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Cover by CHAFFEE from ROGUE STAR

IF published monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 18, No. 8, Main Office: 421 Hudson Street, New York, 10014. 60c per copy. Subscription 12 issues \$6.00 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America and Central America and U.S. Possessions, elsewhere \$7.00. Second-class postage paid at New York, New York, and at additional mailing offices. Copyright by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1968. All rights, including translation reserved. All material must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U.S.A. by the Guinn Company, New York, N.Y. 10014

WHADDYA READ?

by H. L. GOLD

If I had made my way into professional writing and editing via fandom, perhaps I would have more sympathy for Isaac Asimov's well and simply written: "Science fiction tends to be lacking in science these days . . . I disapprove . . . I think science fiction isn't really fiction if it lacks science" . . . and Sam Moskowitz's eldritch prose poem: "It is to be hoped that these examples (three stories of the early 1930's) may make a significant enough impression so as to bring about not a substitution of this type of story for what is being written today, but an *incorporation* of the elements they contain into the main body of modern science fiction."

These words appeared in the August 1967 issue of *Galaxy*. If you were its editor, as I was for its first 11 years, you would learn to translate these mild-seeming requests into fanese: "Science fiction ain't got no more *sensa wonda* no more!" In short, let's have stories like those of the 1930's.

I wasn't a fan then. I was one of the writers of that period. And I can tell you that most of what others and I wrote then was pretty dreadful.

Want a typical specimen? Here is *part of a footnote* from my first published story, following two solid pages of pseudo-scientific dialogue:

"Lanse placed the masses of the two suns as being nearly equal. Then, since we know that the velocity of our sun was 18 miles per

second before collision, and 169,000 after, and the masses of the stars equal, we can use the following formula to find an indication to the result.

"Let m_1 and m_2 equal the masses of the two stars; v_1 and v_2 the respective velocities before collision; u_1 and u_2 the corresponding velocities after collision:

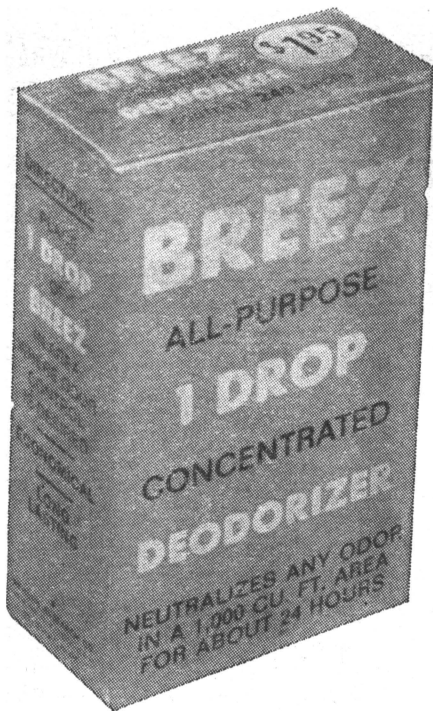
$m_1v_1 + m_2v_2 = m_1u_1 + m_2u_2$ (where the velocities of the sun are known before and after collision, and the masses assumed to be equal).

"Consequently, the other star now travels at 18 mps in the opposite direction from which it came; this we know because, in collisions of *perfectly* elastic bodies, the momentum before collision equals momentum after collision.

"The intervening hyperspace is accountable for the lack of a true catastrophe, and the terrific strain the formula indicates when the sun was reversed in its path, for the fourth-dimensional thrust."

Isn't that awful? Worse yet, I had everything that ever lived, was living or would live all occupying the earth at the same time — which was typical of almost all these cosmic stories. And worse still, nobody, from the editor on down to the young Isaac of those days, noticed my cosmic error: It was space that got warped, not hyperspace — whatever, if anything, *that* may turn out to be.

Dr. Asimov notes that it is almost impossible to make a good living out



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of science fiction alone. He omits the fact that of the tens of thousands of writers in this country, only a tiny percentage earns \$15,000 or more a year by writing of any kind. One fifth of that amount in the 1930's was a very good living. I can think of at least a dozen then and more now who qualify as full-time s-f writers making a good living. A dozen or two may not seem like much, but consider the fact that no more than a hundred or so writers supply all the s.f. at a given time. What he should have said is that it's hard to earn a living by writing.

To get back to what these two distinguished men, one a professional fan and the other an ex-fan professional, are asking for:

Every editor in those primitive days demanded — and got — such story-stoppers as my footnote, which made s.f. so hard to write and harder to read. We plundered college textbooks, newspapers, magazines for springboards, so that whenever we wrote, for example a time-travel story, we threw in the Lorenz-Fitzgerald contraction just as a starter, then added the latest thinking on the matter — all of it such ho-ho-hokum as time being a stream that can be ridden up, down or sideways, or film footage that one could run forward or backward, or a spiral that could be ascended or descended, or — isn't that enough? If you can't imagine going through bunk like that every last time you started reading a story, try whole issues of those magazines. Not a random story here and there, but whole issues, just as you would have bought and read them then.

But besides being expensive, it's not necessary. You can find the old formula of hero vs villain in cosmic crime, cosmic disasters, cosmic mon-

sters from everywhere in the movies and TV of today, which follow the editorial requirements of the 1930's as if there were no better, more modern ones.

Of course there were good s.f. stories then, just as there are good s.f. movies now, but the proportion of good to bad is pitiful and discouraging. At least half of the reason is the witless demand for "explanations" — as if the audience weren't willing to believe everything on the author's say-so provided he offers a good story. Not only do these "explanations" hold up the action, they almost inevitably force something cosmic on the author.

There, I've stated my case against the 1930's. Now let me state my case for the 1960's, using the issue that bore the accusations of my esteemed adversaries:

Hawksbill Station by Robert Silverberg: "A late Cambrian landscape," said Barrett quietly. "This would be a geologist's dream, except that geologists don't tend to become political prisoners, it seems. Out in front is the Appalachian Geosyncline. It's a strip of rock a few hundred miles wide and a few thousand miles long, from the Gulf of Mexico to Newfoundland. To the east we've got the Atlantic. A little way to the west we've got the Inland Sea. Somewhere two thousand miles to the west there's the Cordilleran Geosyncline, that's going to be California and Washington and Oregon someday."

From *Ginny Wrapped in the Sun* by R. A. Lafferty: "Yes, I've got a multidimensional daughter, Minden. Also a neighbor who is either deep or murky. You keep feeding me snatches of that paper of yours so

I suppose that you want to excite my curiosity about it. And the title — *The Contingent Mutation*. What is it? Who is?" "We are, Dismas. We are contingent, conditional, temporary, makeshift and improbable in our species The proposition of my paper is that man is descended, recently and by incredible mutation, from the most impossible of ancestors, Xauenthropus or Xauen Man. The answer of that descent scares me." "Minden, are you out of your mind? Where is the descent? Where is the mutation? . . . One look at Xauen, and everybody saw instantly that the Neanderthals and Grimaldi and Cro-Magnon were all close cousins of the same species — ourselves. They were the template, the master key. They unriddled every riddle. We saw why the chin or lack of chin was only a racial characteristic. We saw it all. There is nothing to distinguish the Xauens from ourselves except that their adults were badly made ganglers, and probably unhealthy. The Xauens are modern men. They are ourselves."

The non-fact article *Travelers Guide to MegaHouston*, by H. H. Hollis, could be quoted from end to end, from Architecture to Zoology, including air-conditioning innovations, handling of smog and pollution, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, in a brilliant extrapolation of the Houston Astrodome to MegaHouston.

From *The Being in the Tank* by Ted Thomas: "Joe Beam said, 'An ammonia and hydrazine environment below zero plus a gamma photon dosage rate of better than 40 megarands per hour, and there he stands like he's admiring Niagara Falls. What is that thing?' Kramer, Beam's chief assistant, spoke up. 'Don't forget the pressure. That atmosphere

in there is down to something like ten to the minus fifth millimeters of mercury. Why doesn't he explode?'"

From *The Great Stupids* by Miriam Allen deFord: "The year 2116: that was when suddenly every human being in the world under 50 years of age became completely unable to reason. And only Daniel Vollard knew why" . . . a proposition that Miss deFord answers with a slight bow to chemistry and sure knowledge of physiopsychology.

From *To Outlive Eternity* by Poul Anderson: "The speed of light can be approached, but nobody possessing rest mass can quite attain it. Smaller and smaller grew the increments of velocity by which *Leonora Christene* neared that impossible ultimate. Thus it might have seemed that the universe which her crew observed could not be distorted further. Aberration could, at most, displace a star 45°; Doppler effect might infinitely redden the light from astern, but could only double the frequency of light ahead. But there was no limit on tau, and that was the measure of change in perceived space and experienced time. Accordingly, there was no limit to the violet shift either; and the cosmos fore and aft could shrink toward a zero thickness wherein all the galaxies were crowded."

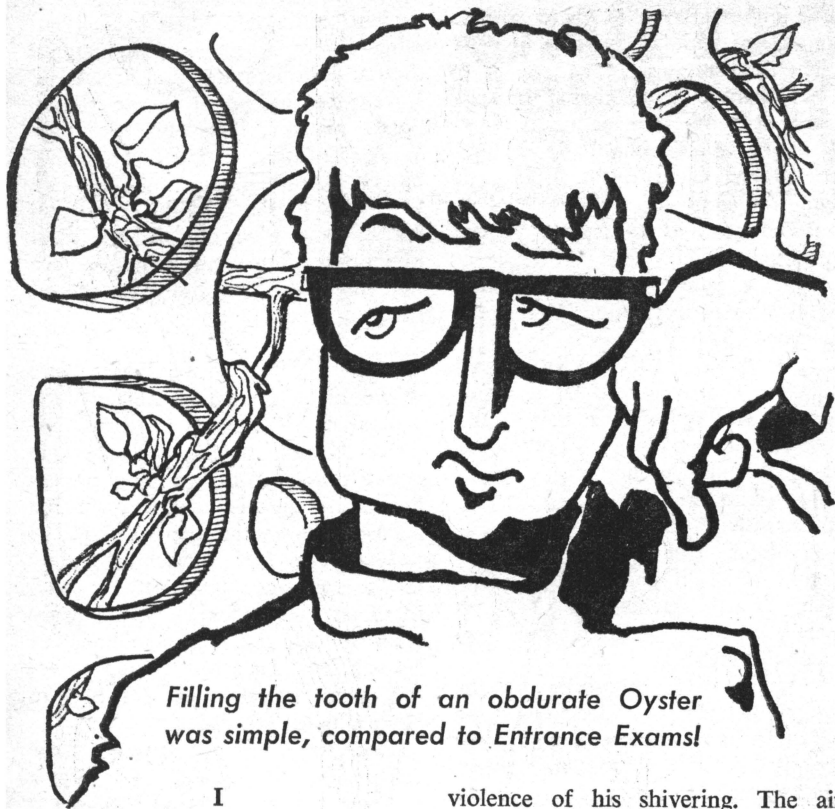
The remarkable thing about these excerpts is that they are not a bit remarkable. They all come from the very same issue in which Asimov and Moskowitz made their conditioned-reflex pleas. What am I proving? That Moskowitz and Asimov and their fanish colleagues do NOT read present-day science fiction. Pay them no heed. Modern s.f. is better than it ever was. — H. L. GOLD

GETTING THROUGH UNIVERSITY

by PIERS ANTHONY



VAUGHN BODE



*Filling the tooth of an obdurate Oyster
was simple, compared to Entrance Exams!*

I

He entered the booth when his turn came and waited somewhat apprehensively for it to perform. The panel behind shut him in and ground tight.

The interior was dark and unbearably hot, making sweat break out and stream down his body. Then the temperature dropped so precipitously that the moisture crystallized upon his skin and flaked away with the

violence of his shivering. The air grew thick and bitter, then gaspingly rare. Light blazed, then faded into impenetrable black. A complete sonic spectrum of noise smote him, followed by crushing silence. His nose reacted to a gamut of irritation. He sneezed.

Abruptly it was spring on a clover hillside, waft of nectar and hum of bumblebee. The air was refreshingly brisk. The booth had zeroed in on his metabolism.

"Identity?" a deceptively feminine voice inquired from nowhere, and a sign flashed with the word printed in italics, English.

"My name is Dillingham," he said clearly, remembering his instructions. "I am a male mammalian biped evolved on planet Earth. I am applying for admission to the School of Prosthodontics as an initiate of the appropriate level."

After a pause the booth replied sweetly: "Misinformation. You are a quadruped."

"Correction," Dillingham said quickly. "I am *evolved* from quadruped." He spread his hands and touched the wall. "Technically tetrapod, anterior limbs no longer employed for locomotion. Digits possess sensitivity, dexterity —"

"Noted." But before he could breathe relief, it had another objection: "Earth planet has not yet achieved galactic accreditation. Application invalid."

"I have been sponsored by the Dental League of Electrolus," he said. He saw already how far he would have gotten without that potent endorsement.

"Verified. Provisional application granted. Probability of acceptance after preliminary investigation: twenty-one per cent. Fee: Thirteen thousand, two hundred five dollars, four cents, seven mills, payable immediately."

"Agreed," he said, appalled at both the machine's efficiency in adapting to his language and conventions and the cost of application. He knew that the fee covered only the seventy-hour investigation of his

credentials; if finally admitted as a student, he would have to pay another fee of as much as a hundred thousand dollars for the first term. If rejected, he would get no rebate.

His sponsor, Electrolus, was paying for it, finding it expedient to ship him here rather than to keep him where his presence might be an embarrassment. Electrolus did not want him on hand to give further advice that might show up the oversights of its own practioners.

If he failed to gain admission, there would be no consequence — except that his chance to really improve himself would be gone. He could never afford training at the University on his own, even if the sponsorship requirement should be waived. He had traveled all over the galaxy since unexpectedly leaving Earth, solving alien dental problems by luck and approximation, but he was not the type of man to relish such uncertainties. He had to have advanced training.

Even so, he hoped that what the university had to offer was worth it. Over thirteen thousand dollars had already been drained from the Electrolus account here by his verbal agreement — for a twenty-one per cent probability of acceptance!

"Present your anterior limb, buccal surface forward."

He put out his left hand again, deciding that buccal in this context equated with the back of the hand. He was nervous in spite of the assurance he had been given that this process was harmless. A mist ap-

peared around it, puffed and vanished, leaving an iridescent band clasped around, or perhaps bonded into, the skin of his wrist.

The opposite side of the booth opened, and he stepped into a lighted corridor. He held up his hand and saw that the left of it was bright while the right was dead. This remained even when he twisted his wrist, the glow independent of his motion. He proceeded left.

At the end of the passage was a row of elevators. Other creatures of diverse proportions moved toward these, guided by glows on their appendages. His own guided him to a particular unit. Its panel was open, and he entered.

The door closed as he took hold of the supportive bars. The unit moved, not up or down as he had expected, but backwards. He clung desperately to the support as the fierce acceleration hurled him at the door.

There was something like a port-hole in the side through which he could make out racing lights and darknesses. If these were stationary sources of contrast, his velocity was phenomenal. His stomach jumped as the vehicle dipped and tilted; then it was plummeting down as though dropped from a cliff.

Dillingham was reminded of an amusement park he had visited as a child on Earth; there had been a ride through the dark something like this. He was sure that the transport system of the university had not been designed for thrills, however; it merely reflected the fact that there was a long way to go and many others in

line. The elevators would not function at all for any creature not wearing University identification. Established galactics took such things in stride without even noticing.

Finally it decelerated and stopped. The door opened, and he stepped dizzily into his residence for the duration, suppressing incipient motion-sickness.

The apartment was attractive enough. The air was sweet, the light moderate, the temperature comfortable. Earthlike vines decorated the trellises, and couches fit for humanoids were placed against the walls. In the center of the main room stood a handsome but mysterious device.

Something emerged from an alcove. It was a creature resembling an oversized pincushion with legs, one of which sported the ubiquitous iridescent band. It honked.

"Greetings, roommate," a speaker from the central artifact said. Dillingham realized that it was a multiple-dialect translator.

"How do you do," he said. The translator honked, and the pincushion came all the way into the room.

"I am from no equivalent term," it said in tootles.

Dillingham hesitated to comment, until he realized that the confusion was the translator's fault. There was no name in English for Pincushion's planet, since Earth knew little of galactic geography and nothing of interspecies commerce. "Substitute 'Pincushion' for the missing term," he advised the machine, "and make the same kind of adjustment for any of my terms which may not be ren-

derable into Pincushion's dialect." He turned to the creature. "I am from Earth. I presume you are also here to make application for admittance to the School of Prosthodontics?"

The translator honked, once. Dillingham waited, but that was all.

Pincushion honked. "Yes, of course. I'm sure all beings assigned to this dormitory are 1.0 gravity, oxygen-imbibing ambulators applying as students. The administration is very careful to group compatible species."

Apparently a single honk could convey a paragraph. Perhaps there were frequencies he couldn't hear. Then again, it might be the inefficiency of his own tongue. "I'm new to all this," he admitted. "I know very little of the ways of the galaxy, or what is expected of me here."

"I'll be happy to show you around," Pincushion said. "My planet has been sending students here for, well, not a long time, but several centuries. We even have a couple of instructors here, at the lower levels." There was a note of pride in the rendition. "Maybe one of these millennia we'll manage to place a supervisor."

Already Dillingham could imagine the prestige that would carry.

II

At that moment the elevator-vehicle disgorged another passenger. This was a tall oak-like creature with small leaf-like tentacles fluttering at its sides. The bright University band circled the center mark. It looked at the decorative vines of the apartment and spoke with the

whistle of wind through dead branches: "Appalling captivity."

The sound of the translator seemed to bring its attention to the other occupants. "May your probability of acceptance be better than mine," it said by way of greeting. "I am a humble modest branch from Treetrunk (the translator learned quickly) and despite my formidable knowledge of prosthodontica my percentage is a mere sixty."

Somewhere in there had been a honk, so Dillingham knew that simultaneous translations were being performed. This device made the little dual-track transcoders he had used before seem primitive.

"You are more fortunate than I," Pincushion replied. "I stand at only forth-eight per cent."

They both looked at Dillingham. Pincushion had knobby stalks that were probably eyes, and Treetrunk's apical disks vibrated like the greenery of a poplar sapling.

"Twenty-one per cent," he said sheepishly.

There was an awkward silence. "Well, these are only estimates based upon the past performance of your species," Pincushion said. "Perhaps your predecessors were not apt."

"I don't think I *had* any predecessors," Dillingham said. "Earth isn't accredited yet." He hesitated to admit that Earth hadn't even achieved true space travel. He had never been embarrassed for his planet before, though when he thought about it, he realized that he had never had occasion to consider himself a planetary citizen before, either.

"Experience and competence count

more than some machine's guess, I'm sure," Treetrunk said. "I've been practicing on my world for six years. If you're —"

"Well, I did practice for ten years on Earth."

"You see — that will probably triple your probability when they find out," Pincushion said encouragingly. "They just gave you a low probability because no one from your planet has applied before."

He hoped they were right, but his stomach didn't settle. He doubted that as sophisticated a setup as the galactic University would have to stoop to such crude approximation. The administration already knew quite a bit about him from the preliminary application, and his ignorance of galactic method was sure to count heavily against him. "Are there — references here?" he inquired. "Facilities? If I could look them over —"

"Good idea!" Pincushion said. "Come — the operatory is this way, and there is a small museum of equipment."

There was. The apartment had an annex equipped with an astonishing array of dental technology. There was enough for him to study for years before he could be certain of mastery. He decided to concentrate on the racked texts first, after learning that they could be fed into the translator for ready assimilation in animated projection.

"Standard stuff," Treetrunk said, making a noise like chafing bark. "I believe I'll take an estivation."

As Dillingham returned to the

main room with an armful of the boxlike texts, the elevator loosed another creature. This was a four-legged cylinder with a head tapered like that of an anteater and peculiarly thin-jointed arms terminating in a series of thorns.

It occurred to him that such physical structure would be virtually ideal for dentistry. The thorns were probably animate rotary burrs, and the elongated snout might reach directly into the patient's mouth for inspection of close work without the imposition of a mirror. After the initial introductions, he asked Ant-eater how his probability stood.

"Ninety-eight per cent," the creature replied in an offhand manner. "Our kind seldom miss. We're specialized for this sort of thing."

Specialization — there was the liability of the human form, Dillingham thought. Men were among the most generalized of Earth's denizens, except for their developed brains — and obviously these galactics had similar intellectual qualities, and had been in space so long they were able to adapt physically for something as narrow as dentistry. The outlook for him remained bleak.

A robotlike individual and a native from Electrolus completed the apartment's complement. He hadn't known that his sponsor-planet was entering one of its own in the same curriculum, though it didn't affect him particularly.

Six diverse creatures, counting himself — all dentists on their home worlds, all specializing in prosthodontics, all eager to pass the en-

trance examinations. All male, within reasonable definition — the university was very strict about the proprieties. This was only one apartment in a small city reserved for applicants. The university proper occupied the entire planet.

They learned all about it that evening at the indoctrination briefing, guided to the lecture-hall by a blue glow manifested on each identification band. The hall was monstrous; only the oxygen-breathers attended this session, but they numbered almost fifty thousand. Other halls catered to differing life-forms simultaneously.

The university graduated over a million highly skilled dentists every term and had a constant enrollment of twenty times that number. Dillingham didn't know how many terms it took to graduate — the program might be variable — but the incidence of depletion seemed high. Even the total figure represented a very minor proportion of the dentistry in the galaxy. This proportion was extremely important, however, since mere admission as a freshman student required qualifications that would equip the individual as a graduate elsewhere.

There were generally only a handful of University graduates on any civilized planet. These were automatically granted life tenures as instructors at the foremost planetary colleges, or established as consultants for the most challenging cases available. Even the dropouts had healthy futures.

Instructors for the University itself were drawn from its own most gifted

graduates. The top one hundred, approximately — of each class of a million — were siphoned off for special training and retained, and a greater number was recruited from the lower ranking body of graduates: individuals who demonstrated superior qualifications in subsequent galactic practice. A few instructors were even recruited from non-graduates, when their specialties were so restricted and their skills so great that such exceptions seemed warranted.

The administrators came largely from the University of Administration, dental division, situated on another planet; they wielded enormous power. The University President was the virtual dictator of the planet, and his pronouncements had the force of law in dental matters throughout the galaxy. Indeed, Dillingham thought as he absorbed the information, if there were any organization that approached galactic overlordship, it was the association of University Presidents. They had the authority — by their own declaration — and the power to quarantine any world found guilty of willful malpractice in any of the established University fields, and since any quarantine covered *all* fields, it was devastating. An abstract was run showing the consequence of the last absolute quarantine: within a year that world had collapsed in anarchy. What followed was not at all pretty.

Dillingham saw that the level of skill engendered by University training did indeed transcend any ordinary practice. No one on Earth

had any inkling of the techniques considered commonplace here. His imagination was saturated with the marvel of it all. His dream of knowledge for the sake of knowledge was a futile one; such training was far too valuable to be reserved for the satisfaction of the individual. No wonder graduates became public servants! The investment was far less monetary than cultural and technological, for the sponsoring planet.

His roommates were largely unimpressed. "Everyone knows the universities wield galactic power," Tree-trunk said. "This is only one school of many, and hardly the most important. Take Finance, now — "

"Or Transporation," Pincushion added. "Every spaceship, every stellar conveyor, designed and operated by graduates of — "

"Or Communication," Anteater said. "Comm U has several campuses, even, and they're not dinky little planets like this one, either. Civilization is impossible without communications. What's a few bad teeth, compared to that?"

Dillingham was shocked. "But all of you are dentists. How can you take such tremendous knowledge and responsibility so casually?"

"Oh, come now," Anteater said. "The technology of dentistry hasn't changed in millennia. It's a staid, dated institution. Why get excited?"

"No point in letting ideology go to our heads," Tree-trunk agreed. "I'm coming here because this training will set me up for life on my home world. I won't have to set up a practice at all; I'll be a consultant. It's the best training in the galaxy

— we all know that — but we must try to keep it in perspective."

The others signified agreement. Dillingham saw that he was a minority of one. All the others were interested in the training not for its own sake but for the monetary and prestigious benefits they could derive from a degree.

And all of them had much higher probabilities of admission than he. Was he wrong?

III

Next day they undertook a battery of field tests. Dillingham had to use the operatory equipment to perform specified tasks: excavation, polishing, placement of amalgam, measurement, manufacture of assorted impressions — on a number of familiar and unfamiliar jaws. He had to diagnose and prescribe. He had to demonstrate facility in all phases of laboratory work — facility he now felt woefully deficient in. The equipment was versatile, and he had no particular difficulty adjusting to it, but it was so well made and precise that he was certain his own abilities fell far short of those for whom it was intended.

The early exercises were routine, and he was able to do them easily in the time recommended. Gradually, however, they became more difficult, and he had to concentrate as never before to accomplish the assignments at all, let alone on schedule. There were several jaws so alien that he could not determine their modes of action and had to pass them by even though the treatment seemed simple

enough. But he remembered his recent experiences with galactic dentition, and the unsuspected mechanisms of seemingly ordinary teeth, and so refused to perform repairs even on a dummy jaw that might be more harmful than no repair at all.

During the rest breaks he chatted with his companions, all in neighboring operatories, and learned to his dismay that none of them were having difficulties. "How can you be sure of the proper occlusal on #17?" he asked Treetrunk. "There was no upper mandible present for comparison."

"That was an Oopoo jaw," Treetrunk rustled negligently. "Oopooos have no uppers. There's just a bony plate, perfectly regular. Didn't you know that?"

"You recognize all the types of jaw in the galaxy?" Dillingham asked him, hardly crediting it.

"Certainly. I have read at least one text on the dentures of every accredited species. We Treetrunks never forget."

Eidetic memory! How could a mere man compete with a creature who was able to peruse a million or more texts and retain every detail of each? He understood more and more plainly why his probability of success was so low. He was beginning to wonder whether it had not been set unrealistically high, in fact.

"What was #36, the last one?" Pincushion inquired. "I didn't recognize it, and I thought I knew them all."

Treetrunk became slightly wilted. "I never saw that one before,"

he admitted. "It must have been extra-galactic, or a theoretic simulacrum designed to test our extrapolation."

"The work was obvious, however," Anteater observed. "I polished it off in four seconds."

"Four seconds!" All the others were amazed.

"Well, we *are* adapted for this sort of routine," Anteater said patronizingly. "Our burrs are built in, and all the rest of it. My main delay is generally in diagnosis. But #36 was a straightforward labial cavity requiring a plastoid substructure and metallic overlay, heated to 540 degrees Centigrade for thirty-seven microseconds."

"Thirty-nine microseconds," Treetrunk corrected him, a shade smugly. "You forgot to allow for the redshift in the overhead beam. But that's still remarkable time."

"I employed my natural illumination, naturally," Anteater said, just as smugly, flashing a yellow light from his snout. "No distortion there. But I believe my alloy differs slightly from what is considered standard, which may account for the difference. Your point is good, nevertheless. I hope none of the others forgot that adjustment?"

The Electrolyte settled an inch. "I did," he confessed.

Dillingham was too stunned to be despondent. Had all of them diagnosed #36 so readily, and were they all so perceptive as to be automatically aware of the wavelength of a particular beam of light? Or were there such readings available through the equipment, that he didn't

know about, and wouldn't be competent to use if he *did* know? He had pondered that jaw for the full time allotted and finally given it up untouched. True, the cavity had appeared to be perfectly straightforward, but it was too clean to ring true. Could —

The buzzer sounded for the final session, and they dispersed to their several compartments.

Dillingham was contemplating #41 with mounting frustration when he heard Treetrunk, via the translator extension, call to Anteater. "I can't seem to get this S-curve excavation right," he complained. "Would you lend me your snout?"

A joke, of course, Dillingham thought. Discussion of cases after they were finished was one thing, but consultation during the exam —!

"Certainly," Anteater replied. He trotted past Dillingham's unit and entered Treetrunk's compartment. There was the muted beep of his high-speed proboscis drill. "You people confined to manufactured tools labor under such a dreadful disadvantage," he remarked. "It's a wonder you can qualify at all!"

"Hmph," Treetrunk replied good-naturedly . . . and later returned the favor by providing a spot diagnosis based on his knowledge of an obscure chapter of an ancient text, to settle a case that had Anteater in doubt. "It isn't as though we were competing against each other," he said. "Every point counts!"

Dillingham ploughed away, upset. Of course there had been nothing in

the posted regulations forbidding such procedure, but he had taken it as implied. Even if galactic ethics differed from his own in this respect, he couldn't see his way clear to draw on any knowledge or skill other than his own. Not in this situation.

Meanwhile, #41 was a different kind of problem. The directive, instead of saying, "Do what is necessary," as it had for the #36 they had discussed during the break, was this time specific. "Create an appropriate mesioclusodistal metal-alloy inlay for the afflicted fifth molar in this humanoid jaw."

This was perfectly feasible. Despite its oddities as judged by Earthly standards, it was humanoid and therefore roughly familiar to him. So men did not have more than three molars in a row; he now knew that other species *did*. He had by this time mastered the sophisticated equipment well enough to do the job in a fraction of the time he had required on Earth. He could have the inlay shaped and cast within the time limit.

The only trouble was his experience, and observation indicated that the specified reconstruction was *not* proper in this case. It would require the removal of far more healthy dentin than was necessary, for one thing. In addition, there was evidence of persistent inflammation in the gingival tissue that could herald periodontal disease.

He finally disobeyed the instructions and placed a temporary filling. He hoped he would be given the opportunity to explain his action; though he was afraid he had already failed the exam. There was just too

much to do, he knew too little, and the competition was too strong.

IV

The field examination was finished in the afternoon, and nothing was scheduled for that evening. Next day the written exam — actually a combination of written, verbal and demonstrative questions — was due, and everyone except Treetrunk was deep in the texts. Treetrunk was dictating a letter home, the translator blanked out so that his narration would not disturb the others.

Dillingham pored over the three-dimensional pictures and captions produced by the tomes while listening to the accompanying lecture. There was so much to master in such a short time! It was fascinating — but he could handle only a tiny fraction of it. He wondered what phenomenal material remained to be presented in the courses themselves, since all the knowledge of the galaxy seemed to be required just to pass the entrance exam. Tooth transplantation? Tissue regeneration? Restoration of the enamel itself, rather than crude metal fillings?

The elevator opened. A creature rather like a walking oyster emerged. Its yard-wide shell opened to reveal eyestalks and a comparatively dainty mouth. "This is the — dental yard?" it inquired timorously.

"Great purple quills!" Pincushion swore quietly. "One of those insidious panhandlers. I thought they'd cleared such obtusities out long ago."

Treetrunk, closest to the door, looked up and switched on his sec-

tion of the translator. "The whole planet is dental, idiot," he snapped after the query had been repeated for him. "This is a private dormitory."

The oyster persisted. "But you are off-duty dentists? I have a terrible toothache —"

"We are *applicants*," Treetrunk informed it imperiously. "What you want is the clinic. Please leave us alone."

"But the clinic is closed. Please — my jaw pains me so that I can not eat. I am an old clam —"

Treetrunk impatiently switched off the translator and resumed his letter. No one else said anything.

Dillingham could not let this pass. Treetrunk had disconnected himself, but the translator still functioned for the other languages. "Isn't there some regular dentist you can see who can relieve the pain until morning? We are studying for a very important examination."

"I have no credit — no money for private service," Oyster wailed. "The clinic is closed for the night, and my tooth —"

Dillingham looked at the pile of texts before him. He had so little time, and the material was so important. He had to make a good score tomorrow to mitigate today's disaster.

"Please," Oyster whined. "It pains me so —"

He gave up. He was not sure regulations permitted it, but he had to do something. There was a chance he could at least relieve the pain. "Come with me," he said.

Pincushion waved his pins, actually sensitive cilia capable of intricate maneuvering. "Not in our operatory," he protested. "How can we concentrate with that going on?"

Dillingham restrained his unreasonable anger and took the patient to the elevator. After some errors, he located a vacant testing operatory elsewhere in the application section. Fortunately the translators were everywhere, so he could converse with the creature and clarify its complaint.

"The big flat one," it said as it propped itself awkwardly in the chair and opened its shell. "It hurts."

He took a look. The complaint was valid; most of the teeth had conventional plasticene filings, but one had somehow been dislodged from the proximal surface of a molar: a Class II restoration. The gap was packed with rancid vegetable matter — seaweed? — and was undoubtedly quite uncomfortable.

"You must understand," he cautioned the creature, "that I am not a regular dentist here, or even a student. I have neither the authority nor the competence to do any work of a permanent nature on your teeth. All I can do is clean out the cavity and attempt to relieve the pain so that you can get along until the clinic opens in the morning. Then an authorized dentist can do the job properly. Do you understand?"

"It hurts," Oyster repeated.

Dillingham located the creature's planet in the directory and punched out the formula for a suitable anesthetic. The dispenser gurgled and rolled out a cylinder and swab. He

opened the former and dabbed with the latter around the affected area, restraining his irritation at the patient's evident inability to sit still even for this momentary operation. While waiting for it to take effect, he requested more information from the translator, which he had discovered was also quite a versatile instrument.

"Dominant species of Planet Oyster," the machine reported. "Highly intelligent, non-specialized, emotionally stable life-form." Dillingham tried to reconcile this with what he had already observed of his patient, and concluded that individuals must vary considerably from the norm. He listened to further vital information, and soon had a fair idea of Oyster's general nature and the advisable care of his dentition. There did not seem to be any factors inhibiting his treatment of this complaint.

He applied a separator, over the patient's protest, and cleaned out the impacted debris with a spoon excavator without difficulty, but Oyster shied away at sight of the rotary diamond burr. "Hurts!" he protested.

"I have given you adequate local anesthesia," Dillingham explained. "You should feel nothing except a slight vibration in your jaw, which will not be uncomfortable. This is a standard drill, the same kind I'm sure you've seen many times before." As he spoke, he marveled at what he now termed standard. The burr was shaped like nothing — literally — on Earth and rotated at 150,000 r.p.m. — several times the maximum employed back home. It was awesomely efficient.

Oyster shut mouth and shell firmly. "Hurts!" his whisper emerged through clenched defenses.

Dillingham thought despairingly of the time this was costing him. If he didn't return to his texts soon, he would forfeit his remaining chance to pass the written exam.

He sighed and put away the power tool. "Perhaps I can clean it with the hand instruments," he said. "I'll have to use this rubber dam, though, since this will take more time."

One look at the patient convinced him otherwise. Regretfully he put away the rubber square that would have kept the field of operation dry and clean while he worked.

He had to break through the overhanging enamel with a chisel, the patient wincing every time he lifted the mallet and doubling the necessity for the assistant he didn't have. A power mallet would have helped, but that, too, was out. It was a tedious and difficult task. He had to scrape off every portion of the ballroom cavity from an awkward angle, hardly able to see what he was doing since he needed a third hand for the dental mirror.

It *would* have to be a Class II — jammed in the side of the molar facing the adjacent molar, both sturdy teeth with very little give. A Class II was the very worst restoration to attempt in makeshift fashion. He could have accelerated the process by doing a slipshod job, but it was not in him to skip even when he knew it was only for a night. Half an hour passed before he performed the toilet: blowing out the loose debris

with a jet of warm air, swabbing the interior with alcohol, drying again.

"Now I'm going to block this with a temporary wax," he told Oyster. "This will not stand up to intensive chewing, but should hold you comfortably until morning." Not that the warning was likely to make much difference. The trouble had obviously started when the original fillings came loose, but it had been weeks since that had happened. Evidently the patient had not bothered to have it fixed until the pain became unbearable — and now that the pain was gone, Oyster might well delay longer, until the work had to be done all over again. The short-sighted refuge from initial inconvenience was hardly a monopoly of Earthly sufferers.

"No," Oyster said, jolting him back to business. "Wax tastes bad."

"This is guaranteed tasteless to most life-forms, and it is only for the night. As soon as you report to the clinic —"

"Tastes bad!" the patient insisted, starting to close his shell.

Dillingham wondered again just what the translator had meant by "highly intelligent . . . emotionally stable." He kept his peace and dialed for amalgam.

"Nasty color," Oyster said.

"But this is pigmented red, to show that the filling is intended as temporary. It will hardly show, in this location. I don't want the clinic to have any misunderstanding."

The shell clamped all the way shut, nearly pinning his fingers. "Nasty color!"



VAUGHN
BODE

It occurred to him that more was involved than capricious difficulty. Did this patient intend to go to the clinic at all? Oyster might be angling for a permanent filling. "What color does suit you?"

"Gold."

It figured. Well, better to humor the patient, rather than try to force him into a more sensible course. Dillingham could make a report to the authorities, who could then roust out Oyster and check the work properly.

At his direction, the panel extruded a ribbon of gold foil. He placed this in the miniature annealing oven and waited for the slow heat to act.

"You're burning it up!" Oyster protested.

"By no means. It is necessary to make the gold cohesive, for better service. You see —"

"Hot," Oyster said. So much for helpful explanations. He could have employed noncohesive metal, but this was a lesser technique that didn't appeal to him.

V

At length he had suitable ropes of gold for the slow, delicate task of building up the restoration inside the cavity. The first layer was down; once he malleted it into place —

The elevator burst asunder. A second oyster charged into the operatory waving a translucent tube. "Villain!" it exclaimed. "What are you doing to my grandfather?"

Dillingham was taken aback. "Your grandfather? I'm trying to make him comfortable until —"

The newcomer would have none of it. "You're torturing him! My poor, dear, long-suffering grandfather! Monster! How could you?"

"But I'm only —"

Young Oyster leveled the tube at him. Dillingham noticed irrelevantly that its end was solid. "Get away from my grandfather. I saw you hammering spikes into his venerable teeth, you sadist! I'm taking him home!"

Dillingham did not move. He considered this a stance of necessity, not courage. "Not until I complete this work. I can't let him go out like this, with the excavation exposed."

"Beast! Pervert! *Humanoid!*" the youngster screamed. "I'll volatize you!"

Searing light beamed from the solid tube. The metal mallet in Dillingham's hand melted and dripped to the floor.

He leaped for the oyster and grappled for the weapon. The giant shell clamped shut upon his hand as they fell to the floor. He struggled to right himself, but discovered that the creature had withdrawn all its appendages and now was nothing more than a two-hundred pound clam — with Dillingham's left hand firmly pinioned.

"Assaulter of innocents!" the youngster squeaked from within the shell. "Unprovoked attacker. Get your foul paw out of my ear!"

"Friend, I'll be glad to do that — as soon as you let go," he gasped. "What a situation for a dentist!"

"Help! Butchery! Genocide!"

Dillingham finally found his footing and hauled on his arm. The

shell tilted and lifted from the floor, but gradually the trapped hand slid free. He quickly sat on the shell to prevent it from opening again and surveyed the damage.

Blood trickled from multiple scratches along the wrist, and his hand smarted strenuously, but there was no serious wound.

"Let my grandson go!" the old oyster screamed now. "You have no right to muzzle him like that! This is a free planet!"

Dillingham marveled once more at the translator's description. These just did not seem to be reasonable creatures. He stood up quickly and picked up the fallen tube.

"Look, gentlemen — I'm very sorry if I have misunderstood your conventions, but I must insist that the young person leave."

Young Oyster peeped out of his shell. "Unwholesome creature! Eater of sea-life! How dare you make demands of us?"

Dillingham pointed the tube at him. He had no idea how to fire it, but hoped the creature could be bluffed. "Please leave at once. I will release your grandfather as soon as the work is done."

The youngster focused on the weapon and obeyed, grumbling. Dillingham touched the elevator lock as soon as he was gone.

The oldster was back in the chair. Somehow the adjustment had changed, so that this was now a basket-like receptacle, obviously more comfortable for this patient. "You are more of a being than you appear," Oyster remarked. "I was never able to handle that juvenile so efficiently."

Dillingham contemplated the drops of metal splattered on the floor. That heat-beam had been entirely too close — and deadly. His hands began to shake in delayed reaction. He was not a man of violence, and his own quick reaction had surprised him. The stress of recent events had certainly gotten to him, he thought ruefully.

"But he's a good boy, really," Oyster continued. "A trifle impetuous — but he inherited that from me. I hope you won't report this little misunderstanding."

He hadn't thought of that, but of course it was his duty to make a complete report on the melee and the reason for it. Valuable equipment might have been damaged, not to consider the risk to his own welfare. "I'm afraid I must," he said.

"But they are horribly strict!" the oldster protested. "They will throw him into a foul salty cesspool! They'll boil him in vinegar every hour! His children will be stigmatized!"

"I can't take the law into my own hands. The court — or whatever it is here — must decide. I must make an accurate report."

"He was only looking out for his ancestor. That's very important to our culture. He's a good —"

The Oyster paused. His shell quivered, and the soft flesh within turned yellow.

Dillingham was alarmed. "Sir — are you well?"

The translator spoke on its own initiative. "The Oyster shows the symptoms of severe emotional shock. His health will be endangered unless immediate relief is available."

All he needed was a dying galactic on top of everything else! "How can I help him?" The shell was gradually sagging closed with an insidious suggestiveness.

"The negative emotional stimulus must be alleviated," the translator said. "At his age, such disturbances are —"

Dillingham took one more look at the visibly putrifying creature. "All right!" he shouted desperately. "I'll withhold my report!"

The collapse ceased. "You won't tell anyone?" the oldster inquired from the murky depths. "No matter what?"

"No one." Dillingham was not at all happy, but saw no other way out. Better silence than a dead patient.

The night was well advanced when he finished with the Oyster and sent him home. He had forfeited his study period and, by the time he was able to relax, much of his sleep as well. He would have to brave the examination without preparation.

It was every bit as bad as he had anticipated. His mind was dull from lack of sleep, and his basic store of information was meager indeed on the galactic scale. The questions would have been quite difficult even if he had been fully prepared. There were entire categories he had to skip because they concerned specialized procedures buried in his unread texts. If only he had had time to prepare!

The others were having trouble too. He could see them humped over their tables, or under them, depending on physiology, scribbling notes as they figured ratios and tolerances

and indices of material properties. Even Tree-trunk looked hard-pressed. If Tree-trunk, with a galactic library of dental information filed in his celluloid brain, could wilt with the effort, how could a poor humanoid from a backward planet hope to succeed?

But he carried on to the discouraging end, knowing that his score would damn him but determined to do his best whatever the situation. It seemed increasingly ridiculous, but he still wanted to be admitted to the university. The thought of deserting this stupendous reservoir of information and technique was appalling.

During the afternoon break he collapsed on his bunk and slept. One day remained, one final trial — the interrogation by the Admissions Advisory Council. This, he understood, was the roughest gauntlet of all; more applications were rejected on the basis of this interview than from both other tests combined.

An outcry woke him in the evening. "The probabilities are being posted!" Pincushion honked, prodding him with a spine that was not, despite its appearance, sharp.

"Mine's twenty-one per cent, not a penny more," Dillingham muttered sleepily. "Low — too low."

"The *revised* probs!" Pincushion said. "Based on the test scores. The warning buzzer just sounded."

Dillingham snapped awake. He remembered now; no results were posted for the field and written exams. Instead the original estimates of acceptance were modified in the

light of individual data. This provided unlikely applicants with a graceful opportunity to bow out before subjecting themselves to the indignity of a negative recommendation by the AA Council. It also undoubtedly simplified the work of that council by cutting down on the number of interviewees.

