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to trap a living enemy!

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by **FRED SABERHAGEN**

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**WORLDS OF**



# **SCIENCE FICTION**

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**ALL NEW  
STORIES**

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## WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU

**H** Heard any of these statements lately?

"Women are as intelligent as men—I.Q. tests prove it." "Animal mothers often adopt babies of other species as their own—witness cats and new born rabbits—so those stories about wolf-boys raised in the jungle could be true." "Negroes are intrinsically less educable than Europeans; the state of civilization in Africa proves it." Or its opposite: "There is absolutely no difference, intellectually or biologically, between races; all men are created not only equal but identical."

If you have heard them—or any of thousands of "clearly proved" or "well known" alleged facts like them that turn up in around-the-cocktail-table discussions of human beings and their manifold strangenesses, a book we have just read called *Your Heredity and Environment* by Amram Scheinfeld (Lippincott) will surprise and fascinate you. True, boys and girls in mass testing get identical scores on I.Q. tests; but what we, at least didn't know—and what Scheinfeld points out brilliantly—is that there is a reason for this: all I.Q. tests have been systematically "corrected" to make male and female results come out equal. For every "boy-oriented" question, a "girl-oriented" question has been conscientiously added. The wolf-boys? Well, says Scheinfeld, apart from all the other arguments against them, consider one thing: the human infant requires longer nursing than any other—

and no mother but a human mother is naturally equipped to provide that much nursing. As to the question of race differences, if any, Scheinfeld makes a crystal-clear case. Most "racial" differences are clearly environmental, not innate—Negroes score somewhat lower on I.Q. tests than whites; but Northern Negroes score *higher* than Southern whites—presumably because of the presence of better schools, better public health services and maybe a more technologically demanding culture. But *some* differences can't be explained that way. For example, some nationalities thrive on an article of diet called the fava bean; others develop a serious illness from it. South African whites suffer from a disease called Porphyria variegata; other whites, and almost all Negroes, practically never have it. In the case of the South Africans, says Scheinfeld, the hereditary factors can be traced back to a single Afrikaner family (named Gerrit); and what is at work is not so much racial difference but genetic drift.

In other words, X nationality may indeed be somewhat more likely to show a certain trait than any other. But an X-man doesn't inherit the trait because his ancestors were X-men; he inherits it from *certain particular ancestors* . . . . Well, there's lots more; but it's a book worth reading. We enjoyed it . . . and we can think of a few people who *need* it!

THE EDITOR



# TIGER GREEN

by GORDON R. DICKSON

ILLUSTRATED BY ADKINS

*Something on the planet loved people—loved them enough to free them from their lives!*

## I

A man with hallucinations he cannot stand trying to strangle himself in a home-made straitjacket is not a pretty sight. But after a while, grimly thought Jerry McWhin, the *Star Scout's* navigator, the ugly and terrible seem to backfire in effect, filling you with fury instead of harrowing you further. Men in crowds and packs could be stampeded briefly, but after a while the individual among them would turn,

get his back up, and slash back.

At least—the hyper-stubborn individual in himself had finally so reacted.

Determinedly, with fingers that fumbled from lack of sleep, he got the strangling man—Wally Blake, an assistant ecologist—untangled and into a position where it would be difficult for him to try to choke out his own life, again. Then Jerry went out of the sickbay storeroom, leaving Wally and the other seven men out of the *Star Scout's* comple-

ment of twelve who were in total restraint. He was lightheaded from exhaustion; but a berserk something in him snarled like a cornered tiger and refused to break like Wally and the others.

When all's said and done, he thought half-crazily, there's worse ways to come to the end of it than a last charge, win or lose, alone into the midst of all your enemies.

Going down the corridor, the sight of another figure jolted him a little back toward common sense. Ben Akham, the drive engineer, came trudging back from the airlock corridor with a flame thrower on his back. Soot etched darkly the lines on his once-round face.

"Get the hull cleared?" asked Jerry. Ben nodded exhaustedly.

"There's more jungle on her every morning," he grunted. "Now those big thistles are starting to drip a corrosive liquid. The hull needs an anti-acid washing. I can't do it. I'm worn out."

"We all are," said Jerry. His own five-eleven frame was down to a hundred and thirty-eight pounds. There was plenty of food—it was just that the four men left on their feet had no time to prepare it; and little enough time to eat it, prepared or not.

Exploration Team Five-Twenty-Nine, thought Jerry, had finally bitten off more than it could chew, here on the second planet of Star 83476. It was nobody's fault. It had been a gamble for Milt Johnson, the Team Captain, either way—to land or not to land. He had landed; and it had turned out bad.

By such small things was the scale toward tragedy tipped. A communication problem with the natives, a native jungle evidently determined to digest the spaceship, and eight of twelve men down with something like suicidal delirium tremens—any two of these things the Team could probably have handled.

But not all three at once.

Jerry and Ben reached the entrance of the Control Room together and peered in, looking for Milt Johnson.

"Must be outside, talking to that native again," said Jerry.

"Outside? — *Oot*-side!" exploded Ben, with a sudden snapping of frayed nerves. "Can't you say 'outside'? — '*Out*-side', like everybody else?"

The berserk something in Jerry lunged to be free, but he caught it and hauled it back.

"Get hold of yourself!" he snapped.

"Well . . . I wouldn't mind you sounding like a blasted Scotchman all the time!" growled Ben, getting himself, nevertheless, somewhat under control. "It's just you always do it when I don't expect it!"

"If the Lord wanted us all to sound alike, he'd have propped up the Tower of Babel," said Jerry wickedly. He was not particularly religious himself, but he knew Ben to be a table-thumping atheist. He had the satisfaction now of watching the other man bite his lips and control himself in his turn.

Academically, however, Jerry thought as they both headed out through the ship to find Milt, he

could not really blame Ben. For Jerry, like many Scot-Canadians, appeared to speak a very middle-western American sort of English most of the time. But only as long as he avoided such vocabulary items as 'house' and 'out'; which popped off Jerry's tongue as 'hoose' and 'oot'. However, every man aboard had his personal peculiarities. You had to get used to them. That was part of spaceship—in fact, part of human—life.

They emerged from the lock, rounded the nose of the spaceship, and found themselves in the neat little clearing on one side of the ship where the jungle paradoxically refused to grow. In this clearing stood the broad-shouldered figure of Milt Johnson, his whitish-blond hair glinting in the yellow-white sunlight.

Facing Milt was the thin, naked, and saddle-colored, humanoid figure of one of the natives from the village, or whatever it was, about twenty minutes away by jungle trail. Between Milt and the native was the glittering metal console of the translator machine.

“. . . Let's try it once more,” they heard Milt saying as they came up and stopped behind him.

The native gabble agreeably.

“Yes, yes. Try it again,” translated the voice of the console.

“I am Captain Milton Johnson. I am in authority over the crew of the ship you see before me.”

“Gladly would I not see it,” replied the console on translation of the native's gabblings. “However—

I am Communicator, messenger to you sick ones.”

“I will call you Communicator, then,” began Milt.

“Of course. What else could you call me?”

“Please,” said Milt, wearily. “To get back to it—I also am a Communicator.”

“No, no,” said the native. “You are not a Communicator. It is the sickness that makes you talk this way.”

“But,” said Milt, and Jerry saw the big, white-haired captain swallow in an attempt to keep his temper. “You will notice, I am communicating with you.”

“No, no.”

“I see,” said Milt patiently, “You mean, we aren't communicating in the sense that we aren't understanding each other. We're talking, but you don't understand me—”

“No, no. I understand you perfectly.”

“Well,” said Milt, exhaustedly, “I don't understand you.”

“That is because you are sick.”

Milt blew out a deep breath and wiped his brow.

“Forget that part of it, then,” he said. “Many of my crew are upset by nightmares we all have been having. They *are* sick. But there are still four of us who are well—”

“No, no. You are all sick,” said Communicator earnestly. “But you should love what you call nightmares. All people love them.”

“Including you and your people?”

“Of course. Love your nightmares. They will make you well. They will make the little bit of

proper life in you grow, and heal you."

Ben snorted beside Jerry. Jerry could sympathize with the other man. The nightmares he had been having during his scant hours of sleep, the past two weeks, came back to his mind, with the indescribably alien, terrifying sensation of drifting in a sort of environmental soup with identifiable things changing shape and identity constantly around him. Even pumped full of tranquilizers, he thought—which reminded Jerry.

He had not taken his tranquilizers lately.

When had he taken some last? Not since he woke up, in any case. Not since . . . yesterday, sometime. Though that was now hard to believe.

"Let's forget that, too, then." Milt was saying. "Now, the jungle is growing all over our ship, in spite of all we can do. You tell me your people can make the jungle do anything you want."

"Yes, yes," said Communicator, agreeably.

"Then, will you please stop it from growing all over our spaceship?"

"We understand. It is your sickness, the poison that makes you say this. Do not fear. We will never abandon you." Communicator looked almost ready to pat Milt consolingly on the head. "You are people, who are more important than any cost. Soon you will grow and cast off your poisoned part and come to us."

"But we can come to you right now!" said Milt, between his teeth. "In fact—we've come to your village a dozen times."

"No, no." Communicator sounded distressed. "You approach, but you do not come. You have never come to us."

Milt wiped his forehead with the back of a wide hand. "I will come back to your village now, with you," he said. "Would you like that?" he asked.

"I would be so happy!" said Communicator. "But—you will not come. You say it, but you do not come."

"All right. Wait—" about to take a hand transceiver from the console, Milt saw the other two men. "Jerry," he said, "you go this time. Maybe he'll believe it if it's you who goes to the village with him."

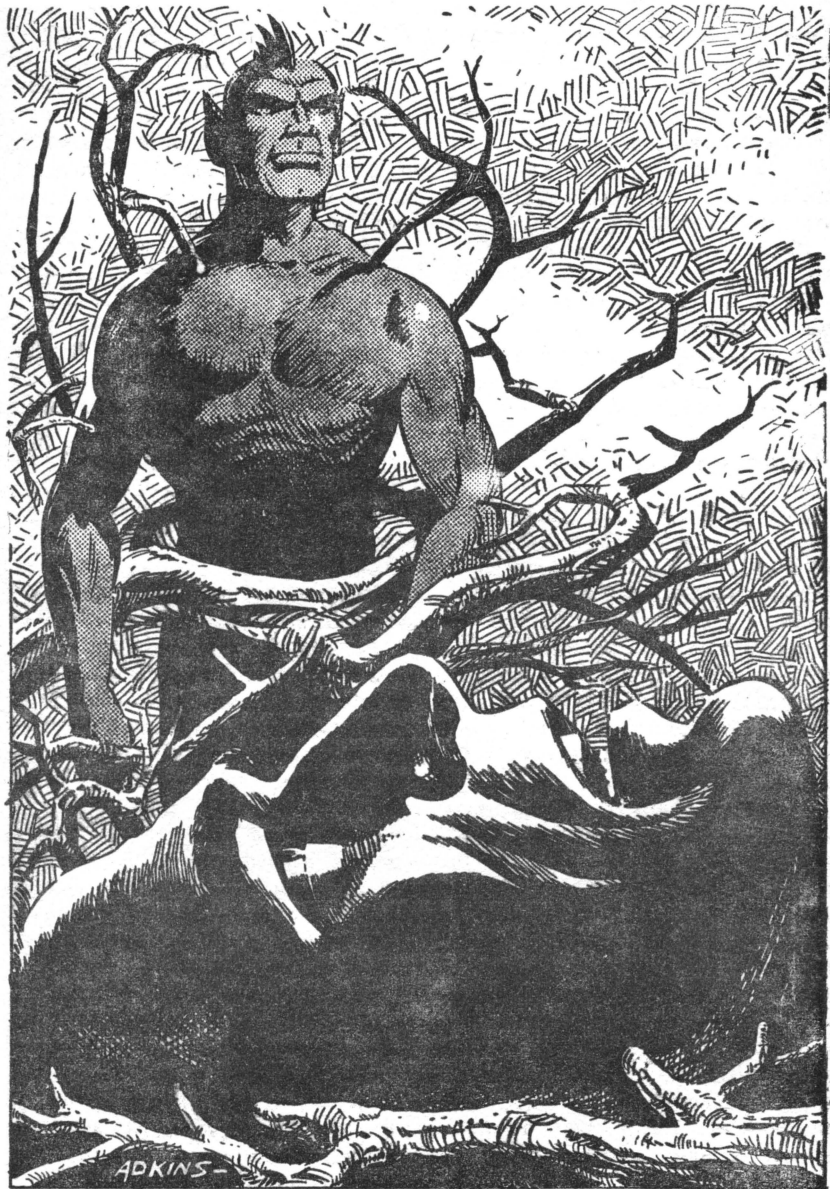
"I've been there before. With you, the second time you went," objected Jerry. "And I've got to feed the men in restraint, pretty soon," he added.

"Try going again. That's all we can do—try things. Ben and I'll feed the men," said Milt. Jerry, about to argue further, felt the pressure of a sudden wordless, exhausted appeal from Milt. Milt's basic berserkedness must be just about ready to break loose, too, he realized.

"All right," said Jerry.

"Good," said Milt, looking grateful. "We have to keep trying. I should have lifted ship while I still had five well men to lift it with. Come on, Ben—you and I better go feed those men now, before we fall asleep on our feet."





**T**hey went away around the nose of the ship. Jerry unhooked the little black-and-white transceiver, that would radio-relay his conversations with Communicator back to the console of the translator for sense-making during the trip.

"Come on," he said to Communicator, and led off down the pleasantly wide jungle trail toward the native village.

They passed from under the little patch of open sky above the clearing and into green-roofed stillness. All about them, massive limbs, branches, ferns and vines intertwined in a majestic maze of growing things. Small flying creatures, looking half-animal and half-insect, flittered among the branches overhead. Some larger, more animal-like, creatures sat on the heavier limbs and moaned off-key like abandoned puppies. Jerry's head spun with his weariness, and the green over his head seemed to close down on him like a net flung by some giant, crazy fisherman, to take him captive.

He was suddenly and bitterly reminded of the Team's high hopes, the day they had set down on this world. No other Team or Group had yet to turn up any kind of alien life much more intelligent than an anthropoid ape. Now they, Team 529, had not only uncovered an intelligent, evidently semi-cultured alien people, but an alien people eager to establish relations with the humans and communicate. Here, two weeks later, the natives were still apparently just as eager to com-

municate, but what they said made no sense.

Nor did it help that, with the greatest of patience and kindness, Communicator and his kind seemed to consider that it was the humans who were irrational and uncommunicative.

Nor that meanwhile, that the jungle seemed to be mounting a specifically directed attack on the human spaceship.

Nor that the nightmare afflicting the humans had already laid low eight of the twelve crew and were grinding the four left on their feet down to a choice between suicidal delirium or collapse from exhaustion.

**I**t was a miracle, thought Jerry, lightheadedly trudging through the jungle, that the four of them had been able to survive as long as they had. A miracle based probably on some individual chance peculiarity of strength that the other eight men in straitjackets lacked. Although, thought Jerry now, that strength that was had so far defied analysis. Dizzily, like a man in a high fever, he considered their four surviving personalities in his mind's eye. They were, he thought, the four men of the team with what you might call the biggest mental crochets.

— Or ornery streaks.

Take the fourth member of the group—the Medician, Arthyr Loy, who had barely stuck his nose out of the sick bay lab in the last forty-eight hours. Not only because he was the closest thing to an M.D. aboard the ship, was Art still deter-

ained to put the eight restrained men back on their feet again. It just happened, in addition, that Art considered himself the only true professional man aboard, and was not the kind to admit any inability to the lesser mortals about him.

And Milt Johnson — Milt made an excellent captain. He was a tower of strength, a great man for making decisions. The only thing was, that having decided, Milt could hardly be brought to consider the remote possibility that anyone else might have wanted to decide differently.

Ben Akham was another matter. Ben hated religion and loved machinery — and the jungle surrounding was attacking *his* spaceship. In fact, Jerry was willing to bet that by the time he got back, Ben would be washing the hull with an acid-counteractant in spite of what he had told Jerry earlier.

And himself? Jerry? Jerry shook his head woozily. It was hard to be self-analytical after ten days of three and four hours sleep per twenty. He had what his grandmother had once described as the curse of the Gael — black stubbornness and red rages.

All of these traits, in all four of them, had normally been buried safely below the surfaces of their personalities and had only colored them as individuals. But now, the last two weeks had worn those surfaces down to basic personality bed-rock. Jerry shoved the thought out of his mind.

"Well," he said, turning to Communicator, "we're almost to your village now . . . You can't say someone didn't come with you, this time."

Communicator gabbled. The translator in Jerry's hand translated.

"Alas," the native said, "but you are not with me."

"Cut it out!" said Jerry wearily. "I'm right here beside you."

"No," said Communicator. "You accompany me, but you are not here. You are back with your dead things."

"You mean the ship and the rest of it?" asked Jerry.

"There is no ship," said Communicator. "A ship must have grown and been alive. Your thing has always been dead. But we will save you."

### III

They came out of the path at last into a clearing dotted with whitish, pumpkin-like shells some ten feet in height above the brown earth in which they were half-buried. Wide cracks in the out-curving sides gave view of tangled roots and plants inside, among which other natives could be seen moving about, scratching, tasting and making holes in the vegetable surfaces.

"Well," said Jerry, making an effort to speak cheerfully, "here I am."

"You are not here."

The berserk tigerishness in Jerry leaped up unawares and took him by the inner throat. For a long second he looked at Communicator through a red haze. Communicator gazed back patiently, evidently unaware how close he was to having his neck broken by a pair of human hands.

"Look —" said Jerry, slowly, between his teeth, getting himself under control, "if you will just tell me what to do to join you and your people, here, I will do it."

"That is good!"

"Then," said Jerry, still with both hands on the inner fury that fought to tear loose inside him, "what do I do?"

"But you know —" The enthusiasm that had come into Communicator a moment before, wavered visibly. "You must get rid of the dead things, and set yourself free to grow, inside. Then, after you have grown, your unsick self will bring you here to join us!"

Jerry stared back. Patience, he said harshly to himself.

"Grow? How? In what way?"

"But you have a little bit of proper life in you," explained Communicator. "Not much, of course . . . but if you will rid yourself of dead things and concentrate on what you call nightmares, it will grow and force out the poison of the dead life in you. The proper life and the nightmares are the hope for you —"

"Wait a minute!" Jerry's exhaustion-fogged brain cleared suddenly and nearly miraculously at the sudden surge of excitement into his bloodstream. "This proper life you talk about — does it have something to do with the nightmares?"

"Of course. How could you have what you call nightmares without a little proper life in you to give them to you? As the proper life grows, you will cease to fight so against the 'nightmares' . . ."

Communicator continued to talk earnestly. But Jerry's spinning brain was flying off on a new tangent. What was it he had been thinking earlier about tranquilizers — that he had not taken any himself for some time? Then, what about the nightmares in his last four hours of sleep?

He must have had them — he remembered now that he *had* had them. But evidently they had not bothered him as much as before — at least, not enough to send him scrambling for tranquilizers to dull the dreams' weird impact on him.

"Communicator!" Jerry grabbed at the thin, leathery-skinned arm of the native. "Have I been changing?"

"I do not know, of course," said the native, courteously. "I profoundly hope so. Have you?"

"Excuse me —" gulped Jerry. "I've got to get out of here — back to th' ship!"

He turned, and raced back up the trail. Some twenty minutes later, he burst into the clearing before the ship to find an ominous silence hanging over everything. Only the faint rustle and hissing from the ever-growing jungle swallowing up the ship sounded on his eardrums.

"Milt — Ben!" he shouted, plunging into the ship. "Art!"

A hail from farther down the main corridor reassured him, and he followed it up to find all three unrestrained members of the crew in the sickbay. But — Jerry brought himself up short, his throat closing



on him — there was a figure on the table.

"Who . . ." began Jerry. Milt Johnson turned around to face him. The captain's big body mercifully hid most of the silent form on the table.

"Wally Blake," said Milt emptily. "He managed to strangle himself after all. Got twisted up in his restraint jacket. Ben and I heard him thumping around in there, but by the time we got to him, it was too late. Art's doing an autopsy."

"Not exactly an autopsy," came the soft, Virginia voice of the Medician from beyond Milt. "Just looking for something I suspected . . . and here it is!"

Milt spun about and Jerry pushed between the big captain and Ben. He found himself looking at the back of a human head from which a portion of the skull had been removed. What he saw before him was a small expanse of whitish, soft, inner tissue that was the brainstem; and fastened to it almost like a grape growing there, was a small, purplish mass.

Art indicated the purple shape with the tip of a sharp, surgical instrument.

"There," he said. "And I bet we've each got one."

"What is it?" asked Ben's voice, hushed and a little nauseated.

"I don't know," said Art harshly. "How the devil would I be able to tell? But I found organisms in the bloodstreams of those of us I've taken blood samples from — organisms like spores, that look like this, only smaller, microscopic in size."

"You didn't tell me that!" said Milt, turning quickly to face him.

"What was the point?" Art turned toward the Team Captain. Jerry saw that the Medician's long face was almost bloodless. "I didn't know what they were. I thought if I kept looking, I might know more. Then I could have something positive to tell you, as well as the bad news. But — it's no use now."

"Why do you say that?" snapped Milt.

"Because it's the truth." Art's face seemed to slide apart, go loose and waxy with defeat. "As long as it was something non-physical we were fighting, there was some hope we could throw it off. But — you see what's going on inside us. We're being changed physically. That's where the nightmares come from. You can't overcome a physical change with an effort of will!"

"What about the Grotto at Lourdes?" asked Jerry. His head was whirling strangely with a mass of ideas. His own great-grandfather — the family story came back to mind — had been judged by his physician in eighteen ninety-six to have advanced pulmonary tuberculosis. Going home from the doctor's office, Simon Fraser McWhin had decided that he could not afford to have tuberculosis at this time. That he would not, therefore, have tuberculosis at all. And he had dismissed the matter fully from his mind.

One year later, examined by the same physician, he had no signs of tuberculosis whatsoever.

But in this present moment, Art, curling up in his chair at the end of the table, seemed not to have heard Jerry's question. And Jerry was suddenly reminded of the question that had brought him pelting back from the native village.

"Is it growing—I mean was it growing when Wally strangled himself—that growth on his brain?" he asked.

Art roused himself.

"Growing?" he repeated dully. He climbed to his feet and picked up an instrument. He investigated the purple mass for a moment.

"No," he said, dropping the instrument wearily and falling back into his chair. "Looks like its outer layer has died and started to be re-absorbed—I think." He put his head in his hands. "I'm not qualified to answer such questions. I'm not trained . . ."

"Who is?" demanded Milt, grimly, looming over the table and the rest of them. "And we're reaching the limit of our strength as well as the limits of what we know—"

"We're done for," muttered Ben. His eyes were glazed, looking at the dissected body on the table. "It's not my fault—"

"Catch him! Catch Art!" shouted Jerry, leaping forward.

But he was too late. The Medician had been gradually curling up in his chair since he had sat down in it again. Now, he slipped out of it to the floor, rolled in a ball, and lay still.

"Leave him alone." Milt's large hand caught Jerry and held him

back. "He may as well lie there as someplace else." He got to his feet. "Ben's right. We're done for."

"Done for?" Jerry stared at the big man. The words he had just heard were words he would never have imagined hearing from Milt.

"Yes," said Milt. He seemed somehow to be speaking from a long distance off.

"Listen—" said Jerry. The tigerishness inside him had woken at Milt's words. It tugged and snarled against the words of defeat from the captain's lips. "We're winning. We aren't losing!"

"Quit it, Jerry," said Ben dully, from the far end of the room.

"Quit it—?" Jerry swung on the engineer. "You lost your temper with me before I went down to the village, about the way I said 'oot!' How could you lose your temper if you were full of tranquilizers? I haven't been taking any myself, and I feel better because of it. Don't tell me you've been taking yours!— And that means we're getting stronger than the nightmares."

"The tranquilizer've been making me sick, if you must know! That's why I haven't been taking them—" Ben broke off, his face graying. He pointed a shaking finger at the purple mass. "I'm being changed, that's why they made me sick! I'm changing already!" His voice rose toward a scream. "Don't you see, it's changing me—" He broke off, suddenly screaming and leaping at Milt with clawing fingers. "We're all changing! And it's your fault for bringing the ship down here. You did it—"

Milt's huge fist slammed into the side of the smaller man's jaw, driving him to the floor beside the still shape of the Medician, where he lay quivering and sobbing.

Slowly Milt lifted his gaze from the fallen man and faced Jerry. It was the standard seventy-two degrees Centigrade in the room, but Jerry saw perspiration standing out on Milt's calm face as if he had just stepped out of a steam bath.

"But he may be right," said Milt, emotionlessly. His voice seemed to come from the far end of some lightless tunnel. "We may be changing under the influence of those growths right now—each of us."

"Milt!" said Jerry, sharply. But Milt's face never changed. It was large, and calm, and pale—and drenched with sweat. "Now's the last time we ought to give up! We're starting to understand it now. I tell you, the thing is to meet Communicator and the other natives head on! Head to head we can crack them wide open. One of us has to go down to that village."

"No. I'm the captain," said Milt, his voice unchanged. "I'm responsible, and I'll decide. We can't lift ship with less than five men and there's only two of us—you and I—actually left. I can't risk one of us coming under the influence of the growth in him, and going over to the alien side."

"Going over?" Jerry stared at him.

**“T**hat's what all this has been for—the jungle, the natives, the nightmare. They want to take us

over.” Sweat ran down Milt's cheeks and dripped off his chin, while he continued to talk tonelessly and gaze straight ahead. “They'll send us—what's left of us—back against our own people. I can't let that happen. We'll have to destroy ourselves so there's nothing for them to use.”

“Milt—” said Jerry.

“No.” Milt swayed faintly on his feet like a tall tree under a wind too high to be felt on the ground at its base. “We can't risk leaving ship or crew. We'll blow the ship up with ourselves in it—”

*“Blow up my ship!”*

It was a wild-animal scream from the floor at their feet; and Ben Akham rose from almost under the table like a demented wildcat, aiming for Milt's jugular vein. So unexpected and powerful was the attack that the big captain tottered and fell. With a noise like worrying dogs, they rolled together under the table.

The chained tiger inside Jerry broke its bonds and flung free.

He turned and ducked through the door into the corridor. It was a heavy pressure door with a wheel lock, activating metal dogs to seal it shut in case of a hull blowout and sudden loss of air. Jerry slammed the door shut, and spun the wheel.

The dogs snicked home. Snatching down the portable fire extinguisher hanging on the wall alongside, Jerry dropped the foam container on the floor and jammed the metal nozzle of its hose between a spoke of the locking wheel and the unlocking stop on the door beneath it.

He paused. There was silence in-

side the sick bay lab. Then the wheel jerked against the nozzle and the door tried to open.

"What's going on?" demanded the voice of Milt. There was a pause. "Jerry, what's going on out there? Open up!"

A wild, crazy impulse to hysterical laughter rose inside Jerry without warning. It took all his will power to choke it back.

"You're locked in, Milt," he said.

"Jerry!" The wheel spoke clicked against the jamming metal nozzle, in a futile effort to turn. "Open up! That's an order!"

"Sorry, Milt," said Jerry softly and lightheadedly. "I'm not ready yet to burn the hoose about my ears. This business of you wanting to blow up the ship's the same sort of impulse to suicide that got Wally and the rest. I'm off to face the natives now and let them have their way with me. I'll be back later, to let you oot."

"Jerry!"

Jerry heard Milt's voice behind him as he went off down the corridor.

"Jerry!" There was a fustilade of pounding fists against the door, growing fainter as Jerry moved away. "Don't you see?—That growth in you is finally getting you! Jerry, come back! Don't let them take over one of us! Jerry..."

Jerry left the noise and the ship together behind him as he stepped out of the airlock. The jungle, he saw, was covering the ship's hull again, already hiding it for the most part. He went on out to the transla-

tor console and began taking off his clothes. When he was completely undressed, he unhooked the transceiver he had brought back from the native village, slung it on a loop of his belt, and hung the belt around his neck.

He headed off down the trail toward the village, wincing a little as the soles of his shoeless feet came into contact with pebbles along the way.

When he got to the village clearing, a naked shape he recognized as that of Communicator tossed up its arms in joy and came running to him.

"Well," said Jerry. "I've grown. I've got rid of the poison of dead things and the sickness. Here I am to join you!"

"At last!" gabbled Communicator. Other natives were running up. "Throw away the dead thing around your neck!"

"I still need it to understand you," said Jerry. "I guess I need a little help to join you all the way."

"Help? We will help!" cried Communicator. "But you must throw that away. You have rid yourself of the dead things that you kept wrapped around your limbs and body," gabbled Communicator. "Now rid yourself of the dead thing hanging about your neck."

"But I tell you, if I do that," objected Jerry, "I won't be able to understand you when you talk, or make you understand me!"

"Throw it away. It is poisoning you! Throw it away!" said Communicator. By this time three or four more natives had come up and



others were headed for the gathering. "Shortly you will understand all, and all will understand you. Throw it away!"

"Throw it away!" chorused the other natives.

"Well . . ." said Jerry. Reluctantly, he took off the belt with the transceiver, and dropped it. Communicator gabbled unintelligibly.

". . . come with me . . ." translated the transceiver like a faint and tinny echo from the ground where it had landed.

Communicator took hold of Jerry's hand and drew him toward the nearest whitish structure. Jerry swallowed unobtrusively. It was one thing to make up his mind to do this; it was something else again to actually do it. But he let himself be led to and in through a crack in the structure.

Inside, the place smelled rather like a mixture of a root cellar and a hayloft—earthy and fragrant at the same time. Communicator drew him in among the waist high tangle of roots rising and reentering the packed earth floor. The other natives swarmed after them. Close to the center of the floor they reached a point where the roots were too thick to allow them to pick their way any further. The roots rose and tangled into a mat, the irregular surface of which was about three feet off the ground. Communicator patted the root surface and gabbled agreeably.

"You want me to get up there?" Jerry swallowed again, then gritted his teeth as the chained fury in him turned suddenly upon himself. There

was nothing worse, he snarled at himself, than a man who was long on planning a course of action, but short on carrying it out.

Awkwardly, he clambered up on to the matted surface of the roots. They gave irregularly under him and their rough surfaces scraped his knees and hands. The natives gabbled, and he felt leather hands urging him to stretch out and lie down on his back.

He did so. The root scored and poked the tender skin of his back. It was exquisitely uncomfortable.

"Now what—?" he gasped. He turned his head to look at the natives and saw that green tendrils, growing rapidly from the root mass, were winding about and garlanding the arms and legs of Communicator and several other of the natives standing by. A sudden pricking at his left wrist made him look down.

Green garlands were twining around his own wrists and ankles, sending wire-thin tendrils into his skin. In unconscious reflex of panic he tried to heave upward, but the green bonds held him fast.

"Gabble-gabble-gabble . . ." warbled Communicator, reassuringly.

With sudden alarm, Jerry realized that the green tendrils were growing right into the arms and legs of the natives as well. He was abruptly conscious of further prickings in his own arms and legs.

"What's going on—" he started to say, but found his tongue had gone unnaturally thick and unmarriageable. A wave of dizziness swept over him as if a powerful general anesthetic was taking hold. The in-

terior of the structure seemed to darken; and he felt as if he was swooping away toward its ceiling on the long swing of some monster pendulum . . .

It swung him on into darkness. And nightmare.

**I**t was the same old nightmare, but more so. It was nightmare experienced *awake* instead of asleep; and the difference was that he had no doubt about the fact that he was experiencing what he was experiencing, nor any tucked-away certainty that waking would bring him out of it.

Once more he floated through a changing soup of uncertainty, himself a changing part of it. It was not painful, it was not even terrifying. But it was hideous—it was an affront to nature. He was not himself. He was a thing, a part of the whole—and he must reconcile himself to being so. He must accept it.

Reconcile himself to it—no! It was not possible for the unbending, solitary, individualistic part that was *him* to do so. But accept it—maybe.

Jerry set a jaw that was no longer a jaw and felt the determination in him to blast through, to comprehend this incomprehensible thing, become hard and undeniable as a sword-point of tungsten steel. He drove through—

And abruptly the soup fell into order. It slid into focus like a blurred scene before the gaze of a badly myopic man who finally gets his spectacles before his eyes. Suddenly, Jerry was aware that what he ob-

served was a scene not just before his eyes, but before his total awareness. And it was not the interior of the structure where he lay on a bed of roots, but the whole planet.

It was a landscape of factories. Countless factories, interconnected, intersupplying, integrated. It lacked only that he find his own working place among them.

Now, said this scene. *This is the sane universe, the way it really is. Reconcile yourself to it.*

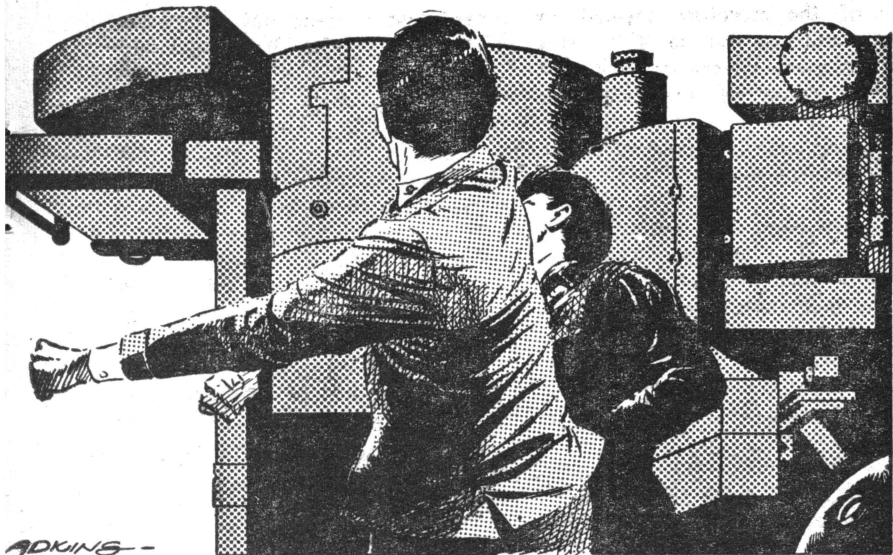
*The hell I will!*

It was the furious unbending, solitary, individualistic part that was essentially *him*, speaking again. Not just speaking. Roaring—snarling its defiance, like a tiger on a hillside.

And the scene went—*pop*.

Jerry opened his eyes. He sat up. The green shoots around and in his wrists and ankles pulled pricklingly at him. But they were already dying and not able to hold him. He swung his legs over the edge of the mat of roots and stood down. Communicator and the others, who were standing there, backed fearfully away from him, gabbling.

**H**e understood their gabbling no better than before, but now he could read the emotional overtones in it. And those overtones were now of horror and disgust, overlying a wild, atavistic panic and terror. He walked forward. They scuttled away before him, gabbling, and he walked through the nearest crack in the wall of the structure and out into the sunlight, toward the transeiver and the belt where he had dropped them.



"Monster!" screamed the transceiver tinnily, faithfully translating the gabbling of the Communicator, who was following a few steps behind like a small dog barking behind a larger. "Brute! Savage! Unclean . . ." it kept up a steady denunciation.

Jerry turned to face Communicator, and the native tensed for flight.

"You know what I'm waiting for," said Jerry, almost smiling, hearing the transceiver translate his words into gabbling — though it was not necessary. As he had said, Communicator knew what he was waiting for.

Communicator cursed a little longer in his own tongue, then went off into one of the structures, and returned with a handful of what looked like lengths of green vine. He

dropped them on the ground before Jerry and backed away, cautiously, gabbling.

"Now will you go? And never come back! Never . . ."

"We'll see," said Jerry. He picked up the lengths of green vine and turned away up the path to the ship.

The natives he passed on his way out of the clearing huddled away from him and gabbled as he went.

When he stepped back into the clearing before the ship, he saw that most of the vegetation touching or close to the ship was already brown and dying. He went on into the ship, carefully avoiding the locked sick-bay door, and wound lengths of the green vine around the wrists of each of the men in restraints.

Then he sat down to await results. He had never been so tired in his

life. The minute he touched the chair, his eyes started to close. He struggled to his feet and forced himself to pace the floor until the green vines, which had already sent hair-thin tendrils into the ulnar arteries of the arms around which they were wrapped, pumped certain inhibitory chemicals into the blood-streams of the seven men.

When the men started to blink their eyes and look about sensibly, he went to work to unfasten the homemade straitjackets that had held them prisoner. When he had released the last one, he managed to get out his final message before collapsing.

"Take the ship up," croaked Jerry. "Then, let yourself into the sickbay and wrap a vine piece around the wrists of Milt, and Art, and Ben. Ship up first—then when you're safely in space, take care of them, in the sick bay. Do it the other way and you'll never see Earth, again."

They crowded around him with questions. He waved them off, stumbling into one of the abandoned bunks.

"Ship up—" he croaked. "Then release and fix the others. Ask me later. Later—"

. . . And that was all he remembered, then.

## V

At some indefinite time later, not quite sure whether he had woken by himself, or whether someone else had wakened him, Jerry swam back up to consciousness. He was

vaguely aware that he had been sleeping a long time; and his body felt sane again, but weak as the body of a man after a long illness.

He blinked and saw the large face of Milt Johnson, partly obscured by a cup of something. Milt was seated in a chair by the side of the bunk Jerry lay in, and the Team Captain was offering the cup of steaming black liquid to Jerry. Slowly, Jerry understood that this was coffee and he struggled up on one elbow to take the cup.

He drank from it slowly for a little while, while Milt watched and waited.

"Do you realize," said Milt at last, when Jerry finally put down the three-quarters empty cup on the nightstand by the bunk. "that what you did in locking me in the sick bay was mutiny?"

Jerry swallowed. Even his vocal chords seemed drained of strength and limp.

"You realize," he croaked, "what would have happened if I hadn't?"

"You took a chance. You followed a wild hunch—"

"No hunch," said Jerry. He cleared his throat. "Art found that growth on Wally's brain had quit growing before Wally killed himself. And I'd been getting along without tranquilizers—handling the nightmares better than I had with them."

"It could have been the growth in your own brain," said Milt, "taking over and running you—working better on you than it had on Wally."

"Working better—talk sense!" said Jerry, weakly, too paled down



by the past two weeks to care whether school kept or not, in the matter of service courtesy to a superior. "The nightmares had broken Wally down to where we had to wrap him in a straitjacket. They hadn't even knocked me off my feet. If Wally's physiological processes had fought the alien invasion to a standstill, then I, you, Art, and Ben—all of us—had to be doing even better. Besides—I'd figured out what the aliens were after."

"What were they after?" Milt looked strangely at him.

"Curing us—of something we didn't have when we landed, but they thought we had."

"And what was that?"

"Insanity," said Jerry, grimly.

Milt's blond eyebrows went up. He opened his mouth as if to say something disbelieving—then closed it again. When he did speak, it was quite calmly and humbly.

"They thought," he asked, "Communicator's people thought that we were insane, and they could cure us?"

Jerry laughed; not cheerfully, but grimly.

"You saw that jungle around us back there?" he asked. "That was a factory complex—an infinitely complex factory complex. You saw their village with those tangles of roots inside the big whitish shells?—That was a highly diversified laboratory."

Milt's blue eyes slowly widened, as Jerry watched.

"You don't mean that—seriously?" said Milt, at last.

"That's right." Jerry drained the cup and set it aside. "Their technology is based on organic chemistry, the way ours is on the physical sciences. By our standards, they're chemical wizards. How'd you like to try changing the mind of an alien organism by managing to grow an extra part on to his brain—the way they tried to do to us humans? To them, it was the simplest way of convincing us."

Milt stared again. Finally, he shook his head.

"Why?" he said. "Why would they want to change our minds?"

"Because their philosophy, their picture of life and the universe around them grew out of a chemically oriented science," answered Jerry. "The result is, they see all life as part of a closed, intra-acting chemical circuit with no loose ends; with every living thing, intelligent or not, a part of the whole. Well, you saw it for yourself in your nightmare. That's the cosmos as they see it—and to them it's beautiful."

"But why did they want us to see it the way they did?"

"Out of sheer kindness," said Jerry and laughed barkingly. "According to their cosmology, there's no such thing as an alien. Therefore we weren't alien—just sick in the head. Poisoned by the lumps of metal like the ship and the translator, we claimed were so important. And our clothes and everything else we had. The kind thing was to cure and rescue us."

"Now, wait a minute," said Milt. "They saw those things of ours work—"

“What’s the fact they worked got to do with it? What you don’t understand, Milt,” said Jerry, lying back gratefully on the bunk, “is that Communicator’s peoples’ minds were *closed*. Not just unconvinced, not just refusing to see—but *closed!* Sealed, and welded shut from prehistoric beginnings right down to the present. The fact our translator worked meant nothing to them. According to their cosmology, it shouldn’t work, so it didn’t. Any stray phenomena tending to prove it did were simply the product of diseased minds.”

Jerry paused to emphasize the statement and his eyes drifted shut. The next thing he knew Milt was shaking him.

“. . . Wake up!” Milt was shouting at him. “You can dope off after you’ve explained. I’m not going to have my crew back in straitjackets again, just because you were too sleepy to warn me they’d revert!”

“. . . Won’t revert,” said Jerry, thickly. He roused himself. “Those lengths of vine released chemicals into their bloodstreams to destroy what was left of the growths. I wouldn’t leave until I got them from Communicator.” Jerry struggled up on one elbow again. “And after a short walk in a human brain—mine—he and his people couldn’t get us out of sight and forgotten fast enough.”

“Why?” Milt shook him again as Jerry’s eyelids sagged. “Why should getting their minds hooked in with yours shake them up so?”

“. . . Bust—bust their cosmology open. Quit shaking . . . I’m awake.”

“Why did it bust them wide open?”

“Remember—how it was for you with the nightmares?” said Jerry. “The other way around? Think back, about when you slept. There you were, a lone atom of humanity, caught up in a nightmare like one piece of stew meat in a vat stewing all life together—just one single chemical bit with no independent existence, and no existence at all except as part of the whole. Remember?”

He saw Milt shiver slightly.

“It was like being swallowed up by a soft machine,” said the Team Captain in a small voice. “I remember.”

“All right,” said Jerry. “That’s how it was for you in Communicator’s cosmos. But remember something about that cosmos? It was warm, and safe. It was all-embracing, all-settling, like a great, big, soft, woolly comforter.”

“It was too much like a woolly comforter,” said Milt, shuddering. “It was unbearable.”

“To you. Right,” said Jerry. “But to Communicator, it was ideal. And if that was ideal, think what it was like when he had to step into a human mind—mine.”

Milt stared at him. “Why?” Milt asked.

“Because,” said Jerry. “He found himself *alone* there!”

Milt’s eyes widened.

“Think about it, Milt,” said Jerry. “From the time we’re born, we’re individuals. From the moment we open our eyes on the world, inside

we're alone in the universe. All the emotional and intellectual resources that Communicator draws from his identity with the stewing vat of his cosmos, each one of us has to dig up for and out of himself!"

