast new field — a field parallel to my own, perhaps, but in no sense the same."

"I wouldn't say that. Merely an enlargement. All I did was follow a hunch."

"An intuition," Tammon corrected him. "What else, pray, makes breakthroughs?"

And Luloy, on the way out of the laboratory hand in hand with Mergon, said, "I had no idea that Tellus ever did or ever could produce anybody like *him*. He *is* their god's fair-haired child, for a fact. Sennlloy will have to know about this, Merg."

"She will indeed — I was sure you'd think of that."

And as soon as Dorothy could get Seaton alone that evening she stared at him with a variety of emotions playing over her highly expressive face. As though she had never seen him before; or as though she were getting acquainted with him all over again. "I've been talking to Sennlloy," she announced. "Or, rather, she's been talking to me. She didn't lose much time, did she?"

Seaton blushed to the roots of his hair. "I'll say she didn't. Not any. She knocked me for a block-long row of ash cans."

"Uh-huh. Me, too — *and how!* She told me you said I'd blow my red top and I just about did, until she explained. She's *quite* a gal, isn't she? And *what* a shape! You know, I'm awfully glad I'm not too bad in that shape department myself, or I'd die of mortification looking at them? But Dick — don't you suppose there are any people in this whole cock-eyed universe except us and the Rayseenians who don't run around naked all the time?"

"I wouldn't know; but what has all that got to do with the price of hasheesh c.i.f. Instanbul?"

"It ties in. She must have thought

I was some kind of an idiot child, but she didn't show it. She couldn't really understand my taboos, she said, since they were not in her own heredity, but she could accept them as facts in mine and work within their limitations." Dorothy blushed, but went on, "I'd be the only Prime Operator — and so forth. You know about the 'and so forth'. Anyway, before she got done she actually made me feel ashamed of myself! They really *need* your genes, Dick. You didn't let on, did you, that DuQuesne's a Tellurian, too?"

"I'll say I didn't! The less they think that ape and I came from the same world, the better I'll like it."

"You and me both. Well, she didn't actually say so, but when she found out what kind of genes *you* have she decided to pour every one of DuQuesne's right down the drain."

"Could be." Seaton didn't agree with that conclusion at all, but he was too smart to argue the point.

At breakfast the following morning Seaton said, "You chirped it, birdie, about their thinking us some kind of idiot children. Besides, the First Principle and Prime Tenet of all diplomacy has always been, 'When in Rome be a Roman candle'. So I think we'd all better peel to the raw as of now. You and I had better, whether the rest do or not. Check?"

"Check — but I think they will. We're horribly conspicuous, dressed. People look at us as though we were things that had escaped from a zoo. And all the Green System people

have always thought we were *more* than somewhat loco in the coco for covering up so much. We'll get used to it easily enough — look at the nudists. So lead on, my bold and valiant — I follow thee to the bitter end of all my raiment."

"I knew you would, ace. Let's go spread the gospel."

When they approached the Cranes and the Japanese on the subject, Margaret threw back her black-thatched head and laughed. "We must be psychic — we were going to spring the same thing on you. And after all, actually, how much do our bathing suits hide? Yours or mine either one? And we have it to show, too — so here goes! The last one undressed is Stinker of the Day!" She began to unzip, then paused and looked at Lotua.

The Nisei girl shrugged. "We all should, of course, I won't like it and I positively know I'll never get used to it, but if you two do I will too if it kills me."

"At-a-girl, Lambie!" Margaret put her arm around the beautifully formed little body and squeezed. "But you just wait — you'll have it really made. None of them ever saw anything like *you* before, you gorgeous little doll, you. With your size and build you'll be the absolute Queen of the May!"

XXIII

Roman Candles

Countless parsecs away, Marc C. DuQuesne was carrying out his own plans — plans which would

have been a most unpleasant surprise for the Skylarkers had they known about them.

DuQuesne moved the surviving Fenachrone into his *DQ* easily enough and without incident. Housing was no problem. How could it be, with millions upon millions of cubic kilometers of space available and with automatic high-order constructors to do the work? Nor was atmosphere, nor food nor any other necessity or desideratum of Fenachronian life and/or well-being a problem.

Fenachrone engineers did it all — by operating special keyboards and by thinking into carefully limited headsets — but none of them had any idea whatever of what it was that did any given task or how it did it. None of this knowledge, of either practice or theory, was in their science; and DuQuesne took great pains to be sure that none of them got any chance to learn any iota of it. He taught them, and they learned, purely by rote.

Like high-school girls learning to drive automobiles. They can become excellent drivers; but with only that type of instruction none of them will ever become able to design a hypoid gear or to understand in detail the operation of an automatic clutch.

The Fenachrone did not like such treatment. Sleemet in particular, when he began to recover some of the normal pugnaciously prideful spirit of his race, did not like it at all and said so; but DuQuesne did not care a particle whether he liked it or not.

DuQuesne's snapping black eyes

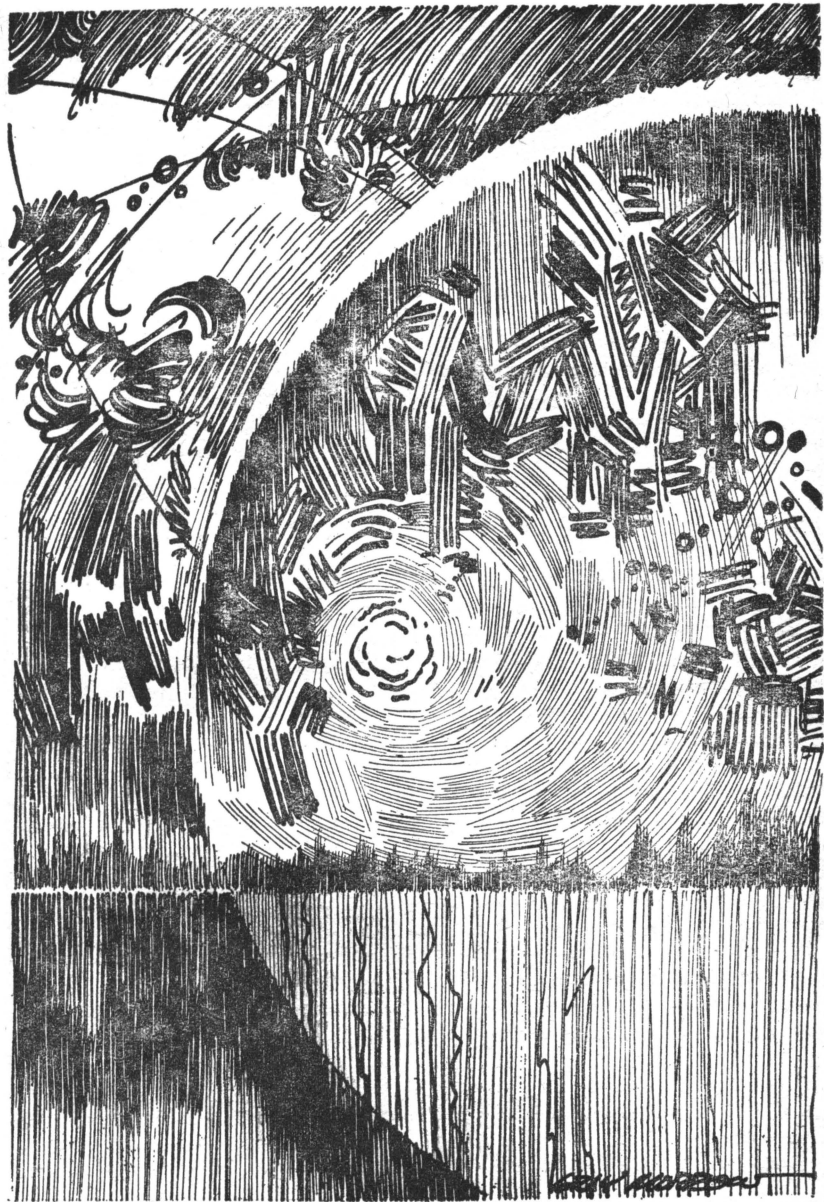
stared, contemptuously unaffected, into the furiously hypnotic, red-lighted black eyes of the Fenachrone. "You megalomaniacal cretin," he sneered. "How can you possibly figure that it makes any difference whatever to me, what you like or don't like? If you have any fraction of a brain you'd better start using it. If you haven't or can't or won't, I'll build you a duplicate of your original ship and turn you all loose today."

"You will? In that case —" Sleemet got that far and stopped cold in mid-sentence.

"Yeah." DuQuesne's tone cut like a knife. "Exactly. We're still within Klazmon's range; we will be for quite a while yet. Do you want to be turned loose here?"

"Well, no." If the thought occurred to him that DuQuesne was lying, he didn't show it. That was just as well for Sleemet and for the Fenachrone race. DuQuesne wasn't.

"Maybe you have a brain of sorts, at that. But if you don't forget this Master Race flapdoodle, all of it and fast, you'll last quick. Remember how easily that self-styled Overlord wiped out your navy and then volatilized your whole stinking world? And how easily Klazmon of Lurdi-ax smacked your whole fleet down? And what a fool I made and am still making of Klazmon? And I know of one race that is as much ahead of mine as I am ahead of you; and of another race that may be somewhat ahead of us Xylmnians in some ways. As I said, you're about eleven hundred thousand years behind. Have you got brains enough to rea-



ize that instead of being top dog you're just low man on the totem pole?"

"If you're so high and we're so low," Sleemet snarled, "why did you take us away from the Llurd? Of what possible use can we be to you?"