They clustered in a tense semicircle around the main translator. The results would be given in descending order. Dillingham wondered why more privacy in such matters wasn't provided, but assumed that the University had its reasons. Possibly the constant comparisons encouraged better effort, or weeded out the quitters that much sooner.

"Anteater," the speaker said. It paused. "Ninety-six per cent."

Anteater twitched his nose in relief. "I must have guessed right on those stress formulations," he said. "I knew I was in trouble on those computations."

"Treetrunk — eighty-five per cent." Treetrunk almost uprooted himself with glee. "A 25% increase!" he exulted. "I must have maxed the written portion after all!"

"Robot — sixty-eight per cent." The robotoid took the news impassively.

The remaining three fidgeted, knowing that their scores had to be lower.

"Pincushion — fifty per cent." The creature congratulated himself on an even chance, though he obviously had hoped to do better.

"Electrolyte — twenty-three per cent."

The rocklike individual rolled

toward his compartment. "I was afraid of that. I'm going home."

The rest watched Dillingham sympathetically, anticipating the worst. It came. "Earthman — three per cent," the speaker said plainly.

The last reasonable hope was gone. The odds were thirty to one against him, and his faith in miracles was small. The others scattered, embarrassed for him, while Dillingham stood rigid.

He had known he was in trouble — but this! To be given, on the basis of thorough testing, practically no chance of admission . . .

He was forty-one years old. He felt like crying.

VI

The Admissions Advisory Council was alien even by the standards he had learned in the galaxy. There were only three members — but as soon as this occurred to him, he realized that this would be only the fraction of the Council assigned to his case. There were probably hundreds of interviews going on at this moment, as thousands of applicants were processed.

One member was a honeycomb of gelatinous tissue suspended on a trelislike framework. The second was a mass of purple sponge. The third was an undulating something confined within a tank — a water-breather, if that liquid were water. If it breathed.

The speaker set in the wall of the tank came to life. This was evidently the spokesman, if any were required. "We do not interview many with so

low a probability of admission as students," Tank said. "Why did you persist?"

Why, indeed? Well, he had nothing further to lose by forthrightness. "I still want to enter the University. There is still a chance."

"Your examination results are hardly conducive to admission as a student," Tank said, and it was amazing how much scorn could be infused into the tone of the mechanical translation. "While your field exercises were fair, your written production was incompetent. You appear to be ignorant of all but the most primitive and limited aspects of prosthodontistry. Why should you wish to undertake training for which your capacity is plainly insufficient?"

"Most of the questions of the second examination struck me as relating to basic information, rather than potential," Dillingham said woodenly, "If I had that information already, I would not stand in such need of the training. I came here to learn."

"An intriguing attitude. We expect, nevertheless, a certain minimum background. Otherwise our efforts are wastefully diluted."

For this Dillingham had no answer. Obviously the ranking specialists of the galaxy should not be used for elementary instruction. He understood the point — yet something in him would not capitulate. There had to be more to this hearing than an automatic decision on the basis of tests whose results could be distorted by participant cooperation on the one hand, and circumstantial denial of study-time on

the other. Why have an advisory board at all, if that were all?

"I am concerned with certain aspects of your field work," the honeycomb creature said. He spoke by vibrating his tissue in the air, but the voice emerged from his translator. "Why did you neglect particular items?"

"Do you mean number seventeen? I was unfamiliar with the specimen and therefore could not repair it competently."

"You refused to work on it merely because it was new to your experience?" Again the towering scorn.

That did make it sound bad. "No. I would have done something if I had had more evidence of its nature. But the specimen was not complete. I felt that there was insufficient information presented to justify attempted repairs."

"You could not have hurt an inert model very much. Surely you realized that even an incorrect repair would have brought you a better score than total failure?"

He had not known that. "I assumed that these specimens stood in lieu of actual patients. I gave them the same consideration I would have given a living, feeling creature. Neglect of a cavity in the tooth of a live patient might lead to the eventual loss of that tooth — but an incorrect repair could have caused more serious damage. Sometimes it is better not to interfere."

"Explain."

"When I visited the planet Electrolus I saw that the metallic restorations in native teeth were indirectly interfering with communication, which

was disastrous to the well-being of the individual. This impressed upon me how dangerous well-meaning ignorance could be, even in so simple a matter as a filling."

"The chairman of the Dental League of planet Electrolus is a University graduate. Are you accusing him of ignorance?"

O-h-oh. "Perhaps the problem had not come to his attention," Dillingham said, trying to evade the trap.

"We will return to that at another time," the purple sponge said grimly. The applicant's reasoning hardly seemed to impress this group.

"You likewise ignored item number thirty-six," Honeycomb said. "Was your reasoning the same?"

"Yes. The jaw was so alien to my experience that I could not safely assume that there was anything wrong with it, let alone attempt to fix it. I suppose I was foolish not to fill the labial cavity, but that would have required an assumption I was not equipped to make."

"How much time did you spend — deciding not to touch the cavity?" Honeycomb inquired sweetly.

"Half an hour." Pointless to explain that he had gone over every surface of #36 looking for some confirmation that its action was similar to that of any of the jaws he was familiar with. "If I may inquire now — what was the correct treatment?"

"None. It was a healthy jaw."

Dillingham's breath caught. "You mean if I had filled that theoretic cavity —"

"You would have destroyed our extragalactic patient's health."

"Then my decision on #36 helped my examination score!"

"No. Your decision was based on uncertainty, not upon accurate diagnosis. It threw your application into serious question."

He shut his mouth and waited.

"You did not follow instructions on number 41," Honeycomb said. "Why?"

"I felt the instructions were mistaken. The placement of an MOD inlay was unnecessary for the correction of the condition, and foolish in the face of the peril the tooth was in from gingivitis. Why perform expensive and complicated reconstruction, when untreated gum disease threatens to nullify it soon anyway?"

"Would that inlay have damaged the function of the tooth in any way?"

"Yes, in the sense that no reconstruction can be expected to perform as well as the original. But even if there were no difference, that placement was functionally unnecessary. The expense and discomfort to the patient must also be considered. The dentist owes it to his patient to advise him of —"

"You are repetitive. Do you place your judgment before that of the University?"

Trouble again. "I must act on my own best judgment, when I am charged with the responsibility. Perhaps, with University training, I would have been able to make a more informed decision."

"Kindly delete the pleading," Honeycomb said.

Something was certainly wrong somewhere. All his conjectures seemed to go against the intent of this institution. Did its standards, as well as its knowledge, differ so radically from his own? Could all of his professional instincts be wrong?

"Your performance on the written examination was extremely poor," Sponge said. "Are you naturally stupid, or did you fail to apply yourself properly?"

"I could have done better if I had studied more."

"You failed to prepare yourself?"

Worse and worse. "Yes."

"You were aware of the importance of the examination?"

"Yes."

"You had suitable texts on hand?"

"Yes."

"Yet you did not bother to study them."

"I wanted to, but—" Then he remembered his promise to the Oyster. He could not give his reason for failing to study. If this trio picked up any hint of that episode, it would not relent until everything were exposed. After suffering this much of its interrogation, he retained no illusions about the likely fate of young Oyster. No wonder the grandfather had been anxious!

"What is your pretext for such neglect?"

"I can offer none."

The color of the sponge darkened. "We are compelled to view with disfavor an applicant who neither applies himself nor cares to excuse his negligence. This is not the behavior we expect in our students."

Dillingham said nothing. His position was hopeless — but he still couldn't give up until they made his rejection final.

VII

Tank resumed the dialog. "You have an interesting record. Alarming in some respects. You came originally from planet Earth — one of the aborigine cultures. Why did you desert your tribe?"

They had such unfortunate ways of putting things! "I was contacted by a galactic voyager who required prosthodontic repair. I presume he picked my name out of the local directory." He described his initial experience with the creatures he had dubbed, facetiously, the North Nebulites, or Enens.

"You operated on a totally unfamiliar jaw?" Tank asked abruptly.

"Yes." Under duress, however. Should he remind them?

"Yet you refused to do similar work on a dummy jaw at this University," Honeycomb put in.

They were sharp. "I did what seemed necessary at the time."

"Don't your standards appear inconsistent, even to you?" Sponge inquired.

Dillingham laughed, not happily. "Sometimes they do." How much deeper could he bury himself?

Tank's turn. "Why did you accompany the aliens to their world?"

"I did not have very much choice."

"So you did not come to space in search of superior prosthodontic techniques?"

"No. It is possible that I might

have done so, however, had I known of their availability at the time."

"Yes, you have repeatedly expressed your interest," Tank said. "Yet you did not bother to study from the most authoritative texts available on the subject in the galaxy, when you had the opportunity and the encouragement to do so."

Once again his promise prevented him from replying. He was coming to understand why his roommates had shown so little desire to spend time helping the supplicant. It appeared, in retrospect, to be a sure passport to failure.

Could he have passed — that is, brought his probability up to a reasonable level — had he turned away that plea? Should he have sacrificed that one creature, for the sake of the hundreds he might have helped later, with proper training? He *had* been shortsighted.

He knew he would do the same thing again, in similar circumstances. He just didn't have the heart to be that practical. At the same time, he could see why the businesslike University would have little use for such sentimentality.

"On planet Gleep," Tank said, surprising him by using his own ludicrous term for the next world he had visited, "you filled a single cavity with twenty-four tons of goldalloy."

"Yes."

"Are you not aware that gold, however plentiful it may be on Gleep, remains an exceptionally valuable commodity in the galaxy? Why did you not develop a less wasteful substitute?"

Dillingham tried to explain about the awkwardness of that situation, about the pressure of working within the cavernous mouth of a three-hundred-foot sea creature, but it did seem that he had made a mistake. He could have employed a specialized cobalt-chromium-molybdenum alloy that would have been strong, hard, resilient and resistant to corrosion, and might well have been superior to gold in that particular case. He had worried, for example, about the weight of such a mass of gold, and this alternate, far lighter, would have alleviated that concern. It was also much cheaper stuff. He had not thought about these things at the time. He said so.

"Didn't you consult your Eneen associates?"

"I couldn't. The English/Eneen transcoder was broken." But that was no excuse for not having had them develop the chrome-cobalt alloy earlier. He had allowed his personal preference for the more familiar gold to halt his quest for improvement.

"Yet you *did* communicate with them later, surmounting that problem."

He was becoming uncomfortably aware that this group had done its homework. The members seemed to know everything about him. "I discovered by accident that the English-Gleep and Gleep-Eneen transcoders could be used in concert. I had not realized that at the time."

"Because you were preoccupied with the immediate problem?"

"I think so."

"But not too preoccupied to notice decay in the neighboring teeth."

"No?" It did look foolish now, to have been so concerned with future dental problems, while wasting many tons of valuable metal on the work in progress. How did that jibe with his more recent concern for the Oyster's problem, to the exclusion of the much larger University picture? *Was* there any coherent rationale to his actions, or was he continually rationalizing to excuse his errors?

Was the seeming unfairness of this interview merely a way of proving this to him?

But Tank wasn't finished. "You next embarked with a passing diplomat of uncertain reputation who suggested a way to free you from your commitment to Gleep."

"He was very kind." Dillingham did not regret his brief association with Trach, the galactic who resembled a trachodon dinosaur.

"He resembled one of the vicious predators of your planet's past — yet you trusted your person aboard his ship?"

"I felt, in the face of galactic diversity of species, that it was foolish to judge by appearances. One has to be prepared to extend trust, if one wants to receive it."

"You believe that?" Honeycomb demanded.

"I try to." It was so hard to defend himself against the concentrated suspicion of the council.

"You do not seem to trust the common directives of this University, however."

What answer could he make to that? They had him in another conflict.

"Whereupon you proceeded to investigate *another* unfamiliar jaw," Tank said. "Contrary to your expressed policy. Why?"

"Trach had befriended me, and I wanted to help him."

"So you put friendship above policy," Sponge said. "Convenient."

"And did you help him?" Tank again. It was hard to remember who said what, since they were all so murderously sharp.

"Yes. I adapted a sonic instrument that enabled him to clean his teeth efficiently."

"And what was your professional fee for this service?"

Dillingham reined his mounting temper. "Nothing. I was not thinking in such terms."

"A moment ago you were quite concerned about costs."

"I was concerned about unnecessary expense to the patient. That strikes me as another matter."

"And the dinosaur told you about the University of Dentistry?" Sponge put in.

"Yes, among other things. We conversed quite a bit."

"And so you decided to attend, on hearsay evidence."

"That's not fair!"

"Is the color in your face a sign of distress?"

Dillingham realized that they were now deliberately needling him and shut up. Why should he allow himself to get excited over a minor slur, after passing over major ones? All he could do that way was prove he was unstable, and therefore unfit.

"And did you seriously believe,"

Sponge persisted nastily, "that you had any chance at all to be admitted as a student here?"

Again he had no answer.

"On planet Electrolus you provoked a war by careless advice," Honeycomb said. "Whereupon you conspired to be exiled — to this University. What kind of reception did you anticipate here, after such machinations?"

So that was it! They resented the circumstances of his application. What use to explain that he had *not* schemed, that Trach had cleverly found a solution to the Electrolus problem that satisfied all parties? This trio would only twist that into further condemnation.

"I made mistakes on that planet, as I did elsewhere," he said at last. "I hoped to learn to avoid such errors in the future by enrolling in a corrective course of instruction. It was ignorance, not devious intent, that betrayed me. I still think this University has much to offer me."

"The question at hand," Tank said portentiously, "is what *you* have to offer the University. Have you any further statements you fancy might influence our decision?"

"I gather from your choice of expression that it has already been made. In that case I won't waste any more of your time. I am ready for it."

"We find you unsuitable for enrollment at this University as a student," Tank said. "Please depart by the opposite door."

So as not to obstruct the incoming interviewees! Very neat. Dillingham stood up wearily. "Thank you for

your consideration," he said formally, keeping the irony out of his *tone*. He walked to the indicated exit.

"One moment, applicant," Honeycomb said. "What are your *present* plans?"

He wondered why the creature bothered to ask. "I suppose I'll return to practice wherever I'm needed — or wanted," he said. "I may not be the finest dentist available, or even adequate by your standards — but I love my profession, and there is much I can still do." But why was it that the thought of returning to Earth, which he was free to *do now* and where he *was* adequate, no longer appealed? Had the wonders he had glimpsed here spoiled him for the backwoods existence? "I would have preferred to add the University training to my experience; but there is no reason to give up what I already have just because my dream has been denied."

He walked away from them.

VIII

The hall did not lead to the familiar elevators. Instead, absent-mindedly following the wrist-band glow, he found himself in an elegant apartment. He turned, embarrassed to have blundered into the wrong area, but a voice stopped him.

"Please sit down, Earthman."

It was the old Oyster he had treated two days before. He was not adept at telling aliens of identical species apart, but he could not mistake this one. "What are you doing here?"

"We all have to dwell somewhere."

Oyster indicated a couch adaptable to a wide variety of forms. "Make yourself comfortable. I have thoughts to exchange with you."

Dillingham marveled at the change in his erstwhile patient. This was no longer a suffering, unreasonable indigent. Yet —

"Surely it occurred to you, Doctor, that there are only three groups upon this planet? The applicants, the students — and the University personnel. Which of these do you suppose should lack proper dental care? Which should lack the typical University identification?"

"You —" Dillingham stared at him, suddenly making connections. "You have no band — but the elevator worked for you! It was a put-up job!"

"It was part of your examination," Oyster said.

"I failed."

"What has given you that impression?"

"The Admissions Advisory Council found me unfit to enter this University."

"You are mistaken."

Dillingham faced him angrily, not appreciating this business at all. "I don't know who you are or why you were so determined to interfere with my application, but you succeeded nicely. They rejected me."

"Perhaps we should verify this," Oyster said, unperturbed. He spoke into the translator: "Summon Dr. Dillingham's advisory subgroup."

They came — the Sponge, the Honeycomb, the Tank, riding low conveyors. "Sir," they said respectfully.

"What was your decision with regard to this man's application?"

Tank replied. "We found this humanoid to be unsuitable for enrollment at this University as a student."

Dillingham nodded. Whatever internecine politics were going on here, at least that point was clear.

"Did you discover this applicant to be deficient in integrity?" Oyster inquired softly. It was the gentle tone of complete authority.

"No, sir," Tank said.

"Professional ethics?"

"No, sir."

"Professional caution?"

"No, sir."

"Humility?"

"No, sir."

"Temper control?"

"No, sir."

"Compassion? Courage? Equilibrium?"

"That is for you to say, sir."

Oyster glanced at Dillingham. "So it would seem. What, then, gentlemen, *did* you find the applicant suitable for?"

"Administration, sir."

"Indeed. Dismissed, gentlemen."

"Yes, Director." The three left hastily.

Dillingham started. "Yes, *who*?"

"There is, you see, a qualitative distinction between the potential manual trainee and the potential administrator," Oyster said. "Your roommates were evaluated as students — and they certainly have things to learn. Oh, technically they are proficient enough — quite skilled, in fact, though none had the opportunity to exhibit the depth of competence

manifested in adversity that you did. But in attitude — well, there will be considerable improvement there, or they will hardly graduate from *this* school. I daresay you know what I mean.”

“But —”

“We are equipped to inculcate mechanical dexterity and technical comprehension. Of course the techniques tested in the Admissions Examination are primitive ones; none of them are employed in advanced restoration. Our interrogatory schedule is principally advisory, to enable us to program for individual needs.

“Character, on the other hand, is far more difficult to train — or to assess accurately in a controlled situation. It is far more reliable if it comes naturally, which is one reason we don’t always draw from graduates, or even promising students. We are quite quick to investigate applicants possessing the personality traits we require, and this has nothing to do with planet or species. A promising candidate may emerge from any culture, even the most backward, and is guaranteed from none. No statistical survey is reliable in pinpointing the individual we want. In exceptional cases, it becomes a personal matter, a nonobjective thing. Do you follow me?”

Dillingham’s mind was whirling. “It sounds almost as though you want me to —”

“To undertake training at University expense leading to the eventual assumption of my own position: Director of the School of Prosthodontics.”

He was speechless standing there.

“I am anticipating a promotion, you see,” Oyster confided. “The vacancy I leave is my responsibility. I would not suffer a successor to whom I would not trust the care of my own teeth.”

“But I couldn’t possibly — I haven’t the —”

“Have no concern. You adapted beautifully when thrust from your protected environment into galactic society, and this will be no more difficult. The University of Administration has a comprehensive program that will guarantee your competence for the position, and of course you will serve as my assistant for several years until you get the hang of it. We are not rushed. You will not be subjected to the ordeal unprepared; that unpleasantness is over.”

Dillingham still found this hard to grasp. “Your grandson — what if I’d —”

“I shall have to introduce you more formally to that young security officer. He is not, unfortunately, my grandson; but he is the finest shot with the single-charge laser on the planet. We try to make our little skits realistic.”

Dillingham remembered the metal mallet dripping to the floor — no freak interception after all. And the way the youngster had retreated before the tube . . . which, being single-shot, was no longer functional. Realism, yes.

That reminded him. “That tooth of yours I filled. I know that wasn’t —”

“Wasn’t fake. You are correct. I

nursed that cavity along for three months, using it to check our prospects. It is a very good thing I won't need it any more, because you spoiled it utterly."

"I —"

"You did such a professional job that I should have to have a new cavity cultured for my purpose. No experienced practitioner would mistake it now for a long-neglected case even if I yanked out the gold and re-impacted it. *That*, Doctor, is the skill that impresses me — the skill that remains after the machinery is incapacitated. But of course that's part of it; good intentions mean nothing unless backed by authoritative discretion and ability. You were very slow, but you handled that deliberately obstructive patient very well. Had it been otherwise —"

"But why me? I mean, you could have selected anyone —"

Oyster put a friendly smile into his voice. "Hardly, Doctor. I visited eleven dormitories that eve-

ning, before I came to yours — with no success. All contained prospects whose record and fieldwork showed the potential. You selected yourself from this number and carried it through honorably. More correctly, you presented yourself as a candidate for the office; we took it from there."

"You certainly did!"

"Portions of your prior record were hard to believe, I admit. It was incredible that a person who had as little galactic background as you had should accomplish so much. But now we are satisfied that you do have the touch, the ability to do the right thing in an awkward or unfamiliar situation. That, too, is essential for the position."

Dillingham fastened on one incongruity. "I — I selected *myself*?"

"Yes, Doctor. When you demonstrated your priorities."

"My priorities? I don't —"

"When you sacrificed invaluable study time to offer assistance to a creature you believed was in pain."

END

NEXT MONTH IN IF!

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IF ... and WHEN

by LESTER DEL REY

Your child may not be an Earthman!

Fifteen years ago, science fiction dealt with a time *when* men would colonize the stars, while a few daring scientists wondered *if* interstellar flight might be possible. Today, most writers have become aware of the difficulties, and interstellar colonies are being treated in fiction as a fantasy somewhat akin to time travel.

Now sane and sober scientists are planning seriously how we'll make the trip — and the date they claim for this possibility is a lot closer than we dared dream. They're not planning millenium-long flights like the one in Heinlein's *Universe*, but trips that can be made in the lifetime of a man, at speeds up to at least a quarter that of the velocity of light — or nearly fifty thousand miles a second.

This was brought home to me at the 1967 Planetology and Space Sci-

ences Meeting, held at the New York Academy of Sciences under the direction of Dr. Robert Enzmann. The final session was a panel on what interstellar flight would mean; Murray Leinster, Frederik Pohl and I were among the writers exchanging ideas with working space scientists. Hardware wasn't discussed, but when it was over Dr. Enzmann began describing the plans and blueprints for the actual ship and flight.

Some of the details are still shrouded in security wraps, since the power for the flight must be provided by atomic fusion, currently held back from development by some of our international agreements on the atom in space. However, successful experimental work on fusion drives has been done already, and several systems have been worked out in theory. By the time work on the ship can be started, we can be pretty sure that

the power to drive us at high speed to the stars will be available.

Every other detail of this constantly evolving Project Orion — as it is code-named — depends on hardware and techniques that could be available to us today. Given official permission and funds, the construction of the first star ship could begin immediately.

The cost of the Project is estimated at a staggering hundred billion dollars. That may come down as the normal development of planetary space missions improves our hardware, but it will still be an expensive proposition. (In passenger miles flown, it's the greatest bargain of all time; one dollar will pay for 30,000 passenger miles!)

Spread over a decade, however, the annual cost is less than twice what we're spending to get to the Moon; or less than one-thirtieth what it cost us to fight in Vietnam. Over a fifteen-year period — a logical span for the Project — this represents only one per cent of our present gross national product.

O Orion is going to be a true space-ship. That means it will never be launched from or landed on the surface of a planet. For its flight, a steady acceleration of half a gravity or less will be adequate; and since it will be assembled in space, free of the pressure of planetary gravity, it can be built to take far less strain than anything we've built so far. Logically, its design takes advantage of this to save mass.

Fuel for the trip will be deuterium. A number of plans have been worked

out to send scoops into the atmosphere of Jupiter and collect hydrogen, which can then be isotopically separated to yield pure deuterium — the form of hydrogen which has double normal weight and is suitable for fusion power. (Interestingly, a paper was read at the meeting on accumulating such fuel from Jupiter for normal flights to Pluto or beyond, where the advantages seem doubtful.) The ship will either be built near Jupiter; or it will be assembled near Earth and towed out to Jupiter to build up its tremendous supply of deuterium.

The ship currently suggested is a cylinder, four thousand feet in diameter, sheathed in three separate layers of thin metal. Inside the sheathing, it is a honeycomb of smaller cylinders packed together to contribute lengthwise strength; each is capable of maintaining its own life support system and protection against space. The cylinders are filled with thin-walled metal spheres, which again supply protection and in which the actual living quarters will be built.

Actually, the main cylinder is composed of three separate shorter cylinders which are joined together; each will have its own crew, operating controls and maintenance system. If any one should be hopelessly damaged, the other two can link together or proceed independently on the trip.

The fuel is carried as a great ball ahead of the ship, so that the whole looks like a monstrous candy apple on a very fat stick. It is this ball of fuel which also provides the main protection for the occupants.

Once beyond the solar system, the danger of any sidewise hit by meteoric rubble is small; and the probable speed of such rubble will not be dangerous for more than a small section of the ship. However, at speeds in thousands of miles per second, a frontal impact could be disastrous. Here, the fuel acts as a great bumper; some fuel may be lost, but the ship itself is protected against penetration.

The ship will start with perhaps 5000 people, and breeding may double this number before arrival. There is ample room. The ship has a volume of two billion cubic feet, or 200,000 cubic feet for each passenger; since a good-sized house has only one-tenth that volume for an entire family, the adequacy of space seems clear enough, even allowing for all necessary supplies and machinery.

Supplies will be in a closed cycle, anyhow. Air will be used by the men and replenished by growing plants, as will water and wastes. This will be a small world, recycling everything as our planet does, with almost no limit to the theoretical time it can spend in space.

The trip may take up to fifty years to complete. That is a large time to cut out of the life of the original volunteers, of course; and the velocity will be still too low for any major contraction effect on the passage of time to be noted aboard; but there may be other ways to decrease the aging of the passengers. Work has been done indicating that many non-hibernating animals can

be made to hibernate by temperature and hormone manipulation. If this can be adapted for human hibernation, aging time can be decreased greatly. At a body temperature of 46° Fahrenheit, a month will age a man no more than a normal day. By rotating the hibernating and working staff, most of the volunteers might reach their destination apparently no more than ten or fifteen years older than they left.

They will never be cut off from contact with Earth, of course. There will be no mutiny from those who lose faith in the home world. Radio and television contact will not require inordinate amounts of power, and even our present capabilities can handle this. There will be a time lag as the ship nears its destination, but this will not destroy the value of what is on the screen from Earth, even though they'll literally only see old movies — as much as a decade older than when broadcast.

They will also receive constant news of what lies ahead. Unmanned probes will have explored the nearer stars for a suitable goal, and another such probe will precede them by a light-month, or so — the distance light travels in one month. This will warn them in time if there should be any serious amount of rubble in their path that might threaten them for instance.

They will be paying their way, incidentally. As they move out between the stars, they will be able to make observations in space that will be invaluable to Earth.

The trip will cover somewhere between five and ten light-years,

probably. There is evidence now that many stars near us have planets, and at least one should be suitable. At worst, there are two favorable goals within about eleven light-years — Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani, already selected as probably habitable.

Contact will not be lost when they reach their destination, either. Earth will want to know everything discoverable about the world around another sun — and the knowledge may well be worth the cost of Project Orion ten times over.

Nobody can be sure of what they will find. But it isn't expected that there will be a green and lovely world waiting for them. These will be chosen as hardy pioneers, and their children will be prepared. They will go down to the planet they find in ferry ships that have been carried along. And there will still be power available for at least a generation from the fuel still not used.

They must find a solar system with two things; one is a world at least as habitable as our Moon. This will enable them to set up a base, just as the Moon itself can be forced into a base for human life by plans already familiar to science-fiction readers.

And they will need a gas-giant planet, one like Jupiter or Saturn. This will provide them with fresh supplies of fuel whenever they want it. The ship will still have its refining equipment and enough fuel to cruise easily across planetary distance.

With a system having this minimum, the colonists can at least resup-

ply themselves. They can even build a second ship for their excess population, if necessary. And they can then go on to explore another system; it will be one previously explored from Earth by probe, probably. Their first trip will not be a waste. If they find a planet better than this minimum, they can settle in and become another branch of humanity.

And that, of course, is the true reason for the trip. So long as man is isolated upon a single world, there can be no safety for the race. Any cosmic or man-made disaster might wipe us all out.

With two or more bases, the chances of ultimate survival are vastly greater. And since we can be reasonably sure that this will *not* be the only colonizing trip, we can hope for many such bases. After all, the ship in orbit will still be ready to go onwards, even if the planet can prove suitable for a colony. Once that colony is well started, they will need no hundred billion dollars to send out another branch; the ship will be ready and the task greatly simplified.

It can be done, according to many serious scientists. And as many of them see it, it must be done.

It lies within our capabilities to begin that first flight to another star by the end of this century, if not sooner! That means that some young child alive today may have a chance to go on the first trip beyond the Sun we know, to plant his steps on a truly alien planet, and to look back across space to the star that was once — but is no more — the sole home of humanity. **END**



*The Other Land was clean, fragrant
and a fit place for Man to live . . .
quite unlike the weary world, Earth!*

When I woke up, I thought I was dead. That's what I had intended to be.

My head was pounding as though someone had been kicking it around a football field. My eyes were burning, and my throat was dry, but the palms of my hands were wet with sweat. I felt awful.

I was lying in the darkness — a warm darkness that was absolute. I knew I was lying on my stomach because my face was pressed into . . . soil? There was sand in my mouth. I must have dreamt I was in a park, because I woke up convinced that I was.

I was lying on a small, roughly

oval-shaped patch of damp, clean, sandy earth. At the edge of the bare ground there were clumps of graceful, silky grass with the seed heads not yet ripe. Beyond that and towering up all around me was a profusion of incredibly green trees, beneath them, a forest floor of countless living plants.

In college — when I had been in college, that is — botany had been one of the few subjects I'd done well in. But I wished that I could remember more of it. I thought if I could identify a few of the trees I would have some idea what part of the state, or even the country, I was in.

It couldn't be a park; they mowed

the grass in parks. Besides, they didn't just dump dangerously deranged people in parks and leave them. Well, are "funny farms" really *farms* . . . ? Wherever I was, I knew they would be after me.

After a while I felt a little better. The sky was growing brighter with daylight, but I couldn't see the sun. Was it still behind the trees? I began to walk slowly through the woods. As I got deeper in among the trees I could hardly see the sky through the intense green canopy. The air was gratifyingly cool.

I was amazed at the beauty of the vegetation which carpeted the ground. It was an Eden — like an imagined paradise of gleaming leaves and lacey flowers.

I walked for — well, my wrist watch was gone, but I think it was for at least ten or fifteen minutes. Finally I realized what was wrong. There were no sounds or signs of life; no insects, no birds, nothing. A faint breeze had picked up and was rustling and rustling the leaves, but except for myself no living thing stirred.

Then I began to give more thought to where I could be.

The last place I remembered being, of course, was the power station. I couldn't be in New York any more; nearly the entire state was the vast megalopolis of New York City, and there was hardly a tree left there, much less a beautiful forest. In fact, I couldn't imagine anywhere in the entire country where such a place as this could exist, so untouched by human degradation. Was I in South America then?

An IF First

Each month *IF* brings you a "first" story by a writer who has never had a science-fiction story published before. This month's "first" is Mary Urhausen, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Wisconsin (Racine Center). Mary's interests are horses, veterinary medicine, science, fiction and science fiction. She's a member of the honor sorority, Sigma Epsilon Sigma, and a talented young lady who will go far.

I came across a path, a very neat little lane weaving among the trees. I looked for footprints or tracks of any kind, but the damp, sandy earth was packed so hard that even my own shoes left scarcely a mark. Above the path the tree canopy was parted, and I could see the vivid blue of the sky. I picked the left path at random and started along it.

I was feeling pretty good now; my head didn't hurt any more and I was even getting hungry again. Actually, it was amazing I wasn't more seriously injured. Outside of the blow to my head and my scorched and ragged clothing, I had survived suicide admirably — or should I say damnably?

If only it weren't for that infernal silence. Had fallout killed the insects and animals? It had been rumored the Venezuelans had used the bomb against Brazil, but that war was over. Wasn't it? Had there been a plague? I didn't know. The papers never let us read about things like that any more; things like plague or murder or . . . suicide. Things like that weren't supposed to happen.

Ahead of me the path fanned out and suddenly I was out of the forest

entirely, standing on a level grassy plain — and staring in amazement.

The land was like a large meadow, resplendent with short, brilliant green grass and millions of small flowers scattered throughout it like colorful gems. About an eighth mile from me out on the meadow there stood a city.

It was a complex of incredibly graceful and unusual buildings, arranged on a huge, circular, paved courtyard — like an architect's models assembled on a big plate. All of the buildings were constructed of what appeared to be smooth white stone and had large, round, porthole-like windows. The largest building stood in the center of the circle, rising far above its fellows. It was an elliptical shaft and contained periodic rows of the round windows, which probably marked the presence of floors or stories. There were about a dozen other buildings, all beautifully designed. One was circular shaped; another mimicked the form of a bird's spreading wings. Others were shaped with sloping spires and domes.

It was such a simple, bold, pleasing arrangement. I thought ruefully of my cramped and coarse New York; of the gigantic megalopolis sprawling for mile after ravenous mile under a shroud of fumes and smoke; of life that had become worse than death in its crowded, crumbling streets —

And here the air was so clean that it hurt my lungs, and the sunlight reflecting off the windows and the smooth, bright, stone walls of the buildings made me squint. My legs felt weak, and I was surprised to feel sweat trickling across my stomach.

Then I saw the people.

There were three of them, and they were strolling — yes, I swear they were just strolling, flagrantly loitering — along the edge of the paved area to the right of the buildings. Then one of them paused, pointed at me; and they began to come toward me.

This was getting ridiculous. Why didn't they just take me away and lock me up — whisk me up with the almighty, omnipresent, ever-right bureaucratic hand and put me where I couldn't harm anyone — including myself? What was I doing here? Why the cat and mouse game?

It was at once both pathetic and absurd; three men — women? They had long hair, shoulder-length at least, and wore long, loosely-fitting robes in pastel shades and delicate floral prints.

One of them seemed to be carrying something under the robe on one arm, but I couldn't see well because the sun was — the suns were —

By the time they were within a hundred yards of me, I'd had it. None of this sleep business; this time I know I fainted.

I was lying on my back on something comfortably contoured to my weary body, and for some damp, cool, intangible reason my eyes were closed, and I could not see. The murmur of their voices was strangely reassuring, like the gentle hum of the air-conditioning units which dominated and sustained every building I could ever remember. They weren't speaking English.

Slowly I opened my eyes, afraid of what I might see. Good God — was

I so sick or had I really seen *two* suns?

I was lying on a tall, couch-like bed, and several of the people were bent anxiously over me. The one nearest my head observed my waking and lifted a hand. I cringed.

He — well, I thought it was a man: a man with shoulder-length chestnut hair, bottomless brown eyes, graceful features, and an absurd blue robe — he spoke reassuringly to me in that soft tongue I could not understand. When I sagged back against the couch, he reached out and lifted the damp cloth from my forehead, nodding gently at me.

Four others stood behind or beside the chestnut-haired one. I think three of them were the ones I'd seen from the meadow; at least the robes — yellow, pale orange, and a sort of green and gold floral print — were the same. The other one I hadn't seen before.

Were they men or women anyway? They had delicate, sensitive, mobile faces, neither definitely feminine or masculine. Their eyes were large, dark, and luminous, their features fine and pleasant. Oddly enough, I thought of a setter I'd once owned — before the Council declared all dogs superfluous and obsolete, that is. She had that same expression: attentive, thoughtful, responsive. All of them wore their hair long, the length ranging from several inches to silky manes that flowed down around their shoulders. Their hair, as their simple clothing, was unadorned. The robes fell to their ankles, and they wore flat, open sandals on their small feet. One of them carried two purple flowers in

his — her? — hand. All of them regarded me with concern and polite curiosity.

I bolted upright into a sitting position, startling them, and my voice came out like a scream.

"Where *am* I!? What are you doing to me?"

I think they were a little frightened by the outburst, some of them anyway. Several took steps backward, their eyes watchful, their arms in protective poses across their robes.

The chestnut-haired one reached slowly out and touched my arm; on his face was a look of such sheer compassion and reassurance that my desperate utterance ceased immediately. He spoke quietly and earnestly, motioning to me with his other hand as if I should follow him.

If it was all a vast Council plot, they already had me where they wanted me; trapped and on the verge of hysteria. I was too weary and frightened to resist. I got to my feet and followed him, my legs unsteady and sluggish in their obedience.

We went out a doorway into a long, curving corridor that followed the outside of the building and was lined on the right side with a row of the big porthole windows. I was in the tall, elliptical building, I guess; far below, the smooth white wings of the other structures spread against the backdrop of the paving and the green of the meadows. My mind was convulsed with loneliness and confusion.

As if he sensed my despair, the chestnut-haired one squeezed my arm encouragingly and pointed at a closed door to the left. One of the others pressed a button on the wall, much as

one would ring a doorbell. The door slid open with a soft hiss.

The interior of the room was so gloomy that I could barely see. I resisted, hanging back obstinately, but the chestnut-haired one gestured at me and tugged on my arm until I stumbled through the doorway. The room had a breath, a pulse, a vibration of its own that made it like a living thing; but it was so dark that I could not see the walls or even the floor, and I was frightened.

The chestnut-haired one was speaking quietly, not to me but to one of the others. I tried to cry out, but he was pushing me gently and firmly forward. They were placing something on my head; then my brain felt like it was freezing, and my eyeballs bulged in their sockets. I tried to struggle but I was unable to free myself from the cold grayness that was invading my mind. And, for the third time since my awakening in this strange world, I lost consciousness again.

I felt groggy, and it was hard to awaken. I opened my eyes in a small, bright room; I was lying on . . . a bed, I guess. The chestnut-haired one was nearby, seated on a fat, stool-like chair.

"Listen," I said weakly, "someone's got to tell me what's happening."

"Of course," the chestnut-haired one said — in fluent, fluid English. "Do you feel all right now?"

"So you *do* speak English!" I exclaimed incredulously.

"No. Now you speak our language."

I stared at him.

"We have supplemented your knowledge," he explained, "in the dark room. We use it sometimes, for children born with . . . unfinished minds."

The explanation strangely satisfied me. It did nothing for my other fears and questions, however.

"W-where am I? What am I doing here?"

"You're here, in the Life Building," the chestnut-haired one replied, his voice polite and concerned. "They found you when you lost your awareness, out by the Tree Land. They thought you might be hurt, and brought you here."

"But where *is* this? Am I on Council property any more?" I was treading thin ice and keenly aware of it, but I was driven even in my desperation to find out.

The chestnut-haired one shook his head. "I do not know what this Council is. You are in our land now."

"I-I'm not in South America?"

"No. That is a place in your land, isn't it?" His voice was sympathetic. "But you are in another land now."

Then I had seen *two* suns? Or was I very, very insane?

"Where *is* this?" I asked, my voice barely above a hoarse whisper. "Who are you?"

"My name is Psilote. You come from a land that you call Earth. We do not know of this land or where it is, or what has brought you to us."

God, how could I believe what he said? It was a hoax, a fraud — a monstrous and cruel trick of the damned Council! And yet, if it was true . . . To admit that possibility seemed tantamount to admitting my

own insanity. Out in that forest I had thought I was either dead or insane and wished for either fate without misgivings. But now it was different — and I was afraid.

“You are troubled,” Psilote said softly; his obvious concern was overpowering. “This Council, it is not in our land. It can not harm you.”

My shoulders slumped. I stifled the urge to flee from him. To where could I flee? I cleared my throat awkwardly, but my voice didn't come out very loudly anyway.

“Last I remember, I was in New York City, at the Third Street power station. I threw myself onto the generator grid. I was trying to commit suicide.” Did he understand the word? “I was trying to kill myself.”

Psilote was silent for so long that I wondered if he'd understood what I'd said. I looked up at his face and I saw that he had indeed understood; his expression of simple and honest empathy touched me like a warm hand. How much did he know about me from that — that room? Or could he read my very thoughts?

“We did not bring you here,” he said softly, “nor can we understand the peculiar warping of time and space which combined in your land to bring you to us. But you flung yourself onto a generator grid, hoping for death. Whatever power has brought you here instead, I would like to think it is the kinder one.”

I thought I was losing my mind. Where in heaven's name could this place be, where men nearly wept at the thought of a person dying? Where a death didn't merely mean

more space, more food, more air. Psilote had said I was in another land. How right he was!

He led me along another portion of the curving hall, to a sort of elevator that whisked us down to the ground level. I followed him across the paved courtyard and toward the circular building. The suns made the white stone gleam like alabaster. Psilote's sandals plopped gently across the smooth flagstones. I glanced down at my own feet; my shoes were terribly shoddy, and one was untied.

Several of the others were standing outside of the circular building. I recognized the one with the shy eyes and the orange robe, and she — I think — smiled guardedly at me.

Psilote nodded a pleasant greeting to them and reached out to take my arm and pull me a little closer.

An older one, with dark hair beginning to become streaked with gray, stared candidly at me. Then he turned to Psilote.

“Whose bud is he, Psilote? I did not think there were mutants any more.”

They all burst into merry laughter. I was not sure what the joke was, but I didn't like being the butt of it. For the first time since I'd met these people, I stopped being scared long enough to be angry.

I seized Psilote by the shoulders; I was surprised at how fragile he felt beneath that flowing robe. “Listen, you long-haired freak!” I shouted. “What's so damned funny about me?”

He was like a rag doll in my hands; nonresistance was an understatement. The others, utterly silent now, viewed my outburst with ob-

vious distress, but made no attempt to intervene. I stared at Psilote, who hung limply from my hands, and I was overcome with a deep shame. I released him and stepped back, acutely aware of the surprise and concern that greeted my actions.

"I'm sorry," Psilote said quietly — why did he have to say *he* was sorry? "We weren't trying to make fun of you. I know you are still upset."

"I — I'm sorry," I echoed stupidly, because there was nothing else I could say.

Psilote touched me gently on the arm. His dark brown eyes went right through me in a way that made me feel helpless and ashamed. Good God, how could he care so much about me? I was a maniac!

Their silence melted rapidly into smiles, and then Psilote introduced me.

"This is Dewan." The older one, apparently he commanded first courtesies. "And Rella." Blond hair — the first I'd seen here; somehow Rella looked like neither a man nor a woman. "And Trewlis." This one had to be a man; very pleasant eyes — they literally sparkled. "And this is Camphos." Camphos was the orange-robed one, a girl I was certain. She had very long brown hair and shy hazel eyes. Something about her own timidity bolstered me.

I realized that Psilote was looking at me with inquiry on his face. Oh — of course! "Uh — I'm Jordan. Edward Jordan," I stammered. At least I thought I was.

"Edward Jordan," Psilote mouthed the name pleasantly. "Come, Edward Jordan, we will eat."

The interior of the circular building was one big room, like an auditorium or a meeting hall. Its polished floor dropped off in degrees, like huge, ring-shaped steps leading down to a large central circle about six feet below ground level. On the bottom circle was an array of tables, benches, and couch-like chairs, many made of wood, others of the smooth white stone. (Where had all this white stone come from anyway? I hadn't seen so much as a pebble outside.) The tables were littered with trays of fruit and delicate bakery, and tall goblets of some sort of drink. A few people were eating; many others were lounging casually about on the couches or on the stone steps themselves. The varying colors of their garments swirled like a muted rainbow. If they were curious about my presence, very few of them showed it by even so much as a glance.

I had expected the food to be very exotic and strange, but it was rather plain — delicious but not exceptional. The fruits were very similar to peaches and bananas (if you can imagine pink bananas). The bakery was like a sweet roll; the drink was a fruit juice. I ate ravenously.

There was only one goblet. I had assumed it was for me, but then Psilote drank from it and pushed it at me with the urging, "Drink; it is good."

I drank. It was good.

Trewlis had gotten up from one of the couches and was walking up the steps. I had noticed a peculiarity in his movement, a sort of odd gesture of protectiveness with his left arm against his robe.

"Can I ask something?" I asked Psilote cautiously.

He smiled. "Of course."

"It's Trewlis. Has he hurt his arm? He holds it oddly."

"No, Trewlis is not injured. He is carrying a child."

In stories they sometimes say a person's mouth drops open in surprise. Mine did. I stared stupidly at him.