Jerry stopped to give Milt a chance to say something. But Milt was evidently not in possession of something to say at the moment.

"That's why Communicator and the others couldn't take it, when they hooked into my human mind," Jerry went on. "And that's why, when they found out what we were like inside, they couldn't wait to get rid of us. So they gave me the vines and kicked us out. That's the whole story." He lay back on the bunk.

Milt cleared his throat.

"All right," he said.

Jerry's heavy eyes closed. Then the other man's voice spoke, still close by his ear.

"But," said Milt, "I still think you took a chance, going down to butt heads with the natives that way. What if Communicator and the rest had been able to stand exposure to your mind. You'd locked me in and the other men were in restraint. Our whole team would have been part of that stewing vat."

"Not a chance," said Jerry.

"You can't be sure of that."

"Yes I can." Jerry heard his own voice sounding harshly beyond the darkness of his closed eyelids. "It

wasn't just that I knew my cosmological view was too tough for them. It was the fact that their minds were closed—in the vat they had no freedom to change and adapt themselves to anything new."

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the voice of Milt.

"Everything," said Jerry. "Their point of view only made us very uncomfortable—but our point of view, being individually adaptable, and open, threatened to destroy the very laws of existence as they saw them. An open mind can always stand a closed one, if it has to—by making room for it in the general picture. But a closed mind can't stand it near an open one without risking immediate and complete destruction in its own terms. In a closed mind, there's no more room."

He stopped speaking and slowly exhaled a weary breath.

"Now," he said, without opening his eyes, "will you finally get out of here and let me sleep?"

For a long second more, there was silence. Then, he heard a chair scrape softly, and the muted steps of Milt tiptoeing away.

With another sigh, at last Jerry relaxed and let consciousness slip from him.

He slept.

—As sleep the boar upon the plain, the hawk upon the crag, and the tiger on the hill . . .      END



# TIME OF WAR

by MACK REYNOLDS

*In the battle for the world, one  
life more or less meant nothing  
— except to the man who took it!*

**T**here was a light flashing red. Alex hit the release button with the heel of his hand, flicked his eyes to the dial in question.

Animal heat.

He dropped both the speed and altitude levers, banked steeply and dove. His eyes went to the screen, he reached up and increased magnification ten fold. His fingers danced over buttons, searching out the appropriate chart. It flashed onto the map-screen.

Damn. The beetle was above that poorly mapped, all but unknown Balkan area where the Thrace of Greece and the Macedonia of Yugoslavia, met Bulgaria. The nearest cities of any size would have been Yugoslavian Skopje, Greek Salonika, Bulgarian Plovdiv, but he was far from the ruins of any of them.

As the ground came up, his eyes shot to the dial again. Quite a bit of animal heat. Probably a man.

A man in this area? Alex pursed his lips. Possible, but not probable.

He was less than two miles in altitude, now. He increased magnification again. The vicinity was highly wooded.

He adjusted his metallic sensors, fossil fuel sensors, nuclear power sensors. For all he knew, this was a Comic trap and they were trying to suck his beetle in. Seemed unlikely, though. He hadn't spotted a Comic in this area for a goodly time.

When he was within a mile of the surface, he cut propulsion completely and hovered. His eyes went back to the chart and he enlarged it to ultimate. It still didn't give him much. The area had been fought over, ravaged, destroyed and rebuilt since the days of Philip and Alexander but it had never really been charted in the modern sense. There were the remains of a small farming town to the south; however, he

couldn't make out if it might be Rodopolis in what had once been Greece, or Novo Selo in Macedonia.

He scowled at the dial. There was more heat radiation than was called for by one person. Perhaps there were two or three. It was possible, no matter how unlikely. The human animal is gregarious; given any opportunity at all he will seek out his fellows, even though it might increase his chances of destruction.

He flicked his eyes over to the cocking handles of the minirockets, though he knew he had checked them out before take-off. Given life below, Alex was in a position to start snuffing it out like candles.

The trouble was, exactly where was he, over Comic territory or their own?

He had made that mistake with the fishing boat, off the coast of Cuba. He had thought, of course, that the two terrified occupants had been enemy civilians. It had been sickening to find his mistake later.

He zeroed-in on the source of body heat, brought the beetle up to a slow, careful speed. It might still be a Comic trap, but he could find no signs of the presence of mechanical equipment in the vicinity. He dropped lower, tense now. He was getting awfully close. He kept his right hand very near the trigger of one of the minirockets.

Suppose it was some peasant, miraculously saved from the holocaust. How was he to know, in this area, if the man was Greek, Macedonian or Bulgar? As he recalled, the nationalities blended into each other

at this point to such a degree that even borders made precious little difference.

All of a sudden, he brought the beetle to a halt and began to chuckle. There in a small meadow, clearing would be the better term, browsed a woebegone cow.

It had been a long time since he had seen a cow. Alex looked at it for a long moment, ruefully. In his youth, he had spent some time on a farm and had loved every minute. It had been fate that had put him into an educational bracket which had wound him up as the pilot of a beetle.

He shook his head, even as he reached for the altitude lever. Had he become a farmer, he would now, without question, have been dead. And even though family, relatives, friends, sweetheart were now all past away, life is to be lived.

He shot into patrol pattern again, resetting his sensors. His Chronometer told him that he had only a few more moments to go.

When his time had elapsed, he put the beetle into orbit, threw the automatic control switch, then stood up, yawning. He stretched greatly, then massaged the back of his neck. He had a tendency to tighten up when on patrol.

Alex turned and threw the cogs on the metal door behind him. He stepped into the corridor beyond and headed for the executive officer's office.

Nick was on the desk. He said, "How did it go?"

Alex yawned again. "Nothing. I begin to suspect that there's nobody

left at all in my area. The fallout must have got those that survived."

Nick grunted. "The Comics would like it, if they knew we thought so. Don't underestimate the human animal, Alex. He survives under some of the most impossible circumstances. Peter ran into a whole island of Eskimo in the northern Pacific."

Alex was surprised. "What did he do?"

"Blasted them, of course. They were Comics."

Alex wondered, inwardly. Eskimo. Possibly they didn't have the vaguest knowledge of the war, nor why it was they were being killed. But Nick was right. Man had a fantastic ability to survive.

Nick said, "You left your beetle in orbit?"

"That's right," Alex said wearily. "It isn't due for a check-out yet." He turned to go, but then recalled the animal he had seen.

He said, "You know what I saw today? A cow. I thought I was getting a heat indication of at least one man, but it was a cow. Wonder how it ever survived."

Nick said, "The last time I was on patrol, I saw four deer."

"Oh? What did you do?"

"What could I do? I was over Comic territory. I blasted them."

"Blasted them! Well, why?" Alex felt a sinking sensation. With so precious little major life left at all on Earth, who could wish to butcher deer?

Nick was irritated. "I told you. It was Comic territory. Had there been any human life hiding out, sur-

viving somehow or other, the deer would have been potential food. I killed them. In the same way as if you saw a house standing, you'd blast it, so that it couldn't be used for shelter." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Was she being milked?"

The other's mind had been on the deer. He said, "How do you mean?"

"The cow. Was she being milked?"

"How would I know?"

"The udder, you ninny. If it was full, she was being milked, which would mean, in turn, that there's somebody doing the milking."

"I didn't get any indication of further animal heat."

"Could be in some sort of dugout. It's surprising how quickly some of the survivors have adapted to protecting themselves against us. Not that they're any smarter than our people. They've worked out a dozen ways of perserving themselves against those buzz-fighters the Comics use."

Alex grunted. He had long been of the opinion that the higher-ups would do better to spend more effort protecting their civilians who had survived, rather than continuing to seek out the pitiful remnant of the Comics who were still alive. However, he didn't say anything. Nick had a mono-rail mind, when it came to official position. *Anything* the brass decided was gospel to Nick.

Alex said, "I'll take another look at the cow, tomorrow, if I can find it again. Even if it is being milked, I'm not sure it's in what was for-

merly our own territory, of theirs."

Nick said, "Well, you know what the general said, when in doubt."

Alex repressed a shudder, as he headed back for his sleeping quarters. The general had never jockeyed a beetle in his life. Had never had to blast a noncombatant. Perhaps he wouldn't be quite so devout a retaliationist, had he to follow his own orders.

**I**n the morning, going by the twenty-four hour Earth Clock, Alex came awake slowly. There had been a time, when he had been an ambitious young officer, that he had tried to discipline himself away from this practice. Now he had given up. In truth, the half hour or so that he allowed to lapse between first stirrings of consciousness and full awakening was the happiest of his day. Happiest wasn't quite the word. There was no such reality as happiness in the life now led. But at least his semi-dream state was the most nearly satisfying.

In half control of his dream-thinking, he could steer his thoughts in what direction he would. Back over yesteryear when there had been ambitions, appetites, goals. When there had been arts to appreciate, crafts to study, entertainments to enjoy.

There had been Anna to love. And what was Anna now? A cinder. If not a cinder, a terrified, underfed, under-clothed, under-sheltered fugitive from the Comic buzz-fighters who patrolled, even as Alex patrolled, seeking out the last remnants of life.

He had allowed his thoughts to go where he would rather they not stray. He came fully awake and swung his legs out over the edge of the bunk.

He went through the usual routine of getting cleaned up and dressed, the never ending sameness of it all, and made his way to the mess.

As he ate the food of the hydroponic beds, the yeast cellars, he scanned the freshly printed day's bulletin.

An inspiration editorial by the general. The day would soon come when, the Comics utterly defeated, the personnel of moon-base would return to Earth and begin the task of reconstruction.

Alex grunted. He sometimes suspected that the general had fed his ideas into one of the typer-computers with standing orders that for each issue of the bulletin a new editorial be turned out, saying the same thing over and over again in a slightly altered version.

The fact was, that there was precious little chance that the Comics would ever be utterly defeated. Their super-Sputnik, as the junior officers had dubbed it, was as impregnable to attack as was the moon-base. And this truth had long since been accepted. The efforts to eliminate their mutual bases had been so costly that neither side any longer attempted it. Such fighting as took place between them, were the rare meetings above the surface of Earth, when beetle met buzz-fighter, usually through inadvertence, and fought it out.



If the truth were known, the general didn't even encourage that. The two fighting craft were so equally matched that one side's losses balanced the other's, and they were running short on the beetles they needed to prosecute the retaliation.

Which brought him to another item in the bulletin. A sneak landing had been made hurriedly in the antarctic and a sizeable amount of supplies loaded upon one of the freighter-craft. The supplies had been left over from the days when the nations had in considerable co-operation been exploring that remote continent.

Alex grunted. So that's where so many of the beetles had been, protecting the scavenging raid. It was a minor victory. In fact, more than balanced by the Comic Raid earlier when they had dispatched an equivalent space freighter to one of the Pacific islands where they had managed to locate a supply of fuel.

**H**e wondered at the need of secrecy here on the moon-base. It was hard to believe that any Comic agents might be among them. And even if there was, how in the world could such an agent ever get a message to the enemy? No, Alex suspected that their rigid security measures were nonsense, left-over methods of an earlier period. The military mind was slow to change, even in the age of space war.

And here was the story of Peter's successful attack upon the Eskimo. Evidently there had been at least a score of them. Alex shook his head. How could it possibly have

been known that they were from Comic territory, originally? The Eskimo were nomadic. Food supply, such as it was, would dictate that they move as much as a hundred miles in a week.

It was the same problem he had faced on the patrol yesterday.

Even had he spotted a survivor of the world debacle, how could he know whether the person was originally a resident of Comic territory? In desperate search of food and shelter, and protection from the ruthless attacks of beetles and buzz-fighters, such a refugee might travel many a mile from his place of origin.

The speaker called his name.

He was to report for immediate patrol.

That was only mildly surprising. The men who had covered the antarctic sneak landing had probably been on duty for long hours beyond the usual. They would need rest. He was comparatively fresh.

He came to his feet, adjusted his tunic on the off chance that he might meet one of the brass hats in the corridors and be dressed down for sloppy appearance, and started for the cubicle which he usually occupied when piloting a remote-control beetle.

At this hour he met only one other person. One of the women scientists. He saluted her, as regulations called for, but she ignored him and bustled on.

It came to Alex, sourly, even as he continued, that this horse-faced, cow-figured specimen was probably one of the few remaining females

of his species who might survive to help replenish the Earth. If any at all survived. Briefly, he wondered if the high-ups had decided upon a program of breeding. If they had, it should best get underway even whilst they were still here on Luna. Most of these women scientists were by no means youngsters. Some must already be past the menopause.

He reached the executive officer's preserve, reported, got his assignment, which was identical to yesterday's, saluted, and continued to his cubicle. He wondered how many beetles were out today. He hadn't seen any of the other fellows in the corridors, or in the mess. Probably everybody who could be spared was on patrol. The Comics were probably in a tizzy over the Antarctic raid, and would be speeding up their retaliation.

He hung his jacket up and seated himself at the control chair, before the screens, the panels, the dials, switches, triggers, gauges and all the rest of it. And even as he went through the standard routine of taking over the beetle, now in fast orbit, his memory went back to the long studies that had been involved in learning this business of eliminating every unit of human life in the lands of the enemy. At the time of his training, he had never expected it to ever come to this. But, then, he doubted if anyone else had, either.

At the very last, he threw the cocking handles of the mini-rockets, threw off the automatic control, and accepted the piloting of the vicious little beetle.

It was a full hour later, an hour of carefully scanning over a large area of southern Europe, when he came to the vicinity where he had spotted the cow the day before.

He had little doubt that he could find the animal again. And yes, there it was. The indicator flashed animal heat.

He increased the magnification of his viewing screen, and sent the beetle darting toward the little meadow the cow had been grazing in the day before.

For the moment, engrossed in his object, he had failed to keep a constant eye on his other screens and scanning devices. Thus it was that his first warning of attack was a flashing ball of fire which, he realized, must have missed the miniature craft he was piloting from afar, by a scant half mile.

Automatically he upped the speed lever, and pulled the directional stick backward, slamming for altitude. He banged open all screens, darted his head around, seeking the source of the attack. The unclear power sensor was flashing green warning, the alarm siren was whining. Impatiently, he brushed them both to inoperation. He decreased magnification on all screens, desperately seeking the foe over the broadcast area, even as he took standard evasive action.

Wherever and whoever his enemy, the Comic wasn't the man he might be. Alex's beetle should have been crisped by now. As it was, he hadn't even been nicked.

And, yes, there it was! A one man buzz-fighter, of course.

It was their one big advantage over the Comics. The enemy craft contained a living pilot who died in defeat. The beetles, piloted remotely from the moon-base, could be destroyed surely enough, but it was impossible for a pilot to be lost. War in air and space had come a long way since the Fokkers and Spads of World War One fought it out over the Western Front.

The buzz-fighters, comparatively large and cumbersome, must needs come down from their artificial satellite base before taking over their retaliation patrols. It was a time consuming, man consuming matter and Alex had a secret admiration for the stamina involved.

Even as they began their jockeying of death, roaring about the sky in great screaming of agonized machinery, great roaring of rockets and jets, he realized that the other must have spotted Alex's beetle toward the end of a patrol, and comparatively was physically exhausted.

Only that would account for the fact that the foe's reactions were obviously slow. Ordinarily, a buzz-fighter gave as much as it took. Indeed, it had some advantages over the tiny beetle. For one thing, it mounted a heavier firepower, a greater supply of bolts. The beetle's sole armament were the two mini-rockets, nuclear charged and capable of blasting a fairly good-sized town. Alex didn't know how many bolts the buzz-fighter boasted, but he knew it was considerably more than two.

He dropped sharply in a feint, came up roaring from below.

He had blisters of cold sweat on his forehead, could feel his shirt sticking to his back. He inevitably perspired in action. Safe, hundreds of thousands of miles away from the combat he might be, but in action you largely forgot that. Not completely though. At least in your subconscious you knew you were untouchable. But how about that enemy pilot? If his craft took a bolt, then all was over. At most, Alex would get a reprimand for being inept.

For the briefest of split seconds, the buzz-fighter was in his sighter screen, past the cross hairs, but in it. He slashed his fist out at the trigger button and his screen blurred momentarily as the beetle's weight dropped suddenly with the release of the mini-rocket.

Then there was glare!

A near hit? Had the missile's sensors caught enough of the enemy's heat to detonate?

Or was it another fluke blast? The mini-rockets Armament was turning out these days weren't up to original standards. Which wasn't surprising in view of the improvising they had to do, what with limited materials.

He came around in a roar—a roar tens upon tens of thousands of miles from his ear—and banged the screens to increased magnification.

And stared.

He had never seen before a buzz-fighter merely crippled. On all other occasions when he had come against the enemy fighters, they had flared up like magnesium upon being

hit. Flared up from the atomic attack in such wise that there could be no question of survival on the part of the Comic pilot.

But now this one was fluttering to earth, like a wounded air-borne bird.

He kicked controls around and headed for it.

He had a double problem. He had exactly one mini-rocket left and couldn't waste it. The enemy pilot must be destroyed beyond any doubt. There were a limited number of Comic pilots left, and each one departed hastened the day when the war could be considered over and the general's oft proclaimed return to earth became a reality.

But there was also the chance that the enemy was still in condition to mount a counter-attack on his diminutive enemy. Alex had no way of knowing whether or not the other was still conscious, but he must assume that he was. The buzz-fighter had caught only the edge of the mini-rocket blast, and had evidently had delicate equipment so smashed that it was no longer fully operative.

He came in with care. With so much care, that the buzz-fighter managed to sink to a landing, by coincidence, in the same meadow in which Alex had spotted the cow the previous day.

He banked around quickly, and dropped the beetle's speed. Perhaps the other was dead. In which case, the thing was to make every effort to get a full size combat unit down here with a freighter-craft and try to capture the buzz-fighter intact,

before the lads on the super-Sputnik caught on and fired a real flattener to blast this whole section of the Balkans. The technicians and scientists there at moon-base had never had the opportunity to take apart a buzz-fighter. Given such a chance, it might lead to some discovery that would make a decisive difference in the prosecuting of the war.

But no. Even as he maneuvered his diminutive fighter into the clearing, a figure broke from the side of the enemy craft and dashed for the woods. At the same split second, the buzz-fighter began to glow in heat, and rapidly crumbled into a mass of flaming nothingness.

The Comic had sabotaged his craft. Alex swore, but his obscenities broke off in the middle.

The other was garbed in shorts and halter, and blonde hair was streaming behind even as she ran for what little protection the trees might offer.

Meaninglessly, as he darted his beetle after her, the thought came to his mind, was the briefness of clothing due to heat in the buzz-fighter, or was it a matter of saving weight?

There was something strangely familiar in her desperate flight, and then it came to him. She ran as Anna ran. As Anna had once run. Her figure, too, was Anna's. Youthful, firm, but all rounded woman. This enemy pilot could be no more than in her mid-twenties.

He had heard that the Comics used women as well as men in the war in space and air, but he had

secretly thought it propaganda, as he thought most of the atrocity stories. Evidently, it was true enough. Comic manpower was evidently as short as his own side's.

She was nearly to the edge of the clearing, running desperately hard, her firm, shapely legs pumping.

She must have known, as he so well knew, that her flight was meaningless. A bolt from his beetle would blast everything in an area the diameter of a mile, reducing it to nothing. But life is so much to be lived, even the last ultimate minute.

Suddenly he pulled back the control stick and, pointing the beetle skyward, hit at the same moment both the remaining mini-rocket trigger and the speed lever. The bolt went arching off into the depths of space, and the beetle headed home.

He threw it into automatic and came to his feet, rubbing the back of his neck as hard as he could press fingers into the flesh.

He went out into the corridor and headed toward the exec's office. Nick was on the desk, as he had been the day before.

Nick looked up. "Thought you were on patrol over the Balkans."

"I was. I fired both my bolts. I've got the beetle on automatic coming in for fresh mini-rockets."

Nick looked at him. "Two bolts to finish off a cow?"

"A buzz-fighter jumped me, while I was going in to blast the animal. I managed to hit it."

Nick was immediately doubly alert. "Wonderful!" He reached for a report pad. "Absolutely sure of destruction?"

"Yes," Alex said. "It burnt to a crisp."

"Wonderful!" Nick crowed, writing rapidly. "You'll get another citation."

Alex said wearily, "I feel pooped, I think I'll take a nap."

Before he turned to leave, Alex said slowly, "Nick, why do we call them Comics?"

"Eh?" The other continued writing the report.

"The enemy, over in that super-Sputnik of theirs, the artificial satellite."

Nick thought about it, finally shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I suppose it's derived from the fact that in the old days we used to ridicule them by saying their young people, their students, spent more time reading cartoon books, comic books, you know, than they did studying the sciences."

"Oh," Alex mused. "I wonder what they call us."

Nick said stiffly, "I would hardly know, but probably something unworthy of our admitted idealistic goals."

Alex made his way to his quarters and slumped down on his bed. His face worked as he stared up at the ceiling. Somehow, he thought that she would survive. The cow was there.

Lieutenant Alex Moiseyevich Menzhinsky knew he was a traitor. The thing was—she ran so very much like Anna had run, back when there was an Anna, back when they'd both been youngsters on the collective. END

# MASQUE OF THE RED SHIFT

by FRED SABERHAGEN

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*Outside the ship the Berserkers  
roamed a ruined galaxy. Inside  
the revelers jeered at Death!*

I

**F**inding himself alone and unoccupied, Felipe Nogara chose to spend a free moment in looking at the thing that had brought him out here beyond the last fringe of the galaxy. From the luxury of his quarters he stepped up into his private

observation bubble. There, in a raised dome of invisible glass, he seemed to be standing outside the hull of his flagship *Nirvana*.

Under that hull, "below" the *Nirvana's* artificial gravity, there slanted the bright disk of the galaxy, including in one of its arms all the star-systems that Earth-descended

man had yet explored. But in whatever direction Nogara looked, bright spots and points of light were plentiful. They were other galaxies, marching away at their recessional velocities of tens of thousands of miles per second, marching on out to the optical horizon of the universe.

Nogara had not come here to look at galaxies, however; he had come to look at something new, at a phenomenon never before seen by men at such close range.

It was made visible to him by the apparant pinching-together of the galaxies beyond it, and by the clouds and streamers of dust cascading into it. The star that formed the center of the phenomenon was itself held beyond human sight by the strength of its own gravity. Its mass, perhaps a billion times that of Sol, so bent spacetime around itself that not a photon of light could escape it with a visible wavelength.

The dusty debris of deep space tumbled and churned, falling into the grip of the hypermass. The falling dust built up static charges until lightning turned it into luminescent thunderclouds, and the flicker of the vast lightning shifted into the red before it vanished, near the bottom of the gravitational hill. Probably not even a neutrino could escape this sun. And no ship would dare approach much closer than *Nirvana* now rode.

Nogara had come out here to judge for himself if the recently discovered phenomenon might soon present any danger to inhab-

ited planets; ordinary suns would go down like chips of wood into a whirlpool if the hypermass found them in its path. But it seemed that another thousand years would pass before any planets had to be evacuated; and before then the hypermass might have gorged itself on dust until its core imploded, whereupon most of its substance could be expected to re-enter the universe in a most spectacular but less dangerous form.

Anyway, in another thousand years it would be someone else's problem. Right now it might be said to be Nogara's—for men said that he ran the galaxy, if they said it of anyone.

A communicator sounded, calling him back to the enclosed luxury of his quarters, and he walked down quickly, glad of a reason to get out from under the galaxies.

He touched a plate with one strong and hairy hand. "What is it?"

"My lord, a courier ship has arrived. From the Flamland system. They are bringing . . ."

"Speak plainly. They are bringing my brother's body?"

"Yes, my lord. The launch bearing the coffin is already approaching *Nirvana*."

"I will meet the courier captain, alone, in the Great Hall. I want no ceremony. Have the robots at the airlock test the escort and the outside of the coffin for infection."

"Yes, my lord."

The mention of disease was a bit of misdirection. It was not the Flamland plague that had put Nogara's half-brother Johann Karlsen



MASQUE OF THE RED SHIFT



into a box, though that was the official story. The doctors were supposed to have frozen the hero of the Stone Place as a last resort, to prevent his irreversible death.

An official lie was necessary because not even High Lord Nogara could lightly put out of the way the one man who had made the difference at the Stone Place nebula. In that battle seven years ago the berserker machines had been beaten; if they had not been, intelligent life might already be extinct in the known galaxy. The berserkers were huge automated warships, built for some conflict between long-vanished races and now the enemies of everything that lived. The fighting against them was still bitter, but since the Stone Place it seemed that life in the galaxy would survive.

The Great Hall was where Nogara met daily for feasting and pleasure with the forty or fifty people who were with him on *Nirvana*, as aides or crewmen or entertainers. But when he entered the Hall now he found it empty, save for one man who stood at attention beside a coffin.

Johann Karlsen's body and whatever remained of his life were sealed under the glass top of the heavy casket, which contained its own refrigeration and revival systems, controlled by a fiber-optic key theoretically impossible to duplicate. This key Nogara now demanded, with a gesture, from the courier captain.

The captain had the key hung round his neck, and it took him a moment to pull the golden chain

over his head and hand it to Nogara. It was another moment before he remembered to bow; he was a spaceman and not a courtier. Nogara ignored the lapse of courtesy. It was his governors and admirals who were re-instituting ceremonies of rank; he himself cared nothing about how subordinates gestured and postured, so long as they obeyed intelligently.

Only now, with the key in his own hand, did Nogara look down at his frozen half-brother. The plotting doctors had shaved away Johann's short beard, and his hair. His lips were marble pale, and his sightless open eyes were ice. But still the face above the folds of the draped and frozen sheet was undoubtedly Johann's. There was something that would not freeze.

"Leave me for a time," Nogara said. He turned to face the end of the Great Hall and waited, looking out through the wide viewpoint to where the hypermass blurred space like a bad lens.

When he heard the door ease shut behind the courier captain he turned back—and found himself facing the short figure of Oliver Mical, the man he had selected to replace Johann as governor on Flamland. Mical must have entered as the spaceman left, which Nogara thought might be taken as symbolic of something. Resting his hands familiarly on the coffin, Mical raised one graying eyebrow in his habitual expression of weary amusement. His rather puffy face twitched in an overcivilized smile.

"How does Browning's line go?"

Mical mused, glancing down at Karlsen. "Doing the king's work all the dim day long—and now, this reward of virtue."

"Leave me," said Nogara.

Mical was in on the plot, as was hardly anyone else except the Flamland doctors. "I thought it best to appear to share your grief," he said. Then he looked at Nogara and ceased to argue. He made a bow that was mild mockery when the two of them were alone, and walked briskly to the door. Again it closed.

So, Johann. If you had plotted against me, I would have had you killed outright. But you were never a plotter, it was just that you served me too successfully, my enemies and friends alike began to love you too well. So here you are, my frozen conscience, the last conscience I'll ever have. Sooner or later you would have become ambitious, so it was either do this to you or kill you.

Now I'll put you away safely, and maybe someday you'll have another chance at life. It's a strange thought that someday you may stand musing over my coffin as I now stand over yours. No doubt you'll pray for what you think is my soul . . . I can't do that for you, but I wish you sweet dreams. Dream of your Believers' heaven, not of your hell."

Nogara imagined a brain at absolute zero, its neurons super-conducting, repeating one dream on and on and on. But that was nonsense.

"I cannot risk my power, Johann." This time he whispered the words aloud. "It was either this or have you killed." He turned again to the wide viewport.

"I suppose Thirty-three's gotten the body to Nogara already," said the Second Officer of Esteeler Courier Thirty-four, looking at the bridge chronometer. "It must be nice to declare yourself an emperor or whatever, and have people hurl themselves all over the galaxy to do everything for you."

"Can't be nice to have someone bring you your brother's corpse," said Captain Thurman Holt, studying his astrogational sphere. His ship's C-plus drive was rapidly stretching a lot of time-like interval between itself and the Flamland system. Even if Holt was not enthusiastic about his mission, he was glad to be away from Flamland, where Mical's political police were taking over.

"I wonder," said the Second, and chuckled.

"What's that mean?"

The Second looked over both shoulders, out of habit formed on Flamland. "Have you heard this one?" he asked. "Nogara is God—but half of his spacemen are atheists."

Holt smiled, but only faintly. "He's no mad tyrant, you know. Esteel's not the worst-run government in the galaxy. Nice guys don't put down rebellions."

"Karlsen did all right."

"That's right, he did."

The Second grimaced. "Oh sure, Nogara could be worse, if you want to be serious about it. He's a politician. But I just can't stand that crew that's accumulated around him

the last few years. We've got an example on board now of what they do. If you want to know the truth I'm a little scared now that Karlsen's dead."

"Well, we'll soon see them." Holt sighed, and stretched. "I'm going to look in on the prisoners. The bridge is yours, Second."

"I relieve you, sir. Do the man a favor and kill him, Thurm."

A minute later, looking through the spy-plate into the courier's small brig, Holt could wish with honest compassion that his male prisoner was dead.

He was an outlaw chieftain named Janda, and his capture had been the last success of Karlsen's Flamlund service, putting a virtual end to the rebellion. Janda had been a tall man, a brave rebel, and a brutal bandit. He had raided and fought against Nogara's Esteeler empire until there was no hope left, and then he had surrendered to Karlsen.

"My pride commands me to conquer my enemy," Karlsen had written once, in what he thought was to be a private letter. "My honor forbids me to humble or hate my enemy." But Mical's political police operated with a different philosophy.

The outlaw might still be long-boned, but Holt had never seen him stand tall. The manacles still binding his wrists and ankles were of plastic and supposedly would not abrade human skin, but they served no sane purpose now and Holt would have removed them if he could.

A stranger seeing the girl Lucinda who sat now at Janda's side to feed him, might have supposed her to be his daughter. She was his sister, five years younger than he. She was also a girl of rare beauty, and perhaps Mical's police had motives other than mercy in sending her to Nogara's court unmarked and un-brainwashed. It was rumored that the demand for certain kinds of entertainment was strong among the courtiers, and the turnover among the entertainers high.

Holt had so far kept himself from believing such stories. He opened the brig now—he kept it locked only to prevent Janda's straying out and falling childlike into an accident—and went in.

When the girl Lucinda had first come aboard his ship her eyes had shown helpless hatred of every Esteeler. Holt had been gentle and as helpful as possible to her in the days since then, and there was not even dislike in the face she raised to him now—there was a hope which it seemed she had to share with someone.

She said: "I think he spoke my name, a few minutes ago."

"Oh?" Holt bent to look more closely at Janda, and could see no change. The outlaw's eyes still stared glassily, the right eye now and then dripping a tear that seemed to have no connection with any kind of emotion. Janda's jaw was as slack as ever, and his whole body as awkwardly slumped.

"Maybe—" Holt didn't finish.

"What?" She was almost eager.

Gods of Space, he couldn't let

himself get involved with this girl. He almost wished to see hatred in her eyes again.

"Maybe," he said gently, "it will be better for your brother if he doesn't make any recovery now. You know where he's going."

Lucinda's hope, such as it was, was shocked away by his words. She was silent, staring at her brother as if she saw something new.

Holt's wrist-intercom sounded.

"Captain here," he acknowledged.

"Sir, reporting a ship detected and calling us. Bearing five o'clock level to our course. Small and normal."

The last three words were the customary reassurance that a sighted ship was not possibly a berserker's giant hull. Berserkers all looked much alike, and what Flamlund outlaws were left had no deep space ships, so Holt had no reason to be cautious.

He went casually back to the bridge and looked at the small shape on the detector screen. It was unfamiliar to him, but that was hardly surprising, as there were many shipyards orbiting many planets. Why, though, should any ship approach and hail him in deep space?

Plague?

"No, no plague," answered a radio voice, through bursts of static, when he put the question to the stranger. The video signal from the other ship was also jumpy, making it hard to see the speaker's face. "Caught a speck of dust on my last jump, and my fields are shaky. Will you take a few passengers aboard?"

"Certainly." For a ship on the brink of a C-plus jump to collide

with the gravitation field of a sizable dust-speck was a rare accident, but not unheard-of; and it would explain the noisy communications. There was still nothing to alarm Holt.

The stranger sent over a launch which clamped to the courier's airlock. Wearing a smile of welcome for distressed passengers, Holt opened the lock. In the next moment he and the half-dozen men who made up his crew were caught helpless by an inrush of man-sized machines—they were a berserker's boarding party, cold and ancient, merciless as nightmare.

The machines seized the courier so swiftly and efficiently that no one could offer real resistance, but they did not immediately kill any of the humans. They tore the drive units from one of the lifeboats and herded Holt and his crew and his erstwhile prisoners into the boat.

"It wasn't a berserker on the screen, it wasn't," the Second Officer kept repeating to Holt. The humans sat side by side, jammed against one another in the small space. The machines were allowing them air and water and food, and had started to take them out one at a time for questioning.

"I know, it didn't look like one," Holt answered. "The berserkers are probably forming themselves into new shapes, building themselves new weapons. That's only logical, after the Stone Place. The only odd thing is that no one foresaw it."

A hatch clanged open, and a pair

of roughly man-shaped machines entered the boat, picking their way precisely among the nine cramped humans until they reached the one they wanted.

"No, he can't talk!" Lucinda shrieked. "Don't take him!"

But the machines could not or would not hear her. They pulled Janda to his feet and marched him out. The girl followed, dragging at them, trying to argue with them. Holt could only scramble uselessly after her in the narrow space, afraid that one of the machines would turn and kill her. But they only kept her from following them out of the lifeboat, pushing her back from the hatch with metal hands as gently resistless as time. Then they were gone with Janda, and the hatch was closed again. Lucinda stood gazing at it blankly. She did not move when Holt put his arm around her.

### III

After a timeless period of waiting, the humans saw the hatch open again. The machines were back, but they did not return Janda. Instead they had come to take Holt.

Vibrations echoed through the courier's hull; the machines seemed to be rebuilding her. In a small chamber sealed off by a new bulkhead from the rest of the ship, the berserker computer-brain had set up electronic eyes and ears and a speaker for itself, and here Holt was taken to be interrogated.

Speaking with a collection of recorded human words, the berserker questioned Holt at great length. Al-

most every question concerned Johann Karlsen. It was known that the berserkers regarded Karlsen as their chief enemy, but this one seemed to be obsessed with him — and unwilling to believe that he was really dead.

"I have captured your charts and astrogational settings," the berserker reminded Holt. "I know your course is to *Nirvana*, where supposedly the non-functioning Karlsen has been taken. Describe this *Nirvana*-ship used by the life-unit Nogara."

So long as it had asked only about a dead man, Holt had given the berserker straight answers, not wanting to be tripped up in a useless lie. But a flagship was a different matter, and now he hesitated. Still, there was little he could say about *Nirvana* if he wanted to. And he and his fellow prisoners had had no chance to agree on any plan for deceiving the berserker; certainly it must be listening to everything they said in the lifeboat.

"I've never seen the *Nirvana*," he answered truthfully. "But logic tells me it must be a strong ship, since the highest human leaders travel on it." There was no harm in telling the machine what it could certainly deduce for itself.

A door opened suddenly, and Holt stared in surprise as a strange man entered the interrogation chamber. Then he saw that it was not a man, but some creation of the berserker. Perhaps its flesh was plastic, perhaps some product of tissue-culture.

"Hi, are you Captain Holt?" asked the figure. There was no gross flaw in it, but a ship camouflaged with

the greatest skill looks like nothing so much as a ship that has been camouflaged.

When Holt was silent, the figure asked: "What's wrong?" Its speech alone would have given it away, to an intelligent human who listened carefully.

"You're not a man," Holt told it.

The figure sat down and went limp.

The berserker explained: "You see I am not capable of making an imitation life-unit that will be accepted by real ones face to face. Therefore I require that you, a real life-unit, help me make certain of Karlsen's death."

Holt said nothing.

"I am a special device," the berserker said, "built by the berserkers with one prime goal, to bring about with certainty Karlsen's death. If you help me prove him dead, I will willingly free you and the other life-units I now hold. If you refuse to help, all of you will receive the most unpleasant stimuli until you change your mind."

Holt did not believe that it would ever willingly set them free. But he had nothing to lose by talking, and he might at least gain for himself and the others a death free of most unpleasant stimuli. Berserkers preferred to be efficient killers, not sadists, though during the long war they had become experts on the human nervous system.

"What sort of help do you want from me?" Holt asked.

"When I have finished building myself into this courier we are going

on to *Nirvana*, where you will deliver your prisoners. I have read the orders. After being interviewed by the human leaders on *Nirvana*, the prisoners are to be taken on to Estel for confinement. Is it not so?"

"It is."

The door opened again, and Janda shuffled in, bent and bemused.

"Can't you spare this man any more questioning?" Holt asked the berserker. "He can't help you in any way."

There was only silence. Holt waited uneasily. At last, looking at Janda, he realized that something about the outlaw had changed. The tears had stopped flowing from his right eye.

When Holt saw this he felt a mounting horror that he could not have explained, as if his subconscious already knew what the berserker was going to say next.

"What was bone in this life-unit is now metal," the berserker said. "Where blood flowed, now preservatives are pumped. Inside the skull I have placed a computer, and in the eyes are cameras to gather the evidence I must have on Karlsen. To match the behavior of a brain-washed man is within my capability."

"I do not hate you," Lucinda said to the berserker when it had her alone for interrogation. "You are an accident, like a planet-quake, like a pellet of dust hitting a ship near light-speed. Nogara and his people are the ones I hate. If his brother was not dead I would kill him with my hands and willingly bring you his body."



“Courier Captain? This is Governor Mical, speaking for the High Lord Nogara. Bring your two prisoners over to *Nirvana* at once,” he ordered.

“At once, sir.”

After coming out of C-plus travel within sight of *Nirvana*, the assassin-machine had taken Holt and Lucinda from the lifeboat. Then it had let the boat, with Holt’s crew still on it, drift out between the two ships, as if men were using it to check the courier’s fields. The men on the boat were to be the berserker’s hostages, and its shield if it was discovered.

And by leaving them there, it doubtless wanted to make more credible the prospect of their eventual release.

Holt had not known how to tell

Lucinda of her brother’s fate, but at last he had managed somehow. She had wept for a minute, and then she had become very calm.

Now the berserker put Holt and Lucinda into the crystal globe that served it for a launch, for the trip to *Nirvana*. The machine that had been Lucinda’s brother was aboard the launch already, waiting, slumped and broken-looking as the man had actually been in the last days of his life.

When she saw that figure, Lucinda stopped. Then in a clear voice she said: “Machine, I wish to thank you. You have done my brother a kindness no human would do for him. I think I would have found a way to kill him myself before his enemies could torture him any more.”

The *Nirvana's* airlock was strongly armored, and equipped with automated defenses that would have repelled a rush of boarding machines, just as *Nirvana's* beams and missiles would have beaten off any heavy-weapon attack a courier, or a dozen couriers, could launch. The berserker had foreseen all this.

An officer welcomed Holt aboard. "This way, Captain, we're all waiting."

"All?"

The officer had the well-fed, comfortable look that came with safe and easy duty. His eyes were busy appraising Lucinda. "There's a celebration under way in the Great Hall. Your prisoners' arrival has been much anticipated."

Music throbbed in the Great Hall, and dancers writhed in costumes more obscene than any nakedness. From a table running almost the length of the Hall, serving machines were clearing the remnants of what had been a feast. In a throne-like chair behind the center of the table sat the High Lord Nogara, a rich cloak thrown over his shoulders, pale wine before him in a crystal goblet. Forty or fifty revelers flanked him at the long table, men and women and a few of whose sex Holt could not at once be sure. All were drinking and laughing, and some were donning masks and costumes, making ready for further celebration.

Heads turned at Holt's entrance, and a moment of silence was followed by a cheer. In all the eyes and faces turned now toward his

prisoners, Holt could see nothing like pity.

"Welcome, Captain," said Nogara in a pleasant voice, when Holt had remembered to bow. "Is there news from Flamland?"

"None of great importance, sir."

A puffy-faced man who sat at Nogara's right hand leaned forward on the table. "No doubt there is great mourning for the late governor?"

"Of course, sir." Holt recognized Mical. "And much anticipation of the new."

Mical leaned back in his chair, smiling cynically. "I'm sure the rebellious population is eager for my arrival. Girl, were you eager to meet me? Come, pretty one, round the table, here to me." As Lucinda slowly obeyed, Mical gestured to the serving devices. "Robots, set a chair for the man—there, in the center of the floor. Captain, you may return to your ship."

Felipe Nogara was steadily regarding the manacled figure of his old enemy Janda, and what Nogara might be thinking was hard to say. But he seemed content to let Mical give what orders pleased him.

"Sir," said Holt to Mical. "I would like to see—the remains of Johann Karlsen."

That drew the attention of Nogara, who nodded. A serving machine drew back sable draperies, revealing an alcove in one end of the Hall. In the alcove, before a huge viewport, rested the coffin.

Holt was not particularly surprised; on many planets it was the cus-



tom to feast in the presence of the dead. After bowing to Nogara he turned and saluted and walked toward the alcove. Behind him he heard the shuffle and clack of Janda's manacled movement, and held his breath. A muttering passed along the table, and then a sudden quieting in which even the throbbing music ceased. Probably Nogara had gestured premission for Janda's walk, wanting to see what the brainwashed man would do.

Holt reached the coffin and stood over it. He hardly saw the frozen face inside it, or the blur of the hypermass beyond the port. He hardly heard the whispers and giggles of the revelers. The only picture clear in his mind showed the faces of his crew as they waited helpless in the grip of the berserker.

The machine clothed in Janda's flesh came shuffling up beside him, and its eyes of glass stared down into those of ice. A photograph of retinal patterns taken back to the waiting berserker for comparison with old captured records would tell it that this man was really Karlsen.

A faint cry of anguish made Holt look back toward the long table, where he saw Lucinda pulling herself away from Mical's clutching arm, Mical and his friends were laughing.

"No, Captain, I am no Karlsen," Mical called down to him, seeing Holt's expression. "And do you think I regret the difference? Johann's prospects are not bright. He is rather bounded by a nutshell, and can no longer count himself king of infinite space!"

"Shakespeare!" cried a sycophant, showing appreciation of Mical's literary erudition.

"Sir." Holt took a step forward. "May I—may I now take the prisoners back to my ship?"

Mical misinterpreted Holt's anxiety. "Oh ho! I see you appreciate some of life's finer things, Captain. But as you know, rank has its privileges. The girl stays here."

He had expected them to hold on to Lucinda, and she was better here than with the berserker:

"Sir, then if—if the man alone can come with me. In a prison hospital on Esteel he may recover—"

"Captain," Nogara's voice was not loud, but it hushed the table. "Do not *argue* here."

"No sir."

Mical shook his head. "My thoughts are not yet of mercy to my enemies, Captain. Whether they may soon turn in that direction—well, that depends." He again reached out a leisurely arm to encircle Lucinda. "Do you know, Captain, that hatred is the true spice of love?"

