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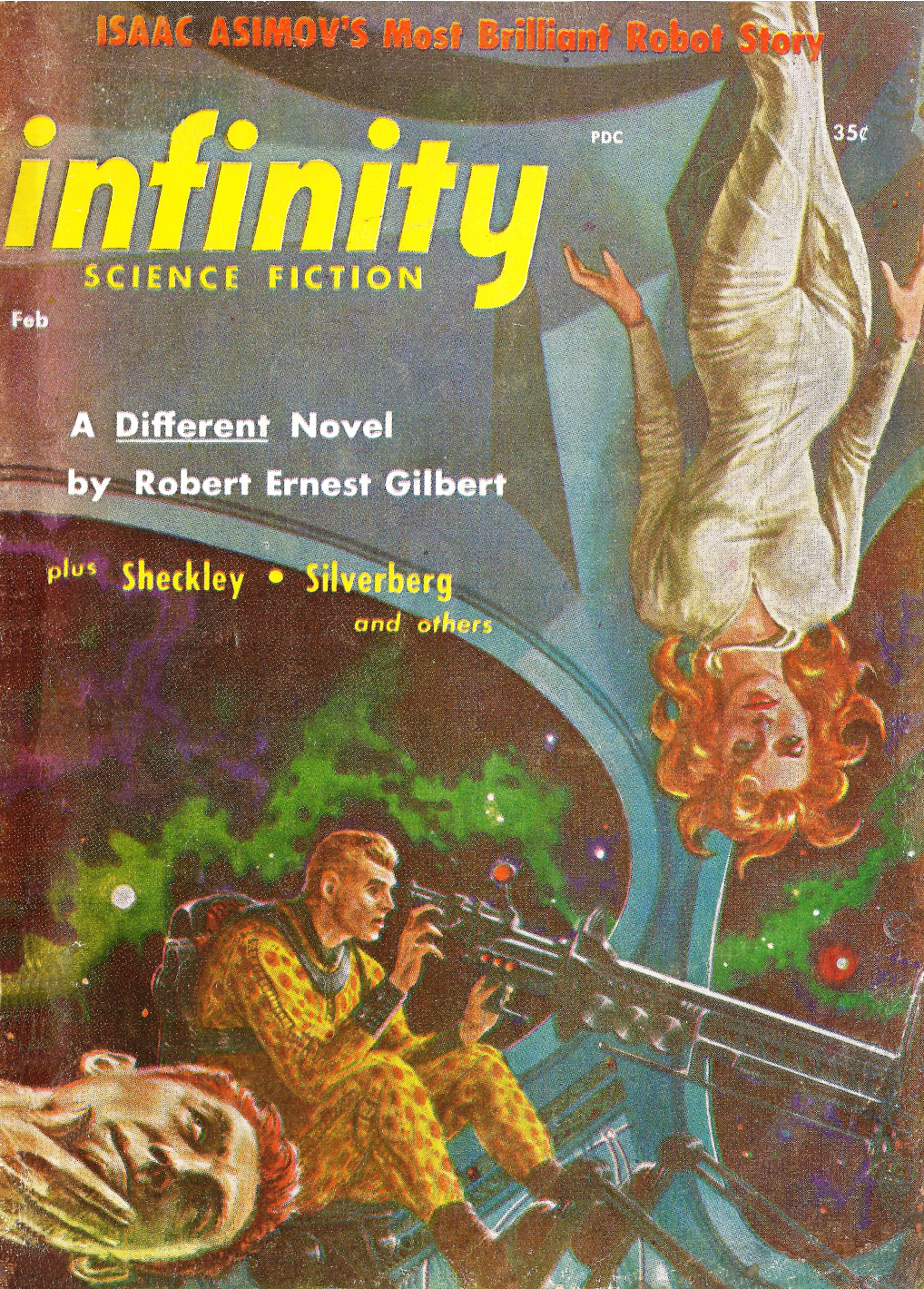

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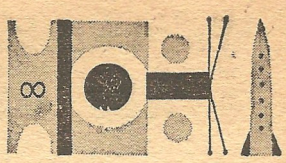

AWARDS AND A-BOMBS

PARDON ME; I'm going to boast a bit. I dislike to use this page for such purposes as a general thing, but this time I feel that it's justified. In any event, you have been warned.

A couple of weeks ago, as this is written, the World Science Fiction Society staged the Fourteenth Annual World Science Fiction Convention at the Hotel Biltmore in New York City. As a highlight, achievement awards were presented to the people in the field who had been judged best, by vote of the entire membership, at their respective crafts.

The award for the best short story published anywhere during the period from August, 1955, through July, 1956, went to Arthur C. Clarke for "The Star," which appeared in the November, 1955, INFINITY.

The award for the best book reviews was presented to Damon Knight, whose "Infinity's Choice" column is a regular feature of INFINITY.

The most promising new writer of the year turned out to be Robert Silverberg, whose stories appear frequently in INFINITY.

I am proud to have published so much material that was deemed worthy of this official acclaim. I am happy to have men like the award-winners as regular contributors. And I am sincerely grateful to all the readers who voted for them.

If this be boasting, make the most of it.

MY REACTIONS to the convention as a whole were considerably more mixed. Like all science-fiction conventions, it was a weekend crowded to the wee hours with fun and good fellowship. It was profitable in ways that can't be measured; for instance, I was able personally to get promises of material for future issues from writers and artists it would otherwise be almost impossible for me to see and talk to.

Most people attend their first convention out of sheer curiosity. But they attend their sec-

Continued on page 111

∞ Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

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COVER: Space-sickness strikes our hero; as suggested by a scene in Hunt the Hog of Joe. *Painted by Ed Emsh.*

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The hog was deadly dangerous and virtually invulnerable— but Planet Maggie's weird laws were what made the hunt really tough!

Illustrated by EMSH

HUNT the HOG of JOE

by ROBERT ERNEST GILBERT

I: THREEDAY NIGHT

EXCEPTIONAL noses with aquiline bridges and upswept tips marked the six adult couples who drifted past me through the valve into the astraplane, Ap-GG-12C. They were large, tanned, blue-eyed, brown-haired people; and they wore white coveralls stamped, in strange letters, "Recessive—Alien Status." The varied children with them were designated simply, "Alien."

Another big man, almost identical with the male emigrants, but dressed in a spotted fur G-suit, floated out of the old shuttle, *Joe Nordo III*. The astraplane's quadpilot stopped watching dials, turned to the newcomer, and said, "Passenger for you, Ypsilanti. Hunter Ube Kinlock, meet Dominant Olaf Ypsilanti."

"Low, Ypsilanti," I said, fighting my chronic spacesickness.

The shuttle pilot glared at me. My left hand was a graft, my cheek was freshly scarred, and my scant red hair needed treatments; but I had not supposed I was that repulsive.

Ypsilanti said, "Papers."

"No time for that," the quadpilot interrupted. "Unclinch in ninety-three seconds. He's from GG about the Hog. Long, Kinlock. I'll see you in 264 hours."

He urged us through the valves.

On the first deck of the shuttle, I swallowed another SS pill. I was unaccustomed to windows in spacecraft. Eleven hundred kilometers below lay Planet Maggie, of Joe's Sun, with the surface partly in darkness. The awesome, greenish convolutions of the adjacent dark nebula filled much of the sky as if churning forward to engulf both planet and spaceships.

Ypsilanti swung to the controls. I secured my baggage in the racks and clutched a couch. With horror, I saw that the shuttle's brain had been removed.

Ypsilanti snarled, "Ordinance 419: Aliens ride the lowest deck."

I went through a manhole to the lowest deck, the second one, and lashed myself down. "How did that many emigrants crowd in here?" I quavered.

Ypsilanti said, "Ordinance 481: Passengers shall not talk to pilots."

At a signal from the Ap-GG-12C, Ypsilanti unclinched and backed the *Joe Nordo III,* reducing orbital velocity until the astraplane was a bright speck. He unstrapped, floated down to my couch, and said, "Papers." I took the GG Travel Book from my chest pocket. The pilot flipped the pages and sneered, "A hunter! Hunt what?"

"Man-eaters. The Jury asked Galactic Government to destroy the Hog. GG sent me. Can't this wait until you ground this thing?"

Ypsilanti exclaimed, "No alien may hunt on Maggie! Shall wait here."

"The 12C won't return for 264 hours!" I yelled. "GG sent me after the Hog."

Ypsilanti laughed. "No aircraft, bombs, men. Slimy thing, one alien cannot kill the Hog. You smell like your owner, Galactic Government. You are not fit to walk on Maggie."

He resumed the controls.

II: FOURDAY MORNING

ALTHOUGH I had previously been spacesick, airsick, carsick, seasick, and sledsick, the descent to Planet Maggie was the first time I believed that Doreen, Laurinda, and Celestine would never again see me alive. How Ypsilanti, occasionally glancing at the few antiquated instruments, found Joetropolis, even in the blundering hours he took, remained mysterious. At last, I saw a clutter of buildings surrounded by a wall. The buildings expanded with dizzy speed, until the shuttle hovered less than one hundred meters above the ground. I gulped weakly at three figures pushing a long metal tube with wheels into a shed

ROBERT ERNEST GILBERT *was born in Kingsport, Tennessee, in those primitive days before toy stores sold kid-sized space helmets, so he made his own by cutting holes in a cardboard box. Since then, he's developed a variety of skills, and has sold stories of various kinds, articles, photographs, cartoons, drawings, and even an airplane design. Now, in "Hunt the Hog of Joe," he combines his talents for satire and suspense in a story that has a surprise and a laugh on almost every page.*

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constructed in an angle of the wall.

The shuttle bounced to a tail-first stop. Ypsilanti dropped a door, unreeled a chain ladder, and climbed out.

"Didn't you forget me?" I gasped. I scrambled to the first deck and almost pitched from the ship. Coarse grass with red undertones covered the field except for patches blackened by exhausts. At one border was a crude shed and a wrecked jetcopter. Cultivated areas, interspersed with patches of brush, separated the spaceport and the walls of Joetropolis. Ypsilanti ran wildly down a rutted lane toward the town.

I located a hoist and lowered my four cases. I eased down the chain ladder to the hot, damp soil of Planet Maggie. Joe's Sun, red and bloated, cleared a clump of trees and half blinded me. Small purple birds jeered from the huge leaves of squat weeds along the edge of the field. Four striped, short-tailed, buck-toothed rodents scurried beneath a stump. Another sat on a discarded can and squeaked threateningly.

Even in the .92 Maggiese gravity, my luggage weighed about sixty kilograms. I yanked the braided leather line from the hoist and was attempting to lash the two smaller cases into a pack, when a distant explosion agitated the still air. Two rodents ran out of the grass and vanished down a hole. As the exploding sounds climbed in pitch, I realized they were mighty grunts.

I unpacked, assembled, and activated the hisser. A soft voice said, "No!"

A woman peeped from behind the shuttle's ruddevator. She bore a faint resemblance to Ypsilanti, but her nose was less prominent. She, too, had brown hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin. She said, "Ordinance 53: Aliens shall approach the city unarmed."

"Low," I said. "I'm Ube Kinlock, the hunter GG sent about the Hog. Are you a port officer?"

"Am a hunter also, slightly. Ordinance 33 forbids introductions of alien males to Maggiese

females, but am Betty Toal."

She stepped from behind the ruddevator. I inhaled sharply. I had encountered colonies not accepting Galactic standards of decency, but was still shocked by extreme exposure. Toal wore a loose, white sack with head and arm holes. Her elbows, knees, and ankles were nude.

Toal stood about one meter from me and said, "Ordinance 31 forbids alien males to be within ten feet of a female. Ypsilanti should have helped you, but is afraid of the Hog. Is little danger now. The Hog avoids the sun."

"That grunting was the Hog?" I deciphered the inscription on the brooch at her throat as, "Minimum."

Toal said, "Yes. The Hog goes to the swamp. Will help with your luggage."

"It's too heavy for you."

"Am thin but strong by Maggiese standards," Toal said.

I managed to carry three cases and the hisser. Toal retrieved a mesh bag, filled with fruit or vegetables, and picked up the fourth case. She asked, as we walked toward the town, "Is true, in the Explored Galaxy, people do not care how children look?"

"What? Children? Yes, generally. Some believe little boys' ears shouldn't stick out too far, and some consider little girls with golden curls and dimples the most charming, but there isn't much prejudice."

"Is also true," Toal said, "no one must marry someone he dislikes?"

"Sometimes an exchange of x-tops and coupons is involved, but it's usually a free choice."

Toal asked no more questions, but followed along pointing out the ripening crunchies and the blooming goodies. She warned me of toothie tunnels across the path. The striped rodents, she explained, menaced stored food, crops, livestock, and buildings. They were checked, to some extent, by traps, poison, and disease cultures.

A WOODEN bridge, crushed and splintered in the middle, spanned a ditch. The bridge was actually made of sawed boards and beams, not liquid wood castings. The prints of cloven hoofs and dewclaws spotted the soft ground.

"The Hog!" Toal said. "Passed between me and the wall!"

I dropped the cases and clutched the hisser with both hands.

Toal said, "If carry that for the Hog, he has been shot with those. Did not hurt much. Of course, were older models."

Wiping at the perspiration splashing down my face, I knelt and examined the hoofprints,

which were roughly thirty-five centimeters long and spaced, from front hoofs to back, almost five meters apart. "How big is the Hog?" I asked.

"Some sows were nine feet high, fifteen feet long."

We slowly crossed the broken bridge. I said, "What's this about dimensions in feet?"

Toal spoke as if quoting a lesson. "In an old book, Joe Nordo found forgotten English measurements. These matched the Maggiese body. Joe Nordo's feet were one foot long. Center of chest to finger tips, with arm stretched, one yard. First joint of little finger, one inch. Was two yards tall."

Toal suddenly smiled as if unaccustomed to smiling. "Silly," she said. "Learn such things in school." She threw out a hand in a sweeping gesture. "Many things here silly. Is true, in the Explored Galaxy, people do not care if you are blue, black, white? How long your nose is?"

"Yes, officially at least, there's no discrimination between humans and intelligent beings because of physical appearance."

Toal sighed. "Must be wonderful. Wish could leave Maggie."

"Why not?"

"Ordinance 3."

The wall around Joetropolis was made of genuine tree trunks treated with preservative and sharpened at the top. Heavy, pointed, irregularly spaced stakes, thrust at angles into the ground, fringed the wall. The effect of these crude fortifications was barbaric, even primitive. Bare electrical wires, strung on insulators fastened to the stakes, only accentuated the prehistoric picture.

"Follow the marked path," Toal said.

The zigzagging path was not more than a meter wide. I avoided touching the wires and reached open ground. A small gate in the wall swung inward, and a man wearing a white sack stalked out. He looked like an older brother of Ypsilanti. The two men behind him looked like younger brothers. Their knees and elbows were indecently exposed.

"Are arrested!" they chorused. One carried a hisser so ancient that it could have been the original model. The others had hand weapons.

"I apologize if I've broken your laws," I said, "but I don't know—"

"Ignorance of law is no excuse!" exclaimed the older man, who had "Dominant" on his brooch. He ordered, "Stop Betty Toal!" One of the guards chased the fleeing Toal along the wall.

"I'm Ube Kinlock," I said. "Galactic Government sent me in answer to—"

"Silence, criminal alien! Ordinance 55: Criminal aliens shall never speak, unless so ordered."

III: FOURDAY NIGHT

I SAT UP in the sweltering darkness of the cell. Mortar dropped on the bed from between the logs of the primitive wall. I grabbed a boot to defend myself against rodents but a voice whispered, "Ki ock. Is Betty Toal."

"High, Toal," I said. "What did they do to you?"

"Have not caught me. Brought food and water. Ordinance 102 forbids a meal for criminal aliens. Find the tube? Did they give you water?"

"A few sips." I gulped slightly metallic water from the tube extending through the hole she had made in the daubing. Toal shoved something through the crack. So far as I could determine in the darkness, it was meat between slices of bread.

I munched the concoction and mumbled, "Thanks, Toal. You'd best run before the guards find you. If I ever get out, and you need anything, let me know."

Toal said, too loudly for secrecy, "Am happy to help. Do not worry about prison. Several Maximums and Dominants opposed calling an outside hunter. May be why they arrested you."

"Stand still, Betty Toal!" a rough voice cried in the dark.

A chorus added, "Are arrested!"

A screech preceded the sounds of rapid breathing, slaps, tearing cloth, and stamping feet. "Stop it!" I yelled, trying to see through the crack. "She only brought some water!"