He, she, his, her . . . I suddenly realized these sexual pronouns had no meaning in the language I was speaking. They were a hangover in my mind. I was using them on the basis of rather sketchy visual impressions, and Psilote was using them only because I was.

Sweat was prickling between my shoulderblades. "Then — you mean Trewlis is a — a woman?" I asked weakly. "And if he is — are you?"

"No, Edward Jordan," Psilote replied quietly, "we are not women. We are the bud people. Not men. Not women. We are all one sex — or rather, we are all no sex."

"But — how?"

Psilote shrugged slightly. "You have seen how Trewlis sometimes supports his child; it is large now, it will be born soon. The buds grow like fruit on a tree, attached to the trunks of our bodies by a meristematic band of tissue bound in ligamentous supports. They are functionally embryos in all stages of their development. Their movements and demands are slight, and they are seldom a burden. When they are mature enough for independence from our bodies, the tough band binding them to us dehy-

drates, and they are freed." His eyes were filled with a subtle humor. "It leaves a very small scar. I would recommend budding to any species."

"You say you are all no sex," I repeated, more for my own edification than anything else, "yet it seems to me that some of you — well, some look more like men and some look like women. Camphos — I thought Camphos was a girl. And I thought you and Trewlis were men."

Psilote smiled. "Even in a sexual species, some males appear effeminate and some females have masculine characteristics. Because of our physical variances, these superficial impressions of masculinity and femininity do exist. Do not be embarrassed." He laughed. "I rather fancy being assumed a man."

Psilote's expression become serious, and he got to his feet. "Come, Edward Jordan," he said. "There is something you must see."

I stood up and followed him up the huge circular steps, where gentle, genderless people in beautiful robes lounged, eating and laughing and carrying their strange and wondrous children close against their warm bodies. Could I be dead? It bothered me to think that I might be dead — lying charred and broken by the generator grid in my other land — and not even know it. Or was I just finally insane? No, my new knowledge was too painfully fresh for that. Insanity is painless; reality stings and you can feel it's there.

Psilote led me out across the paved courtyard, between the graceful white buildings, and into the meadow. The twin suns were straight overhead now,

and the warmth of their rays soaked through my shoulders. Psilote was beside me, his long blue robe billowing gently and brushing along over the tops of the short, silky grass.

We came to the edge of the forest.

I could hear faint laughter, shouting. It was like — well, like children playing. Psilote paused, smiled, motioned.

I stepped forward. Below and beyond spread a small wooded ravine; in it, children of all ages and sizes, clad in brightly-colored robes, romped and sang among the knee-high vegetation, playing games so simple and exquisite that my eyes burned with my own memories.

I turned back to Psilote. "Are they — safe? I mean, out here by themselves like this?"

Psilote seemed puzzled. "What would harm them? They are children; we let them play."

We had walked about twenty minutes (I was going to miss my wrist watch) when we reached our destination. It was a small building, nearly hidden by a tangle of flowering vines and the hanging branches of the surrounding trees. Unlike the buildings in the complex in the meadow, it was not made of white stone, but of some sort of metal that was dull and tarnished with age. There seemed to be no windows and only one door.

I looked questioningly at Psilote, but he stepped up to the oblong metal door and turned the handle; the door grated open with a dry squeak. Psilote went through the doorway, beckoning for me to follow.

The place was one big storage chamber. The walls were lined with files and cabinets, and there was a large, desk-like table in the center of the single room. Psilote touched a panel on the wall, and the glow of a soft light crept into the room.

"We keep things here," he explained, going over to one of the metal cabinets, "things that are important for some other time and are not necessary to keep close at hand." He pulled open a drawer; it rasped stiffly. "I do not care much for metals," he noted, "but he insisted it be metal."

Psilote handed me what appeared to be a fat, bound notebook. It was old, and the paper was yellowed and crisp. I set it gingerly on the table and opened it to a random page. I stared in puzzlement at the writing for several moments before I suddenly realized what it was.

"This is written in English!" I exclaimed. "Where did you get this?!"

Psilote nodded toward the notebook. "Look at it," he said quietly.

I carefully separated the cover from the first page and opened the notebook there. "'Journal of Robert Ascot Lemming,'" I read slowly. "'To whom it may concern: If you are reading this, you are in this other land. These are the bud people — be like them, if you can.'" I flipped a page. There was a date. "'July 24, 1911. This was the morning I woke up in another world —'" I broke off and swung to Psilote, astounded.

"There's been someone else? This Lemming?" Psilote nodded.

"But 1911 — that was over a hundred years ago!"

"Yes, and it was before my life. But this Robert Ascot Lemming was also brought here, as you have been, from this land Earth. He was an old man and he did not live long; but he left these writings, his 'journal,' of the time he spent here. This is what we felt you should see. We were told he left it in case . . . another of his kind came."

I spread my hands protectively over the faded notes. "Can I read this?" I asked hopefully.

Psilote smiled at my caution. "Of course," he said. "There are other books like it, also of Robert Ascot Lemming's writings. They are all for you."

"They'll be safe here?"

"Of course; they have been for over a hundred years. You may come any time to read them."

"Tomorrow?"

"Certainly." Psilote touched my shoulder. "Come, the others will wonder where we are. Myfair's bud was born yesterday; there will be a celebration."

What did they do to celebrate? Get tanked up on pink banana juice? Loll about on their beautiful stone steps and smoke grass? Or just . . . sing and things — things of piercing sweetness like the songs of their brightly-robed children, playing in the quiet green forest . . .

The Director stared at the body on the steel-frame bed, then leaned forward and flipped up the report sheet attached to the railing.

"Jordan, Edward D.," he read dispassionately. He turned to the assistant. "What's this one here for?"

"The usual, sir. Suicide attempt."

The Director stared again at the motionless form on the bed, garbed in a hideous khaki gown. "Humph," the Director grunted. "Which did you give him?"

"8-A, sir; the one with the asexual species in their little Eden-like world. It's proved the most satisfactory — the most soothing — for cases like his, where the problem was a woman." The assistant glanced at the body. "Now he can 'spend' the rest of his life there."

"Humph," the Director grunted again. "Who ever invented this damn dream therapy anyway?"

"Well, it's quite a serviceable solution, sir. What else can we do with them — the senile, the incorrigibles, the manic depressives? We could hardly keep exterminating them; the public was catching on to that and raising the very dickens. It's too expensive to institutionalize all of them in the conventional sense. They're unfit to be trained for anything. With a perpetual, induced dream state, their organic needs are relatively simple to care for — and they're far happier than they could ever be in this real world, I daresay."

The Director poked Edward Jordan's body's leg and watched for a reaction that never came. "You mean," he continued, "he actually thinks he's in that kooky other world, running around with all those freaky people?"

The assistant smiled shortly. "Well, sir, they don't seem freaky to him any more; he's gone through his period of adjustment, and by now he's perfectly content. But yes, for all

practical purposes he is in that other world — and will be for the rest of his life. By selective use of psycho-surgery and drugs, we can implant in his subconscious mind any patterned dream we choose to program him with. It becomes his real life, body and spirit, and no one can interfere with it. Take 8-A, for example. We do introduce a few outside forces; the journal of a 'former resident,' to make him feel a bit more secure. But other than that he can live the rest of his days happy, safe, loved, in 'another land'."

The Director turned away, and the assistant fell into step beside him as they went through the silent ward, filled with the motionless, unfeeling bodies of dreamers.

"There is one puzzling little item on that Jordan case, however, sir," the assistant volunteered.

"And what's that?" the Director said gruffly.

"Well, he tried to kill himself down

at the Third Street power station, sir; threw himself onto the generator grid."

"What's puzzling about that?" the Director snapped.

"All of the generator grids have a safety shut-down; all it did was give him a bad jolt. He'd have to trip up the relay wires before it would have killed him. You'd think he would have remembered that, sir; he'd worked at that power station for eleven years."

"Humph," said the Director.

That night they carried another unconscious body out of the Third Street power station. The coded instructions which the assistant received with the patient recommended that 5-A would probably be the most beneficial treatment. But the assistant stared in surprise at the motionless, khaki-clad body.

It was the Director.

END

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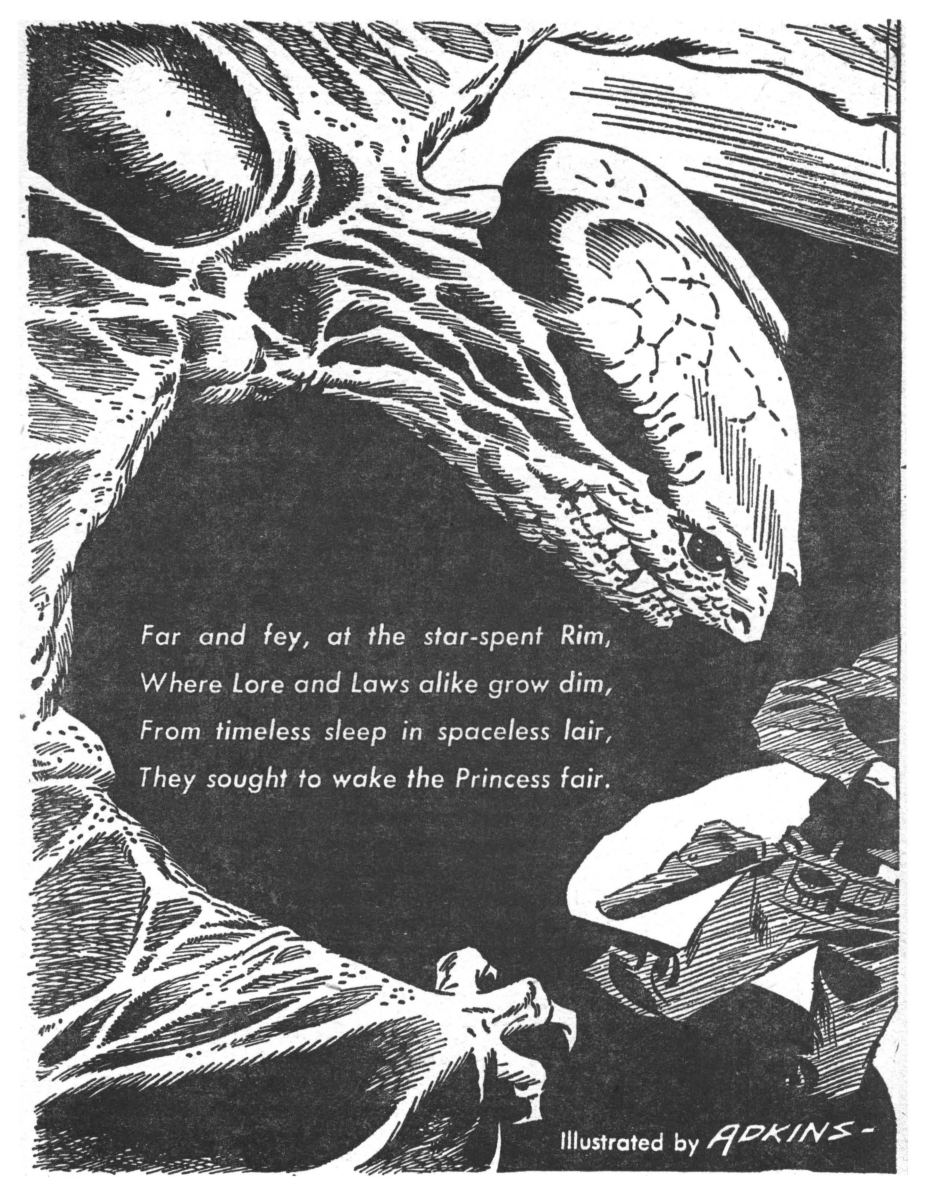
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LAST DREAMER

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



I

John Grimes was really homeward bound at last.

On both Tharn and Mellise he had been obliged to leave the ships in which he had taken passage when requested by the rulers of those planets

to assist them in the solution of rather complicated problems. He had not minded at all; he had welcomed the prospect of action after too long a time as a desk-borne Commodore. But now he was beginning to become a little impatient. Sonya, his wife, would be back soon from her Galac-

tic cruise, and then the major city of Lorn would be — as far as Grimes was concerned — forlorn in name only. He was pleased that *Rim Jaguar* would be making a direct run from Mellise to Port Forlorn with no time-expending calls *en route*. All being well, he would have a few days in which to put things in order prior to Sonya's homecoming.

It promised to be an uneventful voyage — and in Deep Space uneventful voyages are the rule rather than the exception. *Rim Jaguar* was one of the more modern units of Rim Runners' fleet, built for them to modified *Epsilon* Class design. She was well found, well manned and reasonably happy. Grimes was the only passenger, and as Rim Runners' Astronautical Superintendent he was given the run of the vessel. He did not abuse the privilege. He would never have dreamed of interfering, and he made suggestions only when asked to do so. Nonetheless, he enjoyed the long hours that he spent in the control room, yarning with the officers of the watch, looking out through the wide viewports at the great, distant Galactic Lens, unperturbed by its weird, apparent distortion — the resultant of the warped Space-Time through which the ship was falling. He was Earth-born but, like so many spacemen who had made their various ways to this frontier of the dark, he belonged on the Rim, had come to accept that almost empty sky — the sparsely scattered, unreachable island universes, the Galaxy itself no more than a dim-glowing ellipsoid — as being altogether right and proper and somehow far more natural than the

claustrophobia-inducing crowded firmaments of the worlds toward the Center.

He was sitting in *Rim Jaguar's* control room now, at ease in his acceleration chair, his seamed, pitted face and his still youthful gray eyes almost obscured by the cloud of acrid smoke from his vile, battered pipe. He was listening tolerantly to the Third Officer's long list of grievances; shortly after departure from Melisse he had made it quite plain that he wouldn't bite and also that anything told to him by the ship's people would not be taken down and used as evidence against them.

"And Annual Leave, sir," the young man was saying. "I realize that it isn't always possible to release an officer on the exact due date, but when there's a delay of two, or even three months . . ."

"We just haven't enough personnel, Mr. Sanderson," Grimes told him, "to ensure a prompt relief. Also, when it comes to appointments I try to avoid putting square pegs into round holes. You know what *that* can lead to."

"The *Rim Griffon* business, sir?"

"Yes. Everybody hating everybody, and the ship suffering in consequence. A very sorry affair."

"I see you point, sir, but . . ." An alarm pinged sharply. "Excuse me."

It was the Mass Proximity Indicator that had sounded off, the only piece of navigational equipment, apart from the Carlotti Direction Finder, that was functional while the Interstellar Drive was in operation. Grimes swivelled his chair so that he

could look at the globular tank that was the screen of the device. Yes, there was something there all right, something that had no business being there, something that, in the screen, was only a little to one side of the glowing filament that was the extrapolation of the ship's trajectory.

Sanderson was speaking briskly into the telephone. "Control Room here, sir. Unidentified object 00001.5, range 3,000, closing. Bearing opening."

Grimes heard Captain Drakenberg's reply. "I'll be right up, Mr. Sanderson."

Drakenberg was an untidy bear of a man. He looked into the screen and grunted, then turned to Grimes. "And what do you make of it, sir?"

"It's *something* . . ."

"I could have told you that, Commodore."

Grimes felt his prominent ears redden. Drakenberg was a highly competent shipmaster, popular rather than otherwise with his officers, but at times lacking in the social graces. He said mildly, "According to Traffic Control there are no ships in this sector . . ."

"Would it be a Rim Ghost?" asked the Captain. "You're something of an expert on them, Commodore. Would one show up on the M.P.I.?"

"Conditions would have to be exactly right," said Grimes. "We should have had to slip into its continuum, or it into ours. The same applies, of course, to any attempt to establish radio communication . . ."

"We'll try that, sir," said Drakenberg bluntly. Then, to Sanderson: "Line up the Carlotti."

The watch officer switched on the control room Carlotti Communicator, a miniature version of the main set in the ship's Radio Office which itself was a miniature version of the huge, planet-based beacons. The elliptical Mobius Strip that was the antenna began to rotate about its long axis, fading into apparent insubstantiality as it did so.

Then Sanderson threw the switch that hooked it up with the Mass Proximity Indicator. At once the antenna began to swing on its universal mounting, turning hesitantly in a wide arc. After its major oscillations had ceased, it hunted for a few seconds, finally locked on.

"Pass me the microphone," Drakenberg ordered. Then he said, speaking slowly and very distinctly, "*Rim Jaguar* calling unidentified vessel. *Rim Jaguar* calling unidentified vessel. Come in, please. Come in, please."

There was a silence, broken by Grimes. "Perhaps she hasn't got M.P.I.," he suggested. "Perhaps she hasn't seen us."

"It's a compulsory fitting, isn't it?" growled the Master.

"For the Federation's ships. And for ours. But the Empire of Waverley hasn't made it compulsory yet. Or our Shakespearian Sector neighbors either . . ."

He got out of his chair, moved to the screen. "Besides, I don't think that this target *is* a ship. Not with a blip that size, and at this range . . ."

"What the hell else can it be?" demanded Drakenberg.

"I don't know," admitted Grimes. "I don't know."

It hung there against the unrelieved blackness of Rim Space, a planet where no planet should have been, illuminated by a sun that wasn't there at all. There was an atmosphere, with cloud masses. There were seas and continents. There were polar icecaps. But it was real, solid, with enough mass to hold the ship — her Inertial Drive and her Mannschenn Drive shut down — in a stable orbit about itself. An Earth-type world it was, according to *Rim Jaguar's* instruments — an inhabited world, with the scintillant lights of cities clearly visible, scattered over its night hemisphere.

All attempts at communication had failed. The inhabitants did not seem to have radio, either for entertainment or for the transmission of messages. Grimes, still in the control room, looked with some distaste at the useless Carlotti transceiver. Until the invention of this device, whereby ships could talk with each other and with shore stations regardless of range and with no time lag, Psionic Radio Officers had always been carried. In circumstances such as these a trained telepath would have been invaluable, would have been able to achieve contact with at least a few minds on the planet below. Psionic Radio Officers were still carried by fighting ships and by survey vessels, but *Rim Jaguar* was neither. She was a merchantman, and the employment of personnel required for duty only upon very special occasions would have been uneconomical.

She did not carry sounding rockets, even. Grimes, as Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners, had been

responsible for that piece of economy, had succeeded in having the regulations amended. He had argued that ships trading only in a well charted section of Space had no need for such expensive toys. It had not been anticipated that an unknown planet — matter or anti-matter? — would appear suddenly upon the track between Mellise and Lorn.

But the construction of a small liquid fuel rocket is little more than a matter of plumbing, and the *Jaguar's* engineers were able to oblige. Her Second Officer — as well as being the ship's navigator, he specialized in gunnery in the Confederacy's Naval Reserve — produced a crude but effective homing device for the thing. It was hardly necessary. The range was short and the target a big one.

The rocket was fired, on such a trajectory that it would hit the night side while the ship was directly over that hemisphere. Radar tracked it down to the outer reaches of the atmosphere, where it disintegrated. But it was a normal, meteoric destruction by impact and friction, not the flare of released energy that would have told of the meeting of matter and anti-matter. That was that. The initial reports of the sighting, together with all the relevant coordinates, had already been sent to Lorn; all that remained now was to report the results of the sounding rocket experiment. Grimes was scribbling the message down on a signals pad, and Drakenberg was busy with the preliminaries to putting the ship back on trajectory, when the Radio Officer came into the control room. He was

carrying three envelopes, one of which he handed to the Captain, giving the other two to the Commodore. Grimes knew what their contents would be and sighed audibly. Over the years he had become too much of an expert on the dimensional oddities encountered out on the rim of the Galaxy. And he was the man on the spot — just when he was in a hurry to be getting home.

The first message was from Rim Runners' Board of Management and read, "Act as instructed by Admiral commanding Confederate Navy." The second one was from Admiral Kravinsky. "Carry out full investigation of strange planet." Drakenberg, scowling, handed Grimes the flimsy that had been inside his own envelope. Its content was clear enough. "Place self and vessel under orders of Commodore Grimes, Rim Worlds Naval Reserve."

"Keep the ship in orbit, Captain," ordered Grimes resignedly.

II

A dust mote in the emptiness, *Rim Jaguar's* No. 2 lifeboat fell towards the mysterious planet. In it were two men only — Grimes and Sanderson, the freighter's Third Officer. There had been no shortage of volunteers, from the Master on down, but Grimes, although a high ranking officer of the Naval Reserve, was still an employee of a commercial shipping line. To make a landing on an unknown world with horse, foot and artillery was all very well when you have the large crew of a warship to draw upon; should the initial ex-

pedition come to grief there would be sufficient personnel left aboard the vessel to handle her and, if necessary, to man her weaponry. But, insofar as manning was concerned, a merchant ship had to be run on a shoestring. There were no expendable ratings, and the loss of even one officer from any department meant at least considerable inconvenience.

Grimes' decision to take only Sanderson with him had not been a popular one, but the young man had been the obvious choice. He was unmarried and — so Grimes had learned from the control room conversations — was an orphan. He did not have a steady girl friend, even. Furthermore, he had just completed a period of Naval Reserve training and saw himself as a small arms expert.

Rim Jaguar, however, did not carry much of an armory. Grimes had with him his own Minetti and one of the ship's laser handguns. Sanderson had one of the other lasers — there were only three on board — and a vicious 10 millimeter projectile pistol. There were spare power packs and a good supply of ammunition for all weapons.

The Third Officer, who was handling the boat, was talkative on the way down. Grimes did not mind — as long as the young man kept his trap shut and concentrated on his pilotage as soon as the little craft hit the atmosphere.

"This is a rum go," he was saying. "How do you explain it, sir? All that obvious sunlight — and no sun at all in the sky..."

"I've seen rummer," Grimes told him. "Or as rum..."

Like, he thought, the series of alternative universes he had explored — although not thoroughly — in that voyage of the *Faraway Quest* that somebody had referred to as a Wild Ghost Chase. And that other universe, into which he had quite literally blown his ship, the one in which those evil non-human mutants had ruled the Rim. On both of those occasions Sonya had been with him. She should have been with him now — not this lanky, blond, blue-eyed puppy. But that wasn't Sanderson's fault, and in any case, Grimes did not think that he would find the young man lacking in any respect.

"I suppose," the Third Officer rattled on, "that it's all something to do with different dimensions. Here, we're at the very edge of the expanding Galaxy, and the . . . the barriers between continuums must be stretched thin, very thin. That planet's popped through into our continuum, but only half through, if you see what I mean. Its primary has stayed put on the other side of the . . . boundary . . ."

"A fairish hypothesis," admitted Grimes. "It will have to do until we can think of a better one."

And, he told himself, there must be a better one. So far as he knew, the differences between the universes were cultural rather than cosmological. There just shouldn't be a planet here —

"And I wonder what the people are like, sir. Would they be humanoid, do you think, or even human? They must be civilized. They have cities."

Grimes muttered something about plastic jungles.

"Not plastic, sir. They haven't radio, so the chances are that they don't run to chemical engineering. Concrete jungles . . . Would that be better?"

Grimes allowed himself to suppose that it might be.

"You couldn't have timed it better, sir. That large town you decided on will be just clear of the terminator when we get down."

In the Federation's Survey Service, thought Grimes, we were drilled so that such timing became second nature. How had that Instructor put it? "Make your first landing just west of the terminator, and unless some bastard chases you off, you've the whole day to play silly buggers in."

"Better fasten seat belts, sir."

Grimes pulled the webbing taut across his body, snapped shut the buckle. In a boat fitted with Inertial Drive the ride down to the planetary surface should be a smooth one, provided that there was no atmospheric turbulence. But here there was no Spaceport Control to give information on meteorological conditions. He spoke into the microphone of the transceiver. "Commodore to *Rim Jaguar*. We are now entering exosphere. So far all is going as planned." He heard Drakenberg acknowledge.

The air below the boat was clear, abnormally so. The lights of the cities were like star clusters. For a brief second Grimes entertained the crazy idea that they were star clusters, that he and Sanderson had broken through into some other Time and Space, were somehow adrift in regions towards the heart of a galaxy. He looked upwards for reassurance. But he did not,

through the transparency of the overhead viewport, see the familiar, almost empty Rim sky. The firmament was ablaze with unfamiliar constellations. It was frightening. Had Sanderson somehow turned the boat over just as Grimes had shifted his regard? He had not, as a glance at the instrument panel made obvious. He had not — and below were still the city lights; from zenith to horizon there were the stars, and low to the west was a great golden moon. Astern, the first rosy flush of dawn was in the sky.

His voice unemotional, deliberately flat, Grimes reported his observations to the ship.

Swiftly the boat fell through the atmosphere, so fast that interior temperature rose appreciably. But Sanderson was a first-class pilot, and at no time did he allow the speed of descent to approach dangerous limits. Swiftly the boat fell, her Inertial Drive purring gently, resisting but not overcoming the gravitational field that had her in its grip. Through the morning twilight she dropped, and above her only the brighter stars were visible in the pale sky, and below her the land masses were gray-green rather than black, and the city lights had lost their sharp scintillance and were going out, street by street.

It was towards what looked like a park that Sanderson, on Grimes' instructions, was steering, an irregular rectangle of comparative darkness outlined by such lights as were still burning. There were trees there; the men could see them as the boat lost altitude; there were trees, and there

were dull-gleaming ribbons and amoeboid shapes that looked like water, and featureless patches that must be clear, level ground. Bordering the park were the towers of the city — tall, fantastically turreted and, when struck by the first bright rays of the risen sun, shining like jewels in the reflected radiance.

The boat grounded gently on a soft, resilient surface. Grimes looked at Sanderson, and Sanderson looked at Grimes, and then they both stared out of the viewports. They had landed in the middle of the park, on what looked like a lawn of emerald green grass, not far from the banks of a stream. There were trees in the foreground — low, static explosions of dark foliage among which gleamed, scarlet and crimson and gold, what were either fruit or flowers. In the background were the distant towers, upthrusting like the suddenly frozen spray of some great fountain, an opalescent tracery against the clear blue sky.

"Open up, sir?" asked the young officer at last.

"Yes," said Grimes. Briefly, an itemized list of all the precautions that should be taken before setting foot on a strange planet flashed before his mind's eye, but he ignored it. To wear a spacesuit in this huge, gorgeous garden would be heresy. But not all of his training could be dismissed so easily. Reluctantly he picked up the microphone, made his report to the ship. He concluded with the words, "We're going out, now, to make contact with the natives. You have your instructions, Captain."

"Yes, Commodore Grimes."

Grimes wondered why Drakenberg should sound so anxious. "If I don't hear from you again twenty-four standard hours from now, at the latest, I'm to make a report directly to the Admiralty and await their orders." He hesitated, then brought out the final words with some difficulty. "And on no account am I to attempt another landing."

"That is correct, Captain Drakenberg. Over."

"Good luck, Commodore Grimes. Over and out."

Sanderson already had both airlock doors open, and the cool breeze had eddied gently through the little cabin, flushing out the acidity of hot oil and machinery, bringing with it the scent of flowers, of dew-wet grass. There were birds singing outside and then, faint yet clear, the sound of a great clock somewhere in the city striking the hour. Automatically Grimes looked at his watch, made to reset it and then smiled at his foolishness. He did not know yet what sort of time it was that these people kept.

He was first out of the boat, jumping down on to the velvety turf, joined almost at once by Sanderson. "This is a bit of all right!" exclaimed the young man. "I hope that the natives come up to what we've seen so far." He added, "The girls especially . . ."

Grimes should have reproved him, but he didn't. He was too busy wondering what it was that made everything so far seem so familiar. He had never seen this world before, or any planet like it, and yet . . . How did

he know, for example, that this city's name was Ayonoree? How could he know?

"Which way do we go, sir?" Sanderson was asking.

Which way? The memory, if memory it was, wasn't quite good enough. "We'll follow the stream," he decided.

It was a short walk to the near bank of the little river, along which ran a path of flagstones. The water was crystal clear, gently flowing. On it floated great lily pads, and on one of these sat a huge frog, all gold and emerald, staring at them with bright, protuberant eyes. It croaked loudly.

"It's saying something!" cried Sanderson.

"Rubbish!" snapped Grimes, who was trying to break the odd spell that had been cast over them. But were those words that they could hear?

"Follow stream, stay in the dream. Follow stream, stay in the dream."

"You!" shouted Sanderson. "What do you mean?"

In reply the batrachian croaked derisively, splashed into the water and struck out slowly for the further shore.

So we follow the stream, thought Grimes. He set off along the path, the young man trailing behind. Suddenly he stopped. There was a tree, gracefully trailing its tendril-like branches almost to the water, at one side of the flagstones, another tree a few yards inshore from it. Between the trunks was a huge, glittering web. There was a spider, too, disgustingly hairy, as big in body as a large man's clenched fist, scuttling toward the center of its fragile-seeming net. And

there was an insect of some kind, a confused fluttering of gauzy wings, snared by the viscous strands.

Grimes made to detour around the landward tree. After all, spiders were entitled to a meal, just as he was. Insofar as the uglier sides of Nature were concerned, he tried to maintain his neutrality. He did not especially like spiders — but, in all probability, that oversized insect in the web was something even more unpleasant.

Behind him he heard Sanderson cry out, heard the hiss of his laser pistol and felt the heat of the beam that narrowly missed his right ear. The fleshy body of the spider exploded and hung there, tattered and steaming. There was a sickening stench of burned flesh.

Grimes turned angrily on the young man. "What the hell do you think you're doing? For all we know, spiders are sacred on this world..."

"More likely *these* are!"

Sanderson had pushed past Grimes and, with gentle hands, was freeing the trapped creature. "Look!" he was saying. "Look!"

The Commodore looked. This was not, as he had assumed, an insect. It was humanoid, a winged woman, but tiny, tiny. Her lustrous golden hair hung to her waist, and beneath her filmy green robe was the hint of perfectly formed breasts. Her mouth was scarlet and her eyes blue, and her features were perfectly — too perfectly? — formed. She sat there in the Third Officer's cupped hands, looking up at him. Her voice, when she spoke, was like the tinkling of a little silver bell.

*"Follow stream, and follow river,
When danger threatens do not
quiver;*

*Follow stream to Ogre's Keep,
Wake the Princess from her sleep!"*

"What Princess?" demanded Grim-

es. She turned to glare at him.

*"Prince's servitors, like you,
Should only speak when spoken
to."*

Sanderson was shocked. "This is the Commodore," he said severely to the winged being.

"Commodore, Schmommodore!" she replied sweetly — and then, with hardly a quiver of those impractical looking pinions, was gone.

"So you're promoted," said Grimes drily. "And I'm demoted."

"All the same, sir, it was absolute sauce on her part." Then he went on a little smugly. "The odd part is that I *am* a prince. My father was King of Tavistock, until they threw him out."

"And your great grandfather," said Grimes, "who founded the dynasty, was a semi-piratical tramp skipper. I know the history."

"Do we follow the stream, sir?"

"Yes. It's as good a way to explore this world as any."

III

They followed the stream. Through the great park it led them, past enormous beds of fantastic, glowing flowers, through a grove of gaunt, contorted trees. The transition from parkland to city street was abrupt; suddenly there were cobbles underfoot instead of the worn flagstones,

and on every hand towered the multi-colored buildings, the convoluted structures that made nonsense of all the laws of architecture and engineering.

People were abroad now, men and women, a great number of children. They were human enough in outward appearance at least, but there was an oddness about them, an oversimplification of all features, a peculiar blend of stylization and caricature. There was no vehicular traffic, but there were riders — some upon horses, some upon camels, some upon the lizardlike roadrunners indigenous to Tarizeel, some upon beasts that were utterly strange even to the widely travelled Grimes.

The two explorers marched on, ignored by the brightly dressed natives, ignoring them. They should, Grimes knew, have tried to make contact, which would not have been hard. From the scraps of conversation they overheard, it was obvious that Anglo-Terran was the language of this planet. They should have demanded to be taken to the king, president or whatever authority it was that ruled this world. But it was not important. What was important was to find the Ogre's Keep, to awaken the sleeping Princess. It was as though some outside power had taken control of them. The feeling should have been nightmarish, but it was not. Grimes was oddly grateful that somebody — or something — else was making the decisions that he should have been making.

The stream joined a river, and the path continued along the bank of the larger body of water, taking the two

men clear of the city. They walked on steadily, feeling no fatigue, maintaining a brisk pace. They were away from the crowds of the city; they met only an occasional pedestrian, and now and again a peasant man or woman pushing a barrow high-laden with produce in to market. One of these latter, a wizened, black clad crone dragging a little cart overladen with pumpkins, accosted them. Raising high a skinny claw she declaimed in a cracked voice:

*"Dare the dragon! Storm the Keep!
Save us all from endless sleep!"*

"The dragon, madam?" inquired Grimes politely.

But she was given no time to answer him. From the cloudless sky crackled a bolt of lightning, dazzling, terrifying, striking the path between her and the two men. She wailed, "I didn't say anything! I didn't say anything!" and was gone, scuttling towards the city, the cart bouncing along behind her, a trail of bruised and burst pumpkins in her wake.

"Somebody Up There doesn't like her," remarked Sanderson. Then, brightly, "Do you feel in the mood for dragon-slaying, sir?"

"Why not?" countered Grimes. After all, it would be no more outrageous than any of their other encounters to date. *Outrageous?* He repeated the word mentally. Where had he got it from? Nothing, so far, justified its use — the frog, the fairy in the spider's web, all the talk of Ogre's Keeps and Sleeping Princesses and dragons, it had all been perfectly natural. In any well regulated world Sleeping Princesses were there to be awakened, and Ogre's Keeps to be stormed, and

dragons to be slain. Of course, the way that he and the young Prince were dressed was all wrong — more like peasants than like knights errant. But that could not be helped. Disguise was allowable.

"Shall we press on, Your Highness?" he suggested.

"Yes, Sir John. No doubt the dragon awaits us eagerly." Sanderson pulled the projectile pistol from its holster, spun it carelessly with his right forefinger through the trigger guard. "Methinks that our magic weapons will prove more efficacious than swords."

"Mehopes that you're right, Your Highness."

"Then come, Sir John. Time's a-wasting."

They walked on — and then, just ahead of them, Grimes saw a pontoon landing stage on the river. There was a ship alongside it, an archaic side-wheel paddle steamer, smoke issuing from its tall funnel. At the shoreward side of the stage was a notice board and on it, in big black letters on a white ground, the sign:
*RIVER TRIPS TO OGRE'S KEEP.
HALF A FLORIN. VERY CHEAP.*

"Your highness," said Grimes, "let's take the boat and rest awhile, then face the dragon with a smile."

"Have you the wherewithal, Sir John, to pay the fare agreed upon?"

"I have a pass, Prince Sanderson. And so have you — your trusty gun."

Something at the back of the Commodore's mind winced at the doggerel and cried voicelessly, *You're a space-man, not a character out of a children's book!* Grimes almost ignored

it, tried to ignore it, but the nagging doubt that had been engendered persisted.

They marched onto the pontoon, their heavily shod feet ringing on the planking, their weapons drawn and ready. Side by side, but with Sanderson slightly in the lead, they tramped up the gangway. At the head of it stood a man in uniform — and, incongruously, his trappings were those of a Purser in the Waverley Royal Mail Line. He held out his hand. "Good knights, if you would board this ship, pay passage money for your trip."

"Varlet, stand back! The ride is free for this, the bold Sir John, and me!"

"And here, as you can plainly see," added Grimes, making a meaningful gesture with his Minetti, "is our loud-voiced authority."

"Sir, it speaks loud enough for me," admitted the Purser, standing to one side. As they passed him Grimes heard him mutter, "The Royal Mail could not be worse. *They* never made me speak in verse."

Grimes, who was always at home aboard ships of any kind, led the way down to the saloon, a large compartment, darkly panelled, with black leather upholstery on chairs and settees. At one end of it there was a bar, but it was shut. Along both sides were big windows, barely clear of the surface of the water. There were no other passengers.

Overhead there was the thudding of feet on planking. Then there was a jangling of bells, followed at once by the noise of machinery below decks. From above came the long,

mournful note of a steam whistle, and then came the steady *chunk, chunk, chunk* of the paddles. The ship was under way, heading down river. On either side the banks were sliding past, a shifting panorama of forest and village, with only rarely what looked like a cultivated field, but very often a huge, frowning, battlemented castle.

The rhythm of paddles and engines was a soothing one and Grimes, at least, found that it made him drowsy. He lolled back in his deep chair, half way between consciousness and sleep — and when he was in this state his real memories, his very real doubts and worries, came suddenly to the surface of his mind. He heard his companion murmur, "Speed, bonny boat, like a bird through the sky. Carry us where the dragon must die."

"Come off it, Sanderson," ordered the Commodore sharply.

"Sir John, please take yourself in hand. Such insolence I will not stand."

"Come off it!" ordered Grimes again — and then the spell, that had been so briefly broken, took charge again. "Your Highness, I spoke out of turn. But courtesy I'll try to learn."

"My Good Sir John, you better had. Bad manners always make me mad. But look through yonder port, my friend. Methinks we near our journey's end."

Journey's end or not, there was a landing stage there towards which the paddle steamer was standing in. Inshore from it, the land was thickly wooded and rose steeply. On

the crest of the hill glowered the castle, a grim pile of gray stone, square-built, ugly, with a turret at each corner. There was a tall staff from which floated a flag. Even from this distance the two men could make out the emblem — a white skull-and-crossbones on a black ground. And then, as the ship neared the shore, the view was shut out and, finally, only the slime-covered side of the pontoon could be seen through the window.

The paddle steamer came alongside with a gentle crunch, and the engines were briefly reversed to take the way off her. From forward and aft there was a quick rattle of steam winches as she was moored, and then there were no more mechanical noises.

The Purser appeared in the saloon entrance. "Good knights, you now must leave this wagon. So fare you forth to face the dragon."

"And you will wait till we are done?" asked Grimes.

"We can't Sir Knight, not on this run.

*Come rain, come shine, come wind,
come snow,*

*Back and forth our ferries go.
Like clockwork yet, sir, you should
try 'em,*

*And even set your wristwatch by
'em."*

"Enough, Sir John," said Sanderson, "this wordy wight will keep us gabbing here all night. I' truth, he tells a pretty tale — this lackey from the Royal Mail!"

The spell was broken again. "You noticed too!" exclaimed Grimes.

"Yes. I noticed. That cap badge with a crown over the silver rocket." Sanderson laughed. "It was when I

tried to find a rhyme for "tale" that things sort of clicked into place . . ."

Grimes turned on the Purser. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

"Alas, sir knight, I cannot say. *I cannot say?*" The young man's pudgy face stiffened with resolution. "*No!*" Come what may . . ."

Whatever it was that came, it was sudden. He was standing there, struggling to speak, and then he was . . . gone, vanished in a gentle thunderclap as the air rushed in to fill the vacuum where he had stood. Then another man stamped into the saloon, in Captain's uniform with the same familiar trappings.

"Begone, good knights," he shouted, "to meet your fate! Get off my ship, I'm running late."

"Sir," began Grimes — and then that influence gripped his mind again. He said, "Thank you for passage, sir. Goodbye. We fare forth now, to do or die!"

"Well said, Sir John," declaimed Sanderson. "Well said, my friend. We go — to shape the story's end."

"I hope, good knights, you gallant two," growled the Captain, "that story's end does not shape you." He led the way from the saloon up to the gangway.

IV

They stood on the pontoon, watching the little steamer round the first bend on her voyage up river, then walked to the bridge that spanned the gap between landing stage and bank. Overhead the sky was darkening and the air was chill. The

westerling sun had vanished behind a bank of low clouds. Grimes, his shirt and slacks suddenly inadequate, shivered. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself. And then, quite suddenly, *Who am I?* It was a silly question, and he at once knew how foolish it was. The answer shaped itself in his mind. *I am he they call Sir John, true comrade to Prince Sanderson.*

"We forward march," announced the Prince, "my cobber bold, to meet the perils long foretold. Up yonder hill we climb, and there we'll beard the dragon in his lair."

"The dragon wastes no time on fuss," remarked Grimes. "He's coming down and bearding us."

Yes, the beast was coming down, either from the castle or from somewhere else a-top the hill. It was airborne — and even in his bemused state Grimes realized that it should never have gotten off the ground. Its head and body were too large, its wings too small, too skimpy. But it was a terrifying sight, a monstrous, batwinged crocodile, its mouth agape and crowded with jagged teeth, the long sharp claws of its forefeet extended. It dived down on them, roaring, ignoring the laser beams that the two men directed at it, even though its metallic scales glowed cherry red where they scored hits. It dived down on them — and there was more than mere sound issuing from that horrid maw. The great gout of smoky flame was real enough, and Grimes and Sanderson escaped it only by diving into the undergrowth on either side of the steep path.

The beast pulled out of its dive and flapped away slowly, regaining alti-

tude. The men watched it until it was only a darker speck in the dark sky, then realized that the speck was rapidly increasing in size. It was coming for them again.

Something was wrong, very wrong. In the fairy tales the dragons never kill the heroes — but this dragon looked like the exception to prove the rule. Grimes holstered his laser pistol, pulled out his Minetti. He doubted that the little weapon would be any avail against the armored monstrosity, but it might be worth trying. From the corner of his eye he saw that Sanderson had out and ready his own heavy, projectile pistol. "Courage, Sir John," called the young man. "Aim for his head. We've no cold steel — we'll try hot lead!"

"Cold steel, forsooth!" swore Grimes. "Hot lead, indeed! A silver bullet's what we need."

"Stand firm, Sir John, and don't talk rot! Don't whine for what we haven't got!"

Grimes loosed off a clip at the diving dragon on full automatic. Sanderson, the magazine of whose pistol held only ten rounds, fired in a more leisurely manner. Both men tried to put their shots into the open mouth, the most obviously vulnerable target. Whether or not they succeeded they never knew. Again they had to tumble hastily off the path just as the jet of flame roared out at them. This time it narrowly missed Grimes' face. It was like being shaved with a blowtorch.

Grimes got groggily to his feet, fumbled another clip of cartridges out of the pouch at his belt

and reloaded the little automatic. He saw that Sanderson was pushing a fresh magazine into the butt of his heavy pistol. The young man smiled grimly and said, "Sir John, the ammo's running low. When all is spent, what shall we do?"

"The beast will get us if we run. Would that we'd friends to call upon!"

"Many did give us good advice. If they gave us more it would be nice."

"What of the fairy Lynnimame?"

"And how, Sir John, do you know her name?"

The dragon was coming in again, barely visible in the fast gathering dusk. The men held their fire until the last possible moment — and it was almost the last moment for both of them. Barely did they scramble clear of the roaring, stinking flame, and as they rolled in the brush both of them were frantically beating out their smouldering clothing. The winged monster, as before, seemed to be uninjured.

Suddenly Sanderson cried out, swung to turn his just reloaded pistol on a new menace. It was Grimes who stopped him, who knocked his arm down before he could fire. In the glowing ovoid of light was a tiny human figure, female, with gauzy wings. She hung there over the rough, stony path. She was smiling sweetly, and her voice, when she spoke, was a silvery tintinabulation. "Prince, your companion called my name. I am the fairy Lynnimame. I am she who, this very morn, from the jaws of the spider foul was torn. I pay my debts; you rescued me. I'll rescue you, if that's your fee."

"Too right it is, you lovesome sprite..."

"Then take this, Prince. And now, good night."

She put something into Sanderson's hand and vanished. Before she flickered into invisibility Grimes, by the pale luminosity of her, saw what it was. It was a cartridge case, ordinary enough in appearance except that the tip of the bullet looked too bright to be lead. "A silver bullet!" marvelled the young man. "A silver bullet. We are saved. He'll play Goliath to my David!"