Holt looked helplessly back at Nogara. Nogara's cold eye said: One more word, courier, and you find yourself in the brig. I do not give two warnings.

If Holt cried berserker now, the thing in Janda's shape might kill everyone in the Hall before it could be stopped. He knew it was listening to him, watching his movements.

"I—I am returning to my ship," he stuttered. Nogara looked away, and no one else paid him much attention. "I will—return here—in a

few hours perhaps. Certainly before I drive for Esteel."

Holt's voice trailed off as he saw that a group of the revelers had surrounded Janda. They had removed the manacles from the outlaw's dead limbs, and they were putting a horned helmet on his head, giving him a shield and spear and a cloak of fur, equipage of an old Norse warrior of Earth—first to coin and bear the dread name of berserker.

"Observe, Captain," mocked Mical's voice. "At our masked ball we do not fear the fate of Prince Prospero. We willingly bring in the semblance of the terror outside!"

"Poe!" shouted the sycophant in glee.

Prospero and Poe meant nothing to Holt, and Mical looked disappointed.

"Leave us, Captain," said Nogara, making a direct order of it.

"Leave, Captain Holt," said Lucinda in a firm, clear voice. "We all know you wish to help those who stand in danger here. Lord Nogara, will Captain Holt be blamed in any way for what happens here when he has gone?"

There was a hint of puzzlement in Nogara's clear eyes. But he shook his head slightly, granting the asked-for absolution.

And there was nothing for Holt to do but go back to the berserker to argue and plead with it for his crew. If it was patient, the evidence it sought might be forthcoming. If only the revelers would have mercy on the thing they thought was Janda.

Holt went out. It had never en-

tered his burdened mind that Karlsen was only frozen.

## V

Mical's arm was about her hips as she stood beside his chair, and his voice purred up at her. "Why, how you tremble, pretty one . . . it moves me that such a pretty one as you should tremble at my touch, yes, it moves me deeply. Now, we are no longer enemies, are we? If we are, I should have to deal harshly with your brother."

She had given Holt time to get clear of the *Nirvana*. Now she swung her arm with all her strength. The blow turned Mical's head halfway round, and made his neat gray hair fly wildly.

There was a sudden hush in the Great Hall, and then a roar of laughter that reddened all of Mical's face to match the handprint on his cheek. A man behind Lucinda grabbed her arms and pinned them. She relaxed until she felt his grip loosen slightly, and then she grabbed up a table knife. There was another burst of laughter as Mical ducked away and the man behind Lucinda seized her again. Another man came to help him and the two of them, laughing, took away the knife and forced her to sit in a chair at Mical's side.

When the governor spoke at last his voice quavered slightly, but it was low and almost calm.

"Bring the man closer," he ordered. "Seat him there, just across the table from us."

While his order was being carried out, Mical spoke to Lucinda in con-

versational tones. "It was my intent, of course, that your brother should be treated and allowed to recover." He paused to see the effect of that statement on her.

"Lying piece of filth," she whispered, smiling.

Mical only smiled back. "Let us test the skill of my mind-control technicians," he suggested. "I'll wager that no bonds will be needed to hold your brother in his chair, once I have done this." He made a curious gesture over the table, toward the glassy eyes that looked out of Janda's face. "So. But he will still be aware, with every nerve, of all that happens to him. You may be sure of that."

She had planned and counted on something like this happening, but now she felt as if she was exhausted by breathing evil air. She was afraid of fainting, and at the same time wished that she could.

"Our guest is bored with his costume." Mical looked up and down the table. "Who will be first to take a turn at entertaining him?"

There was a spattering of applause as a giggling effeminate arose from a nearby chair.

"Jamy is known for his inventiveness," said Mical in pleasant tones to Lucinda. "I insist you watch closely, now. Chin up!"

On the other side of Mical, Felipe Nogara was losing his air of remoteness. As if reluctantly, he was being drawn to watch. In his bearing was a rising expectancy, winning out over disgust.

Jamy came giggling, holding a small jeweled knife.

"Not the eyes," Mical cautioned. "There'll be things I want him to see, later."

"Oh, certainly!" Jamy twittered. He set the horned helmet gingerly aside, and wiped the touch of it from his fingers. "We'll just start like this on one cheek, with a bit of skin —"

Jamy's touch with the blade was gentle, but still too much for the dead flesh. At the first peeling tug, the whole lifeless mask fell red and wet from around the staring eyes, and his steel berserker-skull grinned out.

Lucinda had just time to see Jamy's body flung across the Hall by a steel-boned arm before the men holding her let go and turned to flee for their lives, and she was able to duck under the table. Screaming bedlam broke loose, and in another moment the whole table went over with a crash before the berserker's strength. The machine, finding itself discovered, thwarted in its primary function of getting away with evidence on Karlsen, took as its secondary goal the old berserker one of simple killing. It moved through the Hall, squatting and hopping grotesquely, mowing its way with scythe-like arms, harvesting howling panic into bundles of bloody stillness.

At the main door, fleeing people jammed one another into immobility, and the assassin worked among them, methodically mangling and slaying. Then it turned and came down the Hall again. It came to Lucinda, still kneeling where the



table-tipping had exposed her; but the machine hesitated, recognizing her as a semi-partner in its prime function. In a moment it had dashed on after another target.

It was Nogara, swaying on his feet, his right arm hanging broken. He had come up with a heavy handgun from somewhere, and now he fired left-handed as the machine charged down the other side of the overturned table toward him. The gun-blasts shattered Nogara's friends and furniture but only grazed his moving target.

At last one shot hit home. The machine was wrecked, but its impetus carried it on to knock Nogara down again.

There was a shaky quiet in the Great Hall, which was wrecked as if by a bomb. Lucinda got unsteadily

to her feet. There were sobs and moans and gropings everywhere, but no one else was standing.

She picked her way dazedly over to the smashed assassin-machine. She felt only a numbness, looking at the rags of clothing and flesh that still clung to its metal frame. Now in her mind she could see her brother's face as it once was, strong and smiling.

Now there was something that mattered more than the dead, if she could only recall what it was — of course, the berserker's hostages, the good kind spacemen. She could try to trade Karlsen's body for them.

**T**he serving machines, built to face emergencies on the order of spilled wine, where dashing to and fro in the nearest thing to panic

that mechanism could achieve. They impeded Lucinda's progress, but she had the heavy coffin wheeled half-way across the Hall when a weak voice stopped her. Nogara had dragged himself up to a sitting position against the overturned table.

He croaked again: "— alive."

"What?"

"Johann's alive. Healthy. See? It's a freezer."

"But we all told the berserker he was dead." She felt stupid with the impact of one shock after another. For the first time she looked down at Karlens's face, and long seconds passed before she could tear her eyes away. "It has hostages. It wants his body."

"No." Nogara shook his head. "I see, now. But no. I won't give him to berserkers, alive." A brutal power of personality still emanated from his broken body. His gun was gone, but his power kept Lucinda from moving. There was no hatred in her now.

She protested: "But there are seven men out there."

"Berserker's like me." Nogara bared pain-clenched teeth. "It won't let prisoners go. Here. The key . . ." He pulled it from inside his torn-open tunic.

Lucinda's eyes were drawn once again to the cold serenity of the face in the coffin. Then on impulse she ran to get the key. When she did so Nogara slumped over in relief, unconscious or nearly so.

The coffin lock was marked in several positions, and she turned it to EMERGENCY REVIVAL. Lights sprang on around the figure

inside, and there was a hum of power.

By now the automated systems of the ship were reacting to the emergency. The serving machines had begun a stretcher-bearer service. Nogara being one of the first victims they carried away. Presumably a robot medic was in action somewhere. From behind Nogara's throne chair a great voice was shouting.

"This is ship defense control, requesting human orders! What is nature of emergency?"

"Do not contact the courier ship!" Lucinda shouted back. "Watch it for an attack. But don't hit the lifeboat!"

The glass top of the coffin had become opaque.

Lucinda ran to the viewport, stumbling over the body of Mical and going on without a pause. By putting her face against the port and looking out at an angle she could just see the berserker-courier, pinkly visible in the wavering light of the hypermass, its lifeboat of hostages a small pink dot still in place before it.

How long would it wait, before it killed the hostages and fled?

When she turned away from the port, she saw that the coffin's lid was open and the man inside was sitting up. For just a moment, a moment that was to say in Lucinda's mind, his eyes were like a child's, fixed helplessly on hers. Then power began to grow behind his eyes, a power somehow completely different from his brother's and perhaps even greater.

Karlsen looked away from her, taking in the rest of his surroundings, the devastated Great Hall and the coffin. "Felipe," he whispered, as if in pain, though his half-brother was no longer in sight.

Lucinda moved toward him and started to pour out her story, from the day in the Flamland prison when she had heard that Karlsen had fallen to the plague.

Once he interrupted her. "Help me out of this thing, get me space armor." His arm was hard and strong when she grasped it, but when he stood beside her he was surprisingly short. "Go on, what then?"

She hurried on with her tale, while serving machines came to arm him. "But why were you frozen?" she ended, suddenly wondering at his health and strength.

He ignored the question. "Come along to Defense Control. We must save those men out there."

He went familiarly to the nerve center of the ship and hurled himself into the combat chair of the Defense Officer, who was probably dead. The panel before Karlsen came alight and he ordered at once: "Get me in contact with that courier."

Within a few moments a flat-sounding voice from the courier answered routinely. The face that appeared on the communication screen was badly lighted; someone viewing it without advance warning would not suspect that it was anything but human.

"This is High Commander Karlsen speaking, from the *Nirvana*."

He did not call himself governor or lord, but by his title of the great day of the Stone Place. "I'm coming over there. I want to talk to you men on the courier."

The shadowed face moved slightly on the screen. "Yes sir."

Karlsen broke off the contact at once. "That'll keep its hopes up. Now I need a fast launch. You, robots, load my coffin aboard one. I'm on emergency revival drugs now and if I live I may have to re-freeze for a while."

"You're not really going there?"

Up out of the chair again, he paused. "I know berserkers. If chasing me is that thing's prime function it won't waste a shot or a second of time on a few hostages while I'm in sight."

"You can't go," Lucinda heard herself saying. "You mean too much to all men —"

"I'm not committing suicide, I have a trick or two in mind." Karlsen's voice changed suddenly. "You say Felipe's not dead?"

"I don't think so."

Karlsen's eyes closed while his lips moved briefly, silently. Then he looked at Lucinda and grabbed up paper and a stylus from the Defense Officer's console. "Give this to Felipe," he said, writing. "He'll set you and the captain free if I ask it. You're not dangerous to his power. Whereas I . . ."

## VI

From the Defense Officer's position, Lucinda watched Karlsen's crystalline launch leave the *Nirvana*

and take a long curve that brought it near the courier at a point some distance from the lifeboat.

"You on the courier," Lucinda heard him say. "You can tell it's really me here on the launch, can't you? You can DF my transmission? Can you photograph my retinas through the screen?"

And the launch darted away with a right-angle swerve, dodging and twisting at top acceleration, as the berserker's weapons blasted the space where it had been. Karlsen had been right. The berserker spent not a moment's delay or a single shot on the lifeboat, but hurled itself instantly after the launch.

"Hit that courier!" Lucinda screamed. "Destroy it!" A salvo of missiles left the *Nirvana*, but it was a shot at a receding target, and it missed. Perhaps it missed because the courier was already in the fringes of the distortion surrounding the hypermass.

Karlsen's launch had not been hit, but it could not get away. It was a glassy dot vanishing behind a screen of blasts from the berserker's weapons, a dot being forced into the maelstrom of the hypermass.

"Chase them!" cried Lucinda, and saw the stars tint blue ahead; but almost instantly the *Nirvana's* auto pilot countermanded her order, barking mathematical assurance that to accelerate any further in that direction would be fatal to all aboard.

The launch was now going cer-

tainly into the hypermass, gripped by a gravity that could make any engines useless. And the berserker-ship was going headlong after the launch, caring for nothing but to make sure of Karlsen.

The two specks tinted red, and redder still, racing before an enormous falling cloud of dust as if flying into a planet's sunset sky. And then the red shift of the hypermass took them into invisibility, and the universe saw them no more.

Soon after the robots had brought the men from the lifeboat safe aboard *Nirvana*, Holt found Lucinda alone in the Great Hall, gazing out the viewport.

"He gave himself to save you," she said. "And he'd never even seen you."

"I know." After a pause Holt said: "I've just been talking to the Lord Nogara. I don't know why, but you're to be freed, and I'm not to be prosecuted for bringing the damned berserker aboard. Though Nogara seems to hate both of us . . ."

She wasn't listening, she was still looking out the port.

"I want you to tell me all about him someday," Holt said, putting his arm around Lucinda. She moved slightly, ridding herself of a minor irritation that she had hardly noticed. It was Holt's arm, which dropped away.

"I see," Holt said, after a while. He went to look after his men. END

# RETIEF'S WAR

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*There were ten lost Terran girls in Quopp's jungle and only Retief could save them — if he could save himself*

The Weens gathered around Retief and the one member of the tribe who had captured him. Their attitude was disapproving.

"Jik-jik," someone called to him from the ranks, "you all the time talking to something to eat. What you all say to a nice barbecue sauce on this meal, greens on the side?"

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

"Get your feather-picking members off me, you ignorant clodhoppers!" a thin Voion voice screeched. "I'm a member of the Planetary Armed Forces! There's a big reward out for anybody that hurts a mem—" The speech cut off in mid-word. Threshing sounds followed.

Moments later, three Ween pushed into the clearing, hauling the limp figure of a bright-polished



## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE —

The planet of Quopp is inhabited by creatures that are half machines, and all diabolical. Their body chemistry is organic-inorganic, with limbs like wheels or rotors and steel-sharp talons and teeth.

It is, in short, the kind of world where Earthmen walk cautiously, or do not walk at all.

But Earth Ambassador Longspoon is confident he has the situation under control. With the connivance of certain native Quoppina he is abetting the spread of a revolutionary movement which will unite all of Quopp's scores of hostile tribes, placing them all under a single government which will be friendly to Earth . . . he hopes.

Unfortunately his hopes are blighted. Retief discovers shipments of arms and, investigating, finds himself threatened by the Voion tribesmen. He escapes and makes his way to Terrie headquarters, which is in an uproar because a spaceship loaded with human females is approaching the planet out of control. The pilot asks for Retief but crashes before he can learn her identity. Meanwhile Retief is being pursued by the Voions, trying to keep their arms shipments secret. He escapes with the help of a friendly Quopp, who assists him in disguising himself in the mandibles and chitinous body-plates of a typical Quopp.

The Voion hunt for Retief has triggered an insurrection in the city. All Terries are being rounded up, but Retief's disguise gets him through to where he can steal a lifeboat and head out into the jungle, toward safety and, he hopes, a chance to rescue the downed ship of Earth-girls. He lands—and is himself captured by a Quopp tribe called the Ween. "Just in time for dinner," they observe. "You're the dinner!"

member of the Planetary Police. He groaned as they dropped him. One of his wheels, badly warped, whirled lop-sidedly.

"Hoo, this evening shaping up," someone said.

The Voion was lying on his back, waving all four arms feebly.

"You can't do this to me," the captive tweeted. "In the Name of the Wo—" The Ween standing closest to the fallen policeman brought his immense claw around. There was a sound like a pistol shot as he nipped off the newcomer's head with a single snap.

"Well, that the first of them big noises I see trimmed up like he ought to be," Jik-jik said. "You got him just in time, Fut-fut, before he call on the Name of the Worm—" He broke off, looked at Retief.

"In the Name of the Worm," Retief said, "what about a little hospitality?"

"You and your big vocalizing apparatus, Jik-jik," someone said disgustedly. "Well, back to camp. At least we can fry up some policeman to tide us over." A quartet of Ween lifted the limp body; someone else picked up the head.

"Lucky for you you call on the Name of the Worm," Jik-jik said conversationally. "Old Hub-hub ready to dine right now, what I mean."

"Mentioning the Worm takes me off the menu, eh?"

"Well, it give you time to get you thoughts in order, anyway."

"I have a feeling that remark is pregnant with meanings, none of them pleasant."

"Hoo, it simple enough, big boy. It mean us keep you pen up for five days, and then skin you out for a old-fashioned tribal blowout."

An aggressive-looking Ween had pushed forward. "How about if us trim off a few edges now just to sample the flavor?"

"Get back there, Hub-hub," Jik-jik admonished. "No snacking between meals."

"Come on, Meat-from-sky," the aggressive pigmy called. "Get you wheels in gear!" He reached out with his claw to prod Retief—and jumped back with a screech as the heavy sword whipped down, lopping off an inch of the member's pointed tip.

"Look what he do to my chopper!" he shrilled.

"You ask for it, Hub-hub," Fut-fut said.

"I like a lot of space around me," Retief said, swinging the sword loosely in his hand. "Don't crowd me."

The Ween edged back, fifty or more small, dark-glittering creatures like oversized army ants in a wide ring around Retief, his armor a splash of vivid color in the gloom. Hub-hub jittered, holding his damaged claw high, torch-light glinting on his metallic sides.

"I is hereby taking this piece of meat off the chow list!" he screeched. "I is promoting him to the status of folks!"

"Hey, Hub-hub, is you gone out of you head? What the idea of doing a trick like that?" A chorus of protest broke out.

Jik-jik confronted the outraged tribesman.

"He chop off a piece of you, and now you chumming up to him! What the idea?"

"The idea is now I ain't got to wait no five days to get a piece back!" Hub-hub keened. "Get back, all of you!" He waved the two-foot long, steel-trap claw in a commanding gesture. "I is now going to snip this stilter down to size!"

The Ween drew back, disappointed, but obedient to Tribal custom. Hub-hub danced before Retief, who waited, his back to the tree, the sword held before him, torch-light glinting along its steel-hard razor-sharp edge. Hub-hub darted in, legs twinkling, snick-snacked a double feint high and low with the big fighting arm, lashed out viciously with a pair of small pinchers, then struck with the big claw, eliciting a loud *bang!* from Retief's chest armor — and staggered as the flat of Retief's blade knocked him spinning.

"Hoo!" Jik-jik shrilled. "Old Hub-hub chew off more than he can bite this time!"

"Let's call this off, Shorty," Retief suggested. "I'd hate to have to skewer you before we've really gotten acquainted."

The Ween danced in, pivoting on spider legs, fainted, struck with his fighting claw —

Retief's sword flashed in a lightning arc. It sang as it bit through steel-hard metallo-chitin. The oversized claw dropped to the ground.

"He . . . he done chop off my chopper!" Hub-hub said faintly. "Now he going stick me for sure."

He crouched, waiting, a drop of syrupy dark fluid forming on the stump.

"Serve you right, Hub-hub," someone called.

"Suppose I let you go?" Retief stepped forward and prodded the Ween's slender neck with the sword point. "Promise to be good and speak only when spoken to?"

"Way I feels now, I done talking for good," Hub-hub declared.

"Very well." Retief lowered the blade. "Go with my blessing."

"Well, that a neat trick, big boy," Jik-jik commented. "Take him six months to grow a new arm, and meantime he learn to keep he mandible buttoned."

Retief looked around. "Anybody else?" he inquired. There were no takers.

"In that case, I'll be on my way. You're sure you haven't noticed a ship crashing in the vicinity in the past few hours?"

"Well, now, that's different," Jik-jik stated. "They was a big smash over yonder a while back. We was looking for it when we found you."

"The name's Retief. Now that we're all friends and tribesfellows, how about a few of you showing me the spot where it came down?"

"Sure, Tief-tief. It not far from where you was."

Retief walked over to examine the body of the decapitated Voion. He had obviously been a member of Ikk's police — or army — complete with brand-new chromalloy inlays and an enameled cranium insignia with a stylized picture of what looked like a dragonfly.

"I wonder what this fellow was doing out here, so far from town," Retief said.

"I don't know," Jik-jik said; "but I got a feeling when us finds out us ain't going like it."

## V

The bright disc of Joop was high above the treetops, shedding a cold white light on the village street. Retief followed as Jik-jik and two other tribesmen led the way along a trail worn smooth by the wheels of generations of forest dwellers. It was a fifteen minute trek to the spot where Pin-pin halted and waved an arm.

"Yonder where I found that policeman," he said. "Back in the brush. I heard he cussing up a cyclone back there."

Retief pushed through came to a spot where fallen limbs and scattered leaves marked the position of the injured Voion. Above, the silvery ends of broken branches marked a trajectory through the tree-tops.

"What I wondering, how he get up there?" Pin-pin inquired. "Funny stuff going on around here. Us heard the big crash—that why us out here."

"The big crash—which way was that?" Retief asked.

"Yonder," Pin-pin pointed. Again he led the way, guided by the unerring Quoppina instinct for direction. Fifty feet along the trail, Retief stooped, picked up a twisted fragment of heavy, iron-gray metallo-chitin, one edge melted and charred. He went on, seeing more bits and

pieces. A bright-edged shred here, swinging from a bush, a card-table-sized plate there, wedged high in a tree. Then suddenly the dull-gleaming mass of a major fragment of the wrecked Rhoon loomed through the underbrush, piled against the ribbed base of a forest giant.

"Hoo, that big fellow hit hard, Tief-tief," Pin-pin said. "Wonder what bring him down?"

"Something he tried to eat disagreed with him." Retief made his way around the giant corpse, noting the blaster burns on the stripped hub of the rotors, the tangle of internal organic wiring exposed by the force of the crash, the twisted and shattered landing members. The rear half of the body was missing, torn away in the passage through the trees.

"Wonder what a Rhoon meet big enough to down him?" Pin-pin wondered. "He the toughest critter in this jungle; everyone spin gravel when a Rhoon flit overhead." The Ween dipped a finger in a smear of spilled lubricant, waved it near an olfactory organ.

"Foo!" he snorted. "That gone plumb rancid already! I guess we don't make no meal off this fellow!"

Retief clambered up the side of the downed behemoth, looked down into an open cavity gouged in the upper side of the thorax, just anterior to the massive supporting structures for the rotating members. Wires were visible; not the irregular-diametered organic conduits of the Quoppina internal organization, but bright-colored cables bearing lettering . . .

"Hey, Tief-tief!" Pin-pin called

suddenly "Us better get scarce! This boy's relations is out looking for him!"

Retief looked up; a great dark shape was visible, hovering a few hundred feet above tree-top level. By the bright light of Joop, a second and a third Rhoon appeared, cruising slowly back and forth over the position of their fallen comrade.

"They going to spot him any minute now," Pin-pin said. "I say let's get!"

"They can't land here," Retief said. "They've already spotted him: they're patrolling the location." He looked around, listening. There was the whine of the breeze among metallic leaves, the high throb of idling Rhoon rotors, a distant rustle of underbrush . . .

"Somebody's coming," Retief said. "Let's fade back and watch."

"Look Tief-tief, I just remembered. I got a roof needs patching—"

"We'll lie low and pull back if it's more than we can handle. Pin-pin. I don't want to miss anything."

"Well . . ." The three Ween went into a hurried consultation, then clacked in reluctant agreement. "Okay — but if it's a bunch of them no-good Voion coming to see what they can steal, us leaving," Pin-pin announced.

**I**t was five minutes before the first of the approaching group came into view among the great scarlet-and purple-boled trees, laden with full field packs and spare tires.

"What I tell you?" Pin-pin whispered shrilly. "More of them policemen! They all over the place."

Retief and the Ween watched as more and more Voion came up, crowding into the clearing leveled by the passage of the Rhoon, all chattering in a subdued buzz, fingering their blackwood clubs and staring about them into the forest.

"Plenty of them," a Ween hissed. "Must is six sixes of sixes if they's a one."

"More than that. Look at 'em come!"

An imposing-looking Voion with a jewel in his left palp appeared; the others fell back, let him through. He rolled up beside the dead Rhoon, looked it over.

"Any sign of Lieutenant Xit?" he demanded in Trade dialect.

"What he say?" Pin-pin whispered.

"He's looking for the one you fellows found," Retief translated for him.

"Oh-oh. They ain't going to like it if they finds him."

The conversation among the Voion continued:

". . . trace of him, Colonel. But there's a native village not far away. Maybe they can help us."

The colonel clacked his palps. "They'll help us," he grated. "Which way?"

The Voion pointed. "Half a mile — there."

"All right, let's march." The column formed up, started off in a new direction.

"For a minute I figure they mean Weensville," Pin-pin said. "But they headed for the Zilk town."

"Can we skirt them and get there first?" Retief asked.



"I reckon. But I ain't hungry just now — and besides, with them policemen on the way —"

"I'm not talking about grocery shopping," Retief said. "Those Voion are in a mean mood. I want to warn the villagers."

"But they's Zilk. What we care what happen to them babies?"

"The Terries I'm looking for might be there. I'd prefer to reach them before the Voion do. Beside which, you villagers should stick together."

"Tief-tief, you is got funny ideas, but if that's what you wants..."

Retief and his guides pushed through a final screen of underbrush, emerged at the edge of a cleared and planted field where the broad yellow leaves of a ripening crop of alloy-plants caught the Jooplight.

"Them Zilk a funny bunch," Pin-pin said. "Eats nothing but greens. Spends all they time grubbing in the ground."

"In that case, I don't suppose they have to wait until a policeman drops in to plan a meal," Retief pointed out. He started across the open field.

"Hoo, Tief-tief!" Pin-pin hurried after him. "When I say they don't eat folks, that don't mean they don't snap a mean chopper! Us is tangled with them before, plenty of times! You can't just wheel in on 'em!"

"Sorry, Jik-jik. No time for formalities now. Those cops aren't far behind us."

A tall, lean, Quoppina appeared at the far side of the field — a bright yellow-orange specimen with long

upper arms tipped with specialized earth-working members, shorter, blade-bearing limbs below.

"Oh-oh; they sees us. Too late to change our minds now." Jik-jik held his fighting claw straight up in a gesture indicating peaceful intentions.

"What d'ye want here, ye murderous devils?" a high, mellow voice called.

"I'm looking for a party of Terrans whose boat crashed near here a few hours back," Retief called. "Have you seen them?"

"Terrans, is it?" The Zilk hooted. "I've not seen 'em. And if I had, I'd not be likely to turn 'em over to the likes o' you."

Other Zilk were popping from the low, domed huts now, fanning out, moving forward on both flanks in an encircling pincer movement. At close range, Retief could see the businesslike foot-long scythes tipping the lower arms.

"Listen here, you Zilk," Jik-jik called in a voice which may have quavered a trifle. "In the name of the Worm! Us ain't just here to ask foolish questions; us is got news for you folks."

"And we've got news for you — not that ye'll ever have the chance to spread it about —"

"Us come to tip you folks off," the Ween persisted. "They a mob of mean-looking Voion on the way! Less you wants to tangle with 'em, you better head for the brush!"

"Don't try to put us off with wild tales, Ween!"

"It's the truth, if I ever told it!"

"Why would ye tell us?"

"Beat me. It were Tief-tief here had the idea."

"What kind of Quoppina is he?" the Zilk called. "I've seen no stilter wi' half the length o' member that one shows."

"He a out-of-town boy just passing through."

"Tis a trick, Wikker," a Zilk beside the spokesman hooted. "I'd not trust the little butchers as far as I could kick 'em — nor the big stilter, neither."

"The Voion are looking for a friend of theirs," Retief said. "They have an idea you'll help them look."

"We'll help 'em off our land," a Zilk stated. "I seen a mort o' the scoundrels about the acreage lately, running in packs and trampling the crops."

"They're armed and they mean business," Retief said. "Better get ready."

The Zilk were closing in now; the two Ween crowded up against Retief, their fighting claws clicking like castanets. Retief drew his sword.

"You're making a mistake," he told the advancing Zilk leader. "They'll be here any minute."

"A sly trick, ye heathens. But we Zilk are too shrewd for ye."

"Hey!" A Zilk called. The others turned. The lead elements of the Voion column were just emerging from the forest. At once, the Zilk formation broke, fell back in confusion toward the town.

"Get the females and grubs clear," the Zilk chief honked, and dashed away with the rest. The Voion colonel, seeing the tribesmen in confusion, barked an order; his troops

rolled forward through the field, clubs ready.

"Let them have the town!" Retief seized the arm of the chief as he shot by. "Disperse in the jungle and you can re-form for a counter attack!"

The Zilk jerked free. "Well — maybe. Who'd ha' thought a crowd of Ween were telling the truth?" He rushed away.

The Voion were well into the village now. Startled Zilk, caught short, dashed from huts and wheeled for cover, burdened with hastily salvaged possessions — only to drop them and veer off with hoots of alarm as fast-wheeling Voion intercepted them.

"Us better back off," Jik-jik proposed from the shelter of a hut on the sidelines.

"Scout around and try to round up the survivors," Retief said. "Pin-pin, you make it back to Weensville and bring up reinforcements. The Voion need a little lesson in inter-tribal cooperation before their success goes to their heads."

Half an hour later, from a screen of narrow pink leaves that tinkled in the light breeze, Retief, several dozen Zilk and seventy-odd Ween watched by the waning light of the fast-sinking Joop. A swarm Retief estimated at three hundred Voion, a few showing signs of the brisk engagement, prodded their captives into a ragged line-up.

"I don't know what's got into them babies," Jik-jik said. "Used to be they garbage-pickers, slipping around after Second Joop, looking



for what they could pick up. Now here they is, all shined up and acting like they rule the roost."

"They've gotten a disease called ambition," Retief said. "The form they have causes a severe itch in the acquisitive instinct."

"Not much meat on a Zilk," someone mused. "What you reckon they want over here? Can't be they just looking for they boy; them Voion never frets over no trifles like that."

"Hoo!" Fut-fut said, coming to Retief's side. "Look what they up to now!"

The Voion, having arranged the captive Zilk in two columns of a dozen or so individuals of both sexes, were busy with strips of flexible metallo-plastic, welding shackles to the arms of the first in line, while others of their number poised with raised clubs to punish any resistance. The lead Zilk, seeing the chain about to be linked to him, lashed out suddenly with his scythe, severing a Voion arm at the first joint, then plunged through the circle around him, dashed for the jungle. A Voion wheeled into his path, brought his club around in a whistling arc — and bounced aside as the Zilk snapped out an overlong digging arm, just as two more Voion closed from the off side, brought their clubs down in unison.

The Zilk skidded aside, arms whirling, crashed in a heap and lay still.

"Nice try, Wikker," the Zilk chief muttered. "Don't reckon I'd endure chains on me, either."

"That's what happens when you

play it their way," Retief said. "I suggest we work out some new rules. We'll decoy them into the jungle, break up their formation and take them one at a time."

"What you mean, Tief-tief? Us going to tackle them ugly babies?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Well, I guess you is right. Us ain't got nothing else scheduled for the evening."

"Good," Retief said. "Now, here's what I've got in mind . . ."

## VI

Three Voion working busily to pry the lid from the Zilk Town grain bin paused in their labors. Again the thin cry sounded from the forest near at hand.

"Sounds like a lost grub," one said. "A little tender roast meat wouldn't go bad now. Pounding in the skull-plates of farmers is hard work."

"Let's take a look. The Colonel's busy overseeing the looting; he won't notice us."

"Let's go." The three dropped their pry-bars and wheeled briskly across to the deep shadow of the thicket whence the sound emanated. The first in line thrust branches aside, rolled slowly forward, peering through the shadows. There was a dull *smack!* and he seemed to duck down suddenly. The Voion behind him hurried forward. "Find it?" he inquired, then skidded to a halt. "Juz!" he whistled. "Where's your head?" Something small and blue-green sprang up before him, a huge claw opening —

At the sound—a sharp *whock!*—the third Voion halted. “Huj?” he called. “Juz? What’s go—” A scythe swung with a whistle and his head bounced off to join those of his comrades. Jik-jik and Tupper, the Zilk leader, emerged from the brush.

“Work like a charm,” the Ween said. “Let’s do it again.”

Behind him, Retief turned from surveying the work in progress in the town.

“I think the Colonel’s beginning to suspect something. He’s falling his men in for a roll-call. How many have we given haircuts to so far?”

“Half a six of sixes, maybe.”

“We’ll have to stage a group diversion before he figures out what’s going on. Tell Fut-fut and his group to wait five minutes, then kick up a disturbance on the far side of the trail we came in on.”

Jik-jik keened orders to a half-grown Ween who darted away to spread the word.

“Now we’ll string out along the trail. They’ll probably come out in single file. Keep out of sight until their lead unit’s well past our last man. At my signal we’ll hit them all together and pull back fast.”

“It sounds slick. Let’s roll.”

Three minutes later, as a Voion sergeant continued to bark out names, the small messenger darted up to the position where Retief waited beside the trail. “Old Fut-fut ready, he say,” the lad chirped breathlessly. “Hey, Jik-jik! Can I get me one?”

“You ain’t got the chopper for it, Ip-ip; but you can scout around

the other side of the town. Soon as you hear them policemen’s heads popping you set up a ruckus. That’ll keep ’em guessing—them that still has guessing equipment. Now scatt! It time for the fun to begin.”

A shrill yell sounded from Fut-fut’s position, then an angry yammer of Ween voices, accompanied by sounds of scuffling.

From his concealment behind a yard-wide tree with a trunk like pale blue grass, Retief saw a stirring in the Voion ranks as they looked toward the outcry. The Colonel barked an order. A squad of Voion fell out and rolled quickly to the trail mouth. There was a moment of confusion as the troops milled, not liking the looks of the dark tunnel; then, at a shrill command from a sergeant, they formed a single file and started in. The first rolled past Retief’s position, his club swinging loosely in his hand. He was followed closely by another, and another. Retief counted twenty before they stopped coming. He stepped from behind the tree, glanced toward the village; the roll-call went on. He drew his sword, put two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill blast.

At once there was a crash of underbrush, a staccato volley of snicks and snaps, followed in an instant by a lone Voion yell, quickly cut off. The last Voion in the column, ducking back from the attacking Ween, spun and found himself confronting Retief. He brought his club up and gave a shrill yelp as Retief’s roundhouse stroke cut

through the weapon near the grip.

"Go back and tell the Colonel he has two hours to get to town," Retief said. "Any Voion found loose in the jungle after that will be roasted over a slow fire." He implemented the command with a blow with the flat of the blade that sent the Voion wobbling villageward; then he whirled and plunged into the dense growth, made for a vantage point overlooking the village.

There was a high-pitched cry from the far side of the town. Ipp was at work. The Voion were milling now, unsettled by the sudden noises. The one whose club Retief had clipped off charged into the midst of the platoon, shrilling and waving the stump of the weapon.

". . . forest demon!" he was yelling. "Nine feet high, with wheels like a juggernaut, and a head like a Voion, except it was red! Hundreds of them! I'm the only one got away."

Branches rustled and clanked as Jik-jik came up. "Hoo, Tief-tief, you quite a strategist. Got a passel of the trash that time! What's next?"

The Colonel was shrilling orders now, the roll-call abandoned. Voion scurried to and fro in confusion.

"Let them go. I see they're not bothering with their prisoners."

The Voion were streaming away down the wide trail in considerable disorder, flinging loot aside as they went. In two minutes the village was deserted, with the exception of the ranks of chained Zilk, staring fearfully about, and the crumpled bodies of their relatives.

"We'll go in quietly so as not to

scare them to death," Retief said. "And remember—the idea is to make allies of them, not hors d'oeuvres."

Fifty-one Zilk, three of them badly dented, had survived the attack. Now they sat in a circle among their rescuers, shaking their heads mournfully, obviously still not quite at ease in the presence of seventy Ween.

"Ye warned us, I'll gi' ye that," one said ruefully. "Never thought I'd see the day a bunch of Voion'd jump us Zilk, face to face—even if they did have us six to one."

"The Voion have a new mission in life," Retief said. "Their days of petty larceny are over. Now they're after a whole planet."

"Well, I guess we fix them, hey Tief-tief?" Jik-jik chuckled. "The way them babies run, they going to need retreads before they gets to town."

"That was just a minor scuffle," Retief said. "They're shaken up at the moment, but they'll be back."

"You sure enough reckon?" Fut-fut executed a twitch of the palps indicating sudden alarm.

"For a stilter what just hit town at First Joop, you sure take in a lot of ground in a hurry," Jik-jik said plaintively. "If you knowed them rascals coming back, how come you tell us to mix in in the first place?"

"I thought it would save a lot of talk all around if you Ween saw a demonstration of Voion tactics first hand. Then, too, it seemed worthwhile to help out the Zilk."

"We lost good old Lop-lop," Jik-

jik pointed out. "His head plumb  
bashed in. He was a good eater."

"They lost thirty-five club swingers," Retief said. "We've gained fifty-one new recruits."

"What that?" Jik-jik clacked his secondary claws with a br-r-rapp! "You ain't talking about these here greens-eaters?"

"Why, ye murderin' spawn o' the mud devil, d'ye think we Zilk'd have any part of yer heathen ways?" one of the rescueses hooted, waving his scythe. "Ye can all—"

"Hold it, fellows," Retief said. "If it comes to a fight with the city boys, you tribes will stick together or lose. Which will it be?"

"Where you get an idea like that, Tief-tief? They always been a few Voion sneaking around, getting they antennae in—"

"Just before I arrived here, Ikk declared himself proprietor of the planet. If the rest of you are good, he promises to make you honorary Voion."

There was a chorus of indignant buzzes and hoots from Ween and Zilk alike.

"Well, I'm glad to see an area of agreement at last," Retief said. "Now, if you Zilk are recovered, we'd better be pulling out."

"What about our crop?" Tupper protested. "It's all ready to harvest!"

"This here grass?" Jik-jik contemptuously plucked a wide golden leaf from the row beside him, waved it under his olfactory organ. "Never could figure out what a Quoppina thinking of, all the time nibbling leaves . . ."

He paused, sniffed at the leaf

again. Then he bit off a piece with a sound like a sardine can being torn in two, and chewed thoughtfully.

"Hey," he said. "Maybe us been missing something. This plumb good!"

Fut-fut snorted his amusement, plucked a leaf and sniffed, then bit.

"Hoo!" he announced. "Taste like prime Flink. Dog if it don't!"

In a moment, every Ween in sight was busily sampling the Zilk greens.

"Don't s'pose it matters," a Zilk grumbled. "We'll never get the crop in any way, with those Voion robbers on the loose."

"Don't worry about that," a Ween called. "Us'll have these here greens in in ten minutes flat!"

Jik-jik nodded, still masticating. "Maybe us Ween and you Zilk could work together after all," he said. "Us'll do the fighting and you fellows grow the greens."

Retief, Jik-jik and Tupper watched by the trail as the last of the grubs were carted away by nervous mothers to shelter in the deep jungle along with the village pots and pans, and the newly harvested alloy-plants. Suddenly Tupper pointed.

"Look up there," he boomed. "A flight of Rhoon—big ones! Coming this way!"

"Scatter!" Retief called. "Into the woods and regroup on the trail to the north!"

Ween and Zilk darted off in every direction. Retief waited until the lead Rhoon had dropped to almost treetop level, heading for a landing

in the village clearing; then he faded back into the shadows of the jungle.

One by one ten great Rhoon settled in, their rotors flicking back glints of Joopligh as they whirled to a stop. In the gloom, small, dark figures moved: Voion, filing out from between the parked leviathans, formed up a loose ring among the deserted huts, fanning outward.

"Come on, Tief-tief," Jik-jik said softly. "If them Rhoon wants the place I say let 'em have it." He broke off. "Look there!" he hissed. "Voion—swarms of 'em—wheeling right under them big babies' snappers!"

"They got here a little sooner than I expected," Retief said softly. "They must have already set up a field HQ nearby."

"Tief-tief, you know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking them Voion and them Rhoon is working together! But they can't be! Ain't no tribe never worked with no other tribe, not since the Worm's first Wiggle!"

"The Ween and the Zilk got together," Retief pointed out. "Why not the Voion and the Rhoon?"

"But that ain't fair, Tief-tief! Ain't nobody can fight a Rhoon! And they always been such peaceable babies. Just set on their mountain top and leave the flat lands to us!"

"It seems they've changed their ways. We'll have to fall back. Spread the word to the troops to move off—and keep it quiet."

"Sure is getting dark fast," Jik-jik commented nervously. "Us Ween figure it bad luck to move around in the dark of Joop."

"It'll be worse luck if we stay here. They're forming up to sweep this stretch of jungle clear."

"Well—if you says so, Tief-tief," Jik-jik conceded. "I'll spread the word."

Half an hour later, the party paused on the trail, in total darkness now.

Tupper was peering through the blackness. "I'd give a pretty to know where we are," he said. "Stumbling along a trail in the dark—'tis no fit occupation for a sane Quopp."

"We'll have to call a halt until Second Jooprise," Retief said. "We can't see where we're going, but neither can the Voion. They're not using torches either."

"But I can hear 'em. They're not far behind us—the night-crawling heathen!"

"It'll be Second Jooprise in another half hour, maybe," Jik-jik said. "I hopes them Voion is as smart as we is and set still for a while instead of cooking up surprises."

"I don't like it," Tupper stated. "There's something about this spot. I get a feeling hostile eyes are on me!"

"They'll be hostile clubs on you, if you keeps talking so loud," Jik-jik said. "Hush up now and let's all set and rest whiles we can."

Tupper was moving carefully about in the darkness. "Oh-oh," he said softly.

"What that?" Jik-jik demanded.

"It feels like . . ."

"What it feel like?" Jik-jik asked.

"Tief—better give us a light," Tupper said tensely.

Retief stepped to his side, took out a lighter, fired a torch supplied by a Ween. The oily brand flared up, cast dancing light on a purplish-gray mound blocking the path.

"Was there something?" a deep voice boomed out.

"Now we is done it," Jik-jik choked out. "Us is right smack dab in the middle of Jackooburg!"

## VII

At once, a dozen torches flared ahead; Retief looked around at a sprawling collection of wide mud and leaf sheds spotted at random under the shelter of a grove of vast green-barked nicklewood trees.

There was a wide yard, beaten to concrete smoothness by heavy wheels. About it were parked a dozen massive, low-slung creatures, five feet at the shoulder and ten feet long, with dusty magenta back plates, foot-thick rear wheels a yard in diameter, and a pair of smaller wheels forward, evolved from the lower pair of arms. The upper arms, flexible and spade-tipped, were coiled under the wide, flat, duck-billed heads.

"Well?" the same voice, like heavy syrup, insisted. "I hope you have some excuse for bursting in on our nightly contemplation hour!"

"Just leaving, big boy." Jik-jik spun his wheels backwards, raising dust that roiled in the torchlight.

With a rumble, a pair of Jackoo wheeled to cut off retreat. Another pair gave low honks, took up positions flanking the intruders on the

left. More Jackoo appeared from the darkness and still more emerged from shelter among the trees ringing the yard.

"Not in such a darned hurry, skinny-wheels," the Jackoo purred. "Before I roll you out into a pretty orange rug, I'd like to know what you thought you could snatch here."

"I'm looking for a missing party of Terrans," Retief said. "Have you seen them?"