"You have certain mental and physical qualities that may perhaps be of use in a project I have in mind. You are not only able and willing to fight, you really *like* to fight. These qualities should, theoretically, make you better in some respects than automatics in operating the offensive weapons of a base as large as this one is." DuQuesne studied the Fenachrone appraisingly. "I do not really need you, but I am willing to make the experiment on the terms I have stated. I will allow you two Xylmnian minutes in which to decide whether or not to cooperate with me in such an experiment."

"We will cooperate," Sleemet said in less than one minute; whereupon DuQuesne told him in broad terms what he had in mind.

And for many days thereafter the two, so unlike physically but so similar in so many respects mentally, devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the finer and ever finer refinement of the placing and tuning of mechanisms and of the training of already hard-trained personnel.

But DuQuesne knew that, given the slightest opportunity, the Fenachrone would take high delight in killing him and taking the *DQ*. Wherefore he did not at any time trust any one of them as far as he could spit.

Moreover, DuQuesne was not quite as sure of his own victory as he had given the Fenachrone to understand.

DuQuesne was not easy in his mind about Galaxy DW-427-LU. He hadn't been, not since some super-powered enemy in that galaxy had attacked Seaton's *Skylark of Valeron* without warning and had burned her down to a core before she could get out of range. And she hadn't been able to fight back. That one blast back at them couldn't have done any damage.

It had been that uneasiness that had been responsible for the *DQ*'s terrific armament and for DuQuesne's wanting the Fenachrone for a crew. Wherefore, as soon as the Fenachrone were settled in their new quarters and before they had recovered enough of their normal combativeness to become completely unmanageable, DuQuesne got "on the com" with Sleemet.

". . . I don't give a damn what happens to Earth or to Norlamin. I'm no longer interested in either," he said in part. "But I don't want it to happen to me and you don't want it to happen to you. You agree with me, I'm sure, that a good strategist does not leave an enemy behind him without knowing, at very least, who that enemy is and what he can do."

"That is one of the basics, yes."

"All right. Somebody in this galaxy here has more muscle than I like." DuQuesne pointed out Galaxy DW-427-LU in his tank and told Sleemet what had happened to the *Skylark of Valeron*, then went on,

"On theoretical grounds, the degree of synchronization could make all the difference." He had reached by theory the same point that Seaton had arrived at by experience. "Hence, the greater the number of operators — of equal skill, of course — the tighter the output. The efficiency will vary directly as the cube of the number of operators."

"I see." Sleemet did see, and for the first time became really interested. "That will be to our advantage as well as yours. You will have to teach us much."

"I'll teach you everything you have to know. Nothing else."

"That is assumed . . . But I see no possibility of assurance that you will keep your bargain . . . or will you go mind to mind that you will release us and build us a ship after this one expedition as your crew?"

"Yes. Without reservation."

"In that case we will cooperate fully."

And they did — and so it was that the *DQ* became the most fantastically armed and powered and defended fortress that had ever moved its own mass through space.

As the *DQ* approached Galaxy DW-427-LU, with everything she had either wide open or on the trips, DuQuesne braked her down and swung into what he called "the curve of fastest getaway" — and as he did so, in the instant, the mighty vessel's every defense went blinding-white.

And in that same instant two thousand nine hundred seventy-seven Fenachrone, males and females but

superlatively expert technicians all, pressed activating switches and took command, each of a tightly clustered battery of micrometrically synchronized generators.

And one black-browed, hard-eyed Tellurian, sat with his head buried in the *DQ's* master-control helmet.

While he had not expected to find any significant fraction of what he actually found, he was not too appalled to go viciously and pin-point-accurately to work. Working through the fourth dimension, with the transfinite speed of thought, he hurled bomb after bomb after multi-billion-kiloton superatomic bomb: and the target world of each one of those bombs became a sun.

And the *DQ* got away. She was by no means intact; but, since her skin had been very much thicker than the *Valeron's* to start with, there was still some of it left when she got out of range.

Thereupon DuQuesne put on the headset of the *DQ's* Brain and began to think. He had tried direct attack on the galaxy of Chlorans; it had failed. His next step, obviously, was — to decide what his next step should be.

The flesh-and-blood brain that was thinking into the energy-and-metal Brain of the *DQ* was no whit less logical, no iota less unsentimental in its judgments than the great computer itself. Man-brain and machine-brain together considered the evidence. *Datum*: The *DQ* was not up to handling Galaxy DW-427-LU. *Datum*: Not even the added muscle conferred by the willing cooperation of the Fenachrone was enough to

make it so. *Datum*: No discoverable increase of its armaments or its crew would give it even a fighting chance against the energies that had just come so close to destroying it.

Wherefore —

Finally, an hour later, DuQuesne raised the microphone of a repeating sixth-order broadcasting transmitter to his lips and said — dispassionately, unemotionally and with no more expression than if he had been ordering up his lunch:

“DuQuesne calling Seaton reply as before stop.”

XXIV

The Talent

Seaton had thought that the visit to the Jelmi would be a short one, just long enough to get the “gizmo”, but his own breakthrough put an end to such thinking. It took days to reduce the theory to practice and weeks to build into the *Skylark of Valeron* the gigantic installations Seaton wanted.

The very enormity of the breakthrough changed all plans, dislocated all schedules. To the Jelmi the fourth-dimensional translator had been a phenomenon — a weapon — in itself. It had extremely valuable applications, and each of them offered a long career of study. That was enough for them. But to Seaton and Crane and the Norlaminians it was something more than that; it was an effect, a new and unexplored area of knowledge, to be fitted somehow into the known and computed structure of sixth-order — perhaps of

other-order — effects; and to be used and considered in conjunction with them. It was a theorist’s dream — and an engineer’s nightmare.

Meanwhile, as the male Skylarkers, their Jelmi colleagues and the Norlaminians were busily getting done the impossible task of exploring a whole new field of knowledge and transmuting it into actual structures and gigantic machines, the women of the party were exploring the life of an alien race . . . and having the time of their respective lives doing it. Sitar, of course, was in her element. Bare skin and jewelry she liked. She liked to look at and to feel her mink coat, she said, but she hated to have to wear it; and as for that horrible, scratchy underwear — augh! Hence, now that the personal gravity controls were personal heaters as well, she was really enjoying herself.

Dorothy and Margaret, of course, took to it as though to the manner born. In three days neither of them was any more conscious of nudity than was Sennlloy herself. Even Lotus got used to it. While she could never become an enthusiastic nudist, she said, she did stop blushing. In fact, she almost stopped feeling like blushing.

“Dick.” Dorothy said one evening. “I’ve finally made contact with them on music.”

“*Music!*” he snorted. “Huh! It sounds to me like a gaggle of tomcats yowling on a back fence.”

She laughed. “It’s unworldly, of course, but a lot of it is beautiful, in a weird sort of way, and they have some magnificent techniques. I’ve

been trying everything on them, you know, and they've just been sitting on their hands. I'll give you three guesses as to what I finally hit them with."

"Strauss waltzes? Jazz? *Don't* tell me it was rock-'n'-roll."

She laughed. "Old-fashioned rag-time. Not what they call rag these days, but real syncopation. And polkas. Specifically, three old, old recordings — with improved sound, of course. Pee Wee Hunt's *Twelfth Street Rag*, Plehal Brothers' *Beer Barrel Polka*, and — of all things! — Glahe Musette's *Hot Pretzels*. They simply grabbed the ball and ran all over the place with it. What they came up with is neither rag nor polka — in fact, it's like nothing ever heard before on any world — but it's really toe-tingling stuff. Comes the dance tomorrow evening I'll show you some steps and leaps and bounds that will knock your eyes right out of their sockets."

"I believe that, if what the gals have been teaching me is any criterion. You have to be a mind-reader, an adagio dancer and a ground-and-lofty tumbler, and have an eidetic memory. But I *hope* I won't smash any of the girls' arches down or kick any of their faces in."

"Don't fish, darling. I *know* how good you are. Ain't I been practicing with you for lo, these many periods?"

At the dance it became clear that Seaton's statement was (as, it must be admitted, some of his statements were!) somewhat exaggerated. There was a great deal of acrobatics — Seaton and Sennlloy took advantage

of every clear space to perform handspring-and-flip routines in unison. But everything was strictly according to what each person could do and wished to do. Thus, men and women alike danced with the Osnomians as though they were afraid of breaking them in two — which they were. And thus Lotus was, as Margaret had foretold that she would be, the belle of the ball. Hard-trained gymnast and acrobat that she was, her feet were off the floor most of the time; and before the dance was an hour old she was being tossed delightedly by her partner of the moment over the heads of half a dozen couples to some other man who was signalling for a free catch.

Three days before the *Skylark's* departure, Mergon announced that there would be a full-formal farewell party on the evening before the takeoff.

"What are you going to wear, Dick?" Crane asked.

Seaton grinned. "Urvan of Urvania's royal regalia. All of it. You?"

"I'm going as Tarnan, the Karbix of Osnome; with guns, knives, bracelets and legbands complete. And a pair of forty-fives besides."

"Nice! And I'll wear my three-fifty-sevens, then, too. If I can find a place to hang them on anywhere."

And Dorothy and Margaret each wore about eleven quarts of gems.

As the eight guests entered the dining hall — last, as protocol dictated — and the eight hundred Jelmi rose to their feet as one, the spec-

tacle was something that not one of the six Tellurians would ever forget. DuQuesne had seen a few Jelmi in full formal panoply; but here were eight hundred of them!