"Unless you load, you pious prig, he'll play the chef to your long pig!"

Hastily Sanderson pulled the magazine from the butt of his pistol, ejected the first cartridge, replaced it with the silver bullet. He shoved the clip back home with a loud *click*. He was just in time; the dragon was upon them again, dropping almost vertically. The first lurid flames were gushing from its gaping mouth when the Third Officer fired. The result was spectacular. The thing exploded in mid-air, and the force of the blast sent Grimes tumbling head over heels into the bushes, with only a confused impression of a great, scarlet flower incontinently burgeoning against the night.

He recovered consciousness slowly. As before, when he had dozed briefly aboard the river steamer, he was aware of his identity, knew what he was supposed to be doing. And then Sanderson's words severed the link with reality, recast the spell.

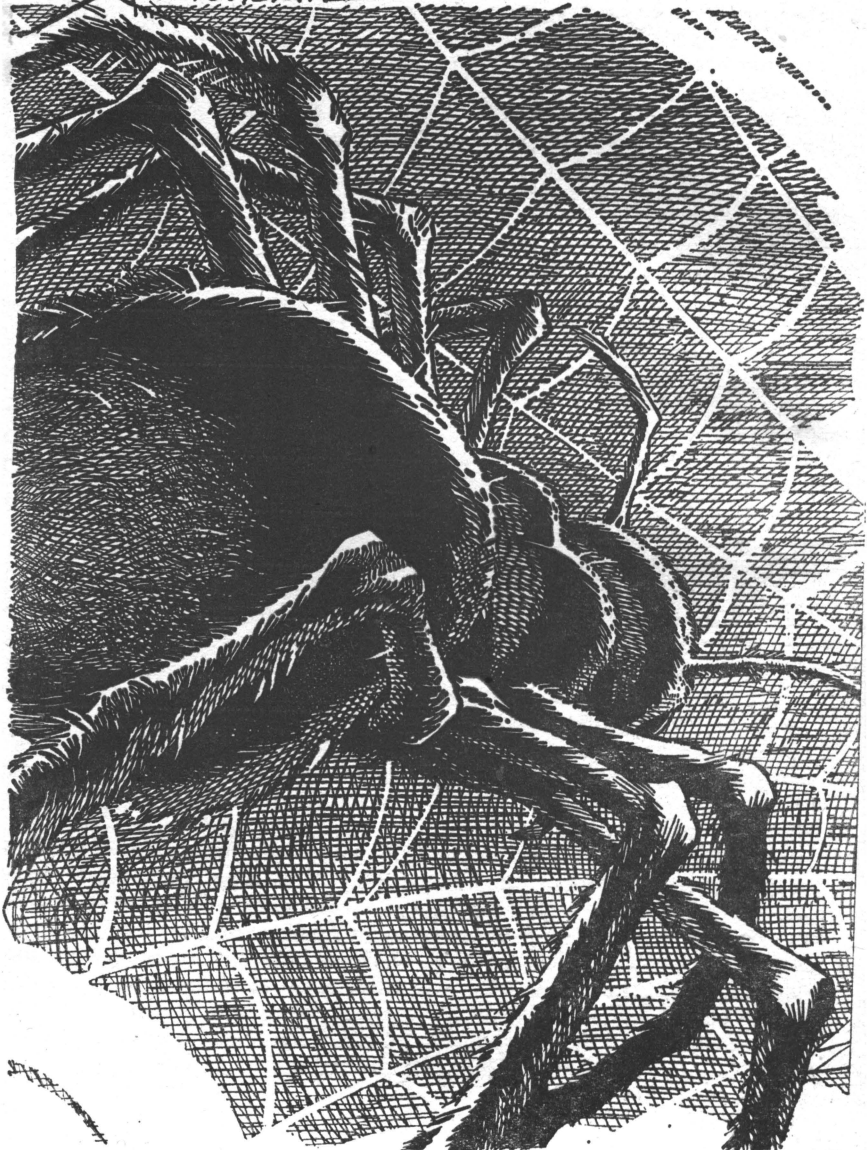
"Arise, Sir John! No time for sleep! We march against the Ogre's Keep!"

They marched against the Ogre's Keep — but it was an undignified scramble up the steep path rather than a march. Luckily the moon was up now, somewhere above the overcast, and its diffused light was helpful, showing them the dark mass of briars that barred their way before they blundered into the thorny growth. They had not lost their weapons, and with their laser pistols they slashed, and slashed again, and slashed until their wrists ached with fatigue and their thumbs were numb from the continual pressure on the firing studs. For a long while they made no headway at all; it seemed that the severed, spiny tendrils were growing back faster than they were being destroyed. When the power packs in the pistols were exhausted they were actually forced back a few feet while they were reloading. It was Grimes who thought of renewing the attack with a wide setting instead of the needle beams that they had been using at first. The prickly bushes went up with a great *whoosh* of smoky flame, and the two men scrambled rather than ran through the gap thus cleared — and even then the barbed thorns were clutching at them.

Then, with the fire behind them, they climbed on — bruised, torn and weary. They climbed, because it was the only thing to do. At last they were high enough up the hillside to see the castle again, black and forbidding against the gray sky. The few squares of yellow light that were windows accentuated rather than relieved the darkness.

DAN ADKINS

SPIDER



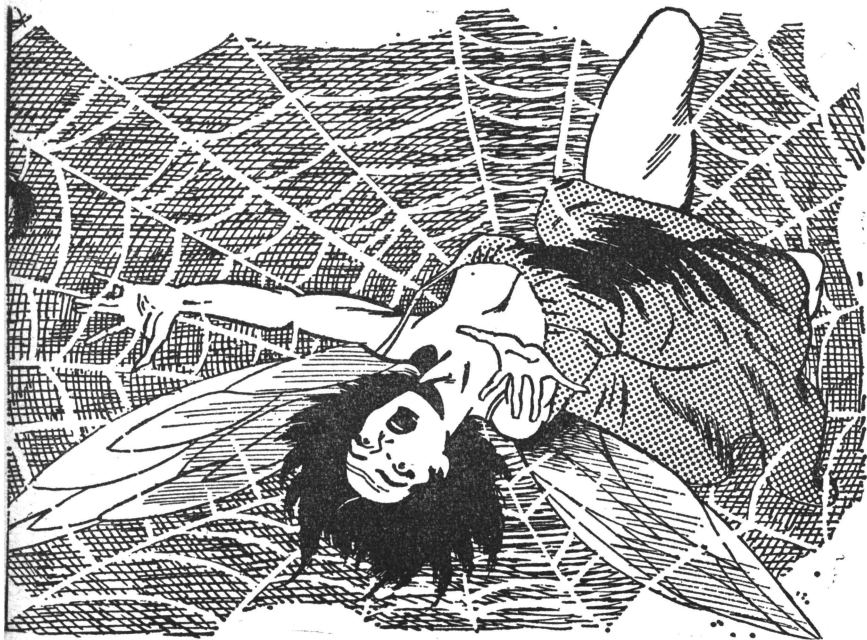
They gained the rock-strewn plateau in the center of which towered the Keep. They stumbled across the uneven surface, making their way between the huge boulders, avoiding somehow the fissures that made of the ground a crazy pattern of cracks. From some of these sounded ominous hissings and croakings and gruntings; from some there was a baleful gleaming of red eyes; but nothing actively molested them. And there was a rising wind now, damp and cold, that made a mockery of their rent, inadequate clothing and that whined and muttered in their ears like unquiet ghosts.

But they kept on — a staggering, faltering pace — and came at last to the great, iron-studded doorway. Barely within Sanderson's reach — and he was a tall man — was a huge

knocker, forged in the semblance of a snarling lion's head. The young officer had to stretch to reach it. As he put his hand to it, it moved of its own accord, emitting a thunderous clangour like an artillery barrage. *Boom, boom! Boom, boom! Boom!—*

Almost as loud were the heavy footsteps that sounded thunderously behind the door. Almost as loud was the deep voice that asked, "Who on this night so bleak and froze, disturbs the Giant Blunderbore?"

The double valves of the door crashed outwards. Standing there, silhouetted against the light, was a human figure. It was all of ten feet tall, and broad in proportion. It looked down at them, its eyes gleaming yellow in the black face, and bellowed, "Enter, princeling! Enter, knight!



Ye shall be my guests tonight." Then, as the two men drew back, it went on, "Come in, come in! This is Liberty Hall — you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

The lapse from rhymed couplets and the use of an expression that had never failed to annoy him snapped Grimes back to reality. He was Commodore John Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, not Sir John, and he was supposed to be investigating this crazy planet. But the castle was real enough, as was the giant who loomed there in the open doorway — as were the bruises on his body that still ached, the scratches and burns that still smarted.

"What's the matter?" he asked nastily. "Can't you find a rhyme for 'bastard'? And who are you, anyhow?"

"And who are you? All I know is that you are outsiders, and I'm supposed to stop you. Not that I want to. This damn foolishness has gone on too long. Much too long..."

From the sky thundered a great voice, "Blunderbore, your duty's plain! These prying strangers must be slain!"

The giant stared upwards, growled, "Nuts to you. I've had you, chum, in a big way."

The answer was a sizzling bolt of lightning, a crackling streak of dazzling energy that should have incinerated Blunderbore where he stood. But he caught it with a huge hand, laughed and hurled it back like a flaming javelin, shouting, "Try that on for size, damn you!"

"What's going on?" Sanderson whimpered. "What's going on here?"

"It's a long story . . ." Blunderbore told him.

"It's a story all right," agreed Grimes. "The city of Ayonoree . . . The Frog Prince . . . The Fairy Lynniname . . . And you, Blunderbore . . ." Yes, it was all coming back to him, and it was all making a fantastic kind of sense.

"Can you be killed?" Blunderbore was asking.

"I suppose so," said Grimes, conscious of the smart of his wounds. "Yes, I fear so. We're the outsiders. We don't belong in the series, do we? And you and the others go on from installment to installment . . ."

"Only because we're trapped. But come in. You have to wake the Princess. It's the only way out, for all of us."

The huge man stood to one side as Grimes and Sanderson hurried into the castle. They were barely in time, were almost knocked from their feet by the wind from the crashing volley of great rocks that fell from the black sky. Splinters stung the backs of their legs painfully. Grunting, Blunderbore pushed past them, seized the two valves of the door in his big hands, pulled them shut just as another shower of boulders crashed against the stout, iron-bound timbers. "Hurry!" he shouted. "He's turning nasty!"

The giant led the way across the flagstoned floor, to the far end of the enormous, gloomy hall. He staggered as he ran — and with cause. The very earth was growling beneath their feet, and each successive tremor was more violent than the last. From

above came a crash of toppling masonry.

The air was thickening. Tendrils of yellow fog clutched at the running, stumbling men, and the writhing mist had substance. Half-seen, evil faces leered at them, distorted visages that were all teeth and dull-gleaming eyes. Vaporous claws reached out for them, solidifying as they did so. Behind Grimes Sanderson screamed, and the Commodore stopped and turned, slashing with his laser at the gelatinous obscenity that had the young officer in its grip. It piped shrilly as it disintegrated, stinking sulphurously.

"Hurry!" Blunderbore was still shouting. "Hurry!"

The stone floor was cracking underfoot, heaving and buckling, and from the high, vaulted ceiling ominous groans resounded. The castle could not withstand this punishment for long. The flaring torches were going out, and there was a strong smell of escaping gas — and then, as a chance spark ignited the explosive mixture, there was a fiery blast that almost finished the destructive work initiated by the earthquake.

Almost finished . . .

But Blunderbore and the two spacemen were still on their feet, somehow, and there were still walls around them, although crumbling and tottering; and over their heads the last stone arch still held, despite the torrential rain of rubble that was clattering upon and around it. Ahead of them was the great fireplace into which the giant jumped without stooping. Then he bent slowly and fumbled among the dead ashes. He straightened even more slowly, the

muscles of his naked back and arms bulging and glistening. He grunted as he came erect, holding before him an enormous slab of stone. He cast it from him — and the noise of its fall and its shattering was lost amid the general uproar.

Under the slab was a spiral stairway, a helix of rusty iron running down and down, down to murky depths where flickered an eerie blue glimmer. The prospect was not an inviting one; how long would the walls of the shaft withstand the incessant tremors?

Even so, the great fire was yet to come, whereas the frying pan was becoming hotter and hotter. Great sheets of flame from the ruptured gas mains were shrieking across the ruined hall, and through them crashed increasingly heavy falls of debris. And the writhing phantasms were back, multiplying in spite of the geysers of burning, exploding gas, coalescing, solidifying, piping and titting. They were insubstantial no longer; their claws and their teeth were sharp.

"Down with you!" bellowed Blunderbore. "Down with you! It's the only way!"

"You lead!" gasped Grimes, using his laser like a sword, slashing at the half-materialized things that were closing in upon them.

"No . . . I'll hold . . . them off . . ." The giant had wrenched the great iron spit from its sockets on either side of the fireplace, was flailing away with it, grunting with every stroke. Tattered rags of ectoplasm clung to its ends, eddied through the smoke and dust-filled air.

Grimes paused briefly at the head of the spiral staircase, then barked to Sanderson, "Come on!" He clattered down the shaking treads, his left hand on the outer guard rail, his pistol clenched in his right fist. The central column seemed to be trying to tie itself into a knot, but it held, although the steps were canting at odd angles. The walls of the shaft were starting to bulge inwards.

Grimes ran — down, down, round, round — keeping his footing in spite of the earthquake shocks, in spite of his increasing dizziness. He ran, and after him ran the Third Officer. Up there above, Blunderbore was still fighting; his joyous bellowing came rolling down on them like thunder, loud even above the clangorous destruction of the Ogre's Keep.

Down, down . . .

Grimes staggered on, forcing his legs to move, to go on moving, taking great gasps of the damp, fetid air. Something barred his way, something long and serpentlike, with absurdly small forelegs, with curved poisonfangs and a flickering black tongue. The Commodore tried to stop, tried to bring up his pistol to a firing position, but could not. His impetus carried him on. Then he was *through* the monster; its body offered no more resistance than wet tissue paper.

Down, down . . .

It was more of a fall than a run.
It was a fall.

Grimes thudded gently into something thick and soft, lay sprawled on the soft bed of moss, breathing in great, painful gulps. Slowly he became aware of his surroundings — the cave, lit by a soft, rosy radiance

with no apparent source, the opalescent colonnades of stalactite and stalagmite, the tinkling, glittering waterfall. He focused his attention upon his immediate vicinity. The Prince was still with him, was himself slowly stirring into wakefulness. Sir John knew where he was. This was the Witch's Cave, the home of the wicked Melinee.

She was standing over them, a tall woman, white of skin, black of hair, vividly red of mouth, clad in a robe of misty gray. In either hand she held a crystal goblet, bedewed with condensation. She murmured, "Rest you awhile, good knights and true, and pray accept this cooling brew."

Sanderson reached greedily for the vessel she held out to him — and Grimes, firing from his supine position, exploded it into a spray of splinters and acrid steam.

"It's not the mess," protested Sanderson, "but it's the waste! I never even got a taste!"

"Prince, had we quaffed the witch's wine," Grimes told him, "it would have turned us into swine . . ."

Melinee laughed, a low, throaty gurgle. "You know too much, too much by far. But you'll be more fun the way you are." She looked at Sanderson as she said this. The invitation in her black eyes, her parted scarlet lips, was unmistakable.

The young officer reacted. He got gracefully to his feet, took a step towards the witch. He said gallantly, "Who needs wine when you're around, beautiful?"

"Careful!" warned Grimes.

"Have we been careful so far, sir?"

We've been collecting all the kicks — it's time that we got our paws on some of the ha'pence." Then, to the woman, "Isn't there somewhere around here a little more private?"

She smiled. "My bower, behind the waterfall . . ."

"Sanderson! I order you to keep away from this female!"

"I give the orders around here, old man," said Melinee sweetly. "This is my cave, and whatever your rank may be it means nothing as long as you're on my property." She turned again to Sanderson. The filmy robe was already slipping down from one smooth shoulder, and it was obvious that she was wearing nothing underneath it. "Come," she murmured.

The admonitory voice boomed from the roof of the cavern. "Melinee, you forget yourself!"

"I don't!" she shouted. "I'm remembering myself. I'm a real person, not a character in some stupid children's fairy story! If *you* can't write adult fiction, buster, *I'm* taking charge of the plot. I'm supposed to be stopping these men from going any further, aren't I? Then shut up — and let me do it my way!"

"Melinee!"

"That's not my name, and you know it." She turned again to Sanderson. "Don't be shy, spaceman. I'll show you just how wicked a wicked witch can be!"

"Mr. Sanderson!" Grimes' voice crackled with authority. "Leave that woman alone!"

The young man stood there, obviously thinking mutinous thoughts but not daring to express them. The woman stood there, looking at him, a

contemptuous little smile curving her full lips. And then she turned, began to walk slowly and gracefully towards the waterfall. Her robe was almost transparent.

"Melinee!" The voice from the roof expressed entreaty as well as anger.

And why, Grimes asked himself suddenly, should I be on his side? He said aloud, but quietly, "All right, Mr. Sanderson. Go with her."

Sanderson shook his head bewilderedly. "First of all you tell me not to, and now you say that I can . . . After all, we *are* on duty . . ."

"Go with her," repeated Grimes. It was more of an order than a suggestion.

"But, sir . . ."

"Damn it all, when I was your age I didn't have to be told twice."

The Wicked Witch called over her shoulder, "Do as the nice man says, darling."

The Third Officer made a sort of growling noise deep in his throat, glared defiantly at the Commodore, then started after the woman. She had reached the shimmering curtain of the waterfall, was passing through it. As she turned to look back through the rippling transparency Sanderson quickened his pace. Grimes chuckled, pulled from his pocket the battered pipe that somehow had survived unbroken, filled it, then ostentatiously used his laser pistol as a lighter. It was a dangerous trick, but an impressive one.

From beyond the cascade came the sound of a crooning female voice. "Mirror, mirror on the wall . . . Who is the fairest one of all?" Then



there was a crash of splintering glass and a scream. "No! No! You can't do that to me! I'll fix you! I'll fix you, you . . . fairy story teller!"

Melinee burst back into the main cavern. She was shaking with murderous fury. "Look!" she yelled. "Look what that bastard did to me!"

Grimes looked. Sanderson looked. "But . . ." the latter started to say. Grimes interjected hastily, "It's shocking!" He was lying — as the mirror must have done.

"Come on!" she snarled. "This bloody joke's gone on quite long enough!"

VI

She led the way into her bower, through the curtain of falling water. As Grimes passed through it, he heard behind him the clatter of falling stalactites, felt the brief wave of scalding heat as the waterfall flashed into steam. But it was too late to harm him, and the others were well clear.

On the far wall of the bower was the mirror — or what had been the mirror. Now it was only an elaborately molded golden frame set into the rock face. Melinee scrambled through it, ignoring the sharp shard that ripped her robe from hip to ankle. Sanderson followed her, then Grimes. The tunnel beyond it was unpleasantly organic in appearance, a convoluted tube, with smooth and pinkly glistening walls, winding and pulsing underfoot, writhing.

Melinee ran on, sure-footed. Somewhere she had lost her sandals, had probably used one of them to smash

the lying, libelous looking-glass. The men, in their shoes, slipped and slithered, but they kept up with her. Down they went, and down, losing all sense of direction, losing their footing, putting hands out to steady themselves against smooth, warm walls that shrank away from the touch. Down they went, and down, gasping in the hot air, suddenly conscious that the red-glowing walls were steadily contracting. Soon there would be no going any further ahead, and no turning back.

They were crouching, and then they were slithering on their bellies. Grimes, who had passed Sanderson while it was still possible, while there was still freedom of movement, suddenly found his way blocked and realized that the crown of his head was pressing against the soles of Melinee's bare feet. Faintly her voice came back to him. "We're there . . . At the airlock . . . But . . . I don't know how to open it . . ."

"I . . . I have to crawl past you . . ." gasped Grimes. Then, urgently, "Make yourself small, woman! Breathe out!"

"I'll . . . try . . ."

Like an earthworm in its tunnel — but with far less agility, far less speed — the Commodore edged forward. Somehow he managed to get both arms ahead of his body, clutched filmy fabric and the firm flesh beneath. He heard her give a little scream, but he ignored it. Cloth tore, and then he had a firm grip on her waist, just above her hips. His face was over her heels, and then pressing down on her ankles. Somehow he

was still able to draw an occasional breath. His face was sliding — but slowly, slowly — up the valley between her calves. He hunched his back, and the resilient wall above him gave a little.

He grunted as he wriggled forward. Somehow he negotiated her buttocks, then his fingers were on her shoulders. He pulled himself ahead more rapidly now. He spat out a mouthful of hair, then slid his hands along her upreaching bare arms. And then there was metal, blessedly hard and solid to the touch — and touch was the only sense that he had to guide him.

Was this an airlock door? He did not know; he had only her word for it. And if it were, indeed, an airlock door, was it of the standard pattern? It had to be, otherwise the situation was utterly hopeless. Cramped as he was, Grimes could never get his laser pistol out of its holster — and if he could, its employment in this confined space could well prove fatal to himself and to the others.

His fingers groped, scrabbled, feeling nothing at first but smooth, seamless metal. He had almost given up hope when he found what he was looking for — the neat little hole, large enough to admit a spacegloved digit. He had to squirm and contort himself to get his hand to the right angle. Under him Melinee whimpered a little, but did not complain.

The tip of his index finger crept over the faired rim of the hole, pushed into it, at first encountering nothing at all and then, after what seemed an eternity, smooth plastic. Grimes pushed, felt the surface give. He

maintained the pressure, relaxed it, pushed again, and again, making O in Morse Code — O for Open.

He heard the faint whirr of machinery — a noise that suddenly became louder. The inward-opening door almost took his finger with it. And then he was in the airlock, closely followed by Sanderson.

Melinee had vanished.

Slowly Grimes and Sanderson walked through the too-silent alleyways of the ship, fighting the lassitude that threatened to close down upon them, forcing their way through air that seemed to possess the viscosity of cold treacle. But they were not alone. In their ears — or in their minds? — sounded the croaking voice of the Frog Prince, the tinkling soprano of the Fairy Lynnimame, the husky whisper of Melinee. "You must not give in. You have come so far; you must not give in. Waken the Princess. Waken the Princess." And there was Blunderbore's urgent muttering, and the faint voices of the *River Queen's* Captain and Purser. "Wake the Princess. Wake the Princess."

They stumbled on, weakening, through the gelid air, the internal atmosphere that didn't even smell right, that didn't smell at all, that lacked the familiar taints of hot oil and machinery, of tobacco smoke and women's perfume, the clean, garden scents of the hydroponics deck. They staggered on, through alleyways and up companionways, fighting every inch of the way, sustained somehow by the fairy-tale characters whom they had encountered.

And Grimes knew what was wrong, knew the nature of the stasis that must soon make them part of itself, that *would* make them part of itself unless they reached the Mannschenn Drive room in time. He had read of — but had never until now experienced — the almost impossible balance of forces, the cancelling out of opposing temporal precession fields that would freeze a ship and all her people in an eternal *Now*, forever adrift down and between the dimensions. That had been one of the theories advanced to account for the vanishing without trace of that Waverley Royal Mail liner ten standard years ago — the ship aboard which the writer Clay Wilton had been a passenger.

Grimes could remember, vividly, the blurb on the dust jacket of the book that he had bought as a present for the small daughter of a friend. "The last of the dreamers," the author had been called. He had skimmed through it, had laughed at the excellent illustrations and then, to his amazement, had been gripped by the story. It was about a world that never was and never could be, a planet where sorcery was everyday practice, where talking animals and good fairies and wicked witches interfered in the affairs of men and women.

You are beginning to understand . . . whispered Lynnimame.

There was the door ahead of them, with *Mannschenn Drive* in shining metal letters above it. There was the door ahead of them, the closed door, the stubborn door. It would not yield. Human muscles were pow-

erless against the stasis; human muscles with strength flowing into them, somehow, from outside were still powerless. The handle snapped off cleanly in Grimes' hand.

"Let me, sir," Sanderson was saying. "Let me try."

The Commodore stepped slowly to one side, his motions those of a deep sea diver. He saw that the young man had his laser weapon out of its holster; was struggling to raise it against the dreadful inertia.

He pressed the firing stud.

Slowly, fantastically the beam of intense light extruded itself from the muzzle, creeping towards that immovable door. After an eternity it made contact, and after another eternity the paint began to bubble. Eons passed, and there was a crater. More eons dragged by — and the crater was a hole. Still Sanderson, his face rigid with strain, held the weapon steady. Grimes could imagine that luminous, purple worm crawling across the space from the door to the switchboard. Then Sanderson gasped, "I can't keep it up!" and the muzzle of the pistol wavered, sagged until it was pointing at the deck.

We tried, thought Grimes. Then he wondered, *Will Wilton add us to his permanent cast of characters?*

Suddenly there was sound again — the dying, deepening whine of a stopped Mannschenn Drive unit, of spinning, precessing gyroscopes slowing to final immobility. Like a bullet fired from a gun deflected *after* the pulling of the trigger, the laser beam had reached its target. There was sound again — fans, and pumps, the irregular throbbing of the Inertial

Drive, and all the babble and clamor of a suddenly awakened ship. From bulkhead speakers boomed a voice, that of the Captain of the river steamer. "Whoever you are, come up to the main saloon, please. And whoever you are — thank you."

VII

Grimes sprawled comfortably in an easy chair, a cold drink ready to hand. He had decided to stay aboard this ship, the *Princess of Troon*, having persuaded her Master to set trajectory for Lorn. After all, he was already ten years late — a few more weeks would make very little difference. During the voyage the Commodore would be able to question the *Princess's* personnel still further, to work on his report. He was keeping young Sanderson with him. Drakenberg had not been at all pleased when deprived of the services of a watch officer — but the Commodore piled on far more G's than he did.

Already Grimes was beginning to wonder if his report would be believed, in spite of all the corroborative evidence from the personnel of both ships, *Rim Jaguar* and *Princess of Troon*. He recalled vividly the scene in the passenger liner's main saloon when he and Sanderson had made their way into that compartment. The stasis must have closed down while everybody was at dinner; dishes on the tables were still steaming.

They had all been there — the froglike Grollan, the old lady who had been the peasant woman en-

countered on the towpath, the pretty, fragile blonde whose name should have been Lynnimame, but was not — all of them looking like the characters in the illustrations to the Clay Wilton books. And there was the big — but not all that big — Negro, who was a physicist, not an ogre, and the Captain, and the Purser. There was the beautiful woman who could have been the model for the Melinee in the pictures and who was, in fact, Mrs. Wilton. There were other officers, other passengers, and among them was Clay Wilton himself. He had the beginnings of a black eye, and a trickle of blood still dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Ship's staff had formed a protective cordon about him — making it quite obvious that this was only because they had been ordered to do so.

After the first excitement there had been the conference, during which all concerned tried to work out what had happened, and why. Blundell, the big physicist — it had been hard not to think of him as Blunderbore — had said, "I've my own ideas, Commodore Grimes. But you, sir, are the recognized authority on Rim phenomena . . ."

Grimes was flattered, and tried not to show it. He made a major production of filling and lighting his pipe. After he had it going he said, "I can *try* to explain. The way I see it is this. The ship went into Stasis — and somehow drifted out from the Waverley sector towards the Rim. And out here, at the very edge of the expanding Galaxy, there's always an . . . oddness. Time and Space are

inclined not to follow the laws that obtain elsewhere. Too, Thought seems to have more power — physical power, I mean — than in the regions more towards the Center. It's all part and parcel of the vagueness — that's not quite the right word — of . . . of everything. We get along with it. We're used to it.

"Well . . . Look at it this way. You were all of you frozen in your everlasting Now, but you could still think, and you could still dream. And who was the most expert dreamer among you? It had to be Clay Wilton — after all, his publishers refer to him as *The Last Of The Dreamers*. Mr. Wilton dreamed out the story that he was working on at the time when your Mannsenn Drive went on the blink. Then he dreamed of the next story in the series, and the next, and the next . . . Somehow a world shaped itself about his dreams. Out here, on the Rim, there must be the raw material for the creation of new galaxies. Somehow that world shaped itself, a solid world, with atmosphere, and vegetation, and people. It was real enough to register on all *Rim Jaguar's* instruments, even though it vanished when this ship came out of Stasis. It was real enough — but, with a few exceptions, the people weren't real. They were little more than mobile scenery. The exceptions, of course, were those characters drawn from real life. And they led a sort of double existence. One body here, aboard the ship, and another body on the surface of that impossible planet, dancing like a puppet as Mr. Wilton manipulated the strings. But towards the end, the puppets got restive . . ."

"You can say that again, Commodore," grinned Blundell.

"Yes, the puppets were getting restive and realized that they, too, could become puppetmasters, could use Mr. Sanderson and myself to break the Stasis. And at the same time, Mr. Wilton was trying to work us into his current plot." Grimes turned to the writer. "Tell me, sir, did you intend to kill us?"

"Nobody dies in *my* stories," muttered the man. "Not even the bad-dies."

"But there has to be a first time for everything. That dragon of yours was far too enthusiastic. And so was your destruction of the castle."

"I'd gotten kind of attached to the place, too," grumbled the physicist.

"I meant no harm." Wilton's voice was sullen.

"Don't you believe him!" flared Mrs. Wilton — Melinee, the Wicked Witch. "He has a nasty, cruel streak in him and only writes the sweetness and light fairy tale rubbish because it makes good money. But that trick of his with my mirror will be grounds for divorce. Any judge, anywhere, will admit that it was mental cruelty."

"But what did you do to *me*?" demanded the weedy little man, taking a pitiful offensive. "You destroyed my world."

But did we? Grimes wondered. Sanderson and the fragile little blonde had come into the small smoking room and had not noticed him sitting there; he had his weight on his shoulderblades and the top of his head was well below the back of

his chair. They were sharing a settee only a few feet from him.

"The really fantastic thing about it all, Lynnimame — I like to call you that, after all, it was your name when I first met you. You don't mind, do you?" Sanderson was saying.

"Of course not, Henry. If you like it, I like it."

"Good-oh. But as I was saying, the really fantastic thing about it all, the way I fitted into old Wilton's story, is that I *am* a prince..."

"But I think," said Grimes coldly as he got up from his chair, "that the Wicked Witch will be able to vouch that you're not a fairy prince."

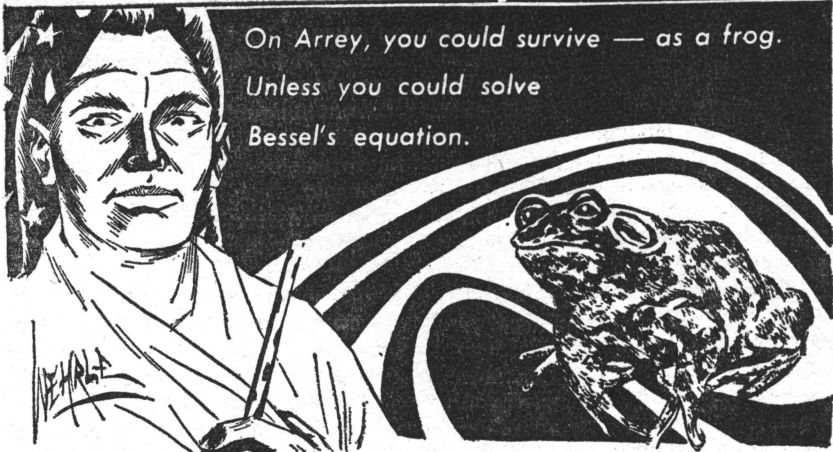
And would they all live happily ever after? he wondered as he made his way to his cabin. He doubted it.

END



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*On Arrey, you could survive — as a frog.
Unless you could solve
Bessel's equation.*



MERLIN PLANET

by E. G. VON WALD

It was just before noon in the little town of Arrey that Jerrold Aix beheld the logically impossible event.

He shut his eyes tightly, shook his head, and then looked again. The scene had not changed. There was the huddle of wary people on one side of the small village square. There was the tall, hooded man with the bushy beard and the piercing black eyes. And there was the oversized frog sitting on the pile of ragged garments.

Suddenly frightened, Jerrold took a backward step, but he had already been observed. The bearded one was now looking intently at him, the

slender stick in his hand raised as if to gesture.

Jerrold abruptly ducked around the edge of a squat stone building and ran. It was not easy to run on those slippery cobblestones, and the muddy water of the puddles splashed in the village square drove him on.

It had been a bad day right from his carefully-selected native costume, but the shock of what had happened the beginning. First there was that long chess game during the Zipstar trip. In a careless moment, he had pushed the wrong pawn, and that political scientist from Arcturus IV took immediate advantage of it. The

result was a desperate but futile defense in the inexorable logic of the end game. It had been a bitter thing for one who had been champ at Centaurus Multiversity.

Then the landing officer of the Zipstar boat had insisted on leaving him ten kilometers outside Arrey as a security measure, so that he had to spend the whole morning walking in a hot, muggy sun.

And now this — impossible, illogical and terrifying. He almost expected to find that they had dropped him on the wrong planet, but finally he saw the sign at the end of the narrow street, right where it was supposed to be. This calmed him a little. He slowed down, hiked his skirts to ford a particularly large puddle in front of the sign, and entered the rickety, wooden building.

“Well?” There was a gray-haired man seated behind the desk who seemed irritated at the interruption.

Jerrold tried to talk, but he was out of breath. Instead, he pulled his appointment card from a pocket and set it on the desk.

“Um,” said the man after a brief glance at it. “Sit down.”

Jerrold gratefully sank onto the crude wooden chair indicated. “Is this the right place?” he panted.

“This is Consolidated Enterprises, Endive Planet Division,” said the grizzled man. “I am Director Finn. And according to your appointment card, you are the new operative I’ve been trying to get out of Personnel for the past six months. What’s the matter with you?”

Jerrold shook his head. “I don’t know what happened,” he said uncertainly. “But I saw something that is absolutely impossible.” His voice faltered.

“Oh-oh,” said Finn. He got up quickly and drew a bottle and glass from a cupboard and poured Jerrold a stiff one.

“Here, drink this. I gather you saw one of the local hot-shots at work. What happened?”

“I don’t know. It was logically impossible. It just couldn’t have happened, but I saw it and —”

“Drink!” ordered Finn bruskiy.

Jerrold drank, sputtered and gasped for breath. After a moment, Finn said, “Feel better now?”

Without replying, Jerrold nodded.

“Then tell me what you saw.”

“Oh.” Jerrold drained the last few drops from the glass. Then he stated, “Like I said, it was impossible. I thought I saw a man changed into a frog.” He took a deep breath and wondered whether his new boss would laugh or call for the medics.

“Frog, eh?” Finn said thoughtfully. He nodded. “Sounds like one of Eilen’s spells. He’s a mean one, all right, but shrewd. A pity the sheriff can’t pin anything illegal on him.”

Jerrold stared at him with dismayed wonder. “You mean you believe it really happened?”

“Who knows what really happens in such events?” Finn asked impatiently. “That’s all beside the point, anyway. Universal Enterprises isn’t in the natural philosophy business. But if you are going to work on Endive, you had better get used to

such things. Didn't they brief you on the place?"

"Certainly. Planetary specs, commercial potentials, local languages —"

"But no magic?"

Jerrold shook his head incredulously.

"And no counter-magic, then, I take it?"

"Counter-magic!"

Finn scowled and returned to his chair. "Didn't they even tell you that Endive is a merlin planet?"

"Oh yes."

"But you didn't bother to look up the reference."

"Oh, but I did look it up," Jerrold protested. "The Catalog said that a merlin planet is a generic term for certain, very unusual planets which have technologically primitive cultures in which magic plays a strong role. They are closed to ordinary interstellar commerce, except for special franchises."

"Well," Finn admitted, "It's sketchy, but it's all there. You just didn't believe it, I guess. You read the word 'magic' and mentally interpreted it as 'belief in magic.' Right?"

Jerrold drew a breath and started to say something to the effect that such a conclusion was obvious, but then he remembered the over-sized frog hopping out of the pile of ragged clothing.

"It looks as if I'll have to brief you," Finn grumbled. "As if I didn't have enough to do already."

He frowned and pulled a cigar out of a desk drawer. After lighting up, he said, "Merlin planets are different. You can say that in spades.

They have a funny chemistry and a funny minerology. That's why we are in here. Endive produces one of the most remarkable natural essences ever discovered. There is a big demand for it, and so far nobody has come close to synthesizing it.

"The trouble with the place is that there is something about it that is — well, call it hallucinogenic if you like. If somebody spells you into being a frog, you think you are a frog and so does everybody else, including the animals."

"You mean it's an illusion. A hypnotic gas in the atmosphere or something like that."

"Scratch the hypnotic gas and anything like that. Consolidated spent a whole year with their regional research staff trying to isolate a physical cause, and they couldn't do it. They ended up with some mishmash about psionic feedback, which might satisfy them, but it didn't help us any. We still had to come in here pretty much helpless at first, or lose the franchise.

"Call it mass hypnosis, if it makes you any more comfortable. Only there's a strange side effect on Endive. Given the necessary environment for good frog survival, you can last indefinitely. As a frog, that is."

"But how —"

"That's the reason for the postulate of psionic feedback. The ecology is stable. An enchanted frog is just as good as a natural one here on Endive."

Finn quickly held up a hand to forestall any more discussion. "Just accept it as a local difficulty in doing business. Think you can do that?"

"I'll try," said Jerrold uncertainly. "Good. Now for your counter-magic." Finn dumped some ashes from his cigar and smiled. "With your background, you won't have a bit of trouble. The local wizards can't touch you."

Jerrold listened and found himself saying, "That's nice. Why?"

"All you have to do is go through some fairly elaborate mathematical pattern in your head. Like, for instance, solving Bessel's equation."

"Bessel's equation," murmured Jerrold.

"Well, it doesn't have to be Bessel's equation necessarily. That's just an example. It happens that my favorite counter-spell is LaPlace's equation in cylindrical coordinates. By the time I've separated the variables and got into the Bessel part of it, every wizard within spitting distance is completely terrified. Nobody knows why, but the local wizards can feel it when you just think this sort of thing at them."

"Who," asked Jerrold, "is Bessel?"

Finn looked at him with surprise. "You mean to tell me a math major never heard of Bessel's equation?"

"I am not a math major," Jerrold replied. He drew his new degree from his tunic and handed it over. "My major was interstellar business. That's mostly law, with a little non-technical engineering."

"Oh, no!" Now it was Finn's turn to be disconcerted. "I specifically asked them for a first class mathematician. They told me that they had hired some of them at Centaurus General Multiversity."

"That's my school, all right," Jerrold told him. "But I haven't had a math course in fourteen years. Would a little elementary trig help?"

"I doubt it," said Finn. "What a mixup!" He raised his voice and shouted, "Arline!" Then he turned back to Jerrold. "You are sure you don't know something just a little more advanced and complete? A little calculus, maybe?"

Jerrold shook his head.

"This is bad," said Finn. When his secretary entered, he said, "Where's the requisition on this new operative, Arline? I asked for math, and the idiots sent me law."

"Oh, dear," said Arline. She glanced sympathetically at Jerrold, then went to a file cabinet. She drew out of it a large, bulky folder and set it in front of Finn. "That is the complete correspondence."

For several minutes, the director went through the records in the file folder and finally slammed it shut. "As I read it, it says math grads are very expensive this year and that they are afraid my budget might not be able to handle the cost. So I guess we're stuck with him."

Jerrold remembered those job interviews. Law grads were as common this season as the math grads were scarce. If he hadn't spent so much time on his hobby, he would have been high enough on the honors list to compensate, and thus get one of the glamorous assignments. Unfortunately, although he could memorize an entire chess game, he discovered in the final exams that legal precedents were something else again.

He said, "Maybe I could memorize one of your math patterns. I've got a pretty good memory for some things."

"No good," grumbled Finn. "We tried that already. Unless you understand the significance of the pattern, it doesn't work."

"Surely there must be something else—"

"It's too new to tell. The research boys at Regional Headquarters say that the sophisticated evocation of a complete, self-consistent logical pattern like mathematics interferes with local patterns already resonant in the psionic feedback net. At least as far as magic is concerned. But until they find out precisely how and why, we're stuck with the way we do it now."

"Then I guess I better go back and try to get reassigned."

"Too late for that," said Finn. "Endive is too far off the main sequence of Zipstar routes. There won't be another boat in here for six months." He shrugged. "So, if you are going to stay, you might as well get to work."

"But is it safe, Boss?" Arline asked earnestly. "Remember how it was when we first came here."

"I remember. We nearly lost half a dozen operatives before we accidentally found out about the math bit. But that was a few years ago. Things are different now. Every wizard in the area knows that we are able to throw a counter-spell at them that will ruin their magic for weeks. And their whole business is magic, right?"

Arline agreed doubtfully.

"Well, then. Who around here knows that this fellow can't counter-spell with the best of us? All he needs is a wand."

"Why of course!" exclaimed Arline enthusiastically. "If they think he is a wizard like the rest of us, they will be afraid to challenge him."

"What's this about a wand?" asked Jerrold.

"You have to have a magic wand if you are going to be a magician, don't you?" Finn asked with a smile. Then he went on more seriously.

"We all know a little math, here, but there isn't a single one of us who is really good at it. So what we do is take a walking stick and carve the key steps on it. It is very much like an ancient Irish ogam stick. For those of us who know the code, it's a mnemonic device. For the Endese, it's a magic wand.

"It's a pity we couldn't get a really good mathematician in here. He might be able to neutralize the whole region for months, and it would be easier for us. What's more, somebody like that might be able to teach enough math to the serfs so that they might be able to protect themselves.

"Meanwhile," Finn concluded, "we have work to do. Fix this fellow up with some kind of wand, Arline. Then take him over to the sheriff with you and report that beggar. Anasa isn't going to be much interested in just a beggar, I guess, but it's the least we can do to help the poor guy."

The Director turned back to his cluttered desk, and Jerrold left with Arline.

Sheriff Anasa was short, squat and muscular, and he wore his wizard's hood carelessly thrown back, revealing curly, blond hair. He was, as Finn predicted, not very enthusiastic about the frog.

"All right," he grumbled. "So some silly beggar got himself changed into a frog. What am I supposed to do about it?"

"But this is a human being," insisted Arline.

"No, it isn't," replied Anasa crossly. "It is a frog. You said so yourself. Do you expect me to chase down every frog in the village and try to invert the spell? It would take me all afternoon."

Arline said, "Director Finn believes that Eilen is the magician who did it."

Immediately, Anasa sat up and looked at her intently. "Eilen? I was told that he might be in the neighborhood. You have a witness?"

Arline indicated Jerrold:

"Ah." The sheriff turned to Jerrold and said, "Can you positively identify Eilen?"

Jerrold shook his head. "I can describe him, but I never saw him before. There were others in the square, though, who might be more familiar with your man. Why don't you ask them?"

"You Farofflanders have odd customs," Anasa replied. "Here we do not take the testimony of serfs. Even," he added scornfully, "if they could say anything useful. And if it were Eilen, they will be afraid to incur his wrath by telling me about it. Let me hear your story, just as you remember it."

Jerrold related the event, omitting nothing.

Anasa nodded slowly. "It certainly does sound like Eilen. But you don't know whether there was a challenge, since you are not familiar with our customs. If Eilen offered the proper challenge and the man accepted, then it was all perfectly legal. There is nothing against the law if two wizards have a contest, provided no innocent bystander wizards are injured."

