

WORLDS OF



MAY 1966
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SCIENCE FICTION

SILKIES IN SPACE

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by **A. E. VAN VOGT**

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GEORGE SCHELLING

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By Max Shulman

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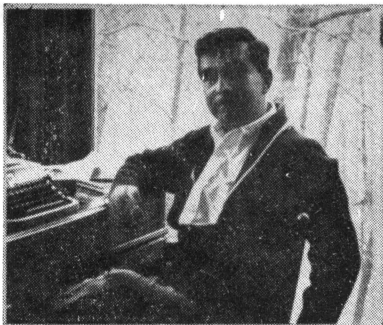
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THE YEAR OF THE HORSE

Thirty years ago I wrote a fan letter to a magazine in which I asked the eternal question about a definition of science-fiction. A copy of the magazine lies on my desk now, with a Pitman scrawl on the margin to answer my own question: "If literature is a mirror to life, then sf is a mirror to possibility." I'm sure I considered that very clever a generation ago. Today, I'm less certain, unfortunately.

There are two other things beside the old magazine in front of me that focus my doubts. One is a picture of the surface of the Moon as released by Tass, taken as a result of mankind's first actual landing on an alien world. Man has not yet reached that ancient challenge, but he has sent his eyes ahead and has seen it from the close vantage of his own height. Here is the mirror of possibility provided by science and technology.

Beside that is a list of choice science fiction, I gather. There's an organization of about a year's standing, calling itself Science Fiction Writers of America, which is planning another set of awards for the best stories of the year. They have a highly liberal system of nomination, and this is the list of all the stories judged worthy by the members. It might be called the mirror of possibility provided by science fiction — but only by an extraordinary exercise of charity. There are a few good stories listed — enough so that a diligent voter

can almost fill the categories. But perforce, possibility is hardly the criterion that must lie behind the majority of listings.

Scientific possibility isn't exactly faulted. Generally, it simply isn't taken into account. I know that some of the writers of the stories read accounts of modern scientific progress, but they don't bother spilling much of it over into the stories. The men who filled the 1936 issue of the magazine with fiction were far more current in their real science than those of 1966. (This observation, of course, refuses to accept psionics as *scientific* background, because no new advance has been made in that for 6000 years.)

I gather that writers today aren't interested in trying to use knowledge gained during the past couple of decades. The easy excuse seems to be that science has caught up with science fiction, so the fiction can't operate in that field any more. I can only assume that they really mean that 1966 science has caught up with 1936 science fiction and that there isn't enough cribbable new stuff in the old stories. Certainly with the new frontiers available now, a man willing to think could find enough speculation for three more decades of fictional exploration. Biochemistry alone offers a hundred new ideas for novels.

But it seems that most of the writers today in the field don't care about that. They have found the new

realities — the ancient humanistic semi-sciences, and they have been exploring 1926 sociology and 1916 analytical psychology, more or less. Human values, they tell me, now have replaced machine values in science fiction. Fee, fi, ho hum.

There is no argument about the fact that human beings, rather than mere gadgets, must be the fountainheads of the future. There never was any such doubt. If the shorter works of H. G. Wells had failed to teach this lesson, I could have learned it in 1936 from the stories of Raymond Z. Gallun and several other writers.

Of course science fiction must hold up a mirror to possibility in its human characters. But as I look at the picture of the moon and consider the selected list of our field's current literature, I wonder where the mirror went. The lunar photograph shows an aspect of the near future that must be met by humans and fitted into future human values. Any future reality or possibility must mirror this, but I cannot recognize it in the humanity I find generally depicted. Is this the race to launch a thousand ships and tackle the crater walls of Selene?

We're going to need more than protagonists for the decades ahead, I'm afraid. We're going to need men of devotion. Don't tell it to the professors of literature who have misunderstood the bitter love of Fitzgerald to make the current eddy in the "mainstream", but we are even going to need old-fashioned — shhh! — heroes. And we'll get them, because in all our reality we've always had them and still have them, and there is no other possibility to a viable race of men.

Our stories were full of OGW heroes once — Oh Gee Whiz heroes. They were a bit crude at times as they stormed Olympus to throw the gauntlet of humanity in the face of the gods, but they were never dull. Now, however, time has rolled along. New writers have found new values, slanted to those values that the critics of Academe and would-be Academe can comprehend. Now we have the OGW protagonist — the Oy GeWalt protagonist.

There are going to be human and technical problems to face and to solve eventually in the future possibilities science mirrors for us. Probably some of the men who touch down where the photograph was taken are going to die — and die happily, just as they are now knowingly volunteering to take the risk. And other men will live — by efforts that would literally be incredible in any fiction. Men have done such things in reality throughout history. Look up Xenophon's *Anabasis* or the account of Peary's Polar Expedition, for example. They only foreshadow future possibility, since they took place in relative familiar environments.

This year, my Chinese friend tells me, is the year of the Horse. (I haven't had the bravado to ask what last year was.) It has, of course, nothing to do with emotional narcosis, but refers to a noble animal that has often carried courageous, intelligent and dignified humans into deeds of reality and of derring-do. By riding very hard toward some honest grail, science fiction should find this a good year in which to catch up to 1936. I wonder if the next list will justify my extreme optimism?

—Lester del Rey



*He was not human, but his loyalty
was to mankind — and not to a space
creature that was older than time!*



SILKIES IN SPACE

by A. E. VAN VOGT

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

I

Nat Cemp, a Class C Silkie, passed the man—and stopped.

Something about the other triggered a signal in that portion of his nervous system which—even in his human state—retained a quota of his Silkie ability.

He couldn't remember—hard as he tried—ever having felt that particular signal before.

Cemp turned in the street and looked back. The other man had paused at the near corner. Then, as the light became green, he walked briskly toward the far sidewalk. He was about Cemp's height of slightly over six feet and seemed about the

same build—a hundred and ninety pounds.

His hair was dark brown, like Cemp's, and he wore a dark gray suit, as did Cemp. Now that they were several hundred feet apart, the initial impression he had had of somebody familiar was not so clear.

Yet, after only a slight hesitation, Cemp rapidly walked after the man, presently came up to him, and said courteously, "May I speak to you?"

The man stopped. At close range, the resemblance between them was truly remarkable, suggesting consanguinity. Blue-gray eyes, even nose, firm mouth, shape of ears, strong neck, and the very way he held himself, were similar.

Cemp said, "I wonder if you are aware that you and I are practically twins."

The man's face twisted slightly. Lips curled into a faint sneer. The eyes gazed scornfully at Cemp. He said in an exact replica of Cemp's baritone voice:

"It was my intent that you notice. If you hadn't this first time, then I would have approached you again. My name is A-Brem."

Cemp was silent, startled. He detected in the man's tone and manner something akin to hostility. Contempt, he analyzed wonderingly.

Had the other been merely a human being who had somehow recognized a Silkie in human form, Cemp would have considered it one of those occasional incidents. Known Silkies were sometime sought out by humans and insulted. Usually, the human who did such a foolish act

could be evaded, or good-naturedly parried, or won over. But once in a while a Silkie had to fight.

But the man's resemblance to himself indicated that this encounter was different.

As he had these thoughts, the stranger's cynical gray-blue eyes were gazing into Cemp's. The man's lips parted in a derisive smile, showing even white teeth. "At approximately this moment," he said, "every Silkie in the solar system is receiving a communication from his alter ego."

He paused; again the insolent smile. "I see that has alerted you, and you're bracing yourself—"

It was true. Cemp had abruptly decided that, whether the other's statement was true or not, he could not let him get away.

The man continued: "—bracing yourself to try to seize me. It can't be done, for I match you in every way."

"You're a Silkie?" Cemp asked.

"I'm a Silkie."

By all the logic of Silkie history, that had to be a false claim. And yet there was the unmistakable, sensational resemblance to himself.

But Cemp did not change his mind. Even if this were a Silkie, he himself had a superiority possessed by no other Silkie. In a clash and direct contact he had had with an alien life form the year before, he had learned previously unknown techniques of body control. It had been decided by the Silkie Authority that he should not communicate his newly gained ability to any other Silkie. He hadn't.

That extra knowledge was now

his advantage—if the other were indeed a Silkie.

“Ready for the message?” said the man, insolently.

Cemp, who was ready for the battle of his life, nodded curtly.

“It’s an ultimatum.”

“I’m waiting.” Grimly.

“You are to cease and desist from your association with human beings. You are commanded to return to the nation of Silkies. You have a week to make up your mind. After that date you will be considered a traitor and will be treated as traitors have always been, without mercy.”

Since there was no “nation” of Silkies, and never had been, Cemp—after considering the unexpected “ultimatum” for a moment, and dismissing it—made his attack.

He still didn’t quite believe that his “twin” was a Silkie. So he launched a minimum electric charge on one of the magnetic bands that he could use as a human. Enough to render unconsciousness but not damage.

To his dismay, a Silkie magnetic screen as powerful as anything he could muster warded off the energy blow. So it was a Silkie.

The stranger stared at him, teeth showing, eyes glinting with sudden rage. “I’ll remember this!” he snarled. “You’d have hurt me if I didn’t have a defense.”

Cemp hesitated, questioning his own purpose. It didn’t have to be capture. “Look,” he urged, “why don’t you come with me to the Silkie Authority? If there is a Silkie nation, normal communication is the best way of proving it.”

The other Silkie began to back away. “I’ve done my duty,” he muttered. “I’m not accustomed to fighting. You tried to kill me.”

He seemed to be in a state of shock. His eyes had changed again, looked dazed now. All the initial cocksureness was gone. He continued backing away.

Cemp followed, uncertain. He was himself so highly trained a fighter, it was hard to grasp that here might be a Silkie who was actually not versed in battle.

He soothed: “We don’t have to fight. But you can’t expect to deliver an ultimatum, and then go off into nowhere, as if you’ve done your part. You say your name is A-Brem. Where did you come from?”

He was aware, as he spoke, that people had stopped in the street around them and were watching the strange drama of two men—one retreating, the other pursuing, a slow step at a time.

“First, if there’s a Silkie nation, where has it—have you—been hiding all these years?” Cemp persisted.

“Damn you, stop badgering me! You’ve got your ultimatum. You’ve got a week. Now leave me alone!”

The alter ego had clearly not considered what he would do after delivering his message. His unpreparedness made the whole incident even more fantastic. But he was showing anger again; recovering his nerve.

An electric discharge, in the jagged form of lightning, rode a magnetic beam of his own creation; struck at Cemp, crackling against the magnetic screen he kept ready to be triggered into existence.

The lightning bolt bounced away from Cemp, caromed off of a building, flashed across the sidewalk past several startled people and grounded itself on the metal grill of a street drain.

"Two can play that game," said A-Brem in a savage tone.

Cemp made no reply. The other's electrical beam had been maximum power for a Silkie in human form; death level potency. Somewhere nearby, a woman screamed. The street was clearing. People were falling away, seeking shelter.

The time had come to end this madness, or someone might be killed. Cemp acted on the evaluation that, for a reason that was not clear, this Silkie was not properly trained and was therefore vulnerable to a non-lethal attack by a technique involving a simple version of Levels of Logic.

He wouldn't even have to use the secret ability he had learned from the alien a year before.

The moment he made up his mind, he did a subtle energy thing. He modified a specific set of low energy force lines passing through his brain and going in the direction of A-Brem.

Instantly, there was manifested a strange logic implicit in the very structure and make-up of life. The logic of levels! The science that had been derived by human scientific method from the great Silkie ability for changing form.

Each life cell had its own rigidity. Each gestalt of cells did a specific action, could not do other. Once

stimulated, the "thought" in that particular nerve bundle went through its exact cycle, and if there were an accompanying motion, or emotion . . . that also manifested precisely and exactly and without qualification.

Even more meaningful, more important—a number of cell colonies could be joined together to form a new gestalt, and groups of such clusters had *their* special action.

Such a colony gestalt was the sleep center in human beings.

The method Cemp used wouldn't work on a Silkie in his Class C form. Even a B Silkie could fight off sleep.

This Silkie in human form began to stagger. His eyes were suddenly heavy-lidded; and the uncontrolled appearance of his body showed that he was asleep on his feet.

As the man fell, Cemp stepped forward and caught the body; prevented an injurious crash to the concrete sidewalk—and simultaneously did a second, subtle thing.

On another force line, he put a message that manipulated the unconsciousness gestalt in the other's brain. It was an attempt at complete control. The sleep cut off perception from the environment. Manipulation of the unconsciousness mechanism eliminated those messages from the brain's stored memory that would normally stimulate to wakefulness someone who was not really sleepy.

Cemp was congratulating himself on his surprisingly easy capture—when the body he held stiffened. Cemp, sensing an outside force, drew back. To his complete astonishment, the unconscious man rose straight up into the sky.

In his human form, Cemp was not able to determine the nature of the energy that could accomplish such an improbable feat. He should, he realized, transform to Silkie. He found himself hesitating. There was a rule against changing in full view of human beings.

Abruptly, he recognized that this situation was unique; a never-before emergency. He transformed to Silkie and cut off gravity.

The ten-foot body, shaped a little like a projectile, rose from the ground at missile speed. Most of his clothes, completely torn, fell to the ground. A few tattered remnants remained, but were swept away by the gale winds created by his passage.

Unfortunately, all of five seconds had gone by while he made the transformation; and since several additional seconds had passed before he acted, he found himself pursuing a speck that was continuing to go straight up.

What amazed him anew, was that, even with his Silkie perception, he could detect no energy from it, below it or around it. Yet its speed was as great as anything he could manage. Accordingly, after moments only, he realized that his pursuit would not be in time; and that the body of A-Brem would reach an atmosphere height too rarified for a human to survive, unless he acted promptly. He therefore mercifully removed the pressure from the sleep and unconsciousness centers of the other's body.

Moments later, he was disappointed — but not surprised — as he sensed from the other a shift to Silkie

form; proof that the man had awakened and could now be responsible for himself.

A-Brem continued straight on up, as a full-grown Silkie now; and it was presently obvious that he intended to risk going through the Van Allen belt. Cemp had no such fool-hardy purpose.

As the two of them approached the outer limits of the atmosphere, Cemp put a thought on a beam to a manned telstar unit in orbit around Earth. The thought contained simply the data about what had happened.

The message sent, he turned back. Greatly disturbed by his experience — and being without clothes for human wear — he flew straight to the Silkie Authority.

II

Cemp, descending from the sky down to the vast building complex that comprised the central administration for dealing with Silkies, saw that other Silkies were also coming in. He presumed, grimly, that they were there for the same reason as himself.

As the realization came, he scanned the heavens behind him with his Silkie senses, and perceived that scores more black spots were out there, hurtling closer. Divining imminent confusion, he slowed and stopped. Then, from his position in the sky, he telepathed Charley Baxter, his human contact inside the building, proposing a special plan to handle the emergency.

Baxter was in a distracted state but presently his return thought

came: "Nat, yours is just about the best idea we've had. Because you're right. This could be dangerous."

There was a pause. Baxter must have gotten his message through to other of the Special People, for Cemp began to record a general Silkie warning:

"To all Silkies: It would be unwise for too many of you to concentrate at one time in one place. So divide into ten groups on the secret number system, plan G. Group One only approach and land. All others disperse till called."

In the sky near Cemp, Silkies began to mill around. Cemp, who—by the designated number system—was in group three, veered off and climbed to the upper atmosphere, and darted over a thousand miles to his home on the southern tip of Florida.

En route, he talked mentally to his wife, Joanne, who—like Baxter—was one of the Special People. And so, by the time he walked naked into the house, she had clothes laid out for him and knew as much as he about what had happened.

As Cemp dressed, he saw that she was in a womanly state of alarm; more concerned than he. She instantly believed that there was a Silkie nation, and that this meant that there would also be Silkie women.

"Admit it!" she said tearfully. "That thought has already crossed your mind, hasn't it?"

"I'm a logical person," Cemp defended. "So I've had fleeting thoughts about all possibilities. But,

being sensible, I feel that we have a lot of things to explain before I can reject what we know of Silkie history."

It was an accepted part of the human-Silkie relationship that Silkies had been developed from biological experiments. A human sperm and ovum had been brought together in a test tube under controlled conditions by scientists who utilized the DNA and DNP discoveries.

"What's going to become of our marriage?" Joanne said in an anguished voice.

"Nothing will change."

She sobbed, "I'm going to seem to you like a native woman of three hundred years ago who is married to a white man on a South Sea island—and then white women start showing up."

The wildness of her fantasizing astounded Cemp. "It's not the same," he said. "I promise complete loyalty and devotion for the rest of our lives."

"Nobody can promise anything in personal relations," she said. But his words seemed to reassure her after a moment. She dried her eyes and came over to him and allowed herself to be kissed.

It was an hour before a phone call came from Charley Baxter. The man was apologetic for the delay, but explained that it was the result of a conference on Cemp's future actions.

"It was a discussion just about you in all this," Baxter said.

Cemp waited.

The final decision was to continue to not let Cemp intermingle with other Silkies— "for reasons that

you know," Baxter said significantly.

Cemp surmised that the reference was to his secret knowledge — learned from the alien. Ever since, he had been put on special assignments that kept him away from other Silkies.

Baxter now produced the information that only four hundred Silkies had been approached by alter egos. "The number actually reported in," he said, "is three hundred and ninety-six."

Cemp was vaguely relieved, vaguely contemptuous. A-Brem's claim that all Silkies were targets was now proved to be propaganda. He had already shown himself to be an inept Silkie. The lie added one more degrading touch.

"Some of them were pretty poor duplicates," said Baxter. "Apparently, mimicking another body is not a great skill with them."

However—he now admitted—even four hundred was more than enough to establish the existence of a hitherto unknown group of Silkies. "Even if they are untrained," he said, "we've absolutely got to find out who they are and where they came from."

"Is there no clue?" Cemp asked.

No more than Cemp knew.

"They all got away?" Cemp interjected, astounded. "No one did better than I?"

"On the average, not as well," said Baxter.

It seemed that most Silkies had made no effort to hold the strange Silkie who confronted them; had simply reported in and asked for instructions.

"Can't blame them," said Baxter.

He continued frankly, "But I might as well tell you that your fight and your reasons for fighting make you one of the two dozen Silkies we feel we can depend on in this matter. So here are your instructions —"

He concluded: "Take Joanne with you, but go at once!"

The sign said: "All the music in this building is Silkie music."

Cemp, who never listened to any other kind, saw the faint distaste come into his wife's face. She caught his look and evidently his thought, for she said, "All right, so it sounds dead level to me, as if it's all the same note — well, anyway, the same few notes, close together, repeated in various sickening combinations."

She stopped, shook her beautiful, blonde head, and said, "I guess I'm tense and afraid and need something wild and clashy."

To Cemp, who could hear harmonies in the music that were beyond the reach of ordinary human ears, her outburst was but a part of the severe emotional reactions to things, to which he had long become accustomed from this human female he was married to. Women, wed to Silkies, had a hard time making their peace with the realities of the relationship.

As Joanne had put it more than once: "There you are with this physically perfect, beautiful male. But all the time you're thinking: 'This is not really a man; it's a monster that can change in a flash either into a fish-like thing or a creature of space.' But of course I wouldn't part with him for anything."

The music sign was soon behind them, and they walked on into the interior of the museum. Their destination was the original laboratory, in which the first Silkie was supposed to have been produced. The lab occupied the center of the building; it had been moved there a hundred and ten years before—according to a date on a wall plaque at the entrance.

It had seemed to Baxter that a sharper study should be made of the artifacts of Silkie history. The entire structure of that history was now for the first time—for the very first time—being questioned.

It was this task, of re-evaluating the past data, that he had assigned to Cemp and Joanne.

The lab was brightly lighted. It had only one visitor: a rather plain young woman with jet black hair but no make-up and with ill-fitting clothes was standing at one of the tables beside the far doorway.

As Cemp came in, a thought—not his own—touched his mind. He started to turn to Joanne. She, being one of the Special People, could communicate with him on thought level, and so he took it for granted that the message came from her.

—Took it for granted, that is, for several seconds.

Belatedly, realization came that the thought had arrived on a magnetic carrier wave—Silkie level.

Cemp swung around and stared at the black-haired woman. She smiled at him, somewhat tensely, he noted; and then her thought came, unmistakably:

“Please don’t give me away. I was

stationed here to convince any doubting Silkie.”

She didn’t have to explain what she meant. The thunder of it was pouring through Cemp’s mind.

According to his knowledge, there never had been any female Silkies. All Silkies on Earth were males, who were married to women of the Special People—like Joanne.

But this black-haired, farmerish type was a female Silkie! That was what she was letting him know by her presence. In effect, by being here, she was saying, “Don’t bother to search dusty old files. I’m living proof that Silkies were not produced in somebody’s laboratory two hundred and thirty years ago.”

Suddenly Cemp was confused. He was aware that Joanne had come up beside him; that she must have caught his thought, and was herself dismayed. The one glimpse he had of her face showed that she had become very pale.

“Nat!” her voice came sharply. “You’ve got to capture her.”

Cemp started forward, but it was a half-hearted movement.

Yet, in spite of the uncertainty in his actions, he was already having logical thoughts:

Since only hours had gone by from the moment that he first saw A-Brem, she must have been stationed here in advance. She would therefore have had no contact with the others. And so she wouldn’t know that to a trained Silkie like himself, she was as vulnerable as an unarmed civilian opposed by a soldier.

The black-haired woman must

suddenly have had some doubt of her own. With an abrupt action, she stepped through the door near which she had been standing and closed it after her.

"Nat," Joanne's voice, high pitched, sounded mere inches behind him. "You can't let her get away!"

Cemp, who had emerged from his brief stasis, projected a thought after the female Silkie: "I'm not going to fight you, but I'm going to stay close to you until I have all the information we want."

"Too late!" A magnetic carrier wave, human-Silkie level, brought her thought. "You're already too late."

Cemp didn't think so. He arrived at the door through which she had disappeared. Was slightly disconcerted to find it was locked. Smashed it with a single, jagged lightning thrust of electrical force. Stepped through its smoking remains—and saw the woman in the act of entering a gap in the wall made by a sliding door.

She was not more than three dozen feet away; and she had half-turned, and was looking back in his direction. What she saw was evidently a surprise, for a startled look came into her face.

Hastily, her hand came up to something inside; and the door slid shut. As it closed, Cemp—who was running toward it—had a glimpse of a gleaming corridor beyond. The existence of such a secret passageway had too many implications for Cemp to consider immediately.

He was at the wall, fumbling for the hidden door. When he could not

find it after several long moments, he stepped back and burned it down with the two energy flows from his brain which—when they came together outside his body—created an intense electric arc. It was the only energy weapon available to him as a human being but it was enough.

A minute later, he stepped through the smoking opening into a narrow corridor.

III

The corridor in which Cemp found himself was made of concrete and slanted gently downward. It was dimly lighted and straight; and so he could see the young woman in the near distance ahead—about two hundred feet.

She was running, but as a woman runs wearing a dress; not very fast. Cemp broke into his own high-speed lope and, in a minute, had cut the distance between them in half. Abruptly the concrete ended. Ahead was a dirt cave, still lighted, but the lights were set at longer intervals.

As she reached this point, the young woman sent him a message on a magnetic force line: "If you don't stop chasing me, I'll have to use the—" something not clear—"power."

Cemp remembered the energy that had lifted A-Brem into the sky. He took the threat seriously and instantly modified a magnetic wave to render her unconscious.

It was not so cruel an act as it would have been earlier. Now she fell like a stone—which was the unfortunate characteristic of the un-

consciousness gestalt—but it was into dirt and not on cement. The motion of her body was such that she pitched forward on her knees, then slid down on her right shoulder. It didn't look too severe for her—so it seemed to Cemp as he came closer to where she was lying."

He had slowed to a walk. Now, still wry, he approached the prostrate body, determined not to let any special "power" remove her from him. He felt only slightly guilty at the violent method he had used. His reasoning had permitted no lesser control over her. The "sleep" shut-off on A-Brem had not prevented that individual from turning on the force field—so Cemp considered it to be—that had saved him.

Quite simply, he couldn't let her get away.

Because it was an untried situation, he acted at once. At this moment, he had her; there were too many unknowns for him to delay.

He knelt beside her. Since she was unconscious and not asleep, her sensory system was open to exterior stimulation.

But for her to answer, she would have to be switched to sleep, so that the shut-off interior perception could flow.

So he sat there, alternately manipulating her unconsciousness center when he wanted to ask a question, and her sleep center for her reply. It was like ancient ham radio with each party saying "over" when his message was completed.

And, of course, in addition, he had to make sure that she did reply to his queries.

What he did for that was ask one question after another, and each time modify a magnetic wave with a message to the brain cell gestalt that responded to hypnotic drugs.

The result was a steady mental conversation:

"What is your name?"

"B-Roth."

"Where do you come from?"

"From home."

"Where is home?"

"In the sky." A mental image came of a small stone body in space; Cemp's impression was of a meteorite less than twenty miles in diameter.

"Where is it now?"

"About to go around the sun, inside the first planet's orbit."

So she *had* come to earth in advance. So they *were* all far from "home"; apparently had had no preliminary realization that they were out-skilled by Earth Silkies. As a result, he was now obtaining this decisive information.

"What is its orbit?" Cemp asked.

"It goes as far out as the ninth planet."

Neptune! What a tremendous distance!

Cemp asked quickly, "What is its mean speed?"

Her answer was in terms of Mercury's year, which—when converted to Earth time—came to a hundred and ten years per orbit.

Cemp whistled softly. An immediate association had leaped into his mind. The first Silkie baby had been created in a test tube slightly more than two hundred and twenty years

before; that was the official history. The time involved was exactly twice as long as the orbital period of the little Silkie planetoid.

Cemp ended that train of speculation abruptly, and demanded from B-Roth exactly how she herself would again find the planetoid, which surely must be one of thousands of similar bodies.

The answer was one that only a Silkie could operate from. She had in her brain a set of relationships and signal recognition images which identified for her the location of the Silkie home.

Cemp made an exact mental copy. He was about to begin questioning her for details on other matters—when an inertia phenomenon effected his body.

He was flung backwards—

As if he were in a vehicle, his back to the forward motion; and the vehicle stopped suddenly, but he went on—

Because he always had protection against sudden falls, he had been moved less than eight feet, when he triggered his magnetic field, his only screening mechanism as a human.

The field he set up could not stop gravity pull directly, but it derived from the earth's magnetic force and gained its power from the force lines that passed through this exact space.

As Cemp modulated the lines now, they attached themselves to flexible metal bands that were woven into his clothes, and they held him. He hung there a few feet above the floor.

From this vantage point he was able to examine his situation.

At once, the phenomenon was shown as completely fantastic.

He detected in the heart of the gravity field a tiny molecule complex. What was fantastic about it was that gravity was an invariable, solely dependent on mass and square of distance.

Cemp had already calculated the gravity pull to be the equivalent of three times that of Earth at sea level. And so . . . by all the laws of physics, that incredibly small particle must have an equivalent mass to three Earths!

. . . Impossible, of course.

It was by no means a complex of one of the large molecules, so far as Cemp could make out; and it was not radioactive.

He was about to abandon his study of it, and to turn his attention to his own situation—when he noticed that the gravity field had an even more improbable quality.

Its pull was limited to organic matter. It had no effect on the surrounding dirt walls, and in fact—his mind poised in a final amazement—the woman's body was not influenced by it.

The gravity was limited to one particular organic configuration—himself!

One body, one human being only—Nat Cemp—was the sole object toward which it was oriented.

He found himself remembering how he himself had been untouched by the field that had lifted A-Brem. He had sensed the presence of a field, but only by the way the mag-

netic lines that passed through his head were affected by it. Even in his Silkie form—as he pursued the hurtling body of his alter ego—that and merely that had been true.

This was for him; a personal gravitational field; a small group of molecules that “knew” him.

As these events took place, and these flashing awarenesses came to him, Cemp turned his head and gazed back at the young woman.

He was not surprised at what he saw.

His attention had been forcibly removed from her; and so the pressure on the unconsciousness “valve” in her brain was released. She was stirring, coming to.

She sat up, looked around, and saw him.

She came to her feet quickly, with an athletic ease. She evidently did not remember what had happened while she was unconscious, did not realize how completely she had given away basic secrets; for her face broke into a smile.

“You see,” she said. “I told you what would happen. Well, good-by.”

Her spirits visibly high, she turned and walked off into the cave, presently disappeared as it gradually curved to the left.

After she was gone, Cemp turned his attention back to the gravity field. He assumed that it would eventually be withdrawn, or fade out, and he would be free. He had the distinct conviction that he might have only minutes in which to examine it and discover its nature.

He thought unhappily: “If I could

change into my Silkie form, I could really examine it.”

But he dared not, could not.

At least, he couldn't and simultaneously maintain his safe position.

Silkies had one weakness, if it could be called that. They were vulnerable when they changed from one form to another.

Considering this, Cemp now conducted his first mental conversation with Joanne. He explained his predicament, described what he had learned, ended: “I think I can stay here all day and see what comes of this, but I should probably have another Silkie stand by for emergencies.”

Her anxious reply was, “I'll have Charley Baxter contact you.”

IV

She phoned Baxter and passed the conversation on to Cemp in thought form.

Baxter was enormously excited by the information that Cemp had obtained about the alien Silkies. He regarded the gravity field as a new energy application, but was reluctant to send in another Silkie to help.

“Let's face it, Joanne,” he said. “Your husband learned something last year which, if other Silkies understood it, might wreck the delicate balance by which we're maintaining our present Silkie-human civilization. Nat understands our concern about that. So tell him I'll send a machine in there to act as a barrier for him while he makes his changeover into Silkie.”

It occurred to Cemp that the ap-

pearance of new, hitherto unknown Silkies would alter the Silkie-human, relationship even more. But he did not permit that thought to go out to Joanne.

Baxter's conversation concluded with the statement that it would probably take a while before the machine could be gotten to him. "So tell him to hold on."

After Baxter had hung up, Joanne thought at Cemp: "I should tell you that I'm relieved about one thing."

"What's that?"

"If the Silkie women are all as plain in human form as B-Roth then I'm not going to worry."

An hour went by. Two . . . Ten.

In the world outside, the skies would be dark; the sun long gone; the stars signalling in their tiny brilliant fashion.

Charley Baxter's machine had come and gone. And Cemp—safe in the Silkie form—remained close to the most remarkable energy field that had ever been seen in the solar system. What was astounding was that it showed no diminishment of the colossal gravity effect. His hope had been that with his super-sensitive Silkie perception he would be able to be aware of any feeder lines that might be flowing power to it from an outside source.

But there was nothing like that; nothing to trace. The power came from the single, small group of molecules. It had no other origin.

The minutes and the hours lengthened. The watch became long, and he had time to feel the emotional impact of the problem that now confronted every Silkie on Earth.

The need to make a decision . . . about the Space Silkies.

Morning.

Shortly after the sun came up outside, the field manifested an independent quality. It began to move along the corridor, heading deeper into the cave. Cemp floated along after it, letting a portion of its gravitational pull draw him. He was wary but curious, hopeful that now he would find out more.

The cave ended abruptly in a deep sewer, which had the look of long abandonment. The concrete was cracked. There were innumerable deep fissures in the walls. But to the group of molecules and their field, it seemed to be a familiar area, for they went forward more rapidly. Suddenly there was water below them. It was not stagnant, but rippled and swirled. A tidal pool, Cemp analyzed.

The water grew deeper, and presently they were in it, travelling at undiminished speed.

Ahead the murky depths grew less murky. They emerged into sunlit waters in a canyon about a hundred feet below the surface of the ocean.

As they broke surface a moment later, the strange energy complex accelerated. Cemp, suspecting that it would now try to get away from him, made a final effort to perceive its characteristics.

But nothing came back to him. No message, no sign of energy flow. For a split instant, he did have the impression that the atoms making up the molecule group were—some-

how—not right. But when he switched his attention to the band involved, the molecules must either have become aware of his momentary awareness and closed themselves off—or he had imagined it.

Even as he made the analysis, his feeling that he was about to be discarded was borne out. The particle's speed increased rapidly. In seconds, its velocity approached the limits of what he could permit himself to endure inside an atmosphere. The outer chitin of his Silkie body grew hot, then hotter.

Reluctantly Cemp adjusted his own atomic structure, so that the gravity of the alien field no longer affected him. As he fell away, it continued to pursue a course which took it in an easterly direction, where the sun was now an hour above the horizon. Within mere seconds of his separation from it, it left the atmosphere and, traveling at many miles a second, headed seemingly straight for the sun.

Cemp came to the atmosphere's edge. "Gazing" by means of his Silkie perceptors out upon the vast, dark ocean of space beyond, he contacted the nearest telstar unit. To the scientists aboard, he gave a fix on the speeding molecule group. Then he waited hopefully while they tried to put a tracer on it.

But the word finally came: "Sorry, we get no reaction."

Baffled, Cemp let himself be drawn by Earth's gravity. Then, by a series of controlled adjustments to both the magnetic and gravity fields of the planet, he guided himself to the Silkie Authority.

V

Three hours of talk—

Cemp who, as the only Silkie present, occupied a seat near the foot of the long table, found the discussion boring.

It had early seemed to him that he, or some other Silkie, ought to be sent to the Silkie planetoid to learn the facts, handle the matter in a strictly logical but humanitarian fashion, and report back to the Authority.

If, for some reason, the so-called Silkie Nation proved to be unamenable to reason, then a further discussion would be in order.

As he waited for the three dozen human conferees to reach the same decision, he couldn't help but notice the order of importance at the table.

The Special People—which included Charley Baxter—were at the head of the long table. Next, ranging down on either side were the ordinary human beings. Then, on one side, himself, and below him, three minor aides and the official secretary of the three-man Silkie Authority.

It was not a new observation for him. He had discussed it with other Silkies and had had it pointed out to him that here was a reversal of the power role that was new in history.

The strongest individuals in the solar system—the Silkies—still were relegated to secondary status.

He emerged from his reverie to the realization that silence had fallen. And that Charley Baxter, slim, gray-eyed, intense, was coming around the long table. He stopped across from Cemp.

"Well, Nat," said Baxter, "there's the picture as we see it." He seemed embarrassed.

Cemp did a lightning mental back-track on the discussion. And realized that they had indeed arrived at the inevitable conclusion.

But he noted also that they considered it a weighty decision. It was a lot to ask of any person, that was the attitude. The result could be personal disaster. They wouldn't be critical if he refused.

"I feel ashamed to ask it," said Baxter, "but this is almost a war situation."

Cemp could see that they were not sure of themselves. There had been no war on Earth for 150 years. Nobody was an expert in it any more.

He climbed to his feet as these awarenesses touched him. Now, he looked around at the faces turned to him, and he said, "Calm yourselves, gentlemen. Naturally I'll do it."

They all looked relieved. The discussion turned quickly to details: the difficulty of locating a single meteorite in space; particularly one which had such a long sidereal period.

It was well known that there were about fifteen hundred large meteorites and planetoids, and tens of thousands of smaller objects. All of these had orbits or motions which, though subject to the laws of celestial mechanics, were often very eccentric in their movements. A few of them, like comets, periodically came in close to the sun, then shot off into space again, returning for another hectic go-round fifty to a hundred years later. There were so

many of these intermediate sized rocks that they were identified and their courses plotted only for special reasons. There simply had never been any point in tracking them all.

Cemp had matched course with and landed on scores of lone meteorites. His recollections of those experiences were among the bleaker memories of his numerous space flights. The darkness, the sense of utterly barren rock, the profound lack of sensory stimulation. Oddly, the larger they were, the worse the feeling.

He had discovered that he could have a kind of intellectual affinity with a rock that was less than a thousand feet in diameter. Particularly was this true of an inarticulate mass that had finally been precipitated into a hyperbolic orbit. When he computed that it was thus destined to leave the solar system forever, he would find himself imagining how long it had been in space, how far it had gone and how it would now hurtle away from the solar system and spend eons between the stars.

A government representative—a human being named John Mathews—interrupted his thought:

"Mr. Cemp, I'd like to ask you a very personal question."

Cemp looked at him and nodded.

The man went on, "According to reports, several hundred Earth Silkies have already defected to these native Silkies. Evidently you don't feel, as they do, that the Silkie planetoid is home. Why not?"

Cemp smiled. "Well, first of all," he said, "I would never buy a pig in a poke the way they have done."

He hesitated. Then in a serious tone he continued: "Entirely apart from my feelings of loyalty to Earth, I do not believe the future of life forms will be helped or advanced by any rigid adherence to the idea that I am a lion, or I am a bear. Intelligent life is, or should be, moving toward a common civilization. Maybe I'm like the farm boy who went to the big city—Earth. Now my folks want me to come back to the farm. They'll never understand why I can't, so I don't even try to explain it."

"Maybe," said Mathews, "the planetoid is actually the big city and earth the farm. What then?"

Cemp smiled politely, but merely shook his head.

Mathews persisted: "One more question. How should Silkies be treated?"

Cemp spread his hands. "I can't think of a single change of value."

He meant it. He had never been able to get excited about the pecking order.

Yet he had known for a long time that some Silkies felt strongly about their inferior—as it seemed to them—role. Others, like himself, did their duty, were faithful to their human wives and tried to enjoy the somewhat limited possibilities of human civilization—limited for Silkies, who had so many additional senses for which there was no organized creative stimulation.

Presumably things could be better. But meanwhile they were what they were. Cemp recognized that any attempt to alter them would cause

fear and disturbance among human beings. And why do that merely to satisfy the egos of somewhat less than two thousand Silkies?

At least, that had been the problem until now. The coming of the Space Silkies would add an indefinite number of new egos to the scene. Yet, Cemp reasoned, not enough to change the statistics meaningfully.

Aloud he said, "As far as I can see, under all conceivable circumstances, there is no better solution to the Silkie problem than that which exists right now."

Charley Baxter chose that moment to end the discussion, saying, "Nat, you have our best, our very best wishes. And our complete confidence. A spaceship will rush you to Mercury's orbit and give you a head start. Good luck."

VI

The scene ahead was absolutely fantastic.

The Silkie planetoid would make its circuit of the sun far inside Mercury's eccentric orbit, and the appearance was that it might brush the edges of the great clouds of hot gas that seemed to poke out like streamers—or shapeless arms—from the sun's hot surface.

Cemp doubted if such a calamity would actually occur, but as he periodically subjected his steel-hard, chitinous Silkie body to the sun's gravity, he sensed the enormous pull of it at this near distance.

The circle of white fire filled almost the entire sky ahead. The light

was so intense, and came in on him on so many bands, that it overwhelmed his receptor system, whenever he let it in. And he had to open up at intervals in order to make readjustments in his course.

The two hurtling bodies—his own and that of planetoid—were presently on a collision course.

The actual moment of "collision" was still hours away. So Cemp shut off his entire perception system. Thus instantly he sank into the deep sleep which Silkies so rarely allowed themselves.

He awoke in stages and saw that his timing had been exact. The planetoid now was "visible" on one of the tiny neural screens inside the forward part of his body. It showed as a radar-type image; and at the beginning it was the size of a pea.

In less than thirty minutes it grew to an apparent size of five miles—which was half its diameter, he estimated.

At this point, Cemp performed his only dangerous maneuver. He allowed the sun's gravity to draw him between the sun and the planetoid. Then he cut off the sun's gravity, and, using a few bursts of energy—manufactured at the edge of a field behind his body—darted toward the planetoid's surface.

What was dangerous about this action was that it brought him in on the day side. With the super brilliant sunlight behind him, he was clearly visible to anyone in or on or around the planetoid.

But his theory was that no Silkie would normally be exposing himself to the sun; and that in fact every

sensible Silkie would be inside the big stone ball or on its night side.

At close range in that ultra-bright light, the planetoid looked like the wrinkled head and face of a bald, old Indian. It was reddish-gray in color, and pock-marked and lined, and not quite round. The pock marks turned out to be actual caves. Into one of these, Cemp floated.

Cemp went down into what to his human eyes would have been pitch darkness; but, as a Silkie the interior was visible to him on many bands.

He found himself in a corridor with smooth, granite walls that led slantingly downward. After about twenty minutes he came to a turn in the passageway. As he rounded it, he saw a shimmering, almost opaque energy screen in front of him.

Cemp decided at once not to regard it as a problem. He doubted if it had been put up to catch anyone. In fact, his lightning analysis of it indicated that it was a wall, with the equivalent solidity of a large spaceship's outer skin.

As a screen it was strong enough to keep out the most massive armor-piercing shells.

Going through such a screen was an exercise in Silkie energy control.

First he put up a matching field, and started it oscillating. The oscillation unstabilized the opposing screen and started it in a sympathetic vibration. As the process continued the screen and the field began to merge. But it was the screen that became part of Cemp's field; not the reverse.

Thus, his field was within minutes a part of the barrier. Safely inside it, he crossed the barrier space. Once past it, disengagement was a matter of slowing down the oscillation until the field and the screen abruptly became separate entities.

The sound of the separation was like the crack of a whip.

And the fact that there was sound indicated he had come into air space. Quickly, he discovered that it was air of an unearthly mixture. 30% oxygen, 20% helium, and most of the rest, gaseous sulphur compounds.

The pressure was about twice that of sea level on Earth.

But it was air, and it undoubtedly had a purpose.

From where he had floated through the energy barrier, he saw a large chamber, the floor of which was about a hundred feet below him.

Soft lights shone down.

Seen in that light, the room was a jewel.