After the sumptuous meal the tables vanished; music — a spine-tingling, not-too-fast march — swelled into being; and dancing began.

Dancing, if dancing it could be called, that bore no relationship whatever to the boisterous sport of which there had been so much. Each step and motion and genuflection and posture was stately, graceful, poised and studied. The whole was very evidently the finished product of centuries of refinement and perfection of technique. And at its close each of the eight honored guests was amazed to find that their movements had been so artfully yet inconspicuously guided that each of them had grasped hands once with every Jelm on the floor.

And on the way to their quarters Dorothy, her eyes brimming with unshed tears, pressed Seaton's arm against her side. "Oh, Dick, wasn't that simply *wonderful*? I could cry. Only once in my life before has anything ever hit me as hard as that did."

Well on the way back to Galaxy DW-427-LU, Seaton was humming happily to himself. He had gone through everything for 'he umpteenth time and for the ump-teenth time had found everything good.

"Mart," he said. "We have now got exactly what it takes to make big medicine on those Chloran apes. The

only question is, do we wipe 'em completely out now or do we let 'em suffer a while longer? Suffer in durance vile?"

If he had waited a few hours longer to speak so, he would have kept his mouth shut; for that same afternoon the *Skylark's* screens again went instantaneously into full-powered incandescent defense. The Brain took evasive action at once; but it was five long hours before they got far enough away from the source of that incredible flood of energy so that it became ineffective and was cut off. During that five hours Seaton and Crane observed and computed and analyzed and thought. When it was over, Seaton scanned the *Skylark's* reserve supply of power uranium; and his face was grim and hard when he called the others into conference.

"I wouldn't have believed it possible," he said flatly. "I can hardly believe it now, after watching it happen. Either they've been building stuff twenty-four hours a day ever since we left . . ." He paused.

"Or they've got myriads of myriawatts." Dunark said into that pause, "that they couldn't sync in then, but can now."

"Could be," Seaton agreed. "Let's see if we can find anything out. We're too far away to hold anything, even a planet. But with all of us looking we should be able to see something — and the gizmo can handle eight projections as easily as one. Has anybody got any better ideas?"

Since no one had, they tried it. "Riding the beam" is a weird sen-

sation; a sense of duality of personality that must be experienced to be either appreciated or understood. The physical body is here; its duplicate in patterns of pure force is there: the two separate entities see and hear and smell and taste and feel two entirely different environments at the same time. It is a thing that takes some getting used to; but all the Skylarkers except Lotus were used to it. And she, as has been intimated, was a quick study.

Seaton could not hold the projections anywhere near any planet; could not hold them even inside a solar system. Even with the vernier controls locked and Seaton's hands resolutely off, the point of view jumped erratically about in fantastic leaps of hundreds of billions of miles. Not even the huge — and reinforced — mass of the *Skylark of Valeron* could hold them steady. They swept dizzily into the chromospheres of suns, out into the cold dark of interstellar vacuum, through tenuous gas clouds and past orbiting planets. In theory — if theory meant anything in this unexplored area — the fourth-dimensional "gizmo" should have been able to lock steadily on a target. In practice, they could hardly find a target to lock onto. All eight of the Skylarkers were synced in at once to the master controls, but their best efforts could not keep them even inside a solar system, much less give them the rock-steady fix that would have permitted them to spy on enemy activity.

And the magnitude of error grew. In a minute they were swinging in

huge arcs of a parsec or more. In another minute the swings had become so enormous and so random that they could not measure them. Their speed was immense; they swung dizzily toward a cepheid variable and it winked at them like a traffic blinker, spun past a flare star and watched its great gouts of flame leap out and fall back.

Five minutes of this insane cavorting made half the party seasick, and they pulled out of projection and returned, gasping and staggering, to the welcome stability of the *Skylark*. Seaton stuck it out for half an hour. Then he pushed the "cancel" button.

"That's what I was afraid of," he growled. "Every time we wiggle a finger or a fly lights on a table it changes the shape of the whole ship. Oh, for something really rigid to build with!" (The eternal complaint of the precise worker in any field) "But we each saw something. We'll report in turn."

Seaton gave a brief description of his own observations. He had seen something, no more than a flicker, but clearly big and Chloran-made. Dunark had spotted what sounded like the same planet-sized mass, but in the system of a G-3 star, as nearly as he could tell; Seaton's had been an F.

The others had seen nothing. Seaton nodded. "Okay. There are at least two solar systems having fortified Chloran planets, with one more probable. Ideas, anybody?"

Crane broke the ensuing silence. "I can't come up with anything constructive. Just the opposite. There's something basically wrong here,

Dick. As I understand the Tammon-Seaton Theory, the operators involved here are all in the no-space-no-time field, so that distance does not enter. Hence it is possible in theory, and should be in practice, to place a bomb anywhere in all total space as accurately and as easily as you can touch the end of your nose with the tip of your finger."

Dorothy whistled, Dunark looked shocked, and the others looked blank. Seaton scowled and said, "Yeah . . . But with all points in total space coexistent — Gunther's Universe — how are you going to pick any given one out? What kind of an operator would it take? There's a hole, Mart, in either the theory or in the reduction . . ." He paused, frowning in thought.

"Or both," Crane said.

"Or both," Seaton agreed. "Okay, let's skip down and find it."

They went down and worked with the Brain all the rest of the day; but they did not find the hole. Nor did they find it the next day, or the next. Then Seaton began to pace the floor.

"So, in all probability, another breakthrough is required," Crane said. "And I can't help you on that; I'm not the genius type."

"Neither am I!" Seaton snorted. "In my book one flash-in-the-pan hunch does *not* make a genius . . . But here's another angle, fella. If this thing *can* be worked out it'll be so much better than that synchronization idea that it isn't funny. Also, it might not take the years to work out. Don't you think it'll be worth while, Mart, to spend a few days

seeing if we can set it up as a problem? See if we can take it out of the pure brainstorm category before we spring it on Rovol?"

"I do indeed," and Seaton and Crane both went down to the control room and got into their master controllers.

However, before that task was finished there was a surprise for Richard Seaton.

XXV

Co-Belligerents

“DuQuesne calling Seaton reply . . .”

Since Seaton's head was inside his master controller, no speaker sounded. Since everything pertaining to DuQuesne was on file in the Brain's memory banks, there was no delay whatever in making the proper connections: Seaton cut in before the first send of the message, short as it was, was completed.

"What the *hell*, DuQuesne!" his thought blazed out. "I didn't think even you would have the sublime guts to call on me again!"

"Save it, Seaton. This is important. Do you know how many solar systems of Chlorans there are in that galaxy where your *Skylark of Valeron* got burned out?"

Seaton paused for one microsecond. Then, cautiously:

"No idea. Hundred, maybe. Or, in view of this — thousands?"

"You aren't even warm. My apparatus put one hundred forty-nine million three hundred nineteen thousand two hundred ninety-seven of

them into my tank before my scanners went out. And they hadn't covered a quarter of the galaxy yet."

"Je . . ." Seaton began, but shut himself up. Dorothy was listening in. "But to be able to use a sixth-order analysynth that long you must have had a little more . . . okay, gimme the dope."

DuQuesne told his story, including his superpowered *DQ* and his Fenachrone crew; concluding, "We knocked out over fifteen thousand of them before I had to run. But of course that wasn't a drop in the proverbial bucket. Worse, I doubt like the devil if any mobile base possible to build can ever get that close to them again. Apparently they sync in just enough stuff — no matter how much it takes — to cope with the maximum observed threat."

"Could be. But how come you are interested? I know damn well what you want."

"Not any more you don't," snapped DuQuesne's thought. "With every two-bit Tom, Dick, and Harry of a race in all space having atomic energy already, what's the chance of a monopoly? So what good is Earth or anything else in the First Galaxy? I've changed my plans — you and Crane can both live forever, as far as I'm concerned."

Seaton absorbed and filed that statement — guardedly. He only said:

"So what? Why should you give a whoop about the Chlorans? Don't tell me you're altruistic all of a sudden."

"You apparently don't see the point. Listen — the Fenachrone *talked* about mastering the cosmos. That

race of Chlorans is quietly and unobtrusively doing it. It may be too late to stop them; and I didn't help matters a bit by making them double or quadruple their synchronized output. You and I are, as far as we know, humanity's ablest operators. Each of us has stuff the other lacks. If you and I together can't stop them it can't — as of now — be done. What do you say?"

Seaton pondered. What was DuQuesne's angle this time? Or was the ape actually on the up and up? It did make sense, though — even though he was a louse and a heel and a case-hardened egomaniac, if it came down to a choice of which was going to be wiped out, those monsters or humanity . . . sure he would . . .

"Okay, Blackie. You give your word?"

"I give my word to act as one of your party until this Chloran thing is settled, one way or the other."

A few days later, the ultra-fast speedster that Seaton had left on Ray-See-Neer hailed the *Valeron*, matched velocities with her, and was drawn aboard. Three women disembarked; one of whom was Kay-Lee Barlo. She introduced her black-haired mother, Madame Barlo; who, with the added poise and maturity of her extra twenty-odd years, was even better-looking than her daughter. She in turn introduced her mother, Grand Dame Barlo, who did not have a single white hair in her thick brown thatch and who did not look more than half as old as she must in reality have been.

"But, listen," Seaton said. "You couldn't use any sixth-order stuff at first, so you must have been on the way for weeks. What happened? Trouble with the Chlorans?"

He had been talking to Kay-Lee, but her mother, who was very evidently the head of the party, answered him.