"Can't serfs be innocent bystanders?"

"Who cares about serfs? They are powerless and easily replaced."

"It would seem," said Jerrold, "that this one cannot. The beggar is the only one who can give you the information you seek, and he is now a frog. Perhaps, however, a great wizard like yourself, Sheriff, can cause a frog to speak."

The slur was not lost on Anasa. "You have a quick tongue," he snapped. "I noticed in your story that you were frightened. This is perfectly understandable for those who know no magic, but I see you bear a wand." He indicated the newly carved walking stick in Jerrold's hand.

"He was new here," Arline put in quickly. "We have, as you say, different customs."

The sheriff shrugged his heavy shoulders and let the point pass.

"I was just curious," he said. "As I am sure Eilen must have been. To me it is unimportant. What is important is that Eilen is a rogue and should be imprisoned in a large block of granite. Unfortunately, so far he

has managed to avoid any public violation of the law. Perhaps the beggar might have to be consulted, after all."

He stood up. "So. Now if you will forgive me, I must set about investigating that fool frog."

It took Jerrold several days to familiarize himself with the operation that Consolidated Enterprises was conducting on Endive. The barter deal itself was simple. Essence was distilled in the countryside, with the aid of certain insects. Eventually, it was shipped to Arrey by caravan, where Finn traded a low grade of bullion for it. About every six months, a Zipstar boat dropped down under camouflage radiation to pick it up.

The background was more complicated. For many years, Central Authority had the policy of permitting the assimilation of any planet that could maintain its cultural identity within a galactic civilization. This meant that any technological changes must be initiated by the populace of the planet in question. Endive, mired in the confusion of an effective magic, was technologically helpless. Physical law seemed to change almost with the wind, or at least upon the whim of some overlord wizard. The common serf, from whom progress ultimately must come, could do nothing to help himself.

Such a planet must be monitored. Survey teams were costly to field, however, so certain carefully restricted commercial activity was permitted as the most economical way of keeping tabs on the place. Unmentioned was the fact that this was

also the way, long sanctioned by tradition and practice, for the dissemination of civilization.

Finn showed Jerrold a sketchily-drawn map on the wall of his office. "You can see the territory where we operate," he explained. "It may not seem large to you, but by the time you have made the rounds, you will realize how slow travel is in a primitive place like this."

"I understand," said Jerrold. "The principal means of transport is a *jagon*, which looks like a horse but travels like a donkey."

"Right. Another problem we have is information. For instance." He tapped a location in the distant mountains. "Here is the Satrapy of Bengal. This usually is a rich source of essence, but something has happened up there. I don't know what the trouble is, but the caravan Bengal sends to Arrey at this time of the year hasn't arrived. Your first assignment is to go up there and find out what happened to it."

Jerrold studied the map with care. "That looks like a week's trip, providing I don't get lost."

"About that, but you shouldn't have much trouble. I can provide you with a guide who knows the way. As a rule, the intervening region is infested by bandit wizards, but according to Sheriff Anasa the bandits seem to have moved elsewhere this summer. He is worried about it. They sometimes hire out as mercenaries, and that makes it more difficult for him to control them."

"Maybe they waylaid the caravan," Jerrold suggested.

"Possibly. Not very likely, though,

because Bengal usually sends a couple of squads of his soldiers with the caravan. He has a good-sized army of wizards to maintain his authority there in the mountains."

The trip proved uneventful for the first two days. Like most Endese, the guide was no wizard, but he was stoic about the powers that be in the universe. Also, like most Endese, he had no name other than that of his job.

On the third night, they bedded down by a delightful fresh brook, teeming with fish. Guide caught some and cooked them, while Jerrold sat on the grass and studied his map.

"Ordinarily," said Guide, "such a pleasant place as this would be used only by a large convoy. It is too obvious a stopping place for the night. And the bandits like to strike at night."

"We haven't seen any so far," Jerrold pointed out.

"True," agreed Guide. "But there is always the first time. I am grateful to be in the company of a Farofflander wizard in such a place."

Jerrold looked around the pleasant countryside in some alarm. It seemed peaceful enough, except for a large, dense forest in the distance. He asked about that.

"In the forest there are lions," said Guide. "Who knows? Some of them may be enchanted people, but their appetites are those of lions."

As Jerrold considered what sort of animal might be considered a lion on Endive, Guide added, "It is fortunate that they do not stray far from the forest."

Nevertheless, shortly after the sun set, their pack animals appeared restless. Guide went to quiet them, and when he returned he said quietly, "I think we are not alone in this valley. Might I suggest a small protective spell?"

Jerrold's mouth was dry. He said, "Better stir up the fire."

"Of course," Guide murmured. "I forget that you Farofflanders use light when you make your magic."

He quickly stirred up the fire and threw on more fuel, but its light did not do much to dispel the gloomy shadows surrounding them. Soon there came a low snarl from not far away, and the pack animals immediately commenced a tumult. Reluctantly, the two men picked up torches and went to investigate.

The tumult continued, and in the dim light cast by the torches, Jerrold could just make out the cause, its eyes glowing.

"Wizard Aix," cried the Guide. "Cast your spell quickly."

Lacking a spell to cast, Jerrold threw his torch, but the big cat merely snarled and stepped nimbly aside. That left him with his wand as his only weapon. It was heavy enough, so he prepared to wield it as a club. About this time, the lion vanished. In its place stood the bandit, Eilen.

"I wish no conflict with a Farofflander," said Eilen, his voice deep and mournful.

Jerrold decided that the best defense under the circumstances was arrogance. "Then leave us," he ordered.

"In due time," murmured the wizard in his bass voice. "For a moment, I thought you intended to club me to death with that wand, instead of casting a proper spell."

"Would you like me to cast one now?" demanded Jerrold, brandishing the wand threateningly.

For the space of perhaps ten seconds, Eilen considered the question. Then he said, "You feared me in the village. True, you held no wand at the time. Now you have a wand, yet you hold it like a club, rather than the mystic device that it should be. I find this interesting, and I shall think further on it."

His manner changed. "I have claimed this wilderness as my domain. Therefore it is suitable that you pay me a tribute."

"I pay you nothing," snapped Jerrold.

"Perhaps," said Eilen. "Perhaps. You have given me much to think upon. At the moment, however, I am in a hurry to reach my destination, so I must leave you. But do not forget that you owe me a tribute. I shall exact it when the time is ripe."

With that he moved back into the shadows and disappeared.

The two men returned to the fire, and Jerrold asked Guide his opinion of the affair.

"Eilen means you no good," said Guide thoughtfully. "If he was indeed in a hurry, then we probably will not see any more of him this trip. However, one day he will not be in a hurry."

He shrugged and settled down on his blanket. As an afterthought, he said, "Almost it seemed as if he were

going to challenge you. This is very strange behavior. One might even think that he does not regard you as a wizard."

Jerrold got little sleep that night. He spent the time going over in his mind the whole illogical situation. The Endese had magic. Magic was illogical. There was a psionic feedback network operative on Endive, according to Finn. This might be logical, but why should it be that the thinking through of a complicated mathematical theorem interfered with the magic? Jerrold knew little math, but he was convinced that the most important thing about math was consistency of logic. Beginner's math was of no value, so Finn had indicated, because it did not represent a complete system. The conclusion, therefore, must be that it was necessary to have recourse to a complete, logical system in which there was no room for the non-causal relations which represented magic.

Eventually, he drifted into a doze, trying to think about complete, logical systems in which no non-causal relations existed.

They did not see Eilen the next day, and soon they were wending their way through the foothills of the Satrapy of Bengal. The rugged countryside gave way to small, tilled fields with serfs at work in them, and the outhouses where the essence was distilled. Finally they came to the village itself.

The news of their arrival spread quickly, and it was only minutes after their entry that they were met by a squad of hooded soldiers who



W. H. R. L. E.

insisted that they follow. In a short time, they found themselves in a large encampment overlooking a valley. The satrap emerged from his tent to greet them.

"Welcome, Farofflander," said Bengal heartily. He came right to the point. "Accept my apologies that pressing business has delayed the usual caravan of essence."

Jerrold nodded and looked around at the grouping of disciplined soldiers, their capes thrown back in the cool mountain air.

"You have quite an army here," he said.

"Of course I have an army," replied Bengal. "I am at war with the Satrap of Bichardy." He pointed to an encampment on the opposing hill.

"Usually my forces are adequate to defend my realm, but Bichardy has enlisted mercenaries. He has made them many promises of wealth and glory for the taking. For two months, we have watched each other like jackals, so evenly matched that neither of us could make a decisive move."

Jerrold said, "Indeed. Your realm seemed quite peaceful as we approached."

"Of course it is peaceful," shouted Bengal. "Do you think my wizards have been idle? Many a sneak attack in the night has been met by sneak defense. It is a tiresome thing, not to be able to attack like a civilized person. Yet if I were to send a squad of lion conjures at him, he would counter with tiger conjures. Firebreathers are met by deluge-makers.

"No, we have been too evenly

matched to fight it out, but the change has come. Only this morning, Bichardy was joined by a group of stragglers from the wilderness. This will tempt him to attack. We should know soon."

"Perhaps," suggested Jerrold with care, "it might be better for me to watch the event from some more distant vantage point."

"By no means," Bengal insisted firmly. "As I say, the denouement is at hand. Bichardy has twenty more soldiers. But I have a Farofflander who wants the essence from my fields."

Jerrold shook his head. "There is nothing I can do to help you. My organization is committed to neutrality in such conflicts."

"Of course. And nobody is more desirous than I of seeing to it that your attitude remains unchanged. But remember that you are here to get essence. You will not get it from Bichardy. He is not a builder, like me. He is a raider, a destroyer."

The satrap became more earnest. "I do not ask that you cast a spell on Bichardy. Simply let him know that you are my ally. This will strike fear in the black hearts of his followers."

A messenger came pounding up the trail and panted, "Highness, the Satrap of Bichardy has signaled that he wishes to parley."

Bengal frowned. "Strange," he said. "I would rather expect an attack. But come with me, Farofflander. This provides me with my opportunity. Merely to show yourself at my side should suffice to ensure peace in this countryside."

It was a hard argument to resist. Jerrold took a firm grip on his wand, displaying it conspicuously, and marched down into the valley beside Bengal.

Bichardy also brought an aid. With a thrill of somehow alienated fear, Jerrold saw that it was Eilen.

They met, and Bengal shouted, "Enough of this, Bichardy. You see my ally. Leave my lands, and nothing further will be done to you. Attack, and you attack a Farofflander."

"We will have a contest," insisted Bichardy in his turn. "My man against yours."

"You dare challenge a Farofflander?" asked the astounded Bengal.

"My man says that he knows this Farofflander. He says that this Farofflander is afraid of him, ran in terror when first they met, and later failed to defend himself properly against the threat of my man's enchantment.

"I know nothing of this, myself," Bichardy added. "This I do know. If my man is wrong, I am already defeated, for the Farofflander can ruin my army with a single spell. But if my man is right, I think I can defeat you, Bengal. And our battle is now long overdue."

Bengal glanced sharply at Jerrold. "Can this be true?" he demanded angrily. But he did not wait for an answer. He turned back to Bichardy and said, "I accept."

With that, he strode from the field without a backward look.

A few minutes later, Jerrold and Eilen alone occupied the valley.

"I have considered your behavior in detail," Eilen said in his deep, mournful voice. "I have concluded that although you now bear a wand, you do not understand the use of it. You are like the first Farofflanders that came here, helpless as a serf.

"Also, you will recall that I told you I would exact a tribute from you when the time was ripe. Such a time is now at hand. You will be the tool of my aggrandizement, for I shall be famous for having beaten you. Many people will fear my name. In time, I shall replace Bichardy himself as lord of the mountains."

Jerrold found himself saying, "But suppose you are wrong about me?"

Eilen shook his head, his smile confident. "I am not wrong, Farofflander. That wand is useless to you."

Slowly, as a cat torments a mouse, he prepared for the final, terrible gesture.

"You are right about the wand," Jerrold told him. "But you are wrong about me. I need no wand."

He began his chant out loud. For a moment, Eilen stood transfixed. Then the full significance of the counter-spell bore down upon him; he clutched his head in agony and fled.

Finn was pleased, in spite of the fact that Jerrold returned without the essence. "That's great, Aix," he said. "I'll have to let the research boys know about this. When did you figure it out?"

"The night Eilen visited us. I decided that even if I didn't know any of your kind of systematic logic, I had my own. There is nothing so in-

exorable as the logic of chess, particularly in the end game. It is a complete system where everything is visible, nothing is mysterious, and every effect has a clearly discernible cause. There is no room for magic on the chess board. I simply recited the moves of a famous tournament game which I had memorized in college."

"All right. Now tell me this. Why did Bengal get so angry with you at the end? You won his war for him, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I tried an experiment. You said that you couldn't teach the Endese enough math to protect themselves against magic. Math is abstract and difficult to motivate with such people, but chess is a game and works just as well. Checkers is a similar game and much easier to learn than chess. So I taught some of his servants to play it. They got to be pretty good in just a few days.

"That's when Bengal blew his top.

He said that between my spells and my games I was reducing his domain to barbarism, that they wouldn't be able to practice magic there for years, and he had no idea how he was going to keep the serfs in line without it. As I left, he had started his soldiers drilling with spears and clubs."

Finn considered this information thoughtfully for several minutes. Finally he smiled.

"Bengal is right, of course. His farmers have been virtual slaves, because they could not practice magic. Now things will be different up there. A serf can fight back against spears and clubs."

The director's smile broadened as his enthusiasm grew.

"This will spread. The serfs have finally learned a tool against magic they can use. It will be slow at first, but the step has been taken. Endive is finally on the road to the stars."

END

Announcing — **THE GALAXY AWARDS**

Galaxy Publishing Corporation announces the establishment of annual awards for excellence in science-fiction writing. Every story appearing in the magazines *Galaxy* and *If* in issues dated 1968 will be eligible for the first series of awards, which will consist of:

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*Somewhere the Song of Man must
mute the fear that all men feel!*

There were only three things to which he might look forward now. Possibly four. He would not be certain of the fourth until he found it, or it found him.

He stood beside a marble bench in a garden filled with flowers. There was no sun in sight, but a diffuse brightness like morning or evening filled the place, and a breeze that was cool moved the leaves and the branches.

He seated himself on the bench and regarded the colors of the flowers, their fragrances strong in his nostrils. As he sat there, a final touch of remorseful oblivion dropped from his consciousness, was gone.

Then, somewhere far behind him, it began, a single note, rising and rising in pitch, until it approximated the scream of a freight train passing in the distance. Abruptly, his hands

began to shake, and he jammed them into his pockets and balled them into fists.

Then it died. The song of the blue baboon was finished.

The garden came alive with the sounds of insects and birds.

He turned when he heard the footfall, and she was standing there on the flagstone walk, her pale blue blouse open at the throat, her black slacks cuffed high above white sandals. Her carmel hair still touched her shoulders, and she smiled as she touched his.

"Kenneth."

He rose to his feet, and she was in his arms.

"Sandra!" he said, and drew her down on the bench beside him.

They sat there a long, silent time, his arm about her shoulders. Then, "It was strange," he said.

"Strange that you became a hero? Many things were forgiven on the Day of Liberation, to those who fought."

"No," he said. "Strange that you came back to me. I never thought I'd see you again."

He plucked a white camellia and wove it into her hair.

"You couldn't really have been a traitor, or you wouldn't have fought on that day, the day we liberated Earth," she said, and she stroked his cheek as she said it.

He smiled. "I was weak," he said, "but never a traitor. They were wrong about me, all along."

"I know. Everyone knows now. It's all right. Forget it."

But he could not. The rats at the back of his mind began to gnaw upon the corpse of a memory. What? What was it?

He sprang to his feet and stared down into her dark eyes through the wet curtains that covered them now.

"You're not telling me the whole truth. Something's wrong. What is it?"

She shook her head slowly and rose to her feet. He moved away, then turned his back on her.

"Three things . . . What are the other two?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he heard her say.

"Then I have to find out."

There was silence. He waited a time, then turned around.

She was gone.

He moved along the walk until he came to a path, winding downward to his right through a stand

of broad-leafed trees. He heard a sound of splashing water, from that direction. He followed it.

The man beside the stream had his back to him, but he recognized him from a gesture: a quick flick of his thumb toward his head, to moisten it; and then the hand was lowered to seal the cigarette paper he held. A flare of light, and a moment later smoke swirled back over his shoulder.

He turned, and they regarded one another.

"Roscoe . . ." he said.

The man lowered his cigarette, stroked his black beard, spat abruptly. He wore khakis under a dirty field jacket; a pistol hung at his side.

"Pig!" he said, raising his cigarette like an accusing finger.

"What's wrong, Roscoe?"

"What's right, animal?"

"I don't . . ."

"You betrayed us during the invasion! You sold out your tower to those blue — baboons! — from another world! It might have stood! We might have won! But because you betrayed us, they enslaved the human race!"

"No!" he said. "I didn't!"

"You gave them information! You were well paid for it!"

Then he remembered his tower group in the sea, so large a destroyer looked like a toy beside it. He remembered the swelling green of the Atlantic, far below his station. He had sat there at his post as such a vessel passed. He was one of the three workers at UN Automated Defense Station 7. The other two were dead by then or wishing that

they were, for first one fool and then the other had been taken away by the blue-furred Kheean, who had seemed to come out of nowhere the previous evening without even disturbing the radar. Baboon-like they raged through the station, sometimes moving on all fours, their song of triumph a single, mounting shriek that rose and blared like a diesel's whistle. He imagined they occupied the station completely. Two of them guarded the cell in which he remained. He remembered, he remembered . . .

"I let them pay me to destroy suspicion," he said. "There's a difference between useful and useless information. Everything I told them was useless."

"You rationalize, traitor, for you could not have known what would have been useful to them. Then you let them pamper you, for six years, as a factory supervisor."

"I was working with the underground the full time, you know that, getting ready for the Day."

"I think maybe you worked both sides, but it doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"You're going to die."

"You are going to kill me?"

"I've already killed you."

"I don't follow you . . ."

Roscoe laughed, then stopped abruptly at the sound of Sandra's voice:

". . . And it means nothing that he fought bravely on the Day of Liberation?" she asked, stepping into sight along the trail.

Roscoe blew smoke and looked away.

"So you summon your good angel to defend you," he said finally. "What sort of tale is it that she tells? You were a coward on the day we rose up. You ran!"

"That's not so!"

"Then why is it that I myself had to shoot you, for desertion under fire — all the bullets in the back?"

Kenneth clasped his forehead, rubbed it.

"It's not true. I was shot by the enemy."

"You were killed by me, and she knows it! *You* know it!"

"I — I'm not dead . . ."

"At this very moment they are probably typing up your death certificate, and your vital organs are on their way out, for transplant into some real human being. You know it! They gave you the drug that kills the pain, makes the final seconds seem like hours. Gives you illusions too, to pass the time. You are talking only to yourself. There can be no lying here! Admit it, you are a traitor and a coward!"

"No!"

"You twist everything," said Sandra. "*You* are fear and natural human guilt. He was a hero of the revolution."

"We lost the revolution. We have lost the entire Earth, because of the likes of him! *You* are wishful thinking. *You* are the final coverup."

"We did not lose! We won, because of men like him! *You* know it!"

And Kenneth stood straight. At first unsure, then smiling. He said, "Now I understand. All men fear the final instant of their lives, and

they wish to judge themselves and be judged, be found not wanting —”

“They wish to rationalize and cloak with illusion,” said Roscoe, “as you’ve done. But they know in the end, as you will know.”

There came the sound of a trumpet from across the stream, then the sounds of other instruments. Somewhere, a brass band was playing march music.

Kenneth pointed in the direction of the music.

“Three things. Subconsciously, I knew there’d be time for perhaps three important things. Let me be judged by whatever approaches!”

They crossed the stream, moving from stone to stone, wading through shallows. They mounted the hill these faced and looked down upon the broad highway that passed before it. There were buildings along its way, some of them in ruin, all of them fenced by throngs of cheering people. The pageant moved into sight. It was the armies of the Liberation passing in review. None wore real

uniforms and all looked dirty and tired, but they stood erect and marched in stride, soon to be decked with flowers and bits of colored paper. As one, they began singing, and their voices mingled, though each seemed to be singing a different song. The national anthems of all the peoples of the Earth blended together into the Song of Man that poured forth from their throats, rose above the cheering.

“There is your answer, Roscoe!” he cried out. “I was right! We’ll go to them!”

The bearded man moved down the hill to join the passing troupe. Kenneth took a step, then turned and held out his hand.

Sandra had vanished.

A white something fluttered at his feet, and he bent forward to pick it up. He saw that it was the camellia he had woven into her hair, and even as he raised the flower, its center turned a dark, darkening color that spread like a rising, single stain over all —

END

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What The Old Aliens Left

by D. M. MELTON



Illustrated by *Brand*

*Old alien technologies never die —
instead, they just wither away . . .*

I

Murpho's Morgue was one of the places that made life on Otho IV tolerable. The old building was no less alien than other Isopteran ruins taken over by the Project. In fact Securityman Cliff Savill had lately found there was something

about the alien building that was getting on his nerves. But in it Murpho offered a variety of foods, Andromedian brandy and Terran beer. And his partner, Molly Cato, made your day by just being there.

It followed that the Molly watchers, an unofficial group which definitely included Cliff Savill, plus the

eaters, the drinkers, the talkers and the loafers, stopped at the Morgue every evening. So did the workers from the big OMA R & D Lab nearby. And while Securityman Savill knew OMA's Miss Larkin slightly, he was surprised when this time she hurried directly to his table.

He was also faintly amused, watching the usual falling-domino succession of swiveling heads mark her progress across the room. The amusement lasted through the time it took to make room on one of the Old Alien wall shelves Murpho used as benches. By then it was plain she had not just stopped with the others for a day-end drink. Hers was anything but small talk. And presently she closed icy fingers around his wrist.

"But Mr. Savill you aren't listening! Mack Weymouth was *murdered!*"

He had been listening. He just hadn't liked it.

His first thought was that she had to be wrong. Not murder! Not here! The Project homicide rate was zero. He rejected that, laying it to a reluctance to admit this Securityman's dream job might be turning into the real thing. But honesty made him realize that wouldn't scarf. He had never backed away from any job.

Finally, reluctantly, he admitted the real reason his mind kept lunging away like a gaffed sailfish; she was accusing Molly Cato of being at the very least an accessory to murder!

His face felt stiff, and Miss Larkin was staring anxiously at it. She said, "You don't believe me!"

"I hear what you say. Go on."

"I told you. Mack simply disappeared, three months ago. But today, just now, I overheard some Rug Row talk, a front-office intercom left open. They think those two people who own this place murdered Mack, because of something that was found here. Whatever it is, OMA wants it. So they're trying to blackmail Mr. Murpho and that big blonde girl."

Savill forced his mind to stop fighting the gaff. He wouldn't have used that description for Molly Cato. But even leaving her out, he didn't like the words blackmail and murder. Yet blackmail as a business gambit was not unknown. Render it semantically acceptable, and Otho Mining Associates would be capable of it. As for murder, there's a murky cave in every mind where an ape squats drooling. He could even recall flashes of angry fantasy which had left *him* feeling guilty and ashamed.

"You're certain of what you heard?"

"Yes! And when they found out I had, they threatened to send me back to Terra. They don't want the murder reported. It would break up their ploy. And it sounded like they meant to see that I *couldn't* talk about it!"

"Who are *they*?"

"One voice was too faint. Mr. Kotch came after me. I — I ran. And Mack told me once he was sure Mr. Murpho had something valuable right here, in this building. And didn't want *anyone* to know about it."

Savill frowned. Murpho being secretive about a find? Hell, you uncover something big, you put it up for bid and go home rich. That was the

whole idea behind the Project. He tried another tack. "Maybe your friend really is only missing. This blast desert is big and empty, and most of it is still up for grabs. Couldn't he have just gone out on his own, prospecting? People do."

"No. He'd have told *me*. Don't you see? OMA doesn't want his murder reported. There's something right here they want and they think they can get it from these people who own it if only..."

He felt another icy tremor go up his arm. She had gripped his wrist again and her wide black eyes were pleading. "Please! Here comes that Mr. Kotch! I'm afraid to go back there again!"

He felt a flare of anger at himself. Her story was not unreasonable. As part of Security, he didn't like the thought of murder on the Project. As Cliff Savill, he liked even less the implication that Molly Cato might be involved. But both Miss Larkin's voice and her manner had the feel of truth. And now the coarse-featured, dull-eyed Kotch, obviously bearing down on their table, strengthened that impression.

Savill knew Kotch, a new man and a deputy to a near-summit OMA Associate. There was a lot of arrogance in his walk and his voice. He ignored Savill and fixed licorice-dull eyes on the girl. "Larkin, I warned you about repeating that crazy lie!"

Savill stood up. "What lie, Kotch? We were discussing the weather."

The black eyes shifted. "This is OMA business. I heard what she's been saying, and she's blown her

mind. She's going back to talk with the boss. Now!"

"He can talk at Security Center. I'll take the snooper mike, Kotch."

"You'll take a trip to the infirmary if you butt in. Come on, Larkin!"

Savill let out his breath. Roughing up OMA Brass was non-regulation. At any rate, pressure from OMA had created the vacancy he had been hired to fill. But he kept his hand out and shifted his feet, watching Kotch's jaw muscles. Not one man in fifty could start a serious move without clenching his teeth. Kotch was easy to read. He went down hard, and Savill's thumb and forefinger at the base of his neck didn't quite make him scream.

"Regulation Twelve, Kotch! Right of Privacy!"

Savill stepped away, perversely hoping Kotch would try again. But Kotch climbed to his feet and kept his distance. "Chief Cayhill will hear of this! You'll be working some Ter-ran alley again, and soon!"

"With you around I can't see much difference, Kotch. As of now, Miss Larkin will be wearing a V & A spot-ter. If she yells for help, or if her light goes off the board without her clearing it, she'll get help!"

Kotch glared, and his fists clenched. But when Savill pocketed the snooper and brought out a Vid-Aud unit, checking it tersely to the Security Center Map Board, Kotch stamped away. Miss Larkin kept a hand on Savill's arm while he locked the spotter to her wrist. Her disconcerting eyes glowed gratitude, and she said throatily, "Thank you, Mr. Savill."

He waved it away. "You'll be safe

anywhere in the City now. Report to the Center tomorrow early. Don't let Chief Cayhill scare you. He bellows at everybody."

The Morgue's clients were moving back to their seats when she walked out. There was a replay of the pattern of swiveling heads. Savill grinned. The Girl Who Walked. Then he sobered. There was some work to do. Kotch had been right on one point. This wasn't a Terran slum. Even though, incredibly, some of the same kinds of trouble appeared to be shaping. He should have been prepared for that because of the nature of the Project itself. Otho IV was full of alien gadgets. Some were beyond comprehension; most were ahead of Terra's best. And even ten centuries after some Out-Star's saturation H-treatment, a few were still flickering. Search and Salvage on Otho meant big money. And where there are Terrans and big money, there can be big trouble.

Had big trouble hit the Project? If the frightened Miss Larkin's story were to be believed, it sure as hell had. But his stomach started doing free-fall evolutions when he glimpsed Molly Cato across the room. Murpho — maybe. The Morgue Management, he thought wryly. A Beauty and a Beast. Old Murph did look menacing. He was bald as a boulder and shaped like one, and his thick neck spread with startling abruptness into a face like a catfish. But that didn't make him a killer. He had said that, he recalled. And Miss Larkin had asked, wide eyed, "How can you tell? About anyone?"

He had conceded that. Anybody's

ape could get loose. And it could have happened. Murpho could have found something valuable. Weymouth, an OMA man, could have learned of it, and Murph could have killed him. That last didn't quite click, but the next item fit beautifully. OMA, knowing of it, wanted it — as always at their price. And what better way was there to impose a buyer's market than to hold the threat of a murder charge over the seller?

II

He sighed heavily. It had to be checked out. He had to admit he might have complicated it by flooring and searching, however fruitfully, the assistant to one of the Associates at OMA. Otho Mining Associates was the largest and by far the most influential of the S & S operators. And while the Project had about the same degree of democracy as a division of infantry, it was still free enterprise. Cayhill had pointed that out, when he hired Savill.

The Chief had scowled under bushy eyebrows and compared Savill's face with the photocube. "Hummm. Six two, hundred eighty. Old picture. Your nose has a cant that doesn't show here. Says you have the stupid — ah — insubordinate habit of not waiting for reinforcements. Well, you wouldn't need reinforcements here. We screen out the gun toters."

"They leave their fists on the shuttleboat?"

"You brought in yours, didn't you? But we're not dealing with the same kinds of people you find in those Terran city streets. For you, this job



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would be Rest and Recreation. I could start you at three-stripe rating, but you'd begin with rookie work — the Missing File. These people are mostly good heads. More Doctors per acre than most universities. But they do get lost. So we find 'em. In fact that's about all we have to do. You want the job?"

Savill had kept him in suspense a full five seconds. That zero homicide rate sounded restful. And it had been. Riding the computer-controlled floaters, which actually was about all there was to do, made him wonder what was going to save a pragmatic type like himself from stark boredom. Then he discovered there was synthosteak and Terran brew available, in quantity, at Murpho's Morgue.

And there, too, he discovered Murpho's partner, Molly Cato. What had bothered him about that, and continued increasingly to bother him, was that so far she hadn't seemed much impressed by the new Securityman. To her, he was just another client to be smiled at and talked to. He wanted to be more than that. And now, for the first time since he'd met her, he felt something other than unmitigated pleasure at seeing her approach his table.

Why her covert watchfulness earlier, during Miss Larkin's stay at his table? He pushed that implanted, unwelcome suspicion aside. It wasn't difficult. A lot of the Project's distaff side was out of the R & D mold: thin hair, thin lips, thin hips. Molly Cato was a notable exception.

She was shoulder high to a big man, and her slanted black eyes didn't, at first, seem to go with her yellow hair

— and wouldn't, on another face. Hers was one of those rare, memorable faces where ordinary features blend into something extraordinary. She dropped a no-limit house token into the slot at the table as she sat down. But her slanted black eyes were faintly mocking.

"Her Hero!" she jibed. "Why is it you never offer *me* the protection of that strong right arm? Weren't you a little impetuous? That curtain act was classic but it sure won't help your popularity rating around OMA."

Savill grinned. He had learned to sort out her conversation. Much of it was made up of questions to which she didn't expect an answer. You replied to whatever she said last. He filled his glass, nodding thanks. "One of my burdens, Molly. Nobody loves the Securityman."

"This is *true*? You're never around when I want you."

He grinned again. Molly talked like that. It was strictly an act, but Morgue clients, when so favored, liked it. So did he. Trouble was, he wanted her to mean it. But he found now, that he was uneasy, troubled by unfamiliar guilt. He was going to have to be a cop on duty, weighing every word she said. He nodded toward the bar. "I see Murpho turned the place over to you. Molly, how did as ugly a man as Murpho ever talk you into a partnership?"

She shrugged, a gesture worth observing. "Easy. Murpho likes money and makes money. You just have to watch him to be sure you get your share of the loot."

"Where is he?"

She shrugged again. "His living quarters, I suppose. Where else could he go? How did that karate workout start? Men never fight over *me*. Maybe if I learned how to walk . . ."

"Did you know Miss Larkin's friend, Mack Weymouth?"

"So you won't talk. A gentleman. You mean that bad tempered engineer? He's the one you should watch out for. He's her guy, although he hasn't been around for two, three months."

"Friend of Murpho's?"

"He and Murph used to tinker with the bar console. Mack is a fluidics man. They were trying to fix that booth back in the corner, but never did get it working. Mack hasn't been around since the time your little friend with the eyes and the follow-me walk stood him up. When I left that day, he had been waiting back there in the corner for three hours, getting madder by the minute. Hey!" She gave him a tilted, quizzical look. "She was watching Murph before she started down that imaginary runway to your booth. Is Murph in some kind of trouble? She complaining?"

"Well, she doesn't like him."

Abruptly Molly dropped out of character. "Leah Larkin! Do you strong, aggressive types really like those cooing biceps-patters?" Then she shrugged again. "Murpho is hard to like, but he isn't as mean as he looks. He's just better than average greedy."

Savill nodded, frowning. He had traced too many dead men back to somebody else's greed. There was money to be made here selling cold drinks and hot food. But there was a

great deal more money to be made from the sale of Old Alien artifacts, if you found good ones. He asked, "Ever found anything salable around here?"

Molly looked surprised. "Here? What could there be in *this* spooky pile of plastic and Termite spit? Could you even tell me what the Bugs used this building for? Oh, we've had offers. This is a mint. Murph has even offered to buy me out. But it's the business, not the building, that is valuable."

Something stirred faintly in Savill's mind. It didn't quite reach the surface but it prompted a question. "What kind of a price?"

"To me? His kind of a price. What else? Murph will swindle anyone, any time. It's a conditioned reflex. But I can handle him. I catch him trying to swindle me, I'll clobber him good. Look, Hero. I have clients who are willing to talk about *me*. And stop fighting over women here or I'll call a cop."

She touched his shoulder, smiled her in-character smile, and moved on. Suddenly he grinned. She could handle Murpho, for sure. She could be explosive. She was a Terran. And when she exploded, she picked up whatever was under her hand. He frowned at that. Until now he had thought it was amusing.

His eyes followed her across the shadowy room and then he looked around at the room itself, trying to see it as it might have been before those unknown alien invaders had blasted the only slightly better known builders off the planet. Something of

big value here? Until recently it had seemed to him only Alien. Now, he recalled, even Molly had called it "spooky."

It was one of the few Old Alien surface installations still standing in the City. But it had been passed over for more promising prospects by the quick money S & S outfits like OMA. Dimly lit now — apparently a custom followed by tavern keepers since the mastodon oil lamp — the rectangular room looked as if it had been planned for some utilitarian purpose. But no one knew what. There were recesses along three walls, large enough to be used as booths. Hence the nickname that had stuck, Murpho's Morgue, because of the slabs of some non-metallic material on the walls of each booth. The slabs were high enough to be used as benches.

Murpho had kept them. He had cleared the rubble, roofed the shell, and cleaned the still undamaged walls and floor so that the murals and the oddly rectilinear floor pattern, repeated in the booths, gleamed. He had installed self-contained servo tables in the center and had adapted what appeared to have been some kind of communications counter at one side for the tricky tubing of his bar console. With Murpho's skill at synthesizing and blending, and with Molly Cato's personality, the Morgue was an institution, a public house which was far more than a bar, and a welcome relief from the bleak desolation of the blast desert.

But what, he wondered, could there be about this Old Alien shell valuable enough to motivate murder and its giggling bedmate, blackmail? His head

was beginning to ache. He ignored it, knowing it meant only that his mind was skittering, caught in the ambivalence of being told to work on a problem which he wanted to solve but was fearful of the solution. A murder had to be uncovered quickly, if there had been one. But what if . . .

He thrust the building's owners out of his mind and looked around at the building itself. For the past three months it had seemed unaccountably — there it was again — spooky. The Missing File. Which now had a new name, Mack Weymouth. Once, gossiping with Murpho at the bar, Savill had started abruptly toward the back corner booth, certain he had glimpsed Shorty Wills, who was a red-starred name on the Missing File. Shorty had taken a case of negotiable claim deeds with him when he dropped out of sight. Another time it had been big Hank Wyatt. Hank, before he disappeared, had been carrying on a running feud with Murpho.

There had been others who had come to mind here, unexpectedly. In a way it reminded him of the effect of those sneaky subliminal inserts some agencies had been caught slipping in behind the picture in a view-tank. A dirty trick as old as visual communication; inexplicably you found you knew the code call that would reach, by name, one of Harriet's Happy Hippies. He shrugged irritably. But he frowned at the incomprehensible wall murals and the odd tracery of faintly fluorescent floor decoration. What had those big brained, wasp-waisted Isoptera used the place for? Was there some incompre-

hensible Termite gadget around, still flickering?

He shrugged again and emptied his glass. Probably he recalled the missing people here simply because they all had one thing in common. They were all regulars at Murpho's Morgue. Which meant little. Who wasn't?

He got to his feet, but the problem stayed on his back. And he was letting himself be diverted. Whatever had been found here, if anything, represented only money. What counted was what had been done about it, because of it, and by whom. He hadn't learned much from Molly that he hadn't known. Murpho had tried to buy her out. That was new. And Weymouth, the missing man, had been working here with Murpho. Also new. Murph was hog greedy, out for a fast credit. But everybody knew that. Weymouth could have been a partner. Men had been killed because their partners hadn't wanted to share the loot. And killers innumerable had been blackmailed out of their loot. But dammit, Molly Cato wouldn't...

His head was aching when he went home. He slept little.

III

His temples still throbbed faintly next day when he pushed in through the Chief's privacy screen. Cayhill was glowering, but that was no cause for alarm. Savill had learned the Chief just wouldn't admit he needed lens surgery. Cayhill couldn't see clearly much beyond the width of his desk. Lowering his head and glowering up past bunched eyebrows gave him a narrow field of extended vision.

But the glacial eyes glittering under snowy hair and eyebrows were disconcerting to many. Cayhill held up the snooper. "So you confiscated an illegal gadget. Commendable. What if he hadn't had it?"

That, Savill thought warily, was a point to consider. Outside the boundary of an undemocratic Work Project, search of the person was illegal. A man's hip pocket was his castle, inviolate. Even here, it might be an open question.

Hurriedly he asked, "Have you projected it?"

"Yes. And talked with your Miss Larkin. The crystal shows you smirking like a cadet at a woman who is not all that good looking."

"If I had a smirk, she soon wiped it off."

"True. But you swallowed the story whole, then and there. Look, I have to walk a high, tight wire where OMA is concerned. And when she cued you in with those appealing black eyes, you didn't even try to be tactful. You girded your loins, mounted your stallion, waved your sabre and yelled, 'Cha-a-a-rge!' Well, I was young once. But it openly put that girl under full Security protection, with all that implies. OMA is going to come charging back."

"I was there. I thought it was necessary."

Cayhill sighed. "I'm not saying it wasn't. Anyway, it's done. But handling OMA is my department. Let's get to your job. Is either Murpho or Molly capable of premeditated murder? For gain? Plus the gruesome little chore of disposing of a body? And where is the body?"

Savill suppressed a smile. The Chief was getting as bad as Molly. He tried to answer all the questions at once. "I think not."

Cayhill squinted, nodding. "So does the computer. But it doesn't have much data on Miss Larkin except what you fed into it last night before you started brawling. And the snooper. Look. Her guy is missing, but he said no farewells. Is she a rejected plaything, angry, frustrated, hallucinating? I know one frustrated woman who is crowding critical mass. Is *this* one psycho?"

Savill frowned, but Cayhill's glacier eyes pulled him back to the subject.

"No. I believe she told the truth."

Cayhill rubbed his white thatch and glared. "You and the computer! It also says that every person on the Missing List, to which we have now added Weymouth, was last seen either in or near the Morgue. So?"

"So it has to be something we haven't thought of."

Cayhill leaned forward, scowling heavily. "Well, we better think of it. Soon. We know what Leah Larkin says. Damned soon we'll know what OMA says. And whether for the reasons she gives or from righteous indignation, OMA is going to scream — defamation of the corporate image, bias, incompetency, assault by a Securityman, brutality, the whole list. OMA has the ear of the Inspector General. I don't say he is biased, but some of the ambitious Light Colonels who flit around this sector like to make a favorable impression on influential people. And at the top, OMA has influence. All right. Go see

Murpho. Feed it to the computer again, so I can have it as you go along if I need it. And don't go twisting his arm, hear? There are regulations against it."

Savill was almost to the screen when Cayhill called his name. The Old Man's eyes seemed to have lost some of their glacial quality. "There's always the chance this may *not* turn out to be 'something we haven't thought of.' You want me to take this one?"

Savill felt his face getting stiff again. "I'm not trying to make Colonel."

Cayhill continued his stare. Then gruffly he came as close to an apology as Savill had ever heard. "I shouldn't have asked. Get going."

It wasn't far to the Morgue, and Savill liked to walk the City in daylight. You either suffered or enjoyed the twin suns, depending on your state of mind. He liked hot, dry weather. That millennium-old blasting had not glassed over completely. Traces remained of narrow, twisting "streets." They looked more like out-sized termite runs than walkways. Occasionally one would dip underground. It was similar in other lightly blasted areas. You wondered how the Bugs found their way or moved anything bulky. But they had once had a planet-wide mining and industrial complex going here. The very immensity of this partly natural but mostly blast desert accounted for so many of these R & D people getting lost or stranded. But, until recently, they had always been found. He was scowling thoughtfully when he entered the now nearly empty Morgue.

It was too early for Molly, but Murpho met him with the grimace he thought was a smile. The smile vanished when Mack Weymouth's name came up. Murpho spread his pudgy hands, and his gesture could have been called a shrug. "Cliff, I just don't know. Sure, Mack spent some free time here. He helped me make some improvements in the synthesizer and the flow systems to the booths. But he hasn't been around lately."

Savill looked at the intricate bar console. "Is that what you were working on? Murph, what was under that old counter you're using?"

"Nothing much. Traces of wiring. Some old Termite tubing. Plugged or disintegrated. Nothing I could use."

"Have you ever really gone over the place? The original survey showed something solid, apparently shielded, down deep."

Murpho's round torso again rippled with that pseudo-shrug. "The whole planet has patches of buried shielding scattered around, Cliff. What they've opened hasn't made any sense, except maybe to a Termite. Why wreck a building to dig up a chunk of plastic filled with crystals? The R & D boys have cartons of the stuff. I wanted the *building*, to open a saloon. Cliff, what are you getting at? What do you want?"

Savill relaxed against the bar. "Missing people, Murph. Weymouth, sure. But there's also Shorty Wills, and that loud-mouth Hyatt, and three or four others. Vanished. All Morge regulars. Do you know anything about them?"

Murpho's broad face remained

bland but his eyes flicked toward the corner of the room. Savill looked. There was nothing there — the same Alien flooring, a special chair, outsize to accommodate Murpho's round bulk, an empty out-of-service booth, the door to Murpho's quarters. Savill looked back at Murpho.

"Do you?"

"Cliff, people come and go. I don't pay much attention."

"You're going to have to start, Murph. The story we get isn't pretty. To begin with, has OMA made an offer to buy this place?"

Murpho came to his feet. His broad, bland face was incapable of much expression but there was something that could have been fear in his eyes. "You've been listening to that girl! She's out of her mind! There hasn't been any murder. Ask OMA! Ask Kotch!"

"I'm going to, Murph. And you know more about it than you're admitting. Miss Larkin talked only to me and the Chief. Where did you learn about it? Kotch? Is Kotch trying to squeeze you out of this place? Look, man, if you're in a jam, the place to come is to me or to Cayhill!"

"You get out of here, Cliff! That woman is off her beam and just trying to make trouble. And so are you! Just because Molly won't..."

Murpho backed away when he found Savill was towering over him. Savill was following Murpho's retreat when the V & A unit in his pocket hissed insistently. He snapped, "Chief, I'm busy! Check the computer!"

An unmodulated voder unit intoned, "This is the computer. Chief Cayhill is being informed of your

work up to now. Take a priority message. Report to Chief Cayhill immediately. End of message."

Savill scowled. For a routine assignment, or chewing out, Cayhill would have bellowed for action himself. This was formal and ominous. The toneless voice repeated, "Take a priority . . ." He vented his irritation even though he knew it was wasted. "Coming!"