The walls were inlaid with precious stones, fine metals and varicolored rock, cunningly cut into a design. The design was a continuing story picture of a race of four-legged, centaur-type beings, with a proud bearing and—wherever there were close-ups—sensitive though unhuman faces.

On the floor was a picture of a planet inset in some kind of glowing substance that showed the curving, mountainous surface, with sparkling lines where rivers flowed, three-dimensional appearance of trees and other growth, glinting oceans and lakes, and thousands of bright spots marking cities and towns.

The sides of the planet curved away in proper proportion, and Cemp had the feeling that the globe continued on down and the bottom was probably visible in some lower room.

The over-all effect was completely and totally *beautiful*.

Cemp surmised that the life scenes and the planet picture were an accurate eidolon of a race and a place with which the Silkies had at some time in their past been associated.

He was mentally staggered by the artistic perfection of the room.

He had already, as he floated down, noticed that there were large archways leading to adjoining chambers. He had glimpses of furniture, machines, objects, shining bright and new. He surmised they were artifacts of either the centaur or other civilizations. But he could not take time to explore. His attention fastened on a stairway that led down to the next level.

He went down it, and presently found himself facing another energy barrier.

Penetrating it exactly as he had the other, he moved on and into a chamber filled with sea water.

Inset in the floor of that huge room was a planet that glimmered with the green-blue of an undersea civilization.

And that was only the beginning. Cemp went down from one level to another, each time through an energy screen, and through similarly decorated chambers.

Each was inlaid in the same way

with precious stones and glinting metals. Each had breathtaking scenes from what he presumed were habitable planets of far stars, and a different atmosphere.

After a dozen, the impact began to be cumulative. Realization came that here, inside this planetoid, had been gathered such treasure as probably did not exist anywhere else. Cemp visualized the 700-odd cubic miles that comprised the interior of the most fantastic asteroid in the galaxy; and he remembered what Mathews had said. The human government official had speculated that perhaps the planetoid was the "city" and Earth was the "farm".

It began to seem more true.

He had been expecting momentarily to collide with an inhabitant of the planetoid. After passing three more of the chambers, each with its glowing duplicate in miniature of a planet of long ago and far away, Cemp paused and re-considered.

He had a strong feeling that in learning of these treasures, he had gained an advantage—which he must not lose—and that the Silkies did indeed have their living quarters on the side away from the sun, and that they did not expect anyone to arrive in this surprise fashion.

The idea continued to seem correct, and so he turned back and was presently dropping directly toward the dark side.

Again the cave openings. And a few score feet inside, the energy barrier. Beyond that was air and gravitation exactly as at sea level on the Earth.

Cemp floated down into a smoothly polished granite chamber. It was furnished with settees, chairs and tables, and there was a long, low-built bookcase at one end. But the arrangement was as in an anteroom; formal and unlined in. It gave him an eerie feeling.

Still in his Silkie form, he went down a staircase and into another chamber. It had soil in it, and there was vegetation, which consisted of temperate zone Earth shrubs and flowers. Once more, the arrangement was formal.

On the third level down were earth-like offices, with information computers. Cemp, who understood such matters, recorded what they were. He observed also that no one was using this particular source of data.

He was about to go down to the next level—when an energy beam of enormous power triggered the super-fast defense screen he had learned from the Kibmadine the previous year.

The coruscation as the beam interacted with an ever vaster intensity with Cemp's barrier screen lit the chamber as if sunlight had suddenly been let in. It stayed lit as whoever directed the beam tested the screen's durability in a sustained power thrust.

For Cemp, it was a fight that moved at lightning speed down the entire line of his defenses, and came finally up against the hard core of the second method he had learned from the Kibmadine.

There, and only there, he held his own.



VII

A minute went by before the attacker seemed finally to accept that Cemp simply used the beam itself to maintain the barrier. Hence, it took nothing out of him, and it would last as long as the beam—and re-form as often as necessary.

As suddenly as it had begun, the attacking energy ceased.

Cemp stared around him, dismayed. The entire chamber was a shambles of twisted, white-hot machinery and debris. The granite walls had crumbled, exposing raw meteorite rock behind it. Molten rock dripped in a score of flowing rivers from the shattered ceiling and walls. Great sections were still tumbling and sliding.

What had been a modern office





had become in a matter of minutes a gutted desolation of blackened metal and rock.

For Cemp, the initial staggering reality was that only the high speed Kibmadine screen had saved him. The assault had been gauged to overwhelm and over-speed the entire Silkie defense and attack system.

The intent had been death.

No bargaining, no discussion, no questions.

The hard fight had driven him down to a special logic of levels. He felt an automatic outflow of hatred.

Yet, after a little, another realization penetrated: "I won!" he thought.

Calm again but savage, he went down five more levels; emerged abruptly at the upper level of a great vista, a huge open space.

The city of the Silkies spread below him.

It was precisely and exactly like a small Earth city. Apartment buildings. Private residences. Tree-lined streets. Cemp was bemused; for here also the native Silkies had clearly attempted to create a human atmosphere.

He could make out figures on a sidewalk far below. He started down.

When he was a hundred feet above them, the people stopped and looked up at him. One—a woman—directed a startled thought at him: "Who are you?"

Cemp told her.

The reaction of the four nearest people was astonishment. But they were not afraid, or hostile.

The little group—three women and one man—waited for him. As Cemp came down, he was aware that they were signalling to others. Soon a crowd had gathered, mostly in human bodies, mostly women, but an even dozen arrived in the Silkie form.

Guards? he wondered. But they were not antagonistic either.

Everybody was mentally open; and what was disconcerting about that was, no one showed awareness of the attack that had been made on him in the office section near the surface.

Instantly, he saw their unawareness as an opportunity. By keeping silent and alert, he would be able to spot his vicious assailant.

He presumed the violence had been planned and carried out at the administrative level.

"I'll find those so-and-so's!" he thought grimly.

To his audience of innocent citizens, he said, "I'm acting as an emissary of the Earth Government. My purpose here is to discover what binding agreements are possible."

A woman called up to him, "We can't seem to change into attractive females, Earth style. What do you suggest?"

A gale of laughter greeted her remark. Cemp was taken aback. He hadn't expected such easy friendliness from the crowd.

But his determination did not waver. "I presume we can discuss that also at government level," he said, "but it won't be first on the agenda."

Some remnants of his hate flow must have gone out to them with his thought, for a man said sharply, "He doesn't sound very friendly."

A woman added quickly: "Come now, Mr. Cemp. This is your real home."

Cemp had recovered. He replied; a steady level thought: "You'll get what you give. Right now, you're giving good. But the agents your government sent to Earth made blood-thirsty threats."

His thought paused there, puzzled. For these people as they were right now, did not seem to have any of that threat in them. It struck him that that should be very significant.

After a moment's hesitation, he finished:

"I'm here to discover what it's all about, so why not direct me to someone in authority?"

"We don't have authorities." That was a woman.

A man said, "Mr. Cemp, we live

a completely free existence here and you and other Earth Silkies are invited to join us."

Cemp persisted, "Who decided to send those four hundred messengers to Earth?"

"We always do that, when the time comes," another woman replied.

"Complete with threats?" asked Cemp. "Threats of death?"

She seemed suddenly uncertain. She turned to one of the men. "You were down there," she said. "Did you imply violence?"

The man hesitated. "It's a little vague," he said. "But I guess so." He added quickly, "It's always been this way when E-Lerd conditions us in connection with the Power. Memory tends to fade very quickly. In fact, I hadn't recalled that threat aspect until now." He seemed astonished. "I'll be damned. I think we had better speak to E-Lerd and find the reason for it."

Cemp telepathed directly to the man. "What was your after feeling about what you had done?"

"Just that I communicated that we Space Silkies were here, and that it was time for the Earth Silkies to become aware of their true origin."

He broke off, turned to the others. "This is fantastic," he said. "I'm astounded. We need to look into E-Lerd's administration of the Power. I uttered murderous words when I was on Earth! That's not like me at all."

His complete amazement was more convincing than anything else could possibly have been.

Cemp said firmly, "I gather then

that, contrary to your earlier statements, you do have a leader, and his name is E-Lerd."

One of the Silkie bodies answered that. "No, he's not a leader, but I can see how that might be understood. We're free. No one tells us what to do. But we do delegate responsibilities. For example, E-Lerd is in charge of the Power, and we get its use through him. Would you like to talk to him, Mr. Cemp?"

"Indeed I would," said Cemp with immense satisfaction.

He was thinking: "The Power! Of course. Who else? The person who has control of the Power is the only one who could have attacked me!"

"My name is O-Vedd," said the Space Silkie. "Come with me."

His long, bullet-like body detached itself from the group of similar bodies and darted off over the heads of the crowd. Cemp followed. They came down to a small entrance that led along a narrow, smooth-walled, granite corridor. After a hundred feet this opened out to another huge space. Here was a second city.

At least, for a moment that was what it looked like.

Then Cemp saw that the buildings were of a different character. Not dwellings at all. For him, who was familiar with most of the paraphernalia of manufactured energy, there was no question. Some of the massive structures below were the kind that housed atomic power. Others were distributing plants for electricity. Still others had the unmistakable shape of the Ylem transformation systems.

None of these, of course, was *the*

Power. But here indeed was power in abundance.

Cemp followed O-Vedd down to the courtyard of a building complex that, despite all its shields, he had no difficulty in identifying as a source of magnetic beams.

The Space Silkie landed and transformed to human, then stood and waited for Cemp to do likewise.

"Nothing doing!" said Cemp, curtly. "Ask him to come out here."

O-Vedd shrugged. As a human, he was short and dark. He walked off and vanished into a doorway.

Cemp waited amid a silence that was broken only by the faint hum of power from the buildings. A breeze touched the super-sensitive spy-ray extensions that he maintained in operation under all circumstances. The little wind registered through the spy mechanisms, but did not trigger the defense screens behind them.

It was only a breeze, after all; and he had never programmed himself to respond to such minor signals.

He was about to dismiss it from his mind; about to contemplate his reaction to the Space Silkies — he liked the crowd he had seen — when he thought, sharply; A breeze *here!*

Up went his screen. Out projected his perceptors.

He had time to notice, then, that it was indeed a breeze but that it was being stirred by a blankness in the surrounding space.

Around Cemp, the courtyard grew hazy; then it faded.

There was no planetoid.

Cemp increased all signal sensitivity to maximum.

He continued to float in the vacuum of space, and off to one side was the colossal white circle that was the sun.

Cemp felt a sudden energy drain from his body. The sensation was of his Silkie screens going up, of his system resisting outside energy at many levels.

He thought in a tense dismay: "I'm in a fight. It's another attempt to kill me."

Whatever it was, it was automatic. His own perception remained cut off, and he was impelled to experience what the attacker wanted him to.

Cemp felt himself, then, like a man suddenly set upon in pitch darkness. But what was appalling about it was that his senses were being held by other forces, preventing awareness of the nature of the attack. What he saw was —

Distance disappeared!

There, spread over many miles of space, was a group of Silkies. Cemp saw them clearly, counted in his lightning fashion two hundred and eighty-eight, caught their thoughts, and recognized that these were the renegade Silkies from Earth.

Suddenly, he understood that they had been told where the Silkie planetoid was, and they were on their way "home".

Time was telescoped.

The entire group of Silkies was transported in what seemed an instant to within a short distance of the planetoid. Cemp could see the planetoid in the near distance —

only a few miles away, twenty at the maximum.

But to him the baffling, deadly, fantastic thing was that, as these marvellous events ran their course at one level of his perception, at another level the feeling remained that a determined attempt was being made to kill him.

He could see, feel, be aware of almost nothing.

But throughout, the shadowy sensations continued. His energy fields were going through defensive motions. But it was all far away from his awareness, like a human dream.

Being a fully trained Silkie, Cemp watched the internal as well as the external developments with keen observation. Strove instant by instant to grasp the reality. Monitored incoming signals by the thousands.

He began to sense meaning. Began to have initial speculations about the nature of the physical-world phenomenon involved. And he had the feeling of being on the verge of his first computation when — as suddenly as it had begun — it ended.

The space scene began to fade. Abruptly, it winked out.

He was back in the courtyard of the buildings that housed the magnetic power complex.

Coming toward him from the open doorway of the main building was O-Vedd. He was accompanied by a man who was of Cemp's general human build: over six feet, strongly muscled; his face was heavier than Cemp's, and his eyes brown instead of gray.

As he came near, he said, "I am E-Lerd. Let's talk."

E-Lerd continued: "To begin with, I want to tell you the history of the Silkies."

Cemp, who was braced for a bitter quarrel, who could feel in himself a multitude of re-adjusting energy flows . . . proof of the severity of the second all-out fight he had been in — for which he absolutely required a complete explanation — was electrified by the statement.

At that moment, caught up as he was in a steely rage, nothing else could have diverted his attention. But —

The history of the Silkies! To Cemp, it was instantly the most important subject in the universe.

The Silkie planetoid, E-Lerd began, had entered the solar system from outer space nearly three hundred years before. It had, in due course, been drawn into a Sol-Nep-tunian orbit.

On its first encirclement of the sun, Silkies visited the inner planets and found that Earth alone was inhabited.

Since they could change form, they studied the biologic structure necessary to function in the two atmospheres of Earth — air and water — and set up an internal programming for that purpose.

Unfortunately, a small percentage of the human population — it was soon discovered — could tune in on the thoughts of Silkies.

All those who did so in this first visit were quickly hunted down and their memories of the experience blotted out.

But, because of these sensitive humans, it became necessary for Silkies to seem to be the product of human biologic experiment. An inter-relationship with human females was accordingly programmed into Silkies, so that the human female ovum and the male Silkie sperm would produce a Silkie who knew nothing of Silkie history.

In order to maintain this process on an automatic level, the Special People — those persons who could read Silkie minds — were maneuvered into being in charge of it.

Thereupon, all adult Silkies returned to their planetoid, which now went to the remote end of its orbit. When it came again into the vicinity of Earth more than a hundred years later, cautious visits were made.

It became apparent that several unplanned things had happened.

Human biologists had experimented with the process. As a result, in the early stages, variants had been born. These had propagated their twisted traits and were continuing to do so, growing ever more numerous.

The actual consequences were:

— A number of true Silkies, capable of making the three-fold transformation at will.

— Class B Silkies, who could transform from human to fish state, but with no ability to become space people. They were a stable form.

— Variants!

These latter two groups had largely taken to the oceans. Accordingly it was decided to leave the Class B Silkies alone, but that an effort be made to inveigle the Variants into gigantic spaceships filled with water,

where — thus concentrated — they would be isolated and prevented from interbreeding.

This plan was already under way by the time the Silkie planetoid made its round of the sun and again headed out toward far Neptune.

Now they were back. And they had found an unfortunate situation.

Somehow, Earth science — virtually ignored by the early visitors — had achieved a training miracle for the Silkie perception system.

The Earth Silkies had become a loyal-to-Earth, tight-knit, masterful group of beings, lacking only the Power.

Cemp “read” all this in E-Lerd’s thought; and then, because he was amazed, he questioned him about what seemed a major omission in his story.

Where had the Silkie planetoid come from?

E-Lerd showed his first impatience.

“These journeys are too far,” he telephated. “They take too long. Nobody remembers origins. Some other star system, obviously.”

“Are you serious?” Cemp was astounded. “You don’t know?”

But that was the story. Pry at it as he might, it did not change. Although E-Lerd’s mind remained closed, except for his telephated thoughts, O-Vedd’s mind was open. In it Cemp saw the same beliefs and the same lack of information.

But why the tampering with human biology, and the intermixing of the two breeds?

“We always do that. That’s how we live — in a relationship with the inhabitants of a system.”

“How do you know you always do that? You just told me you can’t remember where you came from this time or where you were before that.”

“Well — it’s obvious from the artifacts we brought along.”

E-Lerd’s attitude dismissed his questions as being irrelevant. Cemp detected a mind phenomenon in the other that explained the attitude. To Space Silkies, the past was unimportant. Silkies *always* did certain things, because that was the way they were mentally, emotionally, and physically constructed.

A Silkie didn’t have to know from past experience. He (or she) simply had to *be* what was innate in Silkies.

It was, Cemp realized, a basic explanation for much that he had observed. This was why these Silkies had never been trained scientifically. Training was an alien concept in the cosmos of the Space Silkies.

“You mean,” he protested, incredulous, “you have no idea why you left the last system where you had this inter-relationship with the race there? Why not stay forever in some system where you have located yourself?”

“Probably,” said E-Lerd, “somebody got too close to the secret of the Power. That could not be permitted.”

That was the reason — he continued — why Cemp and other Silkies had to come back into the fold. As Silkies, they might learn about the Power.

The discussion had come naturally around to *that* urgent subject.

"What," said Cemp, "is the Power?"

E-Lerd stated formally that that was a forbidden subject.

"Then I shall have to force the secret from you," said Cemp. "There can be no agreement without it."

E-Lerd replied stiffly that any attempt at enforcement would require him to use the Power as a defense.

Cemp lost patience.

"After your two attempts to kill me," he telepathed in a steely rage, "I'll give you thirty seconds—"

"What attempts to kill you?" said E-Lerd, surprised.

At that precise moment, as Cemp was bracing himself to use logic of levels . . . there was an interruption.

An "impulse" band—a very low, slow vibration—touched one of the receptors in the forward part of his brain. It operated at mere multiples of the audible sound range directly on his sound receiving system.

What was new was that the sound acted as a carrier for the accompanying thought. The result was as if a voice spoke clear and loud into his ears.

"You win," said the voice. "You have forced me. I shall talk to you myself—by-passing my unknowing servants."

IX

Cemp identified the incoming thought formation as a direct contact. Accordingly, his brain—which was programmed to respond instantaneously to a multitude of sig-

nals—was triggered to instant effort to suction more impulses from the sending brain.

. . . And he got a picture. A momentary glimpse. So brief that even after a few seconds it was hard to be sure that it was real and not a figment of fantasy.

Something huge lay in the darkness deep inside the planetoid. Lay there and gave forth with an impression of vast power. It had been withholding itself, watching him with some tiny portion of itself. The larger whole understood the universe and could manipulate massive sections of space-time.

"Say nothing to these others." Again the statement was a direct contact thought which sounded like spoken words.

The dismay that had seized on Cemp in the few moments that had now gone by was on the level of desperation.

He had entered the Silkie stronghold in the belief that his human training and Kibmadine knowledge gave him a temporary advantage over the Space Silkies, and that—if he did not delay—he could force a decision that might resolve the entire threat from these natural Silkies.

Instead, he had come unsuspecting into the lair of a cosmic giant.

He thought, appalled, "Here is what has been called 'the Power'."

And if the glimpse he had had was real, then it was such a colossal power that all his own ability and strength were as nothing.

He deduced now that this was what had attacked him twice. "Is

that true?" he telepathed on the same band as the incoming thoughts had been on.

"Yes, I admit it."

"Why?" Cemp flashed the question, "did you do it?"

"So that I would not have to reveal my existence. My fear is always that, if other life forms find out about me, they will analyze how to destroy me."

The direction of the alien thought altered: "But now, listen; do as follows —"

The confession had again stirred Cemp's emotions.

Because the hatred that had been aroused in him had the sustained force that derived from the Logic of Levels stimulation — in this instance the body's response to an attempt at total destruction — he had difficulty now restraining additional automatic reactions.

But the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. And so, presently, he was able, at the request of the monster, to say to E-Lerd and the other Silkie:

"Take a while to think this over. And when the Silkies who have defected arrive from Earth, I'll talk to them. We can then have another discussion."

It was such a complete change of attitude that the two Silkies were surprised.

But he saw that to them the change had the look of weakness, and they were relieved.

"I'll be back here in one hour!" Cemp telepathed to E-Lerd.

Whereupon he turned and climbed

up and out of the courtyard, darting to an opening that led by a round-about route deeper into the planetoid.

Again the low, slow vibration touched his receptors. "Come closer!" the creature urged.

Cemp obeyed, on the hard-core principle that he either could defend himself — or he couldn't. Down he went, past a dozen screens, to a barren cave, a chamber that had been carved out of the original meteorite stuff. It was not even lighted. As he entered, the direct thought touched his mind again: "Now we can talk."

Cemp had been thinking at furious speed; striving to adjust to a danger so fantastic that he had no way of evaluating it.

Yet 'the Power' had revealed itself to him rather than let E-Lerd find out anything. That seemed to be his one hold on it; and he had the tense conviction that even that was true only so long as he was inside the planetoid.

He thought: ". . . Take full advantage."

He telepathed: "After those attacks, you'll have to give me some straight answers, if you expect to deal with me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Who are you? Where do you come from. What do you want?"

It didn't know who it was.

"I have a name," it said. "I am a Glis. There used to be many like me long ago. I don't know what happened to them."

"But *what* are you?"

It had no knowledge. An energy life form of unknown origin, travel-

ing from one star system to another, remaining for a while, then leaving.

"But why leave? Why not stay?"
Sharply.

"The time comes when I have done what I can for a particular system."

. . . By using its enormous power, it transported large ice and air meteorites to airless planets and made them habitable; cleared away dangerous space debris, altered poisonous atmospheres into non-poisonous ones . . .

"Presently the job is done, and I realize it's time to go on to explore the infinite cosmos. So I make my pretty picture of the inhabited planets, as you saw, and head for outer space."

"And the Silkies?"

They were an old meteorite life form.

"I found them long ago, and because I needed mobile units that could think, I persuaded them into a permanent relationship."

Cemp did not ask what persuasive methods had been used. In view of the ignorance of the Silkies of what they had a relationship with, he divined that a sly method had been used. But still, what he had seen showed an outwardly peaceful arrangement. The Glis has agents—the Silkies—who acted for it in the world of tiny movements. They, in turn, had at their disposal bits and pieces of the Glis's own "body", which apparently could be programmed for specific tasks beyond their ability to perform.

"I am willing," said the Glis, "to make the same arrangement with

your government for as long as I remain in the solar system."

But absolute secrecy would be necessary.

"Why?"

There was no immediate reply, but the communication band remained open; and along it there flowed an essence of the reaction from the Glis: an impression of unmatched power, of a being so mighty that all other individuals in the universe were less by some enormous percentage.

Cemp felt staggered anew.

But he telephated: "I must tell someone. Somebody has to know."

"No other Silkies—absolutely."

Cemp didn't argue. All these millennia, the Glis had kept its identity hidden from the Space Silkies. He had a total conviction that it would wreck the entire planetoid to prevent them from learning it.

He had been lucky. It had fought him at a level where only a single chamber of the meteorite had been destroyed. It had restricted itself.

"Only the top government leaders and the Silkie Council may know," the Glis continued.

It seemed an adequate concession. Yet Cemp had an awful suspicion that in the long past of this creature every person who uncovered its secret had been murdered.

Thinking thus, he could not compromise. He demanded:

"Let me have a complete view of you—what I caught a fleeting glimpse of earlier."

He sensed, then, that the Glis hesitated.

Cemp urged: "I promise that only the persons you named will be told about this—but we *must* know!"

Floating there in the cave in his Silkie form, Cemp felt a change of energy tension in the air and in the ground. Although he himself put forth no additional probing energies, he recognized that barriers were going down.

And presently he began to record.

His first awareness was of hugeness.

Cemp estimated after a long, measuring look that the creature, a circular rock-like structure, was about a thousand feet in diameter.

It was alive, but it was not a thing of flesh and blood.

It "fed" from some inner energy that rivaled what existed in the heart of the sun.

And Cemp noticed a remarkable phenomenon.

Magnetic impulses that passed through the creature and impinged on his senses were altered in a fashion that he had never observed before—as if they had passed through atoms of a different structure than anything that he knew.

He remembered the fleeting impression he had had from the molecule. This was the same but on a massive scale.

What startled him was that all his enormous training in such matters gave, no clue as to what the structure might be.

"Enough?" asked the creature. Cemp said, "yes," doubtfully.

The Glis accepted his reluctant

agreement as a complete authorization. What had been a view through and past the cave wall, abruptly disappeared.

The alien thought spoke into his mind: "I have done a very dangerous thing for me in thus revealing myself. Therefore, I again earnestly impress on you the importance of a limited number of people being told what you have just witnessed."

In secrecy—it continued—lay the greatest safety, not only for it but for Cemp.

"I believe," said the creature, "that what I can do is overwhelming. But I could be wrong. What disturbs me is, there is only one of me. I would hate to suddenly feel the kind of fear that might motivate me to destroy an entire system."

The implied threat was as deadly—and as possible—as anything Cemp had ever heard.

Cemp hesitated, feeling overwhelmed, desperate for—and needing—more information.

He flashed: "How old do Silkies get?" Added quickly: "We've had no experience, since none has yet died a natural death."

"About a thousand of your Earth years," was the answer.

"What have you in mind for Earth-born Silkies? Why did you want us to return here?"

Again there was a pause; once more the sense of colossal power. But presently with it there came a reluctant admission that new Silkies, born on planets, normally had less direct knowledge of the Glis than those who had made the latest trip.

Thus, the Glis had a great interest in insuring that there was plenty of time allowed for a good replacement crop of unknowing young Silkies.

It finished: "You and I shall have to make a special agreement. Perhaps you can have E-Lerd's position and be my contact."

Since E-Lerd no longer remembered that he was the contact, Cemp had no sense of having been offered anything but . . . danger.

He thought soberly: "I'll never be permitted to come back here, once I leave."

But that didn't matter. The important thing was —

. . . Get away! At once

X

At the Silkie Authority, the computer gave four answers.

Cemp rejected two at once. They were, in the parlance of computer technology "trials". The machine simply presented all the bits of information, strung out in two look-overs. By this means a living brain could examine the data in segments. But Cemp did not need such data — not now.

Of the remaining two answers, one postulated a being akin to a god.

. . . But Cemp had experienced the less-than-god-like powers of the Glis, in that it had twice failed to defeat him. True, he believed that it had failed to destroy him because it did not wish to destroy the planetoid. But an omnipotent god would not have found that a limitation.

He had to act as if the amazing fourth possibility were true.

The picture that had come through was one of ancientness.

The mighty being hidden in the planetoid predated most planetary systems.

"In the time from which it derives," reported the computer, "there were, of course, stars and star systems, but they were different. The natural laws were not what they are today. Space and time have made adjustments since then, grown older; and so the present appearance of the universe is different from what the Gliss knew at its beginnings. This seems to give it an advantage, for it knows some of the older shapes of atoms and molecules and can recreate them. Certain of these combinations reflect the state of matter when it was — the best comparison — younger."

The human government group, to whom Cemp presented this data, were stunned. Like himself, they had been basing their entire plan on working out a compromise with the Space Silkies.

Now, suddenly, here was a colossal being, with unknown powers.

"Would you say," asked one man huskily, "that to a degree the Silkies are slaves of this creature?"

Cemp said, "E-Lerd definitely didn't know what he was dealing with. He simply had what he conceived to be a scientific system for utilizing a force of nature. The Glis responded to his manipulation of this system, as if it were simply another form of energy. But I would guess that it controlled him, perhaps through pre-conditioning, installed long ago."

As he pointed out, such a giant life form would not be concerned with the everyday living details of its subjects. It would be satisfied with having a way of invariably getting them to do what it wanted.

"But what *does* it want?" That came from another man.

"It goes around doing good," said Cemp. He smiled a tight smile. "That's the public image it tried to give me. I have the impression that it's willing to make over the solar system to our specifications."

At this point Mathews spoke, "Mr. Cemp," he said, what does all this do to the Silkie situation?"

Cemp said that the Silkies who had defected had clearly acted hastily. "But," he finished, "I should tell you that I find the Space Silkies a very likable group. In my opinion, they are not the problem. They have the same problem, in another way, that we have."

"Nat—" said Charley Baxter, "do you trust this monster?"

Cemp hesitated, remembering the deadly attacks; remembering that only the Kibmadine defense screen and energy reversal process had saved him; and that the great being had been compelled to reveal its presence to prevent him from forcing E-Lerd to open his mind—which would have apprised the Space Silkies of the nature of the Power.

"No!" he said.

Having spoken, he realized that a simple negative was not enough answer. It could not convey the reality of the terrifying danger that was out there in space.

He said slowly, "I realize that my own motives may be suspect in what I am about to say. But it's my true opinion. I think all Earth Silkies should be given full knowledge of the Kibmadine attack and defense system at once, and that they work in teams to keep a constant watch on the Glis, permitting no one to leave the planetoid—except to surrender."

There was a pregnant silence. Then a scientist said in a small voice, "Any chance of logic of levels applying?"

"I don't see how," said Cemp.

"I didn't either," said the man, unhappily.

Cemp addressed the group again: "I believe we should gird ourselves to drive this thing from the solar system. We're not safe until it's gone."

It was as he finished speaking that he sensed an energy tension . . . familiar!

He had a sensation, then, of cosmic distance and cosmic time—opening.

Power unlimited!

It was the same feeling he had had in the second attack . . . when his senses had been confused.

The fear that came to Cemp in that moment had no parallel in his experience. It was the fear of a man who suddenly has a fleeting glimpse of death and destruction for all his own kind and for his planet.

As he had that awful consciousness, Cemp whirled from where he was standing. He ran headlong toward the great window behind him, shattering it with an arc of lightning

as he did so. And with eyes closed against the flying glass, he plunged out into the empty air seventy stories above the ground.

As he fell, the fabric of space and time collapsed around him like a house of cards tumbling. Cemp transformed into Class C Silkie, and became immensely more perceptive. Now he sensed the nature of the colossal energy at work: a gravitational field so intense that it actually closed in upon itself. Encompassing all things, organic and inorganic, it squeezed with irresistible power —

Defensively, Cemp put up, first, his inverter system.

And perceived that that was not the answer.

Instantly, he triggered gravity transformation — an infinite variable system, which converted the encroaching superfield to a harmless energy in relation to himself.

With that, he felt the change slow.

It did not stop. But he was no longer so involved, no longer so enveloped; and yet he was not completely free.

He realized what held him. He was oriented to this massive segment of space-time. To an extent, anything that happened here happened to him. To that extent, he could not get away.

The world grew dim. The sun disappeared.

Cemp saw with a start that he was inside a chamber, and realized that his automatic screens had protected him from striking the hard, glittering walls.

And he became aware of three other realities.

The chamber was familiar, in that there below him was one of the glowing images of a planet. The image showed the oceans and the continents, and the fact that he was looking down at it seemed to indicate that he was — somehow — back inside the Silkie planetoid, in one of the “art” rooms.

What was different was that as he looked down at the planetary image, he saw the familiar outlines of the continents and oceans of Earth.

Realized —

That the feeling of a virtually unlimited force pressing was a true explanation of what had happened.

The ancient monster that lived at the core of the planetoid had taken Earth, compressed it and everything in it and on it, from an 8000-mile-in-diameter planet into a hundred foot ball and had added it to its fabulous collection.

It was not a jewel-like image of Earth there in the floor.

It was Earth itself.

Even as he had the thought, Cemp sensed that the planetoid was increasing speed.

He thought: “We’re leaving the solar system.”

In a matter of minutes, as he hovered there, helpless to act, the speed of the planetoid became hundreds, then thousands of miles a second.

After about an hour of continuing acceleration, the velocity of the tiny planetoid in its ever-widening hyperbolic orbit was nearly half that of the speed of light.

A few hours later, the planetoid was beyond the orbit of Pluto, and it was traveling at near light-speed.

XI

Somewhere in there, Cemp began to brace himself. Anger spilled through him like a torrent down a rocky decline.

"You incredible monster!" he telepathed.

No answer.

Cemp raged on: "You're the most vicious creature that ever existed. I'm going to see that you get what's coming to you!"

This time he got a reply. "I'm leaving the solar system forever," said the Glis. "Why don't you get off before it's too late? I'll let you get away."

Cemp had no doubt of that. He was its most dangerous enemy, and his escape and unexpected appearance must have come as a hideous shock to the Glis.

"I'm not leaving," he retorted, "until you undo what you've done to the Earth."

There was silence.

"Can you and will you?" Cemp demanded.

"No. It's impossible." The response came reluctantly.

"But you could, if you wanted to, bring Earth back to size?"

"No. But I now wish I had not taken your planet," said the Glis unhappily. "It has been my policy to leave alone inhabited worlds that are protected by powerful life forms. I simply couldn't bring myself to believe that any Silkie was really dangerous to me. I was mistaken."

It was not the kind of repentance





that Cemp respected. "Why can't you—unsqueeze—it?" he persisted.

It seemed that the Glis could create a gravity field, but it could not reverse such a field. It said apologetically, "It would take as much power to undo it as it took to do it. Where is there such power?"

Where, indeed? But still he could not give up. "I'll teach you what anti-gravity is like," Cemp offered, "from what I can do in my own energy control system."

But the Glis pointed out that it had had the opportunity to study such systems in other Silkies. "Don't think I didn't try. Evidently anti-gravity is a late manifestation of matter and energy. And I'm an early form—as you, and only you, know."

Cemp's hope faded suddenly. Somehow, he had kept believing that there was a possibility. There wasn't.

The first grief touched him, the first real acceptance of the end of Earth.

The Glis was communicating again: "I can see that you and I now have a serious situation between us. So we must arrive at an agreement. I'll make you the leader of the Silkie nation. I'll subtly influence everything and everyone to fit your wishes. Women—as many as you desire. Control—as much as you want. Future actions of this planetoid you and I shall decide."

Cemp did not even consider the offer. He said grimly, "You and I don't think alike. I can just imagine

trusting you to leave me alone if I ever took the chance of changing to human form."

He broke off, said curtly, "The deal as I see it is a limited truce, while I consider what I can do against you, and you figure out what to do to me."

"Since that's the way you feel," was the harsh reply, "let me make my position clear. If you begin any action against me, I shall first destroy Earth and the Silkie nation, and then give you my attention."

Cemp replied in his own steely fashion: "If you ever damage anything I value — and that includes all Silkies and what's left of Earth — I'll attack you with everything I've got."

The Glis said scornfully, "You have nothing that can touch me — except those defense screens that reverse the attack flow. That way, you can use my own force against me. So I won't attack. Therefore — permanent stalemate."

Cemp said, "We'll see."

The Glis said, "You yourself stated that your levels of logic wouldn't work on me."

"I meant not directly," said Cemp. "There are many indirect approaches to the mind."

"I don't see how anything like that can work on me," was the reply.

At the moment, Cemp didn't either.

XII

Through miles of passageways, up as well as down, and round-

about, Cemp made his way. The journey took him through long chambers filled with furniture and art objects from other planets.

En route, he saw strange and wonderful scenes in bas-relief and brilliant color on one wall after another. And always there were the planets themselves, glowingly beautiful, but horrifying too, in his awareness that each one represented a hideous crime.

His destination was the city of the Silkies. He followed the internal pathway to it because he dared not leave the planetoid to take an external route. The Glis had virtually admitted it had not anticipated that he — its most dangerous enemy — would survive. So if he ever left these caves, he would have no further choice, no chance to decide on what the penalty — if any — or the outcome should be, and no part at all in the Silkie future. For he would surely never be allowed to return.

Not that there was any purpose in him. His grief was too deep and terrible. He had failed to protect, failed to realize, failed in his duty.

Earth was lost.

So quickly, so completely, a disaster so great it could not even be contemplated for more than instants at a time.

At intervals, he mourned Joanne, and Charley Baxter, and other friends among the Special People, and the human race.

By the time he was sunk into these miseries, he had taken up an observation position on top of a tree overlooking the main street of the Silkie city.

There he waited, with all of his signal systems constantly at peak alert.

While he maintained his tireless vigil, the life of the Silkie community had its being around him. The fact that the Silkies continued to live mostly as humans began to seem significant.

Cemp thought, shocked: "They're being kept vulnerable."

In human form, they could all be killed in a single flash of intolerable flame.

He telepathed on the Glis band: "Free them from that compulsion, or I'll tell them the truth about what you are."

An immediate, ferocious answer came: "You say one word, and I shall wipe out the entire nest."

Cemp commanded: "Release them from that compulsion, or we come to our crisis right now!"

His statement must have given the Glis pause, for there was a brief silence. Then: "I'll release half of them. No more. I must retain some hold over you."

Cemp considered that and, realized its truth. "But it has to be on an alternating basis. Half are free for twelve hours, then the other half."

The Glis accepted the compromise without any further argument.

It was clear that it was prepared to recognize the balance of power.

"Where are we heading?" said Cemp.

"To another star system."

The answer did not satisfy Cemp. Surely, the Glis didn't expect to go on with its malignant game of collecting inhabited planets.

He challenged, "I feel that you have some secret purpose."

"Don't be ridiculous, and don't bother me any more!"

. . . Stalemate.

As the days and the weeks went by, Cemp tried to keep track of the distance the planetoid was covering and the direction it was going.

The speed of the meteorite had reached nearly a light year a day, Earth time.

Eighty-two of those days passed. And then there was the feel of slowing down. The deceleration continued all that day and the next. And, for Cemp, there was finally no question: He could not permit this strange craft, which was now his home, to arrive at a destination about which he knew nothing.

"Stop this ship!" he ordered.

The Glis replied angrily: "You can't expect to control such minor things as this."

Since it could be a deadly dangerous scheme, Cemp replied: "Then open yourself to me. Show me everything you know about this system."

"I've never been here before."

"All right, then that's what I'll see when you open up."

"I can't possibly let you look inside me. You may see something this time that will make me vulnerable to your techniques."

"Then change course."

"No. That would mean I could not go anywhere until you die about a thousand years from now. I refuse to accept such a limitation."

The second reference to Silkie age

gave Cemp great pause. On Earth no one had known how long Silkies could live, since none born there had died a natural death. He himself was only thirty-eight years of age.

"Look," he said finally, "If I have only a thousand years, why don't you just sit me out? That must be only a pinpoint in time compared to your own life span."

"All right, we'll do that!" replied the Glis.

But the deceleration continued.

Cemp telepathed: "If you don't turn aside, I must take action."

"What can you do?" was the contemptuous response.

It was a good question. What, indeed?

"I warn you," said Cemp.

"Just don't tell anyone about me. Other than that do anything you please."

Cemp said, "I gather you've decided I'm not dangerous. And this is the way you act with those you consider harmless."

The Glis said that it believed that, if he had been able to do something, he would already have done it. It finished: "And so I tell you flatly, I'm going to do as I please; and the only restriction on you is, don't violate my need for secrecy. Now, don't bother me again."

The meaning of the dismissal was clear. He had been judged to be helpless. Categorized as someone whose desires need not be considered. The eighty days of inaction had stood against him. He hadn't attacked; therefore he couldn't. That was palpably the other's logic.

Well . . . what could he do?

He could make an energy assault. But it would take time to mount, and he could expect that the Silkie nation would be wiped out in retaliation, and Earth destroyed.

Cemp decided he was not ready to force such a calamity.

He was presently dismayed to realize that the Glis's analysis was correct. He could keep his mind shut and respect its need for secrecy—and nothing more.

He ought, it seemed to him, to point out to the Glis that there were different types of secrecy. Gradations. Secrecy about itself was one type. But secrecy about the star system ahead was quite another. The whole subject of secrecy—

Cemp's mind poised. Then he thought: "How could I have missed it?"

Yet, even as he had the awareness, he realized how it happened. The Glis's need to withhold knowledge of itself had seemed understandable. And somehow the naturalness of it had made him by-pass its implications. But now—

"Secrecy!" he thought. "Of course! *That's it!*"

To Silkies, secrecy was an understood phenomenon.

After a few more seconds of thinking about it, Cemp took his first action. He reversed gravity in relation to the planetoid mass below him. Light as a thistledown he floated up and away from the tree top that had been his observation post for so long.

Soon he was speeding along granite corridors.

He reached without incident the chamber which contained Earth.

As he set his signals, so that all his screens would protect that precious round ball, Cemp permitted himself another increment of hope.

"Secrets!" he thought again, and his mind soared.

Life, in its natural impulse, had no secrets.

Baby gurgled, or cried, or manifested needs, instant by instant, as each feeling was experienced. But the child, growing older, was progressively admonished and inhibited; subjected to a thousand restraints. Yet all his life the growing being would want open-ness and unrestraint; would struggle to free himself from childhood—and that was what it was—conditioning.

Conditioning was not of itself logic of levels. But it was related; a step lower, only. The appearance was of a control center; that is, a rigidity. But it was a created center, which could be repeatedly mobilized by the correct stimulus. That part was automatic.

The decisive fact was that, since the Glis had conditioned itself to secrecy . . . it was conditionable.

Having reached this penultimate point in his analysis, Cemp hesitated. As a Silkie, he was conditioned to incapacitate rather than kill, to negotiate rather than incapacitate, and to promote well being everywhere.

Even for the Glis, death should be

the final consideration, not the first.

And so he telephated: "In all your long span, you have feared that someone would one day learn how to destroy you. I have to tell you that I am that feared person. So, unless you are prepared to back down from those insolent statements of a little while ago, then you also must die."

The answer came coldly, "I let you go to your planet, Earth, because I have the real hostages under my complete control. The Silkie Nation!"

"That is your final statement?" Cemp questioned.

"Yes. Cease these foolish threats! They are beginning to irritate me."

Cemp now used the words: "I know where you come from, what you are, and what happened to others like you."

He, of course, knew nothing of the kind. But it was the technique. By stating the generalization, he would evoke the Glis's perception and memory network, first, the truth. Then, like all living things, the Glis would immediately have the impulse automatically to give forth with the data as it actually was.

Yet, before it could be so, it would exercise the restraint of . . . secrecy.