"Check the criminal alien!"

Soon the wooden hall floor creaked and rattled. The door rolled up. Lights blinded me. Three striped toothies streaked for their holes.

"Search him and the room," ordered a Dominant, apparently the man who originally arrested me.

"You don't get much sleep, do you?" I asked.

"Silence!" he said. "Ordinance 55: Criminal—"

I took up the refrain. "—aliens shall never speak, unless so ordered."

The Dominant created fuming noises. The guards searched futilely. In frustration, the Dominant said, "Where is the weapon she gave? Speak."

I said, "I have no weapons, but I'd like to tell you how Galactic Government will react when—"

They walked out and rolled down the door. I flopped on the bed and perspired and brooded.

On Henderson's Globe of Spica, I had planned to terminate my present career with this

hunt. I had never especially enjoyed the hazards of hunting, which had cost me a hand, much blood, and large areas of skin. Doreen, Laurinda, Celestine, and I had decided to emigrate to Mother Earth. Game wardens, foresters, and gardeners were needed for the century-old project of reclaiming that world. There I would find work more pleasant than pursuing things with tentacles, fangs, and maws. Of course, if I failed to earn a large fee from this hunt, we would be unable to go.

My principal difficulty was that Maggie was private. GG had no authority except to send inspection parties. A private planet could not attempt interplanetary or interstellar flight without GG supervision, nor could it own weapons other than those required for defense against native life. Most private planets had been settled two centuries before, when there were individuals wealthy enough to undertake stellar colonization. Few who tried succeeded. The fifteen or twenty private planets in the Explored Galaxy were all eccentric. Some even advocated capital punishment, an archaic system of killing mental defectives.

The one factor on my side was that no GG citizen could be punished by a private planet—or so Galactic law specified.

IV: FIVEDAY MORNING

TOOTHIES raced for their holes when the Dominant and three guards entered the cell. "Did you get any sleep?" I asked.

The Dominant announced, "Shall see the Jury."

They marched me out into the hot, slanting rays of Joe's Sun. Large, brown-haired, big-nosed pedestrians gawked at me with stolid curiosity. The women carefully kept at a distance of ten foot lengths. We turned a corner and passed a column of varied men and women who did not fall within Maggiese standards. They carried or pushed primitive agricultural tools, such as chain saws, weed burners, and self-propelled soil tillers and sickle bars. Their brooches were inscribed, "Farmer."

We climbed a broad flight of plank steps into a huge log building with wooden pillars and carved friezes. The Dominant said, "Guard him," and passed through one of the many doors in the vestibule.

I examined two flat photographs on the wall. I decided that the Maggiese letters labeled the man as Joe Nordo, and that he had said, "To be alike is to be free." The woman was Maggie Ione Curwen Nordo. Evidently, she had never said anything worth quoting.

Although Maggie was rather pretty, she had features similar to Joe's. Joe was a caricature of most of the natives. His face appeared almost in profile, so that the combination concave and convex bridge of his nose jutted prominently.

The Dominant came through another doorway and motioned. The guards ushered me into a room where Betty Toal sat between two more guards. Dirt smeared her face and her torn white sack.

"Low, Toal," I said. "What—"

The Dominant said, "Planetary Ordinance 104: Criminal aliens shall not speak to fallen Maggiese females."

"Can't you do anything but gibber Ordinances?" I yelled. "Toal only gave me some water. If you—"

Leather bands snapped around my wrists. The guards tied me to rings in the wall. The Dominant strapped a harness under my jaw and across the top of my head. I tried to talk, but all that came past my clenched teeth was, "Effhyu hink hyu kun—" and I stopped.

Someone called, "Criminal Minimum Betty Toal!"

Toal left the room between her guards. She returned, in not more than fifteen minutes, alone. She wore loose white coveralls stamped, "Recessive—Alien Status." As she passed me, her teeth flashed in a glad and grateful smile.

V: FIVEDAY AFTERNOON

ABOUT two hours past noon of Planet Maggie's twenty-seven hour day, a man called, "Criminal Alien Ube Kinlock!"

Surrounded by guards, I stiffly walked into an auditorium with a high, peaked ceiling supported by heavy wooden beams. A few spectators sat in rows of wooden benches. Tall windows stood open, and mechanisms with rotating blades fanned the air, but the room was stifling. Toothies chased each other across the beams.

At the end of the room, a man sat in a high box. As we approached, I saw that he was a replica of the Joe Nordo portrait in the vestibule. Carved in the molding around the top of the box was the legend, "His Perfectness, Spencer Gaius Quesnay, the Joe Nordo Ideal."

The guards halted and made peculiar gestures, swiftly touching their foreheads with extended hands. One announced, "Your Perfectness, we bring Criminal Alien Ube Kinlock."

Behind a long desk below Spencer Gaius Quesnay's box sat five men—large, tanned, and well provided with noses. A placard identified the man in the

center, who had gray in his hair, as, "Foreman Maximum Rory J. N. Eijkman." He said, "Criminal Alien Kinlock broke many Ordinances." He picked up a paper and read from it. "Broke 320 by refusing to show papers to the shuttle pilot, Ypsilanti. Broke 419 when attempted to ride the upper deck. Broke 481 by conversing with the pilot."

The list of my defections grew. My movements had been observed from the wall by something called scopeplate. Any slight suspicion that I had flaunted an Ordinance was assumed to be proven fact. Even my use of the cargo hoist was criminal, and my relationship with Betty Toal was filled with offenses. I grunted indignantly in the head harness, but no one listened. Perspiration drained from my body.

After weary minutes, Eijkman read the last of my foul deeds, which was speaking to Toal in the outer room. Eijkman said, "Because of many crimes, suggest he be charged with breaking 792, which covers disrespect to people and customs of Planet Maggie."

An unusual noise came from the spectators. I twisted my head and saw that they were slapping the palms of their hands together.

Eijkman glanced at the other men behind the desk. He frowned at me and said, "Were you Maggiese, should recommend that you be reduced to Farmer. Are reportedly an agent of the creeping monster, Galactic Government. Were sent to kill the Hog. One alien with nothing but small weapons cannot kill the Hog. Am always opposed to asking Government aid. So—"

A man named Maximum Qasim Pierre Macready, according to his sign, exclaimed, "Foreman, object! If the Hog is not killed, may as well find another continent or island. If this alien—"

"The case concerns the alien, not the Hog," Eijkman said.

"Think it silly for an entire population to be scared by the Hog!" cried J. N. Zengo Bartok, a man leaner than the others. "The alien is a well known hunter. Suppose—"

Eijkman said, "Order!" He glared at me. "Sentencing the alien would require appeal to foul Galactic Government. Recommend deportation."

I had anticipated being dragged away to a gas chamber, or an electric chair, or some other savage torture device; but I still did not like Eijkman's decree.

Eijkman said, "Ordinance 30: Alien tourists shall not stay on Maggie longer than one week. That is, nine days or 243 hours. Must be above air by 26:47 Threeday night."

Bartok objected, "Have not passed the decision!"

Eijkman ignored him. "Since no plane will be in space then, time must be extended."

"Uh—ah, yes, must," said His Perfectness, Spencer Gaius Quesnay, the Joe Nordo Ideal, as he leaned from his box. "Er, should not force the—um—alien to leave without a plane."

Bowing to the box, Eijkman told me, "As His Perfectness explains, must wait here for the Ap-GG-12C. Will return at about 20:50 next Fourday. Shuttle blasts at 18:00."

"Foreman," Bartok again interrupted. "Should see if this alien can destroy the Hog, however long it takes."

The other Maximums began commenting. I fumbled with the head harness. The guards restrained me, but Quesnay gestured from his box and mumbled above the din, "Let, uh, the alien —ah, speak. Would like to, uh, hear him."

The guards removed the straps. I massaged my chin and croaked, "Your Perfectness." I cleared my throat noisily. "Your Perfectness, I agree that I should hunt the Hog."

"What, ah, is he saying?" Quesnay grumbled. "Cannot understand a, uh, word."

I spoke more distinctly. "I'll be happy to leave as soon as the Ap-GG-12C returns, if you'll let me hunt the Hog while I'm here. I'll guarantee to kill him, if you cooperate, but with three conditions."

"Of course, conditions," Eijkman said hopefully.

"According to GG regulations, I must investigate the place of a carnivorous life form in the bionomics of a planet or continent and decide if destroying it would be harmful."

"Can doubt the Hog should be killed?" Bartok yelled. "In three years, he and sows have killed 237 Maggiese!"

Foreman Eijkman sneered, "Can import more hogs. The continent swarms with them. Since Criminal Alien Kinlock believes should not kill the Hog—"

"I didn't say that!" I almost snarled. My feet throbbed from too much standing. "I'll give an example, also about hogs.

"Many centuries ago on Mother Earth, in a place called Sumatra, there were animals like the hellcat of Four, Alpha Gruis, except they were smaller and had stripes. These cats sometimes ate men, but hunters liked to kill them whether they were maneaters or not. As the cats decreased, the wild hogs in Sumatra increased. The hogs started eating the crops, mostly some plant, called palms, from which oil was taken. The hogs practically destroyed the econ-

omy of Sumatra, because the cats, which had checked the hog population, had been destroyed."

Bartok said "Clever fable. All the Hog eats is us and domestic animals. And killing him will not destroy his species."

"I'll accept that," I said. "The second condition is that I must learn if the Hog has near-human intelligence, and if we can communicate with him."

Eijkman laughed harshly. "Communicate? The Hog has no intelligence."

"Very well. The last condition is that you must pay my fee, since this private planet makes no donations to Galactic Government." I impulsively doubled my rates and said, "My fee is one thousand x-tops, fifty coupons, to be paid when I've killed the Hog."

Eijkman said, "Gangster!"

Macready said, "Give him platinum bars. Have too many now."

I raised my voice above the arguing. "There's a standard form in my Travel Book. It relieves GG of any consequences and guarantees that I be paid. It must be signed by the highest authority on the planet."

"The Jury is head here!" Eijkman said. "Order!"

His Perfectness mumbled from above, "Give, uh, the alien the form."

Eijkman looked as if he had swallowed something sour. He muttered, "His Perfectness suggests Criminal Alien Kinlock get the statement. Vote."

The other four Maximums nodded. Eijkman said, "Am opposed. Four to one."

Quesnay said, "Good—uh, give the uh statement. Guards, huh, find his baggage. Take him, er, to Dominant Rasmussen."

Eijkman growled at me, "Will leave this planet at 18:00 o'clock Fourday!"

VI: FIVEDAY EVENING

BY THE TIME my papers had been located and the form filled and stamped by the Jury, and my luggage had been found and loaded on a three-wheeled cart, Joe's Sun was setting. A guard, who talked enough to reveal that his name was Smith, guided me through the stifling streets. Already the dark nebula was visible, and thunder-clouds on the horizon added to the possibility that the sky was having convulsions.

Smith helped me pull the cart up a ramp to the planked walk of the outer wall. Guards stood at intervals and peeped through infra-red goggles or checked strange instruments. Some laughed after we passed. We crossed a bridge to the second story of a log building. Smith beat the door with his knuckles, until a

girl, an adolescent edition of Betty Toal, opened it. "Fine weather, Minimum," she said.

Smith asked, "Dominant Rasmussen here?"

"Yes—" The girl became aware of what I was and backed away to a legal ten foot length.

The guard helped deposit my cases inside the doorway. A huge, white-haired old man lumbered into the hall. He supported his obesity with a wooden rod curved at one end. "Dominant Alcaeus Rasmussen," said Smith, "Alien Hunter Ube Kinlock."

Rasmussen's Maggiese nose tilted at the end so that the nostrils almost paralleled the plane of his puffy cheeks. His chins concealed his neck. "Was warned would come here," he grunted. "Eat. Then we talk of the Hog."

I said, "Thanks," and turned to Smith, but he was gone.

Rasmussen ushered me into a wood-sheathed room. A toothie thrust his striped head from a crack, squeaked once, and withdrew. About fifteen people sat at a table. Sighting me, one woman screamed, and all the females, including a girl about eight, pushed back their stools. "Sit down," Rasmussen commanded. "Will be no menace here."

Rasmussen placed me at a small table in the corner and occupied a stool opposite me. He said, "Ordinances forbid close contact between alien males and Maggiese females. Eating together, too dangerous." A young man set a plate and cup before Rasmussen, who said, "Emilio, serve the alien also."

Emilio furnished me with a bewildering assortment of bowls, cups, plates, and utensils, while glowering as if I had stolen his x-tops. The soup smelled somewhat like the preservative on the city walls, but I was too starved to care. "Do you know Betty Toal?" I took time to ask. "I seem to have caused her trouble with the authorities. I want to help her if possible."

"Needs no help," Rasmussen said. "Has reached her goal. With your assistance, has broken laws until must be deported. Was scheduled to marry the pilot, Olaf Ypsilanti."

"Marry Ypsilanti!" I choked on the soup.

"A fine man," Rasmussen said. "The girl's reaction is odd."

I started on a mixture containing cubes of meat and exotic vegetables. The people at the large table had stopped eating and fixed me with disconcerting stares. I said, "It's hard to tell you people apart."

"Those are children, grandchildren, in-laws," Rasmussen explained. "All true Maggiese resemble each other. Is the Joe Nordo Plan. Someday, except

for age and sex, all Maggiese will be alike."

"I thought Planet Maggie had only been settled two centuries. You surely must have developed new genetic techniques for everyone to be this much alike so soon."

"No. Hereditary Controls Council hunts new ways. Attempt to count and identify human genes with devices they invented. Plan all marriages and calculate appearance of offspring. Much guessing. Still have Mongoloids, blonds, even red hair." Rasmussen glanced at my red hair.

I ate coarse bread and drank juice with unknown flavors. I asked, "Why make such a bother over looks?"

Rasmussen frowned. "Joe Nordo said, 'To be alike is to be free.' When men are exactly the same, envy, suspicion, prejudice, other evils vanish. Already Planet Maggie stands alone. Only true democracy in the Explored Galaxy. Jury is chosen by the people. Ordinances these men provide must pass in referendum with a ninety per cent majority. Farmers, of course, do not vote. His Perfectness the Joe Nordo Ideal is but an honored figurehead, the man who most resembles Joe Nordo."

I said, "The people actually vote for these stu—uh, for these Ordinances?"

"Of course. Their right."

Outside, the sky was now completely dark except when streaked with chains of lightning. Rumbling thunder rattled the windows.

VII: FIVEDAY NIGHT

AFTER DINNER, Rasmussen led me to his "den." I had expected a cave, but it was another wooden room. The advance winds of the gathering storm stirred the cloth around an open window and ruffled papers on a carved desk. I turned left, jumped convulsively, and clawed for imaginary weapons.

A pair of tiny red eyes peered from beneath flopping ears. From either side of a truncated snout, two yellow tusks jutted upward. Grayish-brown, creased, tuberculated skin sprinkled with stiff hairs covered a monstrous head at least a meter and a half wide and two meters long.

I recovered enough to see that the horror was mounted on a plaque above a stone arch. Rasmussen eased his enormous body into a strong chair. He gestured at the head and explained, "A sow. The Hog is larger. Snout is almost solid bone. Skin two inches thick, filled with horny plates harder than many metals. Almost impervious to our hissers."

I said, "I've seen strange ani-

mals, but this thing— Maybe it's the width of the jaw, and the close-set eyes, and the way the snout tilts up. It looks like something horribly human." Suddenly, I realized that it resembled Rasmussen.

The old hunter closed the window against the first cool breeze I had breathed on the planet. Rain splashed the transparent panes. Rasmussen said, "Maggiese hogs are not true swine. No one has examined them much. Who cares? Could be marsupials or unique. Similar appearance is an evolutionary coincidence, quite often seen in the Explored Galaxy."

He pointed to an antique weapon in a rack with other arms. "Only rocket rifle on the planet. Found it in the museum. Two hundred years old. Some of the rockets fired. Others were duds. Used it to kill five sows and twenty pigs. Now the rockets are all gone. Type is no longer made. In any event, laws forbid importing. Trapped, poisoned, shocked, and shot the other four sows and twenty-one pigs. Betty Toal—do not understand her—Betty Toal killed four pigs."

I said, "She mentioned that she was a hunter." I considered Toal for a moment and asked, "How may I contact her?"

"If insist, shall show you her house tomorrow."