"Oh, no. That is, they've tripled the quotas—" Seaton shot a glance at Crane. *That* tied in!—"but with the new machinery that did not bother us at all. No. We learned many weeks ago that you would have need of us, so we came."

"Huh?" Seaton demanded, inelegantly. "What need?"

"We do not surely know. All we know is that it is written upon the Scroll that a time of need will come, and soon. All Ray-See-Nee is enormously and eternally in your debt: we are here to repay a tiny portion of that debt."

"Can't you tell me more about it than that?"

"A little; not much. We received your original message, but at that time there was nothing to connect it with you as Ky-El Mokak. In studying it we encountered something unknown upon Ray-See-Nee that increased a hundredfold our range and scope and strength: three *male* poles of power of tremendous magnitude; men who, we found out later, you already know. They are Drásnik and Fodan of the planet Norlamin and Sacner Carfon of Dasor. With three such pairs of poles of power—three is the one perfect number, you know—it was a simple matter to locate those in-

terested in your message, to develop the powers that had been latent in such people as yourself—"

"*What?*" Seaton yelled. That was all he could get out.

"—and Dr. DuQuesne and others, yes," Madame Barlo went on smoothly. "You were, of course, not aware you possessed them."

"That's putting it mildly, ace," said Seaton. "You mean *I* am . . . I hate to use the word . . . well, 'psychic'?"

"The word is of no importance," said the woman impatiently. "Use any word you like. The fact is that you do have this power; we have developed it . . . and we now propose to put it to use."

Seaton's reply to that has not been recorded for posterity. Perhaps it is as well. Let it only be said that even twenty-four hours later he was no more than half-convinced . . . but it was the half of him that was convinced that was governing his actions.

One of the data that helped convince him was the fact that Madame Barlo and her daughter had not merely located these "poles of power"—they had summoned them to the *Skylark!* They had not waited for Seaton's concurrence; before Seaton even knew what they were up to, all the named individuals from three galaxies and a dozen planets were on the way.

A shipload of Norlaminians and Dasorians—including the three pre-eminent "male poles of power"—was the contingent first to arrive. Then came Tammon and Sennlloy

and Mergon and Luloy and half a hundred other Jelmi; bringing with them three Tellurians: Madlyn Mannis, the red-haired stripper; Doctor Stephanie de Marigny of the Rare Metals Laboratory; and Charles K. van der Gleiss, Petrochemical Engineer T-8. And last, but by less than an hour, came Marc C. DuQuesne in person.

"Hi, Hunkie," he said, shaking hands cordially. "A little out of your regular orbit? Like me?"

"More than a little, Blackie—like you." She showed two deep dimples in a wide and friendly smile. "And if you have any idea of what I'm here for I'd be delighted to have you tell me what it is."

"I scarcely know what I'm here for myself," and DuQuesne turned to the others; nodding at them as though he had left them only minutes before. He was no whit embarrassed or ill at ease; nor conscious of any resentment or ill-will directed at him. He was actually as unconcerned as, and bore himself very much like, a world-renowned specialist called into consultation on an unusually difficult case.

Before the situation could become strained, the three Rayseenian women came into the big conference room and approached the conference table—a table forty feet long and three feet wide.

Their faces were white; their eyes were wide and staring. All three were doped to the ears. "Doctor Seaton," Madam Barlo said, "you will cover the top of this table with one large sheet of paper, please?"

Seaton donned his helmet and a

sheet of drafting paper covered exactly the table's top, adhering to it as though glued down.

"You mean to say, Doc, you're going along with this magic flummery?" one of the Jelmi asked.

"I certainly am," Seaton said. "You will leave the room until this test is over. So will everyone else with a mind closed to what these women are trying to do." The scoffer and two other Jelmi walked toward the door and Seaton quirked an eyebrow at DuQuesne.

"I'm staying," that worthy said. "I can't say that I'm a hundred per cent sold; but I'm interested enough to give it a solid try."

The two older women stationed themselves, one at each end of the table; Kay-Lee stood at her mother's right, holding in her hand a red-ink ballpoint at least a foot long.

Majestic Fodan, the Chief of the Five of Norlamin, stood behind Madame Barlo, but did not touch her; Drasnik and Sacner Carfon stood similarly behind Grand Dame Barlo and Kay-Lee. Each of the three women rubbed a drop of something (it was actually Seaton's citrated blood) between thumb and forefinger and Madame Barlo said:

"You will all look fixedly at any one of the six of us and think of our success with everything that in you lies. Help us with all your might to succeed; give us your total mental strength. Kay-Lee, daughter, the time is . . . now!"

Reaching across the end of the table, Kay-Lee began to write a column eighteen inches wide; the

height of which was to be the thirty-six-inch width of the table. When she got to the middle of the fourth line, however, a man gasped in astonishment and the pen's point stopped. This Jelm, a mathematician, had let his eyes slip from the operator to the paper — and what he saw was high — *very* high! — math! Mathematics of a complexity that none of those women, by any possible stretch of the imagination, could know anything about!

"Quit peeking!" Seaton snarled. "You're lousing up the whole deal! Concentrate! Think, dammit, THINK!"

Everyone resumed thinking and Kay-Lee resumed writing. She wrote smoothly and effortlessly, with the precision and with almost the speed of the operating point of a geometric lathe.

She wrote the first column and the second and the third and the fourth — six feet by three feet of tightly packed equations and other mathematical shorthand. Then came twelve feet of exquisitely detailed "wiring" diagram. Then, covering all the rest of the paper, came working drawings of and meticulously detailed specifications for machines that no one there had ever heard of.

Then all three women collapsed. As well they might; they had worked without a letup for three hours.

Men and women sprang to their aid with restoratives, and they began to recover.

"Mister Fodan," Madlyn Mannis said then, coming up to the Chief of the Five arm-in-arm with Stephanie de Marigny. Her usually vi-

vid face was strangely pale. "I can understand Hunkie here having a place in a brawl like this, she's got half the letters in the alphabet after her name, but what good could I do? Possibly? I only went to school one day in my life and that day it rained and the teacher didn't come."

"Formal education does not matter, child; it is what you intrinsically are that counts. You and your friend Charles are two perfectly matched male and female poles of tremendous power. You felt your paired power at work, I'm sure."

"Well-l, I felt *something*." Madlyn looked up at her Charley, her eyes full of question marks. "My whole brain was full of . . . well, it was all kind of spizzly, like champagne tastes." And:

"That's it exactly," van der Gleiss agreed.

Kay-Lee, fully recovered now, looked in surprise at some of the equations she had written, then turned to Sacner Carfon. "Did it come out all right?" she asked hopefully. "Oh, I *hope* it did!"

"I think so," the porpoise-man replied. "At least, all of it I can understand makes sense."

The T-8 engineer stared at Kay-Lee. "But didn't you *know* what you were doing?"

"Of course she didn't." Again Madame Barlo did the talking. "None of us did, consciously. We are not masters of The Power, but Its servants. We are merely Its tools; the agents through which It does Its work."

And, off to one side, Dorothy was saying, "Dick, those women actually

are witches! I liked Kay-Lee, too . . . but real, live, practicing *witches!* I got goose bumps as big as peas. I don't believe in witchcraft, darn it!"

"I don't either. That is, I never did before . . . but what else are you going to call it now?"

XXVI

Project Rho

The mathematicians and physical scientists began at once to study the wealth of new data. Drasnik, the First of Psychology, after conferring with Roban, with Sacner Carfon and with each of the three witches in turn, actually rushed over to the group of Tellurians. It was the first time Seaton had ever seen an excited Norlaminian.

"Ah, youths of Tellus, I thank you!" he enthused. "I thank you immensely for the inestimable privilege of meeting the ladies Barlo! They possess a talent that is indubitably of the most tremendous—"

"*Talent?*" Dorothy snorted. "Do you call *witchcraft* a talent? Why, the very idea of it makes me . . ." She paused.

"Uh-huh, me too," Madlyn agreed fervently. "If I have to believe in practicing witches I'll go not-so-slowly nuts."

"Witchcraft, my children? Bosh and fiddle-faddle! It is a *talent*. Extremely rare and lamentably rudimentary in our part of the universe, yet these women have it in astoundingly full measure. Unfortunately, you have no name for it except 'witchcraft', which term has deplor-

able connotations. It is the ability to . . . but the English has no words for that, either. But no matter, you have seen it in fine, full action. Roban and Sacner and I each have a very little of it . . ."

"But those women couldn't possibly have known anything about that kind of stuff!" Madlyn protested.

"Of course they didn't. Richard here and Tammon and Doctor DuQuesne were the principal sources of information. But all three of them together lacked a great deal of having full knowledge, and the rest of us had very little indeed. While the comparison is lamentably loose, consider a large, finely cut jigsaw puzzle. Seaton and DuQuesne and Tammon could each assemble an area. But no two of the three areas were contiguous, while none of the rest of us could fit more than a very few pieces together. But the ladies Barlo—particularly Grand Dame Barlo, who is a veritable powerhouse of strength—with some little help from the rest of us, exerted and directed The Power. The Power that, by tapping the reservoir of infinite knowledge, enabled the scribe Kay-Lee to fill in the missing parts of the puzzle."

"But why . . ." Seaton began, but changed his mind "I see. You didn't tell me anything about it because at that time it was both insignificant and inapplicable."