"Terrans? What on Quopp are those?"

"A type of stilter. They look a little like me, actually, except that they have tender skins."

"Hmm. Sounds tasty. Tell you what; whoever catches them first divvies up with the others, all right?"

"They're not to be eaten," Retief corrected. "I want them whole."

"Oh, greedy, eh?" More Jackoo rolled to complete the encirclement.

"Oh-oh," Jik-jik twittered. "Us surrounded."

"That's fine," Retief said. "Now we won't have any Voion sneaking up on us."

"Tief-tief, us don't want to tangle with those boys," Jik-jik hissed. "They is tough customers. They ain't fast on they wheels, but when they starts it take a mountain to stop 'em. They flatten whatever they meets!"

"Good. They'll make excellent heavy armor."

"Tief-tief, you is got strange ideas. These Jackoo ain't got a friend in the jungle. They grubbers, and they don't care what kind they gets. Ween, Zilk, Flink—"

"Maybe we can offer them a change of diet."

"If you have any last words, better get them said." The Jackoo were closing in.

"You boys is got wrong ideas." Jik-jik crowded against Retief. "Us just dropped in to say howdy. I mean, us figured—I mean Tief-tief figured—"

"What he means is," Tupper amplified hastily, "the club-swinging rogues ha' carried out a dastardly attack on Zilk Town, and—"

"And you boys is next," Jik-jik added. "So—"

"Heavens, one at a time!" the Jackoo bellowed. "Gracious, a person can't even hear himself think! Now, let me get this straight: Just which of you is offering what others for sale?"

"The cute one with the long stilts," a Jackoo suggested from the background. "He's the owner, and these other two—"

"Nonsense, Fu-fu! The sour-looking one owns the squatty one, and the stilter is some kind of a flack—"

"You're both wrong," a third hollow voice chimed in. "The little jumpy one with the big bitey thing obviously—"

"Gentlemen." Retief held up both gauntleted hands. "I wonder if you've noticed a small conflagration in the near distance?"

"Gracious, yes," the Jackoo named Fufu said. "I thought it was morning and woke up hours early!"

"A large party of Voion calling themselves Planetary Police have raided Zilk Town. They'll be here next."

"Well, dandy! Maybe they'll have some succulent grubs for sale."

"This isn't like last time," Retief said. "They're not small-time free-lance bushrangers any more. They've incorporated as a government and gone into the wholesale end. They start off by levying a modest hundred percent property tax. After collecting that, they draft the survivors into government service, in what capacity we haven't yet determined."

"Ummm, no." The nearest Jackoo thumped heavy palps together in the gesture of Invitation Declined. "We're content as we are, living our peaceful, contemplative lives, bothering no one—"

"What about all them grubs you steals?" Jik-jik put in.

"Well, if you're going to get *picky* . . ."

"What Fufu means is that we don't want to sign up for the program," a Jackoo explained. "Naturally, we think enterprise is ducky, but—"

"It's not exactly an invitation," Retief said. "More of an ultimatum. Your village is on their route of march. They should be here by First Jooprise."

"Well, they'll just have their trouble for nothing," Fufu snorted. "Having one salesman call is one thing, but whole squads of them is simply out of the question!"

"Sure is glad us settle this thing when us did," Pim-pam said heatedly. "Now us better disappear in a hurry. Them Voion done snuck up on us; they about six deep all the way around the town."



“I just remembered,” Jik-jik said. “I got cousins on the far side of the valley. I believes I’ll just go pay them Ween a call.”

“Hey, that a good idea, Jik-jik,” a nearby Ween chimed in. “Ain’t seen old grandpa since I a nipper. I believes I’ll just go along.”

“It’s a shame the way us been neglecting our kin,” another offered.

“I has a yen to travel myself,” a third realized aloud.

“Hold on,” Retief called as a general surge toward the surrounding foliage gathered force. “Running away won’t help. The Voion will catch you whichever way you go.”

“It was satisfying, getting the hook into a few o’ the murdering no-goods,” Tupper keened. “But there’s too many o’ ’em. Our only chance is to slip off, quiet-like . . .”

“Why, you bunch of spoilsports!” Fufu honked. “Do you mean you’re going to run away just because a few worthless lightweights might be decapitated?”

“Us worthless lightweights wheeling out of here while the wheeling good,” Fut-fut declared. “Rest of you can do what you likes; it a free country!”

“That’s right, Tief-tief,” Jik-jik sighed. “You Dipple-macs is good fighters, but us knows when us licked.”

“Just listen to them chatter,” Fufu grunted. “A shameful display of ar-rant cowardice. Luckily, we Jackoo are simply too brave for words. Unfortunately, we can’t see in the dark, so we’ll have to bow out of night operation. In fact, I think it might be a good idea to slip away to quiet-



er territory now and recharge our plates. It *has* been rather an unsettling evening—”

“Gentlemen,” Retief called, “you’re all talking like idiots. They have us hemmed in on all sides. There’s only one way to get out of this trap—and that’s fight our way out.”

“How in the world did we get mixed up in this, Fufu?” a Jackoo boomed. “Why don’t we just mash these noisy creatures and get back to sleep?”

“Listen at them,” Jik-jik said. “They ready to quit! Only us Ween doing any fighting talk. Too bad we is got to sneak off with the rest of them—”

“Ween, ha!” Tupper shrilled. “Tief-tief’s no Ween.”

“He a honorary Ween,” Jik-jik said sullenly.

“We’re wasting time arguing,” Retief said. “If we hit them hard, we can punch our way through. They won’t be expecting attack.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Fufu said. “Since Tief-tief is the one who wants to start trouble, why doesn’t he go do it alone? Then in the confusion, the rest of us can just steal away.”

“Hey, that not a bad idea.” Jik-jik nodded judiciously. He eased over beside Retief.

“This you big chance to impress me,” he whistled. “Not only will you hog all the glory, but if you gets annihilated, nobody miss you. What you say?”

“Very well,” Retief said. “I’ll lead the attack—if you’ll permit me to sit on your back, Fufu—and if the rest of you will follow my lead.”

“Well . . . us Ween is fighting sons of guns,” Jik-jik said. “But seeing as them Zilk done pooped the party . . .”

“It was you Ween started this talk o’ desertion,” Tupper honked. “We Zilk will stick as long as any o’ ye—if you go first, Tief.”

“That’s settled, then,” Retief said. “Sharpen up your cutting edges, everybody, and we’ll see what we can do.”

## VIII

“One thing about being a stilt-er,” Jik-jik said almost enviously, eyeing Retief, sitting astride Fufu. “You sticks up there like you was welded on. Can’t no fellow with wheels manage that trick.”

“Get ready!” Retief called. Brush was stirring across the yard. A big, tall Voion rolled into view, a jewel glinting in one palp. He crossed his upper arms, propped the lower ones on what would have been hips in a vertebrate.

“You, there!” he shrilled in Tribal dialect. “This village is under arrest! Now, all of you Jackoo lie down and roll over on your backs. And if you happen to catch those out-of-town agitators under you, so much the better!”

Fufu’s oculars, plus both pairs of antennae, snapped erect. “*What* did he say?”

“He wants you to lie down and play dead,” Retief explained.

“A Jackoo lie down? He *must* be having us on,” the great creature honked. “Once a Jackoo is off his wheels, he’s—well, I shouldn’t noise

this about, but since we're allies now—"

"I know; he can't get up again."

"Well?" the Voion colonel shrilled. "You have exactly one minute to do as you're told, or my troops will fire the underbrush and burn you and your village into slag!"

"These huts of yours; they burn pretty well, don't they, Fufu?" Retief inquired.

"Well, we *do* use magnesium-bearing leaves for our roofs. They're light and easy to manage."

"What we going do now, Tiefertief?" Jik-jik demanded. "Them salesmen means business."

"They've formed up a nice envelopment all the way around position," Retief said. "And they have all the strategic advantages. That leaves it up to us to score a tactical victory."

"What them words mean?" a Ween demanded.

"They mean the Voion have us outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked—so we'll have to beat the wheels off them in a fashion they're not expecting."

"How we going do that?"

"Just be patient another ten seconds," Retief said soothingly.

The glow of approaching Jooprise was bright in the east. Abruptly the fast-moving body leaped into view, a vivid edge of greenish light that swelled into a white glare as the great disk swept upward.

Retief drew his sword, pointed it at the Voion.

"Let's go, Fufu," he said. The Jackoo leader gave a mighty honk,

and with a surge of power lunged into motion, his tribesmen at his back.

Retief could see leaves tremble on the trees ahead as the ground shook to the charge of the forty multi-ton Quoppina. For a startled moment, the colonel stood his ground. Then he backed, spun, shot into the underbrush a scant ten yards ahead of Fufu.

Retief ducked as his mighty mount thundered in among the trees. Leafy branches whipped aside with a screech and clatter of twisted metallo-wood. A polished Voion flashed into sight, gunned aside barely in time, whirled to thrust a bright lance-head at Retief, who struck it aside, heard a screech cut off abruptly as the Jackoo in line pounded across the spot where the invader had stood. More Voion were in sight ahead now, scattering before the avalanche of Jackoo. There was a loud *twang!* and a heavy arrow glanced off Retief's chest armor, whined away over his shoulder. Fufu slammed full tilt into a six-inch tree, bounced it aside as though it were a bundle of straw, veered slightly to miss a two-foot trunk, flushed a Voion who darted ahead, tripped, disappeared under Fufu's blind charge. Two Voion popped up at once, levelling lances; Retief crouched low, struck one spear aside with his sword point, saw Fufu's grubber knock the other flying.

Behind and on both sides a heavy crashing of underbrush attested to the presence of other units of Federation heavy armor charging in line

abreast. Above, leaves jingled and clanged to the passage of moving bodies. Reflected Joop-light winked from the accoutrements of half-concealed Voion.

"Whee!" Fufu hooted. "This is perfectly thrilling! I never thought I'd be charging into battle with a generalissimo sitting on me!"

"Just be sure I'm still in place when you charge out again," Retief instructed.

A portable searchlight winked on ahead, silhouetting scurrying Voion against a bluish haze as they rushed to form up a defensive line against the thunder of the approaching attackers.

"Oh, that's lovely," Fufu panted. "I can see them better now!"

The Voion ahead were dashing Nither and thither, each seemingly reluctant to hog the glory of placing himself in the path of the oncoming enemy.

"Swing to the left now," Retief called. A Voion shot across the path ahead, whirled, brought a hand-gun up as Fufu veered to slam the gunner under his wheels. Two more Voion popped up, leaped aside, gave despairing yelps as Fufu's flankers steamrolled them. Fufu was running parallel to the Voion front now, fifty feet inside the beseiging line, half a dozen yards behind a tribesfellow. Voion were racing alongside the turf-pounding line, loosing off arrows which clacked harmlessly off Jackoo armor. One shot in close, fired at Retief, who ducked, thrust with the sword, saw the Voion wobble wildly, go over, bounce high and slam into a tree.

The crashing of metallo-chitin under horny wheels was like the thundering of a heavy surf, punctuated by belated screeches of alarm as the Voion rear ranks caught glimpses of the doom rushing down at them. Spears arced up, falling as often among the Voion as among the rebellious tribesmen; blasters fired wildly, and here and there a club swung in a vain blow at a racing Quoppina. Then suddenly Fufu was through the main body, slamming past astonished rearguardsmen who gaped, dithered, fired too late.

"Swing left!" Retief called. "Maybe we can isolate this bunch!"

Now the Jackoo raced parallel to the outer fringes of a sizable detachment of the foe, cut off from the main body. Behind them, the Ween and Zilk who had made their dash trailing close along the lanes opened up by the heavyweights charged on, disappeared into the surrounding forest in hot pursuit of the demoralized main body.

Locked in a solid mass of entangled wheels, the entrapped herd cut off by the rebels battled hopelessly to retreat. Those who eluded the freight-train column and fled to the shelter of the woods seemed to disappear abruptly as soon as they reached cover.

The Voion captives were now compressed to the consistency of a single interlocked traffic jam, screeching mournfully and huddling back from the patrolling heavyweights.

"Hold it up, Fufu," Retief called. The Jackoo puffed to a halt, wheez-

ing heavily. His tribesmates following his lead, closed ranks, buzzing and humming, radiating heat like big purple boilers. The ensnared Voion squalled, drew even closer together as the mighty creatures stared at them, their sides heaving from the run. The few Planetary Police still mobile darted to and fro, then threw down their weapons and huddled against their embattled fellows. Behind Retief, the concealed combat teams emerged from the brush, snappers snapping, scythes waving.

"Fall out for a ten-minute break, gentlemen," Retief addressed his fighters. "They'll be back in a few minutes; but with about three hundred cops in our custody, we may find the opposition in a mood to talk terms."

"Tief-tief, I got to hand it to you," Jik-jik stated. "Our plan work out pretty good! Us leave a trail of wide, skinny policemen all the way back to where Jackooburg use to be!"

"Used to be?" Jackoo heads turned.

"Sure. What you think that smoke is?"

"Why—they wouldn't dare!"

"Never mind," Jik-jik said. "It wasn't much of a place anyhow. But Tief-tief—like I says, you is a credit to honorary Weenhood. Only thing I don't see is, how come you won't let us get on with breaking them Voion down into bite-size? Way they jumbled up, it take 'em six months to figure out whose wheels belongs to which."

"This bunch we've rounded up is

just a small part of the Voion army," Retief pointed out. "We'll get the maximum use from them as negotiating material. But not if they're disassembled."

"Hey, Tief-tief!" A Ween who had been posted as look-out hurried up, pointing skyward. "Some kind of flying wagon coming!"

Retief and the others watched as a foreign-made hell settled in nearby. A small undernourished-looking Voion with an oversized head lowered himself from the cockpit, unfurled a white flag and approached, moving unsteadily on wheels of which several spokes were flapping loose.

"All right, let him come. And try to remember not to remove his head before he gets here," Retief cautioned.

"You are Tief-tief the rebel commander?" the newcomer called in a curiously weak voice.

Retief looked the envoy over carefully, nodded.

"We, ah, admire your spirit," the Voion went on. "For that reason we are considering offering you a general amnesty . . ."

Retief waited.

"If, er, we could discuss the details in private?" the emissary proposed in a hoarse whisper.

Retief nodded to Jik-jik and Tupper. "Would you fellows mind stepping aside for a minute or two?"

"Okay, Tief-tief. But keep both oculars on that customer; he look to me like a slick one." They moved off a few yards.

"Go ahead," Retief said. "What's your proposition?"

The Voion was staring at him; he made a dry rasping sound. "Forgive my mirth," he hissed. "I confess I came here to salvage what I could from a debacle—but that voice—those legs . . ." The Voion's tone changed to a confident rasp: "I have just revised my terms. You will relinquish command of this rubble at once and accompany me as a prisoner to Planetary Field HQ!"

"Why," Retief inquired interestedly, "would I do that?"

"For an excellent reason. In fact, for ten excellent reasons, my dear Retief!" The Voion reached to its head, fumbled—then lifted off a hollow head-piece to reveal a pale gray face and five inquisitive eye-stalks.

"Well, General Hish of the Groaci Legation," Retief said. "You're out of your territory."

Hish fixed two pairs of eyes on Retief. "We have in our custody the person of ten Terry females, removed from a disabled vessel illegally on Voion soil," he said coldly. "They are scheduled to be shot at dawn. I offer you their lives in return for the surrender of yourself."

## IX

"**W**hen you coming back, Tief-tief?" Jik-jik inquired worriedly. "How come you going off with this here policeman in this here apparatus?"

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Retief said. "Keep up the hit and run tactics—and recruit every tribe you meet."

"To get aboard," the disguised alien said in Groaci. "To make haste to arrive before the executions."

Retief stepped into the two-man heli in which the emissary had arrived. The latter strapped in, started up, lifted from the wheel-scarred field, then turned in the seat and cocked three unoccupied eyes on Retief.

"I congratulate you on your wisdom in coming along quietly," he whispered in excellent Terran. "I of course disapprove of bloodshed, but without the compelling argument which your presence at Planetary HQ will present, I fear my protests would never have availed to preserve intact the prisoners."

"You still haven't told me what a Groaci military man is doing out here in the brush, General."

"Please—address me merely as Hish. My Voion associates know me only as a helpful civilian advisor. If my voice is to be effective in securing clemency for the captives, no complicating new elements must be introduced into the present rather fragile equation."

"For a group enjoying the services of a high-powered military advisor," Retief said, "the Planetary Army shows a surprising ignorance of the elements of warfare."

"I've only just arrived in the field today," Hish said. "As for these native levies—hopeless. But no matter. In the absence of your restraining presence your irregulars will doubtless devise a suitable disposition for them. The survivors, if any, will perhaps have learned a lesson

or two from the experience which will stand them in good stead during coming campaigns under my tutelage."

There was a heavy satchel on the floor by Retief's feet, its top gaping open. "I see you're taking a practical view of matters," Retief commented. He studied a dull-glinting shape inside the bag. "I confess I'm curious as to just what it is you Groaci expect to net from the operation."

As he spoke, he reached casually and lifted out the inert form of a two-inch Quoppina, a harsh yellow in color, remarkably heavy. Beneath it he saw another, similar trophy, this one a soft silvery color. He replaced the dead specimens.

"Shall we say—new customers?" Hish whispered, staring ahead at the jungle below.

"The prospect of opening up a new market for your usual line of hardware isn't sufficient inducement to launch a hard-headed group like yourselves on a risky adventure under the collective CDT nose."

"Ah, but perhaps the new Planetary Government, sensible of the close ties binding them to the Groaci state, will spurn continued intervention in internal affairs by reactionary Terran influences."

"Booting the Terries is part of the deal, eh? There's still something you're not being perfectly candid about, Hish. What's in it for the Groaci?"

"One must keep a few little secrets," Hish chided. "And now I must give my attention to landing. Such an awkward business, laboring

under the weight of this bulky disguise. Still, it's necessary; the rank and file of my associates seem to suffer from the sort of anti-foreign animus so typical of bucolics."

There were lights below, the dark rectangles of tents, the raw scars of hastily scraped camp streets, packed with the hurrying ant-shapes of Voion. To one side of the field headquarters, Retief saw a rank of parked Rhoon, unnaturally still as technicians crawled over them under the glare of portable polyarcs.

The heli dropped in to a bumpy landing. At once it was surrounded by Voion nervously fingering weapons. Hish replaced his headpiece, opened the hatch and scrambled out. An officious-looking Voion staff officer bustled up, gave Retief a hostile look.

"Who's this, Hish-hish?" he demanded. "Their truce representative, I suppose?"

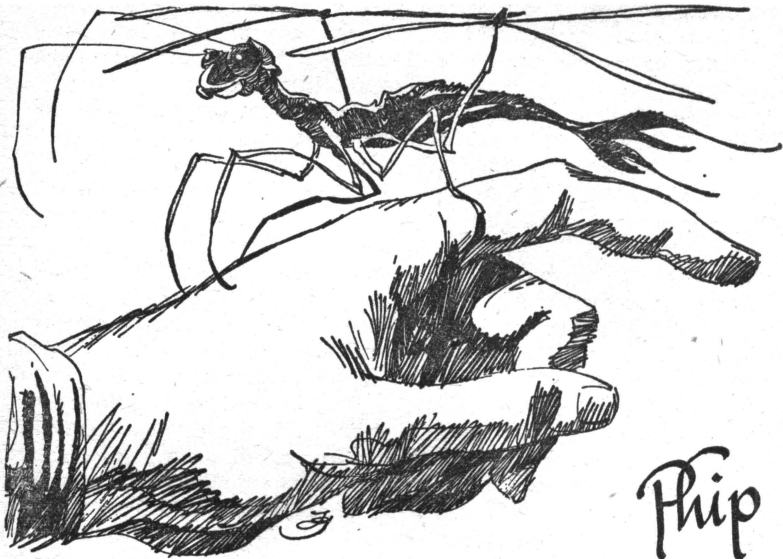
"By no means, Xic," Hish whispered in his weak Groaci voice. "Instruct your chaps to keep a sharp eye on this fellow. He's my prisoner."

"What do we want with more prisoners—and a stilter at that? I've already suffered a number of nasty dents from the legs of those Terry cows you insisted we bring in."

"Enough, Xic! I've had a trying evening."

"What did you manage in the way of truce terms? I suppose they're demanding outrageous reparations for those few trivial villages that accidentally caught on fire."

"On the contrary, they demand



Flip

nothing. I left them to their own devices. Now—”

“What about our troops? Those rabble are holding an entire brigade of highly polished soldiers immobilized out there! Why, the cost of the inlays alone—”

“The fortunes of war, my dear Major. Now, if you please, I have important matters to discuss—”

“What’s more important than salvaging my brigade?” the outraged officer shrilled. “How can I be adjutant of an organization that’s been scrapped by the enemy?”

“A neat problem in administration, sir. Possibly you could carry them on your morning report as ‘Missing in Action.’”

“Hmmm. That might work—at least until next payday. Meanwhile, why not disassemble this stilter and

get on with planning our next victory?”

“This stilter will play an important part in that happy event, Xic. He happens to be the rebel commander.”

“Him?” Xic canted his oculars alertly at Retief. “How in Quopp did you manage to capture him?”

“I have a certain skill in these matters. Bring him along now to my tent.”

“Not until the prisoners are released,” Retief said. “I want to see them put aboard a couple of helis and on their way.”

“What’s this? A prisoner dictating terms?” Xic keened.

“No matter; the wench has served their purpose. I had in mind ransoming them off for concessions from the Terry Ambassador, but the

present arrangement has a certain euphony. Go along to the stockade and see that they're released at once."

"I'll go with you," Retief said.

"You'll do as you're ordered!" Major Xic snapped. "Or I'll shorten those stilts of yours by a joint to bring you down to a more manageable size!"

"No, you won't. You'll carefully keep me intact and reasonably well-pleased with things. Hish-hish would like it that way."

"We'll indulge his fancy for the moment, Major," the Groaci hissed. "Kindly lead the way."

The Voion clacked his palps angrily and rolled off toward a stoutly palisaded enclosure looming above the lines of low tents along the company streets.

At a heavy gate made of stout logs welded together a guard produced a foot-long key. He opened a huge padlock, hauled the portal wide, then shouted to a compatriot above. Lights sprang on at the corner towers. Xic motioned a squad of Voion through, then followed, Hish close on his heels, Retief and an additional squad behind him.

There was an outcry ahead. Four Voion shrilled simultaneously, an effect not unlike the vocalizations of mating cats, though magnified. The Voion around Retief jerked up their clubs. Hish darted ahead. Retief pushed after him, came up beside the Voion officer who was waving all four arms and swiveling his oculars excitedly while the soldiers peered about the thirty-yard square

enclosure, all explaining at once.

"Where are the Terrans?" Hish whispered. "What have you done with my prisoners?"

"Quiet!" the major shrieked. He turned to Hish, assuming a nonchalant angle of the antennae.

"Too bad, Hish-hish," he said airily. "It appears they've excavated a tunnel and departed."

"It was the one with the copper-colored cranial filaments," a guard explained. "It demanded digging tools so that it and its fellows could eplivate the ratesifrans . . ."

"What's that?" Hish demanded.

"I don't know!" the major yelled. "Something to do with a tribal taboo. And if you think my boys are going to call down the wrath of the Worm—"

"Beware . . . lest you call down a more immediate ill-temper," Hish snarled. He calmed himself with a visible effort, turned on Retief. "An unexpected development. But the females appear to be free, just as you desired."

"Not exactly," Retief cut him off. "I desired to see them turned loose with a fighting chance of getting across a hundred miles of jungle and back to Ixix."

"Ah, well, life is filled with these trifling disappointments, my dear Retief. Suppose we go along to my tent now and proceed with business."

"Thanks, but I won't be able to make it," Retief said affably. "I have to be getting back to the wars."

"Be realistic, Retief," Hish urged. "My end of the bargain was ful-



filled in a rather informal manner, true, but surely you are not so naive as to imagine that detail nullifies the spirit of our agreement?" Hish asked.

Retief glanced at the looming stockade walls, the Voion ringing him in. "What spirit would that be?"

"One of cooperation," Hish purred. "I suggest we move along from these depressing surroundings now and conduct our little chat in more comfortable circumstances."

"I'm afraid you've gotten a couple of false impressions along the line somewhere," Retief said. "I just agreed to come with you. I didn't promise to do your homework for you."

"Surely the supplying of certain information was implicit in your surrender!"

"Why natter with the scoundrel?" the Voion major put in. "I have specialists on my staff who'll put him into a talking mood!"

"Don't be tiresome, Retief," Hish whispered. "I can squeeze the truth out of you; but why force me to these uncouth tactics?"

"Oh, maybe I have an idea you don't know just where I stand, and that you're a little reluctant to damage CDT property."

"What's he talking about?" the Voion demanded. "What has this to do with interloping Terries?"

"Silence!" Hish snapped. "Go busy yourself with executing the slackers responsible for the escape, or some other routine task!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the major keened. "Some head-

quarters goldbrick sent you out here to poke around and count paper clips, but if you think you can talk that way to me and get away with it—"

"Calm yourself, Major! I should dislike to employ my influence with Prime Minister Ikk to have you transferred to duty on certain other fronts!" Hish turned back to Retief. "You will now give me full particulars on rebel troop concentrations, or suffer the consequences!"

"Suppose we just jump directly along to the consequences," Retief proposed. "It will save time all around."

"As you will, then." Hish turned back to Xic. "Since your stockade has proven inadequate to requirements, what other facilities can you offer for the restraint of the prisoner?"

"Well—there's a nice little room behind post headquarters, specially built to house the officers' stimulant supply. If we ever get any. If it's good enough to keep my kleptomaniacs out of the Hellrose, it ought to keep this stilter in."

"Very well," Hish snapped. "Take him there and chain him to the wall."

The cell was a cramped, low-ceilinged chamber with damp mud walls retained by log pilings. Only the upper foot of them were above ground level. Through the narrow openings between uprights, Retief could see the muddy polyarc-lit acres of the camp stretching a hundred yards to the nearest jungle perimeter.

The crowd of Voion who had escorted him there crowded in, watching as the head jailor shook out a length of tough chain. He welded one end to a projecting stub on an ironwood corner post then approached Retief.

"Just sit quiet now, stilter," he ordered, "while I throw a loop around your neck. And no backchat, or I'll weld your mandibles shut."

"How about putting it on my left stilt instead?" Retief proposed. "That way it won't interfere with my thinking nice thoughts about you, just in case my side wins."

"Confidentially," the welder said in a low voice, "just how strong are you boys?"

"Well, let's see," Retief considered. "There are four billion Quoppina on Quopp. Subtract one million Voion, and that leaves—"

"Wow!" a gaping guard said. "That's better'n two to one, pretty near!"

"Shut up, Vop!" the warder buzzed. "Stick out that stilt, stilter!" Retief complied watched as the Voion threw two loops of stout chain around his ankle, welded the links together.

"That ought to hold you until Hish-hish gets through arguing with the major and comes down to work you over," the Voion snapped off his portable welder. "If you need anything, just yell. The exercise'll do you good."

"What time is breakfast served?" Retief inquired.

"Oh, I'll throw a couple slabs of overaged Dink in to you after a while — if I think of it." The guards

filed from the cell, taking their torches with them, the warder bringing up the rear. He looked back from the door.

"That bad?" he queried. "Four billion of youse?"

"Worse," Retief agreed solemnly. "Some of us vote twice."

## X

There was silence after the door clanked shut. Along the narrow gap between the top of the excavation and the sagging log ceiling half a dozen inquisitive Voion faces were ducked down, staring in at the dark pit. They saw nothing, so they tired of the sport and rolled off to other pastimes.

Retief picked a relatively dry spot, sat down, quickly unsnapped the leather-soled foot-covering from his chained leg, pulled off the shoe, then unbuckled the greave-like shin armor, worked it out from under the loops. A moment later his leg was free. He resumed the leg- and foot-pieces, shook out the chain and arranged a slip-noose for use in the event of sudden callers, then scouted the small room. The metal-wood posts were deep-set, six inches apart. He chipped at one with the clawed gauntlet on his right hand. It was like scratching at a fireplug. The airspace above the wall was hardly more promising; the clearance under the ceiling was no more than eight inches, and the gap between verticals hardly a foot.

A movement beyond the barrier caught Retief's eye. A pattern of glowing, greenish dots danced in the

air a few yards distant, bobbed, came closer.

"Tief-tief!" a tiny voice peeped. "Tief-tief caught-caught!"

"Well, you know my name." Something small and bright green buzzed through the opening, hovering on three-inch rotors.

"Save-save George-George," the tiny flyer said. "Tief-tief pal-pal!"

Retief held out his hand. The six-inch Quoppina—a Phip—settled on it, perched like a jeweled ornament, its head a deep-green, its short body a brilliant chartreuse with forest-green stripes, its four straw-thin legs a bright sunshine yellow.

"Phip-hip help-help," it stated in its tiny voice.

"That's a very friendly offer," Retief said. "There might be something you could do, at that. How about rounding up a couple of your friends and see if you can find a few things for me . . ."

Retief studied the six-foot-long, two-foot-deep trench he had scooped in the stiff clay of the cell floor, rimmed on one side by a low parapet heaped up from the excavated material.

"That will have to do," he said to the half dozen Phips who perched along the sill, watching the proceedings. "Old Hish will be hot-footing it down here any time now to see if durance vile has softened me up."

A last flight of Phips buzzed in through the wall openings, deposited their bean-sized contributions in the small heaps laid out on a mat of leaves flown in for the purpose.

"All-all," one hummed. "Gone-gone."

"That's all right," Retief assured the small creature. "I've got enough now." He lifted a wide leaf heaped with shredded bark selected by the Phips for its high cellulose content, placed it beside the fox-hole. "Somebody give me a light," he called.

A Phip settled in, struck its rear legs together with a sound like a file on glass. At the third try a spark jumped. Retief blew gently on it, watched as the fuel glowed, burst into a bright green flame. He covered the small blaze with another broad leaf; yellowish smoke boiled out. He held the damper in place until the low-oxygen combustion was complete, then lifted it to reveal a double handful of black residue.

"That ought to do the job; now let's prepare the rest of the ingredients."

He picked up a rough-surfaced slab of ironwood previously split off a post, began grating sour-balls into a fine powder.

Half an hour later, Retief packed the last pinch of the finely divided mixture into the container he had improvised from nicklewood leaves, carefully wrapped with lengths of tough wire-vine. He crimped down the top, inserted a fuse made from a strip of shirt-sleeve impregnated with the home-made gunpowder.

"Now, when I give the word, light it off," he instructed the hovering Phips. "Just one of you. The rest will have to stand back at a good distance. And as soon as it's lit—

head for the tall timber. Fast. Don't wait around to see what happens."

"Kay-kay, Tief-tief," a Phip chirped. "Now-now?"

"In just a minute." He hefted the bomb. "A good pound and a half; that ought to have a salutary effect." He placed the rude package on the ledge against an upright, pressed it firmly in position, then packed clay around it, leaving the fuse clear.

"That's it," he said. He stepped into the trench, settled himself face down.

"Light it off, fellows. And don't forget to hightail it."

There was the busy humming of small rotors, then a harsh rasping as the selected Phip struck a spark. A brief sputtering followed, accompanied by the hasty whine of the departing Phip, then silence.

Retief waited. He sniffed. Was there a faint odor of burning rag?"

The *boom!* lifted Retief bodily, slammed him back against the floor of his retreat under an avalanche of mud and screaming wood fragments. He thrust himself clear, spat dirt, his head ringing like a giant gong. There was a harsh stink of chemicals, a taste in his mouth like charred sneakers. Cool air blew from a gaping cavern where the wall had been. A timber sagged from above it, and he could see smoke swirling in a room littered with shattered lumber. A Phip buzzed close. "Fun-fun," it shrilled. "Gain-gain!"

"Some other time," Retief said blurrily. "And remind me to use smaller amounts."

He ducked under the fallen ceil-

ing beams, went up the blast-gouged slope, emerged into the open. Voion shot past him, inaudible in the shrill ringing in Retief's ears. Out of the smoke haze, the slight figure of General Hish appeared, arms waving.

Retief straight-armed the Groaci, saw him go end over end, one artificial wheel bouncing free to go rolling off into the brush. He sprinted, dodged a pair of Voion who belatedly skittered into his path and plunged into the dark wall of the Jungie.

## XI

The trail left by the fleeing prisoners was not difficult to follow. Bits of lacy cloth, dropped handkerchiefs, candy wrappers, and the deep prints of spike heels served to indicate their direction of flight as plainly as a set of hand-painted sign-posts.

The girls had pushed through dense thickets for a hundred yards, then encountered a well-defined trail leading in an approximately westward direction. It was now after Second Jooprise, and Retief moved along in multi-colored gloom beneath towering trees of a thousand varieties, each bearing metal-bright leaves in gay tones, which rustled and tinkled, clashing with soft musical notes as the arching branches stirred to the wind.

Half an hour's walk brought him to a stream of clear water bubbling over a shallow, sandy bottom bright with vivid-colored pebbles. Small aquatic Quoppina the size of Phips

darted to and fro in the sun-dappled water, propelled by rotating members modified by evolutionary processes into twin screws astern.

The water looked tempting. Retief hung his sword on a convenient branch, lifted off the helmet he had been wearing for the past eighteen hours, unstrapped the leather side-buckles and shed the chest and back armor. Then he splashed into the stream and dashed cold water over his face and arms. Back on shore, he settled himself under a mauve-barked tree and took out one of the concentrated food-bars Ibbl had provided.

From above, a plaintive keening sounded. Retief looked up into the tree, saw something move in the Jooplight striking down through branches and glittering dark foliage. — a flash of vivid purple among the blackish-red leaves. There was a second movement, lower down. Retief made out the almost invisible form of a wiry, slender Quoppina, gorgeous violet where the light struck him, decorated with white-edged purple rosettes, a perfect camouflage in the light-mottled foliage.

The creature hung motionless, wailing softly.

Retief jumped, caught a branch, pulled himself up, then climbed higher, avoiding the knife-edged leaves. From a position astride a stout limb twenty feet up, he could make out the cleverly concealed lines of a narrow-mesh net in which the captive — a Flink, Retief saw — hung, a tangle of purple limbs, twisted ropes, and anxiously canted oculars.

"What happened, fellow? Pull the

wrong string and catch yourself?"

"I'm laughing," the Flink said glumly, in a high, thin voice.

"So go ahead, gloat," a second Flink voice called from above. "Rub it in."

"Just a minute and I'll cut you down," Retief offered.

"Hey, me first!" the upper Flink called. "It was him started the trouble, remember? Me, I'm a peaceful Flink, bothering nobody —"

"It's a different stilter, you low-life," the nearer Flink called hastily. "This ain't the one from before."

"Oh, you've seen other stilters around?" Retief inquired.

"Maybe. You know how it is. You meet all kinds of people."

"You're not being completely candid, I'm afraid. Come on — give."

"Look," the Flink said. "Such a crick I've got: How about cutting me down first and we'll chat after?"

"*He's* got a crick," the other Flink shrilled hoarsely. "Ha. In *his* lousy net I'm hanging! Six cricks I've got, all worse than his!"

"You think this noose is maybe comfortable?" the first came back hotly. "Rope burns I'm getting —"

"Let's compare notes later," Retief interrupted. "Which way did the stilters go?"

"You look like a nice, kind sort of stilter," the nearest Flink said, holding his oculars on Retief as he swung in a gentle arc past him. "Let me down and I'll try to help you out with your problem. I mean, in such a position, who could talk?"

# Jackoo



"Cut him down, and he's gone like a flash," the other called. "Now, I happen to like your looks, so I'll tell you what I'll do —"

"Don't listen," the roped Flink said in a confidential tone. "Look at him! And he claims to be number one tribal woodsman, yet. Some woodsman!"

"A woodsman like you I shouldn't be, even without you was hanging in my noose," the other countered. "Take it from me, Stilter, Ozzl's the biggest liar in the tribe, and believe me, competition he's got!"

"Fellows, I'm afraid I can't stay for a conference after all," Retief cut in. "Sorry to leave you hanging around in bad company, but —"

"Hold it!" the Flink called Ozzl screeched. "I've thought it over and I've decided: A nice fellow like you

I want my family to meet —"

"Don't trust him! I'll tell you what. Get me out of this lousy rope, and I'm your Flink."

"You expect this stilter — such a fine-looking Quopp — he should believe that? As soon as I'm loose, everything I own is his!"

"So what'll he do with a pile of empties? My deal is better, believe me, Mister. You and me, such a talk we'll have, you wouldn't believe —"

"You're right; he wouldn't. Him and me, together a long chat we'll have —"

There was a flash of green, a sharp humming.

The Phip was back, hovering before Retief's face.

"Tief-tief flip-flip," it chirped. "Flip-flip Flink-flink!"

"Don't listen!" Ozzl screeched. "What does this midget know?"

"Flip-flip Flink-flink!"

"Hmmm. I seem to remember hearing somewhere that a Flink's word is good as long as he's standing on his head," Retief mused. "Thanks, partner." He gripped Ozzl's lower arms—in his species specialized as landing gear—and inverted the captive tree-dweller.

"If I cut you down, will you tell me where the stilts are?"

"Okay, okay, you got me," the Flink chirped glumly. "Cut me down and the whole miserable story I'll give you."

Retief extracted a similar promise from the second Flink.

"Look out, now," the latter cautioned. "All around is nets."

Retief made out the cleverly concealed lines of other nets and nooses, some small, some large enough to gather in a fair-sized Quoppina.

"Thanks for the warning," Retief said. "I might have walked right in to one of those."

Five minutes later both captives had been lowered to the ground and cut free. They sprawled, groaning, working their arms and experimentally revving up their rotating members—small pulley-like wheels which they customarily hooked over vines or branches for fast travel.

"Well," Ozzl sighed. "Me and Nopl, first class trappers we're supposed to be. Such a picture, the two of us in our own ropes hung up!"

"Nothing's busted," Nopl said. "Boy, such an experience!"

"Don't stall, gentlemen," Retief said. "The time has come to tell all. Where did you see the sitters, how long ago, and which way did they go when they left?"

"A promise is a promise. But listen—you won't tell, okay?"

"I won't tell."

Ozzl sighed. "All right. It was this way . . ."

“So I turn around, and zsktt! The stilter the others called Fi-fi pulls the trip wire. Such a dummy I was to explain it. And there I am, downside up. It was humiliating!”

"Under the circumstances, a little humility seems appropriate," Retief suggested. "And after the stilter tricked you into your own net, what then?"

"Then the two-timer cuts down the rest of the stilts. And off they go thataway." Ozzl pointed.

"Yeah," the other Flink said aggrievedly. "So there we hung until you come along. And all because we try to be polite and show that stilter how the nets work, such an interest it was expressing."

Retief nodded sympathetically. "We stilts are a tricky lot, especially when anybody tries to violate our tribal taboo against being eaten. And on that note I really must leave you."

"What's the rush?" Nopl demanded. "Stick around a while; a little philosophy we'll kick around."

"What about a drink, fellows?" Ozzl proposed. He took a hip-flask from the flat pouch strapped to his lean flank, quaffed deeply, rose to

his full three foot six, flexed his arms. "A new Quopp that'll make out of you," he announced and passed the bottle to Retief.

He took a swallow. Like all Quoppina liquors, it was thin, delicately flavored, resembling dilute honey. He passed the flask to Nopl, who drank and then offered sulphurous sourballs which Retief declined.

"They're a good two hours ahead of me," he said. "I have to make up some time."

The Phip was back, buzzing around Retief's head.

"Tief-tief," the Phip hummed. "Nip-nip!"

"Sure, give the little stool-pigeon a shot." Nopl offered. "Whoopee! Life is just a bowl of snik-berries!"

"My pal, Tief-tief!" Ozzl slung one long, pulley-wheeled member across the lower portion of Retief's back in comradely fashion. "You're a shrewd dealer for a . . . a . . . whatever kind of Quoppina you are!"

Nopl took another pull at the flask. "Tief-tief, you should meet the crowd," he shrilled cheerfully. "A swell bunch, am I right, Ozzl?"

"Such a swell bunch, I'm crying," the Flink replied. "When I think what a swell bunch they are I wonder, what did I do to deserve it?"

"They're a lousy crowd teetotaling small-timers, but so what?" Nopl caroled. "Tief-tief they should meet."

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

Ozzl made a noise like a broken connecting rod, the Flink expression of suppressed merriment. "Guess again, Tief-tief," he carolled, and

waved a wheeled member in an all-encompassing gesture. "Meet the boys!"

Retief glanced upward. From behind every leafy branch and vine-shrouded shrub, a purple Quoppina materialized, a rope or net in hand, a few nocking arrows to small bows, one or two armed with long, flexible tridents.

"About time," Nopl said and hiccupped. "I thought you boys would never show!"

Retief stood in the center of the patch of open, Jooplit sward beneath the big tree from which a hundred silent Flink hung like grotesque fruits. An overweight Flink with the wine-purple carapace of mature age tilted myopic oculars at him. "These two loafers I send out, they should check the traps, and with a drinking buddy they come reeling back," he commented bitterly.

"Who's reeling? Am I reeling? Look at me," Ozzl invited.

"What about the stilter?" someone called. "He looks like prime stock. With a cheese sauce, maybe he should be served."

"My pal, Tief-tief, nobody cuts up! First I'll drop dead!"

"This I could arrange," the older cut him off. "Now, if we slice up this stilter, a snack for everybody he'll make."

"Stop right there," Nobl shrilled. "A businessman like Tief-tief we couldn't eat! Cannibalism, it would be! Instead, we'll truss him up and sell him. Or maybe disassemble him for spares."



Cries rang back and forth as the Flink discussed the various proposals.

"Such a head I've got," Nopl groaned during a momentary lull. "I think I need another little snort."

"That booze of your works fast," Retief commented. "You got through the buzz and into the hangover stage in record time."

"Hung over or no, Ozzl and me will stick by you, Tief-tief. If they vote to sell you, I'll put in a good word we should hold out for top price."

"Marked down you'll not be while I'm around," Ozzl agreed.

The elderly Flink emitted a shrill cry for silence.

"The pros and cons we've discussed," he announced. "It looks like the cons have it." A rustle ran through the Flink ranks. The encircling tribesmen moved in closer, shaking out nets and ropes as they maneuvered for favorable positions. Retief drew his sword, stepped back against the nearest tree-trunk.

"Hey," the oldster called. "What's that sharp thing? It looks dangerous. Put it away before somebody gets hurt."

"It's an old tribal custom among us stilters that we make owning us as expensive as possible," Retief explained. "Who's going to be first to open an account?"

"It figures," the elder said judiciously. "Price supports, yet."

"Still, we try to be reasonable," Retief amplified. "I doubt if I'll disassemble more than a dozen Flink before you get a rope on me."

"Six," the Flink said flatly. "That's my top offer."

"I'm afraid we're not going to be able to get together," Retief said. "Maybe we'd better call off the whole deal."