Since the old man evidently disapproved of the topic, I abandoned it and examined the rocket rifle, a clumsy device that seemed ready to fall apart if anyone dared to fire it. I said, "I'd think you'd import all sorts of weapons when the hogs have killed 237 people."

"Two hundred thirty-eight. Killed a Farmer this afternoon. We follow the Joe Nordo Plan. Nothing may draw us from it. Build comfortable houses not used elsewhere for a thousand years. Our food has not been known out there for five dark centuries. Speech is simple, not slurred and wordy." Rasmussen removed a long weapon with a graceful wooden stock from the rack and said, "Had some success with firearms."

"Firearms?"

Rasmussen displayed a metal tube with an attached point. "Nitrocellulose in this shell explodes. Drives the bullet through the barrel."

"Noisy," I supposed. "Don't you have some big ones mounted on carriages?"

Rasmussen juggled the firearm but avoided dropping it. Deep wrinkles creased his brow. Thunder rumbled and shook the window. The hunter said, "Is the largest yet made."

I said, "Tuesday—no, Fourday morning, when the shuttle was grounding, I saw some men

pushing something with a long tube, and wheels, and trailing pieces. I was too spacesick to care about it, but it could have been one of these firearms, a big one."

"Where?"

"They were putting it in a building in a corner of the wall. Near the gate facing the spacefield, I think."

Rasmussen sat looking at me and chewing his lips. He shook his fat head and purred, "Must be tired. Must rest until morning. Then we find the Hog."

I protested that I had questions about the habits of the Hog, but he took my arm and escorted me into the hall. He pointed and said, "Your room and luggage." The floor boards groaned under his weight, as he passed through a doorway.

The room contained only a cabinet, chair, and bed. A smaller adjoining room was furnished with what seemed to be cleansing facilities. I finally found Emilio, or his twin brother, and had him explain the Maggiese system, which involved lathering and soaking in a small tank of water.

Refreshed, I reviewed the sketchy research I had done on Henderson's Globe, Spica System. With no time to indulge in ponderous interstellar communication before leaving for Maggie, I had gathered but few facts, and they might not apply, since Rasmussen said the Hog was not actually a hog.

I projected a booklet with the mighty title, *Initial Experiments in Earthian Swine* (Sus scrofa) *Production on Freesphere.* If hogs were as delicate as this booklet pretended, I wondered how a similar animal could become an indestructible man-eater. On Freesphere, hogs wallowed only in clean plastic tanks and lived under healthful domes. Their food was carefully compounded and measured. They were constantly inoculated and treated for diseases, some of which were, even today, virtually incurable. They were protected from temperature extremes and from sunburn and sunstroke. The booklet warned that over-exertion or over-exposure to sunlight might cause a hog to have convulsions. It sadly concluded that Freesphere was unsuited to hogs, except under the most expensive conditions.

I read further in my one-volume edition of Witos' classic *Natural History of Ninety Planets,* but even that old-time genius was uncertain about the Maggiese hog. He suggested that, unlike omnivorous swine, it was totally carnivorous, rooting up small burrowing animals or catching larger forms, and speculated that, under standard gravity, it might weigh twelve metric tons. Galactic Government zo-

ologists listed the hog as a probable beast.

Whatever the Hog's nature, I felt that I could kill him by the most effective method of detroying nearly any life form, perforation. The Maggiese had failed by using crude weapons.

VIII: SIXDAY MORNING

SEVERAL rodents crossed the gravel street. I said, "These toothies are a problem, aren't they?"

Rasmussen wore a mottled green and brown sack and stockings gartered above his knees. An eyeshade projected from his forehead. "Not so many as once," he panted. "Sometimes gnawed down houses."

Rasmussen carried a firearm on a strap over his shoulder. I carried the hisser, the robotic, and a pack containing many items often useless but sometimes essential. Joe's Sun glinted into our eyes through cracks in the wall ahead and sparkled on puddles of rainwater.

"Betty Toal lives here," Rasmussen said. He struck his stick against a door in a long, log structure with identical doors spaced at ten-meter intervals. He tried the handle and said, "Not home. Probably has gone to her garden."

We walked on down the street. I said, "An air hunt will be best. It's a good way with large animals."

Rasmussen said, "Saw the wrecked jetcopter at the field? The shuttle would be a poor way to hunt."

"No aircraft on the whole planet? Well, then, a car."

Rasmussen pointed to a man passing on a muscle-powered vehicle. "Have tricycles, but am too old to pedal. Ride a tractor to likely places. Then will be afoot. Mine are flat."

"On foot!"

An uncanny contrivance, such as I had never imagined possible, waited near a wide gate. It had twelve wheels, four small ones in front and in back, and four large, lugged ones in the center. A confusion of rods and bars connected the lugged wheels to double cylinders on either side. Smoke puffed from a pipe atop the round body of the vehicle.

A tired, worried, red-haired man stood on a rear platform and adjusted levers. Although he contrasted completely with the standard Maggiese, he seemed familiar. I then realized that here was a man resembling me.

A woman, dressed in a costume like Rasmussen's, sat in one of the front seats. The old hunter sighed and said, "Fine weather, Betty Toal."

Toal smiled and said, "Low, Rasmussen. Low, Kinlock."

"Why break Ordinances," Rasmussen cried, "until must be deported? Ypsilanti is a fine man. Must go to this extreme? Reconsider the marriage. Let me try to use any influence may have, to re-instate you."

"No, I'm leaving," Toal said.

"Are you all right, Toal?" I asked. "I apologize for causing you trouble. If there—"

"No, no, Kinlock. It was deliberate on my part."

Rasmussen said, "Must not change your Maggiese accent. Even if you go, must remember our ways."

"People out there don't speak Maggiese, and I'm going to stop it. I've been practicing for a year."

Rasmussen said, "At least, Betty, do not make this hunt. Shot pigs, but this is the Hog. Must stay."

"I'm going with you."

"Ordinance 36 forbids male aliens and Maggiese females to ride in the same tractor."

"I no longer obey Ordinances."

Rasmussen puffed out his cheeks and expelled air in an irritated hiss. He glowered at Toal and me and said, "Cannot insure the safety of either. Climb aboard, then, Alien Kinlock."

Toal moved over in the back seat. I heaved my weapons and pack to the platform. Rasmussen took the front seat. I followed him up the short ladder and sat beside Toal. Her elbows were nude, but leather stockings concealed her knees and ankles.

"This is a tractor?" I said. "What is it?"

"Steam engine," Toal answered. "Burns crude oil. Water is carried in this tank around the boiler. The steam pushes the pistons, and the rods turn the wheels."

I shook my head in amazement and wondered why no one had invented a steam engine before.

The red-headed man, who wore a Farmer brooch, walked alongside. "Dominant, the tractor has full steam," he said. "Fire is on automatic."

Rasmussen sneered at the Farmer. "Hope, Yuko, no more failures occur. Your work has been poor."

Yuko touched his forehead with extended fingers and stepped back. Rasmussen pulled a lever and gripped the steering wheel. With a slow chugging noise, the tractor crept forward and, at a rapidly increasing speed, moved through the gate and a gap in the outer defenses.

"Rather noisy!" I yelled.

"Yes!" Toal screeched. "The Hog will hear us miles away!"

"What are miles?"

"A mile is 5,280 feet!"

"I see!"

Trailing a plume of steam, the

tractor puffed somewhat majestically along a dirt road. Toal began a question and answer game, conducted in shouts, about things and affairs in the Explored Galaxy. She asked about tridie, the ultrabrain, astraplanes, and Galactic Government. She asked for more information about marriage customs and about the reasons for women's fashions always concealing elbows, knees, and ankles while often providing scant cover elsewhere. Some of her questions were difficult to answer.

THE TRACTOR now rumbled through a woodland, rank with gnarled trees crowned by gray-green leaves, and abruptly rolled into open ground with a small, walled village in the center. Rasmussen stopped the tractor. The torsos of several men appeared over the top of the wall. They looked odd, for a moment, since two were bony, and one had black hair.

Rasmussen yelled, "Have you seen the Hog?"

A skinny man said, "Fine weather, Dominant. Heard him at 25:30 toward the swamp."

Rasmussen steered the tractor along a road that circled the wall. Nausea from the vehicle's motion crept over me. The ride was especially disconcerting, since the four leading wheels pivoted under the seats and gave an illusion that the tractor was leaving the road on curves.

"What is that place?" I shouted. "I thought Joetropolis was the only town!"

"Young Farmer School!" Toal yelled.

"What's it for?"

"Young Farmers come here for training when they're five! At twenty-two, they're sterilized and go back to Joetropolis!"

I shuddered. "This perfect democracy is a bit harsh!"

"The people vote for Ordinances!"

"Farmers don't vote!"

"No, but their parents do! Suppose it is horrible!" Toal admitted.

Rasmussen turned to us, leaving the tractor to find its own way along the twisting road. He said, "No need to discuss customs with the alien!"

"Watch it!" I yelled.

Rasmussen rotated and steered the tractor away from a jumble of boulders. I perspired against the wind of our motion. Toal said, "Children can choose to be deported! Their parents advise them! The parents can be sterilized and stay here, or they can become aliens and be deported with the child! Must not have other children if one is suspected of being a Farmer! Must wait five years!"

Rasmussen brought the quaking machine to a halt on the crest

of the highest hill yet encountered. The cultivated fields were behind us. Here, stumps covered the slopes, but young trees had been planted in rows to replace the vanished forest. Silence rang in my ears. Then I heard calls and whistles from unknown wildlife.

Stiffly, the fat hunter descended to the dirt track. Pulling my sunhat down and lowering the screen against the increasing heat and glare, I followed. I wore my lightest oversuit, but it seemed as heavy as frigid zone garb. The only blessing of the environment was that no insects or related pests were in evidence.

Rasmussen walked to a patch of plants with round, purple-veined leaves and yellow stems. He pointed with his carved stick and began a lecture. "On the western skyline, the sea. There, the cliffs. That silver thread, inland about three miles, the waterfall into the Baby Maggie River. Three hundred yards wide, full of rocks and currents. Misty cloud in the east is the Joe Junior Swamp, where the cliffs end. Swamp extends along the coast ten miles." He extended both arms and proclaimed, "Joe Nordo chose this protected peninsula to settle. Ocean full of reefs, flesh-eating fish, reptiles, currents."

I asked, "Then how did the hogs come in?"

"That gap in the cliffs. Caused by an earthquake ten years ago. Three years ago, His Perfectness suggested the landslide be used to bring timber. Pontoon bridge was floated across the river. Farmers began leveling the landslide to make a road. One night, the hogs came down the path. Sank many pontoons in crossing. Ate two Minimums and one Dominant who were stationed there."

Moving back to the tractor, Rasmussen said, "Walled the gap and removed the bridge. Hogs ravaged the land. These three years have been the worst, since the grizzly apes—" He heaved himself into the seat. "Must move on. Cannot hunt all day and camp here."

I climbed up beside Toal. "What about apes?" I said, but the old man started the tractor, and the noise smothered my question.

Rasmussen steered downhill, and, at the bottom of the slope, pulled a lever to its limit. The puffing of the machine became a throbbing blast as speed increased. "What are grizzly apes?" I shouted at Toal.

"The apes were all killed in Joe Nordo's time!" Toal screamed. "Threw rocks and hit people with clubs!"

"GG doesn't like that!" I said. "You can't exterminate an intelligent species! You're sup-

posed to negotiate with them!" I put my hand on Rasmussen's shoulder and bellowed, "Please slow it down!"

The old man awarded me a deadly glance. The steam engine's wild panting subsided, and the tractor crept along the road, which had dwindled to tracks sometimes covered by red-tinged grass.

I said, "I hear that Joe Nordo wiped out some intelligent apes."

Rasmussen said, "Betty Toal, no reason to teach this alien history. Killing the apes was necessary. A menace."

"So's the Hog," I said, "but I don't fully believe the Jury's claim that he has no intelligence. He's been clever enough to avoid being killed for three years."

Rasmussen braked the tractor so quickly that I fell across the front seat. He growled, "Hogs killed my first wife and two sons. Killed nearly all my old friends. Am the oldest man left on the planet."

Toal said, "Killed my parents. Everyone in Joetropolis lost friends or relatives to the hogs." Tears welled from her blue eyes and slid down her brown cheeks. "More horrible," she sniffed, "that most were eaten. Why should you care for the Hog, Kinlock? Hunting is your business. Get a large fee for destroying him."

"Shall return?" Rasmussen snarled.

Toal produced a square of white cloth, wiped her eyes, and then blew her nose. "No," I sighed wearily. "Show me the Hog—any range up to two thousand meters—and I'll kill him."

IX: SIXDAY AFTERNOON

We ate lunch under the convoluted branches of a vinetree, having left the tractor on a trail a kilometer away. Surrounding us, except for occasional clearings filled with red plants, the great vines twisted in a confusion penetrated only by paths as entwined as the trees.

Rasmussen had scarcely spoken since our debate. Toal remained icy, although the air was asphyxiating. In an effort to keep the halting conversation from the Hog, until my companions were calmer, I said, "I still don't understand how Maggiese came to look so much alike in only two hundred years."

Rasmussen grunted and chewed a bread and meat ply. Toal studied the green birds that chased through the fringed leaves of the vinetree.

I said, "I recall a few figures about heredity. The chance of any single individual being born from a union is about one in

two hundred fifty million. If the parents differed in only twenty dominant genes, this individual would be one of more than a million possible variations. It's hard to produce specific humans to order.

"Say you're trying to rid a population of an undesirable trait. If twenty-five per cent of the people show the trait, and none are allowed offspring, it would still take three centuries to bring the incidence of the trait down to one per cent, because many people would carry it as a recessive characteristic. Then, mutations may be undetected for generations and upset the whole system. Joe Nordo must have—"

"There he is!" Rasmussen gasped.

"Joe Nordo?" I said stupidly.

"The Hog!" Rasmussen produced an optical instrument consisting of a small telescope for each eye. He said, "Two hundred yards off!"

I jumped up, tripped over a root, fell, crawled to my equipment, and yanked out the quadpod. I set the quadpod close to Rasmussen, lifted the robotic into position, and threw the switches to maximum. "One shot," I predicted. "Explosive pellets with nitrobenzene. Where is he?"

Rasmussen pointed. I swung the robotic and illuminated the sight. In a little clearing, the Hog rooted at a clay bank. His scaly, dull red skin hung in folds and creases about leg joints and shoulders. His straight back terminated in a twitching tail at one end and, at the other, sloped abruptly in a short neck that lowered the snout almost to the ground.

I adjusted the sight to precise focus and reached for the main switch. Something exploded close to my left ear.

"Shot the monster!" Rasmussen cried. He thrust another tube into his firearm and raised it to his shoulder. A thin puff of smoke and a second explosion burst from the barrel. "Again!" Rasmussen exulted.

"What are you doing?" I roared. "I was ready to kill him, and you started exploding that thing!"

The clearing was now empty. A nearly human squeal lingered in the warm air.

"Go find the carcass," Rasmussen said. "Am too old for hiking. The Hog did not stay long in the sun. Were too slow."

Mumbling, I pulled a ranger from my pack and swept the forest with it. I stopped. In an arbor formed by vinetree branches, I saw part of the Hog's head and forequarters at a range of 523 meters. "He's on his feet," I said.

"Where?" Rasmussen gasped.

"One shot," I promised. I jacked the robotic higher and once more focussed the sight. I threw the main switch. The weapon hummed. The barrel moved slightly upward and to the left. The robotic made a spitting noise.

Even as the thud of the exploding pellet reached us two seconds later, I was choking, "A-an antelope, or something! It jumped in front of the Hog. The pellet hit it! That's the only way a robotic can miss—if something covers the target. This is the first—"

Rasmussen laughed. "Perhaps will die from my bullets," he chuckled. "Go look for him, if not afraid. Incidentally, it is unlawful for an alien to kill game on Maggie."

I searched the trees with the ranger, but saw no life except a flock of birds disturbed by the blast. I shouldered my pack, picked up the hisser, and stalked down the hill into the vines.

Rasmussen called, "Be back in two hours. Must return before dark."

STUMBLING over roots and pushing through low tunnels, I tried to reach the clearing in which the Hog had first been sighted. At a sound behind me, I whirled and almost hung myself in a looping tendril. Betty Toal, carrying a slender firearm, moved gracefully in my wake.

"What's wrong with that old man?" I snarled at her. "Is he jealous because he's the great hunter, and I'm after the Hog? I'd have killed the Hog if he hadn't ruined my first try."