And that would be an exact pattern, a reaffirmation of similar, precise restraints in its long, long past. His problem was to utilize it before it de-stimulated. Because so long as it held it was the equivalent of a logic of levels Gestalt.

Having, according to the theory, mobilized it, Cemp transmitted the triggering signal.

A startled thought came from the Glis: "What have you done?"

It was Cemp's turn to be sly, covert, scheming. He said, "I had to call to your attention that you had better deal with me."

It was too late, but the pretense—if successful—might save many lives.

"I wish to point out," said the Glis, "that I have not yet damaged anything of value."

Cemp was profoundly relieved to hear the statement. But he had no regrets. With such a creature as this, he could not hope to repeat what he was doing against it. Once the process was started, it was all or nothing.

"What was it you said before about bargaining?" the Glis asked, urgently.

Cemp steeled himself against sympathy.

The Glis continued: "I'll give you all my secrets in exchange for you telling me what you're doing to me. I'm experiencing severe internal disturbance, and I don't know why."

Cemp hesitated. It was a tremendous offer. But he divined that, once he made it, he would have to keep such a promise.

What had happened was that, as he had hoped, his final signal had triggered the equivalent of a colony Gestalt, in this instance the process by which life forms slowly over the years and the millennia adjusted to exterior change.

. . . The cycle-completing control centers, the growth-change mechanism in the great being, were stimulated.

Silkies understood the nature of growth. And of change they knew much from their own bodies. But Silkies were late indeed in the scheme of life. Their cells were as old as the rocks and the planets, in terms of evolvment. The entire history of life's progression was in every cell of a Silkie.

That could not be true of the Glis. It was from an ancient eon, and it had stopped time within itself. Or at least it had not passed on its seed, which was the way of change through time. In itself, it manifested old, primitive forms. Great forms they were, but the memory in each cell would be limited to what had gone before.

Therefore, it couldn't know what, in holding back as it had, it was holding back from.

"I promise not to go on to the Nijjan system," said the Glis. "Observe—I'm already turning aside."

Cemp sensed a change in the direction of the planetoid. But it seemed a minor act; not meaningful.

He merely noted, in passing, the identity of the star the Glis had named; observed that, since it knew the name, it *had* been there before. Which seemed to imply that it had had a purpose in going there.

It didn't matter; they were turning away from it, would never reach it. If there was a threat there for himself, or Silkies, it was now diverted; had been useful only in that it had forced him to action regardless of consequences.

The Glis's willingness to make amends when it no longer had any choice was merely a sad commen-

tary on its character, but much too late. Many planets—Cemp thought—too late.

How many? he wondered.

And because he was in the strange set emotion of someone whose whole thought and effort is concentrated on a single, intensely felt purpose, he asked the question automatically—as it came into his mind.

"I don't think I should tell you; you might hold it against me," the Glis replied.

It must have sensed Cemp's adamant state, for it broke off, said quickly, "Eighteen hundred and twenty-three."

So many!

The total of them did not shock Cemp. It hurt him. For one of that countless number of unnecessary dead on those planets was Joanne. Another was Charley Baxter.

"Why have you done all this?" Cemp asked. "Why destroy all those planets?"

"They were so beautiful."

True. Cemp had a sudden mental vision of a great planet hanging in space, its atmosphere ballooning up above the oceans and mountains and plains. He had seen that sight often, yet found it always a thing of splendor beyond all the visual delights of the universe.

The feeling passed, for a planet was beautiful when it was brooded over by its parent sun, and not as a shrunken museum piece.

The Glis with its planets was like a head hunter of old. Skillfully, he had murdered each victim. Patiently, he had reduced the head to its

small size. Lovingly, he had placed it in his collection.

For the headhunter, each perfect miniature head was a symbol of his manhood. For the Glis, the planets were—what?

Cemp couldn't imagine.

But he had delayed long enough. He sensed incipient violence on the communication band. He said hastily, "All right, I agree—as soon as you do what I want, I'll tell you."

"What do you want?"

Cemp said, "First, let the other Silkies go outside."

"But you'll do as I've asked?"

"Yes. When you've released them, put me and the Earth outside, safely."

"Then you'll tell me?"

"Yes."

The Glis threatened: "If you don't, I'll smash your little planet. I will not let you or it escape if you don't tell me."

"I'll tell you."

XIV

The method that was used was, the entire section of the planetoid surrounding Cemp simply lifted up and shot off into the sky. Cemp found himself floating in empty, black space, surrounded by meteorite debris.

The Glis's thought came to him: "I have done my part. Now tell me!"

Even as Cemp complied, he began to wonder if he himself really understood what was happening.

Uneasiness came. In setting in motion a cycle-completion process, he had taken it for granted that Nature

would strike a balance. An old life form had somehow been preserved here, and in its body evolution was now proceeding at lightning speed. Millions of years of change had already been compressed into minutes of time. Since none other of its kind remained alive, he had assumed that the species had long since evolved to—what?

What was this creature? A chrysalis? An egg? Would it become a butterfly of space? a great worm? or a gigantic bird?

Such possibilities had not occurred to him before. He had thought only of the possibility of extinction.

But—it struck him keenly—he hadn't considered seriously enough what that . . . extinction . . . might consist of in its end product.

Indeed, he hadn't thought about there being an end product.

Unhappily, Cemp remembered what the computer had reported: That the atomic structure of this giant being reflected a younger state of matter.

Could it be that, as the particles "adjusted" and changed to current norm, there would be a release of energy on a hitherto unknown scale?

Distracted, Cemp thought: "What will it evolve to?"

Below, a titanic thing happened. Part of the planetoid lifted.

A solid ball of red-hot matter, at least a mile thick, lifted slowly out of it. As Cemp drew aside to let the improbable thing pass him, he saw an even more unlikely phenomenon was taking place. The "up" speed of the chunk of now white hot rock and

dirt was increasing—and the mass was growing in size.

It was well past him, and it was at least a hundred miles in diameter. A minute later, it was five hundred miles thick, and it was still expanding, still increasing speed.

It expanded to a burning, incredible mass.

Suddenly, it was ten thousand miles in diameter; and was still going away, still growing.

Cemp sent out a general alarm: "Get away—as fast as you can. Away!"

As he himself, fled, using a reversal of gravity on the monstrous body behind him, he saw that in those few minutes it had grown to a sun over a hundred thousand miles thick.

It was quite pink at his point; strangely, beautifully pink.

The color altered even as he watched; turned faintly yellow. And the body that emitted the beautiful ochre light was now over a million miles in diameter.

As big as Earth's sun.

In minutes more, it grew to the size of a giant blue sun; ten times the diameter of Sol.

It began to turn pink again. And it grew *one hundred times* in ten minutes.

Brighter than *Mira* the Wonderful. Bigger than glorious *Ras Algethi*.

But pink, not red. A deeper pink than before; not red, so definitely not a variable.

All around was the starry universe, bright with unfamiliar objects that glowed near and far; hundreds of them, strung out like a long line of jack-o-lanterns.

Below was Earth.

Cemp looked at that scene in the heavens, and then at the near, familiar planet; and an awful excitement seized him.

He thought: Is it possible that everything had to grow; *its* change altered this entire area of space-time?

Old forms could not keep their compressed state once the super-colossal pink giant completed the growth that had somehow been arrested from time's beginning.

And so the Glis was now a sun in its prime, but with eighteen hundred and twenty-three planets strung out like so many starry brilliants over the whole near sky.

Everywhere he looked were planets so close they looked like moons.

He made a quick, anxious calculation. And realized with great relief that all that he could see were still within the warming area of the monstrous sun that hung out there, half a light-year away.

As Cemp descended, at the top speed that his Silkie body could withstand, into the huge atmosphere blanket that surrounded Earth . . . everything seemed the same—the land, the sea, the cities—

He swooped low over one highway and observed cars going along it.

He headed for the Silkie Authority in a haze of wonder, and saw the shattered window from which he had leaped so dramatically—

—Not yet repaired!

When, moments later, he landed among the same group of men who had been there at his departure, he realized there had been some kind of a time stasis, related to size.

For Earth, and its people, all that eighty days had been . . . eighty seconds.

—Afterwards, he would hear how people had experienced what seemed like an earthquake, tension in their bodies, momentary sensory blackout, a brief feeling that it was dark—

Now, as he entered, Cemp transformed to human form and said in a piercing voice: "Gentlemen, prepare for the most remarkable piece of information in the history of the universe. That pink sun out there is not the result of an atmospheric distortion.

"And, gentlemen, Earth now has eighteen hundred inhabited sister planets.

"Let's begin to organize for a fantastic future!"

Later, comfortably back in his Florida home, Cemp said to Joanne:

"Now we can see why the Silkie problem didn't have a solution as things stood. For Earth, two thousand of us was saturation. But in this new sun system—"

It was no longer a case of what to do with the six thousand members of the Silkie nation, but how could they get a hundred such groups to cope with the work to be done?

Quickly!

END



THE HISTORIAN

by CARROLL J. CLEM

Here's the whole saga of Man's conquest of the starlanes — and how the triumph came to an end!

Chapter 34

As was stated in the last chapter, Earth had established bases on the Moon. By 2087, Mars had been colonized: four self-sustaining communities were thriving on the Red Planet. Thirty years later, the impossible was realized in the form of an atomic drive. The new propulsion principle made travel to the stars practical. Human civilization spread into other cultures. However, since no intelligence was found to equal his own, man felt it his duty to enrich, teach and otherwise aid the alien races.

“A wright, Bugs, let's go! You think we took you outa them stinkin' huts for nothin'?”

“Sergeant, it's not necessary to continue this shouting. They're already filing out, as you can see.”

“Yes, sir, but it's the only thing they listen to. The louder you talk the better they listen.”

“Er . . . Sergeant, there's one over there who hasn't moved.”

“Hey! You! Get goin'! Uh, it's dead. Startin' to rot too. Nothin' but a damn big bug.”

“Well, it doesn't matter, they're all aboard now. Just leave him . . . it. We'll never be back to this primitive, filthy world.”

“Sir, did you hear about the speech Rauvkaus made a few days ago?”

“Who's Rauvkaus?”

“You know, sir. When this planet was first discovered, Colonel Erricson and his men brought one of the chief Bugs — Rauvkaus — back to Earth, taught him our language. And the damned cockroach has been stirrin' up trouble ever since.”

“What did he say?”

"Said his people — people, get that, people! Ha! — they were bein' shipped to the salt mines. Salt mines? What's a salt mine anyway?"

"It doesn't matter what he said. We're civilizing an entire race, a whole planet of primitive arthropods."

"Well, Lieutenant, if you're ready? After you, sir."

"There she is, Sergeant, my first command, the *Arcturus IV*. Named after our destination, the only planet where Biotemp is grown. Marvelous substance. Enables a human to live for 200 years or more. Too bad about the original population: all died off. Measles. Funny how common Earth diseases hit some races. Doesn't matter though, the pincers on the Bugs are perfect for removing the fruit of the Biotemp vine."

"Damn! Look, sir — two more dead Bugs. There's a man throwin' 'em out the hatch."

"So much death, Sergeant. Fine way to celebrate my sixty-first birthday!"

"Just out of navigation school, right, sir?"

"Yes, Sergeant, I'm just starting out."

"That's great, sir. Wish I had gone myself, but things were tough."

There were hostile beings, however, and if the colonists were endangered, it was necessary to eliminate the creatures. But the essential eradication was done in a humane manner and only animals which did not show intelligence were eliminated — quickly, quietly and honorably.

They are coming, Great One.

There is nothing we can do. They are stronger than we. They come from beyond the last sun. They are our conquerers.

Great One, they are just outside. Be strong. We will meet again.

"Three days trackin', boy. Now we'll have some fun."

"I'll do it, but I won't enjoy it, Corporal."

"Drop the 'Corporal', boy. You're a cadet; I'm a regular. So what? We're buddies. All right? Let's have some target practice."

"It's dark in here. Bring your light?"

"Sure, boy. There, you can see 'em way in the back. Usual group — eight young, one old."

"How can you tell the old one from the others?"

"He's in the back of the cave. You can barely see him. His fur is droppin' out and his teeth are worn down. And God, what fangs!"

"That's what's worry me, Joe. If they're so vicious, why haven't they attacked us?"

"Scared! That's why! They're scared to death! You can tell by lookin' at 'em that their fangs and claws could tear hell out of you. Grab your blaster, boy. Stop talkin' and start shootin'. Watch this, it's a barrel of laughs when you burn off a couple of arms and they just sit and stare, full of contempt. If they weren't so scared of our guns they'd kill us!"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Okay, boy, I cut 'em all down but two and they're all yours."

Great One, I can't bear the pain. It will pass, child. You must be patient. There is another world without pain where these creatures can never reach us.

I know, Great One. We will be together again. But why do they torture us?

They think that we will do them harm. Our appearance is grotesque in their eyes. They are a young race, but they are killing themselves while yet children.

Great One, the time has come. The suffering is . . .

Good-by, my child.

“Hey, Joe, look over here. Some tracks, leading out.”

“Right, boy. But let's pick up the teeth of these back here so the governor will give credit for our trouble.”

“Trouble? Are you kidding? I haven't had so much fun in years!”

In spite of the difficulties man encountered, he explored and settled the entire galaxy. But he did not meet a race of equivalent intelligence in all his wanderings.

“Are you finished, Mr. Chapman?” the officer asked.

“No,” he replied, “but I'm quit-

ting. You can finish it yourself.”

“But Mr. Chapman, no one can equal your ability in writing a history of the galaxy's masters.”

“I disagree; the remaining work is yours.”

“Thank you, I'll try. Yes, I believe I will.”

He picked up Chapman's final page and read: “. . . did not meet a race of equivalent intelligence in all his wanderings.' Yes, Mr. Chapman, just a small addendum: 'The race was more intelligent.' Is that not correct, Mr. Chapman?”

The officer smiled as he laid down the pen, his single eye sparkling in his scaly face.

“Now, sir,” he said. “if you will follow the guard to the Preserving Section, the — uh . . . 'race of man' will live forever in you and your great work, side by side, in our museum of extinct peoples.”

After Chapman had gone, the officer slumped onto his front legs, his smile gone. “I wish we could have saved a female also. Only half of a pair is worthless. Perhaps a replica could be made under Mr. Chapman's directions. If the female is like him, the work should not be too difficult. *He* could very easily be duplicated!”

END

Don't miss the next thrilling installment of

EARTHBLOOD

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THE HIDE HUNTERS

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Illustrated by ADKINS

*The man with the weapon was a friend
— but friendship was only skin deep!*

I

Sitting in the shade to avoid the hot sun of the upper Amazon, Ed Grayson fanned himself and listened to the old chief plead for the rifle lying on top of the packing case.

"Please give gun," the old chief said.

"Why do you want the rifle?" Grayson questioned.

"Want her to kill grandson," the old chief answered, hate popping in his eyes.

"To kill your grandson!" Grayson gasped. "But that's—"

He was going to say that this was

murder but caught himself before he spoke. In this hot and savage wilderness in upper Brazil, a world where few white men had ever penetrated in modern times, murder might have a different definition than it had in the more civilized countries. Here in this place there was no law and never had been. Tribal custom took its place. Perhaps it was the custom among this tribe for the grandfather to kill the grandson! After all, if this were true, it would be only a step away from the latent hostility found by the psychoanalysts to exist at the unconscious mind levels among civilized people, in which the

father either killed the son or drove him away from home.

"Why would you want to kill your grandson?" Ed Grayson asked. He made his voice as calm and as reasonable as possible. Perhaps, if the old chief could be made to think that killing a grandson was a common practice among white men, he could be induced to explain.

Trying to answer, the old native wrinkled his face until he looked like a howler monkey, seeking among the little Portuguese, Spanish and English that he knew for the right words to express his thoughts.

He needed no words to express his emotion. His face revealed that he was feeling only hate—this in blazing intensity. But he had problems in expressing clearly what was on his mind.

"Grandson dead already," he began.

"Then you can't kill him," Grayson said.

"Want kill his hide!" the old chief said. Triumph was in his voice. He had said what he wanted to say, even in clumsy English. Certain that he would be understood, and his request granted, he reached for the rifle.

Grayson grabbed the long gun and laid it across his knees. As if this was what he had been reaching for all the time, the old chief fingered a thick coil of stout nylon cord lying on top of the packing case.

"I don't understand," Ed Grayson said. He forced his voice to be calm. "If your grandson is dead—"

"But his hide is alive!" the chief shouted. "Want kill hide. Give gun." Again he reached for the weapon.

"No!" Grayson said. He swung the muzzle of the gun so that it covered the native. The old chief settled back on his heels. Squatting there, toothless and almost hairless, with flabby flesh hanging loosely on twisted bones, he suddenly looked as ancient as the hills, as worn as eroded mountains.

The rifle would make him big, would enable him to stand erect, would make him—if not young again, still it would enable him to be a man again, a leader of his own people.

If only this stupid white man would give him the gun! Didn't the white man know the danger that existed here in this hot country of the upper river? Was the white man so ignorant of real life as it existed here to hold back because of fanciful notions about the word called *murder*? Didn't the white man realize that death was the only solution for some problems?

Wondering how a man could be dead but his skin could still be alive, Ed Grayson was silent. He was a young man, a chemist, and at age 27 he was known as a comer in that part of the scientific and industrial complex that was interested in chemistry. Here in this jungle world he did not feel at home and never had. Something about the fetid jungle, the hot, steaming wetness of the place, the gross sexuality of it, troubled him deep in his mind where the old fears of the race still lived. Suddenly he wished that McPherson was back in camp with him.

But McPherson had gone back



D. ADKINS

down the river with the last weekly trip of the helicopter that brought supplies up to them and took away for shipment overseas any yagate roots they had been able to find.

Grayson and McPherson were both chemists. Since each also had a streak of adventurer's blood in him, they made an excellent team. A Swiss drug company was paying them excellent salaries — and was also picking up the tab for the cost of the helicopter — to make a thorough search through this country of the upper Amazon for a plant called yagate by the natives who lived in this region.

This was the century of the psychedelic drug, with many curious-minded humans using such consciousness-expanding drugs in an effort to see what was beyond the limited and limiting structure of their own personalities, what was over and above the limited frame of reference of their daily lives. Abroad in the world again was the idea that was old when Egypt was new, when Baalbek was building, when Ur was a new place in the land of the Chaldees. That idea was that men did not see all of the universe with their eyes or hear all of it with their ears or grasp all thoughts with their conscious minds, and that beyond the world men saw in their daily lives were other worlds, perhaps other universes. Perhaps the Earth itself was dual, perhaps men at most saw only half of it! Perhaps the devil was more than a myth and perhaps there was a god who sometimes spoke to men in a still, small voice!

At least, these were some of the

ideas that were emerging from the transcendental experiences of those who were experimenting with the psychedelic drugs. The questions to which they sought answers were as old as the race of men.

Since experience had indicated that nature was the first and biggest manufacturer of psychedelic substances, companies supplying the demand for psychedelic drugs were going to nature for the raw material they needed, to the swamps, to the jungles, to the forests and to the fields. LSD 25 had come from a fungus growing on rye grain. Psilocybin had come from a mushroom growing wild in the jungle country of Mexico. Mescaline had come from a small cactus called *peyote* which grew wild in the desert country of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Another consciousness-expanding drug had come from the seeds of the blue morning glory.

Yagate was — or was rumored to be — a plant growing in the jungle swamps of the upper Amazon which had consciousness-expanding alkaloids in it.

"This is what brought me here," Ed Grayson thought, running over the chain of circumstances that had brought him to the upper Amazon. "Now that I am here, I have the privilege of watching this old chief make up his mind whether he is strong enough to knock me down and take this rifle away from me by force! The old devil is almost civilized in his attitudes! He just wants a gun. He doesn't give a hoot about the ethics or the morals involved!" Bitterness rose in him at the thought.

“Gimme gun, I kill hide of grandson!” the old chief spoke.

“Gimme H-bomb, I kill everybody who disagrees with me!” Grayson said. He had not intended to make such a statement, but the words, driven by the rising bitterness in him, had popped unbidden from his mouth.

“Hunh?” the chief grunted. H-bomb was a word he did not understand.

“Gimme laser beam, I fry everybody the H-bomb leaves alive!” Grayson continued.

“Huh-hunh?” the chief asked. He did not understand the words but he got the underlying idea readily enough. “Where can get H-bomb, where can get laser thing?” he asked, eagerness rising in his voice. “Use to kill devils who wear grandson’s hide. Where can get—”

“Oh, go to hell, you murderous old devil!” Grayson said. He was shocked at the words that had popped from his own mouth. “No, I’m not going to give you this rifle. To make murder legal, moral and ethical, you have to be a nation, and civilized. And even then you have to call it war. “No!”

A wave of resentment crossed the old chief’s face, then was gone as another course of action came to his mind. Reaching into the hide bag which he always carried, he produced a gnarled and twisted root.

“That’s yagate,” Grayson said. Automatically he reached for it.

The old chief jerked it back. “Gimme gun,” he said. “Will show where to find root, lots of root.”

“You’re trying to bribe me!” Grayson gasped.

“When white men do it is called *trade*,” the chief answered. Again he reached for the rifle.

“If I give you the rifle, you may use it to kill several innocent people. I don’t want their blood on my hands,” Grayson said. “The answer is—no!”

Rising to his feet, he entered the nylon tent. Looking through the open flap, he saw the old chief rise and stalk angrily into the jungle. He felt a little sorry for the native. The old man had a problem of some kind, but the problem, whatever it was, could not be solved with a rifle bullet.

If the old chief had claimed that a man-eating jaguar was killing his people, Grayson would have loaned him the gun, and gladly. But to kill the hide of his grandson!

To the chemist, this made no sense whatsoever.

II

Perhaps an hour later, Grayson noticed that the coil of nylon cord was missing from the top of the packing case. He did not doubt that it had gone into the skin bag while his back had been turned as he entered the tent.

“If I let him get away with murder, he’ll rouse the whole jungle,” Grayson thought. “And our root hunting will be at an end.”

Picking up the rifle, he followed the dim trail the old chief had taken as he had stalked angrily into the jungle. Under a tall tree at the edge

of a little clearing, he caught a glimpse of the old warrior squatting on the ground beside something that Grayson could not make out. Seeing him coming, the old man scowled and brought up the point of the knife he was using. He made no attempt to throw it or to strike with it as Grayson approached but he held it ready.

A noose in one end, the long nylon cord lay on the ground. Looking up into the tree, Grayson saw where the old chief had crouched above the trail, the nylon noose dangling and ready for anything that passed beneath.

Looking down, Grayson saw on the ground what had passed under the tree. His first thought was that it was an animal. Nausea crawled in his stomach as he saw that it was a human being. The nausea grew stronger when he saw that the old chief had almost finished skinning what he had caught in his noose.

"You—" Grayson began.

Ignoring him, the old chief finished skinning his captive. Tugging at the skin, he pulled it free from the body on the ground. Picking up the skin, he reverently carried it to the other side of the clearing. There, as gently as any mother could have laid down a sleeping baby, he laid the skin on the ground. Carefully, he straightened the legs and arms, then, knife in hand, he returned to face the white man.

"You not give gun, I use noose," the old chief said.

"You—" So far Grayson got before he choked.

The old chief pointed to the skin

he had laid on the ground. "That hide of grandson," he said.

He pointed again, this time at the body. "That Ugo devil," he said. Bitterness too deep for words was in the tone of his voice.

For the first time, Grayson really looked at the body. There were several strange things about it, he saw, but his first impression was that it was covered with soft white fur. He also saw that it showed no indication of bleeding, this in spite of having been skinned. There was something else about it that was very strange. Or perhaps the strangeness was in his eyes. But wherever it was, in the body or in his eyes, the body gave the impression that really it was without shape or form. As he watched, it seemed to be flowing, moving, twisting, changing in a way that was quite impossible to describe.

Moving closer, he saw that the body was covered with a sort of white syrupy liquid instead of blood and that what he had thought was white fur was actually thousands, perhaps millions, of small white tubes about as big as hair which had connected this body to the skin that the old chief had so gently laid to one side.

In removing the hide from the body, the old chief had simply severed these millions of tiny tubes.

Again, Grayson felt nausea trying to rise within him. He pointed at the body. Words babbled on his lips. He knew he was trying to ask where that body had come from, what kind of a body it was, were there others like it anywhere in this jungle?

"Ugo devil!" the old chief said. In his world, there was no restriction against kicking a fallen enemy. He did just this. Drawing back his foot, he kicked with his heel, a heavy blow that rolled the body over.

The body rolled from the kick. And kept on rolling. When it reached the edge of the little clearing, it leaped to its feet.

Howling, it fled along the trail.

"Hung with noose, stuck with knife, thought was dead!" the old chief gasped. "What needed to kill Ugo devil?"

Grayson was trying to say this was a question he could not answer when the old chief seemed to find a solution. Snatching the rifle from the chemist's un-nerved hands, he fired at the body running along the trail.

The body kept on running. Before the chief could shoot a second time, it had disappeared around a bend in the trail. Swearing, working the bolt of the gun, the chief ran after it.

Neither the body nor the chief returned. When the shadows began to grow thick in the jungle, Grayson retraced his steps to the nylon tent in the bend of the river where he and McPherson had established their base camp. Inside the tent was McPherson's rifle. Grabbing it, Grayson feverishly slid a cartridge into the firing chamber.

The night that followed was bad. Images of a human skin reverently laid out on one side of a clearing and of a skinless body fleeing howling up a jungle trail danced in the chemist's mind every time he tried to go to sleep.

He had seen something that all of his training and experience had told him could not happen. He knew the memory of what he had seen this afternoon would remain with him all of his life and would return to haunt his dreams forever. Seeing that skinless body running howling up a jungle trail was a sight that no man would ever forget. What was the creature the old chief had expertly roped with a noose in a nylon cord? Where had it come from? Were there others like it? Was it perhaps hunting through the dark night for another hide to occupy? Had it seemed to lose shape because it had no real shape of its own? Did it flow like water to assume the shape of any container it occupied? If it flowed into the skin of a jaguar would it become a jaguar? If it flowed into the hide of a bushmaster, would it become that deadly snake? If it flowed into the hide of a human would it talk like a man, think like a man, walk like a man? Where did it get the skin it occupied? Did it kill a human, then skin him, then did it slip inside the hide it had stolen?

In spite of all of the mapping from the air and in spite of the expeditions that had laboriously crawled by boat along the rivers, what did science really know about the green hell of the Amazon jungle?

Sometime just before day, Ed Grayson slipped into uneasy slumber.

He awakened with a jump that lifted him completely off the cot. Outside the tent were howling noises.

With McPherson's rifle in his hands, Grayson got outside the tent just in time to see the helicopter settle to the cleared space that served as a landing area. At the controls was the pilot whose handlebar mustache made him look like a pirate. Grinning cheerfully through the plastic cabin was McPherson.

Ed Grayson thought he had never been so glad to see anybody in his life as this tall Scot. Setting the ship down, the pilot left the motor running while he descended to listen to the sound of the vanes. Grayson took his partner into the nylon tent and tried to tell the tall Scotchman what had happened. McPherson listened with little patience.

"Ed, you shouldn't use yagate unless somebody is with you. It's worse than drinking alone," McPherson said. "There is no predicting what any human will think he sees, hears, or feels while under the influence of any of these psychedelic drugs."

"I wasn't using yagate," Grayson said.

"No?" McPherson's black eyebrows formed questioning twin v's on his forehead. "Did you find some wild morning glory? Or perhaps some sacred mushrooms? We can get a good price for either of these."

"I didn't use any psychedelic drug," Ed Grayson said. "I'm telling you what I saw with my own eyes."

"Oh," McPherson said. He looked out the raised flap of the tent, to the clearing where the pilot with the handlebar mustache was still listening to the whine of the helicopter vanes. "Oh," he repeated. "Ed, while the ship is still here, maybe you had

better use it to run back down the river. Have the pilot take you far enough downstream to find a really good hospital. Stay there for a week and get a thorough checkup."

"But—" Grayson tried to say.

"There are obscure infections here in this jungle that sometimes hit the white man in strange ways. Having lived with them, the natives are usually pretty immune."

"I know that—"

"These down-river docs have been dealing with these infections for a long time," McPherson continued, seemingly without hearing his companion's protest. Quietly, as if this was the thing to do, he lifted his rifle from Grayson's hands. Taking the elbow of Grayson's right arm, he urged his companion out into the clearing and toward the helicopter.

"Damn it—" Grayson began. The sudden decision and quick action of his companion had dazed him. He wanted to protest that he was not crazy, that he had really seen what he claimed to have seen, but he knew his companion was acting in his own best interests and that if their positions had been reversed, he would have insisted on McPherson going downriver for a medical check-up and a possible psychiatric evaluation. In this jungle your life often depended on your companion. Who wanted to risk his own life by having a crazy man as a partner?

"I'll handle everything here while you are gone," McPherson said. "I'll hunt up the old chief who showed you that yagate root and see if I can bribe him into showing me where he got it. Hola, pilot! My

partner is going back downriver with you."

Grinning, the pilot turned a brown face and amiable brown eyes toward them.

"Just a little checkup—"

McPherson ducked as a hummingbird darted from the jungle behind them passed within inches of his head.

Following the flight of the hummingbird with his eyes, Grayson saw what happened. "That hummingbird stuck its bill into the pilot's forehead," he said.

Already shaken mentally and emotionally by McPherson's calm decision and quick action, Grayson had little emotion left to invest in so strange a sight as a hummingbird committing suicide by ramming its fragile beak into the hard skull of a man. To Ed Grayson at this moment this was just another incomprehensible thing that could happen.

"Hah?" McPherson said. He stared at the pilot. A bit of bright red color had suddenly bloomed on the forehead of the helicopter man. "Hummingbird, hell—" McPherson began, then ducked again as a second whistle sounded in the air above him.

"That one stuck its bill in the pilot's cheek," Grayson said.

The pilot was reaching for the first bright red spot when the second spot appeared. He grabbed at it, jerked it from his skin, then reached up to his forehead and pulled out the first hummingbird. Holding them both in one hand, he looked at them. As he looked his brown face seemed

to turn white. Lifting his eyes, he stared toward the jungle behind the two white men moving toward him.

Seeing something there, he turned quickly and ran toward the cabin. Getting one foot on the step, he seemed to slip and to fall against the side of the ship. As he tried to stand erect, two other hummingbirds struck him, each adding a spot of red as a decoration for the brown shirt he was wearing.

"Hummingbirds, hell!" McPherson gasped. "Those are poison darts from blowguns!"

Turning toward the jungle, he fired repeated shots from the rifle.

"I see them!" Grayson said. "The jungle is crowded with natives." Staring, it seemed to Ed Grayson that the green growth of the jungle had suddenly sprouted a growth of long tubes.

Some of the tubes dropped away as McPherson fired at them. But others remained. And as McPherson emptied the rifle, all that remained were converging on the two white men.

"Into the helicopter!" the Scot shouted. Turning, he and Grayson ran toward the ship.

III

Ahead of them, the pilot had spread out both arms. Looking like a drunken man trying to balance himself, he seemed to go into a slow dance.

For a moment he looked like some native dancer moving in unison to the beat of a funeral drum. He seemed to have forgotten the ship.

Instead of trying again to climb into the protection of the cabin, where the plastic would stop blowgun darts, he started to scream. Running and screaming, he disappeared into the green jungle.

Ed Grayson leaped headfirst into the cabin of the helicopter. Right behind him, McPherson jerked the door shut. Like little feather-decorated ornaments, darts struck the outside of the cabin, to fall away from the tough plastic without penetrating.

The vanes of the ship were still turning.

"I watched the pilot on the way up here," McPherson said. "I can fly one of these ships if I have to." He settled himself into the pilot's seat and advanced the throttle.

"But the pilot—" Grayson tried to protest.

"We'll try and find him from the air, then maybe we can pick him up," McPherson answered. Under the advanced throttle, the motor throbbed heavily. Rotor vanes began to sing at a higher pitch. The ship started to lift but was down on the right. McPherson compensated for the right drop—and over-compensated and the ship dropped left. He brought it back to something near level and the ship lurched into the air.

The spinning vanes brushed vegetation at the edge of the clearing. McPherson shoved the throttle wide open. The ship seemed to leap into the sky. Before he could check it, the helicopter was high above the trees and was caught in a stiff wind that did not exist on the jungle floor but which blew heavily here in the

sky. Catching the helicopter, the wind hurled it westward, toward a group of low hills that rose like mounds at the place where the rising land was trying to stop being jungle and was attempting to become an erosion sloping eastward from the mighty Andes to the west.

In spite of all that McPherson could do to bring it under control, the wind flung the helicopter to a crash landing at the edge of a pile of huge, tumbled stones on top of the centermost of the low hills.

The safety belt in the pilot's seat saved McPherson but Grayson had neglected to fasten his safety belt, with the result that he was flung across the cabin. He struck the door just as it was wrenched open beneath him. He hit the ground on his feet. Careening from the tumbled rocks, the helicopter missed him, but as he went to the ground, he felt a stabbing jolt of pain shoot up his left leg and he knew he had either sprained or broken his ankle. In a thunder of ripping vanes and tearing metal and breaking plastic, the helicopter came to rest.

Fortunately McPherson had the presence of mind to turn off the motor, with the result that the wreckage did not catch fire.

Ed Grayson, sitting on the ground and holding his left ankle with both hands, looked up as McPherson came over to him. McPherson's face was covered with sweat and he was obviously on the edge of the shakes.

"Things sure do happen fast around here," McPherson said, wiping his face. "First the na-

tives shoot the pilot full of poisoned darts, then I crash the helicopter. Ed, I'm just damned sorry. Are you badly hurt?"

"It's a sprain, I think," Grayson said.

"There's a first aid kit in the helicopter. There's also a machete and a .38 revolver. We've got the rifle, but no ammunition for it. I'll get the kit."

Grayson could not endure the pressure of a bandage on his rapidly swelling ankle. With the machete, McPherson cut a crutch from a forked sapling. Using this to support his weight, Grayson was able to hobble.

"We'll hole up here until your ankle gets well enough for you to walk, then we'll go down to the river and buy or steal a dugout canoe," McPherson decided. "You have the pilot's pistol. The machete will be enough for me."

The .38 had been made in Spain. It was rusty but looked as if it would work. Fully loaded, Grayson slipped it under his belt. A box of extra cartridges went into his pocket.

"There's a tarp in the helicopter," McPherson said. "We'll use it to stretch between those two big rocks. In this way, we'll have enough of a tent to keep the rain off of us." McPherson's voice went into silence. When he spoke again, his expression had startled surprise in it.

"Look, Ed, at the carvings on that flat rock! If those are not Egyptian hieroglyphics—"

"Oh, nuts!" Grayson said. "Now you're the one who has been eating yagate." Then Grayson saw the

huge flat stone to which his companion was pointing. His voice went into silence too.

Once this flat stone had been a part of a building. This much was obvious at first glance. Perhaps all of the stones here had once been a part of a structure that had existed here. As this thought passed through his mind, Ed Grayson caught a glimpse of this building—so fast did his imagination operate—as it had once existed.

He saw a building such as had once existed in Karnak, in ancient Egypt, heavy stone columns forming the front of a temple which had faced a court. Only the building that had once existed here had not faced a court. It had faced a huge altar stone. Turning to his left, Grayson saw the altar stone still in place.

Beyond the altar stone was a long oval of darkness that he had not noticed until now. A hole was there, or a pit, or a shaft, which led downward.

Bringing his eyes back to the first stone, he saw carvings there, a man with the head of a jackal, a man with the head of a hawk. He knew instantly that these were symbols for some of the gods of ancient Egypt, for Anubis, for Thoth, for Osiris.

"But this is Brazil!" he heard McPherson protest. "There is no known connection between Egypt and the country of the upper Amazon." The tone of McPherson's voice said he had come face to face with a wonder that was stretching his mind beyond its permissible limits.

"There is a known connection



now," Grayson said. "It's right there on those rocks and we know it."

"But how—"

"I can't explain it either," Grayson said. "Look at that figure!"

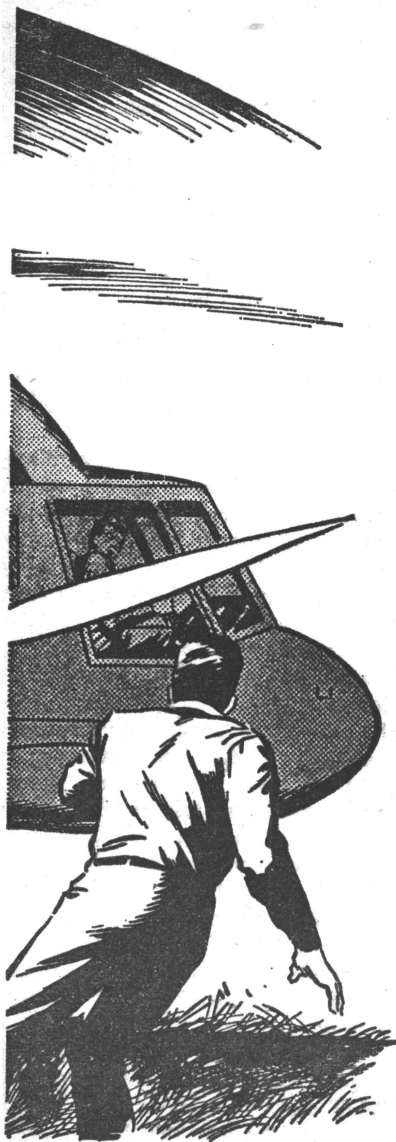
The figure to which he pointed was larger than any of the others. It showed the ibis-headed god standing on top of a huge snake which he had speared.

"The Egyptian name for that ibis-headed god was Thoth, which means truth," Grayson said. "A symbol such as this can only mean that they are trying to convey the idea that truth has conquered or is conquering or will conquer something which they have symbolized as a snake. What do you suppose the masons who cut this symbol were trying to tell us?" In the chemist's voice awe and wonder were mixed.

"Damned if I know," McPherson answered. "Maybe they were trying to warn others that snakes existed in this jungle."

"And maybe they expected everybody who saw this symbol to know about the snakes in the jungle," Grayson said. He was still bitter about the way his companion had reacted to his report of the old chief skinning what looked like a human. "Maybe in the symbol of that snake they were trying to tell us about something evil, sinister, dangerous, perhaps deadly, something that goes like a snake with its belly upon the ground." Grayson's voice was suddenly heavy with emotion.

"Oh, come off it, Ed," McPherson said. "Maybe the Egyptians believed



in evil things but that was thousands of years ago. We know better than to call anything *evil* today. There are plenty of things that are not on our side, but that does not mean they are evil, just that they are different. The sooner we stop using such silly labels, the better for us."

"Remember, I saw something run howling along a jungle trail," Grayson answered. "Whatever that thing was, I would call it more than different. I would call it evil. And so would the old chief who cut his grandson's skin off of it!"

"Oh, the devil—" McPherson said, obviously shaken.

"Perhaps," Grayson answered.

"What do you mean by *perhaps*?" McPherson answered. "You don't mean that you believe there's something in these jungles that you would be justified in calling a devil."

"The old chief believes it," Grayson interrupted. "And sure as hell, there is something here in these jungles that is either a devil—or belongs to a different system of evolution than we do."

"But where—"

"How would I know where it came from?" Grayson said. "How do I know where I came from? Where did the human race come from? Where did life itself come from? Every idea on this subject is theory, which means that somebody has been guessing. The truth is, we don't know the first thing about the origin of life. Maybe it started in a hole in the ground and has been working its way surfaceward ever since!"

"Started in a hole in the ground—" McPherson began, then

was silent. For the first time, he had become aware of the huge stone altar and of the oval-shaped opening beyond it. Shock was on his face as he glanced at his companion. "Ed—"

"I didn't say that was where life really started," Grayson said. "I said for all we know to the contrary, it could have started in a hole in the ground, but I'm guessing and I know it. Let's go look at that altar and at that hole in the ground."

With the machete, McPherson cleared away some of the tough growth. Grayson hobbled behind him.

The altar stone was made of black basalt. It was smooth on top—from scouring by other stones or from the passage of many, many bare feet across it. McPherson climbed to the top, then reached down and gave Grayson a hand. Standing on the huge stone, with the hot jungle sun beating down on them, they looked down. And down. And down. Into the hole. Into the pit. Into blackness that grew blacker and blacker as it went farther and farther down. Struck simultaneously by slight dizziness, both men moved back.

"Do you suppose they threw their victims from this altar into that pit?" McPherson gasped. His voice was a whisper of shocked sound.

"Guessing again, I would say that was exactly what they did."

"But why?"

"Maybe they were feeding, or *thought* they were feeding, or *believed* they were feeding something that lived down in that hole," Grayson answered. His voice was a dry

rattle in the wind. He shifted the weight on his crutch to ease the pain in his left ankle.

"Oh, hell—" McPherson began.

"Maybe that's what they thought was down at the bottom of that pit," Grayson said.

"But damnit, Ed—"

"Just a little while ago, I told you a preposterous story of a skinned creature running howling up a jungle trail," Grayson went on. "You didn't believe me. What if the people who built this temple here threw living victims from this altar into this pit, because they believed that some angry deity, some minor god, lived down there in that pit, and that by making sacrifices to it, they were gaining its favor, or were protecting themselves from its depredations—"

"Oh, hell, Ed!" McPherson wiped sweat from his face. "You're in a state of shock."

"Here's the altar, there's the pit," Grayson went on. "I know what I saw. You make what you can of all of it. You put it together in your imagination and see how it fits."