"He's right," someone stated. "Worth twelve Flink, including maybe me, he's not."

Retief started forward, swinging the sword loosely. "Just step back, gentlemen," he suggested. "I have important business to transact, and no time to continue this delightful discussion."

A noose whirled at him; he spun, slashed; the severed line dropped to the ground.

"Hey! That's expensive rope you're cutting!" someone protested, hauling in the damaged lariat.

"Let him go," another suggested.

"What's that?" the elder shrilled. "You want I should let valuable merchandise go stiling right out of sight?"

"Listen, Tief-tief," Ozzl called. "There's only the one trail, and it leads straight to the rockspire. Now, with us, you get sold for parts, so okay, there you are. But you climb up there and a Rhoon picks you up and flies off — then where are you?"

"Did you say Rhoon?" Retief inquired.

"On top of the rock spire they're thick like Phips on a jelly flower. A chance you haven't got!"

"Still, I think I'll risk it," Retief said. He moved toward the trail and two Flink rushed in, nets ready.

He knocked them spinning, dodged two nets and a lasso, leaped for the dark tunnel of the trail and ran for

it with a horde of Flink baying in hot pursuit.

## XII

Later, on a rocky slope a hundred yards above the tops of the thick jungle growth below, Retief pulled himself up onto a flat boulder. He turned and looked down at the Flink tribe clustered below, staring up and shaking fists.

"Dirty pool, Tief-tief!" Ozzl yelled. "This kind terrain our wheels ain't meant for."

"Thanks for escorting me this far," Retief called. "I'll find my way from here."

"Sure." The Flink waved a member at the steep escarpments rising above. "Just keep climbing. The Rhoon roost is only about a mile — straight up. If you don't fall off and get killed, the Rhoon you'll find after a while. Or they'll find you." He clicked his antennae in the gesture of Sentimental Farewell. "You were a good drinking buddy."

Retief scanned the slope above; he had a stiff climb ahead. He lifted off his helmet, pulled off the gauntlets, slung them by a thong to his belt. He shook his canteen; nearly empty. He took a last look at the valley and started up the almost vertical slope.

It was an hour after dawn when Retief reached a narrow ledge a thousand feet above the Jungle valley below. The wind whistled here, unimpeded by Quoppian flora. In the distance, a pair of white flyers of medium size wheeled and dipped

under the ominous sky of approaching First Eclipse, where the fire-edged disc of Joop rushed to its rendezvous with the glaring Quopp sun. Far above, a mere speck in the dark blue sky, a lone Rhoon circled the towering peak where the giant flyers nested.

Retief studied the rock-face above. It was a smooth expanse of black slate-like stone rising sheer from the ledge. The route upward, it appeared, ended here and the Flink waited below.

One of the white aerialists was dropping lower, coming in to look over the intruder. Retief donned his head-piece, shifted his sword hilt to a convenient angle, waited for the visitor. He could hear the beat of its rotors now, see the pale coral markings along the underside of the body, the black legs folded against the chest region, the inquisitive oculars, canted to look him over.

"What seek you here upon the wind-slopes, groundling?" a thin voice called down to him, tattered by the gusty breeze. "There's naught for your kind here but unforgiving rock-spires and the deep, cold air."

"They say the Rhoon have their nests up there," Retief called.

"That do they. Up a-high, where low clouds scrape their bellies and death-blooms grow amid the moss as black as night."

The flying creature dropped closer; the slipstream from its ten-foot rotors battered at Retief, whirling dust into his face. He gripped the rock, braced his feet apart.

"Aiiii!" the flyer called. "If a

zephyr from my passing can come nigh to spill you from your perch, how will you fare when some great lordling of the Rhoon comes like a cyclone to attend you here?"

"I'll work on that one when I get to it," Retief shouted over the tumult.

"If you've come to steal my eggs, you've picked a lonely death."

"Is there any other kind?"

The flyer settled lower, reached out and gripped a buttress of rock with black talons; its rotors whined to a stop.

"Perhaps you've tired of life, chained to the world, and you've come here to launch yourself into one glorious taste of flight," it hazarded.

"Just paying a social call," Retief assured the creature. "But I seem to have run out of highway. You wouldn't happen to know an easier route up?"

"A social call? I see you wish a braver death than a mere tumble to the rocks."

"I'd like to sample the view from the top. I hear it's very impressive."

"The view of raging Rhoonhood stopping to defend a nest is said to be the fearsomest on Quopp," the flyer agreed. "However, few eyewitness tales of the experience are told."

Retief studied the creature's rotors, spinning slowly as the wind sighed over the thin, curved blades.

"How much weight can you lift?" he inquired.

"I once plucked up a full-grown

Flink and dropped him in the river yonder," the flyer motioned with one limber arm. "I doubt if he'll come thieving 'round my nest again."

"I weigh more than a Flink," Retief pointed out.

"No matter that. You'd fall as fast as any Flink, and make a better splash."

"I'll bet you can't lift me," Retief challenged. The flyer revved its rotors, shifting its grip on its perch.

"Most groundlings plead for life when once I catch them on the rockspires. Now you invite my wrath."

"Oh, no. I'm just talking about flying me up there!" Retief pointed to the peaks towering above.

"Fly you . . .?"

"Sure. I can't walk up a vertical wall, and it wouldn't be convenient to go down and look for another route."

"Can you be serious, poor earthbound grub? Would you indeed trust life and limb to me?"

"Most Quoppina will keep their word to a harmless stranger. Why should you be any different?"

"A curious rationale," the flyer said. "And yet, withal, a most refreshing one. I'd come to think of crawlers all as timid things, who cling and whimper out their fear when I come on them here among the lonely peaks. And now here's one who speaks as boldly as a flyer born!"

"Just put me down anywhere in climbing range of Rhoon country," Retief suggested.

"A strange anomaly is this! A wingless one who dares to come among the masters of the sky!" The

flyer whirled its rotors, lifted, drifted, hovering toward Retief. "I'll put you to the test then, groundling! Perhaps you'll weight me down, and then together we'll go tumbling toward our death below. But if my rotors hold, I'll bear you up—my life upon it!"

"Fair enough." Retief sheathed his sword, squinting against the down-blast of air. He reached for the steel-hard grapples of the flyer, gripped, held on.

Air screamed as the whirling blades raced, biting for purchase. Then he was lifting, floating up, wind screaming past his face, the mountainside dwindling away below.

The flying creature rose swiftly for a hundred feet; then it slowed, gained another fifty feet, inched upward, its rotors laboring now.

A gust of wind tilted it, and it dropped, then righted itself, struggled upward again, paralleling the smooth face of rock at a distance of thirty feet, Retief estimated. A small white flower growing from a crevice caught his eye. Slowly it dropped below him as the flyer gained altitude foot by foot. Above, Retief could see a tiny ledge where the vertical face ended, and above it a long sweep, only slightly less steep, to a lone spire thrusting up another five hundred feet against the darkening sky.

"How say you, groundling?" the laboring flyer's voice rang out. "Will you trust me to press on, or shall I give it up and place you safe below?"



"Just a little way now," Retief called. "You can do it, old timer."

"I like the groundling's spirit, wings or no!" the Quoppina shouted into the wind. "We'll hazard all . . . and win or die . . . and none can say we quailed before the test!"

"You'd better save your wind for flying," Retief called. "We'll stage a self-congratulation session after we get there."

The wind whipped, buffeting. The cliff face moved past with agonizing slowness.

Retief's hands were numb from the strain; the ledge was still twenty feet above, inching closer. The Quoppina's breathing was loud, wheezing. The sound of the rotors had changed timbre. They seemed to flutter now, as though the blades were loose. Then another sound was audible—a sharp whirring, coming closer . . .

Retief twisted his head. A second flying Quoppina had come up from the port beam. It hovered, studying the situation with alert oculars.

"That one's too big to eat, Gulin-da!" it called. "I'll wager he's as tough as Wumblum wheel-rim!"

"I'll place him . . . safe above . . . or die . . ." Retief's flyer got out.

"Ah—then it's a wager! Well, I suggest you waste no time. A Rhoon has seen you now, and half a minute hence he'll be here."

Retief's flyer grunted a reply, settled down to steady pulling. Ten feet more, five, three . . .

There was a deep thrumming, a beat of wind that bounced the flyer closer to the cliff-face. Retief craned, saw the huge-bodied shape of a

fast-descending Rhoon silhouetted against the vast, glittering disks of its spinning rotors.

With a final, gear-screaming effort, the smaller flyer surged upward the final yard, banked toward the ledge. "Farewell!" it screamed. Retief dropped, slammed stony ground, fetched up against the rising wall above as the Rhoon pounced, missing, its fanged eating-jaws wide.

Retief rolled away as the Rhoon struck out with a barbed hind leg, missed and struck again, sent stone chips flying. A narrow crevice split the rock a yard distant; Retief dived for it, wedged himself in just as the disk of Joop cut off the blackish sunlight like a snapped switch. Long Rhoon talons raked against the rock, sending a shower of bright sparks glimmering against the sudden dark. Then, with a hoarse scream, the Rhoon lifted away; the beat of its rotors faded.

Retief leaned back in his cramped refuge, let out his breath with a long sigh, alone now with the stars that twinkled in the false night of the eclipse and the moaning wind that searched among the rock crannies.

Retief rested while Joop edged across the bright corona of the distant sun; the glowing halo bulged, then burst into full light as the transit was completed.

He scanned the sky. A pair of Rhoon circled far above, light flicking from their rotors. He squeezed out of his hideaway, looked over the edge of the two-foot shelf on which he stood.

Far below, the ledge from which

he had hitched the ride to his present position showed as a thin line against vertical rock. And far below that, the Jungle stretched like a varicolored carpet across low hills to distant haze.

He looked up. Striated rock loomed, topped by a rock spire that thrust up like a knife blade a final hundred feet. Retief turned back to the cranny in which he had hidden.

It narrowed sharply into darkness — but a steady flow of cold air funnelled from it. He went to hands and knees, pushed through the first narrowing, found that the passage widened slightly. Above, the sky was a bright blue line between the rising walls of rock. He rose, crunching brittle debris underfoot, braced his back against one face of the chimney, started upward . . .

Halfway up, Retief found an out-thrust shoulder of rock on which to rest. He ate half a food-bar, took a swallow of water — the last in his canteen. Then he went on.

Once the cleft narrowed, then widened out into a near-cave, from which a cloud of tiny gray-black Quoppina no bigger than hummingbirds swarmed in alarm, battering at his face and uttering supersonic cries. Again, the black shadow of a Rhoon swept across the strip of sky above, momentarily blanking out the meager light. The armor chafed, cutting into his back; his hands were cut in a dozen places from the sharp-edged rock.

The crevasse widened again ten feet from the top. Retief made the last few yards in a scramble up a deeply scored slope half-choked with

weathered and faded fragments of Quoppina exoskeleton and sun-bleached organic gears looped by tangles of corroded internal wiring.

The Rhoon, it appeared, were messy eaters.

Keeping in black shadow, Retief studied the open sky. A thousand feet above, two Rhoon wheeled lazily, unaware of the intruder in their domain. He stood, dusted himself off, looked around at an oval platform fifteen by twenty feet, backed at one side by a spear of rock that rose ten feet to a needle point, edged on the remainder of its periphery by a void that yawned across to a stupendous view of high, lonely peaks, only a few of which topped his present vantage point. Closer at hand, a heap of round boulders caught his eye: Butter-yellow spheres eighteen inches in diameter. He went to them, tapped the smooth surface of one; it gave off a hollow, metallic bong. There were six of them — Rhoon eggs, piled here to hatch in the sun.

Retief glanced toward the monster parents circling above, still apparently serenely ignorant of his presence.

The big eggs were heavy, unwieldy in their lopsidedness. He lifted down the topmost spheroid, rolled it across to the cliff's edge, propped it, delicately poised, just above the brink. The next two eggs he ranged beside the first. Two more eggs formed a short second rank, with the final orb positioned atop the others. Retief dusted his hands, resumed the helmet and gauntlets he had laid aside earlier, then posted

himself squarely before the gargantuan Easter display and settled down to wait.

### XIII

A cold wind whipped down from the deep blue sky. Retief watched the mighty Rhoon elders wheeling in the distance, tireless as the wind—a description which, he reflected, did not apply equally to himself.

Half an hour passed. Retief watched the high white clouds that marched past like gunboats hurrying to distant battles. He shifted to a more comfortable position leaning against a convenient boulder, closed his eyes against the brightness of the sky...

A rhythmic, thudding whistle brought him suddenly wide awake.

A hundred feet above, an immense Rhoon swelled visibly as it dropped to the attack, its giant rotors hammering a tornado of air down at him, swirling up dust in a choking cloud. The Rhoon's four legs were extended, the three-foot-long slashing talons glinting like blue steel in the sunlight, the open biting jaws looking wide enough to swallow an Ambassador at one gulp.

Retief braced himself, both hands on the topmost of the pyramid of eggs as the flying behemoth darkened the sun.

At the last possible instant the Rhoon veered off, shot past the peak like a runaway air-liner, leaving a thin shriek trailing in the air behind it. Retief turned, saw it mount up into view again, its thirty-foot propellers flexing under the massive

acceleration pressures. It swung in to hover scant yards away.

"Who comes to steal Gerthudion's eggs?" the great creature screamed.

"I want a word with you," Retief called. "The egg arrangement is just a conversation piece."

"High have you crept to reach my nest, and slow was your progress," the Rhoon steam-whistled. "I promise you a quicker return passage!" It edged closer.

"Careful with that draft," Retief cautioned. "I feel a sneeze coming on. I'd hate to accidentally nudge your future family over the edge."

"Stand back, egg-napper! If even one of my darlings falls, I'll impale you on a rock-spike to dry in the sun!"

"I propose a truce. You restrain your violent impulses, and I'll see to it no accidents happen to the eggs."

"You threaten me, impudent mite? You'd bribe me with my own precious Rhoonlets?"

"I sincerely hope so. If you'll just perch somewhere, I'll tell you what it's all about."

"Some reason must there be for such madness under the morning sun! To hear the why of it, I confess I'm curious!" The Rhoon mother swung across the platform, settled in at the far edge in a flurry of dust, clinging to the rock with four jointed legs like lengths of polished gray pipe. Her yard-long head reared up a full fifteen feet to stare down at Retief, the shadows of her rotors flicking across her horny features as the blades slowed to a leisurely wind-driven twirl.

"Mind you don't twitch now, and send what remains of your short future tumbling down into the abyss," the huge flyer admonished in a voice that boomed like a pipe organ. "Now, tell me. Why chose you this peculiar means of dying?"

"Dying isn't exactly what I had in mind," Retief corrected. "I'm looking for a party of Terrans. Stilfers, somewhat exactly like me, you know."

"And you think to find them here?"

"Not exactly; but I have an idea you can help me find them."

"I, Gerthudion, lend aid to the trivial enterprises of a planet-bound mite? The thin air of the steeps has addled your wits!"

"Still, I predict you'll take an interest before long."

The Rhoon edged closer, stretching its neck. "Your time grows short, daft groundling," she rumbled. "Now tell me what prompts you to dare such insolence!"

"I don't suppose you've been following recent political developments down below?" Retief hazarded.

"What cares Gerthudion for such?" the Rhoon boomed. "Wide are the skies and long the thoughts of the Rhoonfolk —"

"Uh-huh. I'm a long-thought fan myself," Retief put in. "However, a brand of mite called the Voion have been cutting a lot of people's thinking off short lately."

"How could any petty dirt-creeper cut short the thoughts of a free-born Rhoon?"

"I'll get to that in a minute," Re-

tief promised. "Is it true that you Rhoon have keen eyesight?"

"Keen is our vision, and long our gaze."

"And your wind's not bad, either. Too bad you're too big for a career in diplomacy; you could keep a round of peace talks going for a record run. Now, tell me, Gertie, have you noticed the smoke columns rising from the forest over there to the north?"

"That I have," the Rhoon snapped. "And lucky for you my eggs you're embracing, else I'd tumble you over the edge for your impertinence."

"Those are tribal villages burning. The Voion are setting out to take over the planet. They have very specific ideas of what constitutes a desirable citizen. No Quoppina who isn't a Voion seems to qualify."

"Get to the point!"

"You Rhoon, not being Voion, are going to have to join the fight."

"A curious fancy, that!" the Rhoon bassooned. "As though the lofty Rhoon-folk would stoop to such petty enterprise!"

"I wonder if that keen vision of yours has detected the presence of a number of Rhoon cruising around at tree-top level over the jungle in the last few days?"

"Those did I note, and wondered at it," the Rhoon conceded. "But a Rhoon flies where he will."

"Does he?" Retief countered. "Those particular Rhoon are flying where the Voion will."

"Nonsense! A Rhoon, servant to a creeping mite who'd not a goodly swallow make?"



"They have at least two squadrons of Rhoon in service now. And unless someone changes their plans for them, there'll be more recruits in the very near future. You, for example."

"Gerthudion, slave to a verminous crawler on the floor of the world?" The Rhoon spun its wide rotor with an ominous buzzing sound. "Not while I live!"

"Exactly," Retief said.

"What mean you?" the Rhoon croaked. "What mad talk is this?"

"Those Rhoon the Voion are using are all dead," Retief said flatly. "The Voion killed them and they're riding around on their corpses."

Gerthudion squatted on folded legs, her stilled rotor canted at non-aeronautical angles.

"This talk makes no sense," she tubaed. "Dead Rhoon, their innards to replace with wires imported from a factory on another world? Power cells instead of stomachs? Usurping Voion strapped into saddles in place of honest Rhoonish brains?"

"That's about it. You Quoppina all have organo-electronic interiors, and there's enough metal in your makeup to simplify spot welding the necessary replacement components in position. A nuclear pack the size of a fat man's lunch will supply enough power to run even those king-size rotors of yours for a year. I didn't have time to examine the dead Rhoon I saw in detail, but I'd guess they've even rigged the oculars to a cockpit display screen to take advantage of your natural vision. Riding their zombies, the Voion can

probably fly higher and faster than you can."

"They'd dare?" the Rhoon burst out, vibrating her posterior antennae in the universal gesture of Propriety Outraged. "Our airy realm to usurp? Our very members to employ? Aunt Vulugulei! For a week her dainty tonnage I've not seen; could it be...?"

"Quite possibly she's been fitted out with a windshield and rudder pedals," Retief nodded. "And some shined-up Voion's probably sitting where her main reactor used to be, carving his initials on her side and revving her rotors—"

"Enough! No more!" The Rhoon wagged her oculars in a dizzying pattern. She rose, creaking, on legs quivering with emotion, started her rotors up. "I'm off, my fellow Rhoon to consult," she called over the rising tumult of air. "If what you say is true—and I've a horrid feeling it is—we'll join in, these ghouls to destroy!"

"I had an idea you'd see it that way, Gertie. And don't forget to ask if any of them have seen a party of stilts in the Jungle."

"Inquire I will; meantime, my eggs from that precarious edge withdraw. If one should slip, your ragtag horde will lack a leader!" In a hail-storm of blown pebbles, the Rhoon leaped off, beating her way eastward toward a cluster of tall peaks.

Retief turned at the sound of a loud *scrongg!*—like a sheet-metal roof being lifted off a shed by a high wind. The heap of eggs quiv-

ered. The ripping noise came again; a gleaming spike poked out through the polished curve of the center spheroid in the bottom row, ripped a foot-long tear.

An ungainly shape thrust through the opening—a head like a chrom-alloy pick-axe equipped with a pair of alert eyes which fixed on Retief. The beak opened.

“Quopp!” the fledgling Rhoon squalled. “Quopppp!”

It struggled frantically, snapping the impressive jaws, lined, Retief noted, with a row of triangular razors. A clawed leg appeared, gained the newcomer another six inches of freedom. As the broached egg rocked, those above trembled, then toppled—inside the nest!—with a crash like spilled milk cans.

One, badly dented, bounced to a stop at Retief’s feet. A six-inch split opened to reveal a second baby face, complete with meat shredders. The first Rhoonlet gave a final kick, sprawled free of the shell, which skidded across the platform, driven by the wind, disappeared over the side. A third egg gave a jump. A bright needle-point punctured its side.

The first of the newborn Rhoon was unsteadily on its feet now, trying out six short, unspecialized limbs, claw-tipped, the rear pair showing only knobby buds where later the rotating members would develop—a form not unlike the ten-million-year remote ancestor of all the Quopp tribes. The hatchling wobbled, steadied, then charged, jaws gaping. Retief side-stepped, noting that infant number two was now

half clear of his prison, while number three was surveying the scene with interested eyes. Dull clunks and clangs attested to activity within the other three eggs.

The eldest infant managed to halt its rush just short of the cliff-edge, teetered for a moment staring down into the awesome depths over which it would soar later in life, and backed away, hissing. Then it remembered lunch and rushed Retief again in time to collide with younger brother, freshly on the scene.

While the two tangled, squalling, Retief hastily maneuvered half a dozen scattered rocks in place to form a rude barricade, stationed himself behind it. The argument ended as a third young appetite shot past the combatants, zeroing in on the free lunch. The trio hit the barrier with a metallic crash, rebounded, came on again. And now there were four.

The beat of heavy rotors sounded above. Gerthudion, flanked by two immense males, distinguished by gold and red cranial plumes, dropped in with a tornado of air that sent her young slithering and squawking across the rocky platform—and over the edge.

“Hey!” Retief called. “Your kids!”

The Rhoon settled in. “That’s all right; obnoxious creatures, those. It’s only the eggs I’m concerned about, their hatching to insure. Anyway, they’ll be all right. It’s good experience. As for the call to war, we’re with you—”

A small head appeared over the edge; scabbling claws pulled a hun-

gry Rhoonlet up, the others close behind. Retief stepped to the giant parent, scaled the massive side and straddled the back just behind the head.

"Let's get moving," he called over the pound of idling rotors. "I'm beginning to share your view of the younger generation."

"As for your Terries," Gerthudion honked, "Lundelia reports he's seen such a group as you describe near the village of the Herpp, a few miles west."

"Then just drop me off there, if you don't mind."

The Rhoon leaped into the air, the backwash from her pounding rotors a howling typhoon.

"I'll take you there," she boomed over the uproar. "Then thereafter you'll guide me to these ghoulish Voion, my vengeance to wreak!"

**I**t was a swift flight from the chill altitudes of the rock spires down across rolling jungle to the bend of the river, where the pinkish copperwood huts of the Herpp nestled in the shelter of the trees.

Gerthudion settled in to a bouncy landing on a sand spit where there was clearance for her rotors. Retief slid down, settled his sword belt into position for a quick draw, scanning the silent village with its neat wheelways, orderly flower beds and colorful awnings.

"Nobody in sight, Gerti. I think the inhabitants beat a hasty retreat when they saw you coming."

"Or mayhap they crouch behind their door-posts with drawn bows," the flyer suggested.

"Yeah, mayhap. I guess there's just one way to find out." He walked across the sand, climbed a grassy bank, stood at the end of the village street beside a long table heaped with bright-colored fruits and fragments of husk—a task apparently hastily abandoned.

He called, "I am Tief-tief, and I dance the dance of Friendly Intentions."

There was a flicker of motion at a window. The polished tip of an arrow poked into view, followed by a pale blue head.

"I am Nop-Nee, and I dance the dance of Fair Warning."

"I'm looking for some friends of mine," Retief called. "Don't let Gerthudion bother you. She's tame."

The Rhoon snorted loudly.

"—and she won't eliminate your village unless you carelessly initiate hostilities by letting fly with that arrow."

The aimed weapon disappeared. The Herpp emerged cautiously from the door, the arrow still nocked but aimed off-side now.

"What makes you think your friends are here?" he chirped.

"Oh, word gets around. There are ten of them — stilts, you know."

"Never saw them," the Herpp snapped. "Now you better get back on that monster of yours and dust back off where you came from, before we clobber the both of you."

"Don't do anything hasty, Nop-Nee," Retief cautioned. "Gerthudion is a patient Rhoon, but you *might* annoy her with that kind of talk."

"Bah, we've seen enough Rhoon in the last twelve hours to last us,"

the Herpp snapped. "A round dozen of the devils flew over and dropped stones on us last night. Told us to surrender, before they set the whole place on fire!"

"That's unfortunate," Retief agreed. "But those were outlaw Rhoon. Gerthudion's on her way to hunt them down right now."

"Then she'd better get started. We've got catapults and ballistae rigged, and by now they're zeroed in and ready to fire. So—" he raised the bow—"scat!"

"I admire your spirit," Retief said. "But first I want the ten Terrans."

Nop-Nee drew the bow-string farther back. "Not on your life! I'm not turning harmless foreigners over to the likes of you and your oversized cronies! They're guests of Quopp, and they'll receive hospitable treatment. I am Nop-Nee and I dance the dance of Ferocious Defiance!"

"And I'm Retief and I dance the dance of Mounting Impatience—"

"You can dance the dance of Apoplexy for all I care," Nop-Nee yelled. "Git!"

Retief cupped a hand beside his mouth. "Girls, if you're in there, come on out!" he called in Terran. "I'm here on behalf of the Terry Embassy at Ixix!"

The Herpp jumped back in alarm. "Here, I'm Nop-Nee and I dance the dance of Confusion! That sounded like Terry talk!"

A door banged wide on the third hut in line, and a slim brunette Terry female in torn flying togs ap-

peared. She shaded her eyes at Retief, while other girls crowded out behind her.

"Ladies, I'm enchanted to find you," he said.

"Who are you?" the brunette asked. She had a snub nose and blue eyes and was not over nineteen. "I thought I heard a Terran voice."

"That was me, I'm afraid. I'm known as Tief-tief. I'm here to help you."

"You're not from that nasty little Voion who locked us up in a corral?" the girl asked.

"By no means. He and I are confirmed antagonists, ever since I blew up his liquor vault."

The girls were in a huddle now, whispering together.

"Well," the brunette said. "I guess we may as well take a chance; Aphrodisia likes your voice." She smiled and came forward. "I'm Rene. It's very nice of you to trouble about us, Mr. Tief-tief."

"Girls, now that I've located you, I can make arrangements to fly you out. I'm afraid Ixix isn't a healthy place for Terries right now, but there's a trading post at Rum Jungle where you'll be reasonably safe for the present." Retief looked over the little group, all young, all pretty, all showing signs of a difficult day and night in the jungle.

"Which one of you is Fifi?"

The girls looked at each other. Rene bit her lip. "She's not here, I'm afraid. We heard that a rebel army was organizing to fight the Voion, and she started out early this morning alone to try to reach them."

TO BE CONCLUDED

# THE LONELY HOURS

by W. I. McLAUGHLIN

*At the end of the universe he  
saw the epic of Man's hopes —  
and the misery of Man's defeat!*

George Rock felt stomach being plastered against spine while his ship accelerated into another computer-guided evasion curve.

"Georgie-Porgie, you wine-soaked fool, you're getting everything you deserve."

Self-recrimination couldn't change the past, but it did serve as mental fingertapping to keep the spaceship's lone occupant from concentrating fully on the thing that was out there chasing him.

The computer ordered the ship into a relatively straight line of flight. Rock expressed his relief by fumbling around in his pocket for some matches. He didn't complete the ritual of lighting the dead cigarette that stuck to his dry lips, but rather scanned the external sensor indicators. External electromagnetic

field strength was uniformly down. This together with the continued straight flight of the ship indicated that the computer had, for the present, successfully evaded the thing.

Again he lashed himself in nervous thought. "Light up, idiot. This may not be your last cigarette after all, if you smoke it fast."

Rock fed his psycho-web programs into the central processing unit of the computer, replacing the evasion program which had just successfully gained him the time to attempt this next step in his defense against the thing.

While his ship hurtled toward the dead ion laminae that lay ahead, Rock allowed himself the luxury of relaxing with his cigarette.

"Lord knows I'll be busy enough when I get to the ion sheets. That

glorified adding machine can run the ship while I finish this ciggy and have a drink . . ." The thought of alcohol brought a stab of pain from his unsatisfied hangover, ". . . of goddamn milk."

Rock punched the console, getting a squeeze bag of milk for his trouble. In between squirts he worked on another cigarette and surveyed the situation in preparation for the coming battle with the thing. At least he hoped it would be a battle and not just his execution.

He knew that his meeting with the thing had been a sport, a freak — one of those occurrences that probability legislates against with a "1" followed by an absurd number of zeros. But the universe was a big place. Astronomical research confirmed the 20th Century cosmologist Hoyle in his views as to the nature of the universe: it was indeed infinite in time and space. The universe expands away from every one of its constituent points. But it doesn't thin out because, as described by Hoyle's Canonical Creation equations of the 1970's and 1980's, hydrogen atoms continually "ping" into existence throughout space. Then they cluster together around local irregularities and finally boil themselves into galaxies with all their concomitant structure.

Laymen and scientists alike could never comprehend the vast dimensions of the universe. A digit followed by a long string of zeroes means little to anyone. But if size alone was unintelligible, one corollary of this size was not — the liter-

ally infinite variety of life in the universe.

If monkeys stabbing blindly at typewriters could, given sufficient time, reproduce all of the earth's books, then how much more could be punched out in a universe of infinite time and space twitching purposelessly but effectively under the stabbings of the laws of physics.

Man, through imaginative writings and scientific skylarking, was somewhat prepared for the luxuriance of planetary life; almost every non-binary star was accompanied by an inhabited planet. But biological life was just a part of the universe of consciousness: the marvelously intricate hydrodynamic mechanisms of the pulsating star Mira exhibited a consciousness as far advanced as any race of planetary creatures, and in interstellar space vast laminae sheets of ions bound together by electromagnetic glue flexed back and forth in intricate patterns of awareness.

Rock's ship sped towards the remains of one of these ionic laminae. Death came inevitably to all life, whether man or ordered patterns of ions, and the ionic concentration that the ship's sensors had detected lying ahead was just a vast electrically charged corpse shucked off from the galaxy that gave it birth to drift in intergalactic space. Spaceship and pursuer approached this corpse for their ghoulish rendezvous.

Rock knew that only his nearness to the Magellanic clouds had made possible the appearance of this drifting hulk. The cavernous reaches of intergalactic space rarely entertain-

ed any visitors. Only near the shoals of a galaxy might evidences of life activity be found, excepting of course the nameless things that occasionally blew in from intergalactic space—the mad fish from the deep ocean.

“And now, you besotted bard, you’ve got one of those little playmates sticking up your exhaust pipe.”

**I**t happened about six hours ago. George Rock, poet and seeker of new experiences, had lain wine-drugged in his single-seater space craft. The object was to get away from it all—a quick trip in space drive to the absolute aloneness of intergalactic space and then, oh thrill upon thrill, alcoholic contemplation of whatever alcoholic poets contemplate while sitting in deep space. Recovering from these reveries, Rock failed to notice the tell-tale indications of menace.

Only when radiation reached alarming levels outside of the ship did the warning bells sound, awakening the sleeping man. But by then the thing from deep space had spread enough of its diffuse self over the ship to prevent shifting to space drive. Rock knew he had been lucky to get the ship moving again at top speed in local drive.

While building up to maximum acceleration he had activated the psycho-web introductory and exploratory program. The psycho-web report came out as expected—the radiation was organized, sentient, and quite mad by all recognized social standards. For a creature wan-

dering endlessly in an abyss totally devoid of anything but self what else could the result be?

“Aren’t we mad together. Maybe you’re just a great big slobbering dog that’s looking for a friend. And who could you find out here but a madman for a friend?” The remark was more bravado than humor.

But the warning mind pressures that had come with the creature’s first onslaught weren’t characteristic of man’s best friend. The howling madness had sent waves of nausea thrilling through Rock’s body as he activated evasive procedures. The ionic laminae had been spotted early in the chase, and for the last five hours the ship had headed for the spent corpse, with only occasional evasive procedures ordered by the computer when the mind pressures became unbearable.

Rock asked the computer for a read out. He studied the printed output. Thoughtfully he laid the sheets aside and ordered food. Time enough for a tuna sandwich and another bag of milk before rapid deceleration would begin in the vicinity of the ion cloud. Using the psycho-web to activate the dead ion cloud was a desperate measure. But after six hours of running and computing Rock knew that the thing was too swift for his craft to outrun in local drive.

**R**ock was three drags into a cigarette when deceleration began. He was slammed into his couch with maximum force and held there breathless and gaunt until the ship had spent its motion. With shaking

hand he took a last drag on his cigarette and threw it into the disposal. He checked over the lights on the computer console once more. Then as the first hint of the approaching madness blew over his mind, he injected his arm with somnal and settled back to let the planned psycho-web sequence take over.

Computer circuits clicked on and off as the psycho-web absorbed the essential features of Rock's mind. A perfect reproduction was then established in the outlying ion cloud by the psycho-web projector. Rock retained control of half of his projected psyche and voluntarily relinquished the other half, now a tempting, unprotected morsel lying out there.

The programmed computer instructed the pscho-web's environment simulator in the rules of the upcoming "game". He knew that he must interest the creature in contesting for control of the ion cloud complex. The alternative was to sit in the ship and absorb wave after wave of insane raving. The outcome of that would be all too predictable.

The thing roared over the ship and into the cloud. It slobbered and drooled over the contact with otherness. Aeons of aloneness were ended. It plunged into the cold water of experience. After a period of disoriented orgy its discrimination increased and it sniffed out the lure of Rock's exposed psyche. The possibilities for intimacy excited it to a frenzy and it merged.

The ship's power plant reeled at full blast to counterbalance the thing's mind force. The psycho-web

grew taut and held. The players were in place and the drama began.

Twenty-five yards separated the antagonists. The white whale twitched its monstrous tail and shot forward towards the longboat. The snowy-hill plowed through the sea with ever-increasing speed, questing for the man with the harpoon.

Captain Ahab braced in the boat. With six feet of sharpened steel he faced the apparition bearing down upon him. The gap separating man and whale closed.

At the last possible moment the whale swerved to avoid a harpooning. But Ahab was too close, and with a cry he drove the harpoon home.

The new goad of pain spurred the whale forward. Rope whizzed from Ahab's longboat in response to this spurt. The oarsmen started to turn the boat to prepare for a tow chase. In the confusion of turning boat and speeding line a loop of rope snaked about Ahab's neck, and in a flash he was gone.

Quickly the whale sounded with the half-strangled Ahab in tow. In victory Leviathan reached for the depths. As the blackness closed about Ahab a change occurred in his features. His strangled purple face grew in size, and his lips drew apart, exposing yellowed teeth which took on the appearance of fangs. The struggling whale, for all its size, could no longer contrive to pull down the now rapidly enlarging figure of Ahab. Its plunge was halted and it began to rise, tugged upward by the gigantic Ahab who grew



in size with every moment. Soon the whale rocketed up through the surface, not under his own power but as a satellite of the engorged Ahab.

Ahab's face was a mask of demonic fury. The roaring that filled the world was complemented by the total madness that poured from his eyes. The ocean began to dissolve and the blueness of the tropic sky darkened to black. The universe was melting and coalescing into the bloated, screaming Ahab. The whale alone remained distinct but was dwarfed by the still-growing Ahab-thing.

In intergalactic space, 25,000 light years from the Magellanic clouds, a twisted sheet of ions flexed in response to an urgent computer command. Ahab and the whale vanished. The raging thing continued its fury in the now unmonitored ion cloud. The spacecraft's power plant went into emergency overload to balance the rampaging force that threatened to consume the whole of Rock's psyche. Then, having been deprived of its Ahab-activity-center, the thing gradually diffused its energy and was content to snuffle about the ion cloud.

Having survived a direct frontal assault on its ego, the thing was now wary and must be approached by more subtle means. The computer spun its tapes rapidly, searching for a suitable way. Making its choice, it activated the environment simulator. There was a short wait until the thing stumbled upon Rock's psyche again. Having been once burned it hesitated momentarily. Then lust overrode its newly found prudence,

and it merged. Once again the psycho-web grew taut.

The morning of the heretic's execution was gray. A light drizzle was falling. The heretic had to be carried to the stake because his body was too broken for him to go under his own power. Inquisitor-General Oswald Spranger was burning him along with eighteen accused witches. The Inquisitor-General had instituted a reign of terror such as Germany had never seen before.

The Inquisitor-General personally saw to it that the heretic was securely bound to the stake and had properly received the last rites. The heretic noted that the faggots heaped about his feet were composed exclusively of green wood. Green wood burned hot without a large flame and resulted in a much slower death. Evidently the Inquisitor-General's interest in the execution was not exclusively theological. The final details having been attended to, including a last minute request for recantation of heresy, the fires were lit at the heretic's stake and at the eighteen other stakes.

Soon the air was filled with smoke, burning flesh and screams. The flames licked about the heretic and his face contorted with agony. Finally he broke and started screaming and crying for a quick end. The last thing he saw before the smoke obscured everything was the gloating face of the Inquisitor-General peering through the smoke and flames.

As soon as the burning green wood had completely hidden the heretic from the onlookers' sight his

agonized features relaxed and he broke into a smile. Lord, how all this smoke made him want a cigarette! Well, the quickest way to remedy that was to get back to the ship. The heretic vanished out of existence, leaving slack ropes tied to the burning stake, and George Rock raised himself from the couch in his spaceship. The Inquisitor-General would really be incensed when he found no bones at the stake. He'd be convinced that the heretic had also been a warlock.

Rock hungrily lit a cigarette and checked the computer output. As he had hoped, the thing was now in complete control of the ion cloud and no longer needed the psycho-web for its fantasies. Rock gently eased the spacecraft out of the ion cloud. When he was free he shifted to space drive and was on the way home. At the rate the ion cloud was drifting into intergalactic space it would be a long way out before the thing had burned all the witches in Germany. **END**

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# The Doomsday Men

by KENNETH BULMER

Illustrated by MORROW

*They delved into the minds of dead Men to  
trap the killers that menaced all Earth!*

## I

**I**n forty-three and a half seconds James McLellan Partridge would once again be dead—once more murdered.

Partridge walked now unhurriedly through the throng of late evening strollers along the brilliantly lit boulevard, lackluster eyes seeing the profusion of glittery tourist-trap trash garishly illuminated behind plate glass, ears hearing the muted pneumatic thump of suspended traffic-lanes above, feet feeling the firm-

ly yielding surface of the pedway beneath, nose smelling the subtly bracing city scents all about and tongue tasting the soothing menthollin in his mouth. James Partridge, like most men, took these appurtenances of modern civilization for granted.

But of all those myriad city dwellers hurrying about their multi-storied catacomb of light and bustle and rush, only he—only James McLellan Partridge—was due to die within the minute.

At least, Robin Carver made the

mental correction, at least for now. Other men and women would die this night; death was the one final incurable disease. But as of this recurring minute James McLellan Partridge and Robin Carver would share that death in so enwrapped a symbiosis that for the agonizing instant of death each would become the other. Carver, too, would share that scarlet moment of destruction.

He didn't like that. Carver never had relished the final moments of death when the symbiosis became too painful, too poignant. It was in that moment that he wondered why he did what he did, an instant of self-doubt that vanished with the stroke of death that set him free.

Partridge sucked on his mentholl with the acidulated enjoyment of the addict. Stripes of gaudy color from shop windows lay athwart the boulevard, cutting at right angles to the street lighting and lacquering the faces of passers-by with gay chameleon-like changes that served to remind Carver only of the pathetic brilliance of painted mummy-cases from the dusty tombs of Egypt.

A narrow service alley between stores opened off to the right. It was a constricted space, not as well lit as the boulevard but still suffused with the saffron sheen from animated advertisement panels plastering the walls with gigantic color and movement. Partridge walked at the focal point of six differently colored and sized shadows as he turned down the alleyway to the place where he had met his death.

Twenty seconds to go now.

As always when death zero approached Carver felt the weird inappropriateness of the victim's unawareness. Despite his knowledge that the victim could not know, he still cringed as he awaited the impact.

A shadow moved in the mother-of-pearl radiance of the alley.

Two shadows, clinging and then parting. Opening out. Waiting. Two shadows waiting at death zero.

Partridge looked at them. His dull city eyes saw them as people, as passers-by, non-personalities that were met by the thousand and forgotten quicker than a shower of rain.

Carver looked at them. Carver took them into his mind, every lineament of them. He treasured up every single revealing feature and made very sure he would know them again. For this he was here.

**T**hey were dressed as Withits. Sharp, mod, snappy. Carver took their incongruous uniform dress in with a single all-embracing glance.

The boy shuffled his feet, his face loose and leering, his whole posture at once ingratiating and repellent.

"Have you a light, citizen? My flicker's dry."

"His flicker's dry," the girl said, the saffron light coating her black lank hair. "No selfigs. Gotta light?"

"Why — a light? Yes." James McLellan Partridge aroused from apathy to a jerky wish to please. He began to take out a gas lighter.

Ten seconds.

"Now?" said the girl.

The boy licked his lips. They shone unhealthily. His hand slid with the furtive movement of a snake into his pocket. "Sure, Belle," he said.

"I wanna!" Belle spoke on a breath, her chest moving spasmodically, her face pinched and yet alive, vibrant. "Let me—you promised!"

"What was that?" said Partridge, the lighter extended in his right hand.

Three seconds.

"Aw—all right, Belle."

Her eyes showed the rapacity of a rat.

"Thanks, Marv! Thanks a trillion! This is the kick I crave!"

And still Partridge held his lighter out on his palm. Still he stared at the two Withits, still he had no inkling of what was to happen in . . . in—

One second.

Belle lifted her short skirt. The flash of the shiv against the white of her thigh above the tan stocking at last got through to Partridge.

He dropped the flicker. He took a half step back. His right hand spread, lifting, the fingers opening like a fan.

Carver felt his brain trying to move muscles that did not belong to him. He automatically wanted to fall into a fighting crouch, take the knife away from the girl and not bother overmuch if he hurt her doing it . . .

*Partridge hasn't a clue how to defend himself!*

"Go on, Belle! He'll yell any minute!"

Marv pushed at the girl's shoulder and she surged forward, her black hair falling across the left side of her thin face. Her eyes glinted in the saffron light.

The point of the knife struck a star of brilliance into Partridge's eyes. He blinked. He didn't even see the knife as it clove forward.

But he felt it.

Carver, of course, could not see the knife, either.

The feel of the knife going in nauseated him. The sensation effectively blocked out Partridge's, he could not feel the sharp shrill of pain biting into Partridge. Partridge opened his eyes for the last time, his mouth open and bubbling and forming words that did not come. The boy and girl, Marv and Belle, the Withits, were looking down on him. The bloodied knife hung in the air before Partridge's graying vision. The Withits gloated. Pink tongues licked stained lips. A sheen of sweat glistened on their foreheads. An intense absorption in the final death agonies of this man they had murdered concentrated in their faces, screwing them up, tightening them, turning them into the semblances of satanic, satiated evil.

James McLellan Partridge fell to the ground. He fell exactly at death zero, where he had been found.

Confused random impressions and sensations struck at Robin Carver. This was always a moment of great but dangerous fascination. He saw—

But he had no concepts to explain even wordlessly to himself what it was he saw as Partridge died. Partridge's eyes closed and he was dead;



and the blackness came thankfully for Robin Carver.