IV

He was wary when he pushed through the shimmering privacy screen and sized up the visitors. Kotch, of course, with a mark on his neck and his licorice eyes still smoldering. Beside him sat a typical Terran tycoon, well dressed in a suit of thermocloth which apparently had shorted out. The round, button-eyed face was pink and hot. The third visitor was several thousand light-years distant, but very much in evidence. The subspace comscreen showed the image of a cold, bony face and most of the spit-and-polish tunic of a Project Service uniform. The screen carried the code identification of one of the Inspector General's cruisers. Deputy! OMA had reacted fast! And with muscle.

The Chief named them. Pink Face was OMA's Mr. Willits. Stone Face, sure enough, was a Colonel Holt, enroute to Otho. Savill felt his stomach muscles squeeze, for the Chief's voice had an unfamiliar, I-never-saw-this-guy-before-in-my-life tone.

"Sergeant Mr. Willits formally charges that your irresponsible actions, during and after an illegal

search of Mr. Kotch's person, have caused the spread of a malicious, slanderous story, completely false, and originating with an unbalanced, hysterical ex-employee of his, Miss Leah Larkin."

So. The Old Man was going formal.

"Miss Larkin's story has been checked by the computer's psychograph unit."

Willits spoke up blandly. "It proves only that she believes what she says. She overheard a part, a fragment, of a conversation. She misinterpreted what she heard. Her actions may be understandable, considering her near hysterical state of mind. Her contract was up for review, and I also assume she was — ah — abandoned by Mr. Weymouth."

Savill turned to Cayhill. "Have you asked him just where Mack Weymouth is?"

Expressionless, Cayhill nodded. "Out on a confidential field job."

"Then why this awesome show of force? Let's get him in here. One word, just the sight of him, blows this whole thing . . ."

Cayhill interrupted sharply. "That's all, Sergeant. I'll handle it. You are going out on another assignment."

After an incredulous "What?" Savill found astonishment had silenced him. Why the spineless old . . . he was backing away! He was letting them . . . Anger made his voice rasp. "Reassigned by whom? Otho Mining Associates? When I left this office an hour ago I thought you were worried about me! Maybe you were, at that. Who is Security here? I want to know whom to hand my . . ."

A bellow made the visitors wince and drowned out the rest of his words. The Old Man's voice rumbled. "I am Security here, Sergeant, and don't you forget it! The Dispatcher has your orders. Dismissed!"

Blindly Savill clamped his jaw and came to attention. All right, you spineless old goat. But I've had it! He met Cayhill's enigmatic glare, ignored the smug smirks from Willits and Kotch, and met the cold stare from the listening I. G. Colonel on the screen. He saluted the screen, making the meticulously correct gesture include the furiously glowering Cayhill, and then pushed blindly out through the privacy screen. His hands had almost stopped shaking by the time he confronted the Dispatcher.

That worthy grinned when Savill picked up the mike of a voicewriter. "Don't record your troubles for me, Sergeant. I got troubles of my own. I don't borrow any. Look, why can't you be realistic about these . . ."

He stopped when Savill growled and made a fist. But that, Savill thought, was stupid. This guy wasn't a cop, by Savill's standards, but he had been Security trained. His reflexes would never let a punch land.

The Dispatcher grinned again. "So Cayhill burned you down. Before witnesses. So what? That I. G. Colonel who is on his way here wanted to fire you out of hand. So why don't you read your orders?"

Savill took the flimsy. After all, he had never known the Old Man to do anything without a reason. And presently he forgot the Dispatcher. The Chief was sending him out to Joe Blow's claim — Joey Blow, they

called him — who was currently in debt, right up to his jug ears, to Otho Mining Associates. Joey had found and partially reactivated an automated Termite mine. But he had borrowed to the hilt from OMA for a new ore lift.

Savill recalled that when Joey had pushed his bread-boarded control switches, his alien ore carriers had started working like mad, but they carefully avoided his new ore lift platform. With singleminded insistence, they had started dumping ore at the end of a dead-end tunnel. Joey had yelled and had even stood in their way. They had sidled around him, when the end of the tunnel was full, the whole mine had hiccupped and shut down. At the Morgue, Joey had cursed picturesquely at stupid Termite robots which insisted on doing their own thinking.

Savill moved to the computer input. When he finished, he was frowning thoughtfully. The Chief was kicking him in the teeth in a way sure as hell calculated to please and quiet OMA. But he was being sent to the one place where OMA was known to be showing an active interest in an independent claim. Moreover, by OMA standards, a claim which was of dubious value. Registration and Records said OMA had started foreclosure on Joey.

Why? OMA already owned far better mines. They didn't need Joey's. And if you believed the Larkin story, which he did, OMA was also pressing Murpho the hard way — by blackmail — to sell them the Morgue. OMA needed a saloon like he needed

a Map Board man to tell him how to do his job. Suddenly he felt better, so much so that he let the Dispatcher get away with it when the man cracked, "See? I not only have to provide perambulators for you field guys, I have to do your thinking for you. I told you to read those orders."

Savill grimaced. "Nuts! You read 'em and saw only words. Which floater?"

"The single seater. It's programmed."

Slamming the floater door and settling back into its single seat, he tried to relax. He was too wound up to sleep. This could be coincidence. The Old Man might be just getting him out of the way so the I. G. office and OMA could be placated. But that wasn't like him. Savill tried, with eventual success, to appreciate the glittering reds, grays and whites of the blast desert as the floater homed through the hours at safe, computer-governed speeds.

Joey seemed surprised, but glad to see him. "Any other Morgue bench warmer would have remembered to bring some cold brew. How's Molly?" Joey was another of that unofficial, unorganized group, the Molly watchers. But after food and a lot of rambling talk, Joey's puzzlement showed through.

"What the hell, Cliff? I don't need a Securityman. Johnny Hart and I can settle our boundary dispute. My new shaft, if I can finance it, will have to start from his side of the line. But we won't need a referee."

"If you can finance it? Won't OMA help?"

"Help? The greedy bastards are

pushing me to sell. At their price. Or foreclosure. And there isn't a hell of a lot of difference. Kotch has been out here, twisting my arm. And another guy. I chased them to hell out."

"Who was the other one?"

Joey snorted disgust. "Fluidics man, name of Weymouth. I enjoyed throwing him out, the bad tempered ape. He wanted to argue."

Suddenly alert, Savill asked quickly, "When, Joey?"

"Three months ago. They haven't been back, but OMA served papers."

Savill thought, three months! So Willits and Kotch had lied. Maybe. They could have sent him elsewhere later. "What was Weymouth up to?"

Joey pointed to a stud on the panel. "Checking this stuff. It's dead. I could dope out everything else, but I never have figured what the Bugs used the fluidics for. The tubing goes down toward a shielded section, deep. Some of that section is boxed in behind stuff a neutron would have to crawl through. Look. Weymouth filled part of the system before I found him."

Joey punched the stud. "See? Down there, the ore pile those moron ore carriers made. That border glows and then winks off. Whatever it is, it starts and then some kind of fail-safe takes hold. Must have been some kind of scale, or grader, analysis, maybe. But the carriers won't work past it. I'll have to sink my new shaft there and..."

Joey's voice faded as Savill began moving away, down the tube-lit tunnel. The alien machines were lined in a precise row, facing back, as if they had made ready for another

trip before shutting themselves off. They reminded him of a row of Terran road building robots, but they were anything but that primitive. They seemed poised, waiting for something.

With tantalizing expectancy, Savill found he was waiting, too. For what? His head was aching again, but it wasn't telling him anything. He leaned against the last carrier and let his eyes wander. Abruptly his expectancy turned to elation. The floor! It had the same pattern on the edges as the floor at the Morgue. With an effort he kept his voice down. "Joey. Try it again."

There was no sound. There was the faint beginning of a bluish fluorescence in the inlay of the border pattern. But the next instant he found he had jumped back a full step, his nerves tingling. Reflex had jerked his hand back as if he had touched a snake. *The carrier had moved!*

Not much. It couldn't have been seen. It had been more a pulse, a gathering of forces, as if the big robot had been getting poised to move. Quickly he called, "Again, Joey!" This time his touch was light, expectant. In spite of himself he jumped again. But now he was certain. The big machine had completed a cycle, gone as far as it could. And now it was immobilized, trapped between conflicting signals: Work! Hold! Go! No Go!

With agonized clarity he found he was trapped by the same conflict. He knew, now, where the bodies were. But that brought him back to Murpho's Morgue, to Murpho—and to Molly Cato.

His mind spun away, reaching for irrelevant distractions. Why hadn't R & D spotted it? It stood out now like the hidden face in the psychologist's trick picture. It explained the haphazard aimlessness of this whole scattered Isopteran planetary complex. But of course at least one of OMA's R & D people had seen it.

And so had Murpho. So, perhaps, had Molly Cato. And somebody was using it as a weapon—more than a weapon—in a way that was horrifying. He found he was running, then, punching the Chief's V & A comcode as he ran.

V

He ignored Joey's questions and signaled Emergency. That brought him the hum code of the City Map Room, and the Dispatcher's needling voice. "Relax, Savill. We're guarding your ward. Just now she's headed for the Morgue . . ."

"Where's the Chief?"

"He's taking no calls."

"Goddamnit where is he?"

The Dispatcher's voice froze. "He's at the Morgue and he ordered no calls. So I sure as hell won't have him paged for you."

This book-bound idiot would want it in writing. And when he got it, he would come unstuck. Savill lowered his voice. "All right. All right. Have the computer route my floater home. Fast. I have to come in."

"I'll do no such thing! The Chief ordered you out there. That's on the Day Book. You try to move that floater without his clearance, and I'll deactivate the drive!"

Cursing all book-bound desk men, he let the V & A unit snap off and called, "Phone, Joey?" Joey moved aside, and in what seemed an hour Molly Cato's handsome, tilt-eyed face filled the screen. Her in-character smile faded abruptly.

"Oh! You! I'd think you'd be ashamed to . . . Never mind. I'll call her."

"Molly, what are you talking about? Never mind! Get me Cayhill!"

"I'm talking about your friend with the follow-me walk! You might as well talk to her because the Chief is busy! *Is he busy!*"

Her voice was throaty with smoldering, contemptuous anger. He felt himself frowning. Molly always played a part. But she couldn't be this good an actress. This had come as a surprise to her. "Molly, call him!"

"Have you found the body? Strangled with one of my stockings? Look, he has Murph and Kotch and me back there and he's about ready to start using his rubber hose on us. And now he's waving me back. He isn't about to come to the phone. Can't that mean little mind of yours . . ."

"Molly, stop it! Get them out of there! I know what happened to Weymouth, and all the rest of those people who are missing. Don't you?"

"You gibbering cretin, how could I know?"

He had been watching the play of emotion in her face. She *didn't* know! You can't prove a negative, but you can know it! He lowered his voice.

"Molly, screen the phone. I don't want anyone to hear this. And believe me, I was never more serious and I was never more scared. Does he have

you in that out-of-service booth back there in the corner?"

She had moved in close to the nearly silenced phone, so that her face seemed only inches from his own. When she nodded he found that, although he had expected it, he had to make a second try before the words came out. "Molly, that booth back there is an Old Alien matter transmitter. That's what that whole building was—a Termite personnel transportation center. *And that corner booth is working!*"

It took her five seconds. Her mouth formed a startled "O," and her eyes widened. She glanced quickly over her shoulder and then back, waiting.

"Don't go back inside that thing. Cayhill may argue and say he'll call me later. So tell him, if you have to. And when they're out, help him keep people away from there. I don't know what activates it, but it has to be something at the bar. So smile and keep them away. No touch. Like you do me."

Her tilted eyes widened, and he saw them move slightly as if they were scanning his image in the screen. She smiled faintly. "Sergeant, you are probably a smart cop. It appears you are. But in some ways you are just plain stupid!" She glanced over her shoulder again. "Kotch is out, but Murpho and Cayhill are still sitting there. I'll get him. Wait."

She moved away, and the phone hummed, the visual pickup taking in a segment of the thin crowd at the tables in the shadowy background. He could make out one end of the

bar. The privacy hum continued. Wait, she had said. But it shouldn't take this long . . . Abruptly his pulse started pounding. Then he heard a voice, shouting. It was his own. He lunged toward the screen as if it were a window it was possible to go through. The back of a man's head, a shoulder and an arm, had appeared in one corner of the screen. He heard himself raging, and he didn't realize he was senselessly beating his fist on the table until he felt Joey Blough's hand grip his arm and heard Joey's tight, steady voice saying, "Easy, Cliff. Easy. There was nothing we could do."

So Joey, too, had seen the arm reach in toward the backbar, toward something that was out of sight, below the range of the phone's visual pickup, and then stealthily withdraw. And now there was nothing either of them could do but wait.

And wait. Presently Savill sank weakly into a chair Joey pushed up behind him. Then they both waited, occasionally glancing at each other. After a time they stopped doing even that. They could no longer meet each other's eyes. The phone hummed on and on, like the automatic Dead-Ship signal from a liner that has been opened to space.

After an immeasurable time Savill looked up. "I have to get in there."

"What's keeping you?"

"If I don't tell that Dispatcher, he'll kill the floater the minute I touch it. If I do tell him, they'll swarm all over that place, punching and prodding. Maybe nothing can be done, but I want to talk to Kotch first. It had to be Kotch."

Joey got up and reached for a toolkit. "I'm next in line, remember. Come on. I'll help you compound a felony. That drive should be like a transistor radio compared with the stuff I've been bread-boarding around here."

In a little over twenty minutes, Joey looked up from the drive housing they had torched open. "You'll get some radiation. Not enough to hurt. Technically we've swiped a police floater, and it'll sure never be the same again. She'll only skim, now. But fast. Watch yourself, going in."

Savill never could recall much about that twisting, skimming, floodlit ride. But he made the drive last long enough so it didn't start to flare until he had walked away from it in front of the OMA building. There were quick words, ending with a ruthlessly broken arm, when the private guard at the door tried to stop him. He felt no remorse, only a cold realization that the ape in his skull had started screeching and gibbering just inside the mouth of its cave. When he strode into Willits' office, he found Willits and Kotch in a conference, via the comscreen, with Colonel Holt.

Holt's image was clearer now. The cruiser was a good many light-years nearer. Savill ignored the startled protests and walked directly to Kotch.

"I want some answers, Kotch."

Kotch's lips grimaced, and his eyes flicked toward the screen. He kept his voice down, barely audible. "Out, Savill! You're out of your depth here. What you think you know and what you can prove are entirely different."

Savill hit him and then stepped

around the overturned chair. He heard some squealing. That was Willits, yelling for help. The shocked, outraged roar must be the comscreen, somebody thundering that Savill was under arrest, was discharged, was to be tried for felonious assault. After a while the thundering died out. Then he could hear the screaming. And soon, between screams, some talk. And presently Savill thought dully that Kotch was a fortunate man. He had started talking just as the gibbering ape was about to break free.

Savill turned then to the comscreen and the silently staring Holt. "You do what you damned please about me, Colonel. But you heard him. I'd say it was your responsibility to see he doesn't get off planet. The Map Board man will take your orders."

When he entered the now nearly empty Morgue, he glanced at the clock over the bar. It read 0102 of a new day. Three hours! The thin crowd had moved to the self-serving tables in the center of the shadowy room, and the few who questioned him stayed in their seats when he motioned them back. People were used to doing as they pleased here. He walked back and checked the booth. Its emptiness seemed to mock him.

Then he walked to the phone, trying to get the same view he had had before when Kotch's hand had reached toward the end of the bar and then had dropped down, out of the screen's image. And he found the lever Kotch had described. It was part of the system that led into the beer storage section, Murpho's private stock of pilsener.

He looked again at the empty booth. Few, if any, could even see it from out on the floor. He was sweating, and his hands felt cold. He had a fleeting thought that he might just make this worse. But how? It was already about as bad as it could get. He shifted the lever. The floor pattern in the booth glowed faintly. Of course. It was already empty. He looked down at the lever, and the connected stubs of old and new tubing radiating around its base. There was a setting on the other side of the circle, unworn, bearing a bubble of dried paint. His hands were damp, even shaking slightly, and it took force to jam the lever into place. He heard a faint hiss of flowing liquid. And then with relief that made his knees crumple, he heard Chief Cayhill's bellowing voice, rumbling and mad. "Savill! I ordered you . . . Get moving! And close that screen!"

His pulse pounding, he found himself standing rigid, staring at the booth. Murpho and Cayhill were sitting on the benches, and Molly was standing barely inside the faintly pulsing floor pattern, her mouth open with surprise.

"Tell him? I didn't have time! Where were you calling from? I had to pound on his shoulder even to get him to listen, and then he looked up past me and started yelling at you!"

"Never mind! Out of that thing! All of you!"

Molly's face changed from growing understanding to fear, and she moved quickly to one side. Murpho, eyes bulging and his face fish-belly white, needed no urging. He darted out, brushing past Molly. Cayhill rose

slowly and stamped forward, a storm on his face. But both he and Savill turned when they heard a gasp from Molly. Her voice was almost shrill. "Look It's Wills! Shorty Wills!"

Looking trapped and scared, Wills was standing in front of the booth. He was holding a briefcase as if it had suddenly started to tick. The Chief's face lit up, and his voice exploded. "Hah! Where the hell did you come from?" His hand closed on the briefcase, and he marched the little messenger off to the side. "Savill, I'll talk to you later. You stay right here!"

Savill realized it figured. Shorty was a man they had wanted for a long time. The briefcase was worth half a million. But he was still just reacting, not thinking, until he heard Hank Wyatt's bass voice. Hank was sitting at a table, with an empty glass in front of him! And he was grumbling, "Look, Fishface. Are you agin that beer?"

Savill moved quickly to the booth. "Out, Hank! Drag that table with you!"

"Huh? So old Fishface has police protection now! He'll need..."

"Move, Hank! And shut up!"

Hank scowled, but he moved. Molly gripped Savill's arm. "Cliff! Was I...?"

Savill nodded. "See the time? You were in there three hours!"

She caught her breath. "But what's happening now?"

"I think it is the only operative unit. So it was just holding. God knows how. A pattern in a memory bank down behind all that shielding, I suppose. It held, and then kept try-

ing to reverse itself. That's why I kept seeing spooks. Flickers, subliminal." Then he waved an arm. "That's good, Hank. Go get a drink at a table. And keep your mouth shut."

VI

Savill watched expectantly, and as the grumbling Wyatt turned away, a stranger appeared on the bench in the booth. No furniture this time; he was just sitting there. Savill waved him out. Then another, who took one look at Savill's Security tunic and scuttled for the exit. Another! Savill held his breath. One more! That was it! The Missing File! But there should be still another, the guy who had never been in the File at all. Molly gasped again. "There! It's Weymouth!"

It was. But the scowling Weymouth didn't even glance in their direction. Muttering, and looking at his watch, he headed toward the shadowy table area.

Savill felt the tension fall away, leaving him weak and lightheaded. He put an arm around Molly. "That's it, Molly-O! Like a FILO inventory; First In—Last Out! You're rich. They'll bid big. Millions!"

Too late he realized it wasn't the best moment for the reminder. Molly wheeled toward the pasty-faced Murpho. "So! That's why you wanted to buy me out. Megacredits and you offer me tokens!"

Murpho was gasping like a catfish on a grassy bank. Savill pulled Molly back. "Easy. Murph may be in real trouble. A murder charge."

Murpho croaked, "No, Cliff! I swear it! I didn't know. Kotch must

have. He didn't like it when the Chief picked that booth for his talk with us. And he got out the minute Molly left to get the phone."

"Had he tried to blackmail you? Force a sale?"

"Yes. He threatened to bring a murder charge unless I bought Molly out and sold to him. But he didn't tell me how Weymouth had been killed . . . Only that he could prove I had done it!"

Molly's eyes were still blazing. "You lying old bullhead! You thought you could squirm out of it somehow and get all this for yourself. I know you!"

"No! Cliff, I didn't know what had happened to any of them. It wasn't until Shorty Wills failed to come out that I realized that — that every time I drew a glass of pilsener whoever was sitting in booth nine disappeared!"

It was the end of a long, hard day. Afterward Savill figured he must have started giggling about then. Anyway, it didn't occur to him to stop Molly when he saw she was groping blindly while her tilted eyes blazed at Murpho. He saw her arm jerk, and too late he saw she was gripping a section of plastic hose. Then a cold spray — good Terran pilsener, he learned later — hit him in the face.

He pawed helplessly at his eyes, and he heard Murpho's protests. There was a wavering glimpse of Murpho's Roc-egg figure backing away. There was even Hank Wyatt's rumbling bass, yelling gleefully, "Whack 'im, Molly!" Then Savill found he was laughing too, doubled

over, with tears and beer in his eyes. And too late he sensed that Murpho was backing toward the booth. Murpho bounced off the misplaced table, which had no business being there, and fell sprawling.

Savill slapped blindly at the switch of the privacy screen. But that was all he could do. And as the screen was going opaque he saw the glowing floor pattern wink out — in an empty booth. Murpho was gone. And with a final, gurgling sigh the tube system hissed empty too.

The next minutes were always a little blurred. Molly rushed to him, her eyes wide and horrified. "Cliff! I didn't mean to do that!" He put an arm around her. But then to his astonishment her face took on an angry set and her tilted eyes widened. She jerked away. "Well! Your walking doll!"

He felt his jaw go slack and hands grip his arm. Miss Larkin's eager voice cried, "Where is he? I saw him!"

The best Savill could do was point. Mack Weymouth was striding toward them, pushing through the now closing-in crowd. Weymouth's angry eyes shifted from Savill to Miss Larkin. "Where the hell have you been? I wait three hours and come out to find you hanging to this guy . . . where you been?"

"Mack! Mr. Savill can explain . . ."

"Maybe he better. You show up three hours late, wearing a different dress, a different hairdo, and looking like you needed a night's sleep. Just how did you spend the afternoon?"

Savill never did figure what happened to his vaunted Security-trained



reflexes. All he could recall was that after a fair-sized nova stopped flaring around his head he looked up from the floor and saw their backs, moving away, and faintly he heard her voice, "But Mack! I can explain!"

Then the Chief went, "Hummm!" and Savill climbed wearily to his feet. Cayhill was stuffing a pair of old fashioned spectacles into his tunic pocket. Savill felt his jaw go slack again, but tightened it quickly.

"How long have you been wearing those?"

"Hummm! Long enough to see what was happening over here after Shorty turned out to be confused about the date. So that's why Joey's mine suddenly became worth OMA's while to steal! Same kind of thingummy out there?"

Savill nodded tiredly. "His is a big one. For ore transport." Suddenly Savill felt weak and weary. His jaw hurt. His lip was puffed. And one eye was painfully swelling shut. Damned old goat! Going to investigate personally and look where he wound up! The old fraud piled on the pressure, forced you to think over your head and find answers from a thousand years back and then just stood there, rocking back and forth on his flat feet and going "Hummm!"

The Chief rocked back and forth and said, "Hummm! I thought you would come up with something, if you got good and mad and were pushed a little. So it was something we hadn't thought of."

Savill wished there were some place to sit down. "There are several hours you haven't been filled in on yet."

"Oh, no. I've been talking to the Map Board man. Holt ordered Kotch and Willits held. But we're just getting this investigation well started now. You come up with some of the damndest side effects. I send you out to find me a body and a suspect and you turn up a whole room full of bodies that have to be rounded up and brought back in to testify. Well, I'll take care of that. But we'll need Molly's victim, too. You'll stay on duty here, Private, until the Techs wake that thing up again."

It slipped past Savill, until Molly's voice made him jump. "Private!"

Cayhill bellowed back. "Yes, Private! And don't take it out on me! He's not only insubordinate, he ruined a police vehicle, used illegal methods to get information from a citizen, and furthermore . . ."

"You . . . ungrateful old . . . he brought *you* back, don't forget!"

Savill told himself he was just letting his jaw go slack again because it was aching so. But Cayhill's grizzled face had assumed an expression he had never seen. The face was smiling! And the voice was gentle! "No, Molly. I haven't forgotten. I never will."

But then the bellow resumed, full volume. "And furthermore, as I was trying to say when you butted in, he could have stopped you. You were within arms reach, as you frequently are, I notice, except when you go into a huff about something. That was rank incompetence. So he's busted to Private and he's staying right here to keep you under house arrest and wait for the Techs to get *your* victim back!"

Savill frowned, because Molly didn't look in the least like a woman who had just been arrested. She looked about twelve years old. Even after that fleeting look faded, her lower lip stayed pushed out. She glared at Cayhill.

"I don't want him here! Even if his girl with the twitchy walk did twitch out on him!"

"You're under arrest, remember?"

She got it that time. "You actually suspect me?"

"He doesn't. Wouldn't hear of it, even at first. Me, I'm staying neutral. Somebody has to be objective around here. Anyway, I want him out of sight until I get that light Colonel calmed down. You better fix his eye. It's swelling, and he wasn't pretty to begin with. But you wait a day or two before you treat that lip, hear? He has to be able to talk at your trial — and his own." With that Cayhill glared at both of them and stamped out, shooing the crowd ahead of him.

When they were alone, Savill leaned back tiredly and stared at her. "Maybe I *am* a little stupid at that. What's this about my girl? With the — ah — funny walk?"

"Hah! That cooing biceps patter! What her walk says isn't funny. It's indecent. And you're always sitting with her."

"You won't ever stay at my table. You keep treating me like a customer."

"And you keep treating me like a lady!"

"Well, hell's bells, aren't you?"

"You could at least have tried to find out! Smart cop!"

She moved, her eyes taking on that smoldering, in-character look again. After about an hour, or possibly fifty seconds, he gasped for breath and pushed her away to arms' length. It required, he found happily, considerable effort to keep her there. She had been blatantly flaunting the Chief's order about his lip. He found he didn't mind that in the least and he was about to let her go when something caught his eye.

Alarmed, he glanced back toward the booth. Oh-oh! Sooner or later that Termite transmitter was going to upchuck old Murpho. And when it did there just might be another Security problem. Murderer or not, old Murpho had still been trying to cheat Molly out of her share of the loot.

And through it all, he saw, she had never let go of that length of beer hose!


Oh well. He turned her loose and braced himself. A smart cop like Private Savill — under pressure he'd think of *something!*

END

REMEMBER: New subscriptions and changes of address require 5 weeks to process!

WEST IS WEST

by LARRY TRITTEN



*This is the real, the bonded West —
as any duck-billed saurian can tell!*

Sheriff Matt Cooper was in his office reading a dime novel (*Psychedellic Shoot-out at Laser Mesa*) when the door burst suddenly open and Professor Doctor Addams rushed noisily across the puncheon floor. The old psychiatrist's leathern face was pinched with worry, and he was wheezing as if he'd just danced a chicken reel at high noon in Barbecue Valley.

"There's been a killing in the Dirty Lady, Matt! Kreev Cantrell's been shot!"

Not being one to excite easily, Cooper drew himself erect in his chair, pushing the dime novel aside. His expression was stony as he waited for the rest.

Dropping into a nearby chair, Doc Addams tapped his reddened face with a checkered handkerchief, a man shaken.

"I saw the whole thing, Matt," he blurted, his voice spilling outrage. "Randolph Scott Cartwheel gunned down Kreev Cantrell. It was cold-blooded murder!" He paused, considered the words, then added, "in the truest sense, you might say, Kreev being a reptilian life-form."

Cooper leaned forward now, eyes flickering like miniature flintlocks. "How about provocation?"

"Wasn't any. Nope. Leastways, not on Kreev's part. I saw the whole thing. They were just sitting there, playing cards, peaceful-like, when all of a sudden, out of the blue, Cartwheel starts insulting Kreev — just kept getting nastier and nastier. Well, you know how good-natured Kreev always was. He just laughed and said, kind of jokingly, 'Randolph, you're 'bout as mean as a Heilian electro-carnivore.' Then, quick as a wink,

Cartwheel ups and yells, "When you call me that, smile!" Then he hauled out his gun and shot Kreev — three slugs in the carapace, three in the belly. Just like that!" Doc Addams snapped his fingers. "Wasn't pretty, Matt."

"Kreev didn't smile?"

Doc Addams threw out a stabbing gaze. "You're kidding, Matt? You ever see a duck-billed saurian capable of smiling? Not this side of Disney, you ain't!"

Cooper nodded, then got slowly to his feet. "Reckon that's so." He was a tall, rangy man, more muscle than bone, with eyes the color of a cyclone-whipped sky and dark taut hands that could reach for a woman or draw a Colt with equal confidence. For three months now he had been the sheriff of Torn Scalp — ever since his lone and mysterious arrival on West from Earth in a private flivver. At the time the sheriff's job had been open, and Cooper had stepped forward, canyonesque jaw jutting heroically, to fill the vacancy. He had tamed the town considerably.

With Doc Addams following him, Cooper left the office and crossed the dusty main street of Torn Scalp toward the Dirty Lady Saloon, a no-nonsense den of authentic corruption where five dollars would buy anything from three fingers of dream dram to a night in a back-room pleasure stall with a hostess and a package of inhale cubes. Above the swinging doors of the saloon glittered a huge three-dimensional neon sign depicting a semi-clad Earth woman smiling invitingly.

Cooper pushed his way through the swinging doors and strode inside. An open-prairie silence filled the room. There were some lavender Vegans drinking at the bar, minding their own business, eyes like gray stones under their forward-tilted stetsons; except for them the place was deserted. Kreev Cantrell, six feet of slim lacertian deadweight, lay slumped over the green felt of a card table in a far corner. The only sound was the whisk of the Carolian bartender's polishing cloth as he buffed an Owl-hoot Special beaker, goldfish face bleakly impassive.

Cooper went to the corner and examined Cantrell's body, wincing at the sight of the punctured midriff.

He scowled.

"What is it?" asked Doc Addams, at his side.

"Now I got to ride all the way out to the Cartwheel spread," said Cooper, face darkening into a sullen pout. "If I don't get back early I'll miss the *Shane* revival tonight at the Iron Horse!"

Doc Addams made a sympathetic clucking sound, allowed as how that was a shame, but pointed out that a Wayne festival was in the offing and might compensate.

Uncheered, Cooper asked him to tend to disposing the body while he was away.

Cooper got his horse out of the livery stable and rode at a swift gallop out of town. It was a clear, sizzling day, the broiling sun beaming high and yellow like Apache gold, and Cooper welcomed the slap of a light desert wind against his face. Before long he was far from town, in

dull open country scattered with mesquite and cactus and an occasional patch of jewel-grass. As he rode, he switched on his wrist peep and listened nostalgically to country and western songs being sung by a trio called the Saddle Burrs.

Two hours passed, and Cooper led his horse finally up a steep plateau grassland to a big white log house that stood in dramatic silhouette against the drifting sky. He slowed from a trot to a walk and, as he drew near the house, held the reins so that his hands were in conspicuous sight.

Three tall duck-billed lizards came out of the house and stood on the porch. They wore denim work clothes, but each had a .45 strapped on his hip. Cooper knew them well. The one in the middle was Benjamin Cartwheel. The other two were sons of his, Joel McCrea Cartwheel and George Armstrong Custer Cartwheel. The old lizard's other son, Randolph Scott Cartwheel, was nowhere in sight.

"Howdy, sheriff," the old lizard said in a grizzled voice with no welcome in it. "What brings you?"

Cooper leaned on his saddle horn, smiled thinly. "Where's Randolph, Ben?"

"Who cares?"

"You know what he did, Ben. Why not make it easy?"

"Why don't you go chew some loco weed, sheriff?"

Cooper sighed. "I'd hoped for cooperation, Ben. I thought you believed in the law."

Ben Cartwheel laughed — that is

to say, delivered a reptilian facsimile thereof. It sounded like silver dollars rattling.

"I'll tell you one thing, sheriff," he said, his voice slashing like a scalping knife. "When I came to this valley twenty years ago it was new land, virgin land. I carved a home out of it, raised three sons, fought outlaws and rustlers and sandbug plagues and landgrabbers to keep what I had. I didn't do that, sheriff, to end up letting one of my boys dangle at the end of a rope swung by some ranny who hadn't even heard of West when I was fighting for my life. Creatures like me *built* this country, made it what it is, and now you outworld driftabouts start pouring in from every which way looking for some of the glory! What do you know, punk? I'd already seen three different remakes of *High Noon* when you were still in short pants. No, by John Ford, you aren't cutting any ice around here!"

Cooper shrugged, his eyes tinting with a sudden ominous darkness. "Sorry you feel that way, Ben. Now I'll have to get up a posse. Good day."

He wheeled his horse around in one quick fluid motion and rode away. There would be trouble now, he knew, and that was too bad, but hadn't he done his whooping best to head it off?

The lanky ease with which Cooper had slouched low in the saddle was gone now. Instead, he leaned forward like a man angling for trout against the current of a swift stream, and there was in him the straining tension of a chicken at the chopping

block. He went at a fast gallop, straight toward town, a restless cloud of dust marking his trail behind him.

Halfway to town he spotted a riderless horse standing alone, a prone figure sprawled a few yards from it. Cooper rode up and dismounted.

The figure was Randolph Scott Cartwheel, bleeding untidily from various bullet wounds and fast approaching candidacy for becoming a ghost rider in the sky. A thread of blood ran down one side of his bill, and his eyes blinked with glazed recognition as Cooper put an arm about his shoulders and held him up.

"Who did it, Randolph?"

The voice, when it came, was sibilant. "It was Venus Rio Brazos, sheriff."

Cooper flinched as though he'd been standing downwind from a cow whose nostrils were threading the wind. The one person in Torn Scalp he'd always considered absolutely incorruptible was Venus Rio Brazos, her unwholesome job as a dime-a-dance hostess in the Slender Haunch Swirl Palace notwithstanding. The truth was he had a hankering for her, had for some time. To Cooper she was as pretty as the snuff-colored robot bison that roamed the plains of West, or a winning poker hand the week before payday.

"What happened, boy?" he asked, pained.

Cartwheel strained hard to get his last words out. "Said she'd run off with me, sheriff . . . if I killed Cantrell . . . and took . . . and took . . ."

"Easy, boy."

". . . took the Maltese Longhorn Steer . . ."

Cooper's face became like shale.

". . . then she met me here, plugged me, lit out with it . . ." There was a sound in Cartwheel's throat like brisk radio static, then, abruptly, he sagged in Cooper's arms, duckbill pointed skyward.

He was dead.

Just after sunset, his bull-like shoulders set in a determined hunch, Cooper pushed through the swinging doors of the Slender Haunch Swirl Palace. It was dim and cool and crowded inside. Out on the big dance floor cowboys and their hostesses were performing the native dances of a dozen different worlds, whirling, shimmying, kwurring, hopping, shaking, and doing shamelessly intimate Tendril Slink variations to the accompaniment of mercilessly loud psychedelic music blasting from overhead speakers. Cooper stood off to one side, watching the dancers until he saw Venus Rio Brazos doing a suggestive crab walk with a lean buckskin-clad man who might have been human but for his rainbow-hued skin.

When the number ended Cooper went over and drew Venus Rio Brazos aside.

She was a beautiful Earth girl, Spanish, with eyes like candle flames in a breeze and breasts so sweetly high they seemed to levitate. Her green silk dress fit her as snugly as the husk on an ear of Indian corn.

"Want to tell me about Cartwheel?" Cooper asked quietly.

Venus Rio Brazos shot him a chili-

pepper glare. "Oh, you know this?"

Cooper nodded. "Where's the Maltese Longhorn Steer, Miss Brazos?"

Her face became troubled; she bit her lip worriedly, deliberately for a moment, then said, "*Senor*, I have always liked you and I know you like me. Maybe we can work what you call a deal, no?"

Watching the buoyancy of her breasts, Cooper began to sweat. "I got no proof you killed him," he said. "Just his word. Still, the law's the law. Yet, on the other hand, if I was to recover the Maltese Longhorn Steer, Miss Brazos, we could get you a good lawyer and —"

"Enough!" she interrupted. "I will tell you, sheriff. It is this simple: I knew that Cantrell had the Steer and I persuaded Cartwheel to kill him and take it by promising to go away with him. Then I shot him. Why? Simply because your deputy, Fester, and I planned it that way. For a long time we have courted in secret. When Fester found that Cantrell had the Maltese Longhorn Steer, he worked the plan out so we could have it for ourselves, go away together — rich. I gladly agreed. It was for love, sheriff. And now, do you wonder about my confession?"

Cooper, blank-faced, heart heavy, nodded.

Venus Rio Brazos smiled. "It is because I have taken a small derringer from my skirt hem while you were concentrating on my lovelies, sheriff. It is now concealed in my palm ready for action, so to speak. *Comprendo?*"

Cooper's mouth tightened. No, he thought, he didn't comprehend at all,

never would. How, he asked himself, could a girl like the one standing before him prefer a frivolous, unheroic, comedy-relief sidekick like Fester to himself? It made no sense. With injured pride and irritation careening through him, he did what he must.

As in the movies, it was a cinch. Looking intently past Venus Rio Brazos, he drawled, "Well, I guess you two win this hand, Fester." Then, as she glanced behind her, he slapped the derringer to the floor.

Five minutes later she was in a cell, yelling like a Delgan dervish and banging her spike-heels on the steel bars.

On his desk Cooper found a note from Fester that told, in his graceless scrawl, that he had gone out of town to check on a prospector's claim that his pre-fab shack had been dismantled by maverick reservation Indians of Chief Small Coke's tribe and sold to a passing real-estate agent. The note added that Fester would not be back until around ten.

Cooper assayed his time-piece. It was six-thirty, too late to catch *Shane*, but just time enough to make the first feature at the Trough. Feeling that he deserved some entertainment, he locked up the office, walked up Front Street to the box-office, and bought his ticket.

Inside, he pivoted back in the foam-eez saddle seat just as the credits flashed on the screen.

The two films — *Unknown Quantities Seize Fort Kearny* and *Belle Starr Meets the Things From Procyon* — were both enjoyable, if slight-

ly bland, and Cooper sat through them in relaxed quietude. When, three hours later, the curtain was finally lowered as Belle Starr headed her big dun gelding toward a roseate sunset, he got slowly to his feet and shuffled out of the theater with the other creatures.

Halfway to the office he saw Fester emerge from the livery stable at the other end of the block. The thin Melban panda, seeing him at the same moment, waved a forepaw in recognition; and they walked toward each other, meeting at the wooden porch.

They went inside, Cooper leaving the door open to cool the stuffy office. Without preamble, he said, "Fester, I know about the Maltese Longhorn Steer."

"Sure," Fester said. "We finally got it. It's in the desk."

Cooper cocked an eyebrow. *We?*"

"I told you that dance hall chick was sweet on me, man. She digs my fur. Never had a pet. It was no problem having her cop the thing for me. I sweet-talked her, dad. Now we can buy the biggest spread on this orb, swing in fashion."

"Are you trying to implicate *me?*" Cooper shouted, eyes flaring.

Fester blinked at him, stroking his furry chin. His voice came stiffly. "Why not, daddy, you planned the squip. You knew Cantrell had the Steer and you put me to copping it with a promise of half the split. Now, what's this clown talk?"

Cooper shook his head violently, but a shade of doubt crossed his face. "Do you think I could *forget* such a thing?"

"Repress is the word," came a voice from the doorway.

Cooper and Fester both turned to see Doc Addams regarding them, balefully. He stepped into the office and turned to Cooper with a professional expression.

"I overheard the whole thing, Matt. Ever since last week, observation of your behavior led me to suspect you were repressing something of this sort. As my Viennese professor would have — "

"Enough!" Cooper cried. Woodenly, he slouched down behind the desk, stared thoughtfully at his hands for several seconds, then stood again.

"I want to make a statement," he said. "I think I can explain. You see, as a kid, going to western movies, I always had a tendency to do something my friends never did — to identify with the bad guys *as well as* the good. There was a nice maverick quality about such baddies as Barton MacClane that never came through in the Audie Murphys. What this tendency of mine did, I figure, was to set up a subconscious outlaw versus lawman conflict in me. I — I can see that now. Doc was right. I remember everything now. The outlaw element in me took control and planned the theft, then the lawman repressed it. . . ." He paused, then smiled unexpectedly. "But I'm in control now. The *sensible* element has the reins, and it's the one I'm sticking with — the *outlaw* element, that is. You'll both note that, as I've been jawing, I've unholstered my .45. Now, Fester, if you'll be kind enough to open the desk drawer and fetch me

the Steer, I'll be on my way. . . .”

But a strange thing happened. As Fester was sliding open the drawer, an unfamiliar masked man darted suddenly into the office moving so swiftly he seemed to have materialized from empty air. In a blur of motion the stranger flew at both Cooper and Fester, pistoning out chin and body blows with awesome accuracy; and even as the sheriff and his deputy toppled, he was whisking them back to a vacant cell where, like cordwood, he stacked their insensate forms on the single cot; then, as Doc Addams stared, the lone figure dashed back out of the office, leaving him standing there, alone and dazed, holding a small white card that had been thrust into one hand.

Scratching his jaw with the card, Doc Addams murmured to himself, “I wonder who that masked man was.” He looked at the card.

J. Bond
Folk Hero &
Public Servant

“Never heard of him,” mused Doc Addams. “Must be an Easterner.”

He stood for a long while without moving. Then, taking a deep breath, he tiptoed to the desk, opened the drawer and looked inside. The Maltese Longhorn Steer was there.

He closed the drawer and, face reddening, began to nonchalantly whistle *The Entity Waltz*. Halfway through the tune he broke off suddenly, opened the drawer again and took out the Steer.

He left without saying good-by to his friends. **END**

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ROGUE STAR

by FREDERIK POHL & JACK WILLIAMSON

Illustrated by

Quam

The rogue star was mightier than any living creature — but its enemy was a constellation of gigantic suns!

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the great monolithic universe of joined stars and men, ANDREAS QUAMODIAN, Monitor of the Companions of the Star, receives a message from the girl he loves and has given up hope of winning. Back

on ancient, backwater Earth, MOLLY ZALDIVAR tells him that their mutual friend, and the man to whom Andy Quam believes he has lost her, CLIFF HAWK, is engaged in secret and dangerous experiments. She be-

lieves Hawk is trying to create an artificial living organism, a "Rogue Star," which unlike the sentient and generally benign stellar bodies that make up most of the universe's primary stars will use its enormous powers for disruption and destruction.

Quam hastens to join her. He manages through the transflection network which links worlds galaxies apart, making instantaneous travel possible between Earth and any other planet in civilization. He travels millions of parsecs in less time than it takes to cross a room. But on Earth his progress comes to a halt.

It is Starday. On backward Earth, where the symbiosis among men, jursorians and stars has taken the form of a ritualistic religion, this means nothing can be done. He cannot go to her. He cannot reach her by communicator. He cannot secure a guide. He can only wait.

But Molly Zaldivar hasn't waited. Alone she has gone to the cavern in the mountains where Hawk and his partner, THE REEFER, a mysterious man from space, are conducting their experiments.

As she approaches the cave, she is terrified to see a SLEETH, a space creature the size of a horse, capable of traveling at enormous speeds by transflection methods, deadly as an interstellar space-destroyer, guarding the entrance. An explosion knocks her out and drives the sleeth away; Cliff Hawk and the Reefer find her and bring her into the cave.

Meanwhile Andy Quam has found some boys who tell him something of what has been happening with Molly

Zaldivar. Unable to control his patience, Quam storms into a Starday meeting and demands that the monitor, a robot, help him. The robot refuses at first. But then, when three bolts of energy from the sun lash down and strike at the mountains where the cave is located, the robot relents and agrees to take Quam there.