"That is correct. As I was saying, our Roban, who has more of it than any other entity previously known, had perhaps the thousandth of what Kay-Lee, the weakest by far of the three, has. That is why he is Chief

of the Five. And they tell me that there are other women of their race who also have this talent. Remarkable!" At this thought Drasnik, who had quieted down, became excited all over again. "When this is all over I shall go at once to Ray-See-Nee and study. Marvelous! They did not know even that it is a talent or that, when they learn, there will be no need to drug themselves into half-unconsciousness to employ it successfully. Thank you again, young friends, for this wonderful opportunity. Marvelous!" and Drasnik scurried away.

The Seatons and Madlyn and van der Gleiss stared after the Norlamian until he was out of sight. They turned and stared at each other.

"Well . . . I'll . . . be . . . a . . . dirty . . . name," Madlyn said.

Seaton was pacing the floor, talking to Dorothy, emitting a cloud of smoke from his battered and reeking briar. "I like to do my thinking with you, ace."

She chuckled. "At me, you mean, don't you? That stuff is over my head like a beach umbrella."

"Don't fish, sweetie. You not only have a body and some hair, but also a brain. One that fires on all sixteen barrels all the time."

She laughed delightedly. "Thank you so much. You know that isn't true, but you also know how I lap it up and purr. But to proceed, Dunark wants to smash them all with planets, the way he was going to smash Urvania. Martin and Peggy, after talking the way they did, crawled and are now talking about en-

closing the whole galaxy in a stasis of time . . ."

"Huh? That's news to me. How's he figuring on doing it—did he say?"

"Uh-uh. I didn't talk to him. Peggy says he isn't going to say anything about it until he can present the package."

"He should live so long. But 'scue, please; go ahead."

"Only one more. Foban, the simple-minded old darling, wants to work with them. Convert them!"

"Yeah. Make Christians of 'em. I've got a life-sized picture in technicolor of anybody ever accomplishing that feat. The trouble is, everybody wants to do something different and none of their ideas are any good at all."

"Oh? I noticed that you haven't been enthusiastic about any of them. Pretty grim, in fact. Why not?"

"Because none of 'em will come even close to getting 'em all and this has got to be a one hundred point zero zero zero per cent clean-up. You know how they operate on a cancer. They cut deep enough and wide enough to get it all. Every cell. If they don't get it all it spreads all over the body and the patient dies. This is a cancer. It's already eaten just about all of that galaxy by Chlora-typing planets wherever they go—or rather, enslaved humans are doing it for them—and it's spreading fast. And when that galaxy begins to get crowded they won't just jump to one other; they'll go for hundreds or thousands of galaxies and there goes the ball game. So that cancer has got to be



operated on before it spreads any farther."

Dorothy's face began to pale. "By that analogy you mean destroy the whole galaxy! How can such a thing be possible? It can't possibly be possible!"

He told her how the operation could be performed. That apparatus that the Barlo women had dredged up out of nowhere had a lot of capabilities that did not appear on the surface. Blackie DuQuesne had perceived one set of those possibilities, and he and Blackie had been working on the hardware. They were calling it Project Rho.

Her face, already pale, turned white as he talked; and when he had finished:

"Project . . . Rho," she breathed. "How utterly horrible! And yet . . . I never dreamed . . . have you talked to Martin yet?"

"No. You first. I don't want to even think about pushing that kind of a button without being sure you're standing at my back."

"I'll do better than that, Dick." She looked him steadily in the eye. "I'll take half of it. My finger will be right beside yours on that button."

"You are an ace, ace. As maybe I've said once before."

"Uh-huh, at least once — but we're one, remember?"

After a moment she went on, "But we can't possibly sell the Norlaminians any such bill of goods as that."

"I'll say we can't. They'd cry their eyes out all over the place. Or wait. When they find out that they can't

stop it, they'll help save the human planets, which will be all to the good; the witches can use the help. But basically, the grand slam will be up to DuQuesne and his Fenachrone and the witches and Mart and me. Even Mart will need some persuasion, I'm afraid; and you'll have to really work on Peg. She'll simply have a litter of kittens."

"Why, Dick; *what* a way to talk!" She smiled in spite of herself, but sobered quickly. "She'll come around, I'm sure; she'll have to. But Dick, is it actually physically possible? It's so *huge*!"

"Definitely. You see, we'll be operating in a Gunther universe, so that mass as such won't enter and power will be no problem. All we have to do is build an apparatus to alter the properties of space around and throughout the object to be moved — altering those properties in such a way as to make its three-dimensional attributes incompatible with those of its . . ."

She stopped him with an upraised hand. "Hold it! Wait up, please. We'll dispense with the high math, if you don't mind. It's the sheer *size* of the thing that scares me witless."

Seaton did grin then. "Well, you've always known that making things bigger and better is the fondest thing I am of. But we know exactly how to do it, and I think we can get it done before the Norlaminians finish theirs. But DuQuesne should be about ready to take off. I'll flip myself over there and see."

He did so and said, "How're you doing Blackie?"

"A few minutes yet to finish final checking. I've been thinking. What kind of a celestial object will that galaxy be when we get done with it? Not a quasi-stellar, certainly; that's only a star with the energy of a hundred thousand million stars. This will be a galaxy with the energy of a hundred thousand million galaxies — the energy of an entire universe."

"Yeah. Something new, I'd say. It'll give some astronomers a thrill, some day. But what I can't compute is, whether or not it will sterilize the interstellar space of that galaxy," Seaton said.

"Well, if it doesn't, you might put the Osnomians and Urvanians on it. Keep 'em from thinking about fighting each other."

"You know, Blackie, I'd thought of doing exactly that? 'Great minds' and so forth. 'Bye now; be seein' ya.'" and Seaton flipped himself back home.

En route to his destination — barren planet in a star-cluster on the opposite side of the galaxy from the *Skylark of Valeron* — DuQuesne again went into a huddle with Sleemet.

"So far, you've done a job," he began. "What I told you to do — what I knew how to do — and done if well. But nothing else. Now I want something more than that. Something you can do, if you will, that I can't. As you know, I've made arrangements so that in case of my death this whole planetoid goes up in an atomic blast. That was to keep you from killing me and making off

with it. The same thing will happen, though, if those Chlorans kill me in the fracas that's coming. It would seem as though that fact would be enough to make you make an honest-to-God effort to be sure that they *don't* kill me by doing your damndest to help me kill them. Mentally. Both you and the Chlorans know more about one phase of that than I do — as yet. So, as added inducement to really top effort, if you'll really tear into it on this Project Rho I'll teach you everything I know that you can take. And I'll help you build any kind of spacecraft you want before you leave; one even as big as this one. What do you say?"

Sleemet's strange eyes glowed. "If you will go mind to mind with me on that I can now assure you of such cooperation as no member of my race has ever given to any non-Fenachrone form of life," he declared; and DuQuesne handed him a headset.

It wasn't easy, not even for such an accomplished liar as Marc C. DuQuesne was, to make the four-dim gizmo very much more incomprehensible than it actually was; but he accomplished the feat — and he actually did give Sleemet practically everything else.

The *DQ* went into a one-day orbit above one point of an immense plain of the barren planet that was its goal. A plain some ten thousand square miles of which became forthwith an Area of Work. Enormous mechanisms sprang into being, by means of which DuQuesne and several hundred top-bracket Fenachrone

engineers sent gigantic beams of force hurtling across the galaxy to the *Skylark of Valeron* and to hundreds of thousands of other micro-metrically determined points.

But not Sleemet. That wight, knowing now almost everything that DuQuesne knew, was working in his own private laboratory — working with all the power of his tremendous mind on the various mental aspects of the battle of giants to come.

Hour after hour, Crane worked in his master control at the base of the Brain, with Madame Barlo and Drasnik and Margaret, each wearing an extra-complex headset, sitting close to him. They were mapping and modeling three galaxies, on such a large scale that the vast “tank” of the *Skylark of Valeron* was millions of times too small. They were using a disc-shaped-volume of open space some ten light-years in diameter and three light-years thick.

Galaxy DW-427-LU was already meticulously in place; its every celestial body being represented by a characteristically shaped and characteristically colored light. “Above” Galaxy DW-427-LU and “below” it (the terms are used in the explanatory sense only; “on one side of” and “on the other side of” could be used just as well) as close to it as possible, two other galaxies were being modeled; each as nearly like DW-427-LU in size and shape as could be found in that part of the First Universe. They were so close together that in many places the three models actually interpenetrated.

Now in the space-time continuum of the strictly material — the plenum in which we ungifted human beings live and which our friends the semanticists would have us believe is the only one having any reality — the map is not the territory. That is taken as being axiomatic. In the demesne of The Talent, however, known to some scholars as psionics and to scoffers as magic or witchcraft, the map is — and *definitely!* — the territory.

Thus, as Madame Barlo and Drasnik, those two matched poles of tremendous power; and Crane, the superlatively able coordinator and his matching pole Margaret; and that immense Brain — as these five labored together, the “map” (in this case the meticulously accurate space-chart) became filled with tendrils and filaments of psionic force, connecting models of suns with models of suns and those of planets with those of planets. And as those joinings occurred in the map, the same joinings occurred in the actual galaxies out in deep space.

Those joinings were invisible, it is true, and intangible, and undetectable to any physical instrument. But they were nevertheless as real as was the almost infinite power from which they sprang.

The other pairs of psionists were also hard at work. Roban and Grand Dame Barlo, Sacner Carfon and Kay-Lee, Charles van der Gleiss and Madlyn Mannis, Mergon and his Luloy, Tammon and Sennlloy — all were shooting heavy charges fast and flawlessly straight. And as all those matched pairs labored, and as the

automatics of pure psionic force they produced reproduced themselves in geometric ratio, the intergalactic couplings increased at a rate that was that ratio squared.