Toal said, "He's proud. He's vain about his hunting. I think he hates the Hog too much to let him escape. Of course, he protested to the Jury about calling an outside hunter. Probably resents you."

"Yes," I said. "You'd best go to the tractor with him. I don't like hunting on foot in a forest. I never do it if I can use another method."

"No, you need a guide, although Ordinances 37, 38, and 42 forbid a Maggiese female to enter a forest with a male alien."

We smiled at each other. "I'm sorry about this morning," I said. "I didn't intend any insult to the memories of your family and friends. I didn't realize what the Hog had done to you."

"It's all right, Kinlock."

"We'd best go on. You'll be about as safe with me as anywhere, if the Hog circles."

"No, this way."

Toal dodged in front of me and undulated rapidly through the vines. I kept tripping and catching my head or the hisser barrel in the tendrils. We, at length, stepped through an arch into a clearing.

A horde of striped toothies swarmed around a clay bank that had been excavated until cross sections of tunnels were exposed. A hundred little eyes stared. One or two toothies even stood erect on hind feet for a better view. One rodent squeaked. Others answered. Some went into holes in the bank, and others vanished among the matted red flowers that filled the clearing.

I examined the great cloven depressions left in the damp ground by the Hog's feet. "He was rooting for toothies," I said. "The Jury claimed he has no part in this planet's bionomics, but he's checking the toothie population." I glanced at Toal and said, "Don't start glaring like that again. I'll finish the Hog for you. He's probably the only one surviving, since the Jury says he isn't—and one old boar can't carry on the species."

I followed the footsteps of the Hog across the clearing and into the silent green corridors. Infrequent glimpses of the sky revealed darkening clouds sweeping up from the horizon. Something rumbled in the distance. "Thunder," Toal said.

Soaked with perspiration generated by the humid heat and by anticipation of meeting the Hog, I tiptoed around a vine trunk and almost stepped in the mess made by the robotic pellet that should have blasted the Hog. Toal said, "A jumpalong."

The animal, a brown thing with four horns, had been blown nearly in half. The flesh around the wound had turned purple. "Stay away from it," I warned. "Nitrobenzene is potent stuff."

The Hog had departed through a tunnel of his own manufacture, penetrating the vines in a straight line for fifty meters. As I moved into the hole, lightning bathed the forest floor in green light, and thunder crackled. "Do you have rain every day all summer?" I complained.

"Yes," Toal said, "but this is only spring."

Big raindrops splattered against the canopy of leaves. I said, "Do you want to go back? A thunderstorm's not an ideal time to hunt."

"You'd have a cold trail by tomorrow. The Hog may be badly wounded."

I breathed deeply and peered down the dim tunnel. "You watch the rear," I said, whispering for some reason.

Lightning flickered through the vegetation in nerve-racking patterns. The leaves no longer turned the rain. I told myself I was unhinged to hunt the Hog, when hearing him would be impossible, but I walked slowly forward.

The Hog's tunnel broke into a path marked by his hoofs. The

path curved back and forth, for about a kilometer, and led to rocky ground above a tumbling stream. I removed a folded robe from my pack, shook it out, and gave it to Toal. "Put that on," I said. "You'll be soaked if we go out there."

"But what about you?"

"I'm already wet, and very little of it's rain."

The lightning had subsided before the increasing downpour, but, as I walked from the woods, I cringed in a reflex I had acquired after seeing a man struck on a bare plain. Water ran off my sunhat and saturated my oversuit. My non-skid boots slipped on the wet rocks.

A grumbling noise reached me through the rain. I was hoping to dismiss it as thunder, but Toal said, "The Hog."

"Where is he?" I whispered. Toal shook her head. I studied the woods, then turned back to the creek. Old, decayed stumps, piles of rotting brush and limbs, and clumps of young trees spotted the ground across the stream. Gaudy flowering plants grew in broad patches of yellow, red, and orange. Beneath the pelting rain, the warm ground extruded a low, slowly swirling mist.

A SHRILL screech echoed distantly. The hisser jumped to my shoulder, but I saw no target. Toal said, "The tractor whistle. Rasmussen wants to go."

"He said two hours," I objected. "It hasn't been two hours."

"May think hunting is useless in the rain."

"I suppose so," I sighed. "No traces on these rocks. That mist is covering the stream. I have a sniffer, but it won't pick up much from wet ground. You lead, but, if you see the Hog, drop flat to give me a shot."

We sloshed back into the wiggling path. Again the tractor whistle shrieked. We walked faster, slipping in the mud. Somewhere, the Hog grunted. We trotted.

As we reached the tunnel in the vinetrees, Toal stopped. "Listen!" she said. "Starting the tractor! Cannot leave us!"

She ran. I splashed and slid on her track, but she had a fifty meter lead before I reached the dead jumpalong. My running slowed to a tottering shuffle. I breathed in painful wheezes, and lost my sunhat, and did not bother to retrieve it.

I panted into the clearing where we had first seen the Hog. Toal waited near the clay bank. The entrenched toothies peeped from their holes. I thought we were in the wrong place, since the red flowers were now orange, but then I saw that the rain had somehow soaked the color from them, forming red

pools over the clearing.

"I lost your cape," Toal said. Her breathing was only slightly rapid, but I gasped as if I had been strangled.

The Hog grunted. He grunted five times while Toal and I stood immobile. The grunting ascended to a squealing sound like, "Kyieel uhoo! Keel uhoo! Keel oo Keenlogh!"

For the first time on Planet Maggie, I shivered with cold. "Did you, did you hear th-that?" I stuttered. "What goes on? Can the Hog actually talk?"

"Talk?"

"He said, 'Kill you, Kinlock.' "

"How could he?" Toal said. "How could he know your name?"

"He's been listening," I said. Then I snickered hysterically. "That's ridiculous. Rasmussen thinks the Hog may be a marsupial, and marsupials don't talk. He hasn't any tool-grasping organs either."

Toal slogged into the vine woods. "No use running any farther," she said. "The tractor sounds as if it's half way to Joetropolis."

X: SIXDAY EVENING

THE RAIN stopped a half hour after Joe's Sun set. Betty Toal and I were a long distance from Joetropolis and the Young Farmer School. Although Toal had insisted upon carrying the hisser in addition to her firearm, I was ready to collapse under the combined mass of my pack and the robotic, which Rasmussen had left exposed to the rain.

The Hog moved with us. Where he stalked remained impossible to tell. The darkening of night amplified the ventriloquial quality of his grunting. At times, he seemed ahead of us, occasionally he walked on either side, but, most often, he trailed close behind.

"Are you sure there's only one?" I panted. "Sounds like a herd."

In the darkness, the Hog laughed. That is, he rapidly grunted, "Huh, huh, huh, huh!"

I stopped in the middle of the dirt road and squinted at indistinct shapes. A field bordered the road on one side, and an area of fresh stumps and scattered vinetrees, the other. "Do you have any night goggles?" I asked.

"No," Toal said.

"I may have a light in my pack."

"No light! The Hog will charge it. He tracks by scent, but has poor sight."

I imagined I saw a great shape in the brush. "Let's climb a tree," I said. "There's a big vine. We'll wait until someone comes for us."

"No one will search. Ordinance 921 forbids anyone to go outside the walls at night."

"Fine. Rasmussen deliberately left us for the Hog. I can understand he may dislike me, but why you?"

"Eeet oo Keenlogh!" the Hog squealed, almost shattering my eardrums.

"The hisser!" I yelled. I dropped the heavy robotic in the mud, jerked the hisser from Toal's arms, and shoved the woman behind me. I turned on the light under the barrel.

The Hog filled the road thirty meters away. His back was at least four meters above the road.

The Hog had only one glinting red eye. The other side of his head contained a ghastly socket. Half of one ear was missing, and his lower left tusk was broken. The bizarrely upswept, upper left tusk was twice the length of the right. Reddish bristles grew, like weeds among rocks, between the bony plates covering his creased hide. With snout touching the ground, he stood on cloven hoofs too small for his oily, swelling body. A stifling stench emanated from him. He moved.

"Run!" I barked. Pellets swished from the hisser's barrel. Some actually rebounded from the Hog's neck. I shot at the charging monster's skull. The hisser pinged empty. The Hog's tusks slashed upward.

I squawked like a space-happy maniac as a tusk ripped into my oversuit. I tumbled into the air and bounced through the branches of the nearby vinetree.

Hanging stunned in a snarl of creepers, I heard sharp cracks from Toal's firearm. The Hog squealed in rage. "Run, Toal!" I wheezed. "He's pellet-proof!"

The Hog stopped squealing. Mud splashed and brush broke.

"Ube Kinlock," Toal cried, "where are you?" Her cries became a mourning wail. I heard her stumbling in the undergrowth.

"Up here," I groaned. "Up here."

"Oh! Don't move. May have broken bones. Found your lantern." A light flashed across the road and countryside, then moved up the tree. "Badly injured?" Toal called.

Dangling in the vines, I became aware that I throbbed and burned all over. "Don't think so," I said. "He tossed me."

The light swayed. Toal crouched on a broad, living rope slightly above me. She unclipped the light from the neck of her sack and held it close to me. "Anything broken?" she asked.

"I don't know," I moaned. "How can anything so big move that fast?"

"You are scratched and bruised." Toal pulled apart a

long rip in my oversuit. "Side is bleeding," she said. "Have to get you down."

"What about the Hog?"

"Ran. You hurt him, Kinlock. Blood on the road."

"Probably mine. A hundred pellets!" I sighed. "He kept coming."

"Said hissers won't stop him. Must cut that vine around your ankle."

Toal put her hand to the back of her neck and pulled it away clutching a small knife. She sawed at the vines. Far away, the Hog grunted, but the sounds had a new, bubbling quality. Toal said, "Going back to the swamp."

I said, "He can talk. He told me he would eat me."

XI: SIXDAY NIGHT

AT ABOUT 26:30 o'clock, according to Toal, we crawled under the electric wires across the road and reached the walls of Joetropolis. The Young Farmer School had refused to open its gates because of six different Ordinances.

Most of the clouds had cleared away, but the dark nebula hung dim and threatening overhead. While Toal searched for a signal button, I—a collapsing hulk of cuts, bruises, tatters, and disgust—sat in the road. With one foot, the Hog had wrecked ten x-tops, three coupons worth of robotic. I had been unable to find the hisser. The only whole pieces of equipment that we recovered were the light, a water pump, the sniffer, one can of S-rations, and a tube of pellets.

Lights suddenly spotted us. A man loudly intoned, "Why break Ordinance 921?"

"This is Recessive Betty Toal and Alien Hunter Ube Kinlock," Toal said. "Open the gate!"

The man said, "Not till morning. The Hog might enter."

Toal said, "The Hog is in the swamp. Kinlock wounded him. Kinlock should see a doctor. We've walked seventeen miles. Throw us a rope, if you won't open the gate."

Then a voice that I recognized spoke. "Let them climb up," ordered the shuttle pilot, Olaf Ypsilanti. "Want to discuss this matter with them."

A mesh of wooden slats and plastic ropes clattered against the logs. "Let me help you, Kinlock," Toal said.

"I'm all right. You first," I said.

Toal slung her weapon and climbed up the net as if she had had no exercise for days. Ypsilanti's fleshy face appeared in the light. Roughly, he helped Toal over the sawtoothed parapet.

Slowly, I followed. No one assisted me at the top. I tore two new gashes in my ragged

oversuit, and my ankles turned under me when I dropped down to the walk.

Someone turned a searchlight and illuminated the six men and one woman standing on the planks. Ypsilanti gripped Toal's wrists in his big hands. "Why treat me this way, Betty?" he asked. "Were to marry next week. Am a strong, handsome Dominant. Any female Minimum should be proud Controls Council selected me for her."

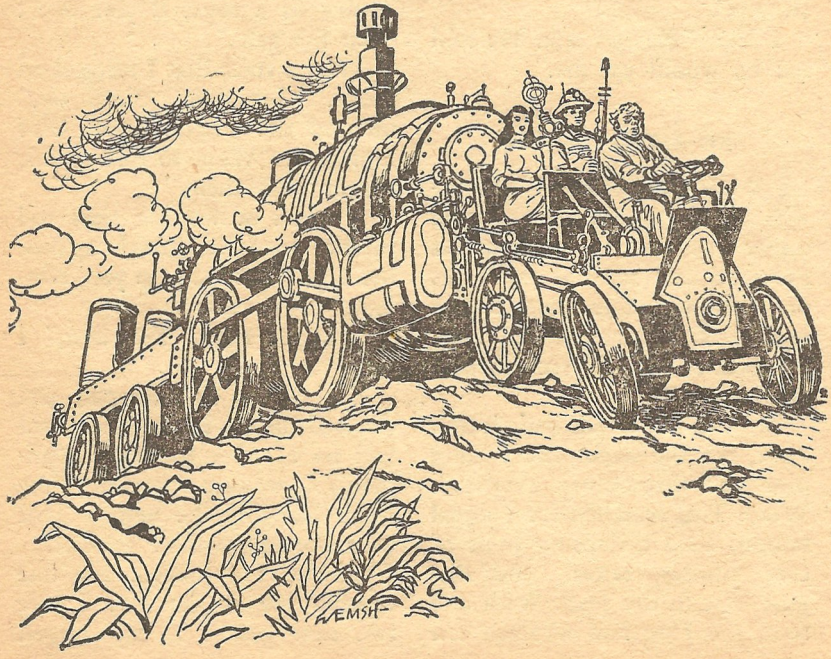
"Turn loose, Ypsilanti!" Toal said.

Ypsilanti said, "You imitate the alien's ugly accent. Have schemed to be deported rather than marry me."

Toal said, "I'd cut my throat first."

Ypsilanti released her. His voice throbbed with anger. "Would not have you! Have been in the woods with an alien!" He put his open palm in her face and shoved. Toal slammed back against the logs.

Shocked by the shuttle pilot's brutality, I swayed to my feet and grabbed his shoulder. I said, "Don't—" and then Ypsilanti's clenched hand thudded against



my jaw. I flipped backward, slid on my shoulders, and stopped with my head hanging over the edge of the walk.

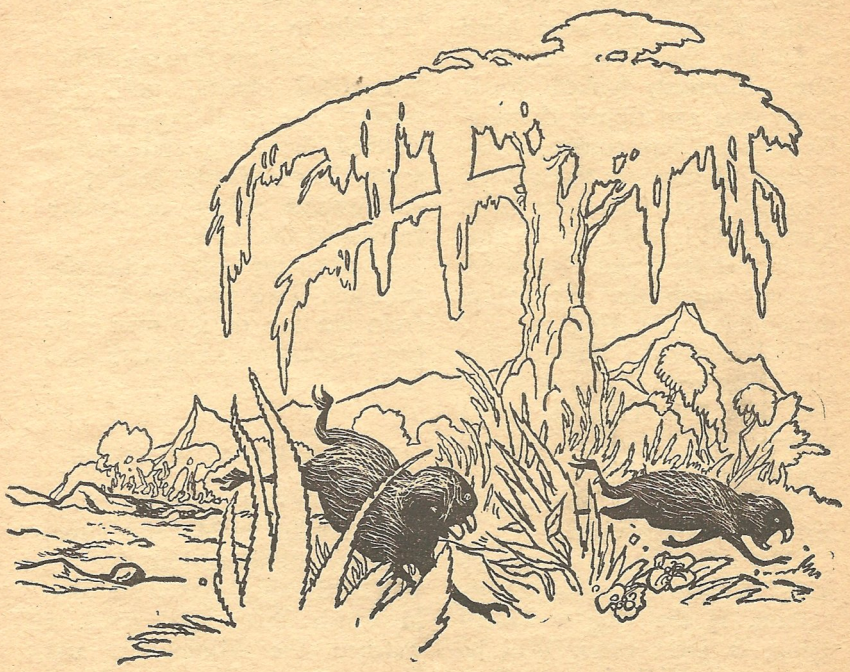
Although I had seen box fights in historical tridies and read of them in books, I had always supposed they belonged in mythology.

Ypsilanti said, "Galactic Government slave! You are not fit to walk on Maggie!"

It seemed that he had told me this before. I sat up. Betty Toal, with knife in hand, struggled between two guards. Ypsilanti kicked me on the leg above the knee. I seized his ankle, jerked, and let go. Yelling, the shuttle pilot toppled from the wall.

"Good! Good!" Toal cried. Blood ran in two streams from her nose. One of the guards had her knife.

Ypsilanti, covered with mud, ran up a flight of steps farther down the walkway and stalked toward us. "Hold him!" he com-



manded. "Will beat his head off!"