He opened his eyes as the tech bent down to detach the sensing lobes from his temples. The lobes slid away gently and with them went death and terror and the near-blasphemous resurrection not of life but of death.

"You're back again, sir." The tech smiled. "Just lie still for a moment. Breath steadily . . ."

Marjie, the tech, was young and blonde and shapely. She slid the sensing lobes from James McLellan Partridge's temples where he lay on the second pallet, lax and limp awaiting the onset of rigor mortis, a man past caring about the gray worries of his gray life. She let them coil back on their leads to the hooks on the front cover plate of the equipment banked against the walls of the hovervan. The sensing lobes snapped into place alongside the pair that had enwrapped Carver's head.

"He was just a Zombie—" Carver said, and paused.

That had been the wrong word to use. Partridge had been a non-personality; but the word zombie had come to have a very special meaning to the men and women on the R.I.D. Even then he was making a mistake, thinking of the Force as R.I.D. "Ridforce" they were to the rest of the police departments and "ridforce" they must remain.

Cy Adams shoved the connecting door to the lobby of the van open and strode in, his round face beaming and his shock of wiry black hair

bouncing with the violence of his movements.

"You're back, Robin! Good. Good. Everything's set up outside. Just let me have a look at you."

Adams, as the unit's psychiatrist and general father confessor, must by regulations check a returning operator first. Even now, with ridforce well into its second decade of operations, the unknown still encompassed them and tripped them up. Carver lay back and let Adams go ahead.

"Where were you born?"

"The Old Oast, Brenchley, Kent. Poor Partridge didn't have much time before he died—"

"When?"

"Twenty-sixth August, eighty-nine. And you didn't send me a card last birthday."

"Thought you'd reached the time of life when you'd want to stop counting. Was Partridge married?"

"Yes. And take it easy with the old age sympathy—I'm only approaching the forties."

"You seem in command, Robin. But—but I don't know. What happened to your wife? *Your* wife?"

"She ran—hey, now, wait a minute!"

"*What happened to your wife, Robin?*"

"She ran away."

Mere simple statements in answer to straight questions couldn't suffice now; asked to prove that he still regarded himself as Robin Carver, prodded by questions until a lid popped, he spoke on feverishly. "She ran off. After we'd been married eighteen months. With a satellite electronics engineer. Left me

holding the baby. Her name, you want? I'll tell you the name of the conniving, snivelling, deceitful little —"

Adams held up a hand, quite unalarmed by the outburst. "That's enough, Robin. Easy, lad, easy . . ."

Carver slowed down. He put a hand to his cheek, a hand that trembled. "Sorry, Cy. Silly of me to blow my top like that. Just, somehow —"

"I know, old son. Forget it. You had a raw deal out of life but you're over it now. All I want right now is to know that you still are Robin Carver. No, not that, exactly. You are Robin Carver, of course. We must be sure *you* know that, too." Adams reached down a hand and pulled Carver off the pallet. "Come on. They're waiting. I know you only had a short trip. But that, strangely enough, is a very good reason for quizzing you that extra bit more."

Carver stood up and reached across to the peg for his jacket. "Oh?"

"Sure thing. Sometimes these short trips give an operator the biggest kick of all. Disorientation is so subtle it can strike unnoticed. After you."

They walked out into the lobby and through to the interrogation van.

Carver stepped into a bright, ac-tinic light falling across the desk and chair, the easel, the ident-books, the filing cabinets and map, the radio equipment. Soames, Detective on Watch, looked up, his hard

craggy face intent beneath tufty gray eyebrows. "D'you see him, Robin?"

"Yes. Two of them — boy and girl. Withits."

"Oh, for gosh-sakes!" Soames pushed his hat back and looked his disgust. "Not them again!"

At his side Rawlinson, second detective, stared at the polished floor of the van, skimpily carpeted. "If it's not the Withits, it's the Slashers — or a dozen other stupid and vicious teen-age status symbol organizations. They all should be stuck against a wall and shot."

"Well, now, Charlie . . ." Soames was the father of a teen-age boy and girl, children born late in his marriage. Quite clearly Carver could see the battle going on in Soames' opinions. "Seems there are teen-agers and teen-agers."

Charlie Rawlinson said: "Your kids are okay, Bob. You know that. I know that. But these Withits now, petty thugs —"

"Not so petty," Carver interrupted. He sat down at the easel. "Not now. The two Withits murdered Partridge." He began to draw with a deft light touch. "Two. Boy and girl. Marv and Belle. Belle asked Marv if she could do it and Marv agreed. They acted like he was doing her a great favor allowing her to murder the man. He wanted to do it himself, that was clear. But she asked him and he let her, just as though she'd asked if she could ride his hover scooter for the kicks."

His eidetic memory brought up fact after fact and channeled them through to his eyes and fingers,



wrought Belle's and Marv's images on the paper. He sat back. "There they are. Pitiful pair, yes? But they really enjoyed pushing that knife into Partridge's guts."

"Why'd they kill him, Robin?" asked Soames.

"If I said no reason I'd be wrong. But there was no reason that makes sense to a policeman seeking a murderer with a motive he can understand. But Cy would know." Carver paused, thinking back to that moment of death zero in the saffron-sheened alley. *This is the kick I crave!* Belle had said.

"They did it," he said at last, slowly, "they did it for kicks."

Their reaction surprised him.

Rawlinson made a short sound of disgust.

Soames leaned back in his chair, tapping the pencil against his nose. "It's beginning to add up. And the picture is a nasty one. Sour. Something Whitcliffe has been worrying about for weeks. This last one only confirms the picture."

"You mean there have been other murders like this?"

"Killing for kicks," said Soames. "Death for a giggle. Pretty, isn't it?"

"My God," said Carver.

As an operator for ridforce his job was ostensibly done as soon as he had identified the murderer and given his colleagues all the information he could. His was not the task of hunting down the murderer. The ordinary police did that as they had always done; only now they hunted with the sure knowledge of who they hunted. If the victim had

looked at his killer — then the police would know him too.

If the victim had no sight of his murderer then the ridforce operator would have to pick up everything he could from the murdered man's background, fit all the tiny pieces together, watch and wait there in the dead man's mind, integrating a life — and a death. Carver happened to be very good at that job. But he still couldn't explain how he had been corralled into it in the first place.

Up until recently the murder statistics had been growing more favorable. But now these last senseless murders had the police chasing teenagers, chasing their tails, trying to comprehend what was going on as well as stopping its results.

The hovervan cleared away and Cy Adams spoke briefly to Carver. "You're off watch now, then, Robin? Alec Durlston is your relief and he'll be —"

"Yeah. I know Durlston is my relief."

The bitterness in his voice made the others look up. "He's always late!"

"We all know what Durlston is," Soames said gruffly. "But just hold on until he signs in. Now let's get back to HQ."

Carver sat in his operator's chair by the door. Somewhere out there in the city, right now, a murder was being committed. Somewhere a man, or woman, a boy or girl, was being brutally done to death. His job was to find out who had broken that basic commandment — "Thou shalt not kill."

Just so long as he remembered that, just so long as he put on the sensing lobes and waited until the murderer struck and then came back to the real world and gave the police every significant item of information he could, just so long as he went on doing his job then he would regard himself as doing a useful piece of work in society. If he began to doubt himself then he must doubt society and all it stood for.

He couldn't allow that. Behind the Shield there was nothing left for him in this world. Apart from Wendy—and she was a magic world apart. A burnt out husk of a man, he must cling with all the vicious selfishness in him to this one vital personality datum; do a good job and rest content.

But it was damned hard.

## II

Alec Durlston had still not reported in for duty by the time it was Hovervan Number Three's turn for duty again. Charlie Rawlinson switched on the radio and checked wavelengths with control. Then he looked up at the tri-di map of the city. It was angled against the junction of two walls and roof so that it tilted out and over them, presenting a detailed schematic. Color coding of trafficlanes, airways, pedways and autoramps crisscrossing the avenues and boulevards lent a ghostly pseudo-beauty to the city map.

"Busy night," said Soames.

R.I.D., the heart and brain of rid-force, was contained in the hover-vans as they waited in the yard for

their calls. Sometimes they waited a long time. Other times, like now, the calls crackled in with frightening speed, demanding the headlong rush to death zero.

The radio blasted. Everyone twisted around automatically to stare at it. Before the words had finished spurting from the speaker the vans were hissing with compressed air, rising, flowing forward with the ground effect rolling them along on cushions of air.

"Attention Three. Death Zero corner of Fredericks and Montgomery. South side. Male. Dropped twenty stories, death instantaneous. Major damage. Triple alarm."

"Major damage," said Charlie Rawlinson. "Hell! You may have trouble, Robin."

"I'll cope."

The door of the van sprang open. It was already moving at ten miles an hour and the figure bundling in charged head down into the van with the violence of his rush. Papers cascaded to the floor. Soames looked around from his seat beside the driver, scowling.

"What's going on? Oh—it's you Alec."

"It's me," said Alec Durlston, straightening up and pulling his jacket down. "Who did you expect? If I hadn't broken the hundred-yard sprint record you'd have taken off without me."

Of course it wasn't just what Durlston said. It was his general attitude. What he didn't say. What he meant. Quite clearly, he was saying: "It's your fault I had to run and jump in, you clods. You

couldn't even wait for a gentleman. But that's all one could expect from the likes of cretins like you."

Naturally, it was anyone's fault he was late but his.

He looked down on Carver, a lean, long look, his overly-handsome face sardonic, waiting.

"Well?" Durlston said acidly.

"Hullo, Durlston," said Carver. He couldn't think of anything he could say to this man, so he remained sitting silently there.

"Aren't you going to get up, man? You're sitting in my chair."

Slowly, Carver rose, letting his body sway slightly with the van's progress. He didn't look at the others in the van. He couldn't.

Durlston took a tissue and flicked the seat, then he sat down with his jacket on, looking cool and calm and impeccable. Carver mooched off up the van and pulled a flap seat out of the wall. He felt his body swaying and surging, as the van sped madly along the airways, unsupported by the cushioning back and arms of a regular chair.

Durlston was on watch. That was the operator's chair and Durlston had the right to sit there. But the whole incident was so petty it boiled Carver up—or would have if he could have been bothered to care.

For the first time this night, apart from that fleeting moment of boiling-over anger when Cy Adams had quizzed him he thought of Wendy. Slim, serious, big-eyed Wendy, with the straight blonde hair helmeting her head, her features solemn with all the worry-

ing perplexities of life facing a fourteen-year old without a mother's guiding hand. No—he was slipping. Wendy was fifteen now. Time had rushed past with the crazy speed of a rocket.

The thought of Wendy and of Marv and Belle frightened Carver. So Wendy had been brought up without the counsel of a mother. But she'd had her father and the Home and they'd turned out some of the finest girls in the world. Wendy was all right. Wendy was straight. Only Carver's consuming love for her made him worry. Anyone so favored, it used to be said, would be marked out for the jealousy of the gods. What should he do, then — disfigure her? Try to camouflage her? Try to cocoon her away from life.

That couldn't be done. Even the husk of a man that was Robin Carver had the wit to recognize that.

The siren slashing a screaming blade of sound through the thick city night, the hovervans drove fiercely through scattering traffic in the blazing energy of their duty to reach death zero in under three minutes.

They didn't always do it, of course. They seldom did; but it was the target figure demanded by regulations. In three minutes the human brain deprived of blood would be damaged beyond repair.

But then—ridforce weren't trying to repair brains. Just get there fast, find the body, slip it into the ridmach hovervan, slap it on the pallet, attach the sensing lobes—in-vestigate.

The driver took the van around a semi-banked corner so fast the magnetic repulsors partially blanked and the van canted and skidded, air sizzling away in a steaming fan behind it. He had the triple turbines opened right out and afterburners on. The vans bellowed a colossal reverberating roar across the city, belching smoke. Any free-flying aircraft un-connected to the city's intricate trafficlanes would have smashed headlong into any one of a dozen obstacles. Free-flying craft were strictly for outside the city.

Outside the city. That was an old-fashioned way of looking at it, as though the city was more important than the country.

Naturally, there could never be a crash, a road accident. They belonged to those queer far-off times when people allowed their teeth to rot in their jaws, blew their noses into cloth and shoved it into their pockets, smoked tobacco that hadn't been treated against lung cancer, let old people die alone and forgotten in dusty back rooms.

Alec Durlston took the pallet as the victim, shrouded in a plastic sheet, lay beside him. Marjie refused to have him on the second pallet.

"Poor devil," said Carver, half to himself. "Did he fall? Or was he helped?"

"I'll soon find out." Durlston lay back and waited for Marjie to complete the connections.

Just how it was done Carver knew he would never understand. What

mattered to him and the police departments was that it did happen. From the sensing lobes on the dead man's head, from the sensing lobes on Durlston's head, power flowed. And the ridmach did the rest. The scientists who had developed R.I.D. knew how it operated. Carver had heard talk of electrical synapse energy interchange, of the residual memory charges, of the permanent imprint of memory on cell structure, the complex amino acids and colloids subtly altered and distorted so that they would never be the same again but always record what had been imprinted on them. Only death would destroy those changes, would set liquid putrefaction to its task of tearing down and liquefying all traces of what had once been a man's mind.

No wonder the detectives of ridforce screamed their way across the city to death zero with all turbofans alight and afterburners full on, breaking near mach unity in the determined effort to tune in to the dead man before death's clogging hand of putrefaction brought a slimy chaos to the tuned perfection of a human brain.

When a person died in the city the D.L. at ridforce HQ picked up the radiation. Machinery hurled that information onto the city map in the duty hovervan, blasted the crew and the operator out into the city, homed in on the DZ. Without the very necessary function of the Death Locator at ridforce HQ the hovervans would seldom and only by chance arrive at death zero in time.

Soames called. When Carver went

through to the admin van he saw to his surprise that the crew was packing up.

"You're going to love this, Robin," said Charlie Rawlinson, shutting the door.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Another call. DZ is close and we're the nearest van. And we happen to be carrying a spare operator."

On the map the ruby light of DZ blinked balefully like Tentoki, the demon lantern bearer. The glittering star of white light representing rid-force hovervan number three sparkled up to that ruby eye. Minutes later, Carver was saying: "Oh, no! A female! That's not for me."

"It's like this, Robin," Soames said patiently. "We're here. You're here. The body's here. Ergo—you go in, female or no female. Check."

"And that's what I call a sweet reasoned explanation."

"HQ would send out another van with a female operator; but things are hectic tonight. There was a buzz Whitcliffe himself was on the prowl."

"So you see, Robin, I know you ops don't like going in when it's a female. But needs must."

Charlie Rawlinson waved an arm and the crew snatched the girl into the van with a courtesy for not-yet-cold clay inherent in their attitude.

In the female regime the ridmach had sometimes to be triflingly re-adjusted. Carver lay on the pallet. He looked at the girl. Her small slender body had been clad in a silver sheath of iridescent scales and she still wore one nylon. Her hair,

long and lustrously black beneath the harsh lights, lay unbound. Her face, oval and well-featured, had been pretty with an olive complexion and magnificent eyes. Her complexion was different now, of course.

So far nobody had taken away the nylon stocking knotted around her neck.

Cy Adams put his head in the door. "Her name was Julie Farish. Good hunting, Robin."

Marjie pushed the start button and coalescing darkness and sunwhorls closed on Robin Carver.

**T**he velvet cushion thrust cruelly against her cheek.

She couldn't turn her head to look up at Roger, imploringly, appealingly, why? Why was Roger doing this? Her thoughts dazzled, chaotic impression, fragments, the constricting feel of something tight about her neck, tight—*tight!*

She couldn't scream—her tongue burst past her lips—her eyes pained with the pressure—she couldn't breathe—couldn't breathe!

She tried to move, floundering like a fish carelessly cast into the bottom of a boat, flashing silver and slinky like her new dress. Black and red sparks cascaded across her blinded eyes. The feeling in her throat and neck—the feeling? the pain!—the pain had gone. She felt sleepy—sleepy . . .

All men were different—but all the same. She'd had to learn to handle men. She'd learned. And Roger had seemed nice—floating on a cottonwool cloud—couldn't talk—*silence!* calls the headmistress

— Roger had been nice; but he'd been funny. Headache.

Oh, God! I'm being murdered!

Only Robin Carver's mind experienced the death of Julie Farish. He cringed. This was never pleasant.

*And she didn't look at this Roger once!*

There was nothing left at this end of the penetration envelope. Time was running out. *I'll have to go back.*

Latch on to a dying person's thoughts. Tap in to death's memories. The memoirs of final extinction to be pored over, studied, learned.

Robin Carver skipped rapidly through the earliest memories, the unhappy childhood, the orphanage, the first man, the jobs, flipping the yellowed pages of memory.

The story was familiar. He would touch down at the first discrete act that set in motion this entirely separate series of events that led up to the murder; if any portion of a person's life can be divorced from the rest. He'd awake with Julie onto the last pages of her life.

### III

**T**he Sweetness and Light Tea-rooms had, a fortnight before, been known as the Ever Joyful and Serene Coffee Garden. Unfortunately a group of Withits had broken in, parking their deliberately noisy hoverscooters anywhere about the chaste green lawns and sand and rock gardens. And they had proceeded with gusto and verve to take the place apart.

Marcel had been livid. He was a

slender man with a moist mouth and hands that wandered. He had redone the place and given it a new name and soon the old clientele drifted back. The same trade went on.

"Hello, Julie darling!" Marcel smiled, oilyly. "So sweet."

"So help me, Marcel, I don't want another night like last. If you do I'll — I'll —"

"Yes, ducks? What will you do?" the words were steel encased in an oil slick.

Julie made a face. "Just think of me, sometimes!"

"But I do, darling, I do!"

"Tell me about the party." Julie changed the subject uncomfortably. She knew the strengths of the syndicates in the city, strengths a young girl, alone, could never match.

"This is important, Julie. A group of new customers. Harry will take you and the other girls. Remember! I want you to be particularly good tonight."

Harry turned out to be a hunk of a man with gorilla features and hair spining from the backs of his hands. Watching everything from his perch there in Julie's mind, Carver missed nothing. Harry was the girl's protection.

*You're going to fall down on your job tonight, Harry.*

Their hovercar sloughed along the autolanes and then with a settling sigh of expiring air came to rest. The door slid open.

Julie's quick eyes picked up the signs of luxury in this pent-house apartment, the refinement and decadence, the over-ripe bloom on the fruit of pleasure. Carver picked up

places, faces, words, gestures, storing them away against the time he would sit in hovervan number three and make his report.

Before leaving the hovercar Julie checked to see that her nylons were straight in a tiny almost childish movement, a birdlike twist of her head.

A flunkey left them in a waiting room with: "Wait here. Mr. Pritchard will be along shortly."

Pritchard turned out to be quiet and unassuming with the air of a confidential valet. Perhaps only Carver of the five watching him observed the deeper power-complex of the man. He stood for a moment studying them, his head on one side, considering. Boldly his eyes strayed over the girl's faces and figures, coming to a decision.

"You," he said, beckoning to Julie. "Put your shoes on and come with me."

"Now wait a minute—" began Harry.

Pritchard said nastily: "I don't think your master would care for you to be present as your friend earns her living. Anyway, your job is to protect these — ah — ladies outside. Not inside." He jerked a perfectly polite yet unmistakably imperative hand at Julie. "Come on."

*So Julie is a Gaiety Girl. Poor lost soul. They ought to have sent a female op on this one . . .*

In the corridor outside Pritchard put his arm around Julie's waist and pressed familiarly. Indecision hit Julie, then she let the hand lie unremoved. It couldn't make any difference now. Up ahead a door

showed where the hall turned at rightangles beneath shaded fluorescent.

Pritchard lengthened his stride and the arm around Julie's waist pressed her on more rapidly. Carver realized that arm had not been amatory but organizational. A burst of laughter spilled from the door. That door showed a plain black patina with a single simple silver, escutcheon, a lion rampant grasping a shattered silver shield, modestly displayed on each leaf. Golden bolt heads and hinge flaps lent a splendid air of barbaric gorgeousness to the door. Pritchard was clearly trying to hustle Julie past it before it opened fully.

"Hurry, girl!" he said and the words snapped sharp and shrewish.

The image of an ogre headmistress rose up. And Julie deliberately allowed one long nyloned leg to slide out between Pritchard's black trousers, to trip him, to send him sprawling in undignified ungainliness onto the carpeted floor.

"Oh, dear, Mr. Pritchard!" said Julie, all contriteness. "I'm so sorry!"

But the door had opened and two men reeled out, laughing and boisterous, caterwauling. Between them, a hand around each waist, a girl danced, the arms of the men heavy and lascivious on her shoulders. Julie took one swift glance at the men, past them into the room beyond the black lion-guarded door.

A packed cacaphony of sound, a welter of lights, a dizzying titillation of scents and the roaring impression of an infernal calliope in

full blast chorused from that jam-packed room. Here was the party. Julie's face reflected animation and she lingered as Pritchard cursed and hauled himself up.

A man stood just inside the door, smiling a small secret smile as the two boisterous near-drunks and the girl who was only a blur in the corner of Julie's eye staggered out. The man wore the usual inoffensive gray suit and black shoes, the string tie and the ivory shirt that had become a uniform in the upper circles of the civil service. Julie glanced with the lively interest of a gaiety girl at his face — and Carver reacted as though stung by a thousand volts of high tension.

*Chris Mellor!*

Even a non-eidetic could remember the tough sparkling spirit of Chris Mellor from the old days! The days when Carver had been just such a one as Mellor appeared still to be. Incredible! He'd thought Mellor dead long since . . .

Then Pritchard grabbed Julie's arm in a grip that brought a little squeal of protest to her lips, dragged her all angrily sideways from that black door and the enticing mysteries it concealed.

Pulled like that, twisted around, Julie could not help but look directly at the girl between the two half-drunken men.

Her reactions meant nothing to Carver.

He forgot he was a ridforce operator.

He forgot that he, himself, was not standing in that lushly carpeted corridor with the sinful sounds of

an orgy thundering away in the background.

He wanted to start forward, to smash a fist into each of those hideous brutish men's faces. He wanted to take the girl with the smooth helmet of blonde hair into his arms, to take her away, to protect her from whatever horror was happening to her here.

He couldn't do anything but look on.

*Wendy!*

Wendy — his Wendy — his own daughter — here!

#### IV

As soon as she had begun work on Whitcliffe's project at the Forensic Science Laboratories Carol Bursham had decided that Whitcliffe was a man with so obsessive a compulsion that the tiniest outside intrusion would have no chance of deflecting him from his life's ambition.

What that ambition was, Carol didn't know. But it existed and drove on, in turn whipping all of ridforce with it. That could not be denied. This current project was only a part of that over-riding ambition. That he would eventually attain the goal of his ambitions she was also convinced. Whitcliffe was that sort of man.

She and Ralph Tzombe, her co-worker on the new project, had been summoned by Whitcliffe to his villa overlooking the cliffs and the sea. She lay now on a formfit, comfortable after the morning swim, lazily watching the sky.



"Look — up there!" Carol lifted herself on one elbow and pointed out to the zenith. Soundlessly a dot swam into view high above the Pacific, soaring at the hundred thousand feet levels and slowly — so slowly at Mach three point five — lowering towards them and the shining city beyond.

Few people would call Carol Burnham pretty. Poised, superbly built, yes. Her eyes, emphasized in the current fashion trend, were perhaps her most powerful weapon in her sex armoury. A man, if she chose, could lose himself in those eyes.

Tzombe levered himself up. "If you look carefully —"

"I know. Watch." Carol stared up in near reverent expectancy with the still and absorbed concentration of a little child.

Like the fragmentary fluid interplay of colors when a bubble bursts, like the palest flickering chrome of a zip-fastener in the sky, ineffably comforting, a single shining sliver slashed down the sky and vanished.

"It makes you feel good to see that!" breathed Carol.

The plane passed overhead and dropped still further as she turned slowly onto her preliminary circuit.

Carol voiced a strange remote question. "I wonder where that plane's flown in from?"

"From?" said Tzombe, startled. "No idea. Isn't there a schedule here? I know Whitcliffe has one. I believe he's actually flown somewhere outside the Shield — all praise and thanks. I think Japan is in that direction — westwards. I'm almost

sure it's Japan, but it may be Africa. I don't really know for sure."

"Japan," said Carol, and shivered. "The thought of flying out — you know, flying outside — makes me feel naked."

"To the Shield all glory and gratitude," Tzombe said automatically. "I bet those people up there are unscrambling their nerves right now."

"I hear they take more tranquilizers than fuel."

"Could be." Tzombe stood up. "Here comes Whitcliffe."

To anyone who did not know him, Whitcliffe looked an ordinary man.

"Good morning, Whitcliffe," they said in unison.

"I wanted to tell you the work is not going fast enough. I want positive results inside a fortnight."

The words struck like a scimitar. "But," Carol stammered. "We've been doing so well! And we know we cannot produce results inside a year."

"A fortnight, Doctor Burnham."

"We could do it if we assumed success was definite." Tzombe prowled restlessly on the bouganvillea bowered balcony hung over the moving sea. "If we said we were right and proceeded on that line —"

"Yes," said Whitcliffe.

Cautiously, feeling her way, Carol said: "We therefore state this: The ridmach works. It is a proven tool but it lacks one quality. It must be applied very shortly after death if the operator is to achieve any coherent picture of the victim's movements."

Ralph Tzombe carried on as

though quoting: "To counter the difficulty of the breakdown of the mind, ridforce operators are hurried to death zero as fast as after-burning turbofans can take them. The Death Locator at HQ can pin point death zero for us. Our job is to get the operator and the equipment there with as little delay as possible."

"But," said Whitcliffe lazily, "your job now is to reverse the order of events. You are trying to compensate for the lack of an operator and a ridmach at death zero. You are going to provide a piece of apparatus that will scan the dead brain and record onto magnetic tape. And the equipment will be packaged into a handy size. You are going to do it — because it can be done."

After a moment, Tzombe said: "We'll do it, Whitcliffe."

Whitcliffe was addressed as 'sir' or 'Whitcliffe' — nothing else.

"You have the Forensic Science Laboratories at your disposal, and they are as well equipped as any laboratory in the Americas."

Carol nodded; but her mind picked up one word spoken by Whitcliffe; one word that she supposed only he among a very few others ever used, a word that at once was so obsolete and so much a soul-mate of everyone that it had become a shadow-word, never used — always present. Americas. Everyone else called the country "this continent" or "the land", — or "the world".

Americas.

But only they had the Shield

(great and glorious Shield to whom be everlasting thanks and gratitude!) and everything outside was less than nothing. There was an Outside outside the Shield (by whom we are sustained) but it had no meaning.

Whitcliffe flicked a yellow abstract. "Last night there were fifty murders in the city. Last year thirty. The trend is up. We must have that recording ridmach in use within a week from your development finals."

Tzombe harrumphed. "We can claim a near hundred per cent success in arrests when the operator actually sees the murderer. And even when he doesn't, the clues he can pick up from the victim's mind give the police enough to arrest the real murderer in something like ninety-eight per cent of the cases."

"Well?"

"Only that this seems to have no effect on the murder rate. Suppose the public were told that the ridforce existed —"

"No!" said Carol automatically.

"Let him continue, Doctor Burnham." Whitcliffe's soft voice would have frozen lesser men; but Tzombe carried on valiantly.

"We keep ridforce a secret because we needed time to prove its efficacy. There were enough prophets of failure when we began. But now — if a man knew he would be stared at and identified by the police through the eyes of his victim, surely he would hesitate, he wouldn't murder."

"They thought once if a criminal knew his fingerprints could identify him there'd be no more crime. What happened?"

"Gloves," answered Tzombe.

"And then?"

"Recognition patterns of glove texture — followed by destruction of gloves, followed by ash reclamation and analysis, followed by total and secret destruction, followed by sweat and breath analysis, shape and measurement analysis — and all the rest."

"But?"

"But fingerprints and the following ramifications of the techniques of detection can be nullified."

"So?"

"But," plunged on Tzombe desperately. "We would have our premeditated murder with the murderer wearing a mask and disguise. But in all the others — the sudden flash of anger blowing off the top of your head, and you come to with the bloody knife and the body — in those we'd still be able to see who had murdered."

"Precisely. But in those cases even the old time detectives could usually detect the murderer. In the one case of premeditated murder is the value of R.I.D. so overwhelming we dare not make it public knowledge."

"I think," Carol said carefully, "we might deter a few would-be murderers. But the vast majority who intended to kill would dream up means of evading R.I.D."

**T**zombe slumped dejectedly into his formfit. "You're right, of course. But the idea sounds so attractive . . . What annoys me is why people want to murder! We've never had it so good as now. Everything the heart can desire is right

here in the continent. We just don't have troubles any more."

"You're too well integrated a personality to understand the desires that ferment in your fellow-citizens. The Shield, artificial manufacture of food and fuels, giveaway prices for clothes you wear once and toss away, homes and transport and luxuries almost for the taking — all these genuinely wonderful things can mean nothing if the girl you want to go to bed with laughs at you and lets Joe Soap around the corner put his arm round her waist. The red gets into your eyes, then, Doctor Tzombe. And you just described what can happen."

"I know, I know," protested Tzombe, "but I mean these other murders. These senseless deaths of respectable men and women on the streets, anywhere, everywhere. They make nonsense of our way of life."

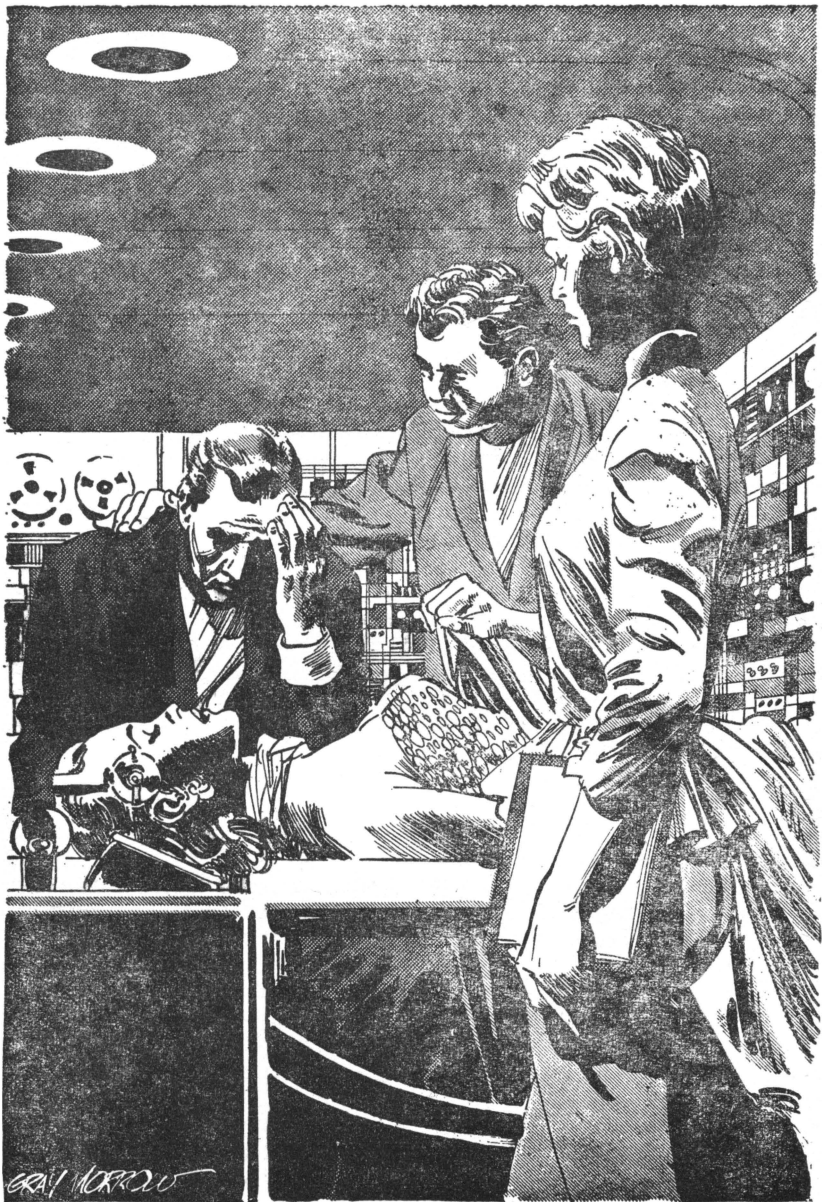
"These stupid teenage gangs, the Withits, the Slashers."

"But we discover who is committing the murder from our ridforce operators up at the sharp end of ridforce. And we secure convictions, and still it goes on."

"Surely, Ralph, you're not suggesting we're making mistakes!" Carol felt shock.

Whitcliffe interjected softly, "It would be a shattering blow to us to discover we were condemning innocent people."

This had been a running sore since the inception of ridforce. "We have to believe in our operators," Carol said passionately. "If they fail, if they are corrupt, if they are careless — why — why —"



"We might as well pack up all the fantastically expensive equipment of ridforce and go home," Whitcliffe finished the thought for them all.

Going down to their hovercar, Tzombe said with a sly friendly smile: "This will get you off the hook with Alec Durlston, Carol."

"I can't stand the man's manner," Carol said, "but —"

She paused. Something about Durlston's lean physical strength tugged at the womanliness in her. She knew what he wanted, and she both yearned for and shrank from it. "I'm always sad to leave Whitcliffe's villa," she said firmly. "There's a clean air here that all the city's fumigants can never reproduce."

Gently, Whitcliffe reminded them as the hovercar's door slid shut: "In a fortnight. I shall keep in close touch."

Just before the hovercar's engines turned over and drowned such tiny cries a gull screeched, clear and lone, from across the bay.

## V

"Name?"

"Robin Carver."

"Where were you born?"

"The Old Oast, Brenchley, Kent."

"When?"

"Twenty-sixth August, eighty-nine."

"When was the last time you felt like going to bed with a man?"

"Sorry, Cy. Never did. I'm heterosexual, thank God. I'm a male, I feel like a male, I act like a male.

Poor Julie Farish couldn't alter that."

*I don't think about Wendy yet. Not yet. Not until I get out of this van and find a place to worry and worry. Steady, boy! Steady!*

"You're all right, Robin. But there's something odd in there someplace. I'd hazard the guess you'd been through a traumatic experience."

"Not me, Cy! I just don't like being in the mind of a beautiful young girl who's just had a nylon stocking knotted about her neck. Is that strange?"

"Not strange. Quite natural for an ordinary man. But you're not an ordinary man, Robin. You're a ridforce operator and, ergo, that means you are abnormal—in the nicest way, of course."

"Of course."

"All I'm supposed to do is make sure you blokes know you are yourselves. Carry on. Soames is waiting."

"Did you get him, Robin?" asked Soames when Carver pushed through into the admin van.

"No."

"No?" Soames exploded. "Well, for gosh-sakes! A girl can't have a stocking knotted like that without seeing something, surely?"

"No, Bob. She called the man Roger, after she was taken in—after she saw—after—"

They were staring at him. "Well, Robin? Go on!"

Carver swallowed. "She thought a man called Roger murdered her; but it wasn't him. I've got him down. But even though I didn't see the murderer at all I could tell he wasn't

Roger. You know; sound of foot-falls, breath rate, atmospheric things we're all trained to pick up. She didn't look at him—and then the stocking was around her neck."

"We'll start with this guy Roger," Soames grunted. "He'll do as a lead. Then we'll have everyone else you saw. Got it, Robin? Everyone."

Carver made out his report. All of it—except for Chris Mellor. He couldn't tell about Chris, anyway, for old time's sake. One agent doesn't tell on another, even casually, even in line of duty, like this.

*Not about Wendy. Not Wendy...*

But of course, he was no longer an agent of the Americas, Carver reminded himself. They'd thrown him out as unstable. No longer fit to be an agent. Damned unfair at the time; it still rankled. But Chris might still be working for the Americas and if he was, a broken-down ex-agent like Robin Carver wouldn't mention his existence to anyone outside Morgan and the Bureau.

His fake past had always held up, even under the stringent inquiries of ridforce. The bureau hadn't let him down there. They knew better than anyone else that a secret service agent has to live after he's fired.

"There's something screwy here, Robin." Soames stared lumpily at the report sheet and the drawings of people Carver had seen through the eyes of a dead girl. "What's the big mystery?"

Carver had to get away to think this thing through. "No mystery, Bob. Apart from not knowing who killed Julie Farish."

"This leaves me no alternative but to assume you fell down on the job. You didn't pry hard enough."

"Now just a minute, Bob!"

"I know how I must sound to you. But I'm the detective in charge of this van and we've never before had to put in the kind of report I'm being forced to hand in now."

Alec Durlston's soft drawl floated infuriatingly across. "Don't forget, Bob, Carver was tired. He'd just been on a penetration—and he was in a female mind. He should never have been allowed to penetrate; it's no wonder he fell flat on his face."

"Now listen here, Durlston!"

"Simmer down, Robin!" Soames slammed a thick hand onto his desk. "All right, Alec. We all know how good an op you are. Let's get back."

Carver slumped. He shut his eyes, squatting on the uncomfortable flap-down seat, and tried not to think of Wendy.

But of course he couldn't.

He could at least drag his mind away from that impossible moment he had seen her lasciviously enmeshed between two half-drunken louts and go back to the golden days of her childhood—days so far away in fact and yet so heart-breakingly near in chronological time.

She'd been a wonderful child, a sanity-giving reason for living, an idol he could dedicate his everything to and negate anything he might desire that conflicted with hers. But she'd grown up true and straight, a laughing sprite in the sunshine. And now this . . .

Back at HQ Soames departed carrying the reports. Charlie Raw-

linson said cheerfully: "You're for the hot seat now, Robin."

When Soames returned he merely said briefly: "You take a day's leave, Robin, starting now. Hammant isn't satisfied. And damn it all, Robin, neither am I."

Hammant was Chief of this rid-force HQ. Carver stood up, feeling the weight of tiredness falling on him. "I'll take that leave, Bob. But there was no indication whatsoever of who killed Julie Farish."

**I**n the old days there would probably have been a strong religious tone to the Home. Idly flicking through a tri-di projector on its walnut table in the waiting room, Carver felt a perennial relief that the Shield had never quite brought into life all the strange religious cults such a phenomenon might have done.

White-bearded and robed priests chanting strange rituals might so easily have come to personify the Shield. The life of the continent could have become warped, twisted away from its true course, made into a mockery of the free life of absolute liberty and freedom from fear. Ritualistic mumbo-jumbo could so easily have symbolized the Shield in the inner lives of everyone. Now it was merely customary to say a short phrase of thankfulness that the Shield existed.

Carver, for one, thanked God it should be so.

He had come to the Home with one question to ask and a biting fear of the answer.

Wendy walked in in response to

the principal's call on the inter-Home radio network. Wendy looked like strawberries and cream, like an unsullied box of chocolates, like the snows of the High Sierras, like a surfer bringing a board in on singles, like a magnum of champagne fizzing into your glass, like the high altar at Canterbury, like a flushed and happiness-drugged child lying abed with the sheets snugged to her chin.

Wendy.

They stared at each other. "Hi, Dad. I'm top-level busy. They're teaching us loads of guff about Outside right now—boring as a high r.p.m. drill. Hey, what's up?"

He hated himself; but training could not be denied even now, even asking his own daughter. "Pal of mine said he thought he'd spotted you in the city yesterday, Wendy."

She squealed with delight. "What a frabjous thought! The city! My, oh, my! You know what the Home rules are, Dad. Not a chance. But wouldn't I have loved to be there, though! Holidays are coming up—I've made a few tentative arrangements—"

His eidetic memory considered the girl with smooth blonde helmet of hair, laughing and flushed, crouching and abandoned, bursting through that ebon door with her Minoan dress flounced out around her like a collapsing parachute. That was Wendy.

*That was Wendy? No. Never.*

**H**e'd known it couldn't be—but the likeness was so complete even he had been deceived. He had

believed for a nightmarish millennium that that poor gaiety girl had been his beloved daughter Wendy.

What sort of a heel was he?

He had to hold onto his control with a bit of iron, champing, wanting to clasp her into his arms and hug her as he had done in the old days when she'd stood forlornly before him, tears dropping round and full over her latest calamity.

Now, of course, she was a young lady.

"You just wait 'til I'm in the city this year! Last year I was so *young!* I've grown up since then!"

"You have, Wendy. But you've all the time in the world. Don't run too fast. Be content, for a little time at least, to walk along beside your poor old dad."

Her eyes caught a vagrant beam of light so that for an instant they sparkled dangerously. She burst out: "There you go again! Why do you do it? Why?" she stopped.

Carver felt a physical pain knife through his guts. Was this the beginning of the parting he dreaded?

"What's that, Wendy?"

"Oh . . . just me being womanish and irritable and irrational. You're my old dad, and that's all that matters." She looked down at her white 'gym shoes. "Judo next, Dad. Of course, I'm quids in having you for a father—I know most of the holds and throws already. I'm boasting; but I'm pretty good. No one to touch me on the campus."

"There used to be colored belts to denote how good you were. I'd say yours would be sky-blue pink."

"Ha, ha."

"Sarcasm, my beautiful brat, will get you nowhere." He dug into his pocket, jingled soldars. "Paper money, if you want it. I know nothing costs much these days; but you're always in need of some bauble or prettifier—"

She withdrew her hand. "No, really, I don't—"

"Well, you are a rum one. That's the first time I've known you actually refuse good hard cash! Conscience bothering you?"

She put one hand on his shoulder, twisted him and, before he had guessed what she was about, had neatly floored him.

He sat up and blew his cheeks out but didn't get up right away. That had been very professional indeed. It made him feel good.

"That, father mine," she announced dispassionately, "is for that. Any more inquisitorial dicta and through the window you go!"

And, by God, he believed she could do it, too.

He rose slowly and, looking up, surprised Wendy staring at him with a tense critical look, as though she was judging the performance of a show horse.

He felt a little bewildered. Then she smiled and the sun came out and he wondered why he doubted her at all.

She'd been here, at the Home. The poor raddled gaiety girl he'd seen had been just that. Already he was getting to work to correct his eidetic memory.

"Must fly, Dad. Lovely to see you. But next time let me know first, huh?"



"Sure, Wendy." He kissed her. "Cheers. And—look after yourself."

As he left he was considering that, thankful though he had been to have mistaken that girl for Wendy, he had been mistaken about Chris Mellor. So far he had managed to push aside the unwelcome thought that for a man to mistake a stranger for his own daughter was hardly a recommendation for a ridmach operator.

Funny thing—it had been through Chris that the Home had been recommended to him.

All the way back he grieved in the thought that now all he had to do was so to arrange things that he could report in on that ebon door and the two thugs and the girl who was not Wendy. He felt really good. Only when he casually tried to analyze why he felt so good was the surprising thought brought home to him.

He was actually doing something!