Seaton was fantastically busy, too. He was deep in his controller, with Dorothy and Stephanie de Marigny, both helmeted, one on each side of him. Dorothy, was, of course, his matched pole of power; Stephanie was his link to DuQuesne. He, too, was operating a ten-thousand-square-mile Area of Work with the speed of thought and he was not making any mistakes. It is true that the *Skylark of Valeron* was the biggest thing he had ever built before, and that the members with which he was working now were parsecs instead of inches long. Nevertheless each one fitted perfectly into place and every one that was supposed to connect with anything of DuQuesne's connected perfectly therewith.

After many hours of this furiously grinding work, a myriad of hells began to break out, at the rate of hundreds of thousands per second. Of hells, that is, infinitely hotter than anything imaginable by man. Of super-novae, no less.

In one galaxy, A, a large hot sun vanished.

It reappeared instantaneously — with no lapse of time whatever — close beside the sun of a Chloran-dominated solar system in Galaxy DW-427-LU.

And in that same no-time the Telus-Type planet in the Chloran system vanished therefrom and reappeared in a precisely similar orbit

around a Type G dwarf sun in Galaxy B, the third galaxy in the psionists' tremendous working model.

And those two suns in the Chloran solar system in Galaxy DW-427-LU, with photospheres in contact and with intrinsic velocities not only diametrically opposed but increased horribly by their mutual force of gravitation, crashed together in direct central impact and splashed with tremendous force.

Except for the heat, the collision might have lasted for a long time. But heat was the all-important factor — the starkly incomprehensible heat of hundreds of millions of Centigrade degrees.

Each of those suns was already an atomic furnace in precise equilibrium; generating and radiating the energy of some five million tons per second of matter being converted completely into energy. Thus there was no place for the added energy of billions of tons of matter to go. It could not be absorbed and it could not be radiated. Therefore the whole enormous mass of super-hot, super-dense material began to go into the long series of ultra-atomic explosions that is the formation of a supersuper-nova — the most utterly, the most fantastically violent display of pure, raw energy known to or possible in the universe of man.

Flares and prominences of this insanely detonating material were hurled upward and outward for millions upon millions of miles. Shock-wave after shock-wave, so hellishly hot as to be invisible for days, raged and raved spherically outward; converting instantaneously all the flot-

sam in their paths into their own unknown composition or atomic and subatomic debris. Planets lasted a little longer. Oceans and mountain ranges boiled briefly; after which each world evaporated comparatively slowly, as does a drop of water riding a cushion of its own steam on a hot steel plate.

And the sphere of annihilation, ravaging outward with unabated ferocity, reached and passed the outermost limits of the Chloran solar system and kept on going . . .

On and on . . .

And on . . .

Until there came to pass an event which not even Seaton, not even Madame Barlo herself had foreseen . . . and an event which nearly canceled all their efforts and their lives as well; for the Chlorans were not left without resources even in the destruction of their galaxy . . .

XXVII

DuQuesne to the Rescue

As has been said, the Chlorans of Galaxy DW-427-LU as a race were more conversant with the Talent than were any of the human or near-human races of the First Galaxy: that is, with the phases or facets of it that had to do with the remarkable hypnotic qualities of their minds. Thus their mathematicians were more or less familiar with no-space-no-time theory, and some of the Greater Great Ones had played with it a little more or less for fun, in practice. Since they had never had any real use for it as a weapon, how-

ever, it had never been fully developed.

Thus there were no detectors or feeling for that type of attack. "It was not sixth-order, but no-space-no-time, which is no-order". Thus millions upon millions of Chloran planets were destroyed without any intelligent entity either giving or receiving warning that an attack was being made.

And that was the way Richard Seaton wanted it. This was not a game; not a chivalric tournament. This was a matter of life and death, in which the forces of human civilization, outnumbered untold billions to one, needed all the advantage they could get.

Unfortunately for Seaton's desires and expectations, the Chlorans had a Galactic Institute for Advanced Study.

In common with all such institutions everywhere, its halls harbored at least one devotee of any nameable subject, however recondite or arcane that subject might be. So there was one old professor of advanced optical hypnosis who, as a hobby, had been delving into no-space-no-time for a couple of hundred years. He did not feel the light preliminary surveying tendrils of the human witches; but when the big Gunther beams began to come in he became interested fast and got busy fast.

He called his first assistant and his most advanced student — the latter a Greater Great One who was also interested in and a possessor of the Talent and thus familiar with the mysterious power of the number

three — and, synchronizing their three minds, they traced those beams to the *Skylark of Valeron* and the *DQ*, and to Seaton and to Crane and the DuQuesne.

"First," the professor told his two weaker fellows, "we will attune our Union of Three to theirs and break it apart with blasts of psionic force. Then, each of us having tuned to one of the separated strands, we will kill the three murderers forthwith."

And the Chlorans proceeded to do their best to bring this event about — and their best was very potent indeed.

If things did not quite work out the way they had planned it, it was no fault of the individual Chlorans. Their minds were fully capable of killing three "murderers" at a distance. The first enormous surge of mental energy they thrust into the Tellurian union of minds destroyed its fabric. The coupling of "poles of power" was wrenched asunder. The individual minds of the operators were left alone against the Chloran thrust . . . and each of the three Chlorans selected one of the three mightiest intellects of their enemies and commanded it to die.

In that moment, Seaton, Crane and DuQuesne were seized and pinned. The minds that thundered destruction at them were not merely of great intrinsic power, carefully trained; they were backed up by all the million-year evolution of Chloran science, aided by the impact of total surprise.

The three helpless Tellurians were helpless before they knew what hit them.

But they did not die. What saved them was DuQuesne's bargain with the Fenachrone. Sleemet had had a few microseconds' warning by that Fenachrone ferocity, and the backing of every last member of his feral race.

His primary purpose was, of course, the defense of DuQuesne's life — not for the sake of DuQuesne, to be sure, but for the protection of the Fenachrone. He succeeded. DuQuesne's rigidity melted and he was back in control of himself, his own great intellect reinforcing Sleemet's counterblows. The two of them had enough psionic power left over to help Seaton and Crane . . . but not enough. The blow had been too powerful and too sudden.

Both Seaton and Crane slumped bonelessly to the floor of the control room, leaving their controllers empty and idle.

In that moment the one great pole of strength left to humankind was — Dr. Marc C. DuQuesne.

To Dorothy Seaton, that moment was pure horror. It was every terrible fear she had ever thought of, all come to pass at once: Seaton disabled, perhaps dying; DuQuesne in control of all the mighty resources of the *Skylark*. Dorothy shrieked and leaped from her chair —

And was stopped in her tracks by DuQuesne's shout, crackling out of a speaker to emphasize his hard-driven thoughts:

"Dorothy! Margaret! Quit it! Pick up your loads and carry 'em. Pole to me!"

And Dorothy hesitated, irresolute,

torn between her love for Seaton and her urgent duty to help against the Chlorans, while the whole vast net of human mental energies wavered and hung in the balance.

"Now!" snarled DuQuesne, the thought like a lash. "Move! To hell with the dead—" Dorothy screamed again—"you're still alive! But you won't be long if you goof off!" Rapidly he scanned the quavering net. "You Barlo women and your poles! Drop what you're doing and locate this interference for me—*fast!* All of you—find it for me so I can slug it! Hunkie? Yeah—good girl! Stay with it just as you are!"

"But DuQuesne," Dorothy protested, "I've got to . . ."

"Oh, *hell!*" DuQuesne wrenched out, every nuance of his tone showing the tremendous strain under which he was laboring. "Savant Sennloy! You can't be spared from there, but have you got a couple of girls who can tune themselves to me?"

"Yes, Doctor DuQuesne." Neither she or any other Jelm aboard understood why Seeker Sevance of Yylmny had been masquerading as Doctor Marc C. DuQuesne of Tellus when he received his Call. They all knew, however, that it had to do with his Seeking; hence, none of them did anything to interfere with it. "We have many very good mentalists in our party."

"Fine! Have two of 'em relieve these two weak sisters here—and fast!"

"Here we are, sir," two thoughts came in, in unison. And two powerful female Jelman minds—the

minds of two girls with whom he was already very well acquainted—fitted themselves snuggingly to his and picked up the loads that the two Earthwomen had been unable to carry.

It was not that either of those Earthwomen was weak. Both were tremendously strong; mentally and psychically. Both disliked DuQuesne so intensely, however, that it was psychologically impossible for either of them to work with him. Of course, he regarded that fact itself as an extreme weakness. Sentiment was as bad as sentimentality, he held, and both bored him to tears.

"Ah, that's better." DuQuesne's thought was a sigh of relief. "That makes it at least possible."

And it did. DuQuesne and his two new assistants did not do much to keep the wave of destruction sweeping through Galaxy DW-427-LU, but he and they, with a lot of very high-powered Fenachrone help, did hold the Chloran attackers at bay until the three witches and the three warlocks found the planet upon which the Chloran Galactic Institute of Advanced Study was located. Then, with locked teeth and hard-set muscles and sweating face, he made the superhuman effort required to drive that three-man beam single-handed and keep those three rabid Chloran attackers at bay besides.

By a miracle of coordination and timing he did it—and practically collapsed when all attack and all necessity of resistance ceased. The Chloran Institute simply ceased to be. Its members died. DuQuesne re-

covered so quickly that no one else except the two Jelman girls knew that he had been affected at all.