A man emerged from the shadows behind the pilot and said, "Ypsilanti, stop."

Ypsilanti whirled. He stood rigid and said, "Maximum Macready, the alien tried to murder me!"

"Nonsense. Saw you knock him down. You should not be here. Have no authority over the guards."

Maximum of the Jury Qasim Pierre Macready glared at the guards. "Release them," he said. "Alien Kinlock has been hired to kill the Hog. Must not interfere." Macready looked closely at my cuts and ripped clothing. He asked, "Any success, Alien Kinlock? Rasmussen thought the Hog got you. Came for help. Tractor had trouble, due to neglect by Farmer Yuko. Rasmussen did not reach the city before sunset. Shoot the Hog?"

Toal answered, "Kinlock shot him, Maximum. He risked his life. The Hog crawled to the swamp. We expect to find his body tomorrow."

Ypsilanti said, "She should not go with this alien."

"Has Alien Status," Macready said. "What she does is not important. If the Hog is indeed dying, is great news. Will be best proved. Kinlock, go to Doctor Izard."

Macready turned and left. I stared at Ypsilanti and the guards. They returned my scowl. Toal and I headed for the steps.

As we went down, Toal said, "You fixed Ypsilanti! If Macready hadn't come, you would have really beaten him. Ypsilanti's needed it for a long time."

"How's your nose?" I asked.

"It's almost stopped bleeding. Turn at the next corner to the doctor."

"You go about your nose. I want to ask Rasmussen a few things."

"I'll come, too," Toal said. "I'd like to watch."

She guided me through dimly illuminated streets, until we reached the wall again. We climbed the ramp and started across the steel bridge leading to Rasmussen's rooms. Something barricaded the walk.

I turned my light on the obstruction. Two toothies blinked from the top of my own baggage. Rasmussen's windows were dark.

XII: SEVENDAY MORNING

AT ELEVEN o'clock, midmorning by Maggiese time, I leaned stiffly against the log wall of the apartmented building in which Betty Toal lived. I watched the Minimums, and Dominants, and a few Maximums pass. Some pointedly ignored me, while others gazed

with hostility. Although all were potential meals for the Hog, they showed no gratitude for my attempts to help them. Sighing, I felt my more prominent bruises and wondered if I should wear a white oversuit for hunting. It was the only light clothing I had left, and I refused to consider Maggiese costume.

Astride a pedal-operated vehicle, Betty Toal rode into the street. The machine resembled the tricycles, but had five wheels with the two rear ones supporting a seat. "Low, Kinlock!" she called. "Come aboard the pentacycle."

"High, Toal. Wouldn't they give you two? I can't let you haul me all over the planet."

"Not hard with the gears."

I piled a firearm, a pouch of shells, and what remained of my pack on the rear seat and climbed in between the wheels. "That redheaded Farmer, Yuko, brought me a firearm," I said, indicating the heavy weapon with two barrels. "He said he borrowed it while Rasmussen was out."

Toal looked at the weapon and said, "If it doesn't knock you down, you'll be all right."

"Wonder why Yuko did it," I said. "Except for you, he's the first person here who's been friendly."

"You look alike, slightly. Be careful of that box of dynamite."

Toal stood on the pedals, gripped the steering bar, and propelled the pentacycle down the street. She wore a fresh green and brown sack, but no leggings.

As we swished through the gate, I said, "What's dynamite?"

"Explosive. Has nitroglycerin in it. Rasmussen killed two pigs with it. We can throw some at the Hog, if he's alive."

"He probably will be," I said. The riding was smoother and much quieter than in the steam tractor. "Explain this about looking alike," I said. "It's worried me since those emigrants boarded the Ap-GG-12C."

"Oh, that." Toal settled back on the saddle. She explained, "You and Yuko look alike. I've heard that unrelated people throughout the Explored Galaxy may look alike. They're called doubles. Even the Hog is similar to real pigs. When Joe Nordo settled Planet Maggie, decided everyone should be the same. Advertised for fifty years. Out of the billions in the Explored Galaxy, selected three hundred colonists who looked like him. Everyone on Maggie is descended from them."

"I see," I said, beginning to experience a new form of motion disturbance — pentacycle sickness. "I suspected new genetic discoveries, but it's only applied coincidence. If—"

Toal braked the pentacycle so

quickly that I almost knocked her from the saddle with my head. "Tractor tracks," she said. Toal dismounted and studied the interlaced wheel marks on the damp road. "Must have been Rasmussen," she decided. "He has the only one with twelve wheels."

I said, "He's trying for the first shot again."

Toal dropped to hands and knees with her face close to the dirt. "Towing something," she said. "I don't know what. Something with two big wheels."

"You can see all that?"

"Why, yes, can't you?" Toal climbed back into the saddle.

As we started, I mumbled, "Without my instruments, I can't see anything."

The absurd cap that replaced my lost sunhat protected my face, but my neck and ears slowly fried. The breeze blew hot and searing against me. Joe's Sun burned in the deep blue sky, and the temperature climbed astonishingly.

XIII: SEVENDAY AFTERNOON

THE Baby Maggie River, three hundred meters wide, gurgled and splashed over water-pocked rocks in its race to reach the Joe Junior Swamp and filter through to the sea. The cliffs, a ragged wall of dark gray rock tilted until the strata were vertical, lined the opposite bank.

Toal and I stood at the end of a track passing down between high rocks to the river. Here the pontoon bridge had once spanned the current. For two square kilometers around us, the trees had been cut and not replanted. The place was a depressing scene of gulleys, brush, stumps, and decaying limbs and sticks. A species of thorny, creeping vine with blue-green foliage predominated in reclaiming the devastated woodland.

"Surely the Hog didn't swim," Toal said.

Dehydrated and soaked with perspiration that would not evaporate, I mopped my streaming face with my sleeve. "He must have left the trail somewhere," I said.

We had again failed to find the hisser near the vinetree, but the Hog's hoofprints, usually following paths and roads, had led us to the river. I unreeled the cable of the sniffer until its nose dangled just above the ground. With the dial in my hand, I explored the edge of the road.

"That brush heap looks broken," Toal said.

I walked in the direction that she pointed. A labyrinth of stone lay along the bank. Heat waves simmered over the ground, and my feet burned in spite of thick boot soles. I reached the brush.

The dial of the sniffer lighted, and the needle turned to the right. "We're on!" I said. "There's more blood. He was still bleeding after running this far. He must be dead, after all. You stay there with the pentacycle, and—"

"Had this argument yesterday," said Toal. "I'll bring part of the dynamite and go with you."

Following the pointing needle, I tripped along through the brush. Dry sticks popped under my feet, and the creepers quickly reduced my oversuit legs to rags. The trail angled across a bend in the river and moved into the shade of a vinetree grove. At first, there was open space between the trees, so that we again reached the river without difficulty. Small holes dotted the dirt beneath an overhanging rock. Toothies swarmed in and out of the burrows and squeaked excitedly.

"Some dynalene might help here," I said. "These things will eat this peninsula bare some day."

"Dynamite," Toal said. "Let them."

The sniffer led us deeper into the vine grove. The round, fringed leaves meshed into a roof that stopped the sunlight and left us walking in a sickly, greenish gloom. Abruptly, the leaves closed down to the earth, forming a rough wall of vegetation across the woods. The mouth of a tunnel opened in the mass.

Toal whispered, "The Hog goes to the swamp through there. We set traps at other tunnels. He always avoided them. It's black as a cave inside."

The sniffer pointed directly to the tunnel. Cloven hoofs had indented the ground. I said, "You go back, and—"

"No! I'll throw dynamite."

"All right. Be careful where you throw it." I grinned sickly. "Is there any way around these vines?"

"Could circle to cleared ground. Would only lead to the swamp. Can't walk in the swamp."

I put the sniffer in my pack and clipped the light to my belt. I tiptoed into the tunnel. Toal followed.

The ground was slippery underfoot, and the amount of light filtering through the massed leaves swiftly lessened. The tunnel curved gently from side to side. One hundred meters from the entrance, I could not see and turned on the light.

The Hog grunted. The ground vibrated.

Raising the heavy firearm to my shoulder, I waited. "Keenlogh!" the Hog squealed. The sound of his breathing reached me. The oily stench of him came

through the tunnel.

Pausing between each step to listen, I moved forward. The tunnel twisted sharply and then branched. Each branch again divided. The Hog grunted, "Huh, huh, huh, huh!"

I moved to the right toward the sound. Down the leafy corridor, a red spot glittered. It blinked from sight before I could aim.

I reached another branch in the tunnel, and my light chose that moment to go out. I stood in total darkness, remembering that I had failed to install a new generator.

"Go back," I whispered in terrified accents. "Light's gone. Toal?"

"Here."

"Go back." Walking sideways, I began a fumbling withdrawal. I brushed against the invisible vines, slipped, and almost fell. "Keep together," I said. "Are you there, Toal?"

I retreated about twenty more steps and said, "Grab my belt, or we'll be separated."

Toal did not answer. The Hog did. He squealed, "Toooaaal!"

"Toal!" I yelled.

"Over here," she said from a distance. "Where are you?"

THE HOG crashed and grunted along the tunnel. I found myself running through the darkness toward a dim, green patch. "Hide, Toal!" I called. I did not pass her. I reached a part of the tunnel in which I could see. I heard the Hog behind me, but did not look back.

Sprinting as if I were a good runner in splendid condition, I reached the open grove. I stopped and turned. The Hog emerged from the wall of vines. Coagulated blood caked his neck and head. His single usable eye blinked in the light. He charged, but he took evasive action, swerving to either side.

In my excitment and unfamiliarity with the weapon, I pulled both triggers of the firearm. The twin barrels discharged with a deafening blast. The recoil knocked me down. A vine burst where the projectiles passed through it.

The Hog galloped over me. One sharp hoof brushed my face. As the Hog turned, I practically ran up a vinetree.

Ten meters above the ground, I sat in the springy branches and breathed hoarsely. The Hog sniffed, twisted his short neck, and fixed his eye on me. "Eet oo, Keenlogh!" he grunted.

The Hog struck at the vine trunk with his forefeet. Rearing slightly and raising his front legs, he worked his way up the vines until his body, which must have weighed nearly fourteen metric tons, stood at a sixty degree angle. The vines bent and

cracked. The Hog's three whole tusks gnashed close to my feet.

I crawled higher and found a vine rope hanging over open ground and leading to another trunk. Dangling first from one hand and then the other, I started across. My arms were ready to pull loose, before I reached the other vinetree and clamped myself to it. The Hog had difficulty in once more putting all feet on the dirt.

Through an opening, I glimpsed the deforested area where we had left the pentacycle. I could see Toal nowhere, nor could I now see the tunnel.

The Hog approached my new refuge, but, instead of rearing, began tearing at the thick stems with his tusks. I became aware that my face bled where his hoof had brushed it.

The Hog worked energetically, ripping and rooting. His armored sides heaved with his panting. He sweated profusely, and the end of his ugly snout dripped with moisture.

The trunks supporting me sagged. I tried to devise some plan, some sure method of escape, but my mind was a panicky jumble. Then I recalled that boring booklet, *Initial Experiments in Earthian Swine* (Sus scrofa) *Production on Freesphere.* The Hog was not of *Sus scrofa,* but he had similar traits. And I had no other plan.

"Yaaa!" I yelled. "You stinking pig! Climb up! I'll kick your snout off!"

The Hog rumbled, backed off, and then ran forward. He lifted his forequarters into the air and smashed into the tangle, temporarily trapping himself. I almost fell from the swaying vines. I climbed down past one of the Hog's protruding feet and dropped to the ground.

I looked for the firearm I had lost, but the Hog was breaking loose. I turned and ran the other way, out of the grove, past the toothie colony, and away from the river toward the open field.

I trotted into the wilderness of rocks, stumps, brush, and creepers. Joe's Sun seared my head, which no longer wore a cap. Heat waves quivered across the blighted land. Heat simmered from exposed rocks. I looked back to see the Hog emerging from the trees.

Faster, I ran, jumping gullies and struggling through patches of thorny creepers. Already I regretted trusting my stiffened muscles and poor running ability to this race. The Hog pursued with incredible speed for an animal his size.

I tried to hurdle a rock, struck the top with one foot, and rolled down a slope. When I again ran, one knee did not function well. My lungs burned, and I made sounds like the tractor.

The Hog had closed the distance between us to twenty meters. He panted loudly, and his whole body glinted wetly.

For agonizing minutes, I moved at the fastest gait I could muster, but it seemed slower than walking. At the top of a low hill, I saw the pentacycle not more than one hundred meters away.

When I started down the slope, the Hog's wheezing warned me. Abruptly, I changed direction. The great boar brushed past me. He staggered down the gentle hill. Spasms jerked his huge body. By the time he had turned, I had flanked him, and, burning unsuspected energy, I ran for the parked pentacycle.

THE HOG charged, almost blindly, forcing me toward the rocks beside the river. The rocks were incinerators in the heat of Joe's Sun. The hot ground burned through my boots. I flopped into a narrow gap. The Hog sniffed at the opening, then moved away. I crawled into the warm shade of an overhanging boulder and lay groaning and gasping.

Swaying in the blazing sunlight, the Hog vomited. He collapsed ponderously on his side. His legs twitched. He struggled to raise his massive head, but his snout fell in the dirt.

I crawled out of the rocks and reeled toward the pentacycle. A toothie scooted from beside the front wheel, and two others watched from the concealment of a creeper.

Several times, I had heard that the Hog seldom stayed in the sunlight, and the booklet, *Initial Experiments in Earthian Swine* (Sus scrofa) *Production on Freesphere,* had said that swine were susceptible to heatstroke. I trembled at the risk I had taken, but I felt a sense of peace I had not known on Planet Maggie.

One thousand x-tops, fifty coupons, the Jury would pay me for killing the Hog, the last animal I would kill for money. My hunting career had reached a successful end. An unhectic life on Mother Earth awaited me.

I suspected that I was becoming delirious in the heat. When I reached the pentacycle, I opened the dynamite box and took one tube in each hand. The tubes were fitted with time fuses.

The Hog breathed spasmodically. I warily neared the heaving mountain of flesh, uncertain of the dynamite's power, but calculating that two detonations near the creature's head would be enough.

Opening his one good eye, the Hog looked at me. His tusks grated together. Weak noises came from his mouth. "Uhdoo nuut keel!"

Sixday evening, I had been

momentarily convinced that the Hog could speak, but had found it hard to accept that faculty in a swinish animal without grasping organs. However, appearance did not always indicate intellectual ability, and the Hog's skull contained ample space for a large brain. Today, now that I recalled his noises, I knew he had again threatened to eat me.

"Uhdoo nut keel, Keenlough," the Hog grunted. He seemed to be asking for his life.

Perhaps I did not feel so strange as would a man who had never conversed with a nonhuman intelligence. Two of my close friends were Triangularians. I said, "What can I do but kill you? You helped kill 238 people."

The Hog made sounds. With great difficulty, I translated his answer as a question. "Is wrong to kill and eat? Men kill and eat. No way to leave this land. Eat toothies. Are hard to catch. Little other food but Maggiese."

The Hog closed his eye and wheezed through his open mouth. I argued with myself.

Galactic Government specified the correct procedure when an intelligent species was discovered. All possible efforts toward peaceful contact and negotiation should be made, however strange or dangerous the species might be. The discoverer could not molest the creatures on his own responsibility. Technically, the Hog was a murderer, but GG renounced the ancient belief that he who kills must be killed, and considered that murderers suffered from a curable illness.

Betty Toal—if she lived—and all other Maggiese would rejoice if I dynamited the Hog. I would receive my fee. No one would realize the Hog had been anything but a man-eating brute. Centuries might pass before GG zoologists examined the giant swine of Planet Maggie, if, indeed, others existed beyond the peninsula. The Hog would probably die of heatstroke, whatever I did.

With some surprise, I found that my pack remained on my shoulders, although it dangled by a single strap. I pulled the water pump from its pocket, walked to the river, and threw in the intake hose. Uncoiling the line, I moved back toward the Hog. The hose was too short, but I set the nozzle for maximum force and, remembering instructions in the booklet, sprayed water over the Hog's head.

The liquid revived him until he could push himself to a grotesque sitting position with his front feet. I shot water into his mouth and said, "Did you catch the woman in the tunnel?"

"Nooo," the Hog answered.

"You killed Toal," I said, dropping the hose and once more

filling my hands with dynamite.