"But what you claim you saw exists now, if it exists at all," the Scotsman protested. "This altar, the ruins here, are thousands of years old. If the people who lived here were sacrificing to something that lived in this pit, something like a gigantic amoeba, it would be dead now. All the people who lived here are gone."

"But perhaps the thing in the pit is immortal. Perhaps it is still alive!"

"Immortal!" McPherson's voice rose in outrage. "Get hold of yourself, Ed."

"The more primitive a creature is, the longer it may live. Think of turtles! They live hundreds of years. There are crabs that can grow new claws if an old one is lost. Perhaps there is a still more primitive type of life that can take on other forms." Grayson, shaken by what he was saying, shook his head at his own words. "I would say that is nonsense, if I thought I knew the difference between fact and non-fact. But right now I'm not sure—"

"Right now you're in a state of shock, Ed," McPherson said. "Tell me—" his voice grew anxious—"Did you hit your head when the ship crashed?"

"No," Grayson said. "I know I'm in shock. But I keep remembering that something is loose in the jungle which once wore the skin of a human, but which lost that skin. I keep wondering if it is looking for another human skin."

"Sit down and rest, Ed," McPherson urged. Helping his companion down from the altar, the Scotsman found a spot in the shade. "You rest here, Ed. I want to drop a rock down that hole and see if I can guess how deep it is. I also want to look at it a little closer and see if it is natural or artificial."

IV

Grayson, resting, tried to ignore the pain in his ankle as McPherson chopped his way through the tangle of vines and shrubs to the edge of the oval-shaped pit. Here the Scotsman went out of sight. Grayson heard him shout, then wait for an

answer, and he knew that McPherson was yelling down the pit the way a small boy calls down an empty barrel, to hear an echo. Eventually the Scot returned. His face, glistening with sweat, was pale.

"If you could walk, I would vote for us to get the hell out of here," the tall man said.

"What's wrong now?"

"That damned hole isn't natural. Somebody dug it. They must have dug another shaft beside it because I can see regular openings in the side wall of the pit but I haven't found the shaft opening yet." McPherson wiped sweat from his face. He gestured toward the symbols on the huge rocks. "Whether the Egyptians had a colony here or whether the people who lived here had been taught to write by the Egyptians, I don't know. It doesn't matter much. What bothers me is how they could have dug this Mo-hole with the primitive tools they had. What bothers me worse is *why* they dug it."

Grayson grunted tonelessly. "The why of it shakes me too. How deep is it?"

"That bothers me most of all," McPherson said. "I try to yell down it. No echo returns. I toss a rock down it and listen. I hear the sound of the falling rock hitting the sides growing weaker but I never hear that rock splash as it hits bottom."

"Um," Grayson said. A wind that was both hot and cold at the same time seemed to blow over the jungle. The wind brought with it the scent of slime, of dampness and of decay, of things that had mouldered much

too long in the dark. "Maybe there's mud on the bottom. Maybe your rock hit soft mud and made no noise."

"I thought of that," McPherson said. "I also thought of the Mayan sacrificial wells in Yucatan. The Mayans tossed human sacrifices down those holes. They also tossed gold and gems with the victims. Fortunes have been recovered from some of those Mayan wells . . ."

"I've heard tell," Grayson said. "Are you thinking of coming back here with a government permit, with soldiers to fight the Indians, and a derrick to swing a bucket out over the hole and enough steel cable to reach the bottom?"

"I thought we'd try to find the entrance to the shaft and go that way first," McPherson said. "That is, if we live long enough to get out of here and to return."

"You don't feel right about this place?" Grayson asked.

"I feel wrong as hell about it," the tall Scot answered. "There's something here in the air that I want to try to cut to pieces with a machete. Only there's not anything here in the air, and I know it. I guess I'm in shock too," he ended, shaking his head.

"You still want to come back even if you don't feel right about the place?"

"Hell, yes. I'm a Highlander. We've dealt with ghosts and demons and bogles and things that go bump in the night much too long to start running from them now."

"Then you believe in that sort of stuff?"

"I'm afraid I do," McPherson answered. "Scientific training had laid a veneer over me. But under that veneer, I'm a Celtic clansman right out of the ancient days when magic was a living force in the world. Something about this place scares the Celt in me." With the machete, he made switching motions in the air.

For both men, sleep was uneasy and irregular this night. Grayson dozed with the pilot's .38 ready in his hand. McPherson kept the machete where he could touch it instantly.

The wrecked helicopter yielded two strong flashlights. They made a small fire in the space between the two huge boulders. Grayson awakened several times during the night and clutched the gun to find it was only McPherson stirring the blaze—and not a creature searching in the dark for a lost hide, as he had feared. Sounds came in the night, a cough that could have been made by a jaguar, a grunt that could have come from a wild pig, and a scream that died into slow silence and which could only have come from the throat of a monkey that had awakened too late to the approach of the python.

The echo of that fading scream lingered in Grayson's mind long after the sound had gone from his ears.

When morning came, both men were in a state of nerves. Grayson's ankle was badly swollen. Even with the crutch, movement was a painful ordeal. McPherson found fruit in

the jungle and brought it to his companion. They ate in silence.

McPherson glanced toward the wrecked helicopter. Lifting the machete, he got quickly to his feet. Following the line of his companion's gaze, Grayson saw what had attracted McPherson's attention. At the sight, Grayson pulled himself to his feet and leaned on his crutch.

A man was coming toward them.

It was the helicopter pilot. At this short distance, there was no mistaking the man's features, and even if these had been in doubt, the long handlebar mustache would have provided certain identification.

"He's dead!" McPherson whispered. "The poison on one dart is enough to kill a man. I saw at least three darts strike him!"

"He's still walking," Grayson said.

"Maybe he has become a zombie," McPherson whispered. He glanced at his companion. "Get that .38 ready!"

Pulling the pistol from his belt, Grayson held it ready.

The man coming toward them seemed dazed. He had lost his hat, his clothing hung in shreds from his body, his brown outer shirt had been torn off and the white undershirt was only a rag now. Torn by briars, his pants legs were wet at the bottom and he had either removed his shoes or had lost them. Stumbling as if he did not notice where he was putting his feet, he walked past the wrecked helicopter without seeing it. Nor did he seem to see the two men though he was walking toward them.

"Poor devil! He's full of arrow poison," Grayson said, sympathy in his voice. He started to call out to

the pilot but McPherson checked him with a quick gesture.

"He walked right past the wreck of his own helicopter without noticing it," McPherson whispered. "I don't like that."

"The arrow poison—"

"I'm not sure it's arrow poison."

"What do you mean?"

"You said the old chief had skinned something, which had then run, howling, down a jungle trail. You said this thing might be looking for another hide."

Cold winds blew along Ed Grayson's spine.

Stumbling, the pilot walked past them without seeing them. His gaze seemed centered on an invisible object hanging in the air. Or was he listening to a sound that they could not hear?

As he got past them, the cold winds blew all over Grayson's body.

A thick, rope-like red line ran down the middle of the man's back. Starting in a furrow in his hair, it disappeared under the belt at his back, then began again on each leg where the torn pants ended.

"He's been skinned!" McPherson whispered. "That's not the pilot, that's something else wearing his hide!" He lifted his voice in a shout. "Hey, you!"

The thing in the skin of the pilot heard McPherson's voice and turned to look toward the source of the sound.

Now for the first time, Ed Grayson got a look at the eyes. The eyes of the pilot had been liquid brown and merry. The eyes of this creature

were black—and were filled with wild hate and equally wild fear.

Grayson could tell nothing about the brain of the creature that owned these eyes. All he could see was the hate-fear in the eyes, hate as old as the Earth was old, hate as deep as the Earth was deep, hate for any creature or for any life-form that had climbed the evolutionary ladder faster than this monster had done, hate because this monster of its own choice had refused to climb the long and painful ladder that led upward to the stars and now was trying to hitch a piggyback ride on other life forms that had gone through the long, slow growth processes.

As Grayson saw the hate that was in those eyes, he also saw the fear that was there.

This monster was scared of everything, but mostly it was scared of sunlight. This was one big reason it hunted hides; it wanted protection from the sunlight. Long eons had gone into perfecting the skin of a human. A hide had to be sensitive, it had to feel the wind and to report whether that wind was hot or cold. In the darkness of the jungle, the skin had to report whether it was touching a wet branch or a python. It had to respond to the caress of a mate. On the other hand, if the skin was too sensitive, the sun would burn it and the cold winds would freeze it.

Having no proper skin of its own, this monster had to steal the skins of other creatures. It was trying to become a gigantic inner parasite on other life forms that were moving upward.



The creature looked at the two men. Pleasure seemed to light its eyes. It seemed to think that here were two new skins to be had for the taking. It moved toward them, hands stretched out to grab at them.

With one sweep of the machete, McPherson cut off both arms at the wrist.

This could not have been the creature's first contact with a sharp-edged weapon but perhaps this was the first time it had met the long knife called a machete. Perhaps it did not understand the long knife but it understood pain. It jerked backward.²

The quick backward movement was all that saved its head. The second sweep of the machete was aimed at its neck but the long knife met only air as the monster leaped away.

Before McPherson could strike a third time, the monster had turned and was fleeing, howling toward the big altar stone.

McPherson followed it. Ignoring the pain in his foot, Grayson hobbled to the altar stone and pulled himself on top of it, the gun ready in his right hand. In the minds of both men was a single thought, that this monster was for killing, for destruction, for obliteration, for sweeping off the stage of creation as a horrible abortion of nature. Just to see this thing wearing the hide of a human was to want to kill it!

Grayson saw the monster reach the lip of the oval-shaped hole. For an instant, it paused there, apparently wanting to jump down this bottomless well. Somehow Grayson got

the impression that this well was home to it, that this was where it had originated and that this was where it wanted to flee, that down below were others of its kind who would succor it. Looking down the hole, it tried to jump, then backed away.

At this point Grayson shot at it but the bullet from the rusty .38 went wide of the mark. Howling, the creature leaped into the undergrowth. McPherson, arriving at this moment, followed it. Later McPherson's voice came from a short distance away, calling to Grayson.

Hobbling on his crutch, the chemist reached the spot where his companion waited. McPherson was standing in front of a v-shaped opening formed by two large blocks of stone that had tumbled from some higher elevation in some remote past.

"It ran in there," the tall Scot said, pointing. "There are steps leading down. I think the steps lead to the openings at the side of the well. I'll want the big flashlight that we took from the helicopter."

"You're going down there?" Grayson questioned.

"Yes," MacPherson answered. He held up the blade of the machete for inspection. A whitish syrupy fluid stained the blade of the long knife. "The pilot had red blood in him: This thing—" His words faded into silence. "Yes, I'm going down there. Wait here until I get the flashlight."

When McPherson returned, Grayson tried to argue him out of entering the cleft between the two stones.

The Scot was adamant. "I'm sorry, Ed, but I'm scared. And when I'm scared, I have to face the thing that scares me. Otherwise I can't live with myself. I would appreciate it if you would not try to argue with me. Instead, go back to our camp and wait for me there."

Grayson tried to get the Scot to take the gun but McPherson refused. "I've got this," he said, making the machete whistle in the air. "Somehow I feel better going after whatever is down there with a knife. Besides, with your ankle, you may need the gun. Thanks for the offer, though."

As McPherson went down the steps, it seemed to Grayson that his friend and companion was a light growing smaller and smaller as it descended deeper and deeper into a lower world that grew darker and darker.

Then McPherson turned a corner and the light disappeared into some grim underworld the existence of which was known only to a few savages that inhabited this bitter jungle-land.

V

At the entrance to the cleft, Ed Grayson waited. And waited. And waited.

Finally the approach of night sent him back to camp. Rummaging in the wreckage of the helicopter, he found two cans of beans which the foresighted pilot had stored in the ship against an emergency landing somewhere.

When the emergency landing had

come, the pilot had not been in a position to take advantage of his own foresightedness.

As he built up a small fire and set one can of beans to warm in the blaze, Grayson found something which destroyed what little appetite he had developed. This was the hands of the pilot, severed from the arms at the wrists by a single blow of the sharp machete.

The hand had shrunk to doll size, to a size that would fit the shrunken human heads the Jivaros made in this same region. However, these hands had not shrunk as a result of being carefully cured in the smoke of a wood fire—as was true of the grisly trophies the headhunters prepared—but had shrunk as a result of their contents running out of them.

Whatever the monster was that used the skins of humans as a means of achieving form, it could not long maintain itself without the help of a restraining form.

Carrying the tiny hands on a stick, Grayson took them away and buried them.

Several hours later, long after darkness had fallen, he was able to eat the can of beans. Even then he was not able to sleep. All around him were the night sounds of the jungle, the chitter of bats, the booms, the thumps, and the screams of insects. He pretended to himself that this cacaphony was keeping him awake but he knew the real reason he could not sleep lay in the hope that he might catch a glimpse of McPherson's light as the Scot returned to camp.

Never had a man been so lonely as Ed Grayson was this night.

As he sat by the tiny fire, watching and waiting, the night sounds began to go into silence. He did not notice that this was happening until he realized very suddenly that it had already happened and that he was sitting almost in the center of a pool of silence. He knew then that something which he had not seen but which the insect life had detected had come silently out of the night and was now very close to him.

Slowly, he pulled the revolver from his belt and cuddled it in his right hand. With his left hand, he picked up the flashlight. The fire had died to a few coals. Looking beyond it, he caught an outline of something against the sky. Fear gripped at his stomach, then relaxed as he saw that the outline was human.

"Mac!" he shouted. "Damn you, McPherson, why didn't you call out? I almost shot you."

Relief was in him. McPherson was back and he was no longer alone in this haunted place. Holding the flashlight in his left hand, he tried to pull himself up on his crutch. The result was he dropped the flashlight.

"Mac, come on to the fire. Mac, I found a can of beans in the helicopter! Mac, come on in and eat!" Groping for the flashlight, Grayson called out to his friend. As he found the flashlight, he saw that McPherson was approaching. As the Scot neared him, he got a whiff of a nauseous odor.

"Mac, you smell like hell! What did you fall into down in that pit? Are you all right, Mac?"

Lifting the flashlight, he threw the beam toward McPherson.

Swishing the machete, McPherson was coming toward him.

Under the beam of light, Grayson caught one glimpse of McPherson's eyes.

They were not the gray of the Celt. They were as black as midnight.

As he realized the meaning of this, he realized two other things. The first was that the creature wielding the machete intended to use that long knife to cut him into two pieces; the second was that this was not his friend McPherson who had come back from some underworld. Not at all. This was something wearing McPherson's hide!

Somewhere in that grim underworld that he had entered, McPherson had lost a battle, the last one he would ever lose!

Grayson shot the monster in the throat, then shot again and again and again, pumping lead into the head and into where he assumed the heart might be, emptying the pistol before the razor edge of the machete could reach him. The creature dropped the machete and turned away. Grayson grabbed the machete. Hobbling on his crutch, holding the flashlight and the crutch in the same hand, Grayson followed. The creature slipped and went down. With the machete, Grayson hacked it into bits. As he struck with the long knife, he screamed again.

"I'll come back and avenge you, Mac! I swear I will. I'll bring an army back here. I swear I will."

Again and gain he struck with the

machete, until he could no longer lift the blade. Then he hobbled back to the fire. For the rest of the night, he made no pretense at sleep. At the first light of dawn, he was hobbling on his crutch down the slope that led toward the river.

A group of natives were coming up the hill. As he glimpsed them coming toward him, Grayson recognized their leader. It was the old chief, who had taken Grayson's rifle and had used it to fire at something fleeing, howling, along the jungle trail where it had just been skinned. The old chief still had the rifle. The possession of the long gun had given him enough authority to raise many fighting men. Armed with long blowguns and with spears, they were following him now.

Shouting a greeting, with joy rising in him at this unexpected deliverance, Grayson hobbled toward the group.

At the sight of him, the old chief lifted the rifle.

"Ho, devil!" the old chief shouted at Ed Grayson. "Ho Ugo devil! Ho!"

With the rifle, the old chief shot him through the heart.

As the sun rose over the little hill with the tumbled boulders with the strange writing on them, it revealed a number of natives grouped around the oval-shaped opening of the pit cut into the solid rock of this strange hill. Gently — as if they hoped that being gentle now would somehow compensate for the evil of their recent mistake — the natives let the body of Ed Grayson slide into the pit.

END

An APA For Everyone

by LIN CARTER

Our Man in Fandom takes us on a guided tour of the world of fanzine publishing — mass-production style!

The Weird and Wacky World of APAdom

LAST MONTH in this space we discussed *fanzines*. Remember? Those wild and wonderful little mimeographed amateur magazines read only within the science-fiction fan world, and but rarely hoving into the bewildered ken of the *Life*- and *Look*-purchasing newsstand-frequenter.

If you are just plain Joe (or Jane) Citizen — no rabid SF fanatic, but someone who just happens to enjoy reading an occasional science-fiction magazine — you probably found the very idea of “ama-

teur magazines” fantastic. I know it does sound odd — whole magazines written, illustrated, edited, published and circulated *privately!* It sounds way-out, when described so baldly, eh? Well, it’s even wayer-out (if there is such a term) when you stop to think that all this leisure-time activity and effort, as well as a not-inconsiderable amount of wallet-squeezing, is poured into publications that seldom go out to more than a couple of hundred people. And, most often, for *free*.

Well, you ain’t heard nuttin yet. There’s a whole other hemisphere to the world of fanzine-publishing —

regular clubs-full of editors only, who limit the circulation of their little magazines to *members only*. (Fannish slang labels these groups "APAs" — short for "amateur press associations.")

But before delving into the strange world of APAdom — an in-group within an in-group, if ever there was — we have one question to consider first. Some of you write, in regard to fanzines, asking the very good question, "Why do these fans devote so much time and effort to publishing something only 200 people will read — what do they get *out* of fanzine-publishing that makes worth while all the time and thought and trouble (to say nothing of expense) they put *into* it?"

Some thoughts on this, then, first.

Never Underestimate the Power of a Hobby

WHAT MAKES a guy either solicit, or compose himself, stories, articles, verse, book and movie reviews, letters, cartoons and such-like, from other amateurs — painstakingly reproduce this stuff by hand-crank mimeograph — collate and assemble — address, and then mail out these minuscule publications?

Your guess would be as good as mine . . . were it not that, well, gee, I'm a fanzine-publisher myself, and I *know*. But the answers are easy. Lots of people suffer from the Creative Itch, otherwise known as dat ole debbil The Urge for Self-Expression, Joe or Jane Citizen's itch may take the direction of cartooning of-

fice characters in caricature, Sunday painting, would-be contributions to The Poet's Corner in the local paper, or maybe even whacking away on that novel you've been puttering with ever since Junior year at college.

In other words, we *dabble*.

Then there's the Good Old Ego-Drive. In science-fiction fandom, this basic human motivation takes the rationale of what you might well call *small-pondism*. That is, we'd rather be big frogs in a small pond (the fan world), than small frogs in a big pond (the everyday, workaday world). Now through the medium of fanzines, your typical gawky adolescent, all elbows and acne, ignored by the local cuties and sniggered at by the high school football stars, can actually be an *international celebrity, noted bon vivant, wit and raconteur, famed as a scathing critic, literary figure and popular personality . . . in the minds of two or three hundred people, remember*.

No, I am not *jesting*. Fandom is just small enough for nearly *any* individual, with luck, initiative and a little stamina, to make a big enough splash in that little pond to become a genuine celebrity. Nor is "international" an exaggeration. Sure, fans dwell on both this and that side of the Atlantic — and Pacific. During my own fannish days, which, come to think, I am still going through, various lit'ry efforts of my own in the fan press stimulated letters of comment and/or compliment from Spain, Sweden, Ireland, India, Japan, Australia, etc.

And, after all — honest, now! — who wouldn't rather be *any* kind of a Big Frog . . . since all but the luckiest of us have to be satisfied with being very small frogs indeed, in the everyday world?

Ego-Drive, via the outlet of fanzining, enables the school kid, the small-town clerk or accountant, the housewife, the frustrated writer in each of us, to air his or her ideas, opinions, tastes and talent for humor to a wide audience of other people who share a mutual interest in fantastic literature. Your dedicated SF fan is vitally interested in this month's *If*, the latest George Pal movie, the newest paperback. He yearns to discuss their merits, or lack of same, with kindred souls. Fanzines are one way of doing this.

But they can turn out to be an end unto themselves. To wit:

Fanzines Carried to the Nth Degree: the APA

NOW THE idea of the amateur press association, the club of amateur publishers, has been with us for nearly a century. There were several such already going strong when science-fiction fans stumbled on the concept. The first, called NAPA (National Amateur Press Association), was launched way back around 1870. Then came a similar group, UAPA (United Amateur Etc. Etc.), about 1890. As the result of a contested election, a splinter-group broke off from the latter some years after its beginning. This splinter-group, rather confusingly *also* called UAPA, is worthy of our attention in that at one point

in its varied and, I have no doubt, colorful, career, its Official Editor (the late and great weird story writer, H.P. Lovecraft) was a leading member, and published in UAPA magazines some of his earliest stories, before he began selling to *Weird Tales*. In fact, while still Official Editor, Lovecraft married the splinter-United's President, Sonia H. Greene. These were not fanzines in the science-fiction sense, of course, but sort of general, mainstream literary mags.

When fandom discovered the notion, FAPA (*Fantasy Amateur You-Know-What*) was born. The fellow who initiated the concept into action was the Superfan of the day, Donald A. Wollheim, who got the ball rolling in 1936. Wollheim, in those days the Fan's Fan, has since gone on to professional science fiction — as an SF novelist, magazine editor, hardcover and paperback anthologist, and more recently, editor-in-chief of Ace Books.

FAPA worked — and still works — along the general lines of the other APAs. Each member, to stay a member, has to publish 'umpty-' leben pages of material each year (amount varies from APA to APA). These are sent on to the hard-working bloke who serves as Official Editor (called OE). He assembles packages of these magazines, one copy of each mag to each package, and forwards the packages on to the individual members.

When FAPA was launched thirty years ago, there were only twelve members on the rolls. Today, there are about sixty-five — plus some

sixty other patient souls on the "waiting list," hanging around until a current member folds his mimeograph like an Arab and silently steals away. (Stringent limits on membership hold the active membership at sixty-five. If you become inactive, i.e., don't publish your empty-leben pages yearly, you are dropped and waiting-lister #1 becomes a full-fledged FAPAn.)

Some time in the 1940's disgruntled fan publishers Joe Schaumburger & Friends in New Jersey, decided to start their own FAPA, and to hell with the waiting-list. They called theirs SAPS, in a daring change of name-style (Spectator Amateur Press Society). I don't know whether SAPS is still in the running, but I can picture a major hazard of membership: "Whatcha crankin' that old mimeograph for, Joe?" (Proudly) "I'm a SAP!"

New Directions in Fan Publishing: the Once-a-Week FAPAs

THE HABIT of fanzine-publishing can become not only addictive, but epidemic. And I doubt if the Salk Foundation and the Mayo Brothers put together could come up with a cure. Here's what I mean.

About two years ago a group of New York City fans, members of a group bafflingly yclept FISFA, decided to start their own APA — with this soul-searing idea: instead of only having to publish 'empty'-leben pages per year, their APA would demand the same *each ever-lovin' week*. Guiding brains behind

this historic concept were fans David G. Van Arnam and Ted White, I believe. Both have since become professional science-fiction novelists, but apparently without dampening their ardor for fannish publishing.

They launched a group called APA F (the "F" stands for *Fanoclasts*, an NYC fan club from whom initial membership was drawn). APA F, still in there cranking the old mimeo-handle, currently distributes fifteen to thirty-odd fanzines *each and every Friday*.

I hasten to reassure you these are very slim little magazines, not hundred-page titans, mostly just one or two pages per issue.

As if this were not exhausting enough — just imagine having to sit down and read sixty-or-so pages of fannish material every blessed week of the year — a rival concern got started out on the West Coast, centering about Los Angeles.

The Los Angelenos, under the aegis of APA-L, publish about the same number of these one or two-page fanzinettes.

To make matters worse, if possible, APA F and APA-L *exchange* weekly mailings. That means each member (unless he's cheating) has to plow wearily through roughly one hundred and twenty pages of fannish writing every week. Let's see, that's about 480 pages every month . . . or somewhere in the neighborhood of *five thousand eight hundred pages* in a full year! The imagination boggles. Each year, then, our dogged APAist slogs wearily through a combined wordage equal to piling Pres-

cott's *Conquest of Mexico and Peru* on top of Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with Plutarch's complete *Lives of the Noble Romans and the Noble Greeks Compared* sandwiched in for comic relief.

What's the Point of It All — If Any?

IT MAKES you wonder, Ego-Drive and Creative Itch notwithstanding, is it all worth it?

Well, by and large, I suppose you might say yes.

In and out of FAPA over the years have been some of the most delightful people you'll ever meet. And some of the most talented. Famed fan humorist Bob Tucker, for example, who writes detective stories and an occasional science-fiction novel under his more formal name — Wilson Tucker. And many another gifted personality went through a FAPA period, and often came out the other end to break out in a rash of published science-fiction novels. Authoress Marion Zimmer Bradley, whose byline has appeared on, I know not how many Ace releases, was — and, come to think of it, by golly, still is, a FAPAN in good standing.

In fact, the ranks of the various amateur press associations have contributed any number of distinguished professional SF authors or editors to the Big Pond of the corner newsstand. Robert W. Lowndes, former editor of *Science Fiction Stories* and a whole satchel-full of other magazines, was a member of FAPA. And there's Ace's Don Wollheim, whom

we have already mentioned. He was FAPA's first President. And come to think of it, *If's* own editor, Fred Pohl, was one of the very earliest FAPA boys, long before he met Cyril Kornbluth and they teamed up to write *The Space Merchants* and *Gladiator-at-Law* and all those other books.

Glancing through a typical FAPA mailing, you will see the good and the bad. Many of the magazines are works of polished craftsmanship, impeccably mimeographed, technically fascinating, displaying all sorts of experimentation such as multi-color mimeography and lavish use of on-stencil artwork. They present fine material, good stories, articles, anthology-worthy verse, witty reviews and features.

Or they will be pedestrian beyond belief, a whole issue devoted to that Curse of the APA — the mailing comments. These are paragraph-long comments on other people's magazines in the last FAPA mailing. This feature can grow like some insidious fungus, until it consumes the bulk of the entire issue . . . and believe me, there is *nothing* in this world duller to read and of less permanent value or interest than Joe Fan's remarks on the last issue of Moe Fan's fanzine.

So What Good Are APAS, Anyway?

WELL, AMATEUR publishing does not *always* have to become an end to itself. Nine times out of ten it suffices to satisfy the good old Creative Itch. All our gawky adolescent or housewife or

small-town accountant needs to sate his lust for Big-Frogism is the narcissistic bliss of reading Moe Fan's praise of his latest FAPazine.

But about *one* time in ten, instead of lulling The Urge for Self Expression, this little taste of Big-Frogism hones and excites it to the danger point. That's the point at which Joe Fan comes to realize it might be worth a try. Why not buckle down and see if it is possible to be a Big Frog — in a *Big Pond*?

At which critical juncture, usually, he throws away his unused mimeo stencils, drags out that half-done novel still left over from his Junior year at college, blows the dust off it and starts punishing the typewriter in earnest.

Next issue, *Our Man In Fandom* takes a look at the most widespread fan-activity of them all — and one in which every science-fiction fan can partake — the Local Fan Club. Who knows, maybe you've been reading science fiction all these years — and all the time there was a lively club-full of people with similar interests right around the corner!

After all . . . what's he got to lose by trying?

Beside his FAPA membership, that is. END

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MOUNTAINS LIKE MICE

by GENE WOLFE

Illustrated by LUTJENS

*This was his day to become
a man—a day when he found
his world was a total lie!*

“Hold still, my lord,” the sly looking man said softly to the young scholar he was dying purple. “This won’t take but a moment. Not too hot is it, my lord?”

“No,” Dirk said, “it’s not too hot.” Stripped to his breech clout in the center of the courtyard, he was watching with awe as the warmth of the sun dried the liquid Otho the Captive dipped up with his rag and stick. Black when it came dripping out of Otho’s pot, it turned the smoothly tanned skin of Dirk’s barrel chest and long legs the color of wild grapes.

They were alone in the court. The west wall, the only one not lined with mud-brick buildings, threw a shadow like the edge of a blade across the flagstones. Over the top of the wall, distant and misted and shadow-side to, Dirk could see the distant lift of the mountains.



For the thousandth time a phrase he had heard once from old Teophilus ran through his head: "The mountains are mice."

It was a comforting thought, but he felt sure Master Theophilus had not meant it to comfort. He had been thinking of stealth and disease and perhaps of other things as well.

"The soles of your feet, please," said Otho.

Obediently Dirk held them up in turn for the fat man to splash his dye on.

"I well remember, my lord," Otho said chattily, "how unnecessary I thought this when it was done to me. I supposed it would be the first place to wear clean. But I found out, my lord, that when the feet are calloused—as mine were then and yours are now, my lord—they are one of the very last places. The magistrate found it between my toes and in the crevices of the thick skin when I was drug before him. I believe I've told you, my lord, that I was nearly clean when I was taken?"

From the wall, a raven which had been perched with its back arrogantly toward them as it stared out over the desert suddenly launched itself thrashing into the air. Outlined for a moment like a heraldic figure, black against the blaze of the afternoon sky, it brought to the young man a sudden personal realization of the frighteningly complex linkage between cause and effect, stimulus and response, which guides every living creature.

Above all others this was the concept his instructors had droned at him daily until he had almost

learned to ignore it. Now, on the verge of the Great Retreat, he was beginning at last to understand the idea he had so often parroted.

The raven croaked twice over their heads and then, with a desperate flapping of wings, settled on Otho's shoulder. In astonishment Dirk searched the captive's plump face for a hint of the understanding he would have seen, he knew, on that of Theophilus or any other Master at such a moment. There was only wonder and a kind of sheepishness.

"He's a pet, my lord," Otho explained hurriedly. "I took him from the nest two weeks ago, and I've kept him in my rooms almost ever since. This is only the second time he's been out." He stroked the bird under its ruffled bill with a pudgy finger. "What ought I to call him, do you think?"

"Corvus Corvax," Dirk suggested drily. "I wish I knew what unsettled him like that."

"Oh, you will, my lord. When you come back to us you'll be a Master yourself, and no one would believe some of the things I've seen my Master, Theophilus, do. Control all sorts of animals; summon the hawks from the sky, if you can credit it."

And so, Dirk thought, you steal fledglings to tame in imitation of him. Never mind, I'm closer to the fledgling stealing level myself. Aloud he said, "Nothing magical happens on the Retreat, Otho. If you almost completed it yourself you ought to know that."

"Ah, but I didn't finish. That makes the difference."

The gate in the west wall, which was the rear entrance to the academy, opened unexpectedly, contrary to the very explicit regulation that no freeman should observe a scholar who had undergone this degradation until he was actually in Retreat and subject to capture.

For a few seconds Dirk and Otho saw an impressively tall man with a full beard and long, bound hair who sat a shaggy wild horse without saddle or bridle. His glance swept the courtyard like a scythe. Then the horse wheeled, revealing the slender barreled automatic rifle slung reversed over its master's shoulders, and they were gone.

Otho exclaimed, "It's Master Aleksandr, come in! My lord, I must get something cooked for him—you are finished already, and you know where to wait. Heavens bless you, my lord!"

The fat man was running toward the kitchen already with his tame bird fluttering after him. At least, Dirk reflected, he knew now what had disturbed it.

The waiting place was a small room at the base of the round tower at the northwest corner of the academy. It possessed a tiny door, a sort of sally-port, which opened directly to the outside. In order to reach it Dirk was forced to walk through several of the other academy buildings. As he expected, the halls were deserted. Every door he did not need to use was tightly shut.

The few possessions he would be allowed to take with him were already in the room, packed in his shoulder-strapped specimen bag: a

plainly made knife with a blade not much larger than the width of his hand, but of excellent steel; a leather water flask; bandages and a bottle of disinfectant; a small magnifying glass; a clasped handbook of meditations with tables of useful information, formulas and recipes at the end. The whole collection, bag included, weighed less than two kilograms.

There was no light in the room save what entered from a narrow firing slit in the wall; but he seated himself crosslegged on the floor anyway, intending to read. Instead, he found himself turning the book endlessly over and over in his hands while he thought of the mountains.

He planned to go to the mountains as soon as his Retreat began, and he wondered if gray old Master Theophilus, who could read volumes in a breath of wind, knew it and would try to prevent him. The mountains were dangerous for anyone, but for a Retreatant they were, paradoxically, almost perfectly "safe." And he could not endure the thought of ending his life like Otho, fetching water and sweeping floors for another man; turning glutton and petty thief because he had no longer any self respect to uphold.

He crossed the room to the firing slit and stared out across the level desert, estimating that another four hours remained before dark.

Seeing the uneven line of the mountains at the horizon he admitted to himself for the first time that he would not be going only to escape a lifetime of Captivity. The mountains themselves drew him. Loom-

ing mightiness across the desert—the promise of a world alien to all he had known from geological formations to climate, peopled with the odds and ends, the hangers-on and survivors, who had somehow endured there when the old order fell to bits. The original owners of the ground, he thought to himself. Still nosing about in the dark corners and plotting ways to stick the torn leaves back on to the calendar.

He shivered, though the mud-walled room was hot.

II

They came for him when the last sunlight had left the sky. He heard them long before the door opened, the steady, careful tread of Theophilus's bare feet contrasting with the uneven shuffle of Otho's rope-soled sandals.

Standing in the doorway with his back to what light there was, Theophilus delivered the ritual explanation of the purpose and conditions of the Retreat, half speaking, half chanting. Dirk could make out only his beard and white hair in the dimness.

When the ritual was over and Dirk had made the proper response, Theophilus said in his normal voice, "Otho will take you to a place from which even in full daylight the walls of the academy cannot be seen. The Retreat proper begins at sunup." Dirk picked up his bag and followed Otho out into the desert.

The sand and stones were still warm under his feet, though he knew that warmth would not last

long. The high-pitched howl of one of the little desert wolves, a sound he had heard often while stretched on his cot in the dormitory, seemed friendly and familiar.

"My lord," Otho said softly, "this is the place."

Unexpectedly, the Captive thrust a stoppered bottle into his hands. Without the slightly obsequious note Dirk had always heard in his voice before, he said, "I've liked you ever since you came, boy, even though you were more severe with me than any of the others. Take this. As soon as it's light spread it all over yourself. In half an hour it will have neutralized the dye and you can wipe off the whole mess with clean sand." Before Dirk could recover from his astonishment the Captive had turned to go, calling over his shoulder, "My own discovery. I had the dye formula, you know, and plenty of time for research. I'll never tell anyone."

With the uncanny skill of a Master, like a puma suddenly disappearing behind some fold of ground hardly large enough to shelter a cactus wren, he was gone.

Dirk called in astonishment, then anger, and finally in an agony of frustration. There was no reply.

The desert was lit with the silvery gossamer radiance of the stars, and silent with an almost unbearable hush. He would have freely sworn that if a grasshopper mouse were to dart from a hole a hundred meters away he would both see and hear it. There was nothing. Heavy and infinitely dishonorable, Otho's bottle weighed in his hand.

If he were to use the preparation, he reflected, he would be safe from capture for the length of his Retreat. He would need only to stay away from the Academy for the two months or so the dye normally required to wear off completely. If he were to meet a freeman he would undoubtedly be taken for a young Master on a field trip. He might even go east to where the sleepy farms and agricultural towns nestled in their irrigated valley and steal or beg food and clothing.

It was impossible, of course.

It would mean living a lie for the remainder of his life—feeling inferior to every Captive failure of a slavey who had at least tried to play by the rules.





Stooping to bring his gaze closer to the sand, he thought he could detect those slight dislocations of the wind-blown pattern which marked Otho's trail. To keep the dye-remover . . . or pour it out, was as unthinkable as using it. Otho, whose actions Dirk felt he could predict well from his knowledge of the man, would believe he had used it. Otho would wink slyly when no one was watching, would make little secret jokes and be just a shadow more than an equal when they were alone. Dirk hated the Captivity system which punished failure so brutally, but he realized that to become the captive of a Captive would solve nothing.

Surprisingly, Otho had apparently not headed directly back toward the academy. The trail slanted off to the northeast in a series of convolutions that threw it behind every

speck of cover. To follow it by starlight was slow work even for an academically trained and field-experienced tracker. For anyone else it would have been hopeless.

Slipping across the desert with his eyes on the spoor, he failed to notice the minute pantomime being performed two hundred meters to his left until his attention was called to it by a sound — a gasping release of breath as though a man had been struck violently in the stomach. A figure which had been moving silently on a course parallel to his own had suddenly found itself surrounded by four smaller figures. There had been a brief flourish of action, the large figure moving with pantherish speed and power but the smaller ones with the incredible swiftness of humming birds — seeming almost to disappear in one spot and reappear without lapse of

time in another. Then the larger figure slumped, emitting the gasp Dirk had heard. By the time he looked up there was no motion.

The symmetrical smoothness of four heads might easily at such a distance have been that of four rounded stones, but he turned as surely as a compass needle and began to trot straight toward them. There was a sound like a strip of cloth being torn, and a muzzle blast like a scarlet star sparkling before the third head. With a violent tug at the shoulder strap his bag leaped away from his side as he threw himself face down on the sand. The four rounded "stones" vanished like soap bubbles. The long wait began.

He drew his bag toward him, got out his knife, and discovered with relief that the bullet had not broken Otho's bottle. With the knife in his hand he watched with unwinking intensity his whole perimeter, listening for the scrape of one red sand grain on another, knowing as he did so that the flitting forms who might be circling to approach him from behind would be more difficult to see or hear than any Master.

At the academy he had been taught to call them by their scientific name of Homo Gyrdá, the latter word being (he knew) a Latin-Anglo-Saxon mongrel for an obsolete unit of measure a little less than half the height of a man. Supposedly it was the average stature of those his parents had called the Poor People or the Pretty People when they told stories in the farmhouse kitchen.

Daylight came without an attack. A hawk, enormous-winged, sailed the updrafts the rising sun fathered when it struck the desert floor. Dick stood up stiffly, rubbing his limbs.

The gyrdá would not stay this close to the academy by day, he felt certain. Trotting ahead, he found the scene of the struggle and read in the sand (by the lack of blurring where the four figures had lain) that they had left almost immediately after shooting at him. The depth of the tracks and the fact that they formed two columns side by side showed that they were carrying off their prisoner; wise desert fighters kept to a single line in order to better conceal their numbers.

He followed them all that day, spending the next night under a stone outcrop where his almost naked body was prevented from radiating its precious heat to the sky.

By noon of the second day of his Retreat he was in the foothills and had lost the trail in the rocks. He was hungry too, and knew that he should not risk another night without food. A straggling mesquite tree offered him some shelter from the sun while he read what information he could from it: the direction of the prevailing winds, that there was iron in the soil, the length of the growing season and so on — reflecting that Theophilus or, he supposed, Master Aleksandr would have understood much more.

Then he noticed that no mesquite beans lay under it.

A pile of rocks about thirty meters off had a spot which appeared

more pounded and compacted than usual in front of every good sized crevice . . . marmots. Occasionally the little animals could be dug out, but a stroll around the rock pile convinced him that this fortress was too extensive and composed of stones too large for one man to handle. A glance overhead confirmed that the inevitable hawk was circling almost too high to be seen. Resuming his seat under the tree, he remained motionless for about twenty minutes, and then began to imitate the shrill whistle of an infant marmot in distress.

For several long breaths nothing stirred. He closed the hand out of sight of the rock pile on a stone. The nose of a small creature appeared in one of the crevices, then vanished again. He whistled weakly. The marmot made a rush that took it not more than fifty centimeters from the rock pile, then scurried back. After another three minutes it came out again. Two meters, then three, from safety.

Then he threw his stone. Not at the marmot, which would have been almost certainly futile at that range; but at the hole from which the little animal had come, to frighten it yet further away.

The hawk came down like a bullet, seeming to split the thin air in his descent, yet the marmot was within two jumps of its hole when the talons seized it. It squealed piercingly once before it went limp. Dick yelled and pelted the hawk with a handful of gravel, at which the bird of prey wheeled to face him, hissing and clacking its curved beak. With a stick

wrenched from the mesquite he was finally able to drive it off, flopping furiously along the ground. Like all birds it had great difficulty in rising unless it could climb to a tree limb or a high point of rock for its take-off.

Dirk skinned the marmot and roasted it over a very economical fire of mesquite, considering his situation as he did so. He knew very little, really, about the gyrdas, and neither where they lived nor what they lived on. Their reasons for capturing Otho he could only guess at.

For the time being it seemed reasonable to assume that he had merely blundered into a party of scouts who had welcomed the opportunity to take a prisoner. The problem now was to discover the trail again.

Although the four Poor People had probably been carrying water bottles of some sort when they captured Otho, he reflected, the supply could hardly be ample. Before he had lost the trail he had seen signs that indicated the Captive — who appeared to have lost his sandal in the scuffle — was slowing the party down. If water consumption were proportional to body weight he would need as much as three of his captors. Yet if they wanted to keep him alive in the desert they would have to supply him. Somewhere near here, then, they had almost certainly replenished their canteens at some source known to them. He set out to discover the place and find Otho, knowing that it would be a very difficult task.

It took him three days. To discover surface water in these arid lands required a knowledge of geology and a sensitive eye for slight differences in the lushness of growth and frequency in occurrence of the common desert plants.