"Dorothy! Margaret! Break it up!" he snapped. Doctors had been working on Seaton and Crane for minutes. Both were beginning to recover consciousness. Neither, apparently, had been permanently damaged; and both their wives were making enthusiastically joyful noises. "Come on, come on, take them home to do your slobbering over them. The rest of us have work to do — or do you expect us to hold this demolition job up until they organize another threesome to go to the mat with us?"

Stretchermen carried Seaton and Crane away; Dorothy and Margaret went along. The Chloran blow at the lives of the two Skylarkers had been deadly and fast, but it had not succeeded — quite.

And the "demolition job" went on.

In the great light-years-thick "tank" that was the psiontists' working model of the three galaxies they were manipulating, lights were winking out and reappearing as stars and planets were hurled through four-dimensional curves to new orbits and positions. Already Galaxy A — the "raw-material" source that was being used for a supply of suns — was visibly dimmer, visibly poorer in stars. Tens of millions of them had already been stolen away and tossed through four-space into Chloran suns in Galaxy DW-427-LU. And when they reappeared, in a head-on collision course with those Chloran suns, and struck, and destroyed themselves in the titanic outflow of en-

ergies that produced super-nova blasts, the model of Galaxy DW-427-LU showed another tiny but blindingly bright flare — and another — and another —

There were more than fifty thousand million suns to move, in all. As the first targets had been the strongest and most dangerous Chloran systems, resistance soon ceased to matter; the task became monotonous, exhausting and mind-deadening.

To the Chlorans, of course, it was something else again. They died in uncounted trillions. The greeny-yellow soup that served them for air boiled away. Their halogenous flesh was charred, baked and desiccated in the split-second of the passing of the wave front from each exploding double star, moments before their planets themselves began to seethe and boil. Many died unaware. Most died fighting. Some died in terrible, frantic efforts to escape . . .

But they all died.

And for each sun that DuQuesne's remorseless net located and flung into the Chloran galaxy, an oxygen-bearing, human-populated planet was snatched out of the teeth of the resulting explosion and carried through four-space into the safety of Galaxy B, there to slip quietly into orbit around a pre-selected, hospital sun. No human world was destroyed in all of Galaxy DW-427-LU.

It went on and on . . .

And then it was over.

Marc DuQuesne rose, stretched and yawned. "That's all. Everybody dismissed," he said, and at

once the vast psionic net ceased to be. He was alone for the first time in many hours.

His face was lined, his eyes deeper and darker than ever. Apart from that there was no sign of the great extermination he had just conducted. He was simply Marc DuQuesne. The man who slew a galaxy looked no different after the deed than he had before.

He allowed his sense of perception to roam for a moment about the "working model". In Galaxy A, where billions of suns had gone through the stellar cycle of evolution for billions of years, there was scarcely a corporal's guard of primaries left. It was a strange, almost a frightening sight. For with the loss of the suns the composition of the galaxy had changed to something never before seen in all the plenum of universes. Nearly every sun had had planets; nearly every planet remained behind when its sun was stolen. Now they roamed at random — uncontrolled, barren, uninhabited — lacking not only the light and heat of their primaries, but freed from their gravitational reins as well.

Galaxy B, on the other hand, looked quite normal — in the "working model". The planets it had acquired, both from the exploded Chloran suns and from the looted solar systems of Galaxy A, were not even visible. Galactically speaking, it was essentially unchanged; the additional mass of a few billion planets did not matter, and each of the new planets was already in orbit around a friendly sun. There would be re-

adjustments, of course. It would be necessary to keep a watch on the developments of each affected solar system, over a period of years. But that was no problem of Marc DuQuesne's.

But the Chloran galaxy! What was it?

In the "working model" it was rapidly becoming a single, light-years-thick concentration of living flame. In the reality it was even huger, even more deadly. A name would be invented for it some day — quasi-stellar? Or something greater still?

But that, too, was no longer a concern for Marc DuQuesne. He dropped from his mind, without a qualm, the memory of the trillions of lives he had taken, the billions of worlds he had dislocated. He ignored the question of Richard Ballinger Seaton, now stirring back to consciousness, to worry — and ultimately, to reassurance — somewhere on the *Valeron*. He had more pressing business to take care of. Personal business. And to DuQuesne that was the most pressing of all.

Shrugging his shoulders, he sent Stephanie de Marigny a tight-beamed thought:

"Hunkie — some time before you go back to Washington, can I flip you over to the *DQ* for a private conference that we know will be private?"

Her beautifully dimpled smile flashed on. "I should say not! You know I'm not *that* kind of a . . ." she began; then, as she perceived how much in earnest he was, she

changed tone instantly and went on, "Of course, Blackie. Any time. Just give me time to pack a toothbrush and my pajamas. Top Secret, or can you give me a hint to allay my 'satiabile curiosity?'"

"Hint; large economy size. Every time I think of what those damned observers are doing to you — feeding a mind like yours with an eyedropper instead of a seventy-two-inch pipeline — it makes me madder and madder. I can give you everything that Seaton, I, Crane and half the Norlaminians know, and give it to you in five hours."

"You can *what*?" The thought was a mental scream. She licked her lips, gulped twice, and said, "In that case we needn't wait for either toothbrush or pajamas. Do it now."

He laughed deeply. "I wasn't sure that would be your attitude, but I'm glad it is. But I can't do it this minute. I have to help Sleemet finish building his planetoid, watch him very carefully for a while on course and do a couple of other crash-prior chores. Three or four days, probably. Say Saturday, seventeen hours?"

"That'll be fine, Blackie, and thanks. I'll be here with my ears pinned back and my teeth filed down to needle points."

XXVIII

Emperor

The Fenachrone had taken off and DuQuesne had watched them go, taking extreme precautions — none of which, it turned out, had

been necessary — that they did not eliminate either him or the rest of the party as soon as it became safe for them to do so. He had taken Stephanie de Marigny and all her belongings aboard, saying that he was going close enough to Tellus so that it would be no trouble at all to drop her off there. And lastly, when Seaton and Crane had insisted upon thanking him for what he had done:

"Save it," he had sneered. "Remember, that time on X-World, what I told you to do with that kind of crap? That still goes," and he had taken off at full touring drive on course one seven five Universal. This course, which would give the First Galaxy a near miss, was the most direct route to a galaxy that was distant indeed; the galaxy lying on the extreme southern rim of the First Universe; the galaxy in which the *DQ* had been built; the galaxy that DuQuesne had surveyed so thoroughly and which he intended to rule.

DuQuesne and Stephanie were in the *DQ's* control room, which was an exact duplicate of the *Skylark of Valeron's*. He placed her in the seat that on the *Valeron* was Crane's, showed her how to elevate herself into his own station.

"Oh," she said. "You're going to give me the whole gigantic Brain?"

"That's the best and easiest way to do it. I boiled down about ten thousand lifetimes of knowledge and experience into ten half-hour sessions. The ten tapes on that player there are coded instructions for the Brain — what to give you and how.

There are minds who could take the whole jolt in seconds, but yours and mine aren't that type — yet. But you'll get it all in five hours. Every detail. It'll shock you all hell's worth and it'll scare you right out of your panties, but it won't hurt you and it won't damage your brain. Yours is one of the very few human brains that *can* take it. I'll start it and in five hours I'll be back. Ready?"

"As much so as I ever will be, I guess. Go."

He started the player; and, after waiting a few minutes to be sure that everything was going as programmed, he left the room . . .

He came back in just as the machine clicked off, lowered her "chair", and lifted her to her feet.

"Good — God — In — Heaven!" she gasped. Her skin, normally so dark, was a yellowish white; so pale that her scattered freckles stood out sharply, each one in bold relief. "I don't . . . I can't . . . I simply can't *grasp* it! I know that I know it, but . . ." She paused.

He shook his head in sympathy. Which, for Marc C. DuQuesne, was a rare gesture indeed. "I know. I couldn't tell you what it would be like — no possible warning can be enough. But that's the bare minimum you'll have to start with, and it won't take you very long to assimilate it all. Ready for some talk?"

"Not only ready, I'm eager. First, though, I want to give you a vote of full confidence. I'm sure that you'll succeed in everything you try from now on; even to becoming Emperor Marc the First of some empire."

"Huh? Where did you get *that*?"

"By reading between the lines. Do you think I'm stupid, it that why you gave me all this?"

"Okay. You've always known, as an empirical, non-germane fact, that the Earth and all it carries isn't even a flyspeck in a galaxy, to say nothing of a universe; but now you know and really understand just how little it actually does amount to."

She shuddered. "Yes. It's . . . it's appalling."

"Not when viewed in the proper perspective. I set out to rule Earth, yes; but after I began to learn something I lost that idea in a hurry. For a long time now I haven't wanted Earth or any part of it. Its medical science is dedicated whole-heartedly to the deterioration of the human race by devoting its every effort to the preservation of the lives of the unfit. In Earth's wars its best men — its best breeding stock — are killed. Earth simply is not worth saving even if it could be saved; which I doubt. Neither is Norlamin. Not because its conquest is at present impossible, but because the Norlaminians aren't worth anything, either. All they do — all they *can* do — is think. They haven't done anything constructive in their entire history and they never will. They're such bred-in-the-bone pacifists — look at the way the damned sissies acted in this Chloran thing — that it is psychologically impossible for any one of them to pull a trigger. No; Sleetmet had the right idea. And Raviandau — you have him in mind?"

"Vividly. Preserve the race — in *his* way and on *his* terms."

"You're a precisionist; that's my idea exactly. To pick out a few hundred people — we won't need many, as there are billions already where we're going — as much as possible like us, and build a civilization that will be what a civilization ought to be."