"Nooo," the Hog repeated. With a mouth unsuited for speech, he laboriously made a proposal. If I would spare him, he would attempt to leave the peninsula, going around the swamp to the coast and risking the currents and sea life in an effort to swim to the main continent.

With my finger on a dynamite fuse, I considered the plan. The Hog swayed to his feet.

Something fiendish screeched overhead. An explosion thundered in the rocks beside the river. Fragments whined through the hot air. The Hog squealed. I dropped prone and wriggled into a depression.

A second explosion rent the ground in front of me, showering me with dirt and brush. The Hog tried to run. His weakened legs quivered under him.

The third blast occurred between his front hoofs.

I crawled into a gully and, idiotically clutching the dynamite tubes, put my arms over my head. Tensed for more destruction, I lay there for several minutes. When I looked up, five or six toothies ran past my face.

Wearily, I stood erect. The Hog's remains lay in a pond of blood. Toothies scuttled out of the brush and the rocks and moved around the carcass. Having seen enough nonhuman intelligence for the present, I refused to believe the rodents were dancing in gleeful victory.

I stumbled off toward the vinetrees to learn the fate of Betty Toal, but she peeped over a rock. "You killed the Hog," she said. "What was that screeching?"

I stopped and breathed deeply. Toal said, "Was lost in the side tunnels."

"No," I murmured, "I didn't kill the Hog."

XIV: SEVENDAY EVENING

LONG SHADOWS fell across a device on a hill two kilometers from the river. The thing was a large firearm with a heavy barrel about three meters long. The barrel rested on wooden supporting and trailing pieces and projected from between two high wheels. Rasmussen lay with his fat right leg crushed and twisted under a wheel.

The old hunter shook an optical instrument at Betty Toal and me. We were wet from the usual daily thunderstorm, which had delayed our search for the killer of the Hog. "Blasted him!" Rasmussen groaned. "Take this cannon off me! Have waited hours. Why did you not come?"

I grasped two spokes and pushed with what little energy remained in my depleted body, but I could not tilt the ponder-

ous firearm. I said, "Can you drive his tractor over here, Toal? You can tow the canner off."

"Not enough pain for you?" Rasmussen gasped. "Use a lever. Lift the wheel."

"Cut a pole," Toal said and drew a knife.

Rasmussen continued to rave. "Where is gratitude? I saved you! Could not kill him by spraying his head."

I said, "You almost blasted me. Yesterday, you left us out here."

"Did as the old books instruct," Rasmussen said. "Bracketed the Hog with two shells. Third round killed him! Forgot the recoil that time. Cannon broke my leg." The old man's brown face had turned a sickly, greenish white.

"Where did you get this canner, uh, cannon?" I said.

Rasmussen moaned, tried to sit up, and sank back on his elbows. "Is what you saw when grounding in the shuttle."

Toal brought a stout pole, and we piled rocks for a fulcrum. I pushed one end of the pole through the wheel spokes and under the axle.

Rasmussen said, "Maximum Eijkman had it built in secret. Could have shot the Hog weeks ago. Eijkman had dreams of changing our government into something strange. Himself as head."

Toal and I threw our weight on the lever. The wheel lifted. Rasmussen crawled sideways. We eased the cannon to the ground.

I said, "Galactic Government forbids private planets to make such weapons."

Rasmussen gasped, "Nonsense. Was required to protect us from native life."

XV: FOURDAY AFTERNOON

As Joe's Sun moved behind rising clouds toward the horizon, an odd little procession walked from Joetropolis. Toal said, "The Jury still refused to pay anything?"

"Yes," I said. "I told them again that Rasmussen wouldn't have killed the Hog if I hadn't lured him into the open. They wouldn't pay even part of my fee, and they wouldn't reimburse me for the equipment I've lost. They quoted Ordinances and said I stole a firearm and a box of dynamite. They hinted that I broke Rasmussen's leg."

Toal said, "You'll make other hunts on other worlds. Their people will reward you."

"I suppose so," I sighed.

Ahead of us, former Foreman Maximum Eijkman, now reduced to Recessive—Alien Status, stalked in injured majesty. Two couples and their Alien children followed us.

Against black thunderclouds,

the shuttle, *Joe Nordo III,* pointed to the sky but appeared incapable of rising above the surface. Somewhere in space and light-hours distant, the astraplane, Ap-GG-12C, approached the orbital rendezvous.

Farmers leaned on their primitive rotor tillers and watched us pass. Several, swinging sticks and shovels, pursued a swarm of toothies. Hundreds of toothies squeaked around the shed at the edge of the spacefield.

Eijkman climbed the chain ladder into the shuttle. As the four men and women helped their children climb, I looked into Toal's blue eyes and said, "Uh, Toal—I mean, Betty. I've rather enjoyed Planet Maggie, in spite of a lot of things. I admire you, Toal. That is, I've never seen another woman quite like you. Your bravery and, uh, all that. What I'm trying to say is, well, you're a hunter, and it looks as if I'll keep on being a hunter. You don't know anyone in the Explored Galaxy. Except me, uh—that is, would—"

Preliminary raindrops spangled the tarnished fuselage of the shuttle. I wiped my face with my sleeve and said, "Doreen, and Laurinda, and Celestine would like you, I'm sure, and you'll like them. They're one of the happiest groups—most of the time, at least. Yes, uh, I'm sure they would approve if—"

"Who are Doreen, Laurinda, and Celestine?" Toal asked.

"Why, they're my wives," I explained. "Out in the Explored Galaxy, almost everyone has—"

Toal's clenched fist struck me squarely in the mouth. She whirled and ran up the ladder.

I spat out a tooth that, anyway, had not been very successfully transplanted. I crawled through the rain, up the swaying ladder, and the first symptoms of spacesickness wrenched my stomach.

Shuttle Pilot Ypsilanti waited on the first deck. He said, "Ordinance 419: Aliens ride the lowest deck."

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TALES FOR TOMORROW: We're very cramped for space in this issue, so all we'll say is that the April issue will contain the usual varied line-up of all-star stories. Among them will be such intriguing items as "Deny the Slake" by Richard Wilson, "The Noon's Repose" by John Christopher, "The Eyes of Darkness" by E. C. Tubb, and several others by your favorite authors, each writing at the peak of his style. And, as usual, look for a surprise or two.

A Special Infinity Feature

We think Edward Wellen is one of the best new writers to hit the science fiction field in many years.

Usually, it takes any new writer a long time to make an impression on the readers and gain recognition.

To help bring Wellen to your attention, we are presenting the special double feature that follows immediately.

Running two stories by the same writer in one issue of a magazine is practically unheard-of in editorial circles.

But we feel that both of these stories are so good—and so different from each other—that we are violating this long-standing "taboo" to bring both of them to you at once.

Now turn the page for

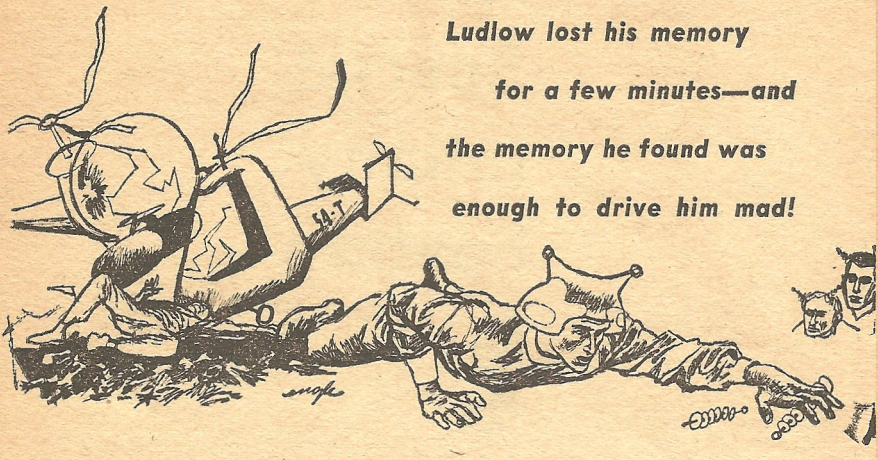
"The Engrammar Age"

and

"Utter Silence"

We think you'll enjoy discovering Edward Wellen.

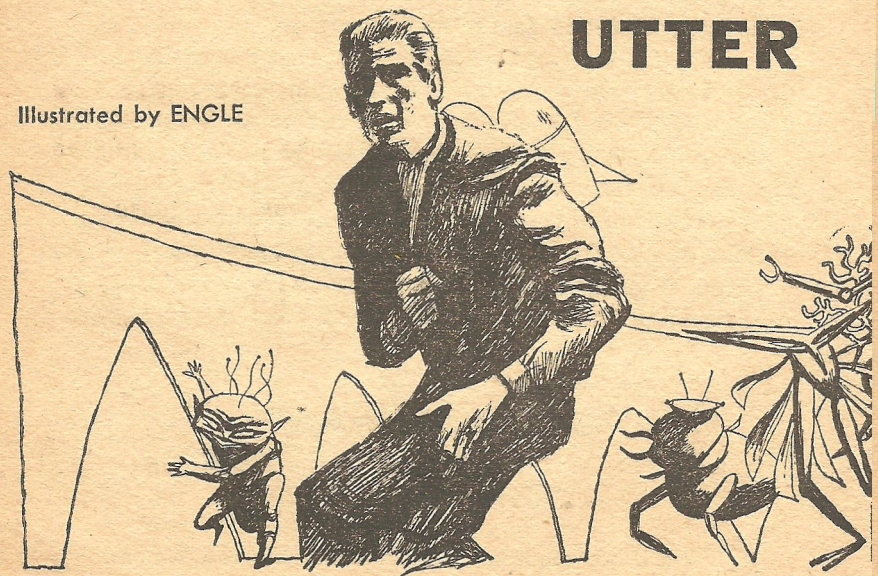
The Engrammar Age



Ludlow lost his memory for a few minutes—and the memory he found was enough to drive him mad!

UTTER

Illustrated by ENGLE



by EDWARD WELLEN

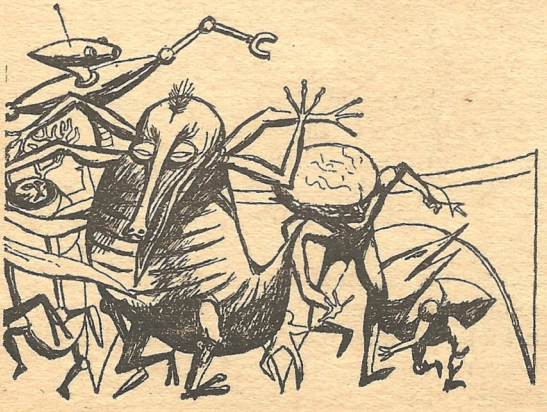
WALTER LUDLOW looked into the glass without reflecting on the twisting and doubling of his tie, looked into the glass without seeing either his brow beetling nobly over his precise features or, as he automatically jacked up his chin, the

top of next page

SILENCE

by EDWARD WELLEN

When a man can't trust his own senses, how can he solve a riddle that makes no sense at all?



"OTTO RAJPEPNA!" he shouted at the challenging emptiness. The shout and its shadow registered in his mind as magnificent showerings of fireworks, and for once he liked his own name. "Captain Rajpepna is on

bottom next page

Engrammar Age

slight whipping of the twin antennae sprouting from that brow.

And yet in a sense he *was* seeing himself. He was gazing not at the mirroring of space but of time. He was seeing in his mind's eye the President handing him the Think Award, and himself graciously acknowledging the enthusiastic applause of the distinguished gathering and accepting the token with a telling speech.

But only for a moment. Back in the present, he tightened the knot of his tie with steady hands. The momentousness of the occasion would not unnerve him. He would not go blank as soon as he opened his mouth. In pre-engrammar days he would have been beside himself with dread, certain in his own mind that he would forget the words he had memorized. And, with horrible certainty, he *would* forget.

But—he smiled pleasurably, and vaguely took note of the mirrored antennae—this was the Engrammar Age, as every one of tonight's speakers was sure

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Utter Silence

the job!" That ironic shout made a pleasing flowering of light. "Rajpepna, Otto! Present and accounted for!" He delighted in the wonderful sparkling pinwheel of the last shout until it spun into nothingness.

He whirled, suddenly feeling foolish. He sighed an orange sigh of relief. There was no one watching him make a damn fool of himself. He sighed a two-tone gray sigh of ruefulness and near-despair. There was no one watching him make a damn fool of himself—because there was no one. He was alone on Rotanev IX.

Looking up, he met the vibrant sky. Somewhere out there, beyond the bronze gong of Rotanev, his spaceship — *his* spaceship — was returning to Tellus. Returning without him. Returning from the colony on Sualocin II with a precious cargo of upalenal—the hard-to-come-by-ripe type. But the upalenal would never reach Tellus. And he of the fireworks would never

to mention more than once with an antennae-quivering bow in his direction. (He himself, however, would modestly remember to refrain from employing the phrase.) In the Engrammar Age there was no forgetting, just as there was no long, painful process of learning to begin with.

Again he beamed unseeingly at himself. He was more than willing to credit the groundwork of others, their mapping of the brain. For the brain child was indisputably of his fathering. He alone had designed the transistor circuits making up the artificial memory. He alone had perfected the ingrafting technique. He alone—

He jumped as something moist touched his ear.

A voice said, "You seem so preoccupied. What's on your mind?"

He saw his wife's face in the mirror, her antennae swaying gently, the green shafts contrasting spectacularly with her red hair and giving a strange impression of two seasons vying—spring and fall.

"Martha!" Walter said reprov-

Continued on next page

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reach Tellus. Captain Otto Rajpepna would die on this waste planet where the mutineers had marooned him.

They would curve well out of Tellurian lanes to deliver the upalenal to a fencing trust, in whose hands it was even more precious as contraband. They would then go on to Tellus—if the fencing trust didn't double-cross them—and lay the loss of the upalenal to a hijacking. They would tell the board of inquiry that Captain Otto Rajpepna had bravely but vainly resisted the hijackers and that his dust now mingled with the dust of stars.

Looking back, he flagellated himself for failing to make soundings. He should have been more aware of what was going on in his ship, of what was going on in the minds of his crew. He must have drifted out of touch with his men. Even so, there's always a stink to the plotting of betrayal—he should have smelled it out. The mutiny had come as a great shock.

He unshouldered his pack—with its precious cargo of food pills, hydroponic seedlings, and

Continued on page 56

ingly. He rubbed at a redness that seemed to burn his ear. "I didn't see you come in."

She said in a low tone, "Sometimes I think you don't see me, period."

"What?" He satisfied himself he had rid himself of the crimson smear. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," she said quietly.

"I have the distinct impression that someone said something," he said with heavy humor, "and I have the further impression it was not myself."

She smiled faintly, as if out of a sense of duty.

He studied himself in the mirror and asked, rather peevishly, "Sure you won't change your mind?"

She hung her head. She seemed very vulnerable just then, with her slender neck bared and her antennae reaching out like uncertain feelers. But anger at her meek stubbornness choked off the hurting tenderness rising in his throat.

He said harshly, "I do wish this once you could summon the will to come along."

As SOON as he spoke he wished he could unsay the words. Martha was passing a limp hand across her pale brow under what were now rods of chastisement. She smiled wanly. He could see he had been unfair to her, but what troubled him more deeply was shame at having allowed himself to betray emotion.

He passed it off with a light sigh and a smile. "Never mind, you'll be with me in spirit, my dear. You're watching the proceedings on your screen, of course."

"Of course, dear," she echoed. "Here, let me."

He turned his head away with an impatient casting motion as she straightened his tie.

"Really," she said, stepping back with a nod that he would do, "I'm so sorry I don't feel up to coming, tonight of all nights. But even if I did, I'd never rest easy in my mind leaving the baby with a robot sitter."

"Nonsense!" He felt the veins throbbing at his temples and forced himself to speak rationally. "It's all in the mind. This is the—the Electronic Age. You have no *right* to give in to foolish feelings. You have no *right* to mistrust the fruits of science. It's unthinkable."

"I'm sorry," she said helplessly, "but that's the way I am."

He nodded tiredly, batoning their discord. Then he shrugged mentally and said, "Don't give it another thought. You needn't feel badly about staying away. You'll be in good company." She looked up quickly and raised her eyebrows at that, and he explained. "All those the engrammar did out of plush teaching

jobs are boycotting the meeting." He paused a moment. "That means I will have to forgo the pleasure of meeting Ash Cemack."