Dirk possessed both. But both had to be honed considerably before he found the spot where a hole scooped in the sand had produced a seepage of water for the gyrda and their prisoner. He filled his own flask and took up the now fading trail.

He strode up long, slanted gullies filled with stones. In the desert and the flat plowlands the country had lain out wide around him with a feeling of spaciousness and natural or man-created orderliness. Because he had himself been taller than most of the objects surrounding him it had not prepared him for the high places, where fields a thousand hectares in extent stretched up on either side of the V-point in which he walked. Long after night came, the light played on the raw rock at the peaks of the mountains.

He did not suffer under the disadvantages of those who have been taught that a human being must eat every day, much less three times daily. His parents had regularly done without food one day a week during the winter, and at the academy his instructors had routinely taught their students the benefits of fasting. He knew how little and how much, a man needed to live.

When they presented themselves he ate the roots of certain plants and used his knife to cut away the spine-studded skins of others to eat the pulp. Twice he was able to find and raze the little storehouses of kangaroo rats, masticating the tough, dry seeds they contained until they were a sweetish paste before he swallowed.

The trail ended at last in a sunken bowl wedged between three great peaks. Fifteen domed huts of flat stones surrounded that rarest of natural wonders, a deep pool of standing water. Outside of the little circle ranged "gardens" where most of the desert plants capable of furnishing some article of food to gatherers were being grown under cultivation.

From a sheltered spot high up the slope of one of the enclosing mountains he watched the life of the village all the remainder of the day, but he could get no clue to the prisoner's whereabouts until it was nearly dark. Then a lone individual appeared, carrying one of the long rods he knew were weapons, and a small jug and hide bag.

He left one of the huts and began flitting up an almost invisible path nearly opposite from his position. After perhaps a minute two others followed him, unarmed, and — so it seemed to Dirk — with the negligent air of gawkers everywhere. The mountainside on which he was hidden was already in shadow although the three climbing gyrda were still sunlit, so he wasted no time in beginning the long trek around to where the path lay fine as cobweb

against the mountain. As he had anticipated, the gyrda were back in their village and only starlight lit the path long before he reached it.

In many places it consisted of no more than a series of hand and foot holds, and his few days in the high country had by no means given him the true mountaineer's immunity to acrophobia. Hours elapsed between the time he reached the path and his last scramble to the summit.

He had naively imagined that the peak of one of the mountains which appeared so pointed when seen from below would actually be sharp, a column or pyramid of rock. In truth it was nearly flat, a table-top of red sandstone about fifty meters by a hundred with a barely perceptible tilt. In the center of this barren little plateau a single verticle stratum of rock rose to about the height of a man, as though a coin on edge had been embedded deeply in the stone. Only when the upper edge of this moved slightly did he realize that a living being was lying along it. He walked silently, crouching, but he had taken only a few steps when a calm voice said, "Walk wide of the pile of stones to your left."

He straightened up. The voice continued, "I am chained here. Who are you? I've been listening to your climbing half the night."

"The retreatant you saw being stained when you came to our academy six days ago, Master Aleksandr. I had thought to find Otho, Master Theophilus's Captive, here."

He was close enough now to see the bearded, intense face well with the starlight full on it. Master Aleksandr was chained on his back, so that his face — when his neck was not craned to watch Dirk — was to the sky.

"You needn't worry about Otho; he is safe in his bed back at the academy, I trust. I was worried about you two though, when Master Theophilus told me you would be starting the Great Retreat that night. And so I followed you."

There was a faint clinking of iron as the Master shifted in what Dirk knew must be a torturously uncomfortable position before he continued.

"I had learned the gyrda were sending patrols closer than ever before to the academy. That was what I had come to tell Theophilus, but I wandered into one myself. Your name is Dirk, is it not? Theophilus mentioned it over dinner that night. Do you see how I am bound, Dirk?"

Dirk paused before answering, uncertain of his vision in the dim light. "I believe a hole has been drilled through that outcrop and a chain connecting your wrists runs through it. May I touch them?"

Master Aleksandr nodded.

"They are welded, sir."

"I know. Can you think of any way to cut them?"

"No, sir."

"Neither can I, and I've been trying for two days — ever since they put me up here. We'll have to part the stone instead. I assume you have the usual Retreat Knife. Try it on the stone."

For some minutes there was no sound save the gritty rasp of the steel edge on sandstone. At length Dirk reported, "It will cut a bit, but I think it would take a month to wear through from the edge to where the chain goes through; it must be sixty or seventy centimeters."

"Look there," the chained man exclaimed suddenly, "just on the horizon. Can you follow my line of sight, Dirk?"

Dirk asked doubtfully, "The blue star?"

Master Aleksandr laughed softly. "It's a planet, and it's what they've stuck me up here to see, so you can't blame me for getting a little excited when it rises. Technically I shouldn't even point it out to you until you finish Retreat.

"Now," his voice hardened, "feel the stone under me just above my waist. You may want to use the point of your knife. Feel a little crack?"

After a moment Dirk nodded.

"Good. I only saw it as a dark line when they were chaining me up here. Now I want you to go about ten centimeters up, under the small of my back, and try to gouge out a deep, narrow hole with your knife. I'll pull myself away from the rock as far as I can."

After Dirk had worked for about ten minutes, the Master asked almost casually, "Making any progress?"

"A little, Sir. Would it be impertinent to ask what it is we're trying to do?"

"Not at all. Have you ever read about Hannibal splitting stones with

vinegar to clear the passes when he crossed the Alps? No, I forgot, you would never have heard of Hannibal. Anyway, he split the rocks with vinegar, according to Livy, and it's puzzled a lot of historians since that time."

Master Aleksandr fell silent; Dirk had already come to realize that his mind was beginning to wander under the strain of the past six days. He said softly, "Vinegar, sir?"

"Not surprising when you once come to understand that *vinegar* is a frequent mistranslation of the word used to designate the sour red wine that was the usual drink of soldiers — of all the common people in those days, in fact. The liquid an army would have in plenty. Handy, in other words." Holding himself tautly away from the stone and Dirk's hands, he was no longer looking at Dirk. His eyes seemed to be following the blue planet as it rose slowly above the horizon. "It's an old trick, much older than explosives as I've said. Drill a hole vertically or nearly so; a line of holes if the stone is thick. Drive in a peg of hard, dry wood — a tight wringing fit. Cut away the top of the peg until it's below the level of the stone. Do you understand so far?"

Dirk nodded.

"Pour in wine, vinegar, water, whatever you have. It will penetrate the cells of the wood and cause them to swell. The pressure is enormous: hundreds of kilos per square centimeter, depending on the wood. Stone has great compressive strength but not much tensile and it's brittle. It cracks."

Dirk could not get the hole deep enough that night.

He went over the far side of the plateau (the descent was actually easier on that side) when a gyrda from the village below came up with Master Aleksandr's morning food and water. The sun stood squarely overhead when he finished pounding in the stake he had whittled from a limb of a dead tree half way down the mountain's slope.

"Near that little cairn of stones," Master Aleksandr directed him weakly, "you'll find a shallow dish with a little water in it. I saw the gyrda refill it this morning from the bottle he carried. Use that to pour on the peg. We'll need what's in the flask for ourselves. But be careful about getting it. Keep your eyes open."

Masters, as Dirk had leaned at the academy, did not usually bother to warn mere scholars unless the dangers or discomforts at hand were very great. Every nerve was alert as he approached the cairn. "I see the dish, Master Aleksandra, and an egg — a rock pigeon's."

"The sun's high now. Look in shade."

Not until the third time Dirk ran his eyes over the ground did he see it, and then he was astonished that he had not seen it at once. It was a lizard, legless or nearly so, whose black body was nearly two meters long though no thicker than a man's wrist. Its absolute motionlessness as it lay in the shadow of a small ledge of rock had made him pass over it repeatedly.

"I've had it under control ever since they put me up here, but I doubt if I could hold it if you were to step on it or kick a stone at it. With the simpler animals reflex action is hard to stop."

"I know," Dirk said shortly. He was, after all, a Retreatant and not a freshman scholar. "Is it so dangerous, then? I've never seen one like it before."

"It's a hamadryad. At least that's the best identification we've been able to make from the archives. It wouldn't be in your texts at the academy because it isn't one of our animals; this is one of the few the gyrda seem to be responsible for."

"I don't understand this," Dirk said slowly as he trickled water from the hamadryad's dish into the hole above the peg top. "It seems to be the sort of thing we were always told would be explained when we had made our Great Retreat. Weren't all the animals from the Motherworld brought in the arcship? I've sometimes wondered if the instructors weren't holding something back."

"There's no secret. It's just that there are so many things for an undergraduate to learn about our own world—Mars—that we try to discourage you from getting started on the endless succession of inquiries about the Motherworld until we're certain we're not wasting our time on someone who'll spend the rest of his life planting maguey. You know at least that mankind did not originate on this planet, judging from what you've just said. Some of the boys who come to the academy from

farms don't even seem to realize that."

With sudden insight Dirk realized that Master Aleksandr was trying to spare them both at least part of the agony of suspense they must suffer during the hours of waiting for the moisture to penetrate the dense wood of the peg, but he did not care. The chance to hear a Master speak at length about the tangled paths of the lost race of Man had never before come to him. And if he failed his retreat by capture or death, it would never come again.

"I have heard it," he said cautiously. "My father used to say too that if you looked into the sky at night you could see the Motherworld, but I thought it was just a fable, like saying you could hear the bees of summer when you put a hollowed out gourd to your ear on a winter evening."

"Could your father read, Dirk?"

"He used to say he could, a little. I don't really think so."

"Well, your great-grandfathers — all of them — were among the best educated men on the Motherworld. I can say that without knowing your family at all, because it's true of every human being on Mars. Besides the language and literature they knew a good deal about every science and each of them was expert in at least two. Or they wouldn't have been allowed to come. When the Mars stations were abandoned by the Motherworld they found themselves at the edge of starvation on a world where the maximum exertions of every member of the

community were barely able to support life."

"But if they knew all those things . . ." Dirk began weakly.

"Most of it wasn't worth a handful of sand then. They couldn't afford mathematics or astronomy or a lot of the other sciences that were of no immediate value in the production of food. Then there were a lot of disciplines that lost their utility when their equipment wore out, because there was no material for replacements except native iron and what could be salvaged from the things previously junked. And there was precious little energy to smelt and work either of them. They had nuclear physicists, but what good were they when Mars's fissionables had turned to lead eons ago?" Master Aleksandr shook his head as though to clear it. "Dirk, can you give me a drink from your flask? I'm getting very dry."

Dirk tilted the flask up, noticing as he did it how drawn the older man's face looked and that he took only one swallow of the water.

Master Aleksandr began again, "That's the Motherworld, that you saw last night. That blue star. The gyrdá chained me up so I would have to watch it all night. I imagine they've done this to quite a few people who didn't have the least idea of what it was they were supposed to be seeing."

"I still don't understand," Dirk said.

"The life sciences remained. In fact, that's us. Metallurgy sunk back to blacksmithing, but botany and zoology and biology — the whole

study of the biosphere — were needed as never before, as well as geology for the location of water and what minerals there were. Fortunately, before the Motherworld abandoned us an attempt had been made to transfer a viable desert ecology from there. That's how we got most of the plants we have, as well as the birds and mammals. But not all the Motherworld's fauna were transferred as you seem to believe. A great many could not possibly have lived here, and a great many others, like the hamadryad, were just not wanted."

"You said the hamadryad was one of the gyrd's animals. I don't follow that; and why did they put it up here with you?"

"As a watchdog. And for most of their prisoners — probably everyone they had before myself — he made an ideal guard. Both frightening and genuinely dangerous. He needs very little water and food, and he couldn't leave the plateau even if he wanted to; he couldn't make some of the climbs. Of course he has to crawl into a crevice shortly after the sun sets to keep from freezing, but I doubt if the other prisoners ever realized that."

"I didn't find it very frightening," Dirk remarked.

"If you had been a prisoner they'd have let you see him kill a wolf before they chained you up. Now look behind you."

Turning, Dirk saw the hamadryad some three meters behind him with half its body lifted from the ground and erect as a candle. Its neck had spread and flattened into a shape

indescribably sinister. Its gaze was fixed not upon himself but on Master Aleksandr with an expression both attentive and, in an utterly alien fashion, intelligent.

"They call them cobra de capello on the Motherworld," Aleksandra said. 'Snakes of the cape.' The gyrd studied the old records and then rearranged the DNA of some harmless reptile to produce it. Clever of them, wasn't it?"

"Now see if there's a new crack in this rock. I think I just heard something."

V

"The mountains are mice," old Theophilus said ruminatively. "Yes. I believe I did tell your class something like that once. I meant to allude to mice as experimental animals, of course; the mountains have been injected with all the viruses and vaccines."

Dirk was scratching the spot on his arm which he had, on Master Theophilus's explicit order, swabbed with Otho's dye remover. It was beginning to itch.

"Like the gyrd?" he asked.

"Yes. The gyrd were devised on the Motherworld to be the permanent settlers of Mars while our forefathers were serving as investigators and observers. Couples who desperately needed money, as well as a few who felt they were advancing the human race, submitted to having their reproductive cells mutated. It seems strange to us who think only of the richness of the old Motherworld, Dirk, but there were many

families there as poor as your own."

They were perhaps two kilometers from the academy, where Aleksandr (in defiance of the normal rule of Retreat) had arranged a night meeting between Dirk and Master Theophilus. To Dirk's surprise his old teacher had brought an unrepentant Otho with him.

"But they got along so well they want to force us to go back to the Motherworld, Sir? That's what Master Aleksandr says. Don't they know we'd do it anyway if we could?"

"They want us to try a little harder," Otho put in.

"The wise men who composed the gyrdra left out the heart," Theophilus said slowly. "They are quick and clever with tools and more fit for Mars than men are, but they have no hearts. Did you know, Dirk, that Aleksandr's name means 'Defender of Men?' And mine is 'Dear to God;' we are descended from the Russian and the Greek contingents originally, I suppose. That was the sort of thing

that was forgotten the first time."

"This spot on my arm is burning," Dirk complained suddenly.

Otho said bluntly, "That liquid is a contact poison, my lord. We give it to every retreatant. If you'd smeared yourself all over as I told you, it would have killed you."

"Our society is too poor to afford cheating in its upper ranks," Theophilus said gently. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure I can accept as easily the idea of another attempt to fit humanity to Mars. You implied that in what you said a moment ago, you know, Sir."

"Would you accept it if the changed men were to be no less human than you are, Dirk?"

As the two of them were walking back to the academy Otho chuckled, "No less human than he is himself!" Master Theophilus reminded him tartly that a fool should not speak. END

Great new novel by Galaxy's
award-winning writer —

THE LAST CASTLE

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Complete in the April Galaxy — don't miss it!

GOLDEN TRABANT

by R. A. LAFFERTY

*Where did the gold come from?
More important — what was the
thing that brought it to Earth?*

The man who entered, though quiet and soft-stepping, was none of your tame animals. He'd kill for the one thing he wanted and couldn't get enough of; but he hardly knew what to do with the packet of it he had under his arm. The man had a slight green tinge to him, and Patrick T. K. guessed that what he carried would have it also.

In an earlier era the man would have been tagged immediately as a seaman. Plainly he was still that, but of a more ethereal sea. Under his arm he had a package wrapped in newspaper, and more sturdily wrapped beneath. It was not a large package, but it was quite heavy.

The faring man was slim but amazingly wiry. Patrick T. K. was fat but with a lean and hungry eye that couldn't be fooled. Patrick set the weight of the package carried by

the man at a hundred and twenty pounds.

If it were iron of such bulk it would weigh hardly a third that. If it were lead it would not be that heavy. Patrick studied the tendons on the side of the man's neck and the bulging veins on the back of his hand. He studied the set of his feet as he stood there, and he calculated the man's center of gravity, package included. Mercury would not be that heavy. Platinum would be heavier by a tenth. Patrick T. K. sometimes made mistakes in his judgment, but he never made mistakes by as much as ten per cent.

So the seaman had a lump of gold to sell him.

Nothing unusual about that. Patrick T. K. bought more sly gold than anyone in town.

"I've been told," said the sea-

man, "and it doesn't matter by whom, that you might be able to give me good cash for what I have here. But I won't be beaten down. I know my price."

"And I know mine," said Paddy T. K. "Twenty thousand dollars. How do you want it? Well, come, come how? Twenties, fifties, hundreds, thousands or a king's mixture?"

"I had priced it a little higher," said the man.

"What? For that undersized loaf of bread under your arm? Two hundred dollars a pound for a hundred pounds is as close as I can figure."

"It weighs more."

"I know what it weighs. But I like to use round figures."

"Shall I unwrap it here? Have you a place to test it?"

"Leave it wrapped. Here is the sum. And if you find it short a bill or two, be assured it is a dishonest mistake."

"There is more where this comes from."

"I can take this much every two weeks. Now be off."

"You're not going to look at it? How can you be sure what it is?"

"I have X-ray eyes."

"Oh."

But when Paddy T. K. was alone he put other things away and locked the door. He took the package to a back room, puffing heavily, for it was just as heavy as he knew it must be. He unwrapped it.

There was little that Patrick did not know about gold. He knew the

greenishness of African gold, whether of the Gold Coast or the South; the greasiness of Kolyma gold and also its extreme unavailability; the cypric tinge of Sierra Madre gold whether from the Guatemala or Mexico district. He was familiar with the sudden brightness of Milne Bay gold, with the granularity of the Canadian, the muscle-like texture of that of Witwatersrand, the lightness of color of the gold of California and nearby Sonora, and the white gold (almost Electrum) of New Guinea above Milne Bay.

This was none of them. It was raw but fine, and very, very slightly cupric. The green tint in it was about the same as that in the complexion of the man. Patrick set down the weight in a notebook. And at the column for the origin he did not hesitate. He wrote down 'Extraterrestrial'.

That was the first written note of the thing.

Later, this gold would be known as St. Simeon gold (from a station on its route, not from its origin), but Patrick T. K., the old jewelry factor and sly gold dealer, was not fooled.

Within a month, the *Wall Street Journal* had also referred to the new gold as extraterrestrial. The boys on that sheet also knew about gold, wherever they got their knowledge. But the *Journal* was derided for its correct guess. Gold cargo had never been authorized. No such gold had been mined except for pilot digs in conjunction with other operations. The cost would have been prohibitive, considering the cargo of neces-

sary production machinery and the rudimentary state of exploration and the rarity of any solid finds. Off-Earth gold was still a generation away.

It was a four-man corporation made up of: Robert Fountain, an unobstructed genius; George Grinder, a ruthless ruffian; Carlos Trevino, the last of the Conquistadores and perhaps the first of a new kind of man; and Arpad Szild, a murderous Irishman who used a dead man's papers and a dead man's name.

Three of them had been dining in quiet luxury one evening at Trevino's when Szild appeared in the midst of them, "the doors and windows being closed," as Fountain related it with his biting humor, but that part of it may not be true.

"I've been there. I can take you to it," Szild said suddenly. He sat down and began to eat with his hands from the bowls.

"I grind up better stuff than you for feed supplement for my cattle," Trevino said. "Who are you? What can you take us to?"

"To the Trabant. You were talking about the legend."

"All right. You talk about the legend, real fast," Robert Fountain said. "You haven't much time." He laid a hog-nosed gun in front of him on the table.

"It's shaped like a balk or a beam," Szild said. "Its greater diameter is twenty-five hundred meters, and its lesser is fifteen hundred—a little less than two cubic miles. It's a misshapen tapered beam or egg with a cleft at its minor end. Its rotation is

a tumble, and the period of the tumble is just short of thirty minutes. It's as bad-natured a rock as can be found. Cuts you to pieces. Shouldn't have an atmosphere, but there's something that tears up your lungs no matter how you're suited. It's an angry place, I tell you. But it's gold."

That was the Golden Trabant, one of the smaller of the eighteen hundred significant asteroids orbiting between Mars and Jupiter. When finally charted several years after this, it would be given the noxious name Venenatus—but that was after it had been treated and its nature changed.

"We have a nice sketchy catalog of every asteroid down to about that size," said Grinder. "Nobody knows much about their details, but they are numbered and given their relative positions and speeds in the asteroid stream. Can you tell us which it is?"

"Can. Won't," said Szild. "But I'll take you there."

Szild had known that he would have to play his ace on the first round. After he had taken them to it, they would have no reason to keep him alive: but he had gambled his life before.

He said he had been there and knew where it was. The odds were high enough for them to take a chance on believing him. They acquired a ship and mounted a flight.

The ship was old and had been deactivated. Carlos Trevino bought it at surplus and had it towed down by tug and beached at a remote spot on the holdings of the Trevino family. It was activated by the genius

of Fountain and the driving energy of Grinder. They took twelve young Hispanic technicians, none of whom are alive to give their versions. They hadn't known what they would run into nor what the labor would be at breaking up and loading the cargo. They went up, and they loaded the cargo.

They came back, the four of them without the twelve young technicians. Their first cargo. A trip of only five weeks. The Trabant was not distant.

Szild showed an exceptional talent at remaining alive. It is hard to kill a man as tough and canny as he, one who is never off guard. He spent the two weeks of the return barricaded in a little compartment, and the three leaders had to postpone Szild's killing till their earthing. Szild knew that they had mostly delegated such jobs as that. He himself had had to kill the twelve young technicians for them.

He bulled his way out when they were busy with earthfall and secure landing.

"He can't get away," Trevino said.

He couldn't get clear of the surrounding jungle; he did. Trevino who knew his own land minutely could track Szild down; he couldn't. He couldn't take much with him; he took a hundred and twenty pounds of it. That wasn't much out of a cargo like theirs, and whatever story Szild might tell would not be believed. He had no reason to tell any story at all; he didn't.

But somehow he reached port

and took passage to the North, for Szild was the man who sold that first lump of gold to Patrick T. K.

Another man would have been satisfied with that and steered clear of them. Not Szild. Nevertheless, they were surprised when he returned to them just at second take-off time, as they were going now with a ship that was really a ship. He came on foot across the savanna from the inland side.

"Something like this happens every time I leave the house for a minute," as the woman said as she examined the mandible and two parietal bones of her newly eaten child," Szild greeted them. "Would you be going without me? The news I had of you was sketchy and I am barely here in time."

"Kill him!" said Robert Fountain.

"Kill him, Fountain says, and the other two look at each other. Was it not better, Fountain, to have a man who will kill when you say kill, and avoid these awkward pauses? But I kill hard, Fountain. I go as long as anybody goes, and afterwards."

Szild went with them. They would kill him after the hard work of loading was done. They would kill him after he had done his turn at the instruments out and back. By and by they would kill him.

They brought back two hundred tons on that second voyage. They made a third voyage and a fourth and a fifth.

The establishment of the Commonwealth of San Simeon did not shake the world. Not at first.

Nobody had ever heard of the place. It seemed a prank. Possibly a name given to a rebel hold.

Yet the Commonwealth was recognized that first day by its two adjacent Central American neighbors. They constituted themselves coprotectors of the new country. One of them, indeed, had ceded the land for it, the ancient and run-down rancho of the Trevino family. Some consideration had surely been paid for this protection.

It was soon after this that the heavy San Simeon Duros (fifty dollar gold pieces) began to appear around the world.

The appearance of these Duros caused a nervousness all out of proportion to the number of them. It is possible that not more than twenty million of them (that is, a billion dollars' worth) went into circulation that first year. That is a large amount coming from a new small country, but it shouldn't be enough to unhinge the world. Yet it did almost that.

Gold had gotten out of the habit of showing itself in society. For years it had sat at home in vaults, and a multiplier had been used to equate it with credit money. Nobody knew what to make of naked gold returning to the market. And what if this stream should be but the beginning of a veritable river?

And the stream was spreading. Three Central American countries were on a gold spree. It was slopping over into others.

The mystery of San Simeon was not solved. The exact location of the country was unknown to the world

at large. Its form of government was not to be ascertained. Its statistics softened and disappeared when examined. It had a president, Fuentes. It had a prime minister, Molinero — the miller, the grinder. It had a foreign minister Trevino. It had the hardest currency in the world. Its national game was playing hob with the currencies of the rest of the world.

If one small shrew is put into a warren of mice or rats, it causes panic. The shrew is smaller than any of them and it may be one against hundreds. But it will eat them; it will eat them alive. And given time, it will eat them all.

Something like this happened to the green money, the white money, the rainbow-colored money of the world. Token shrivels before the thing itself. It could not stand up to free and growing gold.

But if the warren is big enough, the shrew can be contained. There will be some of the rats knowing and political enough to go out and hire shrews of their own. The source of the gold stream could not be hidden forever.

One thing (Szild always said it was a mistake and Robert Fountain agreed that it was, but they couldn't hold the other two in line) was that the first ships begat others. Trevino and Grinder Molinero became too hasty in their greed. In that second year they had twelve ships in the service instead of one. That meant that somewhere between fifty and a hundred men knew the source.

The shores began to cave. The golden stream was a river. It crest-

ed to a torrent. One ship defected, then another. They came back to Earth in other lands than those of their departure. And wherever they came down they spawned other ships.

A dozen other countries were in the race by the third year. Now there was privateering and open piracy. The ships became battle boats, death spheres, and the attrition was terrifying. But the inward flood of the metal continued.

The world importation by the fourth year had risen to five hundred billion dollars annually, if it could any longer be equated in dollars. The gold dollar itself was not as hard as it had been.

The Trabant had changed. The period of its tumble was now only twenty-three minutes. The egg had been cracked and gutted in many places, and the cleft at the minor end had become a chasm between two horns. There was a project to shear off one of the horns and tow it to Earth in hunks of a million cubic yards each. This would be a lot of gold.

It was time for oblique measures, and they were found. The effect of the gold on the world had not really been bad. The effect on most people had been marvelous. But there was a small group that had always borne the burden of currency decisions. They were made nervous by this unbridled activity. Their hold was slipping. They took measures.

A small commission of not overly intelligent men found an answer. In their own field they understood

cause and effect. They acted on doubtful authority, and they were not of one mind about the action. But they did it.

They killed Trabant.

One treatment was enough for the little rock. It couldn't be cleansed; it couldn't be unpoisoned after that. It would be deadly for a thousand years. Then they gave it its first official name, Venenatus, the poison asteroid. A near approach would radiate the flesh off a man's bones.

Things came back to normal in about three years. The shrews had killed each other, and the wise rats once more ran the warren. The new fortunes tottered and fell back into the bags of the old.

Somewhere, we never did know its exact location, San Simeon (no longer able to pay the high price for protection) lost its independence and became again a run-down rancho.

Gold stuck to some fingers longer than to others. Fuentes and Grinder will never run out of it. Trevino was choked to death by the political strings on his. He died along with his small country, and he hadn't intended to.

Szild didn't know what he did with all his money. He paid little attention to it, and he suspected that he hadn't received nearly as much of it as had his nervous partners.

He spent it manfully. He threw it away. It gave him a dour pleasure to go from billionaire to bum. Then Arpad Szild was down to his last San Simeon Duro.

He laughed. Something had been missing from his life. Now it might

be back. His gold was gone. So what to do?

He went up for some more.

Up to Venenatus the poison asteroid that would radiate a man's flesh off?

Sure. Szild didn't believe a lot of that stuff.

Patrick T. K. was alone in his shop when there entered a hooded man with a small heavy package.

"I was beginning to think I would see you no more," said Patrick. "I was told that that traffic had ended. I should have known better. I believe you are the same man, my first supplier of it, though I cannot see your face."

"I have none," said the hooded man. "How much for this?"

"Oh, ten dollars."

"A pound?"

"No. The lot. I figure about eight cents a pound. That's as high as I can go on contaminated gold. Oh sure, I can clean it. It's only the smart men who say it can't be done. It will even leave a handy profit for myself, though not for you. Gold's about done for."

"That isn't much. I have more of the stuff, a fair small load."

"I can take about this much a week. Can you live on ten dollars a week?"

"Yes. I don't eat any longer — no stomach. I don't sleep. I just keep moving. I can live on that."

"And when your fair small load is gone?"

"I go up for another."

"They say nobody goes there and returns."

"I do. But it isn't crowded there now."

"I've a feeling that comes to me rarely. I'd like to help you. Are you blind?"

"I believe so. I have pooled what is left of each of my senses, and somehow it serves. I need no help. I'm the only happy man in the world, the one who found the pot of gold. They can't take that from me. I'll go get it forever."

"After you're dead?"

"Oh, yes. I've known space ghosts. Now I'll be one. It isn't any one line you cross. I live in delirium, of course. It doesn't blunt pain, but it does change the viewpoint. On my last trip down, after I knew that I was already dead, that both I and the gold were ghosts, it was easier. Oh, those are long nights in purgatory I tell you, but I'm not irrevocably damned. There's still the gold, you see."

"You're a happier man than I am. So pass it over."

"Here it is."

But when Szild passed the heavy small package to Patrick, he did it with a hand that was stark splintered bones with only a little black flesh around the heel of it.

Patrick T. K. raised an eyebrow at this, but he didn't raise it very high. A sly gold dealer meets all types.

END

EARTHBLOOD

by KEITH LAUMER and ROSEL G. BROWN

Illustrated by WOOD

Among the weird freaks in the Zoo that spanned the starlanes, he was strangest. He was that legendary creature, a Man!

XII

In the gray light of Chlora's dawn, Roan worked with the others, dismantling the tents, folding the vast canvasses, coiling the miles of rope, stacking and bundling stakes, striking sets and packing props and costumes. The wagons puffed and smoked, and hauled everything back up the ramps into the ship, and then they lowered their scraping blades and pushed all the garbage

back into the circus grounds where it belonged, with the stripped yellow bones of Ithc at the bottom.

Later in Stellaraire's room, she poured Roan a glass of wine and sat on his lap.

"I never knew how much I loved you, until you fought Ithc for me," she said.

"Nobody's said anything about him," Roan said. "Aren't they going to investigate his death?"

"Why should anyone bother? He

What Has Gone Before . . .

A million parsecs from legendary Terra, at the Thieves' Market on Tambool, a pirated pure blood human embryo comes by a mysterious series of events into the hands of the half breeds Raff and Bella Cornay. They settle in a ghetto on the far side of Tambool, where Roan Cornay is born. He grows up among the gracyl, a leathery, winged group of outcasts whose knowledge is entirely instinctive, and who are the servants and victims of the Veed, the saurian ruling class of Tambool. The Yill slave T'hoy hoy tells Roan the legends of ancient Terra, of her heroes and her empires, and of the fabled war with the terrible Niss, which destroyed the power of both forces, and left the empire in shambles, so that the various worlds sank into lawlessness and ignorance. Terra itself is said to have been cut off from the universe for five thousand years, surrounded by a Niss blockade.

At the age of sixteen, Roan sneaks in to watch a traveling Extravaganzoo, using a cable for a tightrope. He is kidnapped by the circus creature Ithc, who kills Raff, and whom Roan wounds in the hand. Gom Bulj, owner of the Extravaganzoo, wants Roan because of his skill in tightrope walking, and also because as a human he will make a good freak.

Roan meets and falls in love with the beautiful exotic dancer, Stellaraire, who helps him find a place in the hierarchy of the circus and introduces him to Iron Robert, the strongest being in the universe. The hatred between Ithc and Roan comes to a head when Ithc takes Stellaraire off after a show, and Roan finds him torturing her with a nerve gun, to the amusement of a group of minor circus people. Roan kills Ithc and rescues Stellaraire, but is shaken by the utter lack of loyalty or decency he meets with everywhere.

wasn't much use with a ruined hand, anyway."

"But what about his friends?"

"You're talking like a Terry," Stellaraire said, and sipped her wine appreciatively. Roan tasted it, too. It was a blossom-pink Doree from Aphela and it tasted like laughter.

Algol II was a wonderful pale green gold-edged mountain that filled half the immense view-screen in the dusty old room that had once

been the grand observation salon.

"I've got an idea," Roan said, standing with his arms around Stellaraire's slim waist. "I've been thinking about what you said, about there being a lot of mutant Terrans here, and about the climate being like Terra. Why don't we stay here? When the show pulls up, we'll disappear. Gom Bulj wouldn't go to the expense of coming back after us."

"Why?" the girl asked, raising

her violet-pencilled eyebrows. "What would we do on Algol II?"

"We wouldn't stay. Just until we made enough credit to leave. I have to get back ho — back to Tambool. Ma's still back there, all alone now."

"But the 'zoo is my home! I've never been any other place since I was ten years old. It's safe here, and we can be together."

"And besides," Roan went on, "Ma will know all about where I came from; maybe who my blood father and mother are. I have to find out. Then I'm going to Terra."

"Roan, Terra's just a mythical place! You can't —"

"Yes, I can," he said. "Terra's a real place. I know it is. I can feel inside that it's real. And it's not like other worlds. On Terra everything is the way things should be. Not all this hate, and not caring, and dirt and dying for nothing. I've never been there, but I know it as though I'd spent all my life there. It's where I belong."

Stellaraire took his hand, leaned against him. "Ah, sweetie, for your sake I hope it's really there — somewhere. And if it is," she added, "I know someday you'll find it."

The 'zoo went well on Algol II. Roan was sure-footed and nimble on the high wire in the light gravity, only three-fourths ship-normal, and Stellaraire's dance was an immense success with the mutant Terrans, who were odd-looking dwarves with bushy muttonchop whiskers and bowed legs and im-

mense bellies and no visible difference between the sexes; but they appreciated the erotic qualities of her performance so well that a number of the locals occupying ringside boxes began solemnly coupling with their mates before she had even finished.

Afterwards, Roan found Stellaraire by the arena barrier, watching Iron Robert in his preliminary warm-up bout.

"I've planned a route for us," he said softly. "As soon as —"

"Shhh . . ." she said, and put a hand on his arm, her eyes on the spot-lit ring where the stone giant was strangling a great armored creature with insane, bulging eyes. It was already quite dead. He was mauling it for the amusement of the crowd which had no way of knowing the beast had died minutes before.

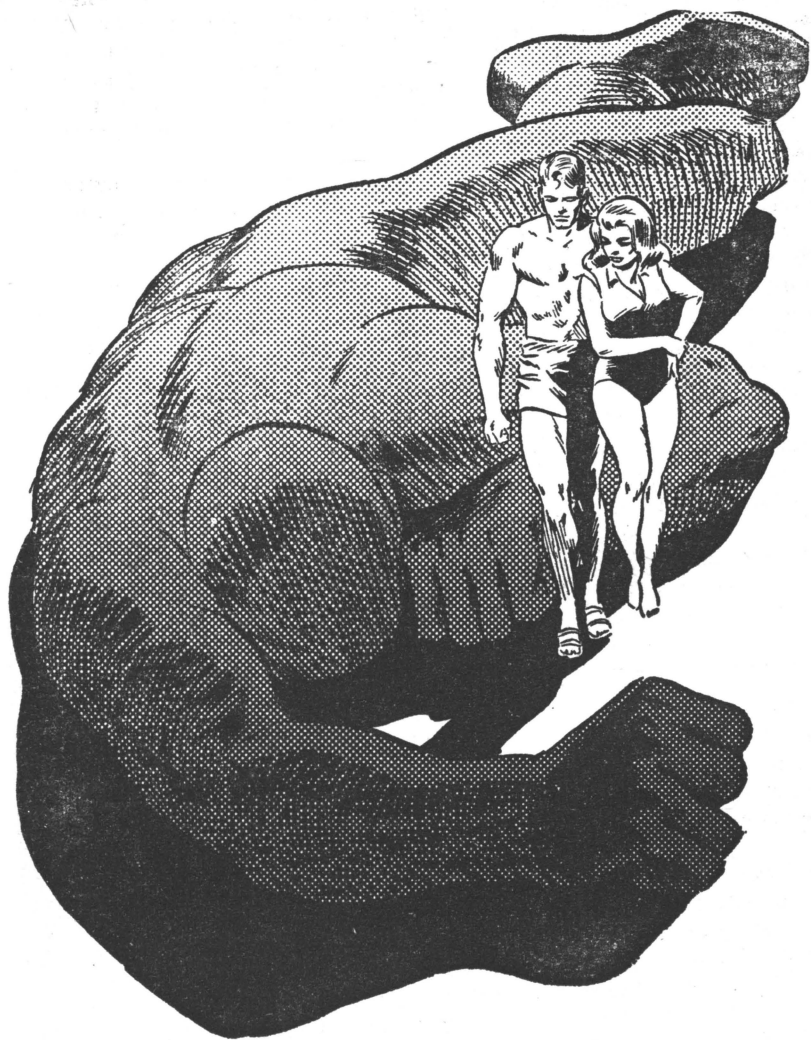
"Listen," Roan insisted. "I have clothes and food in a bundle. Are you ready to go?"

She turned to look up at him. "You really mean it? Now? Just like that, just walk off?"

"What other way is there? This is as good a time as any."

"Roan, it's crazy! But if you're going, I'm going with you. But listen. Wait until after Iron Robert's act. We can slip away while the tops are going down. Somebody might notice if we tried it now — and whatever we do, we don't want to get caught. Gom Bulj has some pretty drastic ideas about what to do with deserters."

"All right. As soon as the fight's over and the noise-makers come on,



we'll mingle with the marks and go out gate nineteen. There's a patch of big plants growing over on that side, and we can duck in there and work our way to the town."

There was scattered applause as Iron Robert tossed his victim aside and raised his huge, square hands in his victory sign. He came over to where Roan and Stellaraire stood, accepted a towel tossed to him by Mag or his twin brother. He wiped pale pink blood from his face and hands, then took a scraper from his belt pouch and began to clean himself, frowning as he worked. He was very neat and meticulous and it made a tooth-cracking noise.

"How you like fight, Terry?" he asked suddenly, scraping his arm with long strokes.

"I didn't really see it," Roan answered. "When I got here it was already over."

Iron Robert chuckled, a sound like a boulder rolling downhill. "Fans like see plenty action," he said. "Iron Robert kill too quick, have to ham up act little, give everybody money's worth." He finished his toilet and put the scraper away.

"Next fight different maybe," he said. "Parlagon easy. Tear up whole parlagon with bare hands. Chinazell next. Never see chinazell before. Chinazell pretty tough, some say. What is chinazell? Who care? Tear him up, too."

"I guess you can beat just about anything they put in against you," Roan commented, looking around to see if Gom Bulj was in sight. It wouldn't do to have him watching when they made their try.

"So far, Terry," the giant said. He looked at Roan with an unreadable expression in his green-glass eyes. "Iron Robert meet all comers. Some day being too tough to kill." He waved a hand at the stands. "That what all come, hope for. Some day they see. Maybe today. Maybe next year. Maybe hundred years. Meantime, meet all comers, fight to win. Iron Robert born to fight. Fight until die."

A horn blew long, nerve-shredding blasts. Crews were hauling sections of heavy fencing into the cleared arena. The PA system boomed out a description of the coming battle. Iron Robert took a gallon-sized swig from a bottle, tossed it aside, stalked out into the center of the ring under the glare of the lights. Jumbo appeared, hauling a vast, iron-barred cage. Its sides trembled as something inside slammed against the bars. The crowd fell suddenly silent. An immensely tall, thin being dressed in green silks that flapped about its long shins pulled a rope and the end of the cage fell aside.

A triangular, scaled head poked out, swaying inquiringly on its serpentine neck. Then the chinazell bounded from the cage and shook the ground when it landed. It was an incredibly monstrous creature, a primitive-world dinosaur type with bony plates along its high-arched spine. But the fearsome thing about it was the gleam of intelligence in the small, glistening eyes. It paused a moment, surveying the sea of faces behind the barriers, and gaug-

ing Iron Robert, half its size, who stood watching it and gauging it back.

Roan heard Stellaraire's quick intake of breath. "No wonder the betting was so high," she said. "Gom Bulj said a syndicate was importing something special from Algol II, just for the fight. It's a high-G planet, and that monster's used to weighing twice as much as he does now. Look at him! I don't think I want to watch this."

"You're not really worried, are you?" Roan asked. "I mean, it's fixed, isn't it?"

Stellaraire whirled on Roan. "I've known Iron Robert ever since I was a little girl," she said. "I've seen him go up against the awfulest fighters and the cruellest killers on a hundred worlds, and he's always won. He wins with his strength and his courage. Nothing else. Nobody helps him—any more than they helped me—or you!" She looked back toward the arena, where the chinazell had seen Iron Robert now. It gathered its legs under it, watching him standing with his back to his opponent, his arms raised to the crowd in the ancient salute of the gladiator.

"I'm afraid, Roan," Stellaraire said. "He's never fought anything like this before!"

The chinazell moved suddenly; it rose up on its hind legs and charged like a huge, ungainly bird straight toward Iron Robert's exposed back. Stellaraire's fingers dug deep into Roan's arm.

"Why doesn't he turn!"

At the last possible moment, Iron

Robert pivoted with a speed that seemed unbelievable in anything so massive, leaned aside from the chinazell's charge and struck out with a club-like arm. The blow resounded against the beast's armored hide like a cannonball striking masonry; it staggered, broke stride, sent up a spray of dust as it caught itself, wheeled and pounced. The vicious triangular head whipped down with open jaws that clashed against Iron Robert's stony hide and dragged him from his feet.