But wasn't he a burned out husk of a man? An ex-agent of the Americas with a blasted career? A man with no hope and no future? A man whose wife had run off with a satellite engineer? A man whose passionately obsessive possession of a single daughter had kept him sane?

Surely he was.

But he was actually doing something. He had a purpose now. He had been able to lie down on the ridmach pallet, don the sensing lobes and venture—bravely!—into the mind of a dead person.

That had been pseudo-life, if you

like. But now he felt the stirring of a purpose outside all of that. Chris Mellor was still around and Carver wanted to know why.

He felt wonderful.

The feeling persisted as he let himself into his apartment in the city. Then he halted, staring foolishly.

"Hello, Soames. I didn't expect to see you in my apartment. How'd you get in?"

"Don't worry about that now, Robin." Soames jerked a hand at the trim, dapper man with the languid expression of a pro fencer and the face of an executioner. "This is Mister Lines. We've had a directive about you from Higher Up."

"Higher Up?"

"The police fished two men out of the sea a short time ago. The D. L. picked up their deaths but by the time a hovervan arrived at the D. Z. both men had been in the sea long enough. Their heads and faces had been deliberately maltreated. But our lab techs picked up enough to make them think they were these two."

Soames held out two pieces of white card. Carver recognized his own work. The colored likeness of Pritchard, the oily arrangements man for the gaiety girls, and of Roger, the pleasure-seeking wet-mouthed roue, stared back at him.

"Both killed? And no penetration?"

"None was possible. Their brains had been mashed to a pulp."

"That's bad!"

When Lines spoke Carver did not like the sound of the man's voice.

He forced himself to look up and brace himself to meet that meaningful voice with a calm composure.

"The directive from Higher Up, Mr. Carver," Lines said, "is that the time has passed for games. You know more about the Farish case than you have told us. We want to know all you saw — everything!"

## VI

From ridforce headquarters a black-painted hovercar took them from the tenth floor. All the time Carver kept telling himself that they couldn't prove anything. Only he had been into the mind of Julie Farish. But this creature Lines, a ridforce security man, acted chillingly as though he knew Carver had kept something back.

No longer was the problem how to insinuate the likenesses of the men he had failed to report into his records. Now the problem was how to stay out of the trouble he appeared to have tumbled in up to his neck.

The hovercar squished through the city, executed a series of complicated landing maneuvers and sighed gently onto a landing platform. Out on the platform they bustled through a door and —

"Hey!" said Carver.

"That's right." Soames walked on ahead, bunched and determined.

He remembered the way Julie had checked her nylons here, that childlike pathetic twist of her head.

"Let's get on with it." Lines kept one hand in his pocket. This was the test. This was the re-run. The

police had turned up the place where Julie had been choked into unconsciousness before being taken away to be killed. Now they were watching him, scrutinizing him, checking on him. They couldn't tap his thoughts — not yet, not until he was dead.

Cheerful thought, that.

Lines led out in just the way Pritchard had done.

Up ahead the corridor turned at right angles beneath the fluorescents. Carver tensed. He knew the door that should be there — that was in fact there as they walked on and its ebon surface, bolted and barred with gold and flaunting that silver lion and shield escutcheon, came into view.

He forced himself to remain calm. He must not reveal that he was filled with a turmoil of indecision.

They clearly knew a lot. They must guess he had not told them everything. The frightening thing was the importance they attached to that. Lines was a high-class security man and, if Carver's eye for details had not faded since his AA days, he was also a licensed executioner.

But they seemed to know too much!

That had been the fact puzzling him. There was a whole lot more intrigue behind this than the mere balking of information.

He still hadn't decided what to do.

He said: "Pritchard fell over here. Julie said she was sorry. I don't think she was, really."

"You didn't mention this door in

your report." Lines spoke softly.

"That's right." He'd made up his mind. "I think Julie must have twisted away. The next thing she knew Pritchard was digging his nails into her arm and dragging her away like a sack of meal."

"She didn't look into the room, then?"

"What room? Oh—you mean the room beyond that door. How could she? I mean, she was being hauled off by Pritchard. She didn't see the door."

"Your report indicated she left the waiting room, went through to the bedroom . . ."

"That's right."

"You didn't mention this bit about Pritchard falling over."

"No." He wasn't going to help them; or put a single word into his mouth that wasn't necessary.

"She didn't hear anything?"

"Pritchard was cursing. He seemed most annoyed."

*This was crazy!* Here he was actually acting as though he must confirm what Pritchard had told them—yet Pritchard was dead before they'd got a sensing lobe to him! They couldn't know what Pritchard had to tell.

Could they?

One thing was sure. Now he couldn't tell them about those two men waltzing out with the pseudo-Wendy. That gave him a twinge of conscience. They could go whistle before he'd mention Chris Mellor. But the others, now . . .

They could be the lead to the murder—and he was concealing their existence.

Carver decided he was not acting naturally enough. He'd better react with the cross, rather put-out attitude of a guy not really comprehending what this was all about, but resentful of the implications.

He said: "I don't get all this. Bob said the report wasn't a good one; but I couldn't help that. Julie just didn't see the man who strangled her. What's all the mystery?"

"You didn't hear anything else?"

"A party seemed to be going on somewhere, but it didn't register with anyone."

"Ah."

So that was his explanation for the gust of noise when the door opened. So let them pick the bones out of that.

"You fully understand, Carver, that when we do not get a sighting report from an operator we have to make sure of the facts?"

Carver put on his best angry-hurt look.

"Oh! I get it! Of all the low-down underhand rotten things to think! You think I was bribed!" He started to swing his arms about. "Well, I'm a ridforce operator! I don't take graft. I didn't spot the murderer and I'm sorry for that—but it's not my fault!" He subsided.

He'd put on a nice performance.

"Say now, Robin—" began Soames, worried.

"We understand your position, Carver." Lines took his hand out of his pocket; some of the tension eased out of the atmosphere. The ridforce security man came to a decision. "We know you don't take graft, Carver. But . . ."

Ridforce had been punctiliously strict about employing only top quality people. A breath of suspicion could blast a man's chances of ever being asked. No one volunteered — because no one of the public knew ridforce existed.

But the possibility of graft had not been overlooked. At first it had appeared impossible. How, you might ask, could a man sitting watching from the mind of a dead person taking graft to conceal the murderer? Ah — but suppose Carver had recognized the man who had murdered Julie. Suppose, for instance, it *had* been Roger. What then?

Easy. Easy cash.

He would have said nothing. Julie looked away, the room was dark, someone else had done it. Not Roger.

As he *had* said.

Then, casually, comfortably, wearing the smooth unbearable smile of the blackmailer, he would have gone to Roger and made a deal. And Roger would have paid up. Oh, yes, he would. He wouldn't know that the very fact of Carver's eidetic memory precluded him from ever saying he had forgotten a fact, that a face had slipped his memory, that now he would put the finger on Roger.

Corruption as a time-binding phenomenon was eminently practicable with ridforce. Any slight breath of it had to be investigated. Strangely, this quizzing brought one relief; he was not now committed to inserting the faces of those two thugs and the pseudo-Wendy into the files.

Still . . . there had been an almost panic-stricken reaction to this Farish case history. He'd have to think about it. It might be rewarding.

In the Forensic Science Laboratories Carol Burnham unclipped the sensing lobes from Lines's temples and pressed the green finish button. Ralph Tzombe smiled warmly at her.

"We've done it, Carol. And well within Whitcliffe's time schedule. I don't think he's as pleased as you are!"

"You're right, Ralph." Carol watched critically as Lines opened his eyes. She hadn't let Whitcliffe down. She picked up the cigarette-pack-sized mech, seeing the insides clearly with her own inner eye.

"It's all here, Ralph. Just pull out these sensing lobes, attach them to the decedent and switch on. And all the ridmach will want is absorbed and magnetically recorded on micro-tape. Then you just slip the lobes on and run the tape and you become an operator and penetrate on a ridforce assignment. And you can do it hours, days, years after the victim meets death zero!"

Lines said: "Wha — No! Keep him off!"

At once Carol cursed herself for a conceited fool. "Listen, Lines! Your name is Josiah Lines! Remember! Where were you born?"

"Uh," gargled Lines. "He came at me with a knife . . ."

"Where were you born?"

"Galveston, Texas. But the knife — it went right in . . ."

"Hold up, Lines! When were you born?"

"Don't you understand?" Lines raked up, caught her wrist in a constricting grip. "That sour-faced swine murdered me! So where am I? What happened!"

"You're in the Forensic Science Labs, Lines, and well you know it! You've just been on a ridforce penetration, that's all. I thought you were an ace operator!"

"Yeah . . . Yeah, I remember. I was trying out your damned invention for Whitcliffe. Sure. That's it."

"You are a member of ridforce internal security. You—"

"I know who I am! Just caught me on a sore spot, coming at me like that. If it had been me I'd have flicked the knife around, stuck it in the Withit's own guts!"

"We had no control over the murder we'd be asked to monitor, Lines." Tzombe spoke smoothly. "But it seems pretty clear our device works!"

"It works," Carol Burnham said on a breath.

When Whitcliffe walked in with his impersonal aura of absolute command, Lines was back to his usual ruthless toughness. Whitcliffe said: "You are feeling quite well?"

"Quite well, sir. Haven't been on a ridmach penetration for some time. Threw me a little. But I'm okay."

"If some of our eager-beaver trainees could talk to you now, Lines, they might understand a little better why we are so strict in our choice and training of operators."

"But," put in Tzombe, "the cases of near-insanity go down with every course, I'm glad to say."

"They still occur. Being a ridforce operator leads all too easily to instability and insanity. It's the price we pay for doing our job."

Ordinary words, commonplace sentiments. But Carol saw with a shiver that Whitcliffe meant every one with a superhuman truth. Nothing would stand in the way of this man. He would crush all opposition.

"I want full scale production of this device. I want every patrol hovercar equipped so they can save the hovervans time. With the D. L. zeroing them in on the D. Z. they will be there much quicker. I suggest we call this device the R.R.I.D."

That fitted. R for Recording. Recording Resurrection Investigation Detection. R.I.D. Ridmech. Ridforce.

Everybody called it the Carol Mark One. That soon became the Carmo.

Production began in secret ridforce workshops and after she had turned over the fruits of her work, Carol suffered a panicky moment of emptiness. What of the future?

So far there had never been a man in her life. Perhaps now she regretted that.

## VII

In the days following his penetration on the Farish case Robin Carver went through the strange and heady experience of finding a purpose in life outside ridforce.

Not to go to the bureau and ask about Chris Mellor was the obvious

decision to make. He'd always been a loner. Perhaps if he'd had a reliable man, like Chris Mellor or Stan Eames, to work with most of the time, he wouldn't have gone to pieces when his wife walked out. Wendy had been a responsibility he'd welcomed. But she hadn't been able to keep him from receiving the big red 'Unstable' stamp on his bureau files.

The bureau had tried to steer him towards the space program; but he had thankfully declined. Even he, a star agent of the Americas, loathed working outside the Shield. He suspected the fear of foreign climes infecting the continent was one of the mainsprings of the lack of progress in the space race. Who wanted to leave the Shield and go to the Moon? Who wanted to leave the Shield at all?

He'd been out, of course, in line of duty. The experience had been stimulating, like hanging by your toenails over a thousand-foot drop. Not pleasant; but undeniably an experience.

He carried on with his ridforce work, making some first class penetrations. The idea of lying beside a dead man and entering his mind to sit and watch all that had happened to him still gave him a shivery disbelieving thrill. The Withits and Slashers went on their killing-for-kicks way. Business was brisk.

More than ever he felt convinced something was brewing behind the scenes of ridforce activity. Rumors of a new device, called a carmo, filtered down spreading alarms of mass redundancies. Then, after a

hectic day's work — four penetrations — standing dialing a hovertaxi he saw a taxi flit toward him, hesitate and then pick up a man standing on the higher pedway.

Shrugging off the annoyance, Carver dialed again. A second taxi parted from the traffic stream and slid across. The first taxi passed within a few feet.

Sitting in it was one of the men who had tumbled through that ebony door, lasciviously embracing the pseudo-Wendy. Carver felt absolutely sure of it.

He stumbled into his own taxi. He hesitated momentarily over the directions he should give. He could not alert the police . . .

"Follow that taxi ahead," he said to the robot. The radar locked on. Wherever the first taxi went the second would follow.

He felt an eerie elation. Whatever was going on, he remained absolutely sure, this man ahead must know something of it.

But why was Chris Mellor at that party?

The taxi ahead leaped across the city and dropped down to a medium level landing platform on the Forensic Science Building.

Evening shadow purpled under the overheads as the man walked briskly through a discreet entranceway. Carver followed. All thoughts of challenging the man vanished. Now he wanted to know the fellow's business. Outside a plainly varnished door the man knocked. The door opened, he entered and the door closed after him.

Why in this building, of all places? Why in the city headquarters of ridforce? Maybe—just maybe this man could explain why Lines had seemed to know so much that should have been locked in a dead man's brain, unreachable by a rid-mach!

Had Carver still been an AA man there would have been no difficulty picking up the faint murmur of conversation beyond that door; he would have been equipped with all manner of bugs and spies. Now he had to strain to try to catch the words.

"It's all set up, boss." That was the thug. "The syndicate will take as many as you can produce."

"Mumble . . . mumble . . . very good. Deliveries . . . caution. Remember!" The dull voice of the second man strengthened. "We cannot afford a single mistake!"

The voices died and Carver stood with one ear against the wood, tantalized, not sure what to do . . .

"Why, Mr. Carver! What on earth are you doing?"

Carver straightened and swiveled as though gripped and twisted by a wrestler. Standing looking at him with the surprised expression of a woman seeing a man in a ladies' toilet was Carol Burnham. She wore evening clothes under an off-white smock.

"Huh?" said Carver, very intelligently.

"It is Mr. Carver, isn't it? Of course. We met at an operator and scientist conference, I think."

"That's right." Carver looked at

Carol Burnham and liked what he saw. She'd been distant and unapproachable, he remembered. In his own clam-tight fashion he had barely nodded at the introductions. Alec Durlston had been there, and that had soured the evening. Durlston had been very attentive to this Doctor Burnham, too.

But right now he felt in a very false position. He couldn't explain.

Carol said: "What are you doing eavesdropping outside Whitcliffe's door?"

"Whitcliffe!"

The murmur of voices approached, thickening from beyond the door—Whitcliffe's and the thug's!

"Look, Doctor Burnham," he said desperately. "I'd like to talk to you—"

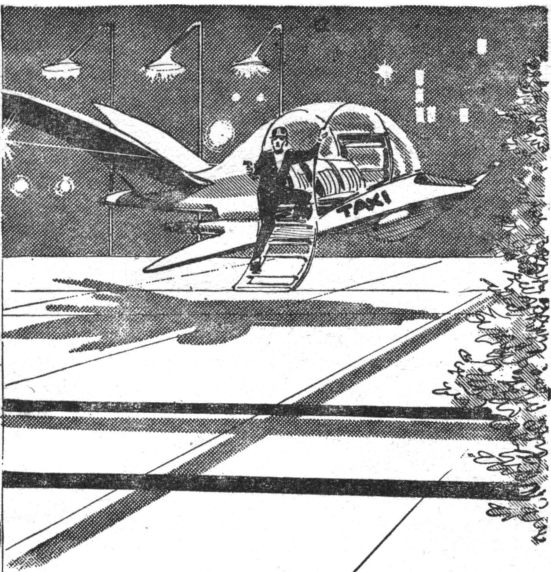
The door opened.

"I'm doing the syndicate a favor, Zeuke, so remember that and make sure they pay up promptly." Then Whitcliffe saw Carol and Carver. "Why, Doctor Burnham. You wished to see me?"

At once Carol recalled the reason for her visit. "Yes, Whitcliffe. I thought you should know at once. When I checked through the stockpile of—uh—I discovered at least a thousand are missing. I certainly signed no indent for them. Neither did Doctor Tzombe."

"I signed the indent myself. We are beginning distribution. But it was good of you, Doctor Burnham, to be so—ah—faithful in your guardianship."

The man called Zeuke said: "Good evening," and, turning abruptly, walked off down the corridor.



Carver could smell his type. He had felt reasonably convinced before, but the foul-up over the pseudo-Wendy had confused the issue. This Zeuke was a proassassin. For the moment Carver left aside his now fully understood mission in bringing the man to justice for his part in the Farish case. He had not committed the murder; but he would know. Carver concentrated instead on wondering what business he could have with Whitcliffe, the head of ridforce.

"I'm rather busy," Whitcliffe was saying. He shot an inquiring lift of eyebrows at Carver.

At once, Carver said: "I just came along to find Doctor Burnham, sir. A personal matter. Nothing important."

Carol glanced at him, and away. "We'll be getting along then, Whit-

cliffe. Good night."

Whitcliffe nodded in dismissal and Carol and Carver walked away. Carver walked as though he expected a needle-gun blast to shred his nerves any second.

"A great man, Whitcliffe," said Carol as they turned the corner. "You'd have got a rocket if he'd found you listening outside his door."

"I didn't know it was his. I'm in a spot of bother and I need help. Thank you for not reporting on me."

"You'd better have a good explanation—or I might do it yet."

She was about to enlarge on that theme when the dully savage blast of a handgun cracked startlingly down the passage.



The shot came from the direction of the landing platform. He was running towards it before he'd had time to analyze his own feelings. The gun was an ordinary solid-projectile job, automatic by the flat crack of it, and not the needle-gun that shattered a man's neutral system at a touch. He went through the last couple of doorways flat out, skidding to a sliding halt at the corner of the landing platform. Carol skittered after him.

A man lay sprawled like a broken sparrow on the platform. Zeuke was just springing into his taxi, still grasping the heavy black automatic in one hand.

He whipped around, triggered a shot at Carver. The bullet made a mess of an aluminum architrave. Carver hit the floor. The taxi whined and belched black smoke, then shot away to be lost at once in the traffic pattern.

Carol panted up, blowing. "What—?"

"This will be on the D.L. now," Carver said. He bent down to look at the man's face, twisted lax against the flooring. "This is like old times. I've stood at Death Zero a few times before—"

But he didn't finish the sentence. The old times tag fitted here, too.

"Stan Eames," he said softly, whispering it so Carol didn't pick up the words. "He's dead. There's only one thing left for a ridforce operator to do now."

Carol surprised him. She slipped a little pack from her pocket and adjusted sensing lobes to Eames's temples.

"Quite a device," she said. "We call them carmos. Since Whitcliffe told us he's beginning their issue there's no harm you seeing one ahead of time." She leaned over and adjusted the controls, switched on. They both leaned back from the body and stared at each other as the little machine whickered softly away to itself, storing all the memories that had been Stanley Eames.

She outlined the carmo's function swiftly to Carver. "We can store information faster than an operator can absorb it. Machine and man, again." She was reacting very well, Carver decided. She might deal in death every day; but that was a scientific, laboratory, pickled sort of death and not the violent bloody painful death sprawled out here.

Down at ridforce headquarters the ruby light of Tentoki the demon lantern bearer would be blinking on a city map in a hovervan and a crew would be hurtling through the city with all afterburners on. But here at D.Z. a new little gadget sat like a spider, calmly plucking everything that rushing hovervan would want to know from the dead brain of the victim. Progress, that was.

"You didn't see—?"

"No," lied Carver, "Anyway, your carmo will give it to us. But why here? Why on this platform just now? That is always the question that tantalizes. Why is death found just where it is found?"

"This could be another in these senseless juvenile slayings," Carol said with distaste. "They're spreading."

"The kids are murdering for kicks

these days. I know. It stinks. But there's something wrong with our whole setup. Everybody's gone sour."

The conversation fitted the empty mood of the moment.

"I think I've felt that for some time. Most people do. But we all try not to think about it, really think, I mean. While we have the Shield (to whom be all the praise and thanks) what is there that can harm us? We just go on from day to day doing the same things, trying to make a shape out of life."

"Making a shape out of life." He watched the shrinking tape on the feed spool and the whirring discs of light spinning out the web that was taking a dead man's memories and recording them for a posterity he would never know. "That just about sums it up. But what sort of shape are we in? Where is the object in life? What are we all scurrying about doing? Where's our goal?"

"All I wanted to do was perfect this little gadget here. Well, I've done that. And now I feel let down."

"Perhaps everyone on the continent is tired —"

"Tired of living, you mean?"

"I don't believe that. Everyone is avid for life — all the frenetic activity of the city proves that. But, somehow, to me, what they're striving for isn't important. Or rather what they find isn't important. People want more out of life today than life can offer them."

The tape whickered to a slicing stop and the tiny green finish light went on. "That's all we'll get." Carol switched off.

He felt he had known Carol Burnham for a long time. He slipped the carmo in his pocket, looking at her.

He liked the way she held her head, her figure, the dark luster of her hair. She was genuine. She had a mind behind that smooth sweep of forehead capable of designing wondrous scientific instruments. But she could with equal facility worry over the straightness of her seams. A feminine electronic genius, yet!

Carver knew it was asking a lot; but he asked, just the same. In this quick and surprising closeness he felt towards her he tried to force a response; if he felt like this surely she must, too? "Look, Carol, I'm in trouble. And I'm going to ask you a favor. A really big one."

He pointed out over the city's lights to the sudden flare and screechingly torturing noise blasting in purple fury from the jets of a ridforce hovervan. "They're here."

"What's the favor?"

"The ridforce will run this poor chap through their ridmach. But I want to see what this is about."

"You want," Carol said with a queer jolt of her heart making the words soft and breathy, "you want to scan that carmo in your pocket? And you don't want me to tell?"

"Will you? Please?"

Feet rapped behind them. Ridforce security men burst out from the building onto the landing platform. Lines shoved his face and his gun under Carver's nose.

"What the hell are you doing here, Carver? What'd you kill this guy for?"

Some odd note in the three turbines of the hovervan told Carver the number he would see painted on the nose. Hovervan Number Three. Charlie Rawlinson began slinging his cameras into action as the stretcher crew bundled out.

"Come on, Carver, cough it out!"

"I didn't kill him, Lines, as a quick ridmach check will show. And take your bloody great gun out of my face!"

Lines' face altered subtly in its planes and shadows. Then, before he could speak, Alec Durlston started to climb down from the hovering van. Carol gripped Carver's arm.

"I can vouch for that, Lines," she said firmly. "We'd just seen Whitcliffe and then found this poor man. And I'm late—"

Carver liked the way she'd brought Whitcliffe's name in. He didn't like the fact that she knew Lines.

"I see," said Lines, resenting having to say it. "Well, you needn't hang about here any longer. If we need your evidence we'll contact you."

Carver turned to Carol. "Let's be going, then. I owe you a coffee."

"You do," she said as they dialed a hovertaxi. "And you also owe me an explanation. I want it—all of it!"

## VIII

She didn't get all of it, of course. But Carver found himself telling her much more than he had imagined he would.

In this city of sin there were

plenty of places where couples could go for seclusion and still remain perfectly respectable. In the cheap, much-used room, Carver sat on the bed and drank auto-vended coffee.

Carol said: "So you think some one is after you because you slipped up on a ridmach report? That's preposterous!"

"I didn't say I had slipped up, just that Lines thinks so. He's dangerous. And the man who committed murder back there on the landing platform is mixed up in this."

"You said you hadn't seen him!"

"I hope you can understand why."

"I suppose you realize that Lines will tie me in with your nefarious activities now."

"No!" He was shattered. "He couldn't!"

"You don't know Lines."

"I can guess."

He took out the carmo and lay back on the bed. Carol leaned over him to switch on. As she pressed the start button her dusky hair fell across his face. Her perfume enclosed him like a tent.

"Just find something that will get us out of this mess," she whispered. "Luck, Robin!"

He hadn't wanted to involve anyone else in whatever was going on; but now Carol had seen very clearly that she had involved herself. Doing that had been terrifyingly easy. And he liked her more than anyone. Wendy? Complications could ensue there . . .

Complications like that of childbirth, darkness and warmth and soft caressing comfort in the reassuringly

rhythmic circle of unity and then violent, ugly movement, dispelling, struggling, dryness and harshness and a loss of comforting darkness to a brilliant sword of agony. The first cry . . .

The first cry, but not the last. Never the last.

Carver skipped through Stanley Eames' birth and upbringing and scanned perfunctorily through to the first years of Eames' service as an agent of the Americas. An odd wry nostalgia possessed him as familiar faces and scenes passed before his scrutinizing eyes, behind the eyes of Stan Eames. There had been three of them. Three buddies. three men dedicated to all the ideals of the perfect AA man.

Stan Eames . . .

Chris Mellor . . .

Robin Carver.

*So that's how I looked then! Too young and fresh and cocky by half!*

Carver skipped on ahead through Eames' memories, working his way in from the birth end of the spectrum, as Carol had said he would.

He had forgotten nothing of the days with Eames and Mellor as an agent of the Americas. Stan Eames had forgotten nothing either. Their two reports of facts tallied microscopically. But the difference in interpretation—the way Eames looked at their problems, the nuances he had picked up that Carver had missed and those he had missed that Carver had seen—these other dimensions and colorings of experience rendered their two reactions

in totally different lights. A sobering thought, almost ominous. Even eidetic memories could not unfailingly tailor the emotions of memories, only blank off what could not be remembered without shame.

This personal comparison of two eidetic memories in one person's brain was surely setting some new record?

Old friends crossed the stage of remembrance as those three friends renished out their training schedules. Carver deliberately bypassed the sick period in his own life, knowing Eames' sympathetic reactions could not be borne now.

When he rejoined, Eames stood trim and straight before an expectant line of newly-fledged AA men. Now they would run their finals with trouble and strife shot at them from all angles by men like Stan Eames and Chris Mellor and Robin—No; no more for Carver. By this time along Eames' life-line he was marked 'Unstable'.

"You have been posted here to polish up on your finals." Eames glared along the ranks—a friendly glare, but one which said he was hell-on-wheels to anyone who thought they could stay out of line. "You are now agents of the Americas. This means you are dedicated through your own free choice to one objective in life. That sole and single objective is the continuance in being of the Shield. That and nothing more."

Stan Eames was thinking of the time he had stood in ranks and heard this from a scarred and veteran agent.

"You protect the Shield. You protect the Shield above and beyond the call of any mundane duty, to the limits of endurance—and beyond. If the continuance in being of the Shield demands your lives they will be given willingly. Gladly. Gratefully."

*As Stan gave his life an hour or so ago . . .*

"Some of you may have thought of yourselves as a kind of modern continuation of the old G-men. This is not so. You do not serve the government. You serve only to protect the Shield. The interests of the government are secondary to the interests of the Shield—which are the interests both of the country and the government."

Within the context of modern life, safe and secure behind the Shield, where governments could operate only within that framework for life, this made simple common sense. No one thought to question it. Anyway, what questions could you ask? The Shield made life in this modern thermonuclear warfare dominated world possible and pleasant. And no government had been able to guarantee that before the Shield.

Women didn't mind having babies after the Shield.

And they didn't worry over the radioactive content of the milk they fed them.

And men knew their sons would never have to face either the holocaust of total war or the equally death-dealing finality of a limited brushfire war.

The Shield was worth fighting for, far more than the so-called Peace that frittered away the nerves and robbed the taxpayers' pockets for armaments that ever more terrified in their complexity and inhumanity of destruction.

There had been opposition to the Shield in its early days, incredible though that now seemed. The ever-hungry warmongers had protested bitterly that no such thing as a total defense had or ever could exist.

But the Shield proved them wrong. Most countries of the world now either possessed nuclear weapons or knew where to obtain them. Some countries had nobly renounced the bomb or refused to countenance its incorporation into their defense systems.

But a few countries had tried the old trick of sliding thermonuclear bombs in tiny fragments through the country's customs, camouflaged in radiological equipment or souvenirs or any of a hundred other unlikely places.

The first agents of the Americas picked those up. The bureau became strong fighting that sort of challenge. Nothing like that existed now. As far as anyone knew, the world lived peacefully together outside the Shield. Not that people bothered much about what happened outside the Shield.

But there were still weird off-beat conspiracies to uncover, nuts who wanted to assassinate the president or blow up the Shield's generators or commit any of the crimes battle-starved men of action are prone to.

On the trail of one such con-

spiracy Stan Eames and Chris Mellor were working with a girl operative, Rusty Lowke. Eames was back-up man. Rusty was a tall, lanky girl, angular-faced and with a karate throw that could break a bull's neck.

Watching and waiting with his two comrades, Carver felt a heart-stopping regret that the old days had gone. Here the three of them were again working on a case. He didn't forget that he had been traditionally a singleton; now he remembered the good times they'd had together.

"It's all fixed," Rusty said buoyantly as their hovercar souged through the traffic lanes. "We'll be admitted without trouble. Just try to act the tough heavies of sin city — it shouldn't be too tough."

"Compliments, yet," said Mellor, smiling.

The hovercar took them down to a landing platform perched high against a craggy building. At once they plunged into a world of luxury and ostentatious good-living they despised — and that Carver recognized with a sudden jump of excitement.

He went hidden behind the watchful eyes of Stan Eames into that familiar over-ripe world of pleasure . . . where very soon now Harry would be bringing Julie Farish and the girls.

**“Y**our partner doesn't seem to be around, Chris.” Stan Eames held Rusty's elbow as they went through the door.

“It was thoughtful of the bureau to assign me a girl friend to make

up the foursome.” Chris Mellor stared around with his friendly smile.

Past the waiting room they went, the room where soon Julie would wait, pushing her shoes off to be more comfortable. Up to the ebon door they went, the door flaunting its silver escutcheon and its gorgeously barbaric golden bolt heads and flanges.

Carver waited in the mind of Stan Eames, knowing that here lay his chance to understand what had been happening to him.

Here in this lavish room license held full sway. All the giggling paraphernalia of luxurious orgies was old stuff to Carver; he'd seen it many times before. He could feel the same distaste as Eames, as the agent stared about on the scintillating costumes, the flash of white flesh, the bewildering coruscations of jewels, the whole sybaritically organized pleasure palace. Giggle-gas balloons plopped and Eames moved away, drawing Rusty with him, so that for a space they lost Mellor.

When Zeuke approached, Carver was not surprised.

“The meeting will take place shortly,” Zeuke said. The gun didn't show more than a half-hairsbreadth beneath the impeccable suit. That was exactly a half-hairsbreadth too much for an agent.

“Thanks.”

Zeuke moved away. The two agents stared upon the animated throng and the miasma of smoke and perfume, the heady scents of rare wines and costly cigars, the whole whing-ding shooting match that represented life as it was lived

in this day and age on this continent.

"Look at all the fat slob." Eames kept a politely bland smile on his face. "Living high on the hog, like opulent princes in the city."

"Living," said Mellor from behind them. "Living at all because of the Shield. If the Shield — if — well, they'd turn into a pack of insanely screaming fear-crazed lunatics."

"You're only alive by the grace of the Shield (to whom all glory and honor and gratitude." A new voice spoke from beside Mellor, soft and mellifluous — a voice Carver knew! And still Stan Eames did not turn around.

"We don't refer to the Shield in lay terms among ourselves," Mellor said gently.

Eames began to turn around. Rusty was smiling warmly, welcoming the new girl.

"Don't worry about Chris. We all have to learn."

"Of course." And then Eames had turned fully about, and there was Wendy.

Only, of course, it wasn't Wendy. Carver knew it wasn't. Wendy had been at the Home when this party took place. She was there now, in the present that encompassed this party, vouched for by the mistresses. This girl in her demurely-outrageous Minoan dress was *not* Wendy. She couldn't be.

Could she?

"This is Zoe Brown," said Mellor.

Zoe Brown took Stan Eames' hand in a friendly grip, looking up at him. A frown dashed abruptly

across her face. Her grip slackened and then tightened. Her eyes clouded and she shivered her bare shoulders.

"What is it, Zoe?"

"Nothing. I — just thought — I haven't met you before, have I? Well, then, I couldn't have recognized you."

But she looked troubled.

Looking at her out of the eyes of Stan Eames, Carver tried to hold on to that central theme. This girl was not, could not be Wendy.

Zoe said: "So we're here because Rusty convinced her contact we're deep degenerate crooks of the underworld."

"Something like that, Zoe. All you do is stick with me. You're here to learn. There may be an assignment, too."

Unobtrusively, people drifted from the hectic perfume-washed atmosphere of the party into a smaller rear room where chairs faced a small stage. Eames looked around at the people waiting. So, too, did Robin Carver. He recognized Zeuke and the other man with him who would soon dance out of the ebon door with Zoe Brown. Most of these people looked respectable and all looked prosperous but Carver understood very well they purveyed vice. They represented a cross-section of the city's vice rings, the syndicates. The party outside afforded gay camouflage.

A man walked briskly in, jumped onto the stage and waited for silence.

Staring through a dead man's eyes at him, Carver felt another

little piece drop into this deadly jigsaw. It was Lines.

Lines said: "You've been asked here tonight to hear a proposition of mutual benefit. You've been taken care of?"

A rumble signified assent. A flashy, thin-faced shark stood up abruptly. "We've had the fun and games. What about the business?"

"You all know business is bad lately. Oh, sure, grown-ups still patronize your — ah — wares. But what about the kids?"

What the meeting thought about teenagers didn't bear repetition. They all agreed that the kids just were not paying the same rich rewards as previously.

"The reason —" Lines overrode the comments — "is that they have found a new kick. They are getting hopped on murder!"

He quieted their protests. "Oh, not so many. Not a lot — yet! But we know unexplained murders are being committed on a rising scale. A gang of kids go out on the city, fin a mug, a non-personality, and they kill him. A lot share in that experience. A lot more share in it second-hand. They have their ways. They seem to derive satisfaction from the smell of death. It gets into their blood."

"That's an old phenomenon," observed a slim triggerman by the door. "It feels good to kill."

"And the cops aren't doing a goddam thing."

"How can they?" Lines smiled evilly. "These killings are aimless, motiveless. But they bring satisfac-

tion to the killers, satiating some yearning, some desire, that your businesses fail to provide."

They didn't like that.

"What should we do then?" demanded the shark nastily. "Provide goons to be killed off if you buy a ticket?"

"Not quite!" The snap in Lines' voice and his tone shook them. They stared at him wonderingly.

"What is this?" demanded a flushed man from the back. "If you're going to offer us humanoid robots to be killed off for kicks, think again. We tried that. It didn't work."

Lines quieted the hubbub. Speaking calmly, he explained what he intended to do.

He brought his listeners manna from their own evil heaven. Added up, it was very simple. Lines was offering these dregs of the city's vice empires the opportunity to buy carmos — R.R.I.D.'s — and hire them out. The kids — anybody for that matter — could penetrate into the mind of a person *as that person was murdered*.

That was what ridforce operators did. They were trained for the job. Now Lines proposed letting loose a flood of ridmechs in the city so that youngsters could drug themselves with the sensations of death.

The scheme made Carver feel sick.

Of course, Lines called the carmos merely devices. He mentioned no names and quoted mythical scientific contacts.

Eames reacted with profound shock. Mellor said softly: "This



must be just about the ultimate in vicarious experiences!"

The meeting broke up with promises made and delivery schedules tentatively organized. This, then, explained what Zeuke and Lines had been up to, the conversation with Whitcliffe, the thousand carnos missing from the stockrooms, Carol's vague suspicions. The forensic science headquarters of the police were being used to manufacture a new and vicious form of pleasure for the underworld the police were sworn to destroy.

And Whitcliffe — the head of riddance — had to be a partner in this diabolical scheme!

## IX

On the bed this strange man Rob in Carver lay breathing in long shallow breaths. Sitting here, she had tried to understand herself and follow her reasons for doing what she had. She had for the moment overcome the fear that had shaken her brutally when she envisaged what Lines would do when he found out she had lied to him. Even Whitcliffe could not save her then.

The very rapidity of events since she had met Carver had left her little time to think. Now she found herself thinking of Carver. Why was she attracted to him in a way that all of Alec Durlston's undoubted masculine charms could not match? She wanted to know Carver better. She wanted —

The door handle moved.

She wrenched her body around to face the door, one hand at her

throat. No one could open that door apart from herself and Carver. The ident key lay in his pocket. Without that the door was sacrosanct.

But the door handle moved. It turned, and a slit of light slashed across the carpet.

She stifled her cry. Knowing the risk she was making Carver take only made her actions more precise as she pressed the green finish button and switched off the carmo. The sizzling of the tapes died to silence.

Into that silence the creak of the door and the hoarse suppressed breathing of the man slowly pushing his way in broke with an ugly violence.

Back in the memories of a dead man, the meeting had broken up. They were circulating about the party, in it and yet not of it.

"You saw those two gorillas flanking the stage, Zoe?" Mellor spoke gently.

"Yes. Ugly customers."

"I think Rusty will have to work on the character who did the talking. Will you see what you can get out of his two bodyguards?"

She made a face — the sort of face Wendy used to make when Carver reminded her the last day of holidays was over — but nodded. "All right. I'll see what Mata Hari can do. You'll be around, though? Just in case."

"I'll be around, Zoe."

This was a rotten sort of business. But it had to be accepted if the country were to be kept clean. Eames watched Zoe Brown move gracefully through the throng, per-

factly composed, laughing gaily as she ducked giggle-gas balloons, kicking free of multi-colored ribbons. She'd do. She was an agent of the Americas on a job.

The two bodyguards moved towards a giggling mass of men and women. Zoe disappeared into the hijinks at their side. Eames didn't know one of those men was called Zeuke, he didn't know that the girl Zoe would soon prance through the ebon door with them to be momentarily seen by Julie Farish as Pritchard dragged her away.

The whole scene wavered like a film waved beneath water. The noise dimmed. The scents faded. He struggled wildly to return, to recreate the moment passed, to inhabit once again the mind of Stan Eames. Then the blackness and the whorls of dark-light anti-color whirled about him.

Someone was shaking his shoulder gently. A hand was across his mouth, the fingers and thumb biting between his teeth, stretching the flesh. A voice whispered desperately.

"Wake up, Robin! For God's sake come back!"

In automatic response he tried to speak but the hand over his mouth dug in more cruelly. The speaker's lips touched his ear, the words barely heard.

"I had to bring you back! You're Robin Carver. You're in a room with me, Carol Burnham — and there's a man breaking in the door!"

**H**e put a hand up and caught her arm. He pressed, hard, three times. Then he moved the hand to

her fingers over his lips. Slowly, the gripping constriction eased.

Her head bent over him.

"I'm okay. I'm Robin Carver. A man — breaking in?"

He looked at the door past the curve of her shoulder.

A sliver of light fell athwart the carpet.

Slowly, inch by inch, the light broadened. The goon was taking no chances of disturbing them.

"This might be just the regular Caves of Joy routine," he whispered harshly. "But — it might not."

Carefully he crawled out of the bed and moved noiselessly towards the door. One second he had been circulating at an orgy and searching for signs of a conspiracy; the next he was creeping out of bed in a darkened room about to deal with an intruder. They'd said you had to be flexible to be a ridforce operator; but this type of flexibility was more suited to an agent of the Americas.

He reached the door and stood quite still behind it.

With spine-jolting brutality the door cracked open. Tear-jerking light splashed acridly across the bed. Bunched muscles beneath dark coat over broad gorilla shoulders moved into the room, black-outlined and menacing, between Carver and the light. He could hear the hoarse hacking breathing and see light splintering from the hairs on the gorilla's necks and ears.

"Awri! Git outta the bed!"

This wasn't Zeuke. This was his companion. This was the man Zoe Brown had been ordered to investigate — and just how had that turn-

ed out? What was Zoe Brown doing now?

"What's going on!" Carol didn't need to put on an act. She was scared right through. "He's got a gun!" But she still had guts enough to scream a warning.

Carver reached around the gorilla's back and cut the edge of his palm down on the man's wrist, just where the bones jutted, just where it hurts the most. Before the gorilla's sharp yelp of pain cut through Carol's words, before the gun thunked to the ground, Carver cut the goon across the side of his neck with the edge. For good measure, he kicked him as he went down, in the place where it would do the most good. The gunman sprawled on the carpet — out.

Carol breathed. "You don't waste much time."

Carver bent, picked up the gun. "Can't afford to." He checked the weapon. Solid projectile automatic. A load of old-fashioned slobs he'd tangled with this time, at that. "Come on. This place is blown."

"Don't forget the carmo." She dropped it into her purse. "I've never seen anyone come out of a penetration so fast before."

"You have to adapt. You had good reason to drag me out. Anyway, I found out what I want to know — until the next stage. I didn't go through to Stan's death . . ."

Out on the landing they avoided the elevator shaft and skipped down the first flight. Carol paused, a hand to her side.

A bullet splashed against the plastic panelling above them.

The second bullet would have passed clean through Carol if Carver hadn't head-down charged her back out of the line of fire from the stair landing beneath.

Through the balustrade Carver could see part of the arm and shoulder of the gunman below. It wasn't Zeuke. He pushed the gun down, fired, then whipped around the corner of the stairs fast, jumping down five at a time, to slam the gun-butt into the man's chin as he sagged, clasping his shattered shoulder. Carver called back up the stairs:

"Come on, Carol! Snap it up. I want this goon."

They manhandled the unconscious thug into the elevator and rode him down to the first landing-platform floor. Only when he had dialed a robo-taxi and dumped the man in, with Carol and himself squashed on the opposite seat, could he relax.

"These men have been sent by Lines to kill us. When he scanned Eames' memories he found out about me — enough to want me dead."

"But why? You must have —"

"I must have nothing. You won't understand this; but I'll tell you what I haven't told a living soul for years. I used to be an agent of the Americas. Oh, don't gape! You haven't heard of them; but Lines has. He'll think I'm still working for the bureau. And we're opposed to what he's doing." Carver told Carol what was intended for her carmos. She listened in shocked and hostile silence.



"But this means *Whitcliffe* is behind it!" she burst out when he had finished. She was very frightened. "He's an arch criminal. No! It's impossible!"

"I'm afraid it isn't."

"I can't believe it! And yet I think you wouldn't lie to me."

"Not any more, Carol. I admire you more than — no, there's no time for that now. I've a job to do. We must find you a safe hideout and then —"

"No."

"Huh?"

"I said no."

"I know you said no. No to what?"

"I'm not hiding out."

"Well, for gosh sakes! You can't go traipsing about with me! I've brought you enough grief already."

"I'm in this now. I slaved my guts out creating those carmos for *Whitcliffe* — all for what? So he could do this filthy thing with them! Oh, no, Robin. I'm seeing this thing through!"

"It all makes sense, though. I've always shied away from those last few particles of time when the victim dies. But I haven't been unaware of the fascination and the dark pull of experiencing death."

"These senseless slayings all over the city *Whitcliffe* had been so worried about — people have gone sour, especially the youngsters. And the experience they get of killing someone is surely only a pale reflection of that they get being killed. That's an old psychological conundrum."

The man on the opposite seat

groaned and stirred. Carver prodded him with his own gun.

"Wake up, sonny. Where is Whitcliffe?"

"Get lost, mac. I ain't gonna tell you." The gorilla shifted around, winced as the pain hit him.