It was more of his heavy humor, but Martha shivered; her antennae trembled and she shot up a hand automatically to make sure of their seating in the socket.

"What made you say a silly thing like that?" she said, frowning prettily. "You know I can't stand even the mention of that creature's name." She shook her head dangerously and said grimly, "I'd like to give him a piece of my mind."

Walter allowed himself to smile as a warm feeling suffused him. How many times had he teased her into saying just that in just that way! True, it was the normal reaction of a devoted wife, and he accepted Martha's attachment to him and his cause, and her dislike of his enemies, as his due. All the same, he was glad Martha showed a fitting sense of values. For, to give the devil *his* due, Cemack had a singularly prepossessing exterior that appealed to the ladies—the weaker-minded ladies, of course. And that made Cemack, as head of the Anti-Engrammar League, a formidable foe.

But when the world no longer needed to waste vast amounts of public funds on schooling; when everyone—even an idiot—was a walking library and could pick up and store the latest findings of genius; and when Cemack himself sported an engrammar that, ironically, enabled him to remember literally thousands of searing speeches attacking the engrammar and its inventor—then all this agitating against compulsory engramming was plainly the work of a man not in his right mind.

With a start, Walter glanced at his watch, suddenly mindful of the fugitive time.

"Say good-bye to the baby for me," he said. And he brushed Martha's cheek hurriedly—but carefully, to keep from locking antennae—and was off in his copter.

Heading west, racing the sun, he flew in brooding solitude. He couldn't get Cemack out of his thoughts.

Some of Cemack's arguments were hard to ignore. Walter turned the matter over in his mind. The man baldly stated that the engrammar was becoming too much of a crutch, that while releasing the mind of the burden of memory it was gradually spreading its clutch over much of the functioning of consciousness, and that there was no telling what havoc it was wreaking in the labyrinth of the unconscious.

Nonsense!

Walter cleared his brow. Why should the least doubt cloud his mind? He was fully persuaded his course was the right one.

He gazed across the streaking woolscape at a veiled sunset. His heart accelerated as he looked ahead into time. Again the President was handing him the Think Award. Again Walter was graciously acknowledging the enthusiastic applause. And again he was modestly delivering his memorable speech of acceptance.

Out of a cloud mass another copter shot straight at his.

Snapping back to the present, Walter thought indignantly, "That idiot's flying at the wrong level!"

WALTER LUDLOW wakened, with a sensation of a bright light licking, flamelike, at the darkness in his mind, to find himself lying on the slope of a peak. Nearby, the two copters, locked in death, were blazing their own pyre. The clouds reflected the fire in a crimson that rivaled the sunset glow.

Walter dragged himself out of the radius of heat. He groaned, shakenly thankful to be alive and able to groan. Transcending pain, ghosts of memory haunted his skull, too flickeringly bodiless to grasp. And with a sinking feeling he grew aware that, even as he was coming to, awareness was slipping away.

In panic his hand shot to his brow. The antennae-memory bank unit was missing.

Numbly he realized that the same impact that had thrown him clear had also torn the engrammar plug from the socket.

Frightenedly racing the clouding of consciousness, he felt around in the weakening light of the dying deathfire. It seemed to him he scrabbled over unending acres of slashing, puncturing stones—and searched in vain. Then his fingers ran over something and his heart leaped like a draft-drunk flame. His hands were shaping to a familiar object.

The engrammar!

It appeared to be intact. But he didn't dare to breathe relief quite yet. The engrammar might have sustained a damaging shaking up. Trembling, he plugged it into his socket.

Lightning flashed across his inward sky. The thundering echo of the crash sounded in his brain and he winced. "The damn fool's flying at the wrong level!" he heard himself thinking.

And for the first time he gave thought to the pilot of the other copter. What had happened to the damned fool?

It was dark now. Vaguely he heard moaning. It sounded ghostly. Then suddenly he made out a shadowy form rising out of shadowy earth. It writhed like a black flame.

By the time Walter felt his way along the slope the form had pitched headlong and lay still, save for a twitching now and then that soon ended. The poor devil was too badly charred to last long, too far gone for anyone to do anything for him. It was just as well the fellow's engrammar was missing; he sighed out his life in unawareness.

Walter bowed his head.

The whirring of a traffic copter shook the air. Its beam swept over the wreckage, painting a bleak abstraction. The copter settled, still beating its vanes to stay level, and an officer jumped out.

Walter moved to meet him. He moved uncertainly, as if his body were going one way and his mind another.

"You all right?" the officer asked.

Walter was not able to make much sense. But luckily the officer recognized the great Walter Ludlow. And dimly Walter was aware that someone was patching him and that another someone was speeding him to the meeting. His head ached exceedingly and he tried not to think.

Slowly, slowly, Walter came out of shock. One after another, speakers had risen to their feet and spoken and he had heard none of them, but it seemed to him a phalanx of antennae had thrust in his direction. When he came to himself again he was standing on the platform, the Think Award in his hands.

The President was gazing at him kindly, as if he understood that Walter was too overcome to speak at once. What was Martha, watching the proceedings on her screen, thinking at this moment?

Martha! All those wonderful times together while Ludlow was busy with his damn engrammar. Martha, I'm coming tonight . . .

One part of him was able to hear himself think that, detachedly, while another heard himself launch into a searing attack on the engrammar and its inventor.

He was facing the stunned, suddenly whispering throng. But he was staring at emptiness.

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(*Continued from page* 51)
air-wringer—and let it drop to the sand with a brown thunk. He gazed across the wearying monotone. He almost wished now that the mutineers *had* scattered him in space. Not that he was looking forward to oblivion, that Great Zero inviting one to sink into its all-obliterating. But incredible time and a chance ray of light might have joined in driving one atom of his dust home to Tellus.

Again a gray sigh. Tellus was loud ties and blue notes and chicken cacciatore. Sualocin II was synthetic loud ties and synthetic blue notes and synthetic chicken cacciatore. Rotanev IX was—what?

So far, Rotanev IX was sand and sand and sand—and crazy gravitational stress that caused a sort of red shift of the senses. You could go mad if you dwelt on one thing too long. And Rotanev IX was one thing—sand—and any time on Rotanev IX was too long.

HE SHOULDERED his pack again and pressed on, hoping to find something new. Guiding himself by the sun and by scooping sand into small mounds at regular intervals, he spiraled out from the spot where they had dumped him. The days passed, all alike, until the day came when his tracks began to close in around him. And that inspiraling told him that he had covered one hemisphere; soon he would be done with paring his apple. And still there was nothing but the smoothly curving horizon of level sand, save where his mounds showed.

Before his food pills ran out he would have to set up the seedlings. It would take a while to wring enough water out of the air to mold and fill an adobe trough. And he would have to raise, brick by brick, an overshadowing building to keep evaporation losses down. He would have to make camp for good, and soon.

But he pressed on, desperately hoping to find something new. Time was running out, not sand. Dawn was thundering up for the 168th time when he found something new.

It was more sand. But it was more sand in one place than he had come upon so far. Much higher than his own heapings. A real dune.

His mouth twisted in a smile;

a bitter taste took the place of kinesthetic sensation. According to his reckoning, his ship was knifing through Pluto's orbit right about now, toward the glint of Tellus. While just over the horizon nothing awaited him but the signs of his own marching. Here, there would be times when by standing on the crest of the dune he would be nearest home. Be grateful for crumbs of stone. Well, here he would found his oasis.

He rounded the dune to seek rest from the brazen note of Rotanev. A clang halted him as he was letting his burden fall. The dune's lee stood sheer. And in it—

He thought he had adapted to the confusing shiftings of perception, but what confronted him now was so unlikely that he wondered if his senses were playing tricks even more fiendish. He sniffed and touched and tasted to make sure. And he convinced himself that he beheld what he beheld—a door. A door of no metal he knew, in the middle of nothing.

Was the sand shawling a vault? Was this a cache? A tomb? A time capsule? What brooded in this blank sphinx?

Only one way to find out. His fingers ran over the door until they met the sticky sweetness of a button. He hesitated, then gave a wry shrug. What did he have to lose? He pressed the button.

The door slid open.

He didn't know what he had looked forward to finding beyond the door, but it certainly wasn't the thing that he saw—nothing. The vault, as he called it in his mind, was dark and empty.

He was fairly sure of that, but he wanted to make absolutely sure. It was important to know. And he was too impatient to wait for Rotanev to strike noon or later, when he would know by the sun's resounding through the vault if there was anything at all inside. He stretched his pack across the threshold to hold an opening if the door decided to slide shut. He shoved one foot slowly across. Nothing happened. He ventured his weight on it, then pulled the other foot across. Nothing happened.

He breathed an orange sigh. He reached out through air like felt and began to probe the chamber, starting with the wall on his left. Even if the vault proved to be fully void, even if he never divined its reason for being, it would be better housing than he could have built for himself. It was the right size, solid—and empty.

With a start, he turned toward the opening. The blurred touch of indigo scraped across his vision. The door was closing.

It took him by surprise but

it didn't worry him. Placing the pack across the threshold had been a sound move. The casing of the pack was of light but strong alloy. It would hold against any possible pressure of the door.

Without slowing in the least, the door sheared the pack and sealed the opening.

WITH A SINKING feeling Rajpepna wondered if the vault's reason for being was to trap. If so, where were the remains of the last victim? Were they the dust he stood on? Or did the trapper make regular rounds? He would never know; how long before the air in the chamber clotted?

Something terrible, and terribly familiar, was happening to him. There was something out of childhood nightmare in what was happening to him and it outraged him that it should be happening again and that it should be happening now.

He raised his hands and balled them, then slowly let them fall and unclench. It would be worse than useless to beat blindly against the mute walls. It would be madness.

A whisper of green grew overt. A sudden slackening of the crazy gravitational stress shifted his senses—for a flash—back to normal. In that flash, he recognized the feeling of near-weightlessness. The room was falling.

This was another something out of childhood nightmare. In spite of his deepening sense of outrage, which urged him to trembling stiffness, he went limp to lessen any impact. The room was a long time falling. He grew weary of remaining inarticulate, but just as he was going tense he slipped instead into a dreaming state. Smiling strangely, he waited. The room kept falling, as if the shaft it shot through wormholed straight to the core of the planet. He waited, smiling strangely. It was no more of a drop than the one he had made from the stream of being of man, when the mutineers had dropped him out.

The end came between one expecting of it and the next. And as his new full weight settled on the floor of the elevator the gravitational stress, feeding on its own inwards, pounded him with new force. He leaned against the wall, tasting vertigo.

The door slid open.

With an untwisting of guts he straightened. He took in with amazement what lay outside. Not sand, but phosphorescent pavement. A walk, leading to buildings. Huge buildings. A city!

In his hurry to get out and enter the city he stumbled over the half of the pack that had

remained in the vault, but righted himself in time. Things rolled out. He gave them brief attention. The precious seedlings, for the most part crushed. Too bad, but in a city like this there was sure to be food. He stood on the pavement and wonderingly trained his senses on what unfolded before him.

Behind him, a blurred touch. He turned, more quickly in the spirit than in the flesh owing to the heavying cross-currents of this crazy planet. The door was sliding shut, sliding shut, shut.

He reached for and found sticky sweetness. He pressed it. The door remained shut.

Well, this would seem to commit him. He turned again to the city. The rock wall in which the door fitted swept up with what seemed to him a wail, swept up and over and down behind the buildings. He stared at the city, waiting.

What, no welcoming committee? Then it struck him that there was not even any traffic. Nothing was moving.

NOTHING was moving in all the metallic city. Far as he could tell, nothing but his own passing was sending disturbing waves through the leaden air. Yet, he had the haunting feeling he wasn't alone, and he glanced around, nervously, as he went. To throw off the feeling, he shouted. Down here, the answering fireworks exploded fuzzily and only added to the haunting feeling. Still, he shouted. But it was a ghost town. Every room of every building he entered was as bare as the elevator.

It was on his second time around that he noticed the door. Strange he hadn't noticed it the first time. It was the only door—apart from the one to the elevator—that he had come upon, and so he should have noticed it the first time.

He found a sticky sweetness. Another elevator! How far down would this one take him? He pressed the button.

The door slid open.

This was no elevator. The door opened on a kind of courtyard. Strange he hadn't seen it from one of the windows in the buildings ringing it. He felt sure he had looked out of every window in every building, and every window had seemed to give on a street.

There was something at the far end of the courtyard. An opening. And running out of it, coming directly toward him, twenty-odd figures. To welcome him—or to fall upon him?

He halted, but not too abruptly, and was careful to make no move, for even a reassuring gesture of his might seem hostile to them. He halted, but a red drumming went on—as though

inertia felt it had to fill in his untaken footsteps.

Odd the figures most certainly were—some vaguely manlike, some not remotely manlike. But what seemed oddest about them was their manner of running. They would keep running forever. They were frozen in midstride, some of them at angles seemingly impossible to maintain.

"Ah, statues!" he said, and the beating quieted. And feeling free to examine them critically he began closing the space. They won his admiration even at a distance, not so much for themselves as for their makers. "What art!" And his admiration increased as the distance decreased and the running seemed increasingly real. "Well, boys," he said, giving one or two figures the benefit of the doubt, "what's the rush?"

He froze, himself, as they answered his question. They represented wildly varying life forms but they had one thing in common. All had the attitude of fear. They weren't running toward him, save as he happened to stand in the line of flight. They were running *from* something. And though they were only statues their look of terror infected him. That look whisper-

ed a warning. Fear, breeding by mere breathing in the ear, made him strain beyond the figures to learn what was pursuing.

He shook himself. "What's wrong with me?" he said, laughing half-angrily. Beyond the figures was only the silent opening. He could have sworn that their eyes followed him as he made for the opening, though when he turned suddenly and stared back they still impaled their eyes not on him but on fear.

"Well," he said, "let's find out what the hue and cry is all about." And he drew a blue breath and moved between the wild flutings of the columns flanking the opening and so passed inside.

HE CLOSED his eyes. But, for a ringing moment, the sound of what had struck his vision continued its reverberating, some invisible orchestra lagging behind some hyper-baton. The sound transposed itself like a negative after-image, then the moment ended.

Utter silence.

Now there's a moronic imperative, he thought, going slightly mad out of relief. *Utter silence!*

He opened his eyes. It took

some doing, but at last he willed himself to open his eyes and end the soothing purple hush. And he scanned again the ringing walls.

More precisely, his eyes ran the gamut of a frieze. It was easy to divine its purpose. Clearly, the frieze recorded a phase of the history of the ruling beings of Rotanex IX. He was able to trace the saddening diminuendo of a once-great race degenerating.

That race's last artist, with an echo of the golden spark still glimmering in his darkening brain, had sculpted for all time the decline and fall of his kind. There whipped past Rajpepna's gaze the whizzing of vehicles, the whirring of dynamos; then, a clashing of cymbals, a devastating time of warring; lastly, a sinking back into slime and silence.

Allowing for a bit of chauvinistic boasting—he caught a hint of an unbelievable means of journeying in space — these beings had once attained a high degree of culture. Apart from the material, he grasped a sense of the ethical values of that culture. At their peak of greatness these beings, with dispassionate justice, had returned good will for good will, bad will for bad will. And it was this last that had turned upon them—had turned them upon themselves—with a vengeance.

He sighed grayly. The frieze touched him, though he wasn't able to tell why. It announced its message of doom and reverberated it through a medium of its own, reaching beyond the senses, beyond sense.

Suddenly a great burden fell upon him. He could hear it getting night, a chilling night when every last unique grouping of shifting atoms was no more. He shivered, seeing a dizzying vision of a time without coordinates, a time without time.

This crazy planet had been doing things to his way of responding to his surroundings. Now he realized it was doing things to his thinking. Stresses seemed to be breaking down the compartmentalizing of his mind, seemed to be buckling the bulkheads holding his id, ripping the seams, flooding it out.

He had an urge to destroy. Deface the frieze! Desecrate the building! Demolish the city! And why not? Wasn't the individual born to die? Wasn't the universe itself born to die? If races reach greatness only to decline and fall, then why not help the process along? If all was for the purpose of purposelessness, then why not hurry the end of all?

There were signs he wasn't the only one to feel this way. Littering the floor were frag-

ments of objects of art. Plainly, they hadn't of themselves fallen to pieces. Someone had dashed them. Someone—

It came to him—*those figures outside were real.* They had been alive. Might even be living, in stasis. Like himself, they were alien to this planet. Each in turn had landed, had found the door in the dune, had descended to the city, had confronted the frieze, had struck out in despair and fear.