His arms encircled the scaled neck, hugging the monster close. In sudden alarm, it braced its feet and backed, and Iron Robert held on, twisting the broad head sideways, his fingers locked in the corners of the clamped mouth. The heavy reptilian tail slammed the ground in a roil of dust. Sparks flew where the bright talons of the creature's short arms raked Iron Robert's invulnerable chest and shoulders. Then it opened its jaws, whipped its neck, flung Iron Robert aside. He rolled in the dust, and before he could come to his feet, the chinazell sprang to him, brought an immense hind foot down in an earth-shaking kick.

Roan coughed as dust floated across from the scene of the battle.

"I can't see!" Stellaraire wailed. "What's happening?"

Iron Robert was on his feet again, grappling a hind leg nearly as big as himself. The chinazell, its weight down on its stunted forelimbs, sidled awkwardly, trying to shake its attacker loose. Its head came

around and down, striking at Iron Robert. He hunched his head closer to his shoulders and reached up for a higher grip.

"The thing's too big for him," Stellaraire gasped. "He can't reach a vulnerable spot!"

With a surge, the chinazell raised the trapped leg clear of the ground and dashed it down. Iron Robert slammed against the concrete-hard clay—but he kept his grip.

"He's hurt!" Stellaraire choked. "It's all he can do to hold on—and that isn't doing him any good. But if he lets go, it will kick him again!"

"At least its teeth aren't hurting him," Roan said. "He's all right. He'll hold on until he tires of it, and then—"

"It won't tire. Not in this light gravity."

The chinazell stood, its ribbed sides heaving, its head on its long neck twisted to look at Iron Robert, who shifted his grip suddenly, leaped, caught a bony boss that adorned the dino's withers and hauled himself across the creature's back, his weight bearing it down. Its legs sprawled out. It plunged violently, striking with its yard-wide jaws as dust rose up in a dense cloud.

The chinazell came out of the dust cloud, wheeled and charged down on Iron Robert as he came to his feet. It bounded past him and struck with its immense tail, a blow like a falling tree. Iron Robert went down. The dino galloped

away, circled, and Roan saw that its tail was broken, the hide torn, blood washing down across the scales, caking the dust. The head writhed on the long neck as the voiceless creature shuddered its pain. It came to a halt, the broken tail dragging now. Its head whipped from side to side as though seeking some escape from its torment. Fifty yards away, Iron Robert came slowly to his hands and knees.

"He's hurt!" Stellaraire cried. "Oh, please, Iron Robert! Get up!"

The chinazell moved heavily, painfully. It walked to Iron Robert, stood over him. It maneuvered into position, raised a leg like an ironwood log set with spikes, brought it down square on Iron Robert in a blow that shook the ground.

"Gom Bulj has got to stop it!" Stellaraire screamed. "It will kill him!"

"Wait!" Roan caught her arm. "He's not finished yet! Look!"

The chinazell was moving awkwardly sideways, its head held low. Iron Robert's mighty arms circled the lean neck. As it dragged him, he freed one arm, raised it, drove his stony fist into one small, lizard eye. The chinazell bucked and tried to shake free, but Iron Robert held on, twisted, struck at the other eye. The dino reared and plunged desperately, and Iron Robert dropped away, lay on his back. He raised his bloody fists, let them fall back.

The blinded chinazell stopped, squatted; thick blood ran down the triangular face; the primitive mouth opened in voiceless agony. It rose, ran a few yards, dragging its dead

tail, then squatted again, its small cunning gone with its eyes. A murmuring ran through the silent crowd, and someone started a hissing, and at the sound the chinazell leaped up, crashed aimlessly against the thick fence. People scrambled back in fright, screaming, and the panicked beast lunged, brought down a section of the barrier, then turned and blundered back, struck the fence again. There was a blare of noise from the PA system, and Gom Bulj appeared, a vivid, bloated figure in scarlet capes, carrying a heavy power gun. He took aim, blew the head off the maimed beast. It fell over sideways like a mountain, kicked out once, twice, then lay still. The headless neck twitched as blood pumped out to puddle in the dust like black oil.

Gom Bulj walked over to Iron Robert, stood looking at him, still holding the gun in his hand, raising it now

“No!” Stellaraire was round the barrier, running toward the entrepreneur.

“You can’t!” Roan heard her voice, almost drowned now in the angry shouting of the crowd that had seen the two most deadly fighters in the Galaxy maim each other, and still felt cheated because there hadn’t been more blood and agony.

As Roan came up, Gom Bulj was holding up a many-fingered hand.

“As you wish, my dear,” he was rumbling. “I merely thought—”

“Iron Robert’s not just another wounded animal,” Stellaraire flared.

“But of course he is,” Gom Bulj boomed, lighting up a footlong cigar. “What else would you call him? But no matter. Say your farewells or whatever, and then back to work, eh?” He turned away.

“We’ll have to get a crew over here,” Roan said. “He’s too heavy to lift.”

“Leave him where he is,” Gom Bulj said. “Disposal is the local’s problem. And now I really must—”

“Aren’t you even going to try to help?” Roan demanded, standing in front of the bulky businessman.

Gom Bulj waved his cigar, blinking at Roan. “Ah, you Terries,” he chuckled. “So impractical” He rippled quickly to one side and past Roan and the crowd of hurrying circus hands swallowed him up. The audience was melting away. Almost before they were clear the seats were going down, and the crews had started on striking the top. Stellaraire was bending over Iron Robert.

“Good by,” she said sadly. “You fought awfully well, Iron Robert. He was just too big for you.”

The stone giant opened his eyes. “Chinazell . . . tough fighter,” he said in a gritty, labored voice. “Dirty . . . trick . . . gouge . . . eyes.” His craggy face was contorted and his huge chest labored with the effort of his breathing.

“Do you think you could stand?” Roan asked. He gripped a massive arm and pulled, but it was like pulling on the trunk of a fallen tree. “We’ve got to get help,” he said, looking over toward the ship that was visible now where the tent

had been peeled back. A crew was folding up the arena partitions, and a group of busy locals were setting to work to skin out the chinazell. There was no one else near.

"No one will help," Stellaraire said. "They just . . . don't help. And anyway —" She paused, looking at Iron Robert as he lay sprawled out on his back.

"Anyway . . . no use," the giant growled. "Iron Robert bad hurt. Bone in back broken. Legs . . . not move. You go now, Gom Bulj not like you be late."

A bald, thick-necked humanoid came up, cradling Gom Bulj's power gun in his arm.

"Get moving, you two," he ordered. "There's work to be done. Gom Bulj said —"

"Don't you give me orders, Bulugg," Stellaraire snapped at him. "Anyway, we were just going."

"I'm not leaving him here like this," Roan said. He looked helplessly around. The skimmers were lifting a sail-like flap of horny skin from the chinazell, exposing the bone-white flesh of the dino's flank. No one was paying any attention to Iron Robert's plight. No one cared. Beyond the busy throng folding canvas, the animals were moving up the aft gangplank into the ship. There was a holdup as a humped animal decided to sit crossways and someone yelled for the electric goad. Then Roan saw Jumbo heaving over the 'zoo grounds like a ship in a slow sea.

"Get Jumbo," he said to Stellaraire. "I'll find some rope!"

"But, Roan —"

"Do as I tell you!" he snapped. He started away and the guard said, "Hey!" and brought the gun around.

"Shut up, Bulugg!" Stellaraire said. "And don't get any ideas with that gun. You're just supposed to hold it and scare people."

XIII

Roan looped the thick, oily plastic cable under Iron Robert's arms, tied it in a vast knot. Stellaraire was perched on Jumbo's head with her legs hanging down over his gray, furrowed forehead. The pachyderm moved his trunk restlessly as Roan tied the cable to his leather-and-chain harness. Looking toward the ship, Roan saw that the animals were almost all aboard now. The last of the yard wagons were puffing away toward the greenish blaze of the setting sun with their loads. A shrill whistle sounded from the ship.

"Hey, shake it up!" Bulugg called. "That's minus a quarter. Whatta, you wanna get left?"

"Pull, Jumbo!" Stellaraire cried. "Hurry! Pull!"

The elephant took a step and jolted to a stop. He looked back over his shoulder, puzzled, and flapped his ears.

"Pull, Jumbo," Stellaraire called; and Jumbo leaned into his harness and pulled, sensing the necessity of something more than ordinary effort. Iron Robert budged, dragging a furrow in the ground and Jumbo strained, putting his back into it, placing his great feet and thrusting, hauling the dead weight of many

tons across the dusty clay of the empty arena.

At the gangplank, Bulugg jumped at the sound of the shrill last-warning whistle. He waved the gun nervously. There were faces at the port above, looking down curiously.

"Five minutes to the Seal Ship bell," he blustered. "You can leave that hunk of rock right here and get aboard!"

Jumbo put a foot on the wide gangway, started up. A loud-speaker was chanting checklist orders. Gom Bulj appeared above, looking out from the cavernous hold.

"Here, here, what's this?" he belated. He waved his arms, staring around as if outraged. Iron Robert's vast inert weight dragged in the dust like a broken monument, reached the end of the gangplank — and jammed.

Jumbo heaved, the harness taut across his chest. A rivet popped from it and clattered against the hull. Roan ran to the fallen giant, caught up a long pole, levered at the stony shoulder. Jumbo rocked twice, then heaved again — and Iron Robert bumped up on the gangway, grinding along the incline with a noise like a wrecked ship being hauled off a launch pad.

Then they were in the hold and Gom Bulj was rippling his walking tentacles, muttering loudly, and the others were staring and then walking away, bored quickly with Terry foolishness. Stellaraire's lavender powder was caked with sweat and two of her gold-painted, so-carefully tended fingernails were broken off.

But Roan looked at her and found her beautiful, with dust in her ochre eyes and streaks down her face, and her gold tights plastered against her body. The port clanged shut.

The ship's lights came on, and they stood and looked down at the great body they had salvaged.

"Well, there went your chance to run away from the 'zoo,'" Stellaraire sighed. "What are you going to do now? Just leave him here?"

"We'll get the vet to look at him. He'll know how to fix him. You and I will bring him food and scrape him. After a while he'll be all right again."

The girl looked into Roan's face curiously. "Why?" she asked. "He was nothing special to you. You hardly knew him."

"Nobody should be left alone to die because they're hurt," Roan said.

"You crazy, funny Terry," Stellaraire said, and then she was crying, and he held her, wondering if it was because she was a Mule and not a real Terran that she was so hard to understand at times.

For two months Iron Robert lay in the canvas-hung compartment Roan and Stellaraire had arranged for him in the cargo hold, with his lower body encased in massive concrete casts to remind him not to try to move. Every day Roan or the girl went over him with a scraper, and assured him he was as handsome as ever. Now and then Gom Bulj came down to stare at the huge invalid, rap his nine knuckles against the casts and mutter about expense.

When the day came that the vet said the casts could come off, Nugg came down and helped Roan work carefully with a jack hammer, freeing him. When they finished, Iron Robert sat up, then got to his feet and stood, whole again.

"Terry customs strange," he rumbled, looking down at Roan. "Not call you Terry now. Call you Roan. Iron Robert your friend, Roan. Not understand Terry ways, but maybe good ways. Maybe better ways than Iron Robert ever know before."

Gom Bulj appeared, puffing two cigars. He looked Iron Robert over, shaking his head.

"A remarkable thing, young Terry. It appears you were right. A valuable property, and good as new — I hope. I'm a fair being, young Terry, and I have decided to reward you. Henceforth, you may consider the Mule, Stellaraire, as your personal concubine, for your exclusive use — except when I have important Terry-type guests, of course."

"She's not yours to give away," Roan said sharply.

"Eh? What's that, not mine?" Gom Bulj blinked at Roan. "Why I paid —"

"No one owns Stellaraire."

"See here, my lad, you'd best remember who it is you're addressing! Are you forgetting I could have you trussed up in leathers and flogged for a week?"

"No," Iron Robert rumbled. "No one lay hand on Roan, Gom Bulj. Iron Robert kill any being that try. Even you."

"Here!" Gom Bulj back-pedaled, staring around wildly. "What's the

cosmos coming to? Am I to be threatened by my own property?"

"Iron Robert not property," the giant rumbled. "Iron Robert of royal ferrous strain, and belong to no being. And Roan my friend. Tell all crew, Roan friend to Iron Robert."

"And since you can't give me away," Stellaraire put in, "Roan still has a reward coming. I think it's time you gave him full freak status and started paying him. And he should be freed from all duties except his high-wire act. And he should eat in the Owner's Mess, with the other stars."

"Why, why —" Gom Bulj stutered. But in the end he agreed and hurried away, still muttering to himself.

XIV

There had been a party celebrating Iron Robert's successful defense of his title against a Fire-saber from Deeb. Roan had drunk too much and not left Stellaraire until almost ship-down. Now he struggled out of a dream in which he fought against iron arms that closed on him, hearing the beloved voice that called by the arena gate.

His eyes were open now. He could hear his own breath rasping in his throat, and the voice was the wailing of a siren, but the crushing weight still held him, flat on his back with the edge of the bunk cutting into his arm, and a wrinkle in the blanket under him like a sword on edge. Far away, bells clanged, and a tiny glow grew be-

hind the black glass disk above the cabin door, swelling into a baleful red that flashed on, off, on . . .

Roan moved, dragged an arm like an ironwood log across his body, turned under the massive pressure and fell with stunning violence to the floor from the bunk.

Lying on his face, he felt the deep vibration through the deck-plates. The engines were running—here in deep space, four parsecs from the nearest system!

He rose to his feet, his bones creaking under the massive acceleration—three gravities at least. Far away, over the bellow of the engines, the clang of bells, the whine of the siren, he thought he heard the sound of Jumbo's trumpeting.

He made his way across the room, into the corridor, dragging feet like anchors, while the noise swelled, crimson lights screamed red alarm, far-away voices called. At the end of the corridor the lift door waited, open. Inside, he reached to the control panel, pressed the button for the menageries deck. For a moment, magically, the weight went away and he drew a breath. Then massive blackness clamped down while tiny red lights whirled.

He was lying on the floor of the car, smelling the salty sea-smell of blood. Through the open door under the blue-white glare of the ceiling, he saw the long white corridor, the barred doors. Crawling again, he made his way along the passage, feeling the slickness underfoot, seeing how the pattern spread from under the doors, blackish red and harsh green mingling in a glis-

tening film that trembled in a geometric resonance pattern.

All around him, over the mind-filling Niagara of the engines, there were bellows, groans, grunts of final agony. Roan went on, not looking into the cages as he passed them one by one, seeing the film of blood dance, spreading.

The high, barred door of Jumbo's stall was bulged outward, one two-inch steel rod sprung from its socket. Behind it, the elephant lay, blinded, ribs broken, one tusk snapped off short. Blood flowed from the open mouth, from under the closed eyelids. Roan could see the animal's massive side rise in a tortured heave as it struggled to breathe.

"Jumbo!" he choked.

The heavy trunk groped toward him. The great legs stirred; a moan rumbled from the crushed chest.

Roan looked at the power rifle clamped in a bracket beside the stall door. He pulled it free, checked the charge, raised it against the relentless pull, aimed between the closed and bloody eyes, and pressed the firing stud.

Alarms jangled monotonously in the carpeted corridor outside the quarters of Gom Bulj. Roan dragged leaden feet past the fallen body of an Ythcan, lying with one three-fingered hand outstretched toward the door of the patron's apartment.

Inside, Gom Bulj lay sprawled, his body crushed against the floor, his eyes bulging from the pressure. He moved feebly as Roan came

to him and went heavily down to hands and knees.

"Why are you . . . killing us all . . . Gom Bulj? Roan asked, then stopped to breathe.

"No . . ." the entrepreneur's voice was a breathless wheeze. "Not me . . . at . . . all . . . young Terry." He drew a hoarse breath. "Old battle . . . reflex . . . circuits . . . triggered . . . somehow. Maximum acceleration . . . three . . . standard . . . gee."

"Why?"

"Ah, why indeed . . . young Terry . . ."

"What . . . can we do?"

"It's . . . too bad . . . too bad, young Terry. No help for us. The time has come . . . to terminate . . . the biological processes . . ."

"You mean . . . die?"

"When the . . . environment becomes . . . hostile . . . a quick demise . . . is greatly . . . to be desired."

"I want to live. Tell . . . me what to do."

Gom Bulj's massive head seemed to sink even deeper into the compressed bulk of his body. "Self-preservation . . . an interesting . . . concept. A pity . . . we won't have . . . the opportunity . . . to discuss . . . it."

"What can I do, Gom Bulj?"

Roan reached to the bulbous body, gripped a thick arm. "I have . . . to try . . ."

"I suggest . . . you suspend . . . respiration. Five minutes . . . should do the trick . . . As for me . . . I may thrash a bit . . . but pay . . . no attention . . ."

"I'll turn off the engines," Roan choked. "How?"

"No use . . . young Terry. Too far. Even now . . . blood runs . . . from your nostrils."

"Tell me what to do."

"On the war deck . . ." Gom Bulj gasped. "Command . . . control panel. A lever — painted white . . . But . . . you can't."

"I'll try," Roan said.

It was an interminable time later, and Roan's hands and knees left red marks against the gray decking as he pulled himself across the raised threshold of the door which a red glare-panel warned: BATTLE CONTROL — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Across the dusty room, the dead gray of the great screens had changed to vivid green-white on panels alive now with dancing jewel-lights. A dark shape moved on the master screen. Below, mass and proximity gauges trembled; numbers appeared and faded on the ground-glass dials. Roan pulled himself to the padded Fire Controller's seat, spelled out the symbols flashing in blue: IFF NEGATIVE.

A yellow light blinked suddenly in the center of the panel. Red letters appeared on the screen, spelling out words in archaic Universal:

MAIN BATTERIES ARMED

The words faded, changed:

MAIN BATTERIES FIRE, TEN SECONDS ALERT.

The auxiliary panels blinked from yellow to red to white.

FIRE ALL, the panel spelled out.

Through the seat, Roan felt a

tremor run through the ship, briefly rattling a loose bolt in the panel. Before him, the banked controls sparkled row on row, telltale lights blinking insistently, gauges producing readings, relays closing, clicking, as the robot panel monitored the action. Roan's eyes blinked back haze, searching for the white-painted switch.

It was there, just to the right of the baleful crimson dial lettered MAIN RADAR — TRACKING. He reached out, forcing his heavy hand up, grasped the smooth lever, threw it from AUTO to MANUAL.

The war lights blinked off. He searched the instruments before him, found a notched handle lettered EMERGENCY ACCELERATION, threw it to ZERO.

A thousand noises growled down to silence. Roan seemed to float upward from the chair as the pressure dropped to the ship-normal half gee. In the stillness, metal popped and groaned, readjusting to the reduced stresses. Distantly someone screamed, again and again.

Roan thought suddenly of Stellaraire, alone in her cabin.

He ran, leaping down the companionways, along to her door. It stood ajar. He pushed it wide —

With a sound like the clap of gigantic hands, the room exploded in his face.

He was a dust mote, floating in a brassy sky where thunder rolled, remote and ominous. Somewhere, someone called to him, and he would have answered, but his voice was choked with smoke as

thick as syrup. He fought to clear it, and then his eyes were open and he saw broken metal, the fragments of a flower dish and of a yellow blossom, and a white hand, limp, the fingers curled.

He was on his feet, choking in an acrid reek of burnt metal, throwing aside a shattered chair, heaving at a fallen fragment of paneling, coughing as dust boiled up from the rubble of insulation, charred cloth, smashed glass and wood and plastic.

She lay on her back, her eyes closed, her face unmarked. Her platinum hair swirled across her forehead.

"Stellaraire!" He knelt, feeling scorching heat against his face, brushing away dust, splinters, paper.

The duralloy beam lay across her pelvis, pinning her tight. Roan felt his throat close as he gripped the cold metal, strained at it, felt its massive inertia. On his knees, he wrapped his arms around the metal section, heaved back until the room swam red.

The odor of smoke was stronger now. Roan stood, hearing the ringing in his head, seeing the pale yellow flames that licked at scattered paper and torn cloth. Twisted wires and broken conduits sagged from the broken wall. Water trickled from a ruptured pipe, and beside it a stream of sharp-odored liquid poured down.

The little colored fish from the tank lay stiff on the floor.

Too late, Roan whirled, threw a quilt over the burning paper. With a *whoosh!* the coolant fluid ignited.

Now red fire boiled black smoke, and a wave of heat struck Roan's face like a whip. He seized up a blanket, thrust it against the broken water line, then threw the wet cloth over Stellaraire's body. It hissed when it touched the floor beside her. He threw himself down, not noticing the searing pain against his back, braced his feet, set his shoulders against the beam, and pushed. It was like pushing at a granite cliff. The air he breathed burned in his throat.

There was a fallen length of duralloy channel under his hand. He thrust it under the beam, levering until the shirt split across his back. The channel buckled. When he tossed it aside, there were yellowish-white burns on his palms.

Stellaraire's hair was burning, the platinum-gold strands blackening and curling. Roan stumbled to the door, out into a smoke-blinded corridor. He would find Iron Robert, and together they would free Stellaraire . . .

XV

In the thick-rugged chamber of Gom Bulj, the entrepreneur lay where Roan had left him, in a puddle of blood, heavy lids half-closed over dull eyes.

"You succeeded, young Terry," he said, his voice a thin echo of its old rumble. "Too late for me, I fear."

Roan swayed on his feet. "Where is Iron Robert, Gom Bulj?"

"Alas, I don't know." The dull eyes turned to Roan's hand.

"You are burned, poor lad. Now you will die, there's a clever boy. Too bad. I had great ambition for you, young Terry. One day . . . I would have billed you . . . as the galaxy's greatest freak."

"It's Stellaraire," Roan said, talking now through a black mist that closed over tighter, ever tighter. "I need Iron Robert."

A wall annunciator crackled and a strange voice spoke: "Attention all hands! Assemble in the main dining hall at once! Bring no weapons! Disobedience is death!"

"What voice is that?" Gom Bulj said faintly. "Are we boarded then?"

Roan made his mind work. "I saw a ship," he said, "on the screens. We fired—and they fired back. I think they won."

"Yes," Gom Bulj blinked heavy lids. "I knew it. I felt the shocks. Alas, in her day *Belshazzar* was a mighty dreadnought of the Empire. But now she has fought her last action." His voice faded to a whisper.

"What should I do, Gom Bulj?" Roan cried.

The heavy body stirred; a last hoarse breath sighed out.

Roan looked down at the still body.

"Gom Bulj is dead," he said aloud. "Jumbo is dead . . . and . . . and . . ."

He whirled, ran into the corridor and toward the dining hall.

All around, sounds of destruction echoed along metal halls. A muffled blast shook the deck plates

under foot. Harsh odors of hot metal and things that burned caught at Roan's throat. He came to the arched entry over the two wide steps leading down to the broad room with its threadbare eternon carpets and blackened gilt fixtures, and stopped, seeing overturned tables, huddled bodies, and standing among them, legs braced wide, cradling weapons, five creatures in coats covered with tight-curved hair.

"Help me!" Roan called.

The nearest creature whirled, swung his weapon around in an easy gesture. There were horns on his head, and his eyes were black stones.

A big creature in a radiation mask stepped to the horned creature's side, knocked the weapon aside, then turned the power pistol gripped in his big fists on Roan, looked him over through the slits in the mask.

"Don't burn this one, Czack. Can't you see he's a Terry?"

"To the pit with Terries," the other snarled — but he lowered his gun.

"Stellaraire," Roan said. Help me."

The tall creature holstered a pistol and took off the mask. Roan looked into wide gray eyes, saw the thin nose, the edge of white teeth between the thin lips.

Roan stared.

"You look like pretty pure stock, kid," the tall Man said. "Where you from?"

"You're a Terran," Roan said. "Help me! The fire —"

The horned creature stepped

close, swung a wide hand against Roan's head. He staggered; the room rang.

"Hands off the kid," the Man said. Roan shook his head, blinking back a blurring film.

"But I asked you a question, kid. Henry Dread doesn't ask twice." The pistol was still centered on Roan's chest.

Roan turned, started back up the steps. A horned humanoid blocked his way, swinging a slow blow that Roan leaned aside from.

"Get out of my way," Roan said. "I have to find Iron Robert!"

"Hold it." Henry Dread had both guns in his hand now, and he turned to the arched door way. A tall, green-skinned Ythcan stood at the top of the two steps. Beside Roan, Czack brought his power rifle up. There was a deafening *ba-wam*; and a flicker of blue light. The Ythcan spun back, fell, kicked and lay still.

"See if there's any more," Henry Dread snapped. A hair-coated creature with hunched shoulders and a bald skull moved past Roan, sprang up the steps. Beyond him, Roan saw a wide silhouette looming against the corridor's glare.

"Iron Robert!" Roan shouted. "Run!"

Facing Iron Robert, the bald creature fired at point-blank range. Roan saw the flicker of blue light that played for an instant against Iron Robert's broad chest, heard a deep grunt; then Iron Robert took two steps, plucked the bald one from the floor, whirled him high and threw him against the wall. He re-

bounded, lay utterly still, his face oddly flattened, blood dribbling from his ear.

"Stand clear," Henry Dread barked. "My blasters will take him."

Roan struck with the edge of his hand at the burned one's arm, caught the power rifle as it fell, swiveled on Henry Dread.

"Don't shoot him!" Roan said.

Iron Robert stood, his eyes moving from one to another of the six weapons aimed at him. Beside Roan, the horned creature snarled. "What are you waiting for? Kill him!"

Henry Dread looked at Roan. He turned slowly, bringing his guns around to aim at Roan's chest.

"Drop it, kid."

"No," Roan said.

The Man's mouth twitched. There was sweat on his forehead. "Don't try me, kid. I'm supposed to be fast — and you're covered. Now let the gun down nice."

"Roan," Iron Robert's deep voice rumbled. "I kill this one?" He took a step forward toward Henry Dread. Six guns tracked him.

"No, Iron Robert. Go to Stellar-
aire — quickly!"

"I kill him easy," Iron Robert said. "Have only two small guns."

"Help Stellaraire, Iron Robert!" Roan shouted. "Do as I tell you!"

Standing straight, Roan forced himself not to think about Stellaraire or about the burns on his hands and body, or about the smell of charred flesh, but only about holding the gun aimed at the pirate's chest. And Iron Robert understood and he turned and went.

"Be smart, kid," Henry Dread said between gritted teeth. "Drop it, before I have to burn you." He was tall and solid, with a scarred face and thick fingers. He stood, two guns aimed at Roan, tense and ready, and the sweat trickled down his face.

"Try it," Roan said.

Henry Dread's mouth twisted in a sort of smile. "Yeah, you're fast, kid. Nobody ever took a gun away from Czack like that before. I don't think he likes you for it."

"Why don't you kill the muck-grub!" The horned one stood in a half-crouch, eyes on Roan.

"Go ahead, jump him, Czack. Even if I put two through the head, I'll bet you a keg he'd nail you on the way down. Want to risk it?"

The other answered in an incomprehensible language. Henry Dread barked an order. His creatures stirred; two filed carefully past Roan and out into the corridor.

"Don't let them try to hurt Iron Robert," Roan said. "If he doesn't come back, I'll shoot you."

The pirate licked his lips, his eyes on Roan's. "What's that walking Bolo to you, kid? You're human!"

"He's my friend."

"Friends with a Geek?" Henry Dread sneered.

"Why are you killing everyone?"

"This tub fired on me first — not that my screens can't handle museum pieces like you tossed at us." The Man's eyes narrowed. "Nobody lobs one into Henry Dread and gets away with it."

"You killed Jumbo — and Gom

Bulj — and maybe . . .” his voice broke.

“Don’t take it so hard, kid. With me it’s business. I needed fuel and ammo . . .” The voice seemed to fade and swell. Roan held his eyes open, leaning against the wall just slightly, holding the gun steady.

“. . . this tub happened along. That’s life.”

There was a movement in the corridor behind Henry Dread. Iron Robert stepped into view. Behind him, a hair-coated creature stepped from a door, brought up a gun —

Roan swiveled and fired, and was back covering Henry Dread’s belt buckle in a movement quicker than the eye could follow. The gunner fell and lay still.

“Wait there, Iron Robert,” Roan called.

The big Man lowered his pistols, tossed them aside. He looked shaken. “Holding these things is likely to be dangerous,” he said. “Kid, you move like a fire lizard on Sunside. But you’re burned pretty bad. You need to have my medic take a look at you. Now, just aim that blaster off-side, so no accidents happen, and we’ll talk this thing over.”

Roan held the rifle steady, listening to the surging in his head. In the doorway, Iron Robert stood and waited.

“Look, kid, you put the gun down, and I’ll guarantee you safe conduct. You and the one-man task force, too. You can’t hold the iron on me forever.”

Roan looked at the Man’s eyes. They were steady on his.

“Well you give me your word as a Man?” Roan asked.

The Man stared at him. “Sure, kid.” He glanced at Czack and the others.

“You all heard what he said, didn’t you?” he said flatly.

Roan lowered the rifle. Czack moved in, snatched it away, brought it up and around —

Henry Dread took a step, slammed a gnarled fist against the horned head. Czack dropped the rifle and spun against the wall. Henry Dread massaged his fist. “The slob didn’t think I meant it.” He looked at Roan. “I guess us Men got to stick together, eh, kid?” He bent and scooped up a gun. Iron Robert came toward him, a blackish stain on his shoulder.

“Shall I kill this one now?” he rumbled.

“No. Iron Robert . . . Stellaraire . . .” Roan leaned against the wall, feeling the dizziness rising. Iron Robert caught him.

“No, Roan,” The great ugly head shook slowly. “The Fair One is gone away, now. Now she dances for the Gods in their high place, above all sorrow.” The deep voice seemed to come from far away.

“Take Roan to your doctors, Man!”

“Yeah — the kid’s in bad shape. You better come too, big boy. You’re a tough one. You took a blaster on half-charge at five paces, and you’re still walking and ready to eat ’em alive. Maybe I can use a Geek like you at that.”

They were alien hands, gentle but impersonally insistent. They poked and prodded with a feel of slick, scaly hide, and hard, too-thin fingers. There was no comfort in alien hands. They weren't like Stel-laraire's hands, warm and soft and — human.

Roan moved to thrust the hands away, and searing pain flashed through his body. He gasped, not at the bodily agony but at the sudden vivid remembrance of hands that would not touch him again, and white-gold hair, and smiling ochre eyes.

"He wakes," a reedy voice said. "A tenacious organism. Not like some of these beings, who seem almost to wish to flee to the long darkness. I feel their souls tremble and shrink under my hands, and they are gone like a snuffed candle. But not this one."

"Make Roan live, Man-doctor," Iron Robert's basso rumbled. "Make Roan live strong."

"Yes, yes. Stay back, you great ugly lout. Now, the wounds are clean. And I have here . . ." There was a sound of rummaging.

"Aha! Now, we'll see."

Roan stiffened at a sensation like molten lead poured across his chest. He was aware of white lights glaring through his eyelids. He moaned.

"Eh, he feels it now. Lie easily, Terran. It is only pain."

"You make pain go away, Man-doctor!"

"I've yearned for a proper patient for these medicines, ugly giant! A

fabulous pharmacopeia, all made for Terrans ages dead. Long have I saved them. Henry Dread likes to fancy his rogues have human blood, but my knives know all their secrets. Half-castes, mutants, humanoid trash! Now, this lad's different. He's almost a textbook example of your pure Terry stock. A rare creature."

The thin voice rambled on, and the hands probed and the fire touched, flamed and faded into a dull numbness. Roan let out a long breath and felt drugged drowsiness creeping over him like warm water rising in a tub.

"This skin," the voice went on, far away now. "The texture! How nicely the blade slides through it! And the color. See, look at this illustration in my book."

"Does he sleep, Man-doctor? Or —?"

"He only sleeps, monster. Faugh, I'm pleased I have no need to take a scalpel to that horny hide of yours. Now get back. I've two hours of close work ahead, and no need of your rusty bulk to hinder me."

It was many hours later. Roan opened his eyes and by a faint light filtering through a barred transom saw the massive silhouette beside him.

"Iron Robert." Roan's voice was a weak croak.

"You wake now, Roan. You sleep, good. Man-doctor small foolish creature, but he fix you good, Roan."

"I should have shot him, Iron Robert."

"No, Roan. He fix you."

"I mean the Man. He killed Stellaraire. I should have killed him. You should have smashed them, smashed their ship."

"Then Roan and Iron Robert die, too, Roan. Too soon to die for you. Too many strange things to see yet, too many places still to go. Long life ahead for you still, Roan."

"Not for me. I'm only a Terry freak, and I'm almost dead already. Dad told me. Humans only have time to start living and they die. And living's no fun. Not any more."

"Sure, lots of fun still to come, Roan. Many great jugs to drink, and far suns to see; many females to take, and enemies to kill, and whole universes to see and smell and taste. Plenty time to be dead after."

"All my friends are dead. And Stellaraire. . ."

"I still alive, Roan." Iron Robert moved and Roan heard a soft metallic clash. "Iron Robert your friend, sure."

Roan raised up on one elbow, ignoring a tearing sensation in his bandaged arm, peering in the dim light. Massive chains lay across Iron Robert's knees, and his wrists were circled by shackles of finger-thick metal.

"Iron Robert — you're chained to the wall!"

"Sure. Henry Dread scared of me, you bet. I let him put chains on me if he send Man-doctor to you."

Roan pushed himself upright, ignoring the pulse that started up, drumming in his temples. He swung his feet heavily to the floor. A blackness filled with whirling lights

swelled to fill the room and he gripped the edge of the bunk, waiting for it to go away.

"I'll make him take them off," he heard himself saying. "I'll make him. It was a Man to Man pact."

"No, Roan, you lie down! Bad for you to move now."

"I don't want to lie down. Call him. Call Henry Dread!"

"Roan! You got to do like Man-doctor say, otherwise you get bad sick."

Roan was on his feet, feeling the floor sway and tilt under him.

"Henry Dread," he called, hearing the words emerge as a croak.

"Wait, Roan. Somebody come."

There were metallic sounds in the corridor. A splash of light glared suddenly; long shadows crouched away from the door that swung wide, and a tall, broad figure stood squinting into the room.

"You yelling for me, were you, boy? Hey — on your feet already?"

"You chained Iron Robert. You didn't keep your word."

"Henry Dread always keeps his word, you!" The Man's wide shape seemed to blur; Roan blinked hard, wavered, caught himself.

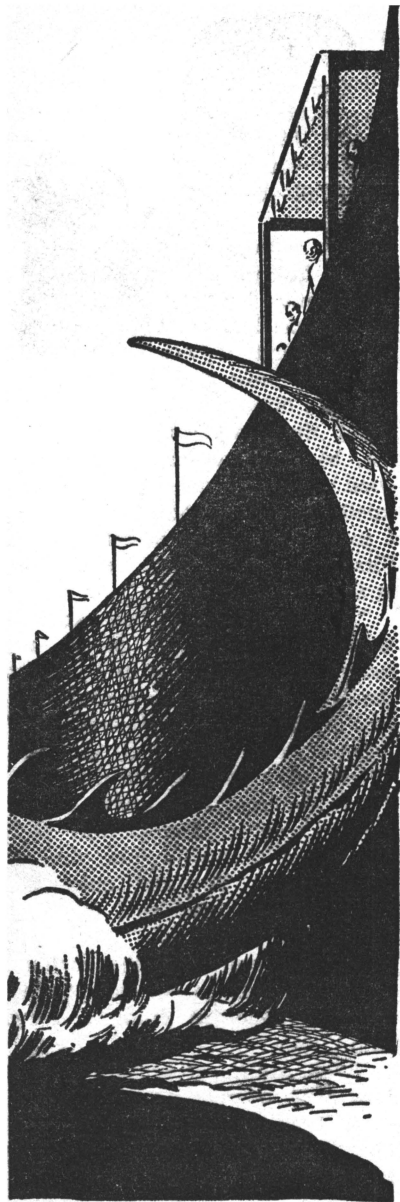
"Unchain him. He's my friend!"

"You better crawl back in that bunk, boy. You're raving! I'm captain aboard this vessel; you're a slave of war. I let the sawbones patch you up, but don't let it go to your head."

Roan advanced toward Henry Dread on uncertain feet.

"Unchain him, liar! Keep your word, murderer!"





Henry Dread's eyes narrowed. "Why, you lousy little —"

Roan lunged, and Henry Dread leaped back, jerked his pistol from his hip holster and aimed it. Iron Robert came to his feet in a clash of chain.

"I'm aiming this right between your eyes, Terry boy," Henry said between his teeth. "One more step, and so help me I burn you down."

"I don't care about that," Roan said, taking a step. "That isn't anything."

"No, Roan!" Iron Robert boomed. "You do like Henry Dread say now, Roan!"

Roan tried to take another step, but the floor tilted and he gritted his teeth, and willed himself not to fall, willed the blackness to retreat.

"I wear chains for you, Roan. You do this for me."

"Kid, you're crazy!" Henry Dread's voice barked. "You'll kill yourself!"

"You wait, Roan," Iron Robert said. "Later, when you get well, then you have chance to kill this one."

Henry Dread laughed, a harsh snarl. "Yeah, listen to your sidekick, kid. You kill me when you feel better."

Then the shadows moved and the light narrowed down and was gone in a clang of metal, and Roan sank down, groped, found the bed, fell across it.

"He's a Man, Iron Robert. A Terry — almost like me. But he's not like Dad said the Terries were."

"Henry Dread mighty scared

Man, Roan," Iron Robert rumbled softly. "And maybe he not such mean man like he make out. He come plenty quick, first time you call. Maybe Henry Dread wait outside, hope you call his name. Maybe Henry Dread plenty lonely Man, Roan."

The bars welded across the door frame of the warhead storage room were as thick as Roan's wrist and close together. He leaned on the mop and looked through the bars at Iron Robert, who sat on a duralloy slab that sagged under his weight, almost invisible in the shadows of the lightless cell.

"The Minid they call Snagglehead is the worst," Roan said. "He's about seven feet tall and he smells like a Charon's mud-hive. Yesterday he tripped me and I almost fell down the aft companionway."

Iron Robert's chains clanked. Roan could see his small eyes gleam. "You be careful, Roan. You don't let riff-raff get you mad. You do like I say. Wait."

"I don't want to wait. Why should I wait?"

"You wait cause you got plenty bad burns, not healed up yet. You want to get crippled for life? You wait, don't pay mind to anybody teases you."

"I do mind, though. I know which ones I'm going to kill first, just as soon as —"

"Roan, you stop that fool talk! You remember how you promise to do like I say."

"I'll keep my promise. Just because Henry Dread's word is no

good doesn't mean I'm a promise-breaker, too."

"You wait a minute, Roan. You too much angry against Henry Dread. He keep promise, all right. He say you and me, he won't kill us. Well—both of us alive, all right."

"I'm going to tell him if he doesn't free you. I'll steal a gun the first chance I get and kill him."

"You do that, you big fool. Roan. I don't mind sit here in dark, rest. Not much rest for me, long time. I sit and think about old days, back home, time Iron Robert young being, have plenty fun. I got pretty good eidetic recall, remember all smells, tastes, sounds, faces. Sure, I got plenty good memories, Roan. First time I got time really look at them good."

"You're stronger than any of them." Roan took a breath and made his voice angry to cover up the break. "You let them chain you, you big dumb hunk of scrap-iron!"

Iron Robert rumbled a laugh. "Plenty easy sit here with chains on. Tough for you, Roan, have to stay outside and let Snagglehead push you round. But you show you got brains, Roan. You stay quiet, you wait. One day you heal up good, then maybe us see."

Roan looked along the corridor. A watch changed as three Minid crewmen emerged from a cargo hold.

"Well, you'll get a chance to see how they operate now, Iron Robert." Roan felt his throat turn dry. "You'll see how much good ignoring them does."

"Okay, Roan, you go now, quick. Don't have to wait for herd of mud-pigs."

"I'll take it without hitting back," Roan said between his teeth. "But I won't run from them, I don't care what you say." He began working the mop, eyes on the floor.

The leading crewman hooked his thumbs in his sagging pistol belt and started toward Roan, laying a trail of oily sandal-prints across the shiny expanse of freshly scrubbed floor. He had thick bowed legs and a hairless skull and there was a wide gap in the row of spade-shaped bluish teeth he was showing in what might have been a grin. Three loops of rough-cut yellow jewels hung against a grimy gold-braided tunic. He stopped two yards from Roan, plucked a dope-stick from a breast pocket, bit off the cap and spat it on the floor, sniffed it appreciatively with wide nostrils and said:

"Hey, boys, looky what's here." He pointed with the dopestick, his wide mouth forming a loose-lipped O of mock amazement. "What is it, a itty-bitty baby boy playin' like a growed-up Geek?"

"Now, it's a cute little pansy-pants, talking to its sweety through the bars," a second crewman offered. "It thinks that rusted-out freak is mighty sexy."

"Hey, don't talk dirty in front of it," another said. "It might learn a dirty word and use it in front of its mama and get 'panked.'"

"Always thought old Henry wasn't as tough as some thought," Snaggle-head stated. "Now he's got hisself a play-dolly." He chuckled, a

sound like gas escaping from a sewer. "Next thing, Old Cap'n get hisself a little Terry bitch and start in breedin' 'em." He haw-hawed, hawked, spat on the floor at Roan's feet. Roan stopped mopping, stood looking at the wide mural on the lounge wall, with its audiovision of a rolling seascape. In the silence the crash and hiss of breakers was loud. Snaggle-head chuckled again, took a final puff and dropped the dopestick on the floor.

". . . but I notice he still don't trust him far! not since he held that gun on his belt buckle. I think his little pet plumb scared him that time."