It is almost too late. The danger Molly Zaldivar warned about has come to pass. The experiment has succeeded; a Rogue Star has been created . . . and it is now beyond human control.

Andy Quam and the robot go to the cave and find Molly and the Reefer injured but still alive. Cliff Hawk is dead. Worse, the rogue has absorbed Hawk's personality into itself—and it does the same thing with the sleeth, the robot and many smaller beings. It is growing both in power and in knowledge with every moment.

But its growth is perverted and complicated. With the incorporation of what remains of Cliff Hawk into its own individuality, the rogue has acquired some of Hawk's traits—human traits, incredibly out of place in a creature composed of a plasma of stripped electrons, brother to stars. It even finds itself drawn to Molly Zaldivar in a simulacrum of an emotion like love. It sends out its tool, the sleeth, to bring her back to its cave. Andy Quam tries to rescue her but fails; his flyer is brought down by the energies of the sleeth; his half-ally, the Reefer, is carried off by the rogue's tools.

Meanwhile the rogue tells Molly

of its love. Terrified and repelled, the girl calls it a monster — pathetically tries to trick it by pretending to return its love — but is discovered. The rogue learns another emotion: anger. It threatens to destroy Molly Zaldivar; she warns it that more powerful forces in the universe, like the sentient star, Almalik, will prevent it.

And the rogue determines to destroy Almalik and all the brotherhood of stars.

XV

Andy Quam landed his flyer before the control dome of the transflex cube and grated, "Control dome! Connect me direct with Headquarters of the Companions of the Star, Almalik three!"

"Your authorization, sir?" the control dome inquired politely.

"Fully authorized! Highest priority!"

"One moment, sir," the control dome said doubtfully. But it did not refuse him. In a moment it said, "I am seeking your circuits, sir. There is a 200-second delay now estimated; will you wait?"

"You bet I'll wait," growled Andy Quam, and sank back in his seat. He ached. Battling rogue stars and strange beings and men from space was not the kind of life he was used to, he thought dourly. But if it was what he had to do to save Molly Zaldivar, he would get used to it!

A small figure appeared at the corner of the square, running hard toward him. Tiny spurts of dust flowered at his heels, and he was panting as he reached the flyer.

"Preacher!" Rufe gasped. "What happened? How's Molly Zaldivar?"

"She's still in the cave," said Quamodian shortly. "I think. Anyway, I never saw her."

"Then what — what are you going to do?"

"Wait." But they didn't have to wait long. The speaker clicked and hummed, and a sweet non-human voice sang:

"Companions of the Star, Chief Warden of Monitors speaking. How may I serve you?"

"You can serve me best," said Andy Quam belligerently, "by getting an emergency survey team out here on the double! This is Monitor Andreas Quamodian speaking. I request — no, cancel that. I demand immediate action!"

The sweet high voice sang sorrowfully, "Ah, Monitor Quamodian. We have been advised of your statements and actions."

"Ha!" barked Andy Quam. "Of course you have! You've been told of my report that a created intellect in the form of a rogue star is loose here; that I have requested authority to use force against it; that I have stated that certain humans and non-human intellects have been damaged, destroyed or threatened by it. And you've ignored what I said."

"Unfortunately, Monitor Quamodian, we have seen no reason to accept this report."

"You think I'm wrong, eh?"

"Not 'wrong,' Monitor Quamodian. It is merely that we do not assess the same quantitative need for action."

"I see," snapped Andy Quam.

"Then look at it this way. I report that a Monitor of the Companions of the Star is suffering paranoid delusions; that he believes himself and his friends attacked by monsters; that in his insanity he is capable of wildly destructive acts of violence; and that this will inevitably reflect great discredit to all Monitors. What quantitative assessment do you give *that!*?"

"Why — why, Monitor Quamodian, that's frightful! We'll send a survey team at once. Who is this deranged monitor?"

"Me!" snapped Andy Quam, and severed the connection.

They left the flyer grumbling to itself in the middle of the square before the transflex gate. "—stupid thing to do," it was saying resentfully. "They'll take you off the roll of Monitors sure. Then what will become of me? Some menial job ferrying tourists —"

The boy's house was only minutes away, and there Andy Quam showered, ate, drank thirstily of the cold, rich milk the kitchen machines produced for him and braced himself for the arrival of the emergency survey team. "How long, preacher? How long before they get here?"

Quamodian considered. "Twenty minutes to think things over. Half an hour to assemble a team. Ten minutes to get their transflex priorities approved — a few seconds to travel. I'd call it an hour."

"Geel! Why, that's only twenty minutes from now. Just think, in twenty minutes I'll be seeing all those crazy three-headed beings, and green-shelled beetles, and —"

"We do not comment on the physical peculiarities of any citizen," Andy Quam said firmly. "Didn't your parents teach you that?"

"Well, yes," the boy admitted.

"Come to think of it," Quamodian went on, "where are your parents? Aren't they ever home?"

The boy shuffled his feet. "Sure, preacher. They're just, uh, busy."

"Rufe!"

"Yes, preacher?" His face was angelically innocent.

"Rufe, let's cut out the nonsense. You're hiding something. I can't imagine what, or why — but let's have it!"

"Aw, preacher. It's nothing. It's —" He looked up at Andreas Quamodian anxiously. Quamodian gazed implacably back. "Well," said the boy, "it's just that they were acting a little funny. They've gone off in a flyer to Nuevo York."

"Nuevo York! Why, that's two thousand miles away!"

"A little more, preacher. Figured it'd take them a day or two each way."

"Why?"

"Well, that's the part that's kind of funny. I mean — gee, preacher, there's nothing wrong with my parents! They're not crazy or anything. They just, well, said the same kind of thing you were saying. About some sort of rogue intellect loose on the earth, and the robot inspector here wouldn't listen to them and they didn't have the right of direct contact with Almalik, like you. So they figured they'd better report it to Nuevo York, where people might be more interested."

Quamodian sat up alertly. "You're still hiding something," he accused. "Why would you be ashamed of their knowing about the rogue star? It's true, you know."

"Sure, preacher. Only —"

"Only what?"

The boy flushed. "It's just that they were talking about it two days ago. That's when they left."

Quam said, "But that can't be! The rogue star wasn't even created then! . . . Oh, I see."

The boy nodded unhappily. "That's the part that's got me a little mixed up, preacher. They thought there was one when there *wasn't*."

They were back at the transflex cube with minutes to spare, but the emergency survey team was early. Evidently they had wasted no time. The control dome cried, through Quamodian's flyer radio: "Stand back! Keep the area clear for a party from Almalik Three, now arriving!"

"Gosh," whispered Rufe. His eyes were round as Saturn's rings, his worries about his parents temporarily out of his mind. "Where are they, preacher? Shouldn't they be coming through? What's keeping them? — *Oh.*"

A dozen grass-green spiral beings, like tiny coils of springs, emerged from the cube. They were twisting in orbit around each other, approaching the man and the boy with a whistle of high-frequency sound. "What in tarnation is that, preacher?" he asked.

"It is not courteous to stare. I don't recognize the species; a multiple citizen of some kind —"

"And that! And — oh, gosh, look at that one!"

"All citizens, I'm sure." But even Quamodian drew his breath sharply, as from behind a foamy, almost translucent bubble of pink there appeared the shark's fangs and slitted eyes of a citizen of clearly carnivorous ancestry. The rest of the citizen was no improvement; it loped on enormously powerful clawed legs like a kangaroo's, possessed two pairs of upper limbs that seemed boneless and lithe as an elephant's trunk, terminated in vivid blue manipulating organs that were almost the duplicate of a star-nosed mole.

But the fourth member of the team, and the one who advanced on Andy Quam, was human enough. In fact, she was lovely.

"Monitor Quamodian?" she demanded. "I am Clothilde Kwai Kwich, temporarily assigned to clean up the mess here on Earth and thus your acting supervisor. What the devil have you idiots been up to?"

Andy Quam swallowed hard. He wiped the palm of his hand on his tunic and extended it to her for shaking. "I — I'm delighted to meet you, Miss —"

"Kwai Kwich," she said, clearly and emphatically. "*Monitor* Kwai Kwich. Please speak briefly and responsively, when it is necessary for you to speak at all. These other citizens and I have little time to waste, and we wish to use it effectively. I suppose our best first move is to make an on-site investigation of the locus of the alleged events which you have tricked us into coming here to investigate."

"Certainly," said Andy Quam feebly, dropping his unshaken hand. "Of course. That's why I was hoping —"

"My associates can of course provide their own transport but, as you see, I am myself human. I assume you have some sort of vehicle?"

"Oh, yes. This one right here."

"Then shall we go?" And Monitor Kwai Kwich brushed past him without a word to enter the waiting flyer.

Dazed, Andy Quam turned to follow, but the boy caught his sleeve. "Say, preacher!" he hissed furiously. "What the dickens is the matter with you?"

Quam stared at him blankly. After a moment he shook his head and followed the girl into the flyer. He didn't know what to say. It was just that he was astonished at his temporary supervisor's appearance.

She wore the garb of an urbane, sophisticated citydweller, her face made up almost past the point of visible humanity, her hair impeccably coiffed. But change her clothes and makeup, Andy Quam thought — put a simple dress on her instead of the mirror-bright tights, the fluffed bodice and shoulders, the diamond of bare skin at the back; scrub her face of the two-inch angled eyebrows and bright blue eyeshadow and rouge — and Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich would become a dead ringer for Molly Zaldivar.

XVI

The rogue was much larger now, and wiser, and stronger.

It did not seem much different in

the despairing eyes of Molly Zaldivar, for at best it was only a cloud of stripped surging electrons, a controlled violence of particles that would have been her death if the rogue's own energies had not kept its components bound to its central mass. But it had fed and grown. It had assimilated neural reactions from Cliff Hawk, the robot, the sleeth, the hundred living creatures larger than **microorganisms** that it had absorbed into itself. It was by no means finished with either growing or learning. Perhaps it could be called adolescent. Almost mature in size and strength and intelligence. Far from mature in its understanding of itself.

Molly made no sound as the radiant whirl summoned the sleeth to it, and entered into the black terrifying shape of the predator from space. The sleeth dropped down upon her and caught her, coldly but harmlessly, in its razored talons, now sheathed in slick, cold chitin. It rose with her through the center of the globe, flew through the cold core of that edgeless opal glow and on and out, tracing the endless passageways to the surface.

Molly did not stir. She was past fear and worry; she was not resigned, but she was passive.

She would not have struggled even if she had known how close to death that murderous opal glow had brought her. But she really did not know.

She did not respond even in the hues of emotion by which the rogue interpreted her mental state. No green blaze of hate, no blues or violets of fear. No spark of love; emo-

tion had left her, leaving her dark, and empty, and merely waiting.

Bearing Molly Zaldivar in the bubble of atmosphere trapped in the sleeth's transflection fields, the rogue left the round Earth.

Tardily they dawdled through the "thick" gases that were the solar atmosphere—so tenuous at one A.U. that human instruments could barely record them, and human bodies would have burst and foamed; but still too thick for the sorts of speed that the sleeth, commanded and driven by the starlike energies of the rogue, could develop. But even so, in minutes they were past gassy Jupiter and Saturn; the void was more nearly empty now, and the rogue drove the sleeth more fiercely.

So fiercely that time seemed to stop.

These were not physical energies that the rogue commanded now; they were the transflection fields of the sleeth and itself. They leaped through empty spaces, through folded light and darkness, through bitter cold and twisting force and giddy deeps of vastness, leaped to the golden suns of Almalik

And were there.

A thin sighing shout whispered passionately in the ears of Molly Zaldivar:

"Observe!" it shrieked, almost soundlessly. "I have begun to destroy Almalik!"

"You cannot," she said bleakly.

"Observe!" it shrieked again, and subsided. It was the molecules of atmosphere itself that the rogue was shaking now, to make sounds that the

girl could hear; it could produce little volume, but in the girl's tiny bubble of air, gazing at the twelve bright but distant stars and one nearby, blinding sun that was Almalik, in the middle of the awful soundlessness of interstellar space, there was no other sound loud enough to drown it out, nothing but her own heart and breath and the faint mindless singing of the sleeth.

"I begin!" whispered the tiny scream, and like a hawk swooping its prey the rogue drove them toward the nearest planet.

It was a small world, less than Pluto and farther from its primary; the horizon was queerly rounded, the surface mottled with creeping blobs of liquid gas.

With a power summoned from its infinite reserves, the rogue seized it, entered it—became it. It grew once more. It fed quickly and avidly, seized new atoms, sucked electrons into the spreading patterns of its being, took new energies from frozen stone. It reached out to survey the space around itself, found ions, gas molecules, a hurtling moonlet—and farther off, a small metal mass inhabited by organic masses of organized matter. The rogue did not know it was a spaceship, did not care.

It drew the spaceship and the sleeth at once to itself. The ship crashed bruisingly on the surface of the tiny world. With the sleeth it was far more gentle, but not gentle enough. The creature struck against a spire of frozen hydrates, screamed soundlessly and went limp. And as it lost control, with it went the bubble of air it carried in its transflection

fields, and Molly Zaldivar lay open to the murderous empty cold of space.

For many nanoseconds the rogue considered what it had done. As best it knew how to do so, it felt alarmed.

At length it seized upon a buried shelf of rock beneath the frozen gases and shook it to make words. "Molly Zaldivar!" rumbled the planet. "What is happening to you?"

The girl did not answer. She lay cradled in a bed of the planet's — of the rogue's own, now — crystal snow, beside the crumpled black body of the sleeth. She did not breathe; there was no longer any air for her to breathe. Dark blood frothed and froze on her face.

"Molly Zaldivar!" groaned the rock of the planet's crust. "Answer!"

But there was no answer.

The rogue tested its powers, felt its new magnitude. Now it was a planet, its coat of frozen gas a skin, its cragged granite mountains bones, its deep pools of cooling magma a heart of sorts. The rogue was not used to so large a body. It regretted (insofar as it understood regret) that its body was unkind to Molly Zaldivar, too airless, too cruelly cold.

From the wreckage of the spaceship, organized masses of organic matter were exiting, clad in metallic artificial skins. The rogue did not recognize that they were citizens and might be of help to Molly Zaldivar; it reached out a thoughtless effector and slew them. And then it again practiced the sensation it experienced as regret; for it realized that they

had owned supplies of water and air, warmth and pressure that could have been used for Molly Zaldivar.

No matter. The rogue was now the planet and could dispose of the planet's resources. It would not let her die.

It shielded her from the cold, warmed the frozen gas around her and cupped it in a sphere of transfection forces. With bits of matter taken from the creatures it had destroyed it healed the damage to her lungs. It warmed her stiffened body, helped her breathe again, found the spark of life in her

And the girl stirred and spoke.

"What are you doing, monster?" she moaned.

"I am saving your life, Molly Zaldivar," rumbled the rocks. "I am destroying Almalik!"

"You cannot, monster," sobbed the girl.

"Observe!"

The rogue's transfection field was vaster now, spreading to hold all its continents of dark and ancient rock, its seas of snow, all its great mass.

With all its might, the rogue prepared to strike at Almalik.

It halted the planet in its orbit and turned inward, toward that white and splendid single sun, the brightest star of Almalik.

And in its hate for Almalik it drove inward, toward collision with the star.

The sleeth was cruelly hurt; but the creature that had been bred to kill pyropods in space was not easily killed. It stirred. The great empty eyes gazed into space, then

bent to look into the eyes of Molly Zaldivar. Ripples of muscles pulsed under the dark, hard flesh. Its transfection fields grew again; it lifted lightly from the frozen gas on which it lay, and its high singing sound grew in volume. The sleeth was not an intelligent creature as Man is intelligent, or the other citizens of the galaxies; but it had awareness. It recognized that something had owned it for a time; it felt that the something was gone, now that the rogue had retreated to explore its new planetary body. It remembered Molly Zaldivar

And when the rogue next turned its attention to the girl she was gone.

The rogue was quick to search for her, and find her. She was in flight.

Mounted on the sleek black shoulders of the sleeth, veiled in its transfection fields, she was climbing away from the rogue planet's frigid skin of snow, flying toward the inner planets of that great white star toward which the planet was plunging.

The rogue thrust out a darting arm of plasma, of its own electrons meshed in transcience forces. It reached to overtake her, pierced effortlessly the sleeth's transfection shield, shook her small sphere of air with an effector.

"Where are you going, Molly Zaldivar?" the air screamed shrilly in her ear.

She turned her head to look at the rogue's shining plasma finger, but she did not answer. The rogue paused, considering. There was strangeness here. Strange that to the rogue she seemed so very lovely. The redder suns of Almalik struck red fire from

her hair; the blue suns burned violet in her eyes. But why should these things matter? the rogue asked itself. Interested and curious. Why should the remembered and absorbed thought-patterns of the organized matter called Cliff Hawk exert so powerful an influence on it still? The rogue made the air shriek in a piercing whisper again: "I love you, Molly Zaldivar. Once I was tinier than you, so small you could not see me; now I am so huge you are no more than a fleck of dust. We have never been akin, and I see no bridge for love between us . . . but I love you!"

"You're insane, monster," she said at last. But her eyes were gentle.

The rogue pondered. "Where are you going?" it demanded again.

"I am flying to the inhabited planets of Almalik. On Kaymak they will deal with you — once I warn them."

"Do you hate me, Molly Zaldivar?"

The girl frowned at its bright sensor and shook her head. "You can't help what you are."

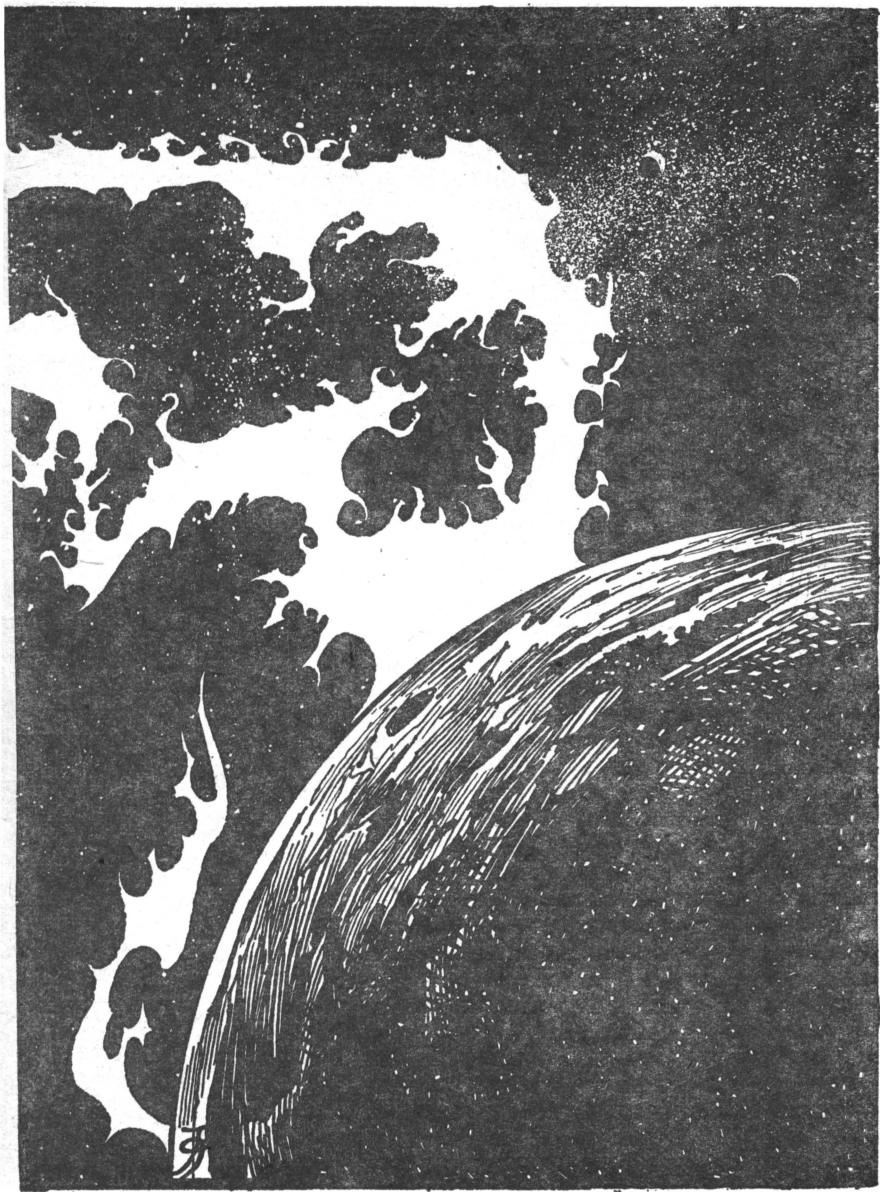
The rogue scanned all her matter for the cold green blaze of fury; it was absent. Eagerly it asked: "Then do you love me now?"

Her face crinkled oddly about the eyes, the skin tawny gold beneath Almalik's far suns. "How could I? I am human — you a monster!" And her violet eyes were damp as they peered at the rogue's shining sensor.

"I love you"

"Insane!" sobbed the girl. And then, "Perhaps I pity you, because you are so sadly deformed, because all your power is thrown away." She shook her head vigorously, the color-





ed lights of Almalik dancing in her hair. "I'm only sorry for you!"

She paused, and said: "If I am in love, I think it must be with little Andy Quam. Monster, I will go back to him. Once I get to the inhabited planets and give my warning — and you are destroyed — I will go to him through a transflex station. But I pity you, monster."

"I will not be destroyed."

"You will be destroyed — unless you kill me first, and keep me from warning the inhabited worlds."

The rogue thought for microseconds. Then at last it shook the air again. "I will not destroy you," the air shrieked. "But I will not be destroyed. Observe! I will kill Almalik before you can warn anyone!"

And it withdrew its plasma arm, as the girl stared wonderingly after.

The rogue flexed its energies, and prepared for the assault.

It tightened the transflection fields that held and moved its planetary mass. The agonized rock of its mantle screamed and grated as it flattened its bare black peaks, compressed its deserts of snow, squeezing itself into a denser projectile. It drove itself toward the blazing sun.

I will die, thought the rogue. *So will Almalik.*

Tardily, almost carelessly, the congeries of massed beings that made up the total of Almalik took note of the intruder and lifted a careless effector to defend itself.

It was not the white star ahead of the rogue that resisted. That sun lay steadily glowing, ignoring the threat. But from a mighty double sun above

it, a golden giant and its immense blue companion, spinning close together, a bolt was launched.

The bolt sprang from the inner plasmas of the golden star, and its energies were huge. An enormous leaping snake, thicker than the rogue's own snow-encrusted planetary body, blazed bright as the star itself. It flashed with transflection speed across the void, faster than the rogue could move to evade it.

But it bypassed the rogue, and struck toward Molly Zaldivar.

Even at the planetary distances that already separated them, the rogue could see the red flash of terror through her being as she saw that darting coil of golden fire. *Help me, monster!* she cried; the rogue could hear no words, but the message was clear, and it responded.

It hurled out an arm of its own ions and their linking transcience energies, coiling it into a plasma shield around the girl and the sleeth. But it was not strong enough. The golden arm of Almalik was stronger; it burst through the shielding plasma wall, coiled a net of golden fire around Molly and the sleeth and snatched them away toward that double sun.

The rogue could not help her. But an emotion that it could not identify as savage joy filled all its patterned mass. *She called me. She asked my help. If I cannot help her, I still can destroy this near white star of Almalik!*

The rogue paused, testing itself, preparing itself to dispose of energies greater than even it had yet employed. It was not strong enough,

it calculated coldly. Not yet. It needed to be stronger.

The planet was cold, but at its core it was not yet dead; crushed gelid masses of iron and heavier metals still seethed, not yet congealed into solids, not yet exhausted of radioactivity and heat. From them the rogue devoured energy and strength. Controlled lightnings flashed along its plasma paths. The planetary mass of its body was now no more than a slinger's pebble to it; a weapon, a missile, a way of killing Almalik.

The rogue intensified its driving field until its crushed mountain ranges smoked, and the deserts of snow thawed and bubbled into boiling seas. The deep core shuddered with earthquake shocks; arcs and auroras raged through its reborn air.

The rogue plunged on to shatter the enemy star.

But Almalik was not unprepared.

From the binary sun above, the golden spear of plasma stabbed at the rogue again. It pierced all the shielding fields, burned through its steaming seas, exploded its crust and jarred its heart with seismic waves. The rogue coldly calculated its damage. *Much. Not too much. I still can kill Almalik!*

The plasma snake recoiled to strike again, again, pocking all the rogue's surface with enormous glowing craters, shattering its being with waves of destruction that the rogue felt as searing pain.

But the rogue would not let itself be destroyed.

It drew on its last immense reserves to increase the power of its transflection shields, holding all the

atoms of its shattered planetary mass in a remorseless, destroying grip. Daring — and learning — it even reached out to suck new energies from the plasma snake itself.

Molly Zaldivar and the sleeth were gone now, lost even to the rogue's far-ranging perceptions as the plasma coil drew them back toward some distant planet's surface. Every bit of matter of more than molecular dimensions for many A.U.s around was gone, drawn into the rogue itself or volatilized by the seething energies employed.

But the rogue was not destroyed. It plunged on to strike the unresisting white sun.

XVII

“Monitor Quamodian,” said the flyer chattily, “you're not going to hear much with your bare ears. They're talking about you.”

Quam glanced at Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich, who was inspecting the fittings of the flyer with distaste and apparently whispering to herself. “I don't know if I want to hear,” he muttered.

The girl said aloud, without looking at him, “What you want makes little difference, Monitor Quamodian. There will no doubt be times when the other citizens will have inquiries to direct to you, or instructions. I do not wish to be distracted by relaying messages, therefore equip yourself with proper hearing facilities.”

Andy Quam grumbled, but accepted the tiny earpiece the flyer offered him on an effector. “— flimsy old

wreck," piped a shrill voice in his ear as he put it on. "We will follow, but kindly move as rapidly as you can." The voice had an odd humming, almost echoing quality, as though a well trained chorus were speaking in almost perfect unison. Quamodian guessed it was the multiple citizen of green spirals.

He disregarded them, quickly inspected his flyer. Its homeostatic devices had repaired the damage, restored the rack of flares. Not that they would be needed, he hoped. Or would be of any use if they were. But they were better than nothing.

"We're all set," he announced. "I guess."

Monitor Kwai Kwich said, with offensive patience: "Then can we not begin?"

Quamodian hunched grimly over the controls and ordered the flyer into the air. The sun was in his eyes as they spun and rose. Nearly doubled in diameter, its red disk was now so dull that his naked eyes could watch it without discomfort. Dark splotches marred it. He thought of saying something to the girl, but decided against it — although she, coming from Kaymak, might not realize there was anything odd about its appearance. Let her find out, he thought. It didn't matter anyway. All that mattered was that he now had help — a kind of help — against the rogue.

They arrowed south across the narrow lake and the first dark foothills, the multiple green citizen and the pinkly glowing cloud following effortlessly behind. The predator citizen with the enormous fangs lolled

silently on the padded seats behind Andy Quam and the girl, while Rufe sat on the floor beneath it, looking apprehensively at its teeth. There was a continuing buzz of conversation on the transience bands coming through his earpiece, but Quamodian disregarded it. He was not interested in their opinions of his flyer, himself or the planet that had spawned humanity. All he wanted from them was their help.

It was dark as they reached the hill that held the cave; the sun was still some distance above the horizon, but its dulled rays gave only a looming twilight in the sky, very little on the ground about the cavemouth. He circled the dark mouth of the cave, searching for the sleeth or any hostile thing. There was nothing. All the landscape held that ominous tinge of red, but nothing moved on it.

Flying warily he approached the rubble of the demolished door.

"Deserted," sang the tiny chorus of the grass-green spirals. "We detect nothing. Another entrance exists lower down."

Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich glanced hesitantly at Andy Quam. "There is a good deal of destruction here," she admitted.

"I told you!"

"Yes. Perhaps there has been an error."

"Lower down!" chanted the spirals. "Other indications! Worth investigating!" And the soft whisper of the cottony-pink cloud citizen sighed:

"Forces have been deployed in the lower area of considerable magni-

tude. Forces still exist in being of unusual characteristics."

Monitor Kwai Kwich said, almost apologetically, "We should investigate."

"Right," rasped Quamodian, and sent the flyer spinning down around the mountain, searching for the lower entrance. The pink cloud citizen was there before him, hovering like a puff of steam at the spout of a kettle before the tunnel mouth.

"You lead," it sighed. "Dispersed matter like myself may be vulnerable."

But Quamodian had not waited for permission. He thrust the flyer into the tight throat of the tunnel, probing with its searchlights for the sleeth, for Molly Zaldivar, for any trace. All he found was the tightening spiral passage itself, lined with evidences of destruction. "Forces of great magnitude," chanted the spirals, whirling about a burst wall, a ripped stanchion. "Evidence of transflection energies. Evidence of plasma activity."

Rufe, forgetting his fear of the long-toothed citizen behind him, stood leaning over Quamodian's shoulder. "Gee, preacher," he whispered, thrilled. "Look at that! Something really racked this place up!"

There was no doubt about that. Staring about as the flyer slid smoothly forward on its transflection fields, Quamodian saw that what had happened in this tiny enclosed space had involved more than merely chemical energies. For the first time he really understood what was meant by a "rogue star"; tiny though the creature had been, less than a gram in weight at first, it had commanded

forces capable of thrusting steel and rock out of its way like tissue.

The long-snouted predator citizen lifted its muzzle and howled a sentence; the translator in Quamodian's ear rendered it as: "Be careful! Monitor Kwai Kwich, should not we report to Almalik before going on!"

The girl bit her lip, was about to speak; but Quamodian overrode her. "No!" he rasped. "You waited too long already. Molly Zaldivar may be dying — may even be —" He did not finish the sentence.

Then they were at the center of the spiral. Quamodian glanced down, swallowed, looked at the girl . . . then tipped the flyer down into the central shaft.

Cautiously they dropped down the shaft, Quamodian's flyer first, the multiple grass-green citizen second, the pink cloud hovering timorously behind. Below them a misty, opalescent disk of pale light expanded slowly into a sphere, and they entered the great round chamber below the hill.

"Astonishing," breathed Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich.

The tardy cloud-citizen sighed fearfully: "The energies are considerable! I am reluctant to come closer."

"Stay, then," grunted Quamodian, staring about. "I wonder — What is it? Do you have any information?"

The girl shook her head. "Some ancient military installation, I suppose. Perhaps from the days of the Plan of Man. The records no longer exist for much of that period . . . But that fusion fire!" She pointed at

the cloud of opal mist that hung above the high steel platform. "What a source of energy! I almost believe that you are right, Monitor Quamodian. With power like that one might really attempt to create a star!"

Andy Quam chuckled sourly, but did not answer. Hands sweating on the flare controls, he dived to a foot or less above the water-stained floor of the sphere. The ripped and flattened orange-painted cab, the dismembered motor and tracks of the handling machine gave him an unpleasant start; something had thrown them about in rage, it seemed. And there were other fragments there among the torn and broken metal bits. A primitive white-painted food refrigerator? Quam did not recognize it at first, did not understand its purpose even then — but finally shook with the realization of what it meant: Molly Zaldivar had been here. The food could have been for no one but her.

But it too had been dropped or flung; the door was twisted ajar, small packets of food were sprinkled across the wreckage. And beyond them, what was that crushed black shape that lay athwart the grating that attempted to carry seepage away?

Clothilde Kwai Kwich recognized it first: "A robot inspector!" she gasped. "Then — then it's all true?"

Rufe said complainingly, "True? Gosh, Miss Kwai Kwich, what've we been telling you all along? Of course it's true!"

It was too late for Andy Quam to feel triumph. He hardly heard the exchange. Eyes narrowed, thoughtful, he was darting the flyer's beams

into every section of the vast sphere. There was nothing else to be seen. The wreckage on the floor, the spidery steel tower and its ominously glittering mist of fusion energy, the water-stained walls themselves. Nothing more.

Molly Zaldivar had been here, he was sure of that. But she was here no longer.

Where had she gone?

The nervous sigh of the cloud-citizen interrupted him. "These energies," it whispered despairingly, "they are ionizing my gases, interfering with my particulate control. I must return to the surface."

"Go ahead," said Quam absently.

"Perhaps we should do the same," bayed the predator in the back seat. "This is dangerous!"

"In a minute," said Andy Quam. He was observing, remembering, analyzing. Dispassionately he realized, with a small surface part of his brain, that from the moment Molly Zaldivar's message had reached him, galaxies away, he had been allowing his love and his emotions to drive him. His carefully trained reasoning faculties, the trait of analysis and synthesis which was so basic a part of his indoctrination as a monitor, had been ignored.

But now he was using them again, and a picture was unfolding under his eyes. Cliff Hawk, rebel, adventurer, skilled transcience expert. The Reefer, callous misogynist. The two of them together in this place, given these energies, the months and even years of time when they had been left unsupervised.

It was all quite logical, he noted abstractly. Hawk's scientific hunger; the Reefer's loathing for humanity and, above all, the fusorian brotherhood; the people, the place, the facilities. They had used them to create a rogue, and in return the rogue had thrust them aside, or killed them, or ignored them.

But it had not ignored Molly Zaldivar.

The rogue was no longer present; its energies would have been detected by any of the citizens in the party. It had gone. And wherever it had gone, Quamodian felt certain, there would be Molly Zaldivar as well.

The girl monitor said hesitantly, "Andy. I mean, Monitor Quamodian . . ."

"Eh? What is it?"

"Perhaps the other citizens are right. I—I don't like the look of this place."

Quamodian frowned. Then a fearsome suspicion crossed his mind. "Clothilde! What was it the cloud said?"

"You mean the cit—"

"Yes! About the energies!"

"Why, it said they were ionizing gases. It has returned to the open air."

"Flyer!" cried Andy Quam. "Analyze those radiations! Quickly!"

The flyer said sulkily, "Thought you'd never ask. Sustained lethality, eight times permissible levels. Safe period at this distance, one hour. We have now been exposed to them for nineteen minutes, and I was going to give an alert in sixty seconds."

"Get us out of here!" ordered Andy Quam. "Fast!"

The flyer bucked, spun, drove upward toward the tunnel. Quamodian stared out the viewplate. The glowing deadly sphere of light flashed past his field of vision, then the tight spiral of the tunnel walls; but he did not see them.

Andy Quam was seeing something quite different, and far worse.

The radiation from that glittering mist of nuclear fire that had flamed for ages in the spherical cave was deadly.

The flyer's instruments had measured its intensity. They were reliable. Quamodian had installed and checked them himself. If they said that the maximum safe dose was one hour, then there was no question, to a probable error of no more than a few minutes one way or another.

It was not Quamodian's own safety that concerned him, nor Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich's, nor the boy's.

How long had Molly Zaldivar been held prisoner in that cave, soaking in those deadly rays?

Quamodian's arithmetic could be little more than a guess. But it was eighteen hours or more since she had been stolen from the little bedroom of Rufe's house. It was not sensible to suppose that less than half of that time had been spent in the cave.

And if it was in fact true that she had been there that long, or anything close to that long, Molly Zaldivar was already as good as dead.

XVIII

They burst out into the cold night air. And even in his fear and

anguish Andy Quam stared incredulously at the sky.

Overhead lay a lacy net of blue and violet fire. Great pale slow lightnings of color writhed through the heavens, soundlessly and hugely; they were so bright that trees cast shadows on the rocky hillside, blurred shadows of color that moved with the supple shifting of the aurora.

The carnivorous citizen thrust its long muzzle forward, past Quamodian's cheek. He felt its hot, faintly fishy breath on his ear as it whined softly, "This spectacle does not appear usual. Can you explain it?"

Quamodian said simply, "I think our own sun has gone rogue."

"But that's impossible," cried the girl. "Sol is not an intellectic body! No trace of volition has ever been detected!"

Quamodian spread his hands, indicating the violence of the aurora. "Then you explain it," he said.

The distant chorus of the grass-green spirals chimed in, "We have recorded reflected intensity of stellar emissions. They have approximately doubled. Three conjectures: One, that this star is pre-nova; improbable. Two, that previous soundings to determine intellect in this star have been in error; improbable. Three, that it has acquired volition."

"You mean it's gone rogue?" the girl demanded. "What probability do you give that?"

"No assessment," chanted the spirals. "No known data for comparison."

"Report to Almalik!" ordered the girl. "You, citizen! You have transcience facilities!"

But the spirals replied, "Our signals from Almalik are disordered. We cannot comprehend their meaning. Nor can we receive acknowledgment of our own reports."

Quamodian had had enough. "Forget Almalik!" he ordered. "And never mind about the sun, either; we can worry about that later. Right now I'm worried about a girl. A human girl named Molly Zaldivar. Perhaps she is somewhere nearby, with or without the rogue intellect. Can any of you detect her?"

Silence.

"Try!" roared Andy Quam. Then, sulkily, the predator citizen lifted its muzzle.

"For some time now," it bayed softly, the transcience receptor in Quamodian's ears converting it into words he could understand, "I have registered the presence of quarry on that far hill."

"Quarry?"

"An ancestral trait," the citizen explained. "It is a particular refinement of chemosampling in ambient air. What you call the sense of smell. But — is not Monitor Kwai Kwich 'human girl' and are not you 'human male,' Monitor Quamodian?"

"Certainly! What about it?"

"Then this quarry cannot be what you seek. It is male. And it is severely injured."

They skimmed over the pitted road, dropped toward the hillside where the carnivore citizen had scented a man. Its sense of smell had not been in error.

The man was the Reefer, huddled against the trunk of a bent ever-

green tree. He looked gray and ill in the flickering colored lights of the aurora. One arm, badly swollen, was in a sling. He gazed up at the flyer apathetically as Quamodian jumped out.

"I want a word with you," Andy Quam shouted.

The Reefer growled hoarsely, "Make it short. I'm a sick man."

"Where is the rogue? Where is Molly Zaldivar?"

The Reefer shifted his weight awkwardly, flinching from the movement of his arm. "Gone. I don't know where."

"When?"

The Reefer shook his head wearily. Pale with pain, he pulled a short black stick from his pocket, gnawed the end off it and began chewing grimly. "A root that grows on the Reefs," he said, his voice almost inaudible. "Filthy to chew, I guess, but it eases pain. It has always been my personal substitute for Almalik.... When did the rogue go? I don't know. It dumped me here this afternoon. Couple hours ago something went on over there—" he gestured weakly at the hill that lay over the cave — "and I saw something bright in the sky."

"The aurora?" Quamodian demanded.

"No! That's been going on since dark. This was something else. I think...." His voice trailed off; he shook himself and finished: "I think the rogue is out in space. Maybe took the girl with him."

Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich interrupted. "Andy! This man is dying. I suggest we get him to a hospital."

The Reefer grinned painfully, worked his lips for a second, then jettied a stream of black liquid at a rock. "Good idea, miss," he said. "Only it's too late for the hospital. I'm going to the church."

"Gosh, preacher!" breathed Rufe, wide-eyed behind Andy Quam in the shifting auroral lights. "Never thought *he'd* say that!"

"Never would," rumbled the Reefer, "if I had the choice. Knew it was coming. Your robot inspector told me weeks ago. 'Malignant fusorian virus,' he said, and he acted like he was enjoying it—much as a robot can enjoy anything. And he said the Visitants could clear it up, but no doctor could. Expect he's right."

"So you're joining Almalik," said Andy Quam.

The Reefer shrugged bitterly and winced from his slung arm. "I've tamed my last sleeth. My free life's ended." A spasm of pain whitened his face beneath the scars and the dirty beard. "Don't think I like it, Quamodian! But half my body's on fire."

"Good!" cried Andy Quam. "That's fine! Now, if you want a ride to Wisdom Creek, you can start paying the fare!"

The boy gasped, and even Clothilde Kwai Kwich darted a sudden incredulous look at Quamodian. The Reefer licked his lips, staring at Quamodian. "What're you talking about? I'm too sick for jokes!"

"That's good, because I'm not joking. I'm going to leave you here to rot—unless you make it worth my while to take you in."

"How?"

"Easiest thing in the world," Quamodian said tightly. "Let's just start by telling me the truth about what you and Cliff Hawk were doing."

Under the many-hued gleam of the auroras the Reefer's eyes gleamed whitely, furiously. If he had had the transcience powers of the sleeth Andreas Quamodian would have been stunned or dead in that moment. There was madness in his look, and a rage that could destroy planets.

But it passed. The Reefer looked away. His jaws worked; he gulped, spat a thin black stream of the juice of his root and said:

"Why not? Makes no difference any more, does it? After all, the Visitants will soon be burrowing in my brain and exposing all my secrets for Almalik to know. Might as well tell you now as have you find out that way . . . but let me sit down in your flyer, Quamodian. I'm telling the truth about being sick."

Andy Quam opened the bubble for him, and painfully the huge man sank into the cushions. The autonomic circuits of the flyer compensated for his weight, and he sat bobbing slightly, looking down on them.

"Truth is," he said, "Cliff Hawk was only working for me. Insolent pup! I knew he thought he was pretty high and mighty, chasing after pure knowledge and all that stuff. But all I wanted was a cure for this virus. Ever since I picked it up on the Reefs, more'n twenty years ago, it's been sleeping there inside me. I didn't mean for it to kill me, Quamodian. But I didn't mean to take on the Visitants, either."

He soothed his splinted arm with rough, blunt fingers, staring up at the many-hued sky. "I did like some of the things the Visitants had to offer, of course. Physical immortality, just about. A cure for this fusorian poison. Power . . . The rogues were my way of getting those things, without letting those parasites into my body. Hawk was just my engineer."

"So you knew Cliff Hawk was creating a rogue?" Quamodian leaned forward to search the Reefer's lax and bloodless face.

"Two rogues, Quamodian. The first got away." He grinned with a spasm of pain. "Looks like the other one did too!"

"I see," whispered Andy Quam, staring up at the angry aurora. "The first one entered our sun. Now it's rogue too!"

The Reefer shrugged.

Clothilde Kwai Kwich cried: "Monitor Quamodian! This must be reported at once. Since our citizens are not in contact with Almalik, we must return immediately to Wisdom Creek and report via the transflex station there."

"It's been reported already," said Andy Quam.

"Impossible! How could it be? We just found out —"

"By Rufe's parents. They knew about it, didn't they?" The boy nodded, looking pleased and excited. "And they've gone to Nuevo York to pass the word along."

The Reefer scratched his ribs cautiously, winced and groaned: "So that's about it, right? Now how about taking me in to Wisdom Creek?"

"Not just yet," said Andy Quam,

deadly quiet. "One more question. What about Molly Zaldivar?"

"That witless little thing! She ruined Cliff Hawk. In love with her, he was; she tried to stop him and messed everything up."

He gasped and leaned forward, clutching his chest. "But I don't know where she is now, Quamodian," he moaned. "Please! Isn't that enough? Won't you take me in before this thing kills me?"

On the way in to Wisdom Creek Andy Quam used the flyer's circuits to contact the control dome for priorities. "Thirty-minute delay on all messages, Monitor Quamodian," said the dome. "I will inform you when your circuits can be cleared."

Grim-lipped, Andy Quam ordered the flyer to the Starchurch. Now that he knew what was wrong with the sun his responsibility was at an end. Almalik would cope with the problem — somehow — or Almalik would fail; Quamodian didn't care. At that moment the only thing on his mind was Molly Zaldivar, stolen into space by the rogue and doomed to early death by the lethal rays of the old power source in the cavern. As for the Reefer, Quamodian didn't care in the slightest whether he lived or died.