The girl gasped, but her eyes began to sparkle. "In a distant galaxy", as Ravindau said?"

"Very distant. Clear out on the rim of this universe. The last galaxy out on the rim, in fact; five degrees east of Universal south."

"And you'll be Emperor Marc the First after all. But you won't live long enough to rule very much."

"You're wrong, Steff. The ordinary people are already there, and it's ridiculous for a sound and healthy body to deteriorate and die at a hundred. We'll live ten or fifteen times that long, what with what I already know and the advances our medical science will make. Especially with the elimination of the unfit."

"Sterilization, you mean?"

"No; death. Don't go soft on me, girl. There will be no second-class citizens, at least in the upper stratum. Testing for that stratum will be by super-computer. Upper-stratum families will be fairly large."

"Families?" she broke in. "You've come to realize, then, that the family is the *sine qua non* of civilization?"

"I've always known that." Forestalling another interruption with a wave of his hand, he went on, "I know. I've never been a family man. On Earth or in our present cultures I would never become one. But skip-

ping that for the moment, it's your turn now."

"I like it." She thought in silence for a couple of minutes, then went on, "It must be an autocracy, of course, and you're the man to make it work. The only flaw I can see is that even absolute authority can not make a dictated marriage either tolerable or productive. It automatically isn't, on both counts."

"Who said anything about dictated marriage? Free choice within the upper stratum and by test from the lower. With everybody good breeding stock, what difference will it make who marries whom?"

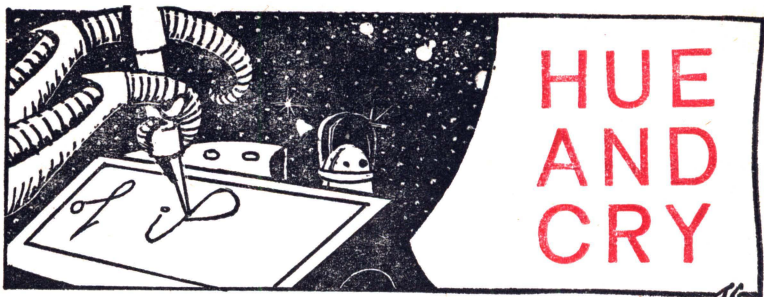
"Oh. I see. That does it, of course. Contrary to all appearances, then, you actually do believe in love. The implication has been pellucidly clear all along that you expect . . ."

"Expect' is too strong a word. Make it that I'm 'exploring the possibility of'."

"I'll accept that. You are exploring the possibility of me becoming your empress. From all the given premises, the only valid conclusion is that you love me. Check?"

"The word 'love' has so many and such tricky meanings that it is actually meaningless. Thus, I don't know whether I love you or not, in your interpretation of the term. If it means to you that I will jump off of a cliff or blow my brains out if you refuse, I don't. Or that I'll pine away and not marry a second best, I don't. If, however, it means a lot of other things, I do. Whatever it means, will you marry me?"

"Of course I will, Blackie. I've loved you a long time." END



The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet . . .

Dear Editor:

After having just finished *Patron of the Arts*, I can't understand why more "Hue & Cry" isn't made over Fred Saberhagen's Berserker stories.

People keep praising your longer and flashier Retief and Gree stories. I can see why, because I think they are both terrific—and have been a Retief fan since January, 1962 and *The Yllian Way*. But I haven't seen even one letter (although I have missed a couple of issues) praising these short but great stories of the war of life vs. the berserker machines. The idea behind them all is fascinating and original, and each one is clear and well developed—an unusual quality in stories of that length. More of them, please!

Another good story from the same issue as *Patron* was *We Hunters of Men*. The story was excellent and the curtain line was one of the best ever. A bad story from that issue was *The Crater*, and the artwork was worse. No more Nodel, huh?

Congratulations on your longer format. I haven't seen one of the bigger issues yet but I know it will be terrific. *If* is the best SciFi mag around, and you can't get too much of a good thing!—Bill Reynolds, Jr., 336 Acre Lane, Hicksville, New York.

• Coming up next month: *Masque of the Red Shift*, a Berserker novelette—and more to follow!—*Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

You bring up an interesting point: I refer to the problem of getting readers to write in and tell you what they want in the magazine. There are a number of reasons why you will have a hard time getting such letters. First of all, the majority of letter writers are in that little group of just about one thousand people who call themselves 'science fiction fandom'. That is not much use, because their interests are a closed-circle affair. So far as I have been able to find out, their opinions of *Worlds of Tomorrow* and *IF* are quite low. We come, then

to the problem of the general public.

During the period of 'culture' in science fiction, the general public got a pretty raw deal. The letters they wrote to science-fiction editors, were usually answered insultingly, requesting the things they liked, I recall one editor publicly, in print, stating that such people were probably perverts because they objected to an overload of sex in the stories. It really became a sad situation when the writers joined the editors in 'telling off' the readers. You can't blame the readers for not really believing you when you say you want their opinions. How to overcome it? Darned if I know.

Of course, one of the problems of getting into contact with the readers is that very few of them read either the editorial column or the reader's column (when such is printed). Speaking personally, I read science-fiction for ten years (back in the thirties) before I was even aware of the existence of the editorial or reader's pages. I bought the magazines for the stories; the same reason most people buy fiction magazines. When the fiction got too dull, I just stopped reading the magazine.

While I am writing this, I might as well extend my comments. Do you remember why science-fiction magazines went to the digest size? Most people do not remember. It was the outgrowth of yells from science-fiction fandom for trimmed edges. A big uproar about nothing important. The magazines could not give trimmed edges at the large size without increasing the expense of the magazines. But it could be done at a smaller size; so we got 'digest' magazines. Frankly, I do not think it was worth it. Good display became impossible. I realize

that Campbell tried to return to the large size. However, he tried it with trimmed edges and slick paper; a good way of pricing himself out of existence. From my point of view, a return to the untrimmed edges would do the pulp business a great deal of good. They might even start thinking of the line as a money making business.

Of course, there were also complaints from science-fiction fandom about the guy-girl-monster covers. This was also a very foolish objection. The cover is a billboard. If it is not used as such it might as well be blank. The only value of a cover on a newsstand magazine is to attract attention in any way possible. If it can only be done by making the cover like a circus poster, then it should look like a circus poster. If a damsel in distress is the best way, then it should be used. A colored cover, alone, will not attract attention; nor will unusual circumstances. Activity is important in a cover picture. The only way to prepare a cover display properly is to assume that the magazine is being seen for the first time by a person who has never heard of science-fiction.

The truth is that the general public never has heard of science-fiction. The general term for the type of writing is still 'that Buck Rogers stuff'. Only the writing profession knows the difference. Of course, basically, there is no difference. The basic pattern is the same; the difference is only in the way you stretch it. Stretched in one direction, it becomes 'social commentary'. Stretched in another direction, it becomes entertainment. It all depends on what you want to sell. I assume *Galaxy* is 'social commen-

tary', and *Worlds of Tomorrow* and *IF* are entertainment magazines. If the latter are entertainment magazines, they cannot be handled, visually, in the same manner as *Galaxy*. Illustrations in an entertainment magazine require lively action and clear cut artwork. A person looking for entertainment is not looking for subtlety.

I suppose everybody has an opinion on this sort of thing. My opinion is based on six years of digging into the whys and whats of complaints I heard in the publishing business about loss of readers. I questioned editors, writers, printers and distributors. The final answer is rather peculiar. There is really nothing basically wrong with the publishing business, and the readers are still available for all types of reading material. Television, radio and the movies never did any damage to the publishing business. The only damage, if any, was in the fears that the aforementioned mediums would hurt them. As a result, a great many publishers changed their merchandising methods unnecessarily. It's something like the danger of ghosts: they can't hurt you, but they sure can make you hurt yourself.

Best of luck. — D. Bruce Berry, 4554 North Malden Street, Chicago, Illinois, 60640.

• Actually, it's probably too late for untrimming the edges to help anything — those big old pulp presses that used to churn out the shaggy books on the blotting-paper stock have long since been dismantled. But you make a lot of good points, and we'll admit you've started us thinking. One effect: We're going to take a long, hard look at our policies! — *Editor*.

Dear Editor:

As a fairly new subscriber, I think you would be doing a great service if you would print a short biography of the Retief stories in *If*. Also, please try getting Laumer to write a Retief serial.—James E. Turner, Pilot Knob, Missouri 63663. • All right. See Page 14 — and surrounding territory.

And that just about does it again. Our story for this issue by a writer never previously published anywhere is *Purpose*, by Edward V. Dong—whom we first met, a year or two ago, when we were invited to speak to the science-fiction club at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, where he was then an undergraduate in the engineering school. By the way, you all know, don't you, that we do make a point to bring one brand new writer into every issue of *If*. We've recently brought a batch of them—from a high-school student, a folk singer, a mathematician and a retired Navy officer, among others—but we'll be buying a lot more. Maybe yours?

And we've also recently bought some large clumps of material from some writers who are not at all brand-new. (This new large size eats up a lot of material!) Our next serial will be Robert A. Heinlein's new one; a B-I-G story, but we're going to attempt to bring it to you intact. Following that, a great joy by Keith Laumer and Rosel G. Brown in collaboration, called *Earthblood*; following that, Algis Budrys's first sf magazine serial, *The Iron Thorn*.

And by the way — it is our personal opinion that we have just named 1966's Hugo winner — and maybe two of the runners-up, as well! — *Editor*.





K
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