Casually, Roan slapped the wet mop across Snaggle-head's sandal. The big crewman jumped back with a yell, stamping his wet foot against the deck. The grin had vanished from the loose mouth; the other crewmen watched with bright, interested eyes. Snaggle-head drew his massive head down close to his burly shoulders. His mouth was open, his brow creased in a black frown.

Ignoring him, Roan thrust the wet end of the mop into the filter unit, watched the rollers close and open, went on with his mopping.

Snaggle-head stepped in front of him; his grimy finger prodded Roan's chest. Roan looked into the over-sized face, spotted here and there with coarse hairs sprouting from inflamed warty blemishes.

"What you think you're lookin' at, punk?"

"It looks like the hind end of a

crundle-beast," Roan said clearly. "Only hairier."

The coarse face tightened; the finger jabbed again, hard. "You take a lot of chances, softy!"

"Whatever it is, "I'll remember it," Roan continued. "Some day I'll put my foot in it."

Snaggle-head's eyes narrowed. "It's a mean-talking one," he said softly. "Too bad it ain't got the guts to back up the talk." The heavy hand swung in a short arc, slammed Roan's head against the metal bulk-head. He staggered, caught himself with the unbandaged arm, shook his head to clear it.

"Is that . . . the best you can do?" he asked blurrily. "I guess you're scared to get too rough. There's only three of you."

The crewman shook clawed hands, palms up, under Roan's nose.

"One of these days, pansy, I'll put the thumbs in, where it counts. I'll put 'em in till the blood squirts."

Roan looked into the pale eyes. "You will, eh? You think Henry Dread will let you?"

The wide mouth dropped open. The pasty face turned a dull pink. "Whatta I care about Henry Dread? As soon as I get ready to croak you, rube, you'll know it — and to the Nine Hells with Henry Dread!"

"Careful," Roan said, nodding toward the others. "They're listening."

"Huh?" The heavy head swiveled quickly to look at the two crewmen. They looked at the ceiling.

"All right, you slobs. Let's get moving. We ain't got all day to gab

with sissy-britches here." The two filed past in silence.

"I'll get to you later, cull," the lead crewman grated.

"Roan," Iron Robert's voice rumbled from the cell. "You got to learn keep mouth shut some-times. That space-rat hurt you much?"

"He didn't hurt me." Roan's face was white in the gloom.

"You not be so dumb, you not talk back, you don't get hit."

"It's worth it."

"Maybe some day he get really mad, hit too hard."

"He hasn't got much of a punch."

"Maybe he got better punch than you think. Maybe what you said not so far off true."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe Henry Dread better friend than you think, Roan. I think he tell all Gooks and Geeks, hands off Human boy. I think he have plans in mind for you, Roan."

XVII

The surgeon clicked his lipless mandibles, peeling off the protective film under which the burns on Roan's shoulder and arm had been healing for many weeks.

"Eh, pretty, very pretty! Pink and new as a fresh-hatched suckling! There'll be no scars to mar that smooth hide!"

"Ouch!" Roan said. "That hurts."

"Ignore it, youngling," the surgeon said absently, working Roan's elbow joint. He nodded to himself, tried the wrist, then the fingers.

"All limber enough; now raise

your limb here." He indicated shoulder level. Roan lifted his arm, wincing. The surgeon's horny fingers went to the shoulder joint, prodding and kneading.

"No loss of tone there," the surgeon muttered. "Bend over, stretch your back."

Roan bent, twisted, working the shoulder, stretching the newly healed burns. Sweat popped out on his forehead.

"At first it may feel as though the skin is tearing open," the surgeon said. "But it's nothing."

Roan straightened. "I'll try to remember that."

The surgeon was nodding, closing his instrument case. "You'll soon regain full use of the limb. Meanwhile, the hide is tender, and there'll be a certain stiffness in the joints."

"Can I — ah — do heavy work now?"

"In moderation. But take care. I've no wish to see my prize exhibit damaged." The surgeon rubbed his hard hands together with a chirruping sound. "Wait until Henry Dread sees this," he cackled. "Calls me a Geek, does he? Threatens to put me out the airlock, eh? But where would he ever find another surgeon of my skill?" He darted a final, sharp glance of approval at Roan and was gone.

Roan pulled his tunic over his head, buckled his belt in place and stretched his arms gingerly. There was a wide header over the doorway. He went to it, grasped it and pulled himself up carefully. The sensation reminded him of a Charon he had seen stripping hide from a

dead gracyl . . . but the injured arm held his weight.

He dropped back and went out into the corridor. There was a broken packing case in a reclamation bin in the corner. Roan wrench-ed a three-foot length of tough, blackish inch-thick wood from it. He looked toward the bright-lit intersection of the main concourse. A steward in soiled whites waddled past on bowed legs, holding a tray up on a stumpy arm. Henry Dread and his officers could be drinking in the wardroom now. It was as good a time as any.

Roan turned and followed the dull red indicator lights toward the lower decks.

He was in a narrow corridor ill-lit by grimed-over glare panels. Voices yammered nearby: shouts, snarls, a drunken song, a bellow of anger. The third watch break hour was underway in the crew quarters.

Roan hefted the skrilwood club. It was satisfactorily heavy.

Feet clumped in the cross-corridor ten feet away. Roan ducked into a side passage, flattened himself, watched two round-backed barrel-chested humanoids high-step past on unshod three-toed feet, bells tied to their leg lacings jingling at each step. When they had passed, he emerged, following the tiny green numbers that glowed over doors, found one larger than the others.

Roan listened at the door; there was a dull mumble of voices. He slid the panel aside, stepped in.

It was a barracks, and he wrinkled his nose at the thick fudgy

odor of unwashed bedding, alien bodies, spilled wine, decay. A narrow, littered passage led between high bunks. A dull-eyed Chronid looked up at him from an unkempt bed. Roan went past, stepped over scattered boots, empty bottles, a pair of six-toed feet in tattered socks sprawling from a rump-sprung canvas chair. Halfway along the room, four large Minids crouched on facing benches, bald heads together.

They looked up. One of them was Snaggle-head.

He gaped; then his wide lips stretched in a cold grin. He thrust aside a leather wine mug, wiped his mouth with the back of a thick, square hand, got to his feet. He reached behind his back, brought out a knife with an eighteen-inch blade, whetted it across his bare forearm.

"Well, looky what's got loose from its string," he started.

"Don't talk," Roan said. "Fight." He stepped in and fainted with the club and Snaggle-head stepped heavily back, snorting laughter.

"Hey, looks like Baby-face got hold of some strong sugarmush." He looked around at the watchers. "What'll we do with him, fellers?"

But Roan's club was whistling and Snaggle-head jerked back with a yell as the wood smacked solidly against his ribs. He brandished the knife, leaped across a fallen bench; Roan whirled aside, slammed the club hard against the Minid's head. The crewman stumbled, roaring, rounded on Roan, a line of thick blackish blood inching down his leathery neck. He lunged again and

Roan stepped back and brought the club down square across the top of the bald skull. Snaggle-head wheeled, kicked the bench aside, took up a stance with his feet wide, back bent, arms spread, the blade held across his body. He dashed blood away from his eyes.

"Poundin' my head with that macaroni-stick won't buy you nothin, Terry," he grated. His mouth was set in a blue-toothed grin. "I'm coming to get you now!"

He charged, and Roan watched the blade swing toward him in a sweeping slash. At the last moment he leaned aside, pivoted and struck down at the Minid's collar-bone. The skirlwood club hit with a sound like an oak branch breaking. Snaggle-head yowled and grabbed for his shoulder, spinning away from Roan; his face twisted as he brought the knife up, transferred it with a toss to his left hand.

"Now I kill you, Terry!"

"You'd better," Roan said, breathing hard. "Because if you don't, I'm going to kill you." Roan moved in, aware of a layer of blue smoke in the muggy air, wide eyes in big Minid faces, the flat shine of Chronid faces, the distant putter of a ventilator fan, a puddle of spilled beer under the fallen bench, a smear of dark blood across Snaggle-head's cheek. The Minid stood his ground, the knife held before him, its point toward Roan. Roan circled, struck with the club at the knife. The Minid was slow: the blade clattered from the skinned hand, and Roan brought the heavy bludgeon up.

His foot skidded in spilled beer.

He was down, and Snagglehead was over him, his wide face twisting in a grimace of triumph. The big hands seemed to descend almost casually.

Roan threw himself aside, but there were feet and a fallen bench, and the hands clamped on him, biting like grapple-hooks, and gathering him into a strangling embrace.

He kicked, futile blows against a leg like a tree-trunk, hearing the Minid's breath rasp, smelling the chemical reek of Minid blood and Minid hide, and then the arms, thick as Roan's thigh, tightened, and Roan's breath went out in a gasp and the smoke and the faces blurred...

“Let him breathe a little,” Snaggle-head was saying. “Then we'll see how good his eyeballs are hooked on. Then maybe we'll do a little knife work.”

Roan twisted, and the arms constricted.

“Ha, still alive and kicking.” Roan felt a big hand grope, find a purchase on his shoulder. He was being held clear of the floor, clamped against the Minid's chest. The Minid's free hand rammed under Roan's chin, forced his face back. A blunt finger bruised his eye.

“Let's start with this one.”

Roan wrenched his head aside, groped with open jaws, found the edge of a hand like a hog-hide glove between his teeth, and bit down with all the force of his jaws.

The Minid roared. Roan braced his neck and clung, tasting acrid blood, feeling a bone snap before the hand was torn from his grip.



And he struck again, buried his teeth in Snaggle-head's shoulder, grinding a mass of leather-tough muscle, feeling the skin tear as the Minid fell backwards.

They were on the floor, Snaggle-head bellowing and striking ineffectually at Roan's back, throwing himself against the scrambling legs of spectators, kicking wildly at nothing. Roan rolled free, came to his knees spitting Minid blood.

"What in the name of the fourteen devils is going on here?" a voice bellowed. Henry Dread pushed his way through the crewmen, stood glaring down at Roan. His eyes went to the grovelling crewman.

"What happened to him?" he demanded.

Roan drew breath into his tortured chest. "I'm killing him," he said.

"Killing him, eh?" Henry Dread stared at Roan's white face, the damp red-black hair, the bloody mouth. He nodded, then smiled broadly.

"I guess maybe you're real Terry stock at that, boy. You've got the instinct, all right." He stooped, picked up Snaggle-head's knife, offered it to Roan. "Here. Finish him off."

Roan looked at the Minid. The cuts on the bald scalp had bled freely, and more blood from the torn shoulder had spread across the chest. Snaggle-head sat, legs drawn up, cradling his bitten hand, moaning. Tears cut pale paths through the blood on his coarse face.

"No," Roan said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I don't want to kill him now. I'm finished with him."

Henry Dread held the knife toward Roan. "I said kill him," he grated.

"Get the vet," Roan said. "See him up."

Henry stared at Roan. Then he laughed. "No guts to finish what you started, hey?" He tossed the knife to a hulking Chronid, nodded toward Snaggle-head.

"Get the vet!" Roan looked at the Chronid. "Touch him and I'll kill you," he said, trying not to show how much it hurt to breathe.

In the profound silence, Snaggle-head sobbed.

"Maybe you're right," Henry Dread said. "Alive, he'll be a walking reminder to the rest of the boys. Okay, Hulan, get the doc down here." He looked around at the other crewmen.

"I'm promoting the kid to full crew status. Any objections?"

Roan listened, swallowing against a sickness rising up inside him. He walked past Henry Dread, went along the dim way between the high bunks, pushed out into the corridor.

"Hey, kid," Henry Dread said behind him. "You're shaking like a Groaci in moulting time. Where the hell are your bandages?"

"I've got to get back to my mop," Roan said. He drew a painful breath.

"To hell with the mop. Listen, kid —"

"That's how I earn my food, isn't it, I don't want any charity from you."

"You'd better come along with

me, kid," Henry Dread said. "It's time you and me had a little talk."

XVIII

In his paneled, book-lined cabin, Henry Dread motioned Roan to a deep chair, poured out two glasses of red-brown liquid.

"I wondered how long you'd take the pushing around before you showed you were a Man. But you'll still have to watch yourself. Some of the boys might take it into their heads to gang up on you when they think I'm not looking."

"I'll be looking," Roan said. "Why do they want to kill me,"

"You've got a lot to learn, lad. Most of the boys are humanoids; I've even got a couple that call themselves Terries. I guess they've got some Terry blood, but it's pretty badly mutated stock. They don't like having us damn near pure bred around. It makes 'em look like what they are: Gooks." He took a swallow from his glass.

"I don't like to work around Gooks, but what the hell. It's better'n living with Geeks."

"What's the difference between a Gook and a Geek?"

"I stretch a point. If a being's humanoid, like a Minid or a Chronid, okay, give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he's descended from mutated human stock. You got to make allowances for Gooks. But a life-form that's strickly non-human — that's a Geek."

"Why do you hate Geeks?"

"I don't really hate 'em — but it's them or us."

Roan tried his drink, coughed, put the glass down. "What's that? It tastes terrible."

"Whiskey. You'll learn to like it, boy. It helps you forget what you want to forget."

Roan took another swallow of the whiskey, made a face.

"It doesn't work," he said. "I still remember."

"Give it time," Henry Dread growled. He stood and paced the room.

"How much do you know about Terry history, boy?"

"Not much, I guess. Dad used to tell me that once Terries ruled the whole galaxy, but then something happened. Now they're scattered, what there is left of them."

"Not 'them,' boy. 'Us.' I'm a Terry. You're a Terry. And there are lots more of us. Sure, we're scattered, and in lots of places the stock has mutated — or been bred out of the true line. But we're still Terries. Still Human. And it's still our Galaxy. The Gooks and Geeks have had a long holiday, but Man's on the comeback trail now. And every Man has to play his part."

"You mean murdering people like — Stellaraire and Gom Bulj?"

"Look, that's over and done. To me a Geek's a Geek. I'm sorry about the girl. But what the hell. You said she was only a mule."

Roan got to his feet; Henry Dread held up a hand. "Okay. No offense. I thought we had a deal? Let's lay off this squabbling. We're Terries. That's what counts."

"Why should I hate Geeks?"

Roan finished his drink, shuddered, put the glass on the table. "I've got reason to hate you, but I was raised with Geeks. They weren't any worse than your Gooks. Some of them were my friends. The only Human I ever knew was my father and I guess maybe he wasn't all Human. He was shorter than you and wide through the shoulders and his arms were almost as thick as a Minid's. And he had dark brown skin. I guess that couldn't be real Terry human stock."

"Hard to say. Seems like I read somewhere that back in prehistoric times Men came in all kinds of colors: black, red, yellow, purple — maybe green, I don't know. But later on they interbred and the pure color strains disappeared. But maybe your old man was a throwback — or even descended from real old stock."

"Does anybody know what a real Terry looks like?" Roan took a lock of his thick dark-red hair between his fingers rolling his eyes up to look at it. "Did you ever see hair that color before?"

"Nope. But don't let it worry you. Everybody's got a few little flaws. Hell, Men have been wandering around the Galaxy for over thirty thousand years now. They've had to adapt to conditions on all kinds of worlds; they've picked up everything from mutagenic viruses to cosmic radiation to uranium burns; no wonder we've varied a lot from the pure strain. Pure or not us Humans must stick together."

Roan was looking at the empty glass. Henry filled it and Roan took another drink.

"He wasn't really my father," he said. "He and Ma bought me in the Thieves Market on Tambool. Paid two thousand credits for me, too."

"Tambool. Hmmm. Hell of a place for a Terry lad to wind up. That where you were raised?"

Roan nodded.

"Who were your real parents? Why did they sell you?"

"I don't know. I was only a fertilized ovum at the time."

"Where'd those Geeks get hold of Terry stock?"

"I don't know. Dad and Ma would never talk much about it. And Uncle T'hoy hoy either. I think Ma told him not to."

"Well, it doesn't matter. You're the closest thing to pure Old Terry stock I've seen. I've made you a member of my crew."

"I don't want to be a member of your crew. I want to go back home. I don't know if Ma's still alive, even, with Dad not there to look after her. I miss Dad. I miss Stellaraire; I even miss Gom Bulj."

"Don't cry into your beer, kid. What the hell, I've taken a liking to you. You play your cards right and you'll do okay. You'll live well, eat well, see the galaxy, get your share of loot, and some day — when I'm ready — you may be in on the first step toward something big. Bigger than you ever dreamed of."

"I don't want loot. I just want my own people. I don't want to destroy. I want to build something."

"Sure, you've got a dream, kid. Every Man has. But if you don't fight for that dream somebody else's dream will win."

"It's a big galaxy. Why isn't there room for everybody's dream?"

"Boy, you've got a lot to learn about your own kind. We've got the drive to rule. To conquer or die. Some day we'll make this galaxy into our own image of Paradise. Nobody else's. That's the way Men are."

"There's billions of Geeks," Roan said. "But you're the only Man I've ever seen."

"There are Terries all over the Galaxy — wherever the Empire had an outpost. I mean to find them — one at a time if I have to. You think I'm just in this for the swag? Not on your life, boy. I could have settled down in luxury twenty years ago, but I've got a job to do."

"Why do you want me? I'm not going to kill Geeks for you."

"Listen, kid, goon squads are cheap. I can hire all I want for the price of a good dinner at Marparli's on Buna II. But you're human — and I need every Man I can get."

"I still haven't forgotten," Roan said. "That whiskey's a fake. So are you. You killed my friends and now you think I'm going to help you kill some more."

Henry gripped Roan's shoulder with a hard hand. "Listen, boy! A Man's got to live. I started off in the Terry ghetto on Borglu, kicked around, spit on, worked like a tunneler in the wood mines. There wasn't a day they let me forget I was a Man — and that all I'd ever get was a Man's share — the scraps, and the kicks, and the curses. I

hung around back doors and ate garbage, sure. A Man's got a drive to live — no matter how. And I listened, and learned a few things. They used to call me in and laugh at me. They'd tell me how once the Terries had been the cock of the walk in every town on ten million worlds, master of everything. And how I was a slave now, and just about good enough, maybe, to wash their dirty clothes and run their errands and maybe some day, if I was a good worker, they'd get me a half-breed wench and let me father a litter of mules to slave for them after I was gone.

"Well, I listened, and I got the message. But not the one they had in mind. They didn't know Terries, boy. Every time they'd show me a book with a picture of a Terran Battle Officer in full dress, and tell me how the Niss had wiped out the fleet — or hand me an old Terran pistol and tell me how their great grand-pap had taken it off a starving Man — it didn't make me feel like a slave. It made me feel like a conqueror. One day one of them made a mistake. He let me handle a Mark XXX hand blaster. I'd read a book or two by then. I'd studied up on Terran weapons. I knew something about a Marx three-X. I got the safety off and burned old Croog and two by-standers down and then melted off the leg-band." Henry Dread stooped, pulled his boot off, peeled back his sock. Roan stared at the deep, livid scar that ringed the ankle.

"I made it to the port. There was an abandoned Terry scout boat

there, dozed off-side, buried in the weeds. I'd play around it as a kid. I had a hunch maybe I could open it. There was a system of safety locks —

"To make it short, I got clear. I've stayed free ever since. I've had to use whatever gutter-scrapings I could find to build my crew, but I've managed. I've got a base now — never mind where — and there's more battle-wagons ready for commissioning — as soon as I get reliable captains. After that —

"Well, I've got plans, boy. Big plans. And they don't include Geeks running the Galaxy."

"Iron Robert's a Geek — and he's my friend. He's a better friend than any of those Gooks of yours."

"That's right boy. Stick up for your friends. But when the chips are down — will he stick by you?"

"He already has."

Henry Dread nodded. "I have to give him credit. I admire loyalty in a being — even a Geek. Maybe old Iron Pants is okay. But don't confuse the issue. A good, solid hate is a powerful weapon. Don't go putting any chinks in it."

"Iron Robert is a good being," Roan said. "He's better than your Gooks and Geeks. He's better than me. And better than you, too." Roan stopped talking and swallowed. "I feel kind of sick," he said.

Henry laughed. "Go sleep it off, kid. You'll be okay. Take the stateroom down the hall from mine here. A Terry crew member doesn't have to sleep with Gooks any more."

"I've got some rags outside Iron Robert's cell. I'll sleep there."

"No, you won't, kid. I can't have a Terry losing face with Gooks — for the sake of a Geek."

Roan went to the door, walking unsteadily. "You've got a gun," he said. "You can kill me if you want to. But I'm going to stay with Iron Robert until you let him out."

"That animated iron mine stays where he is!"

"Then I sleep in the corridor."

"Make your choice, boy!" Henry Dread's voice was hard. "Learn to take orders, and you live a soft life. Act stubborn, and it'll be rags and scraps for you."

"I don't mind the rags. Iron Robert and I talk."

"I'm asking you, kid. Move in next door. Forget those worthless Geeks."

"Your whiskey's no good. I haven't forgotten anything."

"What's the matter with you, you young squirt? Haven't I tried to treat you right? I could send you below decks in lead underwear right now to swab out a hot chamber!"

"Why don't you?"

"Get out!" Henry Dread grated. "You had a big credit with me, kid, because you looked like a Man. Until you learn to act like one, keep out of my way!"

Outside in the corridor, Roan leaned against the wall, waiting for the dizziness to go away. Once he thought he heard a sound, as though someone had started to turn the door latch. But the door remained closed behind him.

After a while he made his way down to Iron Robert's cell and went to sleep.

Iron Robert shook the bars. "You big fool, Roan, go on raid with riff-raff, maybe get killed. What for? You stay safe on ship!"

"I'm tired of being aboard ship, Iron Robert. This is the first time Henry Dread has said I could go along. I'll be all right."

"What kind gun Henry Dread give you, Roan?"

"I won't need a gun. I won't be in the fighting."

"Henry Dread still 'fraid give you gun, eh? He big fool too, let you go in combat with no gun. You small, weak being, Roan, not like Iron Robert. You stay on ship like always!"

"There's a city on this world — Aldo Cerise — that was built by Terrans, over ten thousand years ago. Nobody lives there now but savages, so there won't be much of a fight. And I want to see the city."

"Extravanzoo play on Aldo Cerise, once, long time go. Plenty natives, plenty tough. Have spears, bows, few guns too. And not fools."

Roan leaned against the bars. "I can't just stay on the ship. I have to get out and see things, and listen and learn, and maybe some day —"

"Maybe some day you learn stay out of trouble!"

A wall annunciator hummed and spoke: "Attention all hands. This is Captain Dread. All right, you swabs, now's your chance to earn some prize money! We're entering our parking orbit in five minutes. Crews stand by to load assault craft in

nine minutes from now. Blast off in forty-two minutes." Roan and Iron Robert listened as Henry Dread read the order of battle, feeling the deck move underfoot as the vessel adjusted its velocity to take up its orbit four hundred miles above the planet.

"I've got to go now," Roan said. "I'm in boat number one, the command boat."

"Anyway Henry Dread keep you by him," Iron Robert rumbled. "Good. You stay close, keep head down when shooting start. Henry Dread not let you get hurt, maybe."

"He wants me on his boat so he can keep an eye on me. He thinks I'll try to run away, but I won't. Not until you can go, too."

Boots clanged at the far end of the corridor. Henry Dread, tall in close-fitting leather fighting garb, swaggered up. He wore an ornate pistol at each lean hip and carried a power rifle in his hands.

"I figured I'd find you here, didn't you hear my orders?"

"I heard," Roan said. "I was just saying good-by."

"Yeah. Very touching. Now if you can tear yourself away, we've got an action to fight. You stay close to me. Watch what I do and follow suit. I don't expect much static from the natives, but you never know."

"Roan should have gun, too," Iron Robert rumbled.

"Never mind that, Iron Man. I'm running this operation."

"You nervous as caged dire-beast, Man. If everything so easy, what you afraid of?"

Henry narrowed his eyes at the giant.

"All right, I'm edgy. Who wouldn't be? I'm hitting what used to be the capital of one of the greatest kingdoms in the Empire — and me with a seven-thousand year old hulk and a crew of half-breed space-scrappings. Who wouldn't be a little nervous?"

"Give Roan gun. Or does lad make you nervous too "

"Never mind, Iron Robert," Roan said. "I'm not asking him for anything."

Henry Dread's jaw muscles worked. He jerked the power rifle. "Come on, boy. Get down to the boat deck before I change my mind and give you a job swabbing the tube linings!"

"You bring Roan back safe, Henry Dread," Iron Robert called. "Or better not come back at all."

"If I don't, you'll have a long wait," the pirate growled.

In the cramped command compartment of the assault boat, Henry Dread barked into the panel mike: "Now hear this, you space scum! We're dropping in fast, slick and silent! I'm giving you a forty-second count-down after contact, then out you go. I want all four Bolos to hit the ramp at the same time, and I want to see those treads smoke getting into position! Gun-nery crews, sight in on targets and hold your fire for my command! Heli crews —"

The pirate captain gave his orders as the boat dropped toward the gray world swelling on the forward re-

peater screen. The deck plates rumbled as the retro-rockets fired long bursts, correcting velocity. Atmosphere shrieked around the boat now.

Roan saw the curve of the world swing up to become a horizon. A drab jungle continent swept under them, then an expanse of sparkling sea and a white surfed shoreline. There was a moment of vertigo as the vessel canted, coming in low over green hills; it righted sluggishly, and now the towers of a fantastic city came into view, brilliantly sparkling beyond the distant forest-clad hills.

"Remind me to shoot that gyro maintenance chief," Henry growled. Roan watched as tree-tops whipped past beneath the hurtling ship. Then it was past the wooded slopes, and the city was close, looming up, up, until the highest spires were hazy in the airy distances overhead.

The ship braked, slowed, settled in heavily. A ponderous jar ran through the vessel. The torrent of sound washed away to utter silence. From below, a turbine started up, ran sputtering, smoothed out. Henry looked at the panel chronometer.

"If one of those slobs jumps the gun —"

A light blinked to life on the panel.

"Ramp doors open," Henry murmured. "Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty!" He whirled on Roan.

"Here we go kid! With a little luck we'll be drinking old Terry wine out of Terry crystal before the star goes behind those hills."

Roan stood with Henry Dread at the foot of the ramp, looking out across a pitted and crumbling expanse of ancient pavement. Far across the field, four massive tracked vehicles aimed black gun muzzles at the silent administrative sheds. Nothing moved.

"Empty emplacements," Henry said. "Missile racks corroded out. It's a walk-over."

"Iron Robert said the 'zoo played here once," Roan said. "He said the natives have guns and bows, and know how to use them."

"The carny was here, eh? Who'd it play to, the rock lizards?"

"People," Roan said. "And they wouldn't have to be very smart to be smart enough to stay out of sight when they see a shipload of scavengers coming."

"Corsairs!" Henry barked. "We don't scavenge, boy! We fight for what we take. Nothing's free in this Universe!" He thumbed his command mike angrily.

"Czack! Wheel that tin can of yours over here!" He turned to Roan. "We'll go take a look at the city." He waved his rifle toward the towers beyond the port. "This was one of the last Terry capitals, five thousand years ago. Men built the place, boy — our kind of Man, back when we owned half the Galaxy. Come along, and I'll show you what kind of people we came from."

There was a high golden gate before the city and at the top, worked in filigree, was the Terran Imperial symbol, a bird with a

branch in its mouth, and a TER. IMP. above it.

"I've seen it a million times, in my books back on Tambool," Roan said. "That bird and the TER. IMP. above it. Why a bird, anyhow?"

"Peace," Henry Dread said. "Czack!" he barked into his command mike. "Bring that pile of tin up here and put it in High." Then he turned back to Roan. "TER. IMP. means Terra ran the show. And any bird that didn't keep the peace got his guts ripped out. That's how Men operate, see?"

Peace, Roan thought, turning it in his mind, trying to smooth off the sandpapy edge Henry Dread gave to the word, watching the massive combat unit rumbling up beside him.

"Take it slow. Put it in Maximum now," Henry Dread said to Czack. "That fence is made of Terralloy and nothing'll tear it down but a Terry Bolo."

"But it's stood for five thousand years and nobody can put up another one." Roan said, wanting the TER. IMP. and the bird to stay there another five thousand years. "Why tear it down? Couldn't you just blast the lock?"

"Maybe. But this impresses the Geeks more, if they're watching. Okay. Take it, Czack."

The gate screamed like a torn female, bent slowly and finally landed over the Bolo with a horrible clang and the Bolo, a crease along its top turret now, went on through. Czack traversed his guns, looking for natives.

The quick silence from the fallen gate and the dead city was eerie.

Czack appeared at the upper hatch and swore at the gate and the Bolo and Aldo Cerise in general. He spotted the dent in the Bolo turret and swore worse.

"Maybe we'll find more Bolos in the City," Henry Dread said. "Never seen an Imperial city without 'em and this was a great one. Get you a nice, new Bolo and some nice, new guns. Now get back in the tin can and keep us covered while we do some ground reconnaissance. Shoot anybody you see."

Henry Dread tucked the mike under his tunic. His heavy boots rang on the mosaic of the path they took beside the road, and he gestured with his gun as they went along.

"Those buildings," he said. "Ever see anything that high for beings that don't have wings?"

The Terran buildings climbed high into the sunlight, incredibly straight and solid. From here it all looked perfect. But at Roan's feet the tiles of the intricate mosaic were broken and missing in spots, and Henry Dread kicked at the loose ones as he walked along.

Roan paused to watch a fountain throwing rainbows into the air, spinning shifting patterns of water and light.

"They *built* things in those days," Henry Dread said. "That fountain's been running five thousand years. More, probably. Anything mechanical breaks in this city, fixes itself."

Roan was looking at the house beyond the fountain, with the TER. IMP. symbol on the door, and he gaped up at row on row of floors, windowed and balconied.

"It looks as though that door might open," Roan said. "People might walk out. My people." He paused, wondering how he would feel if this were Home. "But it's all so perfect. So wonderful. If they could build like this, how could anyone beat them?"

"The Lost War," Henry Dread said, coming up to the fountain and drinking from a side jet. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "They call it the Lost War but we didn't lose it. Terra never lost a war. A stalemate, maybe — we didn't win it, either. Anybody can see that. But we broke the power of the Niss. The Niss don't rule the Universe. There's supposed to be the Niss blockade of Terra, and they say there's still a few Niss cruisers operating at the far side of the Galaxy. But that's probably just superstition. I've never run into a Niss. And never met anybody that did — Man, Gook or Geek."

Henry Dread got out his microphone. The men had come in through the ruined gate and were scrambling over the Bolo, perching on its armored flanks and hanging off the sides.

"Fan out in skirmish order," he barked. "Shoot anything that moves."

Roan followed Henry Dread. "Empty," Roan said. "I don't see anything that looks like natives might be living here. I wonder why not? With all this . . ."

"Superstition. They're afraid of it." Henry Dread's eyes were darting in all directions. "But that doesn't

mean there might not be a few natives inside the fence. And they may be right to be afraid of the City. Look over there."

There was a deep hole, blackened at the edges.

"Booby-trapped," Henry Dread said. "Don't know how many might be around the city, or where. So watch out."

They came to a high wall, set with clay tiles, and between the tiles grew tiny, exquisite flowers.

"Park," said Henry Dread. "Full blown memento of Terran luxury. Maybe have time for it later."

"Tank here!" one of the men called from behind a nearby building. "Bolo Mark XXXV, factory fresh!"

"Don't *touch* her, you slat-headed ape!" Czack's voice crackled from his Bolo. "I don't want nobody's filthy hands on her until I see her."

Henry Dread laughed. "It's not a woman, you rackskull. And it's *my* freaking tank and *I'll* see it first."

"Look, I'm going in that park," Roan said, "Call if you want me."

Henry Dread stopped, looked back at Roan, frowning.

"I won't desert," Roan said. "Not as long as you've got Iron Robert back there in the hold."

"Maybe," Henry Dread said. "Maybe if you go in that park you'll find out the difference between Geeks and Men. Maybe you'll understand what I've been trying to tell you!"

"Boss!" Czack called. "Take a gander at this. Full fuel tanks and magazines and —"

"Don't touch anything!" Henry Dread called. "These damned Gooks have scrambled eggs for brains," he added.

"Okay," Roan said, starting to climb up a gnarled old tree that looked over the garden wall. "Fire three shots when you want me to come out."

"Watch out, boy," Henry Dread said, and stopped again. He took out his Mark XXX blaster and handed it over to Roan.

"You'll come back," he said. "And you'll know more than you do now."

Roan balanced the gun in his hand, sitting on a lower limb of the old tree. He felt the solid metal of it, the waiting, repressed power, the cold steel with the flaming soul. He looked up briefly at Henry Dread, who laughed, knowing what Roan felt with the gun.

Then Henry Dread was striding away across the plaza and Roan clambered up the tree, thinking as he climbed of the gracyls and how he'd climbed to follow their flights, and of the circus and the tree he'd climbed to see it, the Never-never tree, little thinking it was his last day on Tambool. And at the height of the wall he thought of Stellaraire and the tightrope and his eyes stung, but then he looked over the wall toward the park.

And there was no room for thought of the past. Here lay the Terran civilization that Henry Dread talked of rebuilding.

Within the park green grass spread and flowers bloomed and

Roan could see small automatic weeders moving along the paths where fountains rose and splashed untouched by time.

And across the manicured precision of the lawn, a fallen statue lay — a vast statue with a tunic draped around its hips. It lay face up, one arm raised, pointing now to the high skies.

It was a Terran. Pure Terra.

And made just like Roan.

Roan leapt down from the wall onto a bank of springy grass, and ran to the statue. Feature for feature — eyes, ears, nose, the connections of muscles — this was Roan. Terran.

Did my father look like this? Roan wondered. Who was this Man? Where did he come from? He walked around to the base of the statue. TER. IMP., it said, with the dove and the branch. And then:

ECCE HOMO
July 28, 12780.

"Ecce," Roan said to the statue, touching it, wondering how the name was really pronounced.

Then he became aware of sound scenting the air. The sound and scent seemed the same, both swirling faintly through the still air and he followed the melody. The scent was not the heavy perfume Stellaraire used, nor were the sounds the coarse sounds of the circus noise-makers. It was all something else. Something that stirred memories — hints, odors of memories — far in the deeps of Roan's mind.

Sunlight he'd never drowsed in,

winds he'd never felt, peace he'd never known.

Peace, he thought, knowing Henry Dread had said it wrong.

The razored, spring-green turf came down to the edges of the pebbled path and ran between gardens of jewel-bright flowers. A wide-petaled blue blossom, with black markings like a scream in its throat, opened and closed rhythmically.

The music stopped briefly and then changed, as though drawing out things in Roan's mind. In the small pause, Roan heard the play of a fountain, a silver sound.

Then, more silver still, came the faint call of horns rising and loudening and loosening old locks in Roan's mind. A smoke-like drift of stringed music floated into the horn motif, countering it softly, and then running away and coming back a little different, so that the horn challenged it and took up the string song itself and then a further, tinkling sound joined the horn and string and built an infinite, convolute structure in Roan's mind that spread through his whole being and finally broke into a thousand crystals, leaving Roan almost in tears for the old, old things that are lost and the beautiful, infinitely beautiful things that never existed.

A fat bee droned past, bumbled inefficiently into a flower and hunted nearsightedly for a drop of honey. The flower folded a maternal petal over the bee and he emerged covered with yellow pollen and bumbled away looking triumphant and ridiculous.

Roan laughed, his nostalgia broken.

The music laughed, too. A little flute giggling and teasing and running away.

Roan went after the sound.

The park went on and on and the flower scents changed and interwove like their colors. Roan came to a still, blue lake, floated with flowers and enormous, long-necked birds that swam like boats and drifted up to him inquiringly when he came to the edge of the lake.

Roan turned from the lake into a wood where the vines made bowers—thorned vines heavy with sweet berries—slim, curled vines blue with wide-faced flowers. He walked through sunny slopes where tall grasses rolled like water in the wind, and deep groves where the moss grew close and green in the still shade of warm-barked trees. Then the grove narrowed to a dark, arching tunnel of branches that ended suddenly in sunlight.

Ahead of Roan was a wide, white flagstone walk that curved between fountains of flying water and led finally to a colonnaded terrace. From the terrace rose a fretted cliff of airy masonry. A house the wind blew through.

Roan, thirsty now, scooped up a handful of smooth, cool water. It had a taste of bubbles, a smell of sunshine.

But the water had not been put there for any purpose, even to drink. It showered into the air merely to fall back into the pool. It pleased Roan somehow to think the mighty Terrans made the water go

up just so they could watch it coming down.

He went up the wide, shallow steps, into the airy building that up close seemed as solid and lasting as time itself. The marble floor within was an intricate design of reds and blues that moved into purple and led the eye straight to a ramp slanting up to a gallery on the left.

Roan listened for a moment to the ringing stillness, then started up the sloping way.

XX

The house was a maze of rooms within rooms, all neatly kept. The air filters whispered noiselessly, but Roan could feel the air they drew. Doors opened silently to his presence. Lamps glowed on to greet him, off to bid him good-by. On polished tables were set objects of curious design, of wood and metal and glass. Roan picked each up and tried to imagine its use. One, of green jade, grew warm as he held it. But it did nothing else and there were no buttons to press. So he carefully replaced it and went on.

Then Roan noticed the pictures.

He stood in the middle of a thinly furnished room and his eye was caught by a picture in sinuosities of blue, as interwoven and complex as the music he'd heard. Every time he looked at the picture the lines caught his eye a different way, led them along a different trail, and he looked at the picture so long the blue disappeared and then the picture itself until finally he was left following tortuous convolutions in

his own mind and it was a shaft of late afternoon sun, burning through a high window, that brought him to himself and made him blink hard to get the sun glimmers from his eyes.

Some of the pictures were like the blue. Others seemed to project out from the walls, or were sheer patterns of light hanging in empty air. And some—as Roan looked and noticed—some were pictures of Terran places and houses and . . . people? The figures were so tiny and distant. Hunt though he did, he couldn't find any close-ups of Terran people. It didn't really matter, though he really wanted to see it.

Roan went on, walking right through a misty Light Picture in the middle of one of the rooms. All this. What was it for? Just to look at? Just to enjoy?

It seemed a human way to be. A Terran way to do things. Roan felt a kinship with all this. He knew how to look at the paintings, how to enjoy the music.

Then Roan walked into a room wide with windows, so that the sunshine shimmered clearly in it. Marble benches stood beneath the low windows and green plants hung over a scoop-shaped sunken pool. As Roan went over to stand on the edge of the empty pool there was a soft *chick!* and water began foaming into the pool.

Roan laughed with pleasure. It was a bath! An enormously magnified version of one Stellaraire had had in her quarters with the 'zoo. He stripped off his shabby, ill-fitting tunic, realizing suddenly how dirty he was.

He stood by a jet of soapy foam and scrubbed himself thoroughly. The pool carried off his dirt and dead skin cells in eddys of black and whirled in renewed, clean water. Roan luxuriated in the bath for an hour, watching the chasing clouds and the blue sky through the windows, and wondering at the delicate veining of the Terran plants that nodded over the water.

And thought wistfully of Stellaraire and how if she were here they'd splash water at each other and be foolish and afterwards walk in the garden and make love with timeless joy in the deep grasses. And live here forever in this enchanted place where there was no violence, no raspy, alien voices, no ugly, misshapen faces, no one hating or despising or envying Roan his Terran ancestry, his Terran inheritance.

But there was no Stellaraire. Only a memory that overfilled him now and then, like a bud with no room to open into a flower.

Behind a colored glass panel Roan found simply designed but beautiful clothes, of some woven material that sprang to fit him as he put it on. There were silver tights that fitted from his ankles to his waist and were cool to the touch. Then a short, silk-lined scarlet jacket, soft to the skin but stiff outside with gold and jewel embroidery. He found boots that fitted softly like gloves, and protected his feet without heavy soles or heels. All this he put on, though there were other things. Thin white shorts and singlets and cloth short boots.

The only other thing Roan took was a magnificent, massive jewel, engraved TER. IMP. It hung around his neck from a gold chain and where it rested against his bare chest, between the edges of his scarlet jacket, it warmed him, almost seeming to throb like a beating heart.

I look the way a Terran ought to look, Roan thought, looking at himself in the enormous mirror that backed the door to the bathing room. The jewel glowed on his browned chest and his freshly washed hair clustered in dark red curls over his forehead.

Roan wondered if a Terran would think him handsome. A Terran Woman. O gods, how long since he'd had a woman!

Roan buckled back on his old link metal belt. He wondered why he thought it brought him luck, because it didn't really. Then he reluctantly picked up the Mark XXX blaster. Here, it didn't seem right. But he shoved it into the belt, which strained to hold it.

Roan retraced his steps through still corridors, down to the echoing concourse, out onto the broad terrace.

Far in 'the sky the lowering sun flashed orange from the towers of the city—where Henry Dread was searching for loot now with his vicious crew of cut-throats. It was soiled, grubby—all of the Universe—but here it didn't exist. He didn't want to call it into being again.

Roan took a new path, behind the house, walking quickly because he didn't have much time left. Night

was coming. He'd seen perhaps, most of what there was to see, and one more quick turn—

Roan drew up short.

Because reflected in a round mirror-pool, among fragile violet flowers, was a human Woman.

She was flushed pink in the sunset, pouring water from a long-necked jar. The water, sparkling pink, too, in the light, rippled over her slim neck, between her lifted breasts and around her softly bent body over her flanks, and finally ran murmuring into the mirror-pool, making no splash or ripple.