Yet there was a sort of grandeur in what happened at the Starchurch. They were greeted by the new robot inspector, his egg-shaped black body bobbing with excitement at the presence of so many illustrious visitors. Even though this was not a Starday, a circle of the saved were kneeling on that wide floor beneath the imaged

suns of Almalik, and Quamodian and Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich led the procession that brought the limping, sullen figure of the Reefer to the Visitants. Behind him the carnivorous citizen, the green-spiral citizen and the cloud brought up the rear.

The kneeling worshippers chanted their praises of Almalik. Then Juan Zaldivar stood up to ask the Reefer the statutory questions — if he understood the nature of symbiotic life; if he had chosen of his own free will to accept the fusorian symbiotes in his body, blood, brain and bone; if he understood that this choice was made forever.

To each question, the Reefer croaked, "I do."

He knelt, and the inhabited saved ones knelt with him, their golden brands glowing in the gloom. They chanted again, their voices rolling solemnly against the mighty dome that held the thirteen suns of Almalik.

The Reefer gasped a sudden protesting cry.

He rose half to his feet, turned with a sudden look of wild alarm, then pitched forward on his damaged arm.

Quamodian heard a sharp, hissing crackle. Fine golden sparks were dancing up from the glowing marks on the bodies and faces of the saved ones, floating delicately toward the prone body of the Reefer. They flew together, gathering into a tiny cloud of golden fire that hovered over him.

The yellow fireball sank hissing into his skin.

An arm of it darted around his body, touched his cheek, retreated to

rejoin the rest. The air was suddenly heavy with the sweet reek of the Visitants.

The Reefer's moans subsided.

Then the chanting ended. He stirred, opened his eyes, stood up easily and came to shake Andreas Quamodian's hand.

"Thanks, friend," his great voice boomed. A serene and gentle smile had fallen over his scarred, ferocious face. The star of the Visitants now glowed faintly above his ragged beard. "All my pain is gone."

Juan Zaldivar came to take his hand. "You are saved now. You'll feel no pain again," he said solemnly.

The control dome had been in touch with Almalik. But there were difficulties. Quamodian blazed: "What difficulties? I must communicate with Almalik at once — go there as soon as possible!"

"Regret," sang the control dome sweetly. "It is a matter of priorities."

"That's what I demand, emergency priority!"

"But Monitor Quamodian," sang the control dome, "when you arrived yesterday you stated the emergency was here."

"It was here. Now I have new facts! I expect a most serious danger to the suns of Almalik!"

Clothilde Kwai Kwich whispered, "Andy, may I speak to him? Perhaps he will listen —" But Quamodian froze her with a glare. She subsided without comment. She had become a softer, more feminine person since the visit to the cave, the discovery that Andy Quam's fears were not groundless.

"State these facts," the monitor rapped out melodiously.

"They are already available to Almalik," said Quamodian. "They exist in the mind of a man called the Reefer who has just received the Visitants. I wish to be on hand among the stars of Almalik, to assist with the interpretation and use of this new information."

He did not add his more urgent private reason; it would have been of no use, since it was not the sort of thing that would influence the control dome's transcience patterns. But he clung to a wild, despairing hope that Molly Zaldivar might appear with her captor, somewhere about the multiple suns of Almalik. If she did, Quamodian wanted to be there.

"Moment," sang the monitor dome. Andy Quam shifted uneasily in the seat of the flyer.

Clothilde Kwai Kwich frowned thoughtfully. "We have priorities," she stated, as if to no one.

"What about it?" Quam demanded.

"Nothing, Andy. Except that the rest of us can go to Almalik at once and plead your cause."

"Agree," chanted the chorus of the grass-green spirals. "Impatient. Urgent. Suggest no delay."

And the cloud citizen sighed, "There exist great forces deployed against Almalik. It is necessary to prepare immediately."

Quamodian said stubbornly, "Do what you like. I am going anyway."

Clothilde looked at him doubtfully, but said nothing. She was saved the need to, anyway; the control dome spoke in all their ears, through the

very little communicator plugs:

"Monitor Quamodian, your request is denied. Monitor Kwai Kwich, your priorities, and those of your party, are withdrawn. There can be no travel to that destination now."

The news struck them all with consternation. The green spirals whirled furiously in their interlocking orbits, their collective thoughts a babble of whispered fear and excitement, just below the threshold of comprehensibility for the others. The predator citizen whined mournfully and edged closer to the boy, Rufe, who stared wide-eyed at Andy Quam. The pinkly glowing cloud citizen whispered somber statements about the disasters that lay ahead, and Clothilde Kwai Kwich's hand crept out, unnoticed, to take the hand of Andy Quam.

"Why?" he demanded furiously. "We are monitors! We cannot be denied priority rights!"

"All priorities are withdrawn," said the control dome somberly. "Our headquarters report anomalous astronomical phenomena among the planets and multiple suns of Almalik. Robot inspector, please clarify."

Unnoticed the black egg-shaped form of the robot had drifted across the square toward them. Its oval sensor was cool and bright and blank. Its high voice hummed: "That is correct, Monitor Quamodian. The outer planet of Almalik Thirteen has suddenly stopped in its orbit. It is moving toward collision toward its primary at many times the normal acceleration of gravity."

Quamodian's eyes narrowed. In-

side his mind whirled with chaotic flashes of foreboding. Molly was there! He was certain of it now, and certain that he must get to her. "Not surprising!" he barked, surprising himself. "That is precisely what I hoped to prevent! I must get there at once to limit the damage, avoid it if I still can."

"Impossible, Monitor Quamodian," the robot whirred. "The collision of the anomalous planet with Almalik Thirteen is expected to occur within a few hours. All transflex facilities are in use for the evacuation of the threatened planets. Even so, they are inadequate. Only a fraction of the population can be saved. Under these circumstances, no incoming travel is permitted."

The girl gasped, next to Andy Quam in the seat of the flyer. The predator citizen lifted his snout and emitted a long, mourning howl.

Quamodian stammered, "But — but I must go there! To help! It is still possible to do something . . ."

The robot did not respond. Its bright black case hung motionless.

Rufe whispered fearfully, "Preacher, what's the matter? Is it dead?"

Quamodian shook his head, staring. The robot's plasma sensor flickered, darkened, went out. Three thick black effector whips slid out of its body shell and dangled limply below it, brushing the dusty pavement of the square.

"Robot inspector?" Quamodian called querulously. Beside him the girl whispered:

"There's something terribly wrong! It's out of communication entirely . . ."

But abruptly the effectors snapped back into the case. The sensor glowed again.

"We have received a further instruction from headquarters," it hummed. "The information states that a powerful rogue invader has destroyed the native intellects in two of the suns of Almalik. The invader has established its own transience patterns in these suns, and it is now attacking the planets of Almalik Thirteen."

Quamodian caught a sudden, rasping breath.

"Call Cygnus!" he demanded.

"Sacred Almalik, spokesman star of Cygnus, is calling here," the robot's high whine interrupted him. "Your transflex travel priority has been approved. You and your party may depart from the Wisdom Creek transflex station at once."

XIX

Light-years away, the rogue's consciousness grew and sharpened in the heat of a cosmic fury. The huge sentience of stripped electrons and plasma soliloquized to itself like a stellar Hamlet:

My seas boil dry . . . my magma bleeds from glowing wounds . . . my core itself is shattered by those savage plasma spears . . . still I hurl myself toward the great white sun ahead

The inner planets of the sun spread wider in their orbits as it approached. They began flashing backward past it; it was only hours now until they, and all the space about, would be dissolved in the blazing debris of the sun the rogue was about to destroy.

And still the sun did not resist.

Swelling vast ahead of the rogue, it lay serenely white, beautiful and quiet, undisturbed by the rogue's attack.

By now the rogue was ancient and mature, in its own terms at least; it had existed and learned through billions of cycles of its picosecond reflexes. It had learned a full complement of "emotions," or at any rate of those polarizing tropisms which did for it what the glandular by-products called emotions did for human beings. It had learned anger, and the calm pride of the target sun called forth anger in the rogue:

If it would only recognize me! If it would only admit causing the sun of Earth to strike at me! If it would offer some apology for deceiving me, for its contempt of me . . . then perhaps yet I could stop my blow

But it ignored him.

The rogue was not entirely ignored. Though the great white star blazed on passionlessly, benevolently, still the rogue found itself the target for great forces from elsewhere. Another sun of Almalik had joined the attack upon it. The blue companion of the golden giant stabbed at it with a twisting shaft of plasma, a monstrous snake of glowing ions and transience energy, which pierced to the rogue's heart, withdrew and jabbed again.

An agony of meta-pain jolted the rogue to its innermost plasma swirl; but it was not destroyed. It gathered its forces and sought for a weapon to hurl back the thrust of the blue star.

And it found one. Passing by the great fifth planet of the unresisting white sun, the rogue reached out with

its plasma arms to snatch a string of moons. It gathered them to itself, fired their shattered mass into its own body, linked their electrons into its transcience patterns. With its new mass it strengthened its defenses.

And secure in its new strength, it drew more strength from the attacking stars themselves. It sucked their transcience energies, through the blue bolts and the golden ones, tightened its transflection fields and hurled its new mass always faster toward the maddening white star that glowed on, contemptuous of all the rogue could do.

And that phase of the battle ended.

Though the rogue had never struck back at the twin attacking giants, they were beaten.

Their plasma coils had exhausted even their giant strength. The coils withdrew, collapsed, disintegrated. The blue giant shrank and dimmed; its golden companion swelled and reddened.

And then they were both dead. Their fusion fires still blazed on — but mindlessly, now; the intellects that had animated them were drained empty.

Sentience had fled from them. Anger and fear and purpose had gone. The blue star swelled again, the golden companion shrank back to normal size; they had become merely globes of reacting nuclear gas, normal atomic engines no longer controlled by any transcience intellect.

It was a clear victory for the rogue . . . but his major enemy, the bright white star in his path, was still the same.

It was not defeated. If it was even threatened, it gave no sign.

The rogue felt its vast quiet mind watching, alert but strangely unafraid. It was anomalous, the rogue considered, that the target star did not request mercy, or a discussion of terms. Anomalous — and somehow disturbing.

But the rogue would not be deterred from its purpose. It plunged on to smash the white star and its haughty pride. It sought and found new fuel for its vengeance. Passing a cloud of asteroids, it swept them up and added them to its mass. It reached ahead to gather in the barren satellite of the fourth planet and crushed and fused the new mass into its own as it sought to crush and fuse all the suns of Almalik.

Already in anticipation, it tasted the acrid joy of victory and destruction.

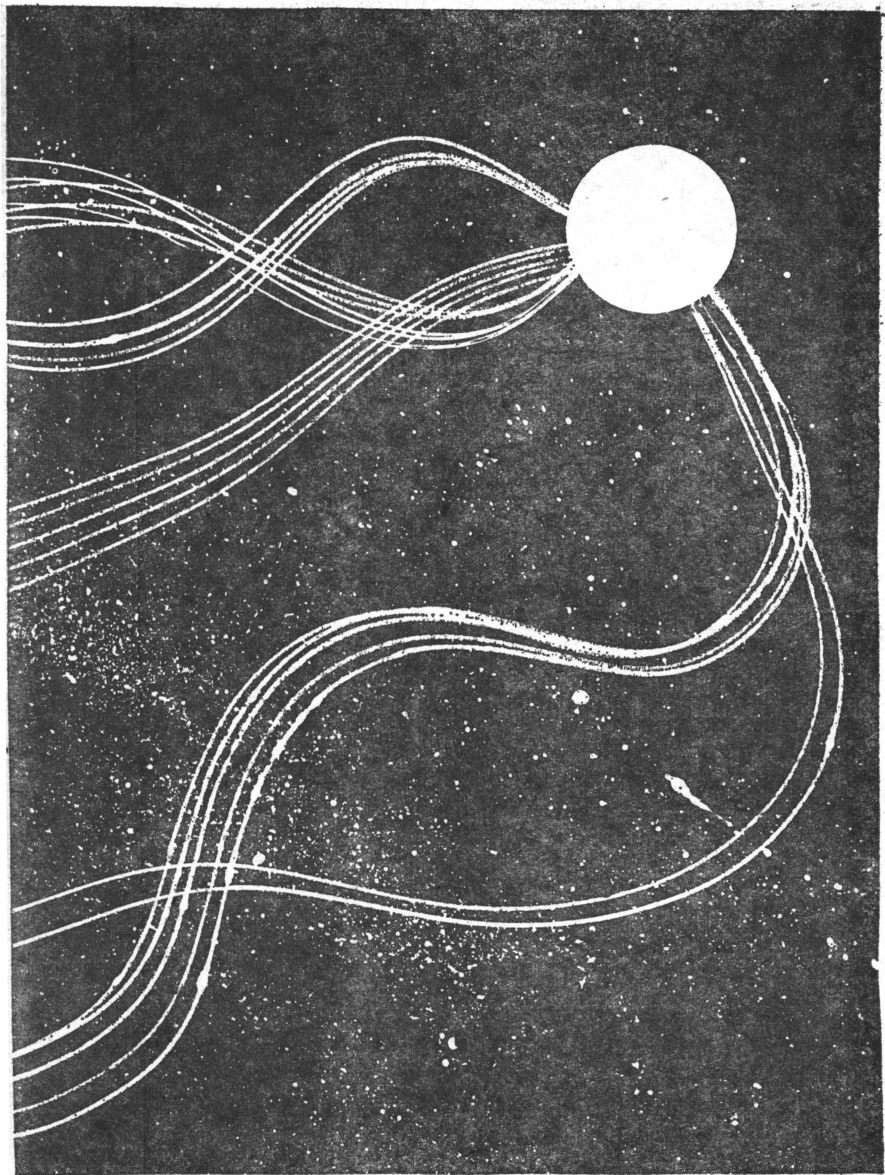
Thirteen suns would die or be driven to mindless burning. A hundred planets and a thousand inhabited worldlets would be destroyed. A million million living things would go up in white-hot plasma as the stars died . . .

And among them, thought the rogue with a bleak stab of pain, would be the trivial living blob of organized matter called Molly Zaldivar.

I do not wish Molly Zaldivar to die. She must die. I will not save her. But I do not wish her to die, because I love her.

In its deadly plunge toward the white star it sent thin threads of plasma effectors ahead to seek her out. Its sensor filaments ranged the cubic miles of void and found her at last,





still on the sleeth, far ahead of the rogue and dropping toward the atmosphere of the third planet. The arm of the golden giant that had freed her from the rogue was gone now, with its master's death; but Molly Zaldivar still lived.

And felt the rogue's delicate tendril-touch.

She looked up, unerringly toward the point in space where his massed energies were driving the planet down to its primary. "Monster?" she whispered.

The rogue was silent. It merely watched, and listened.

"Monster," she said, more confident now, "I know you're there. I don't mind."

She was silent for a moment, leaning forward over the sleek black skin of the sleeth, staring toward the cloudy world below. "You've done so much harm, monster," she sighed. "I wish . . . And yet you've tried to be good to me. Monster, I'm so sorry that you must make war on Almalik!"

The rogue did not answer. But it probed her interior spectrum of thoughts and energies, registered the dark shadow of sadness and, with it, a pale golden glow of — of what? Love? Fondness at least, the rogue considered.

It contracted its tendril to the merest whisper, content only to observe her, while it considered. Its strength was so immeasurably greater than her own that it could lift her from the sleeth in an instant. The energies that had hurled planets about and slain stars could fold both her and the sleeth back into its own fus-

ed and glowing mass effortlessly, carrying them with it into the collision with the proud white star ahead.

But it did not.

It watched her carefully, but without interfering, as she darted, secure in the sleeth's shimmering transfection fields, into the ionized borderlayers of the third planet's atmosphere and dropped swiftly toward the cities on its surface.

The third planet was a blue-green world and beautiful. It was a world of peaceful seas and friendly continents. Dazzling cities dwelt along its oceans and rivers, inhabited by all the many kinds of creatures that were companions of Almalik.

The rogue watched her drop into the towering spires of one of the cities. It was not yet too late; it could sweep her up even there, and bring her back in the effortless recoil of one of its plasma arms.

But it stayed its energies. It merely watched, as it drove on toward the collision, now little more than an hour off, which would sear and melt this world, and destroy the organized mass of matter that was Molly Zaldivar.

XX

The flyer, with its organic passengers and trailed by the green spirals and the pink-cloud citizen, fell endlessly through the transfection distances and emerged into the exit port on Kaymar, crown city of the planet of Kaymar, central world of Almalik.

Clothilde Kwai Kwich's hand tightened in consternation on Andy

Quam's arm. Beside him the boy gasped: "Preacher! Looks like we've come to a bad place!"

The great central dome of the city seethed with citizens of all kinds. Many were human, in this central city of the worlds of Almalik, calm Terrestrials, bronzed giants from the Reefs. But there were citizens in a myriad of shapes and in no shapes at all, liquid citizens and gaseous citizens, citizens that had no form of matter to clothe the bare energies that constituted their beings. The diaphragm of the transflex cube behind them was already contracting on a full load of refugees lucky enough to be on their way to some other world. The shouts, cries, hissing whistles, electronic pulses and other sounds of the countless thousands who had not yet been so lucky added up to a vast chorus of pleas for help. Twenty crystal citizens hung just before them, their razor-sharp edges of bright blue transparency flashing in the suns of Almalik. Quam dropped the flyer to the ramp, opened the door and led the way, ducking under the crystal citizens.

"Got to get out of this crush," he panted. "Headquarters of the Companions of the Star is just over here — I think —"

Clothilde Kwai Kwich cried breathlessly, "Yes, Andy! They'll still be functioning; we'll go there, and —" But she had no breath to finish. It was all they could do to urge their way through the incredible press of citizens. There was neither violence nor outright panic; those were not the enemies. But there were so many of them, so many countless thousands

more than the transflex cube could evacuate in the few score minutes left, and backed by so many thousands of thousands more that had not yet managed to make their way even into the central dome of the city. They were orderly. They were brave. But each of them knew that most of them were doomed.

They fought their way to a clear space and paused for breath. The carnivore citizen was the least affected of them; he glanced at young Rufe and bayed a laughing comment which the translators in Quamodian's ear rendered as: "Let the cub ride my shoulders! We'll never make it any other way."

"Naw!" flamed Rufe. "I can keep up if you can. Come on, preacher, let's do what we came to do!"

The pinkly glowing cloud citizen was the worst damaged of the party. Little cloudlets of his material had been detached; some were still floating after him, rejoining the central mass of his being; others were hopelessly lost in the crush behind them. The grass-green spirals had merely tightened their orbits, maintaining exact spacing and speeds.

"All right," said Andy Quam. "Let's go!"

But a great shout from the dome behind them made them turn.

Every citizen, warm-blooded or cold, humanoid or amorphous, was staring upward, through the crystal ceiling of the dome, with ten thousand thousand eyes, photoreceptors, radar scanners, sensors of every description.

There, streaked like a child's bright daub on the calm blue skies of Kay-

mar, hung the bright and glittering globe of the invading rogue star. Lightnings played about its blazing body as it shot across the sky, its motion visible even though its distance was many millions of miles.

Andy Quam tore his eyes away. "Come on," he muttered. "We've got even less time than I thought."

The Grand Hall of the Companions of the Star was empty. The thirteen suns of Almalik blazed down from the ceiling on an auditorium that could seat thousands, and now held no one at all.

Monitor Clothilde Kwai Kwich said dolefully: "I can't understand. I thought here at least we'd find someone who could help —"

The chant of the grass-green spirals sounded in Andy Quam's ears: "No indications! No operative functions being performed! This construct not inhabited!"

The boy clutched Quamodian's arm. "But preacher," he said. "Almalik told us to come here. Didn't he?"

Quamodian said, "He gave us permission. Directly. Yes." He turned, searching the vast room with his eyes. "But perhaps something has happened."

The weary sigh of the cloud citizen whispered: "There exists a large-scale entity which is observing us."

Quamodian flung himself into a chair, trying to think. Time was so short! He had counted on finding the order of Companions of the Star still functioning. Perhaps it had not been realistic, but in his mind he had expected to find the great hall thronged with worshippers, the many offices

and administrative sections busy about the endless tasks of Almalik. If he had thought at all, he had thought that a robot monitor or a citizen would have greeted them at the entrance, led them directly to someone in supreme authority, received his information about the rogue — and acted. Acted in time to save this world, and all the world of Almalik.

He had not expected that the building would be empty.

The others were waiting quietly for him to act. He realized that, right or wrong, he would have to make the decisions for all of them. And there was less time with every passing clock-tick

He stood up. "All right," he said, "we'll go back to the transflex cube. Perhaps the monitors there can help us."

"Through that mob, preacher? Impossible!" cried the boy.

"Impossible or not, that's what we'll have to do. Unless you have a better idea —"

But then, as they turned to leave, a Voice rumbled softly in their ears.

"Wait," it said.

They froze where they stood. The girl looked imploringly at Andy Quam. She did not speak, but her lips formed a word: "Almalik?"

He nodded; and the Voice spoke again:

"Behold," it said, and the great dome lifted on its transflection forces to reveal the splendor of the heavens themselves. It was daytime now; the glittering stars that the dome was designed to reveal could not be seen. But the bright smear of the invader was there, blighting the beauty of the

calm clouds. And near it in the sky, dropping toward them —

"It's Miss Zaldivar!" shouted the boy. "Look, preacher! It's her and the sleeth!"

They were in that great hall for less than a quarter of an hour, and in all that time Quamodian could not after remember taking a breath. He was overpowered by the immense majesty of Almalik himself, brooding over them, watching and helping. Even the nearness of the girl he had crossed half a universe to find could not break him free from the spell of that immortal and immense star.

Though what was said was surely catastrophic enough to rouse him to action; for Molly Zaldivar, she said, was dying.

"Dear Andy," she whispered across the vast gulf of the chamber, her voice warm and affectionate in his ears. "No! Don't come any closer to me. I'm charged with radiations, Andy dear — the old ones from the Plan of Man machines, new ones that our little monster-star used to try to save my life. Or to give me life again; because I was dead. Anyway, if you come near me now it will be your death . . ."

Even so, he rose to run toward her; but she stopped him with her hand. "Please," she whispered. "Now. What was it that you came from Earth to tell?"

He stammered out the story the Reefer had told him, while Clothilde Kwai Kwich and the boy, one on each side of him, stood silent and awed. Molly Zaldivar listened gravely, her face composed though her

eyes widened, then danced, as she saw how Clothilde's hand sought his.

Then she said, "Thank you, Andy. You've always been the best friend I could ever hope to have. I —"

Her composure almost broke for a moment, but she controlled herself, and smiled. "I don't mind leaving this world much, dear Andy. But I do mind leaving you."

And then she was gone, mounting once more toward the sky on the great, patient back of the sleeth, while the enormous dome of Almalik swung majestically back into place to blot her out.

XXI

Something had happened. The rogue's thin thread of sensor had been snapped; it had lost Molly Zaldivar and her sleeth.

It tried to find them again for many picoseconds, but in vain. Some force larger than itself had shut her off, blinded it to her activities. A sense that in a human might have been called foreboding filled the rogue; but it had not time for even meta-emotions; it was driving ever closer to its enemy sun, and it needed all its forces for the task ahead.

The third planet had fallen far behind it now. It flashed through the orbit of the second planet, now hidden from it at inferior conjunction by the expanding white sun. The great white disk grew ahead of it.

—Still the star ignores my attack. It refuses to resist. It offers no apology for the attacks it has made on me through its lesser stars. Still it is watching . . . mocking me . . .

"Monster! Stop for me. Now!"

The thin filament of the rogue's probing sensor was alive again, carrying a message for it. The rogue energized its perceptions and saw that Molly Zaldivar was pursuing, racing after it on the black and shining sleeth. There was a power flowing from her that the rogue could not quite recognize, but that made it uneasy, unsure of itself. The feeble human frame of organized matter that was the girl should not have been able to dispose such powers. Not even with the energies the rogue itself had bestowed on her; not though her life was close to an end, and all her accumulated strengths were being disposed at once.

The rogue considered for some nanoseconds the possibility that these forces came from its enemy, Almalik. But it dismissed the possibility. It simply did not matter. Contact was only minutes away. Already the thin solar atmosphere was boiling around it. It did not stop, perhaps could not stop; the gathered mass of its planetary body was plunging too fast to be diverted now.

But it sent a message through its plasma effector, shaking the thin atmosphere that the sleeth carried with it through space. "What do you want, Molly Zaldivar?" its tiny voice piped. "Do you love me now?"

Her answer sent a seismic tremor through the core of the planet it had made its body: "Love you, monster? I don't know. I cannot imagine it. And yet — yes, perhaps I do. If it matters"

The rogue shook in its mad plunge. Its boiling seas loosed huge clouds of

vapor as, for a moment, its grasp slackened; lightnings played through its tortured skies. But Molly was still speaking:

"But I have no life left to love anyone, monster. My body is dying, and I must tell you something. Monster! Please listen. *Almalik is not your enemy.*"

A shock of doubt shattered the rogue's great joy.

"Listen, monster! Almalik never hurt you. Almalik has renounced all violence. He could not harm you, nor any sentient thing. Ever!"

Rage shook the rogue now. The crustal rocks of its planetary body snapped, and white-hot magma spewed forth. In the air around Molly Zaldivar its tiny voice shrieked: "Lies! Lies again! The sun of Earth that tried to kill me was Almalik's vassal! Its twin stars that tried to kill me again — they were Almalik's companions!"

But Molly Zaldivar's voice came strongly: "No, monster. I lied to you once, yes. Because I was afraid of you. But Almalik has never lied, nor has he tried to harm you. The sun of Earth that struck you — it was your own brother!"

The rogue called back the huge effector that it had lashed out to strike her. Puzzled, its shrill voice repeated, "Brother?"

"Yes, your brother! Another synthetic sentience, made before you. It occupied the sun of Earth and tried to destroy you — came here before you, and tried to destroy you again through the twin stars of Almalik. But you defeated it, monster. And

now it is gone, and you must stop before you destroy great Almalik!"

The rogue paused, while its sentient plasma revolved the startling new concept. "Brother?" its tiny voice whispered again. A dreadful doubt shivered through its core.

If it were wrong, it thought . . . if it were wrong, then it was doing a dreadful and irrevocable deed.

For if it were wrong, then Almalik had always been its friend. And it was within minutes of destroying Almalik forever.

Methodically, patiently, the rogue rebuilt its net of sensors, threw out probes to scan the patient white star before it — so close now, and so vulnerable! — and all of space around. Its velocity, hard driven and accelerated through hundreds of millions of miles, was huge. Unstoppable. It had thrown its energies in profligate abandon into thrusting the dead planet toward the white star. It was simply too late to stop.

With care and speed it calculated possible trajectories to divert its own plunge, not to stop it — for that was utterly impossible now — but simply to deflect it enough to miss the star and plunge on into the dark space beyond

Impossible. It was too late.

Well, then: to pass through the star's corona, destroying itself in the process, of course, and working great havoc with the star's internal energy balance, but leaving most of it intact

Also impossible. Also too late.

In what passed in it for desperation, the rogue computed its chance of plunging through the skin of the

star but on a tangent that would miss the core, leave the star wounded and erupting with enormous violence, but perhaps not entirely destroyed

Also impossible, and finally impossible. Its energies were too great, its time of collision too near. It would strike the white sun almost dead on, whatever the rogue did now. And rogue and white star together would erupt in the ultimate violence of a supernova, destroying themselves and everything for a light-year or more around.

I regret, thought the rogue. I feel pity. For Molly Zaldivar. For Almalik. For all the myriads of beings on Almalik's doomed planets. And for me.

It sent out a message on the thin, stretched filament of energy with which it had been in contact with Molly Zaldivar, to say that there was no longer any hope.

But it could not make contact.

Once again it searched all of space nearby, seeking Molly Zaldivar and the sleeth. Uselessly. Somehow, Molly Zaldivar was gone.

The patterns of energy that made up the essential beings of the rogue were shaken with grief and pain. Despairing, it thrust with all the energies it possessed at the calm white disk of its target sun, now so near and vulnerable. Great spouts of flame boiled from the star below it; the rogue's own planetary body split and shattered in the violence of its effort to undo what it had done. But it was no use. The fragments of its planet, continental in size, massive as worldlets themselves drove on.

Look, little one. Take that blue star. Use its energies, if you will.

The rogue darted out sensors in all directions, seeking the source of that soundless, gentle voice. The sensors found nothing. But the rogue knew where it came from: it was Almalik, speaking to him from the enormous, swelling, flame-ringed solar disk so near below.

The blue star?

Experimentally the rogue threw out a sensor toward it. It was empty, untenanted since it had destroyed the mad sentience that had inhabited it. It was waiting for it.

Something helped the rogue, something to which it could not put a name: not merely Almalik, not just the star it was so close to destroying, but a congeries of sentiences, a pooled strength of living and stellar creatures, all urging the rogue on, supporting it, giving it help.

It drove along the lines of its sensor and entered into the waiting star.

New energies flooded its webs of sentience. The resources of a giant stellar furnace were now its own to command.

It reached out to the planet it had abandoned, hurtling down on the white star, grasped it with the mighty plasma arms of its new body. White arms from Almalik himself joined the rogue — and with them, golden arms. The rogue puzzled over that for a few electron-orbits; surely the golden star was dead.

Yet it was taking part. The golden arms linked with the blue and white ones, and together, smoothly, strongly, with infinite speed they pulled the planet aside.

The planet did not survive those mighty forces; it crumbled into a million million fragments, streaming past the great white orb of Almalik and heading out into space on cometary orbits.

But it had missed. Almalik was safe.

And the rogue had time to realize what it had gained, in the might of its new stellar body . . . and what it had lost.

The great tolling chorus of the stars welcomed it into brotherhood. *Join us, brother,* said a great collective voice. *Be one with us. Be one with all things that share the bonds of mind. Be one with Almalik.*

And a part of the rogue rejoiced, and a part of it ached with an unpracticed grief for Molly Zaldivar, doomed to death in her frail human body, lost forever.

The slow, gentle voice held a hint of amusement and wry pity. *Look, brother,* it said. *You gave her your strength. We gave her our empty sun for a home.*

And the rogue struck out, unbelieving, with a bright blue plasma sensor toward the golden star; and it met the rogue's sensor with one of its own. Gold thread and blue touched and joined, while the stars watched and rejoiced.

The voice that spoke to the rogue was not a human voice, but there was something of humanity about it — something soft and merry, something very like the voice of Molly Zaldivar, and dear.

"Hello, monster," it said. "Welcome. Welcome forever." **END**



Dear Editor:

I would like to make a few possibly volatile comments in rebuff to Mrs. Wills' letter in the March issue of *IF*, which ran down everything in your magazine from stories (with great misinterpretations) to authors and ending with the advertisements — all of these supposedly being horribly detrimental to children and teenagers.

It is quite obvious that Mrs. Wills is not a reader that you would be sorry to lose. After all, I hope that science fiction magazines continue to be for *thinking* people of all ages, which unfortunately does not include radicals, reactionaries and Bible-belters. I thought that most of those people were in the South, although I notice that Mrs. Wills lives in Michigan.

What would Mrs. Wills have teenagers read? — *Argosy*, *Playboy*, etc., *True Confessions*, etc. etc.???

Personally, I am very glad that my almost teenager has shown an interest (even though rather slight so far, but hopefully it will expand with age) in science fiction. It helps give her an insight into the possible future and helps her have a mind that will probably be much more open in its thinking to all of the problems that arise in the world,

and off the world, if she is lucky enough to have that opportunity.

Yes, Mrs. Wills, *IF* does teach and does make *some* people think. Thank heavens for the authors who do make us think, like Messrs. Zelazny, Pohl, Saberhagen, Anderson, Niven, Clark, Blish, Van Vogt, Vance, etc., etc., etc., etc. — (Mrs.) Dana Morris, Apt. 6-F, 511 Chesterfield, Nashville, Tennessee 37212.

* * *

Dear Editor:

As you may have gathered from the copies of *Stroon* I have sent you — I am somewhat of a Cordwainer Smith enthusiast. I am currently preparing a concordance/exegesis and a chronology of the Instrumentality stories for future issues of *Stroon*. I was wondering if you either have or know the whereabouts of any of the original manuscripts as it is possible that they might contain passages and information deleted from the printed version which would be useful in the ordering of these stories. I am certainly willing to buy any of the manuscripts or pay for the cost of Xeroxing (TM) them. I have a similar interest in collecting the illustrations which accompanied the stories. I have about half the b&w for *The Game of Rat and Dragon*

and the full-sized cover painting for *Space Lords* as well as a few rejected cover sketches for *The Undermen* (which I believe Pyramid is bringing out in early 1968). I fear that the interior illos have been scattered at conventions throughout the country but I have no idea what has happened to the magazine cover paintings.

I bought *International SF* and found it interesting; a few comments are in order. I would prefer to see some longer stories, perhaps even a serial. It takes a much better writer to tell a short story well than a novelette; you should take advantage of this in *International* by cutting down on the shorts. Please don't let the mag lapse into a reprint of British writers only (or even a large portion). They can submit their work directly to the U.S. magazines or try to get a British *science fiction* magazine started. I'm afraid I don't think too much of *New Worlds* in its new avatar and I don't think it provides a market for hard core sf of the Clement/Asimov/Niven school.

In *If*, Saberhagen's *Brother Berserker* was excellent — he has improved greatly since his first appearance. Some readers may rail against the mysticism but I feel that religion, metaphysics, etc. are perfectly legitimate fields for science-fiction (as well as science) to explore. The time may be propitious for a novel length Berserker story. By the by, the *Star Trek* episode, *The Doomsday Machine* by Norman Spinrad, seemed to . . . ah . . . draw inspiration from Saberhagen's conception of the Berserker machines.

Keep the Larry Niven stories coming; he is one of the best new writers you have brought to us. I am curious about the "outsiders" he

has mentioned in his stories and perhaps you could prevail upon him to feature them more centrally in a future story.

I greatly approve of the new SF Calendar which you are starting in *If*. The surprising thing is that no magazine did it earlier — all the other professional fields have such listings. The regional cons have proliferated but then so have the number of fans. This listing should help increase attendance at Boskone V (23-4 March 1968). You are to be thanked for your thoughtfulness and consideration as regards fannish activities. — Anthony Lewis, 124 Longwood Avenue, Brookline, Massachusetts 02146.

• Matter of fact, it looks as though the calendar did just about double Boskone's attendance, with similar effects on the conferences in Baltimore, Columbus and elsewhere. For those of you who have never been to a science-fiction conference: the usual procedure is a program of talks by science-fiction writers, editors, fans, artists and anyone else who may have something of interest to communicate, plus a chance to meet and talk with other sf readers. If that sounds like the kind of thing you might enjoy, keep your eye on the *SF Calendar* in *If*. The way local conferences are proliferating, there'll be one in your own back yard before you know it! — *Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Since it will obviously take some time to put the Poster Plan brought up at the Phillycon into operation, may I offer a stop-gap measure, the Post Graffiti Plan. If even a third of the science fiction readers in this country would write "read science fiction" on the walls

of public rest rooms they visit the underground advertising would be immense. I am sure many want to be ahead of the game. So what if people laugh — they'll notice us. And maybe even read. — J.B. Post, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103.

• If the above reference to the "Poster Plan" confuses you, it was a notion suggested at last fall's Philadelphia sf meeting to prepare and distribute posters advertising *Galaxy*, *If*, etc. A fan suggested it from the audience. We said if enough people were willing to put them up, we'd have them made. Question is, how many readers would be willing to persuade their local dealers to put in the window a card saying something like "Read *If* — the Hugo Winning SF Magazine". Would, for example, *you*? If enough readers indicate they'll try, anyway, we'll print the posters for you. — *Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I have some answers for and some comments on Mr. Kolodzej's letter (*Worlds of IF*, Feb. '68). First, about the Doc Savage novels and Kenneth Robeson. Kenneth Robeson was the pen name for a number of different authors. As you probably know, the Doc Savage stories are reprints from the "pulp" magazines of the twenties, and the publishers were always fishing around for authors. About 170 different Doc Savage episodes were written, and the majority of them (about 90) were written by one person, whose name I forget. It seems that this man wanted his stories as true-to-life as they could be, because he always explored the settings of his stories before he wrote them. As a result of this, he had some quite hair-raising

adventures. If anyone really wants more information, and has access to back issues of newspapers, there was an excellent article in *The National Observer* about six or seven months ago on the topic of the revival of pulp literature. I cannot agree with Mr. Kolodzej that the Jameson series is a must. It seems mediocre to me.

A second book by John Norman is already out. It is named *Outlaw of Gor* and is about Tarl Cabot and his second trip to Counter-Earth. It is written in the same excellent style as Norman's first book.

In your search for good SF, Mr. Pohl, as Mowgli would say, "Good Hunting!" — Christopher Keith, 9 Stevens Terrace, Lancaster, N.H. 03584.

* * *

Dear Editor:

In answer to R.W.C. Ettinger's article *Interstellar Travel and Eternal Life*, I can only say: "Who wants to remember everything?"

I know I don't. There was a toothache I had a few years ago that I would rather forget, altogether. (Despite my liking for Heinlein's "Stranger . . ." pain is one thing I do not cherish!)

Of course this would be taken care of by a selective memory, but — no matter how selective your memory is, you will, still, eventually reach the saturation point, *i.e.*, a time when you have done everything, twenty times each, and are 1) bored, 2) jaded, 3) tired of this whole mess, and 4) ready to end it all. Which does not lead to immortality!

There is one very important advantage to forgetting, and this is that you can have the fun of doing it all over again, for the first time!

Of course this could lead to a situation like the following:

Three immortal men are sitting on a park bench. The youngest is 700,000 years old, the next is 800,000 and the eldest 999,998 years old. The youngster spies a pretty young woman walking past (well, she *looks* young) and says, "Boy, would I ever love to kiss that one!" The next eldest sees another lovely lady, and says, "Boy, would I ever love to hug *that* one!"

The eldest of the three sees another beauty passing by and says,

"Boy, would I ever love to . . ." Then, a puzzled frown passes over his face, and he turns to his two friends. "What was that we used to do?" he asked.

Okay, okay, that is a horrible joke, I admit it! But it makes my point.

As to your new magazine *International*, I have only one thing to say: When does the next issue come out?

Keep up the good work, and the Hugo will be yours again and again.

— James A. Juracic, P.O. Box 11, Fruitvale, B.C., Canada.



July 4-7, 1968. F-UN CON. In Los Angeles: at Statler-Hilton Hotel. For information: Charles A. Crayne, 1050 N. Ridgewood Place, Hollywood, California 90038. Advance membership: \$2.00; supporting membership: \$1.00. Guest of Honor: Harry Harrison.

July 26-28, 1968. OZARKON III. At Ben Franklin Motor Hotel, 825 Washington, St. Louis, Missouri. Guest of Honor: Harlan Ellison. For information: Norbert Couch, Route 2, Box 889, Arnold, Missouri 63010. Membership: \$2.00.

August 23-25, 1968. DEEP SOUTH SF CONFERENCE VI, New Orleans, Louisiana. Details to be announced. For information: John H. Guidry, 5 Finch Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70124. Guest of Honor: Daniel F. Galouye. Membership: \$1.00.

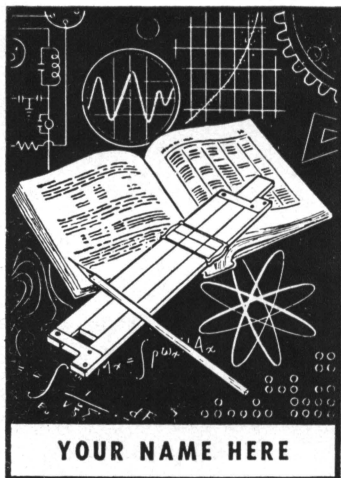
August 29-September 2, 1968. BAYCON: 26th World Science Fiction Convention. At Hotel Claremont, Oakland, California. (We have been told that the hotel has already been completely reserved for the weekend. If you are plan-

ning to attend the convention, it will be necessary to secure accommodations in other hotels/motels.) Guest of Honor: Philip José Farmer; Fan Guest of Honor: Walter J. Daugherty; Special Guest: Takumi Shibano, leading Japanese fan. Highlights: A GALAXY OF FASHION, a fashion show of the future, sponsored by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Meet the Authors party. Special Programs devoted to: STAR TREK, TOLKIEN, BURROUGHS, COMICS, H.P. LOVECRAFT and the PULPS, and MONSTER FANDOM (conducted by Forrest J Ackerman.) An authentic Medieval Tournament — all participants in costume. Presentation of the Hugos by Harlan Ellison. Also: Project Art Show, daily auctions, gala masquerade ball . . . For information: BAYCON, Box 261 Fairmont Station, El Cerrito, California 94530. Membership: \$1.00 foreign, \$2.00 supporting, \$3.00 attending.

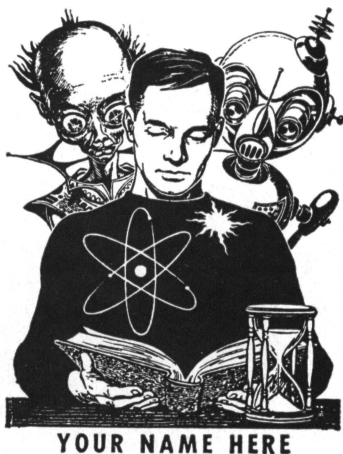
October 18-20, 1968. TOLKIEN CONFERENCE, sponsored by the Tolkien Society of America. At Belknap College, Center Harbor, New Hampshire 03226. Papers are being solicited. Indicate whether you will present a paper or will just attend. Submit title and length of proposed papers early to Ed Meskys (address above).

November 9-10, 1968. PHILCON. At Sylvania Hotel, Broad & Locust Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For information: Tom Purdom, 4734 Cedar Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19143.

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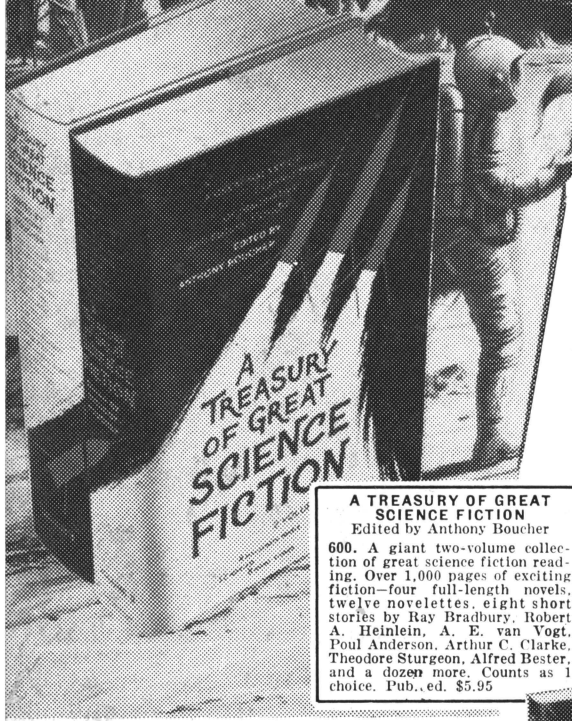
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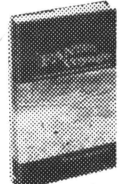


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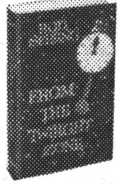


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