Carver thrust his face up to the other's, gripping his collar in a tightly bunched fist. He felt absolutely ruthless. "You know what businesses we're in. We make dead men tell tales! I want to know where Whitcliffe is, and if you know you'll tell me. Otherwise I shall kill you and find out for myself the easy way. It's your choice — mac."

Staring down with a shifty illumination from the city parti-coloring her face, Carol knew Carver would do it, too.

Whitcliffe's man knew that too. He could see it in Carver's eyes. "I dunno where he went."

"That can be checked, too. After you're dead."

Carver began to wonder what it would be like to be in the mind of a victim he killed himself — victim and executioner in one.

The guard broke.

"You bastard," he began, crying with the wrath of being beaten.

Carver flicked a backhand across the fellow's mouth. "Keep your filthy sewer-mouth to yourself. There is a lady present. Talk!"

"New Mexico. That's where he's gone. Somewhere in New Mexico."

Carol bent down. "But where? Where in New Mexico?"

"I don't know. And that's the truth. Things are ready to start! That's all I know. Don't kill me!"

Carver dialed the taxi to a stand. "Leave him," he told Carol, and slugged the guard again. He caught her arm. They hurried away. "Come on Carol," Carver said.

Glancing at the line of his jaw, Carol shivered.

## X

Los Alamos no longer looked as it had when men tentatively tinkered with the inner fires of matter here. Above the surface showed only the shallow rounded dome of a fallout shelter elevator shaft. They stood in the dust and coolness of the night, their hired hovercar silent behind them, staring and wondering at that simple dome.

Carol caught her breath. "And you mean it's here? Right under our feet now? Incredible!"

"We've been spotted on radar and seismic alarms by now. Pretty soon the welcoming committee will call on us. Just remember; act naturally, show no wavering. We must convince them we know what we're talking about."

"I'm glad we had that meal," Carol observed as though irrelevantly. "I'm faint enough as it is."

Carver pressed her arm. "You're going to be all right, I promise."

The searchlight pinned them to the ground. Their shadows streamed distorted behind them. They waited as men moved towards them, the glimmer of helmets, weapons and uncompromising eyes surrounding them.

"You two! Don't move." The voice came chill and impersonal;

but not loaded with hate or anger. "What are you doing here? Didn't you read the warning notices?"

"Yes." Carver spoke strongly. "Is Morgan still around?"

A pause.

The night breathed quietly around them, warmly scented, a part of normal life and yet now remote, miles away from the situation that had developed here and that could not now halt this side of culmination. The man sighed. "He's here. Who are you?"

"An old friend. Just say I must speak to him about what you are doing here. About what lies beneath us — and about a very present peril."

As they went down in the elevator Carol clung to Carver. "Who is Morgan? What did you mean?"

"Morgan is my old chief. He's a hard man, but fair. His job insures he'll listen to me."

Paneled in plastic and concrete, the underground labyrinth was quickly traversed. Soon they reached Morgan's office.

Carver stared about with a wry twitch to his lips, savoring the feel and atmosphere of the place. It hadn't changed. Neither had Morgan to outward seeming.

"So it's you, Robin." Morgan stood up and reached out a hand. Carver shook and once again the old feeling returned. He knew he had no time now to indulge in nostalgia — or ironic self-pity, or even a comradely spirit of revenge and triumph. He could only do his job.

Even if Morgan and the bureau had thrown him out.

"It's a long story, Morg. First thing — has Whitcliffe been here? Have you got foolproof tabs on him?"

"Whitcliffe? Of course he's here. What's the story, Robin? It had better be good."

"Oh, it's good. But just put a triple check on Whitcliffe."

"Why the hell should I?" Morgan flashed sarcasm. "Because you say so? A man who was found unstable by the bureau and now, years afterwards, comes suddenly back demanding it? Who are you compared with Whitcliffe?"

"Umm," said Carver, too concerned with what he must do to feel hurt. "I'll just say this. You'll not only put a triple check on Whitcliffe — you'll probably send out a five-star red alert to arrest before I'm halfway through."

Morgan grunted scornfully; but he lay back in his chair.

Carver told him the lot. Everything. He kept nothing back. In one very real way this was a catharsis of his spirit, a confession, a dumping of his problem onto the capable shoulders of a man he knew would know the answers.

When he reached the point where Whitcliffe was more than suspected of selling carmos illegally Morgan leaned forward and pressed his call button. "Five-star red alert. Whitcliffe. On the double. I want him in this office in five minutes." He glowered at Carver. "Go on."

A red light blinked on a six by four panel at the side. An aide punched the button and the light

went out. He looked up quickly. "That's odd, sir. Alarm in section three, but no response from the visuals or audios."

"Check it out, Rod. Personally," ordered Morgan.

The aide rose and left the office.

Carver went on: "Whitcliffe's use of carmos to recruit tough and fellow-travelers who wouldn't think too much and his dipping into the vice empires, plus one or two items I'd picked up here and there, convinced me that Whitcliffe was out to smash the Shield. Although I was forced to leave Stan Eames early I formed the idea that Chris Mellor, acting on your orders, suspected Lines. Stan was back-up man. He didn't know all that Chris knew—that's the way it figured. And Lines led right back to Whitcliffe."

"We've had quite a few nut cases since you left, Robin. These organized gangs trying to destroy the Shield believe they are right and we are wrong. They are the most diabolically dangerous groups in existence. And now you tell me Whitcliffe is leading one of them!"

Carol sat and listened, and the bottom dropped out of her world.

Her first reaction was to whisper: "You mean the Shield is generated from here? We're sitting right where the Shield (May all glory never cease) was born."

Carver smiled at her. "The Shield protects the Americas from nuclear attack completely, Carol. But the electromagnetic and radiation sheaths have to be generated somewhere. They must have a locus. You're sitting right in the heart of that now."

She gripped the arms of her formfit so tightly they squirmed trying to adjust to her configuration. "And Whitcliffe, the man I admired above all others. He's actually trying to destroy it all! It just doesn't make sense!"

"There's one other item you should know, Robin." Morgan rose and paced. "Perhaps I should have told you; but you might have said no."

Carver wondered what on earth his old chief was maundering about. And it was about time Whitcliffe was brought in by the guards.

"That girl you saw, Zoe Brown..."

"Yes?" But he thought he knew now.

"She was—uh—well I guess you know Chris recommended the Home on my orders. The mistresses are all agents. That's a training school for agents of the Americas, Robin, under cover of being a normal Home renowned over the continent. You see—"

Carver felt very peculiar. A hoarse chuckling escaped him. "I told myself! I should have known no other girl could be quite like that!"

"Wendy reached the Home just before you called. The rocket zoomed her out again as soon as you'd left. We'd kept tabs on you as soon as our agent in ridforce reported that you'd gone in on the Farish penetration. We've been piecing together all the items about this group for some time. But it never occurred to me that Whitcliffe himself could be the man behind it."

The thing that stuck in Carver's mind was a warm, a proud, a tre-

mendously happy feeling that his only daughter was an agent of the Americas. She was a good egg—and he damned well had recognized her! Only the cunning and expertise of the bureau had fooled him. Zoe Brown! Nuts!

"I'd like to thank you, Robin, for not reporting back that you'd seen Chris Mellor. It could have been unfortunate. As it was, they got Stan."

Morgan looked annoyed. "What's happened to Rod? And where's Whitcliffe? Check on it, Brett."

As the aide reached the door it smashed open, and two guards stumbled through supporting the drooping body of a man.

For a moment Carver did not recognize Chris Mellor.

Mellor looked ghastly, his waxy face all drawn down with pain and his eyes glaring from pits of bruised flesh. From his side where one hand pressed unavailingly, the dark bright blood seeped down.

"Whitcliffe," he managed to gasp before they eased him into a formfit. "That devil Lines has double-crossed us. They're here! In the machine room! They're going—going to blow it—" His head lolled and blood spittled his lips.

Morgan headed the rush for the door with a snapped word: "Full alarm! And get help for Chris!"

In the elevator dropping through a hundred floors a small hand reached out and laid pressing fingers along Carver's bicep. He turned in shocked surprise to see Carol staring large-eyed up at him.

"What—?" he began. Then:

"Sure. You're entitled to be in on this. Just keep out of the way of trouble."

She leaned against him. Her emotions had been so tangled and torn lately she felt the crying need of someone in whom to seek rest. She knew now she didn't care what Robin Carver looked like. It was what he was inside himself that mattered. Alec Durlston's physical allure paled to nothing beside that.

The elevator halted and the gates slid open into actinic light. They entered the machine room of the Shield.

The Shield, an electromagnetic radiation creating a field of force sheathing the entire Americas, consumed energy in quantities commensurate with its abilities to check and nullify any weapon, thermonuclear or otherwise, thrown against the western hemisphere. It had saved mankind from itself. It had rendered war impossible. All the energy men could give it would be given willingly, gladly, at whatever cost. So it was Carol stared out upon only a small portion of the complex and echoingly vast underground structure that produced the Shield. No single eye could encompass an entirety that colossal dynamo. Yet she felt bewildered, stunned, cowed and crushed by the skyscraper tall units, the unending vistas of panels, the dwindling perspectives. Here power was a live thing.

"How can they hope to blow all this up?" she whispered to Carver, pressing eagerly on.

"A thermonuclear bomb in the right place will destroy the heart and



brain." His face shadowed with impending disaster. "After that, there will be no more Shield."

Men's shadows flitted between the mechanical colossi on every hand. The quick hateful spitting of weapons crackled past the edifices of electronic engineering.

Morgan shouted, hard and high, "We must stop them! Spread out! Shoot to kill! Where the devil is Whitcliffe?"

This work was of the type Carver had once trained with supreme dedication to perform as a perfect fighting machine. He knew as well as any man present that he fought to preserve the world in peace.

A whey-faced guard with a dangling arm stumbled up. "They're in section four! They've set up a defense and they're working away in there!"

"Assembling the bomb." Morgan cursed. Everyone rushed towards section four.

"At least," offered Carver running beside Morgan. "We have them boxed in. They won't get away now. So they can't detonate the bomb—"

"Don't count on it, Robin. These nuts all have the suicide streak. Good Lord above, man! They must have! Otherwise they wouldn't be crazy enough to blow up the Shield!"

## XI

Deep in section four the unmistakable stink of gunsmoke hung in the air as men fought to get through to where other men were busy concocting an infernal device

that would blast the heart and brains of the Shield. The bureau men began to fight their way in. Men screamed and died. The air thickened. The clanging reverberations of automatic weapons fired between resonant metal walls stung the eardrums.

Crouched down behind a block of instruments, Morgan and Carver watched as attack after attack failed. From behind them Carol said: "D'you think Whitcliffe will listen to reason? Let me talk to him!"

"But—" said Morgan.

"It's a chance." Carver slid his gun out and dropped it on the floor. "I'll go in with Carol. They know us and we know them. They might listen to a proposition. Somehow I can't envision Whitcliffe in the suicide role. It doesn't add up to the estimate I've formed of the man."

"It just can't be Whitcliffe," Carol said stubbornly. "He had everything to live for! Smashing the Shield—oh, God, what a hideous thought! I must speak to him!"

The truce talk was arranged with surprising ease. Soon Carol and Carver, watched by a glowering Morgan and a mass of guards, walked steadily towards the inner entrance to section four, carrying a white tissue on a transistor portable's telescopic aerial.

"I feel like a fool walking in like this," said Carver in a low voice.

"So do I. But Whitcliffe will respect a white flag."

"Sure he will. It's giving him time to complete the assembly and trigger mechanism of the bomb."

Expectedly, Lines met them. He

must have flown in and reported direct to Whitcliffe as soon as his men lost Carver and Carol. Zeuke was with him. Carver restrained the desire to punch them both on the noses. That pleasure would come later. "Where's Whitcliffe?"

"I ought to put a bullet in you here and now, Carver." Lines looked as though the sight of Carver made him sick. "I suppose it's your doing the plan's gone wrong?" He suddenly struck out with his gun, aiming to slash the sight down Carver's cheek. Carver leaned his head back. Then he kicked Lines.

"All right, Zeuke!" Carver's hand went up as Zeuke's right forefinger whitened on the trigger. "He had that coming! But we're here under a flag of truce." Lines lay on the floor, groaning and vomiting. "Let's get to Whitcliffe right away."

Zeuke looked uncertain. Then Whitcliffe's calm, unemotional voice reached them. "Bring Carver along here, Zeuke. And Doctor Burnham, too. I must admit to a little surprise at your presence, Doctor."

They left Lines lying on the floor. The others went with Whitcliffe and the truce party towards the inner sections of four, where Whitcliffe halted them before a small metal door. Beyond that door, Carver guessed, techs were hard at work assembling the bomb and its trigger.

"It seems we have reached an impasse," Carver began. "You can't get away. You can't let that bomb off without killing yourselves — and I don't think you're that foolish."

"I might just be stupid enough to do that, Carver."

Then Carol could not stop herself from bursting in passionately with: "What did you sell my carmos to those horrible people for, Whitcliffe? I trusted in you, believed in you, admired you! And then — and then you do a filthy despicable thing like that. Why?"

"Your youthful sincerity is very refreshing —" Whitcliffe began with the palest of smiles.

"No, Whitcliffe!" shouted Carol. "That won't do any more! Don't you understand? You meant everything that was good and fine to me, a man working to help humanity, working to try to make a better place of the world. And then you pander to the lowest, most debased instincts of a depraved mind!"

"Easy, girl." Whitcliffe moved away. At his side metal tanks of cryotron-cooling helium rose to the ceiling. "Let me try to explain. And this will answer your ultimatum, Carver."

"Go on."

"First of all, I am not insane. I am as well aware as any of you what the Shield has meant in the past to this country and to the world. It gave us peace. It gave us a breathing space, a time to free the shackles of fear from our minds. The countries from Alaska to the Horn, which we call the Americas, were shielded from death and destruction that threatened to rend us from Outside."

"This does not explain why you sold carmos —"

"Listen, girl!" For the first time in her life Carol saw and heard Whitcliffe losing some of that fa-

mous dry composure. He was reacting almost as a normal man to a stress that would have crushed anyone of lesser fiber. And then she castigated herself for thinking of Whitcliffe in the old way . . .

"To deal with this point of the R.R.I.D.'s first. You all know that the Withits, the Slashers, the hosts of other teenage gangs have been enjoying themselves killing innocent people. A savage drenching in blood has given them a ghastly self-satisfaction. Well—I sought to stop that directly, and at source. If I supplied carmos to these youngsters they would revel in the vicarious delights of murder and killing. And they would stop actual violence for themselves." He held up a silencing hand. "It may have been giving in to trends we are sworn to oppose. But I was working against time. It served its purpose in curbing the fires of violence that are due to break over the country—unless the Shield is torn down."

"Tear down the Shield? Take away our sole defense?"

"Yes! Break down the Shield. Open up this continent once more to the common intercourse of the whole world! That is my dream—and my sworn intention!"

Carver felt bewilderment sweep over him like the thunderous blast of a storm whirling away his wits. "But how?"

"How can we stop this country from sinking into final degradation and decadence? You all know the filthy practices that are going on. The murders, the seething violence.

Not only in the city—where, thank God, we can exercise a measure of control—but now seeping out into the clean countryside. We are so introverted, so much a part of our own cesspit that we are all doomed—unless we can let in the clean air of the outside world!"

"I grant you we're a pretty unpleasant lot," Carver said slowly. "I've been feeling that now for some time. So has Carol and a whole lot of other people. But there are still plenty of decent citizens. How does allowing the other nations of the world the opportunity to blow us to pieces help?"

"When China attained nuclear power many people felt like slitting their throats ahead of time. But there were others who did something about it. Oh, not wars. Wars, these thermonuclear days, are suicide. Compromise! Working out solutions. An understanding of the other fellow, no matter what his color or race or creed—and if this sounds like a corny old sermon, remember that all truths tend to become that—because people are too frightened or too lazy and bored to do anything about them. If you act on a truth it is no longer boring or a tired old sermon. Only those truths that are not acted upon become that because they have to be repeated again and again."

"You mean the outside is at peace?" asked Carol.

"It has been for years. A global communications network, mutual aid programs, a determination to make this earth support every one of its sons and daughters in a decent

state of life—all these things have come together to make the outside a pretty livable place. There are still problems. But over the years we've been sheltering behind our Shield the world has passed us by. These are self-evident truths to anyone who looked for them. But our people dared not go outside the Shield to seek, because to do so exposed them. And their first thought when overseas was to return as soon as possible behind the comfort of the Shield."

Carol remembered the aircraft she had seen returning to the continent and coming home through the Shield. The truth Whitcliffe was speaking broke over her in all its fury. She—all of them—had been wrong!

"We've been wrong all along, then?"

"It won't be easy to change your mind; but we will change the minds of all people—who will henceforth never have to cower behind an impregnable defense against a non-existent terror."

Carver moved forward. "This sounds all fine and dandy, Whitcliffe. But to me it sounds like treason!"

Whitcliffe's face showed sadly the feelings he had hitherto kept tightly bottled up. "Can't you believe me, Carver? But for your meddling—in a cause in which you believed and for which I admire you—we would have succeeded."

"What about the murders committed to keep me from finding out?"

"I bow my head. Lines was responsible for the violence; but in the ultimate assessment I must take the blame."

"At least you're honest! I don't envy any man who takes the responsibility for Lines."

Zeuke made an angry step forward, like a bull tossing its horns in an ancient arena.

"Sometimes even the best of intentions must be pursued with crooked tools."

Carver brushed that aside. He had to. What Whitcliffe was telling him meant more than a nice discussion of moral points. It touched upon the continuance of two different worlds: the world he had known all his life and come to loathe, and the world of promise offered him by Whitcliffe—if he would negate the whole of his life's teachings. He must decide; for both worlds could not co-exist.

"Everything I've believed in—turned upside down," whispered Carver, more to himself than the others. He couldn't look at them; he felt ashamed.

Could what Whitcliffe said be true? Everything he had known about the man until so tragically a short a time ago would have convinced him without further argument; but on this single subject there had to be doubt. No one man had the right to capsizes his world like this.

"Look, man," said Whitcliffe and the raggedness in his voice shocked Carver. "You can't crawl behind a wall and shut the door behind you—and out of life."

Even then Carver could not accept what stared him in the face. He sensed that Carol had been convinced by her chief. But could he? Could a man who had trained hard with the agents of the Americas to foil just such a plot as this — leaving out of account that they'd discarded him — could he allow himself to be swayed by arguments that could be specious?

He nerved himself. "I'm sorry, Whitcliffe. I was asked to parley with you — to try to make you see the futility of your actions here, to ask you to defuse the bomb and leave quietly. I must carry out that assignment."

"I'm sorry, too, Carver. And if I refuse your request?"

"I can but go back and report. But I beg you, Whitcliffe — leave the bomb alone! Think what it will do!"

"The bomb is assembled by now. The trigger mechanism also, I imagine. This talk has not been entirely one-sided. Once I press the radio-command signal to go — no one can defuse the bomb before it explodes. This you know."

"I know."

As though on cue that metal door opened. A girl stepped through carefully shutting the door behind her. She wore faded denims and her lithe body showed rounded curves where it pressed against the material. She came forward and turned her smooth blonde helmet of hair to Whitcliffe, seeing only him among all the others.

"The techs have finished, Whit-

cliffe. It's all yours. On the radio-command to go —"

"Thank you, Miss Brown," said Whitcliffe gently.

The girl swung away, tight-faced, grim of jaw and eye, and in that instant only Carver staring with eyes that goggled unbelievably saw that betraying tremble of her lips. This girl was too young to die — even to sacrifice her life for the good of the world.

"Wendy," Carver said, on a breath. He scarcely parted the air with the word, hoping that the girl would walk on, ignoring him.

But she swung around as though caught in a snare.

Her eyes widened. A hand flew to her mouth. The blood fled from that serious, beautiful, heart-wringing face.

"Dad? Dad?"

And then they were in each other's arms, fast locked, and he was talking to her as he had in the old days, calming her feverish childish terrors after a nightmare, stroking the heavy helmet of hair away from her forehead, crooning to her, rocking gently back and forth.

At last Wendy sucked in a lungful of air, pushed Carver away, hands flat on his chest. She stared long and narrowly at him. The others watched this tiny portion of a greater drama as though seeing it compressed through the medium of tri-di. She brushed her hair back herself and drew a deep lung-straining breath so that the denim creaked.

Then: "What the blue blazes are you doing here?"

"Wendy! I thought you were an

agent of the Americas! What am I doing here? Listen here, young lady! What the blue blazes do you mean playing around with a hydrogen bomb illegally?"

"I was an agent, Dad. Morgan picked me out as soon as you left the bureau. Training started early at the Home. I've been working for the bureau for a long time. But as soon as Whitcliffe explained what he was doing and the reasons—well, it's obvious, isn't it? I mean—he's told you and you're here, so it's all right. We're going to blow the lid off the whole boiling pot of horrors this continent has become since we shut ourselves off from everybody else behind that dratted Shield."

## XII

**T**hat dratted Shield! Incredible! To speak so contemptuously of the Shield (To whom all glory and honor and gratitude, etc., etc., etc. . . .)

No! Not any more.

Wendy was Youth. Wendy knew the score. Wendy wouldn't be sucked in by a load of specious rubbish spouted by a cracked demagogue hungry for martyrdom. In Youth lay the key to this whole affair; from the Withits and the expedient Whitcliffe had dreamed up to contain them until the continent was opened to Wendy with her own dreams and conceptions of what life was all about.

It made him feel old. Old, and a little fuzzy around the edges, as though he was superfluous.

He swung on Whitcliffe. "Look

here, Whitcliffe. We don't want to be martyrs. I'm sure Carol doesn't and I'm damn well going to do all I can to stop Wendy and Carol from being incinerated in a death zero we haven't seen in a hundred years. You've convinced them. I'm going to have a try convincing Morgan. Then maybe we can find a more civilized way of shutting down the Shield."

"At last!" breathed Whitcliffe. "You can try, Carver. I gather you know Miss Brown?"

"Huh," said Carver, in the shadow of a spectacular death still able to react to his daughter with paternal comic-opera. "A few years ago I'd have held her across my knee and paddled her for sneaking about behind her old man's back like this."

"We can but try." Whitcliffe motioned to his gathered accomplices. "We will all go out, every single person. We will surrender. When we are well clear of the area I will trigger the bomb, if we have failed to convince Morgan of the truth. The truth or the bomb. One must be the choice."

On his words everyone trooped out under the pathetic white flag and were rounded up under the menacing guns of Morgan's men. Tension crackled in the air. "That bomb is well hidden, Morgan," said Whitcliffe serenely. "And the first man who tries to defuse it will trigger it all. You know a lot about booby traps; but you don't know enough to make that bomb harmless in the time left. I don't advise anyone to go near it."

"Clear everyone out of the area,"

shouted Morgan, in a sweat. "Get the bomb squad here on the double! Warn the surrounding areas! Everyone must take cover in a shelter just in case." He stared viciously at Whitcliffe. "By God! You've a lot to answer for!"

Men and women moved fast. They bundled up in the elevator shafts and scattered out across the New Mexico desert in the thin wind of dawn, with streaks of color layering the horizon towards the east, heralding a day that might transform their whole lives—or might end as it had begun for the millions of the continent, save for the deaths of those who would be branded anti-Shield traitors.

In the nearest fallout shelter Morgan slapped his men around. They were not gentle with the traitors. Carver tried to make his position clear and Morgan greeted him with "Judas!" and lined him up with the rest.

To Carver's surprise Hovervan Number Three turned up with Bob Soames and Alec Durlston aboard.

"I've called in ridforce," Morgan explained, "so that if I have to kill some of your friends to get at the answers I want I'll have it done by experts."

Carver stared curiously at Durlston. The man's face twitched. His eyes were white-rimmed and staring. His hands shook. The man was scared right through, and yet he was safe in this shelter from a hydrogen blast as far off as the Shield generators.

Gruffly, Soames said: "You've got

yourself in a hell of a spot this time, Robin."

"If you fellows would listen to Whitcliffe you'd understand."

"Quiet!" snapped Morgan. "One of you filthy little lice is going to be made to tell me when the bomb is due to go off. And I'm not squeamish about how it's done!"

Staring at that incredible scene Carver kept wondering when Whitcliffe would press the button that would trigger the bomb. He must have the radio-command transmitter on him somewhere. But Morgan thought of that; they stripped Whitcliffe down to the skin and turned up no radio.

"If you'll only listen, Morg!" pleaded Carver.

"I thought you were an agent, Carver! I thought you were helping us. Yet all you can do is whine that Whitcliffe is right! Man alive, d'you know what you're saying?"

"Yes!" shouted Carver desperately. "Yes, I do."

"Kill them all!" screamed Durlston suddenly. He crouched and in his hand appeared an automatic weapon—a needle-gun that shattered a man's neural system at a touch. "I can't live without the Shield! No one can! It wouldn't be decent! They're all mad! Mad!"

For a moment stasis held them. "That's how the chronically underdeveloped will react," observed Whitcliffe with an imperturbable show of his habitual calm. "But we know the country possesses only a relative few of such feeble mentalities. We know we are right."

Staring in shocked horror at Durlston, Carol had the quick insanely gigglish thought that Whitcliffe would be right; but he'd be dead. Durlston showed the classical symptoms of final-stage fear. Very shortly he would be incapable of acting; but in that terror-laden interim he would shoot down all Whitcliffe's associates.

Morgan shouted, hard: "Put the gun down, Durlston! If you kill them we won't be able to stop the bomb!"

The whole situation had been changed by Durlston. Everyone there danced like puppets pulled by the strings of one man's psychotically uncontrollable fear.

"The radio trigger!" shouted Wendy. "Push the button now!"

Everyone stood poised, as though on tiptoe with sinews tensed and straining, ready for the wild leap that would carry them to safety. The stasis held; no one moved.

Thickly Durlston spoke, the words dropping like curdled blood; "It's a radio trigger! And they're not going to have the chance to set it off! The Shield is there to protect me. *Me!*"

The automatic weapon jerked as Durlston's nerves twitched; one eyelid fluttered like torn canvas rounding the Horn. He could not control the spittle that dribbled from the corner of his lax mouth—but his forefinger tightened on the trigger. The narrow red creases disappeared from the knuckle. Blood flowed away. The whiteness of marbled death showed—

Watching the horror that would break over them all, Carol could do

nothing. She could think. She scarcely breathed. She stood graven like some long-forgotten statue rediscovered beneath the sifted sands of time.

The gun spat death.

And Robin Carver hurled his body forward, arms outstretched like the protecting reach of a primitive god, his face blank and gaunt and his eyes staring in concentration, his brain forcing his body on.

Into that cone of death walked Carver. His brain still functioning in a dying body he commanded his shrinking flesh to move forward. But he did not walk into a deathly barrage of leaden bullets. He walked knowingly into a stream of nerve-shattering needles. And with all nerves gone and all motor-responses dead his body could not support that gigantic outpouring of mental will.

Carver fell.

As he fell Durlston laughed.

Then Morgan had snatched the gun away and hurled it from him into outer darkness.

No more than half a hundred heartbeats had passed since Durlston drew his gun.

The nightmare began then for Carol.

From that moment when Robin Carver fell to the ground, his neural system sundered, she knew she would know only regret. Too late she realized what she had lost. She stumbled forward to fall on her knees beside the body and felt the presence beside her of Wendy Carver. No one moved to stop them as they mourned their dead.



**Detective on Watch Soames slipped the carmo sensing lobes on Carver's temples personally. The hovervan had not been brought down here into the fallout shelter. Now Carol's invention was to save the Shield and save humanity from itself. He looked down on Carver's face.**

**"You always did get yourself in spots, Robin. You seemed to have a genius for it."**

**"Hurry it up!" shouted Morgan. "I'm as sorry as any of you that Robin bought it; but that's life. I want to know where that radio trigger is!" He gestured to the guards. "Search everyone. And if you find it handle it like it's the bomb itself." At once a rapid bustle of efficient searching began with the soft whickering of the tape spools crooning a background.**

**The searchers found no radio trigger.**

**With that blaze of insane energy ejaculated in one fear-consuming instant, Alec Durlston regained his usual poise. He looked down on Carver's body and shook his head.**

**"I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry." He swung on Morgan with fierce vitality. "All I did was do your dirty work for you. You were going to shoot one of them for your information. I just did it for you. That's all."**

**"That's all," said Morgan. But he turned his back on Durlston and walked across to talk low-voiced to Soames.**

**"You're not an operator?"**

**"No. But Durlston is. And now he has a vested interest in finding**

**the answer. It's his only out as far as I am concerned. Otherwise I'll book him for murder."**

**Morgan had too much on his mind to argue. A bomb might go off at any moment, triggered in some devious way by this group of insane nihilists. He seemed as far away as ever from preventing it. Carol looked up from where she crouched on her knees beside Carver. Wendy could only kneel silently with her heavy helmet of hair swinging forward, shining, her wide, blank eyes riveted with horrified incomprehension on her dead father's face.**

**"It's all on tape now," Carol said in a leaden voice. "As soon as Durlston has penetrated I'm going in. I owe Robin that. It's all I have left."**

**With the attachment of the sensing lobes to Durlston's temples and the softly repetitious whirring of the tapes the fallout shelter became a place of ghosts.**

**Both sides in this bitter conflict for a world could only wait chained in the coils of science, for what a machine could bring back from the memories of a dead man.**

**Carol waited, wondering how Durlston had the nerve to penetrate a man he had just killed. She knew that thought to be redundant, savoring the irony of the situation in a pathetic and hopeless attempt to blot out her tearing feelings of anger and hatred and futility.**

**"Durlston always was a little slow coming back," Soames said as Cy Adams settled down watchfully beside the still form of Durlston.**

Adams nodded confirmation. "Robin always came back full of snap and awareness of self and where he was. But Durlston always hung back. Loggy."

Soames pressed the green *finished* button and Adams shook Durlston gently. Carol reached down, anxious to slip on the lobes and run the tape again; but then the look of Durlston arrested her. Fleetinglly she remembered how Lines had looked after he'd come back.

Durlston gasped, a puff of air escaping from slack lips. His eyes flicked open, quivering lids moving spasmodically. Deep within those eyes a frightful gulf yawned, an emptiness, a blackness that startled Carol. The man's face twitched. The mouth opened and closed like that of a new born baby.

"You're Alec Durlston," Cy Adams began the drill. "Snap out of it. You're back. Where were you born?"

Durlston only gargled.

"Where were you born?"

"Oast Old, Kenchley, Brent."

"No, no, man!" Adams bent closer, putting incisive bite into his recall words. "You are Alec Durlston! We have to know where the radio-trigger is hidden. You were born —"

Durlston's voice strengthened. "The Old Oast, Brenchley, Kent."

"What? That's Robins! When?"

"Twenty-sixth August, eighty-nine." Durlston's eyes opened wide and force and personality glared out. He gripped his fingers together, shuddered, and then flopped back.

"Alec Durlston," he said. "Yes. Yes, of course! I understand now."

"You always were sluggish, Durlston. You really do understand you are Alec Durlston and not Robin Carver? Good. Tell us, then, quickly — where is the radio trigger?"

### XIII

Durlston moved stiffly and sat up. At once his eyes switched to the

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corpse of Robin Carver and to Wendy still crouched over the body. He saw Carol moving away with the carmo fumbling the sensing lobes onto her temples.

"It's not—" he said. And then: "My God! I don't believe it!" And, finally: "But I must!"

"Where, man? Where?" bellowed Morgan.

"I missed—Carver missed it." He stood up, swayed and then moved creakingly towards Carver's body. He moved like a man drugged, or a man not in full control of his limbs. He reached the body and swayed, then fell to his knees beside Wendy. "They slipped it into his pocket, knowing he would be the one least likely for you to suspect, and disguised as a flicker he might easily own. Here it is."

Durlston held up what appeared to be a straightforward cigarette lighter, one of the gas jobs still preferred by people who didn't care for the almost universal selfigs.

Out of nowhere, he said: "They asked James McLellan Partridge for a light and he produced his flicker. He didn't know he was going to be killed as he held it out. As you don't know what has happened as I hold out this—flicker."

"What are you babbling about, man?" thundered Morgan. "Handle that thing gently! Give it here."

Alec Durlston extended the lighter. His thumb curved over the catch securing the top. He said: "Care for a light?" He pressed.

**I**n the fallout shelter this close to ground zero they'd feel the shock

waves through the ground first. They wouldn't arrive for a moment or two yet. Everyone—Soames, Morgan, Wendy, Whitcliffe—everyone stared at Durlston. Some spoke; but nothing made sense now.

Carol ripped off the sensing lobes and jumped up, her face alight with an enormous, wonderful knowledge.

"The tapes are blank!" she screamed. "Don't you understand? *There's nothing on the tape!*"

Whitcliffe chuckled harshly.

"I always knew it could happen. That's one reason we have such stringent return techniques. And you didn't let us down, Carver! You didn't feel when I put the trigger in your pocket; but you picked it up the second time around. Was it a struggle, taking over Alec Durlston?"

"Taking over Durlston? What is this?" shouted Morgan, despite what was happening outside caught up in this sudden apparation born of scientific technology.

"The bomb—" said Soames.

"I—don't know how it happened," said Robin Carver from the body of Alec Durlston. "I experienced shattering blackness when he fired. I know I was damned determined to close with him, to get him, to shut him up this time, but good. I suppose that violence of hate carried me through into his mind when he penetrated—"

"Hate, Robin?" said Carol. "Or love? Love for the whole human race?"

"I'm not trying to pretend to what I'm not." Carver touched Wendy gently on the shoulder, still trying

to accustom himself to the idea that every time he shaved he'd have to look at Alec Durlston's face in the mirror. "As for love—I know I love my daughter Wendy. And I love you, Carol. You know that."

"I know it."

"I suppose," Wendy said thoughtfully as the first of the battering ground waves rocked in through the pre-stressed concrete, "I suppose I'll just have to get used to having a handsome father. My father in whatever goddam body he likes—just so he's still with me!"

The fallout shelter shuddered to the concussions as a new world was born.

Morgan was trying to speak; trying to explain away to himself the rending of a lifetime's work.

Carver said: "We are going to build a new and better world. Morg. We've let in the fresh air and sunlight. And now we'll be able to see our kinds grow up without being

buried alive behind the Shield."

Outside now the mushroom grew and bloated towards the skies.

"Your carnos won't find much sale with the youngsters now, Carol," said Whitcliffe. "They're going to have too much to do building up a decent life for everyone to be able to fritter away in vicarious pleasures."

The mushroom bloated and rippled and convulsed.

And the Shield had vanished.

Charlie Rawlinson had the tv eye scanning now. They all stood to watch the mushroom on the screen, watching in awe and wonder.

"Do you know what you've done?" whispered Morgan.

"Yes, we know." The feel of this new body was coming nicely to Carver now. He put an arm around Carol's waist and the other around Wendy's. They fitted beautifully.

"We know. We've given our own people the chance to make a fresh start down the right road." **END**

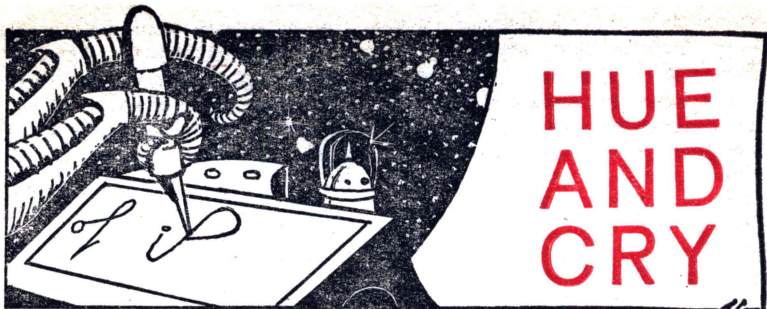
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## The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet . . .

Dear Editor:

I think that your story in September *If*, entitled *Under Two Moons*, is a rather good tale of interplanetary skullduggery. However, you did several things which I consider unpardonable.

Let us look at them in the order of their magnitude. First, you allowed Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark and the mightiest warrior of Barsoom, to be killed by a few interplanetary nasties in a flying saucer. Second, you made one of the greatest rulers of Edgar Rice Burrough's private world an operator of a taxi service. Third, the dead sea bottoms are covered with a sward of ochre, moss-like vegetation; the "canals" are more fertile regions where most of the Barsoomian farms are. Also the only bodies of water to speak of are the Lost Sea of Korus in the Valley Dor, and the underground Sea of Omean. The thot is slate-gray, not slate-green.

If you must borrow The Great One's characters and let them get rubbed out, the least you can do is

leave his worlds alone!—Ivan Theon, 6850 Morella Avenue, North Hollywood, California.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on the new Doe Smith epic! I am by way of being almost a Number One Doc Smith fan, a completist in collecting them, in fact, and this is surely not only the equal of the early Skylarks, he has gone on from those earlier days. Well worth my subscription to *If*, that alone. Not that I complain for a moment at your bringing back such typical Von Vogts as this most recent issue.

Any possibility of getting a new story by Eric Frank Russell? Just an idea . . . I got no complaints, for sure!—Clayton Hamlin, Southwest Harbor, Maine.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

*If* is probably the best sf magazine in the market today. In the past few years that I have been reading it I have noticed only a handful of mediocre stories. I have yet to find a novel contained in its

pages that I have disliked. Yet I have quite a few comments and questions.

1. I am very interested in sf art-work. Gray Morrow is probably the best illustrator in the field. I would like to see more of his work, especially cover illustrations. Perhaps he and McKenna could alternate on covers, Morrow one month and McKenna the next. I am glad to see that you have acquired the services of Wallace Wood, but I am also disappointed. He can do much better work than that which appeared in the September issue. Giunta has been improving every month. I would also like to see more by Jack Gaughan.

2. I would like to see *If* get the new Heinlein novel.

3. Whatever happened to Theodore Sturgeon, who wrote your features until the May, 1964 issue?

4. Are you, the editor, planning to write any sequel(s) to *The Reefs of Space* and *Starchild* in collaboration with Jack Williamson? I hope so!

5. Could you please announce the winners of awards at the 23d World Science Fiction Convention to be held in London in one of your three magazines?

6. Could you tell me if Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* won a Hugo?

7. I think, as probably many other fans do, that it is time for science fiction to change its public image. Whenever people hear that I read sf they suddenly think of me as some kind of nut or eccentric. This is mainly due to bad movies and television shows (such as *The Outer Limits*). It is about time that sf became respectable. I

would like to know what my fellow fans feel about this, and if they have any ideas on how it could be accomplished.—Stanley Krute, 30 Barnesdale Road, Natick, Massachusetts.

• 1. Watch for next month's Morrow cover for the new Heinlein novel—it hasn't been engraved yet, but the painting is a beauty! But McKenna is out of service for a while; he's in England, taking part in the art preparation for Arthur C. Clarke's big new sf movie. 2. We've got it. 3. We've been asking Ted Sturgeon the same question. He's been busy with other projects—but we hope to lure him back to our pages ere long. 4. Yes, the last in the series—which the first two were planned to lead up to—is already complete in rough draft. Tentative title is *Rogue Star*. But when it will be finished and printed we cannot say. With a great lineup of serials already in the safe and carrying us well into next year—Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, followed by Keith Laumer and Rosel G. Brown's *Earthblood*, followed by Algis Budrys' *The Iron Thorn*—publication date for *Rogue Star* is, to say the least, uncertain! 5. Bob Bloch—who, as this is written, is winging his way over the Pole to London—promises us a full convention report, including award winners; we'll try to have it in next issue or the one following at the latest. 6. Yes, it won a Hugo—making, let's see, four so far. (And maybe another in the works!) 7. The trouble with science fiction's public image is that a lot of people simply have lost the habit of exercising their brains and, since they can't

follow it without at least a modicum of thought, prefer to assume there's nothing there worth following. Let them rot, say we—let's confine our interest to the thousands of brilliant and able scientists, engineers, show-business luminaries, writers, statesmen, businessmen and others of unquestioned good judgment who do understand it—who like it, and read it—and often enough write it, too! Out of personal experience we can testify that we have never found a "glamor" institution in this country—from Cape Kennedy to the halls of Congress, from the movie and TV studios to the greatest universities—which does not have a significantly higher proportion of science-fiction readers than the public at large. For the un-turned-on others—it's their loss, not ours.—*Editor.*

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

At the first let me thank you for the many interesting and good science-fiction stories which are published by you. Most I like science-fiction stories from Western countries, and gladly I want to have *Galaxy* and *If* permanently. But I cannot send from East Germany money order to you for a subscription. So I'll ask you if you can give me an address of a fan who like to exchange with me these magazines. I'll give science-fiction books in German languages therefore.—Siegbert G. Gunzel, Schwedter Strasse 268, 1054 Berlin, East Germany.

• Any takers?—*Editor.*

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Your September editorial does nothing to dispel a nice tidy cate-

gorization I have of flying-saucer sightings. There seems to be much in common between saucer-hunting and witch-hunting. Both rely on "an overwhelming quantity of reported observations" and both seem to have about the same degree of scientific acceptability. By all means discuss flying saucers, but in the same way as one discusses astrology or witchcraft, without getting excited, forming "national societies" or even writing patronizing letters with too many present participles. The advocacy of the intensive propagation of dubious "scientific views" can do no good to the cause. I see a lynch mob!—B. P. Townsend, 407 College Street, Burlington, Vermont.

• We weren't advocating. We were only reporting what we had seen and learned after a good many editor-hours of time—and heaven knows, we haven't been able to find any good reason for deciding either for or against the UFOlogists. Far as we're concerned, it's all still an open question.

Incidentally, our editorial drew forth several letters reporting new "sightings". One was particularly interesting—had to do with an experience outside Las Vegas, in a borrowed pickup truck—but the writer didn't sign his name. Would he care to let us know it, in confidence, so we can print his letter? (We'll withhold names on request, but we won't ever print a letter from someone who doesn't sign it.)

And that about fills us up again. This month's "first" story is by W. I. McLaughlin. Next month we start the new Heinlein—strongly recommended! See you then . . .

The Editor

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By J. D. Ratcliff

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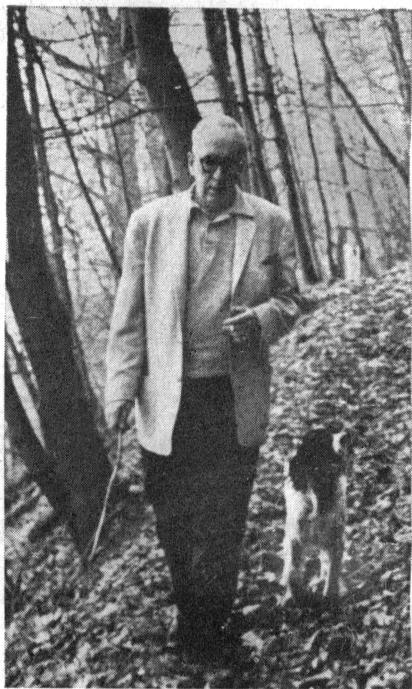
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