"Oh, please," Roan said, not meaning to speak, and went up to the woman. But it was a statue, smiling its dreamy, carved smile, thinking the secret things of women.

Roan reached out and touched the soft curve of the hard, marble cheek.

And then far away came the violent stutter of guns. Then a single shot. A power rifle.

Perhaps it was the anger against life that filled him or perhaps it was a premonition of what was really happening, but Roan was running. Along the curved paths and then straight across the middle of the park where there was a wide concourse and through a small grove where night had already come, and up the fence, holding to the nearest heavy vine, and slowing to be quiet now, along the fence to the tree.

A gun rattled, paused, fired again. A voice shouted.

Roan started down the tree. The streets were violet shadows now, the

towers bright-edged silhouettes against the orange and purple sky. There was a faint movement in the gloom below the tree and a face, a white blob in the darkness, looked up toward Roan, the glint of a knife in the teeth.

There was a sharp hiss. Something chipped at the tiles and then another hiss and whoever it was starting up the tree fell back and slumped to the ground.

Roan hefted the gun out of his belt. His Mark XXX that he'd all but forgotten in the park. Well, that dream of peace was over now.

Roan waited, heard a few shots, distant now, saw nothing moving. He dropped softly from the tree, squatted, turned the body on its back. The coarse, slack features of a bald Minid stared past him with dead, surprised eyes. The stump of a broken-off wooden shaft poked from the Minid's chest just below the edge of the sheepskin vest.

One of crew. A mean, dirty creature, but somehow one of *his*.

Roan stood, trying to see through the dark streets. The firing was becoming steadier now, coming from locations to the north and east. A cold, evening wind blew up, and one brilliantly, orange star came out. Probably the next planet of the sun Aldo.

Roan crossed the street, started up one of the dark avenues toward the north. Lights came on suddenly to illuminate the city; mists of light that seemed to hang in the air like clouds.

There was a sharp hiss. Something struck the doorway of the house

near Roan and clattered on the steps. Roan dropped, rolled, brought his gun around and fired at a figure bounding from the shadowed doorway across the street. The figure fell under the misting streetlight.

Roan retreated to crouch in the angle between the steps and the Terran house. Three long-legged, round-shouldered creatures emerged from the side street. He saw the thick, recurving bows in their hands, the lank hair that dangled beside their oddly flat faces, the heavy quivers slung at their backs. They paused, fanning out. One saw the dead bowman, made a hoarse noise. At once the three whirled, angled off quickly in different directions. One was leaping toward Roan. He brought his gun up fired, swung and fired on a second savage as the first slammed to the curb of the mosaic sidewalk, almost at his feet. The second bowman reeled, stumbled, went down. Roan swung to the third and it dived for the black shadow of the building at the corner as his shot sent blue sparks from the door of the Terran house.

Roan was up instantly, dashing for the corner, rounding it as a heavy arrow touched his shoulder, skipped high, flashed off into darkness. Roan skidded to a stop, stepped back to the corner, dropped flat, thrust himself out. The native was charging from cover. Roan's shot caught him full in the chest and he fell with a tremendous heavy slam an impact of utter finality.

Roan let his breath out in a long sigh, slumped against the pavement, listening. There were no sounds, no

moving feet, no stealthy breathing, only the intermittent rasp and crackle of guns, nearer now but still, he guessed, a street or two away.

He got to his feet, moved off quickly, following a side street that would bring him to the scene of the action by a roundabout route.

XXI

From a low balcony which he had reached by clambering up the shadowed carved front of a peach-colored tower, Roan watched as a party of a dozen or so bowmen assembled almost directly below him in a narrow way.

The sounds of firing came closer from along the wide avenue. Roan could see the blue flashes of power guns now, the yellow stabs of pellet throwers. Below, the leader of the ambushing party spoke, and his bowmen set arrows, crouching silent and ready.

Down the avenue, Roan made out Henry Dread's tall figure among a huddle of humanoids. There were not more than fifty in the party, he estimated—out of over eighty who had landed; a straggling band of cursing frightened raiders caught off-guard, retreating under a rain of arrows that flew from the darkness without flash or sound. A bald Minid screeched, spun, fell kicking. The others passed him by, firing at random into the shadows, coming closer to the ambush.

Below Roan, the bowmen gathered themselves. There was a single, grunted syllable from the leader. He stepped forward—

Roan shot him, swept the gun across the others as they sprang back gaping. Three more fell, and the rest dashed for the deep shadows, disappeared between close walls.

No one in the retiring ship's party seemed to have noticed the by-play. They were formed up into a defensive ring, watching each side street as they passed. Henry Dread held up a hand, halted the group fifty feet from Roan's vantage point. Lying on the balcony, he had a clear view of the pirates and the empty streets all around.

"Belay firing!" Roan heard Henry Dread's voice. "They've pulled back for now."

There were snarls and mutters from the crewmen. They shifted uneasily, watching the dark mouths of side streets. A gun winked blue, a harsh buzz against silence.

"I said belay that!" Henry Dread grated. "We'll hold up here for ten minutes to give stragglers a chance to join us."

"To the Pit with stragglers," the crewman who had fired his gun cut in. "We should stay here and let these local slobs surround us? We're moving on—fast."

"Shut up, Snorgu," Henry Dread snapped. "Maybe you've forgotten I busted you out of a Yill jail after you were dumb enough to get caught flat-footed strangling an old female for her nose-ruby. And now you're going to do the thinking for my crew!"

"Your crew my hind leg, you lousy Terry. We've taken enough

orders from your kind. What about it boys?" Snorgu glanced around at the watching pirates.

Henry stepped up to the heavy-shouldered crewman. "Hand over your gun, Snorgu!"

Snorgu faced Henry, the gun in his fist aimed at the pirate leader. He laughed.

"I'm keeping my gun. And I'm firing when I feel like it."

A crewman beside Henry moved suddenly, caught the pirate captain's arms from behind. Another struck out, knocked Henry's gun from his hand. A third stooped, came up with it.

"Here's where we get a new captain," Snorgu growled. "Lead us into an ambush, hah? Some captain you are. I guess us Gooks have got just about a gut-full of fancy Terry ways."

"I seem to remember giving some orders about looting parties posting sentries," Henry drawled. "And about skeleton crews on the Bolos."

Snorgu snarled and jammed the gun hard against Henry's chest. "Never mind all that. Hand over the keys to the chart room and the strong box in your cabin."

Henry laughed, a hard sound like ice breaking. "You're out of luck. You think I carry a bunch of keys around for stupid deck-apes like you to lift the first time you see a chance? They're combination locks. Kill me and you'll never get in."

"You'll open 'em," someone barked. "A couple needle-burns through the gut, and a couple of days for the rot to set in, and you'll be screaming for somebody to listen

to you sing, and all you'll ask is a fast knife in the neck before your belly explodes."

"Meanwhile, how do you plan to get back to the ship?" Henry Dread cut in. "There might be a few natives between here and there that don't want to see you run off after such a short stay."

"Gun him down," someone suggested. "We've got enough on our hands without we got to watch this Terry."

"Sure. We can beam them locks open."

"Suits me." Snorgu grinned, showing large, widely-spaced teeth in a loose-lipped mouth wide enough to put a hand in sideways. He stepped back a pace, angled the gun down at Henry's belt-buckle—

Roan took careful aim, shot Snorgu through the head.

The pirate's gun flew into the air as his hand jerked up; he stumbled back and fell, and Henry stepped forward, caught the falling gun out of the air, held it aimed from the hip. The crewmen gaped.

"Anybody else care to nominate himself captain?" Henry's sharp voice cut across the silence. The men were craning their necks, looking for the source of the shot. Roan saw one ease a gun around, aim it at Henry Wread; Roan shot him through the chest. As he fell, another brought a gun up, and Henry, whirling, beamed him down.

"Next?" he said pleasantly. No one moved. The crewmen stood stiffly now, cowed, worried. Henry laughed shortly, lowered his gun.

"All right, spread out in a skirmish line and let's get moving." He motioned them past with his pistol. Roan lowered himself over the balustrade and climbed quickly down. Henry Dread watched him come. His narrowed eyes were on the gun at Roan's hip. "Learned to use it?"

"Comes in handy," Roan said casually, imitating Henry Dread's manner. He stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt, looking at the older man. Henry's eyes went from Roan's scarlet vest down the length of the silvery trousers, back up. His eyes locked with Roan's.

"You had a good chance to shoot me then," he said. "But when it got right down to it, you sided me." His face broke slowly into a smile. "I knew you'd figure out which side you were on, boy. You picked a good time. Something you learned in that park?"

"I found a garden," Roan said. "It was perfect; the most perfect place I ever saw. I wanted to stay there. There was everything you could ever need. And then I saw a statue and I touched it, and all of a sudden I saw that it was all dead, frozen, just a fossil of something that was alive once. Something that could live again, maybe. I decided then. I want to make it live, Henry. I want to do whatever I have to do to make it come to life again. I want that stone girl to turn to living flesh and walk in that garden with me."

Henry's hand thrust out. Roan took it. "We'll do it, Roan," the pirate said. "Together, we'll do it."

Smiling, Roan said. "Want the gun back?"

Henry Dread's smile was grim. "Keep it," he said. "From now on, you walk behind me. Keep the gun on your hip, and your right hand loose."

He turned and followed the huddle of pirates, and Roan trailed him, walking with his head up, liking the feel of the heavy gun in his belt.

XXII

"These past two years have been good, Roan," Henry Dread said, refilling his heavy wine mug. "Seven raids, all successful. Enough new men recruited to more than cover our losses; and our fuel and ammo reserves are at the best level in years."

Roan looked at his half-full glass sullenly. "And we're still no closer to starting a new Terra than we ever were. We haven't found even one more real Man to add to the roster. There's still just you and me. Two Terries, two freaks, talking about what we'll do some day."

"Look here, Roan, we've followed every rumor of a Terry we've run across. Is it my fault if they didn't pan out? We'll find a colony of Terries yet. And when we do —"

"Meanwhile Iron Robert's still chained. I want you to release him, Henry."

The pirate's hand came down to slam the table. "Damn it, are we going to start into that again? Haven't I explained to you that that man-eater's a symbol aboard this vessel? My cut-throats saw him stand up to a blaster; they heard him threaten to pitch me through

the side of my own ship! And I let him live! As long as he's chained to the wall his talk is just talk. Maybe a blaster can't touch him, but Henry Dread has him under lock and key! But turn him loose — let him stamp around this ship a free Geek — well, you get the picture!"

"I get the picture," Roan said. "For over two years now I've been living off the fat of the land while my friend sits in the dark with half a ton of steel welded to his leg."

"Hell let's be realistic, boy! He doesn't mind it — not like you or I would! He says so himself. He sits and goes off into some kind of trance! Doesn't even eat for days at a time. He's not human Roan! By the Gods, with Man's Galaxy at stake, you worry about one damned Geek!"

"Set him free. He won't cause any trouble. I'll be responsible for him."

"That's not the point," Henry said in a hard voice. "You'd better settle for having him alive. He's the first Geek I ever let live aboard my ship!"

"That's what your grand dream really boils down to, isn't it, Henry? Killing Geeks."

Henry swiveled to stare into the view screen that curved above the command console. "Somewhere out there, there's a Niss warship," he said quietly. "We're closing the gap, Roan. The stories we've picked up these last couple of months all tell the same tale. The Niss ship is real, and it's not far off. We'll pick it up on our long-range screens any day now."

"More Geeks to kill. That's all it is. It isn't a war; the Niss were beaten — at least as much as the Empire. They're no threat to us or to anybody. They haven't attacked anyone."

Henry swung back. "Haven't they? What about the Mandevoy patrol boat they vaporized last year at a range of twelve thousand miles?"

"The Mandevoy went out looking for trouble. They admitted that. The Niss haven't attacked a planet, or any ship that stayed clear of them. Let's forget the Niss. It's Terra we're interested in. Let's look for Terra."

"Terra!" Henry snorted. "Don't you know that's just a name. Roan? A mythical wonderland for the yokels to tell stories about! The Terran Empire isn't some two-bit world somewhere at the far side of the Galaxy. It's humanity — organized, armed and in charge!"

"There *is* a Terra," Roan said. "And some day I'll find it. If you've given up on it, I'll find it alone."

"Given up!" Henry Dread roared, coming to his feet. "Henry Dread never gave up on anything he set out to do! I'm not chasing rainbows! I'm fighting a live enemy! I'm facing reality! Maybe it's time you grew up and did the same!"

Roan nodded. "You're right. Just set me down on the next inhabited world with my share of the spoils. I'll leave your grand scheme to you; I've got a better one of my own."

Henry's eyes were fierce fires blazing in a face purple with fury.

"By the Nine Gods, I've got a good mind to take you at your word! I picked you out of a damned zoo, a freak in a cage, and made you my second in command — and tried to make you my friend! And now —"

"I've never asked you for anything, Henry," Roan cut in, his blue eyes holding the pirate's. They stood face to face, two big, powerfully built men, one with gray hair and a face of lined leather, the other with a mane of dark red curls hacked short, the clean features of youth, a flawless complexion marred only by a welted scar along his right cheek where Ithc's talons had raked him, long ago.

"But you've taken plenty!"

"I was content with the 'zoo. I had friends there. A girl, too."

Henry Dread snarled. "You'll befriend any lousy Gook or Geek that gives you the time of day. But me, a Commander in the Imperial Ter-ran Navy — I'm not good enough for your friendship!"

Roan's expression changed. He frowned.

"You said — the Imperial Ter-ran Navy."

Henry Dread's eyes held steady. "That's what I said," he grated.

"I thought," Roan said carefully, watching Henry Dread's eyes, "that the ITN was wiped out, thousands of years ago."

"You did, eh?" Henry was smiling a tight, hard smile. He looked at Roan bright-eyed, enjoying the moment. "What if I told you it wasn't wiped out? What if I said there were

intact units scattered all over the Eastern Arm when the shooting stopped? What if I said Rim Headquarters had taken over command control, reorganized the survivors, and held the Navy together — waiting for the day a counter-attack could be launched?"

"Are you saying that?" Roan tried to hold his voice level and calm.

"Hell, boy, that's what I called you up here to talk about, before you started in on your pet Geek!" Henry clapped Roan's shoulder. "I've watched you close, these last years. You've done all right, Roan — better than all right. It's time I let you in on what you're doing here. What we're doing. You thought I was just a pirate, raiding and looting just for the hell of it, getting fat off the leavings of Geeks and Gooks. And you thought my talk about getting the Galaxy back for Man was just talk. I know." He laughed, with his hands on his hips and his head thrown back.

"I can't say I blame you. Sure, I've got a hold full of heavy metal and gem crystals and old Terry cloth and spices and even a few cases of Old Imperial Credit tokens. But that's not all I've got tucked away. Come here."

He turned, walked across the broad command deck of the ancient battle-wagon, tapped keys on the panel. An armored door swung open, and Henry stepped inside, ducking his head, came out with a wide, flat box. He lifted the lid with a flourish, held up a garment of close-woven blue polyon, shook it out. Roan gaped.

"My uniform," Henry Dread said. "As a Commander in the Imperial Terran Navy. I'm assigned to recruiting and fund-raising duty. I've done all right as far as funds are concerned. But this is my first recruitment."

Roan's hungry eyes held on the rich cloth, the glitter of ancient insignia. He swallowed, opened his mouth to speak —

Henry Dread stepped back into the vault, came out holding a second box in his hands. He tucked it under one arm.

"Raise your right hand, Lieutenant Cornay," he said.

Roan stared into the mirror. The narrow-cut, silver corded black trousers fitted without a wrinkle into the brightly polished ship-boots. Over the white silk shirt, the short tunic was a swirl of braid, a gleam of silver buttons against royal blue. A bright-plated ebony-gripped ceremonial side-arm winked at each hip against the broad woven-silver belt with the big, square buckle adorned by the carved TER. IMP. and bird symbol.

He turned to Henry Dread. "I've got about a milliard questions, Henry. You know what they are."

Henry Dread laughed again. "Sure, I know." He keyed a mike, snapped out an order for a bottle and glasses, "Sit down, Lieutenant. I think you can forget about Geeks for a few minutes now while I tell you a few things."

Iron Robert stirred as Roan called to him. His heavy feet scraped

the rusted deck-plates; chains clashed in the gloom and his green eyes winked open.

"What you want, Roan," the heavy voice growled. "You wake Iron Robert from dream of youth and females and hot sun of homeworld."

"I . . . just came to see how you are," Roan said. "I've been busy lately. I guess I haven't gotten down to see you as often as I'd like. Is there anything you need?"

"Just need to know you well and happy, Roan. I think now you and Henry Dread friends, you have good time, not be so sad like before."

Roan gripped the two-inch chromalloy bars of Iron Robert's cell. "It's not just a good time, Iron Robert. I'm doing something. I'm helping to put the Terran Empire back together. I know, it's not much — just one ship, cruising space, looking for Terrans, or rumors of Terrans, and collecting funds for the Navy, gathering intelligence to use when we're ready to launch our counter-attack."

"Counter-attack against who, Roan? You already attack all Gooks and Geeks you find, take all guns and fuel and money."

"You have to understand, Iron Robert! We're not just looting. We need those things! We're cruising according to official Navy orders, hitting every world in our assigned sector. Captain Dread's already been out twelve years. Two more years, and we finish the sweep, and report back to Rim Headquarters."

"Just so you happy, Roan. Have good time, live to full, eat good,

drink good, have plenty fight, plenty women."

"Damn it, is that all living means to you? Don't you understand what it is to try to build something bigger than you are, something worth giving everything that's in you for?"

"Sure, Roan. Iron Robert understand big dreams of youth. All beings young once."

"This isn't just a dream! The Terran Empire ruled this Galaxy once, and could rule it again! Haven't you seen enough suffering and torture and death and indifference and ruins and greed and hate and hopelessness to understand how it is to want to change all that? The Empire will bring back peace and order. If we left it to the damned Geeks it would go on like this forever, only worse!"

"Maybe true, Roan." Iron Robert's voice was a soft rumble. "Fine thing, build towers up into sunlight, squirt water, make pretty sounds."

"Don't make fun of my garden! I shouldn't have told you about it! I might have known a Geek couldn't understand!"

"Hard thing for Geek to understand, Roan. What place Geeks have in Terry Empire? Geeks get to walk in pretty garden too?"

"The Geeks will have their own worlds," Roan said sullenly. "They'll have their own gardens."

"Iron Robert have garden once too, Roan. Fine black stones, and pools of soft mud to lie in, and hot, stinky water come up out of ground. But I think Roan not like my garden. I think hard thing for Roan

and Iron Robert to walk in garden together, talk over old times. Maybe better have no garden, just be together, friends."

Roan leaned his head against the cold bars. "Iron Robert, I didn't mean — I mean — we'll always be friends, no matter what! I know you're locked in here because of me. Listen, Iron Robert, I'm going to tell Henry Dread —"

"Roan not tell Henry Dread anything! Iron Robert made deal with pirate. Geek keep word as good as Man."

"I didn't mean it when I called you a Geek, Iron Robert —"

"Just word, Roan. Iron Robert and Roan friends, few angry words nothing. Iron Robert not shamed to be Geek. Fine thing to be royal ferrous strain and have friend like Roan. Human flame burn short but burn hot, warm old stone heart of being like Iron Robert."

"I'm going to get you out of there!"

"No, Roan. Where else I go? Not like Terry cabin, too small, too weak chair. And only cause trouble. Henry Dread right. Crew not like see Iron Robert free being. Better wait here, be near Roan, and some day maybe we make planetfall together. Meantime, you got destiny to work out with Henry Dread. You go ahead, chase dream of ancient glories. Iron Robert be here by and by."

"We'll be at Rim HQ soon — in a year or two. I'll make them give me a ship of my own then. And you'll be my second-in-command!"

"Sure, Roan. Good plan. Till

then, Iron Robert wait patient — and Roan not worry.”

XXIII

Roan stood up, stretched, rubbed his eyes, drained the mug of bitter brown coffee, clattered the empty cup down on the chart table.

“I’m tired, Henry. Over thirty-six hours we’ve been hanging over the screens, and we’ve seen nothing. Let’s admit it’s another wild-goose chase and turn in.”

“They’re close, Roan,” Henry snapped. His face was grayish and hollow in the lights of the panel. “I’ve chased the Niss for forty years. Another forty minutes and maybe I’ll see them in my sights.”

“Or another forty days. Or forty years, or a thousand, for all we know. Those clod-hoppers back on Ebar probably just gave us the story to get rid of us before the boys get bored and started shooting the town up again.”

“They’re out there. We’ll close with them this time.”

“And if they are — what about it? We’re on a recruiting and fund-raising mission, aren’t we? What’s that got to do with launching one-man attacks against Niss warships? If there is any ship.”

“They’re there, I said! And we’re a Naval ship of the line! It’s always our job to seek out and destroy the enemy!”

“Henry, give it up. We don’t know their capabilities. I know we’ve got special long-range undetectable radar gear, but they may still blast us out of space like

they did that Mandevoy scout a few years ago, before we even get close.”

Henry Dread whirled, stared up at Roan from his seat. “Scared, Lieutenant?”

Roan’s tired face smiled humorlessly. “Sure, I’m scared, if that’s what you want to hear. Or maybe I’ve just got common sense enough not to want to see all you’ve worked for — all we’ve worked for — destroyed just because you’ve got the itch to fire those big batteries you’ve been keeping primed all these years.”

Henry Dread came to his feet. “That’s enough out of you, Mister! I’m still in charge aboard this tub! Now get on that screen until I give the order to leave your post!”

“Slow down, Henry —”

“Commander Dread to you, Mister!” Henry’s face was close to Roan’s, his square jaw, marred by a slight sagging of the jowls, thrust out. Roan straightened, settled his gun-belt on his hips. He was an inch taller than Dread, and almost as heavy through the shoulders. He looked the older man steadily in the eye.

“We’re just nine months out of Rim Headquarters, Henry. Let’s see if we can’t get there in one piece. Both of us.”

Henry Dread’s hand went to his gun. He half drew it, looking into Roan’s eyes, his teeth set in a snarl.

“I gave you an order!”

“You’re a big enough man to take an order back, when you see it’s a mistake,” Roan said flatly. “We both need rest. I know a couple of crewmen who’d like to see the

pair of us out on our feet." He turned away. Henry Dread's gun cleared the holster.

"Stop right there, Mister!"

A clanging alarm shattered the stillness into jagged fragments.

Roan spun. His eyes leaped to the long-range screen. A bright point of blue light glowed near the lower left corner. He jumped to the panel, twisted knobs; the image centered. He read figures from a ground-glass plate.

"Mass, five point seven million Standard Tons; velocity, point oh-nine light, absolute; nine-eighty MPH relative!"

"By the Nine Devils, that's it!" Henry Dread's voice choked. He stared across at Roan, then grabbed up the command mike, bawled into it:

"All hands, battle stations! Secure for action! All batteries, full-arm and count-down! Power section, stand by for maximum drain!"

A startled voice acknowledged as he tossed the mike aside, looked across at Roan. His eyes were wide, bright.

"This is it, Roan! That's a Niss ship of the line, as sure as I'm Henry Dread!" His eyes went on the screen. "Look at him! Look at the size of that devil! But we'll take him out! We'll take him!" He holstered his gun, drew a breath, turned to Roan.

"For the first time in five thousand years, a ship of the Imperial Navy is engaging the enemy! This is the hour I've lived for, Roan! We'll smash them like a ripe fruit!"

He raised his clenched fist. "And then nothing will stop us! Are you with me, boy?"

Roan's eyes held the long shape growing on the screen. "Let's break it off, Henry. We've established that we can get in range, and we have them located. When we reach Rim Headquarters, we can . . ."

"Damn Rim Headquarters!" Henry Dread roared. "This is *my* action! I tracked that filthy blot on the human sky halfway across the Eastern Arm, and now I'm going to burn it clean!"

"You're out of your mind, Henry," Roan snapped. "The damned thing outweighs us a hundred to one."

"Crazy, am I? I'll show you how a crazy man deals with the scum that challenged Terran power at its peak!"

Roan gripped Henry's shoulders, eyes on the screen. "It's not just you and me, Henry! We've got eighty crewmen below! They trust in you."

"To hell with those Gooks! This is what I was born for!" He broke off. A tremor rattled the coffee mug on the table. There was a sudden sense of pressure, of impending violence —

The deck rose up and struck Roan a mighty blow.

Instrument faces burst from the panel, screens exploded in smoke and white light. He had a glimpse of Henry Dread, spinning past him. A thunderous blast rolled endlessly, and then it drained away and Roan was whirling in echoing silence.

He was on the floor, looking up at a soot-smearred figure in rags, bleeding from a hundred cuts, hunched in the command chair, square fists clamped on the fire-control levers. Roan coughed, raised himself on one elbow, got to his hands and knees. The walls spun dizzily.

"How bad are we hit?" he choked.

"Filthy, sneaking Niss," Henry Dread chanted. "Let 'em have another broadside! Burn the devils out of the sky!"

Roan's eyes swept over the shattered panel, the smashed instruments, fixed on the controls in Henry Dread's hands. They hung slack and useless from broken mountings.

"Henry, let's get out of here. The lifeboats . . ."

"Maximum beam," Henry Dread shouted. "Forward batteries, fire! Fire, damn you!"

"We've got to get out." Roan staggered to his feet, grasped Henry's shoulder, pulling his away from the devastated control console. "Give the order!"

Wild eyes in a white face stared up at him. "Are you a fighting man of the Empire or a dirty Geek-loving spy?" Henry tore himself free, lunged for the command mike, dangling from its socket.

"All hands! We're closing with the enemy! Prepare to board."

Roan tore the mike from Henry.

"Abandon ship!" he shouted — and threw the dead mike from him as Henry yelled, swung a wild blow. He leaned aside, caught the other's wrists.

"Listen to me, Henry! We've got to get to the boats! We can survive to fight again!"

Henry stared into Roan's eyes, breathing hard. Swelling blisters puffed the left side of his face. His hair was singed to curled stubble. There was blood at the corner of his mouth. Quite suddenly, the wildness went out of his eyes. His arms relaxed; he staggered, caught himself.

"Two boats," he mumbled. "I've fitted 'em out as raiders. Armor, an infinite repeater each, two torpedos . . ." He pulled free of Roan's grip, pushed past him toward the lift doors, stumbling over the debris littering the deck.

"We're not beaten yet," he was shouting again. "Slip through their screens — hit 'em in close —" Smoke swirled from the lift as the doors clashed open. Henry Dread lurched inside, and Roan followed.

On the boat deck, a dense-packed mob of shouting, struggling crewmen fought for position at the two escape locks.

"It's Captain Dread!" someone yelled.

"Here's the Terry swine now!"

"Open up!"

"Get the boats clear!"

Henry slammed his way through the press, gun in hand. He smashed it down over the skull of a horned bruiser in blackened sheepskin, whirled to face the mob. Behind them, the glare of raging fires danced against the bulkhead visible at the end of the long corridor.

"Listen to me, you swabs," Henry

roared. "There's room in the two boats for every gutter-spawned rascal here — but by the nine tails of the fire-devil, you'll form up and board in a shipshape fashion or fry where you are! You there! Gungle! Let him be! Get back there! Askor! Take number one port!" The pirate chief bellowed his orders, and the frantic crewmen broke off their struggles, moved back, taking places in two ragged lines.

Roan pushed through them, coughing, blinking through the smoke.

"Here, where do you think you're going!" Henry Dread bellowed after him. But Roan was clear of the press, into the transverse corridor now. The smoke was less here. He ran, bounded down a companionway, leaped the crumpled form of a Minid with a short knife standing in his back. Someone's grudge settled, Roan thought as he dashed along the cargo level way.

He skidded to a halt at Iron Robert's cell. Through the layered smoke, he made out the massive figure, seated stolidly on the steel-slab bench.

"Iron Robert! I'll get you out! The keys are in Henry's cabin —"

"Just minute, Roan," the rumbling voice said calmly. "What happen? Iron Robert wake, hear engines dead, plenty smoke in room."

"We tried to attack a Niss warship! It hit us before we even got close, smashed our screens, burned out our circuitry. We're a hulk, on fire. We're abandoning ship!"

"You want Iron Robert go free out of cell? Don't need key, Roan.

Easy." The giant stood, brought his massive arms forward and snapped the chains as easily as loops of wet paper. He stooped, tore the ankle chains from the wall, then peeled the massive collars from his ankles.

"Stand back, Roan." He stepped to the grating, gripped the wrist-thick bars, ripped them aside with a screech of metal, forced his nine-foot bulk through the opening like a man brushing aside a beaded hanging, and stood in the corridor, looking down at Roan.

"You could have broken them any time," Roan stuttered. "You stayed there — in chains — for five years, on my account."

"Good place as any to sit, think. Now fire grow hot. Time to go, Roan."

Roan whirled, led the way along the smoke-fogged corridor, up the companionway, along to the boat deck. Half the crew had entered the lifeboats now. Two dead men lay on the deck, blasted at short range by Henry Dread's guns. The grizzled Terran caught sight of Roan.

"You're taking number two boat! Where in the nine Hells have you been?" Iron Robert lumbered from the smoke behind Roan.

"So! I should have figured!" The gun swiveled to cover the giant. "Get aboard, Roan! We're running out of time!"

"I'll load when my crew's loaded." Roan walked past Henry, ignoring the gun, to the gangway where burly humanoids pushed, crowding through the port.

"I said get aboard!" Henry bellowed.

There were half a dozen more crewmen. They pushed, shouting. Answering shouts came from inside the sixty-foot boat, cradled in its massive davits in the echoing, smoke-filled hold. A broad-faced Minid thrust his head from the lock of number one boat.

"We got a full load!" he roared. "You load any more in here, they'll be standin' on each others' shoulders!"

Henry's gun swung. "I don't care if you have to stack 'em like cordwood! Get 'em in, Askor!" He spun back to face Roan. "What the hell are you waiting for, boy? Get aboard that boat — now! Can't you feel that heat? This tub will blow any second."

"Iron Robert," Roan called past him. "Go aboard."

"There's no room for the hulk!" Henry shouted. "That was an order, Mister!"

Three frantic crewmen struggled at the port of Number two boat.

"No more room!" a hoarse voice bellowed from inside the lock. A broad foot swung out, kicked at one of the men. He fell from the gangway, and the two behind leaped forward. A fight developed in the lock. Henry Dread took a step, aimed, fired once, twice, a third time. Two dead crewmen fell, rolled off onto the hot deckplates. A third was lifted, tossed from inside.

"Fight your way in there, Roan," Henry yelled. "Shoot as many as you have to!"

"Iron Robert —"

"I said he's not going aboard!"

Roan and Henry Dread faced each other, ten feet apart across the blood-spattered deck. The pirate captain's gun was aimed unwaveringly at Roan's chest.

"He goes or I stay," Roan yelled above the clamor.

"For the last time — follow your orders!" Henry bellowed.

"Iron Robert, go aboard!" Roan started.

"Roan —" Iron Robert 'took a step, and Henry Dread wheeled. Blue fire lanced, splashed harmlessly from Iron Robert's chest.

"You board boat, like Henry Dread say, Roan," the giant rumbled.

Henry took a step backward, his gun covering Roan again.

"Listen to Iron Man," Henry grated. "He's telling you."

"Let him board, Henry!" Roan said.

"Over my dead body," Henry grated. "Not even you can —"

"Roan, no!" Iron Robert cried —

In a motion too quick to follow, Roan's hand had flashed to his gun, brought it up, fired, and the the pirate leader was staggering back, his knees folding, the gun dropping from his hand.

He seemed to fall slowly, like an ancient tree. He struck, rolled over, lay on his back with his eyes and mouth open, smoke rising from a charred wound on his chest.

"Roan! You big fool! No room on boat for Iron Robert! Now you kill Henry Dread, true Man who love you like son!"

Roan tossed the gun aside, went to the fallen pirate, knelt beside him. "Henry . . ." His voice caught in his throat. "I thought —"

"You wrong, Roan," Iron Robert's voice rumbled. "Henry Dread not shoot you in million years. Try save your life, foolish Roan. You go now, quick, before ship explode."

Henry Dread's open eyes flickered. They moved to Roan's face.

"You . . . in command . . . now," he gasped. "Maybe . . . right . . . Iron Man . . . okay . . ." He drew a ragged breath and coughed, tried to speak, coughed again. "Roan," he managed. "Terra . . ." The light died from his eyes like a mirror steaming over.

"Henry!" Roan shouted. Two hands like ship's grapples clamped on his arms, lifted him, thrust him toward the port.

"You go now, Roan, live, have long life, do, see many things. Think sometime of Iron Robert, and not be sad. Be happy. Remember many good times together."

"No, Iron Robert! You're coming!"

"No room. Iron Robert too big, not squeeze through port." Roan felt himself propelled through the narrow opening into the noise and animal stink of the crowded lifeboat. He fought to regain his feet, turned to see the wide figure of Iron Robert silhouetted against the blazing corridor. He lunged for the port, and a dozen pairs of horny hands caught at him, held him as he kicked and fought.

"You got to navigate this tub, Terry," someone yelled.

"Dog down that port," another shouted. Roan had a last glimpse of Iron Robert as hands hauled him back. The heavy port swung shut. Then he was thrust forward, passed from one to another, and then he was stumbling into the command compartment. Rough hands shoved him into the navigator's chair. The cold muzzle of a gun rammed against his cheek.

"Blast us out of here, fast," a heavy voice growled. Roan shook himself, forced his eyes to focus on the panel. As in a dream, his hands went out, threw levers, punched keys. The screens glowed into life.

Against the black of space, the long shape of the immense Niss war vessel glowed no more than a thousand miles distant, its unlighted bulk blotting out the stars.

Roan gathered himself, sat upright. His teeth were set in a grim caricature of a smile. He twirled dials, centered the image in the screen, read numerals from an instrument, punched a code into the master navigator panel, then with a decisive gesture thrust home the main drive control.

XXIV

Roan slumped in the padded seat, let his hands fall from the controls.

"We're clear," he said dully. "I don't think the other boat got away. I don't see it on our screens."

A clay-faced creature with the over-long arms and the tufted bristles of a Zorgian pushed through

the crew packed like salted fish in the bare functional shell.

"Listen to me, you muck-worms," he hooted in the queer, resonant voice that rose from his barrel-chest. "If we wanta make planetfall, we got to organize this scow."

"Who asked you?" a gap-toothed, olive-skinned crewman demanded. "I been thinking, and —"

"I'm senior Gook here," a bald, wrinkled Minid barked. "Now we're clear, we got to find the nearest world."

"If we don't wanta all die," a hoarse voice yelled, "we got to pick a new Cap'n!"

"I won't have no lousy Minid telling me —"

"Button yer gill-slits, you throw-back to a mud-fish —"

Roan stood, turned on the men. "All right," he roared — an astonishing shout that cut through the hubbub like a whiplash through cotton cloth.

"You can belay all this gab about who's in charge! I am! If you bone-heads can stop squabbling long enough to let a few facts into your skulls, you'll realize we're in trouble. Bad trouble!"

The Zorgian bellied up to Roan. "Listen, you Terry milk-sop —"

Roan hit the humanoid with a gut-punch, straightened him out with an upward slam of a hard fist, pushed him back among the crewmen.

"We've got no discharge lock," he grated, "so if anybody gets himself killed, the rest of us will have to live with the remains; think that over before you start any trouble."

Roan planted his fists on his hips. He was as tall as the tallest of the cut-throat crew, a head taller than the average. His black-red hair was vivid in the harsh light of the glare strip that lit the crowded compartment. Coarse faces, slack with fright, stared at him.

"How many of you have guns?" he demanded. There was muttering and shuffling. Roan counted hands.

"Sixteen. How many knives?" There was another show of hands, gripping blades that ranged from a broad, edge-nicked machete to a cruel, razor-edged hook.

"Where are we going?" someone called.

"We'll die aboard this can," a shrill cry came.

"We can't make planetfall." Roan's voice blanketed the others. "We're a long way from home, without fuel reserves or supplies." The crew were silent now, waiting. "But we've got our firepower intact. There are two thousand-megaton torps slung below decks and we mount a ten mm infinite repeater for'ard. And there's food, water, fuel and air just a few miles away." He stepped aside, pointed to the forward screen, where the Niss ship swelled now to giant size.

"We're inside her defenses now," he said. "They won't be expecting any visitors in a hundred ton dinghy."

"What do you mean?" a one-eyed man growled. "You're asking—"

"I'm asking nothing," Roan said harshly. "I'm telling you we're going in to attack the Niss ship."

TO BE CONTINUED



Dear Editor:

In the November issue of *If*, in Gordon Dickson's story, *Tiger Green*, I noticed a rather glaring error. The paragraph reads as follows:

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

A minor point that does not detract from the over-all high quality of the magazine—but let's keep authors and editor on their toes!—Edward Wilton.

* * *

Dear Editor:

As a high school student myself, I must disagree with S. Alan Simon. In the school I go to, I know of only two boys and a teacher who read science fiction with any degree of regularity. I have tried many times without success to make converts to science fiction among my friends, but every one of them seems to equate it with such things as *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* or *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. It isn't greatly loved among teenagers because most of them

don't know what it really is. Sure it produces stories like *A Canticle for Leibowitz* but how many people have ever heard of that story?

About your editorial *Air and Space*: it seems to me that many of the "UFologists" have taken on the appearance of a cult. I have read a number of books on the subject both pro and con, and by far the ones which made the most sense were those against. Every book I read defending UFOs was either limited to viciously attacking the Air Force or of the "contactee," group.

As to the formers' claim that 6,000 reporters can't all be wrong, this is my reply: I think that Orson Welles is responsible for a good deal of today's UFO sightings. Ever since he did that *War of the Worlds* program people have seen things in the sky. Another factor in the controversy is what I'll call The American Mind. This is the way that millions of plain ordinary people react to something mysterious. America is notorious for the gullibility of its people. An American will read someplace that scientists believe there is life on other planets. He will then remember a horror movie he saw once in which

Earth was invaded by hordes of slaving BEM's. Now he is left with the impression that anything that comes out of outer space is naturally going to be hostile. Then, along comes some saucer enthusiast who tells him that we are in the process of being visited by creatures from outer space who are friendly. This is vastly more comforting to him than the previous. So now he will desperately want to see one of these flying saucers and because he wants to he will. I imagine it's something like the Placebo Effect. I'm almost willing to bet that whatever UFO reports can't be explained as they have been in the past can be explained in this manner.

By the way, what frequency does WNBC operate on? I'd like to tune in on that program sometime.

Keep the Retief stories coming. I really enjoy that series; I think it's one of the best in science fiction today. I can't understand what anyone sees in the Gree stories, though. I read three of them, and frankly, I was rather bored.

One last thing: we know now that what the ancients used to call miracles were often what we now call UFOs. I wonder if we aren't in the same position as they were. We see something in the sky and try to explain it in terms of our present knowledge, but we really don't know just what it is. Perhaps the UFOs are something which is as far beyond our understanding as a spaceship would have been to a caveman. —Alan McArdle, 6 Nancy Rd., Concord, Mass.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Any further suggestion on how to improve your magazine would be

futile. After going up 32 pages and not going up on price, who can complain? Good work!

The idea of a story rating/readers' choice for some sort of prize — as is done elsewhere and has been suggested by some as an inclusion in your format — is impossible. Who can make distinctions between such *absolute* top writers as you have had in the last year or so?

A regional Southeast United States science-fiction organization may be formed. Anyone interested can obtain more information by writing me and waiting for me to get home from college to answer them.

One question: Is Cordwainer Smith a pseudonym — Irvin Koch, 835 Chattanooga Bank Building, Chattanooga, Tennessee 37916.

● He is not a pseudonym for any other science-fiction writer, if that's what you mean — but it's true that "Cordwainer Smith" is not the name this author was born with. — *Editor*

* * *

Dear Editor:

I think C. C. MacApp's new novel, *Prisoners of the Sky*, was excellent. It read like an aerial Horatio Hornblower, and I hope you print a sequel. — *Daniel R. Mercer, 2 Belmont Lane, Willingboro, New Jersey.*

● That about does it for another month. Note our 'first' for this month, a story by a previously unpublished author named Carroll J. Clem. Note too that we've added a guest editorial — this one by Lester del Rey — on the principle that we've been talking to you every month for a long time now, and it's about time we moved over and gave someone else a shot at it.

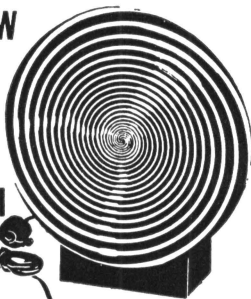
See you next month. — The Editor

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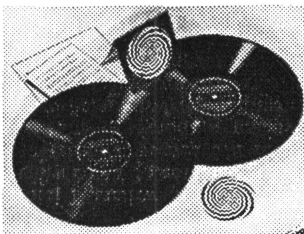
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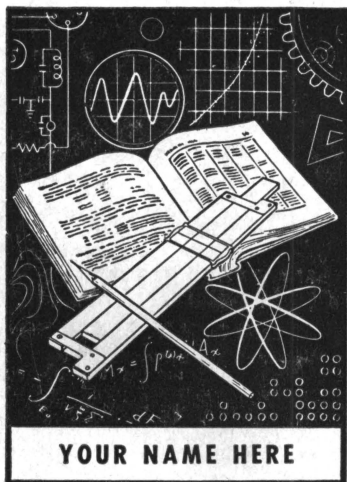
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