Had the dying race of Rotanev IX—wishing to return bad will for bad will—built in a curse? By that he didn't mean anything supernatural. He meant, say, a paralyzing ray that the aura of the will to destroy would set off.

He turned and gazed at the fleeing figures. And all at once his heart stilled. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed to him one of the running figures was missing. Had it—served its time?

Ah, that was a lot of nonsense! He turned back savagely. The urge to destroy was overwhelming.

Impatiently he tried to explain it to his feebly protesting conscience. Listen, when you think of the vast intra- and interatomic spaces nothing has solidity. Really, he would be smashing nothing. To carry it farther, nothing would be smashing nothing against nothing.

He laughed a rainbow. He didn't give a damn whether or not his conscience was listening to his reasoning. He scooped up a shard. He wound up to hurl it at the frieze.

A sharp thought came to him and he held his hand. *Let me take one more look at the frieze.* It took all his will to hold back and he felt a whining coldness in his bones. The air he breathed had the texture of pain. But he held his hand.

And he was barely in time, for even as his hand fell to his side and let the shard drop to the floor with a rose thunk and even as the echoing of his new look was dying away—a second sweep of the frieze, this one a counterclockwise one that revealed the frieze to be a gladdening crescendo—there came a new clangor and the great beings of Rotanev IX materialized around him.

WHEN the mutineers landed on Tellus he was waiting there with a detail of spaceport police to welcome them.

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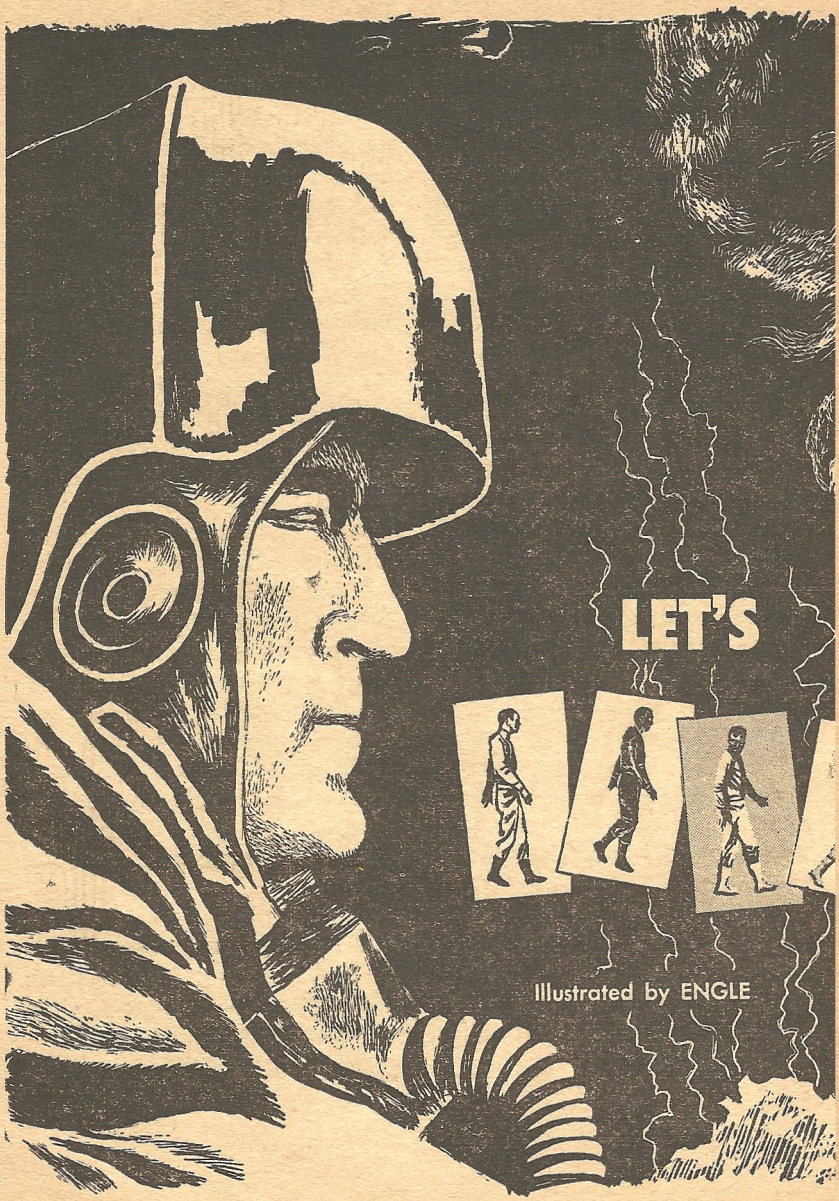
LET'S
Illustrated by ENGLE


GET TOGETHER
by ISAAC ASIMOV

Let's Get Together

by Isaac Asimov

A KIND of peace had endured for a century and people had forgotten what anything else was like. They would scarcely have known how to react had they discovered that a kind of war had finally come.

Certainly, Elias Lynn, Chief of the Bureau of Robotics, wasn't sure how he ought to react when *he* finally found out. The Bureau of Robotics was headquartered in Cheyenne, in line with the century-old trend toward decentralization, and Lynn stared dubiously at the young Security officer from Washington who had brought the news.

Elias Lynn was a large man, almost charmingly homely, with pale blue eyes that bulged a bit. Men weren't usually comfortable under the stare of those eyes, but the Security officer remained calm.

Lynn decided that his first reaction ought to be incredulity. Hell, it *was* incredulity! He just didn't believe it!

He eased himself back in his chair and said, "How certain is the information?"

The Security officer, who had introduced himself as Ralph G. Breckenridge and had presented credentials to match, had the softness of youth about him; full lips, plump cheeks that flushed easily, and guileless eyes. His clothing was out of line with Cheyenne but it suited a universally air-conditioned Washington, where Security, despite everything, was still centered.

Breckenridge flushed and said, "There's no doubt about it."

"You people know all about Them, I suppose," said Lynn and was unable to keep a trace of sarcasm out of his tone. He was not particularly aware of his use of a slightly-stressed pronoun in his reference to the enemy, the equivalent of capitalization in print. It was a cultural habit of this generation and the one preceding. No one said the "East," or the "Reds" or the "Soviets" or the "Russians" any more. That would have been too confusing, since some of Them weren't of the East, weren't Reds, Soviets, and especially not Russians. It was much simpler to say We and They, and much more precise.

Travelers had frequently reported that They did the same in reverse. Over there, They were "We" (in the appropriate lan-

guage) and We were "They."

Scarcely anyone gave thought to such things any more. It was all quite comfortable and casual. There was no hatred, even. At the beginning, it had been called a Cold War. Now it was only a game, almost a good-natured game, with unspoken rules and a kind of decency about it.

Lynn said, abruptly, "Why should They want to disturb the situation?"

He rose and stood staring at a wall-map of the world, split into two regions with faint edgings of color. An irregular portion on the left of the map was edged in a mild green. A smaller, but just as irregular, portion on the right of the map was bordered in a washed-out pink. We and They.

The map hadn't changed much in a century. The loss of Formosa and the gain of East Germany some eighty years before had been the last territorial switch of importance.

There had been another change, though, that was significant enough and that was in the colors. Two generations before, Their territory had been a brooding, bloody red, Ours a pure and undefiled white. Now there was a neutrality about the colors. Lynn had seen Their maps and it was the same on Their side.

"They wouldn't do it," he said.

"They are doing it," said Breckenridge, "and you had better accustom yourself to the fact. Of course, sir, I realize that it isn't pleasant to think that they may be that far ahead of us in robotics."

His eyes remained as guileless as ever, but the hidden knife-edges of the words plunged deep, and Lynn quivered at the impact.

Of course, that would account for why the Chief of Robotics learned of this so late and through a Security officer at that. He had lost caste in the eyes of the Government; if Robotics had really failed in the struggle, Lynn could expect no political mercy.

Lynn said wearily, "Even if what you say is true, they're not far ahead of us. We could build humanoid robots."

"Have we, sir?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we have built a few models for experimental purposes."

"They were doing so ten years ago. They've made ten years' progress since."

Lynn was disturbed. He wondered if his incredulity concerning the whole business were really the result of wounded pride and fear for his job and reputation. He was embarrassed by the possibility that this might be so, and yet he was forced into defense.

He said, "Look, young man, the stalemate between Them and Us was never perfect in every detail, you know. They have always been ahead in one facet or another and We in some other facet or another. If They're ahead of us right now in robotics, it's because They've placed a greater proportion of Their effort into robotics than We have. And that means that some other branch of endeavor has received a greater share of Our efforts than it has of Theirs. It would mean We're ahead in force-field research or in hyperatomics, perhaps."

Lynn felt distressed at his own statement that the stalemate wasn't perfect. It was true enough, but that was the one great danger threatening the world. The world depended on the stalemate being as perfect as possible. If the small unevennesses that always existed overbalanced too far in one direction or the other—

Almost at the beginning of what had been the Cold War, both sides had developed thermonuclear weapons, and war became unthinkable. Competition switched from the military to the economic and psychological and had stayed there ever since.

But always there was the driving effort on each side to break the stalemate, to develop a parry for every possible thrust, to develop a thrust that could not be parried in time—something that would make war possible again. And that was not because either side wanted war so desperately, but because both were afraid that the other side would make the crucial discovery first.

For a hundred years each side had kept the struggle even. And in the process, peace had been maintained for a hundred years while, as byproducts of the continuously intensive research, force-fields had been produced and solar energy and insect control and robots. Each side was making a beginning in the understanding of mentalics, which was the name given to the biochemistry and biophysics of thought. Each side had its outposts on the Moon and on Mars. Mankind was advancing in giant strides under forced draft.

It was even necessary for both sides to be as decent and humane as possible among themselves, lest through cruelty and tyranny, friends be made for the other side.

It couldn't be that the stalemate would now be broken and that there would be war.

Lynn said, "I want to consult one of my men. I want his opinion."

"Is he trustworthy?"

Lynn looked disgusted. "Good

Lord, what man in Robotics has not been investigated and cleared to death by your people? Yes, I vouch for him. If you can't trust a man like Humphrey Carl Laszlo, then we're in no position to face the kind of attack you say They are launching, no matter what else we do."

"I've heard of Laszlo," said Breckenridge.

"Good. Does he pass?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'll have him in and we'll find out what he thinks about the possibility that robots could invade the U. S. A."

"Not exactly," said Breckenridge, softly. "You still don't accept the full truth. Find out what he thinks about the fact that robots have *already* invaded the U. S. A."

LASZLO was the grandson of a Hungarian who had broken through what had then been called the Iron Curtain, and he had a comfortable above-suspicion feeling about himself because of it. He was thick-set and balding with a pugnacious look graven forever on his snub face, but his accent was clear Harvard and he was almost excessively soft-spoken.

To Lynn, who was conscious that after years of administration he was no longer expert in the various phases of modern robotics, Laszlo was a comforting receptacle for complete knowledge. Lynn felt better because of the man's mere presence.

Lynn said, "What do you think?"

A scowl twisted Laszlo's face ferociously. "That They're that far ahead of us. Completely incredible. It would mean They've produced humanoids that could not be told from humans at close quarters. It would mean a considerable advance in robo-mentalics."

"You're personally involved," said Breckenridge, coldly. "Leaving professional pride out of account, exactly why is it impossible that They be ahead of Us?"

Laszlo shrugged. "I assure you that I'm well acquainted with Their literature on robotics. I know approximately where They are."

"You know approximately where They want you to *think* They are, is what you really mean," corrected Breckenridge. "Have you ever visited the other side?"

"I haven't," said Laszlo, shortly.

"Nor you, Dr. Lynn?"

Lynn said, "No, I haven't, either."

Breckenridge said, "Has any robotics man visited the other side in twenty-five years?" He asked the question with a kind of confidence that indicated he knew the answer.

For a matter of seconds, the atmosphere was heavy with thought. Discomfort crossed Laszlo's broad face. He said, "As a matter of fact, They haven't held any conferences on robotics in a long time."

"In twenty-five years," said Breckenridge. "Isn't that significant?"

"Maybe," said Laszlo, reluctantly. "Something else bothers me, though. None of Them have ever come to Our conferences on robotics. None that I can remember."

"Were They invited?" asked Breckenridge.

Lynn, staring and worried, interposed quickly, "Of course."

Breckenridge said, "Do They refuse attendance to any other types of scientific conferences We hold?"

"I don't know," said Laszlo. He was pacing the floor now. "I haven't heard of any cases. Have you, Chief?"

"No," said Lynn.

Breckenridge said, "Wouldn't you say it was as though They didn't want to be put in the position of having to return any such invitation? Or as though They were afraid one of Their men might talk too much?"

That was exactly how it seemed, and Lynn felt a helpless conviction that Security's story was true after all steal over him.

Why else had there been no contact between sides on robotics? There had been a cross-fertilizing trickle of researchers moving in both directions on a strictly one-for-one basis for years, dating back to the days of Eisenhower and Khrushchev. There were a great many good motives for that: an honest appreciation of the supra-national character of science; impulses of friendliness that are hard to wipe out completely in the individual human being; the desire to be exposed to a fresh and interesting outlook and to have your own slightly-stale notions greeted by others as fresh and interesting.

The governments themselves were anxious that this continue. There was always the obvious thought that by learning all you could and telling as little as you could, your own side would gain by the exchange.

But not in the case of robotics. Not there.

Such a little thing to carry conviction. And a thing, moreover, they had known all along. Lynn thought, darkly: We've taken the complacent way out.

Because the other side had done nothing publicly on robotics, it had been tempting to sit back smugly and be comfortable in the assurance of superiority. Why hadn't it seemed possible, even likely, that They were hiding superior cards, a trump

hand, for the proper time?

Laszlo said, shakenly, "What do we do?" It was obvious that the same line of thought had carried the same conviction to him.

"Do?" parroted Lynn. It was hard to think right now of anything but of the complete horror that came with conviction. There were ten humanoid robots somewhere in the United States, each one carrying a fragment of a TC bomb.

TC! The race for sheer horror in bomb-ery had ended there. TC! Total Conversion! The sun was no longer a synonym one could use. Total conversion made the sun a penny candle.

Ten humanoids, each completely harmless in separation, could, by the simple act of coming together, exceed critical mass and—

Lynn rose to his feet heavily, the dark pouches under his eyes, which ordinarily lent his ugly face a look of savage foreboding, more prominent than ever. "It's going to be up to us to figure out ways and means of telling a humanoid from a human and then finding the humanoids."

"How quickly?" muttered Laszlo.

"Not later than five minutes before they get together," barked Lynn, "and I don't know when that will be."

Breckenridge nodded. "I'm glad you're with us now, sir. I'm to bring you back to Washington for conference, you know."

Lynn raised his eyebrows. "All right."

He wondered if, had he delayed longer in being convinced, he might not have been replaced forthwith—if some other Chief of the Bureau of Robotics might not be conferring in Washington. He suddenly wished earnestly that exactly that had come to pass.

THE FIRST Presidential Assistant was there, the Secretary of Science, the Secretary of Security, Lynn himself, and Breckenridge. Five of them sitting about a table in the dungeons of an underground fortress near Washington.

Presidential Assistant Jeffreys was an impressive man, handsome in a white-haired and just-a-trifle-jowly fashion, solid, thoughtful and as unobtrusive, politically, as a Presidential Assistant ought to be.

He spoke incisively. "There are three questions that face us as I see it. First, when are the humanoids going to get together? Second, where are they going to get together? Third, how do we stop them before they get together?"

Secretary of Science Amberley nodded convulsively at that. He had been Dean of Northwestern

Engineering before his appointment. He was thin, sharp-featured and noticeably edgy. His forefinger traced slow circles on the table.

"As far as *when* they'll get together," he said. "I suppose it's definite that it won't be for some time."

"Why do you say that?" asked Lynn, sharply.

"They've been in the U. S. at least a month already. So Security says."

Lynn turned automatically to look at Breckenridge, and Secretary of Security Macalaster intercepted the glance. Macalaster said, "The information is reliable. Don't let Breckenridge's apparent youth fool you, Dr. Lynn. That's part of his value to us. Actually, he's 34 and has been with the department for ten years. He has been in Moscow for nearly a year and without him, none of this terrible danger would be known to us. As it is, we have most of the details."

"Not the crucial ones," said Lynn.

Macalaster of Security smiled frostily. His heavy chin and close-set eyes were well-known to the public but almost nothing else about him was. He said, "We are all finitely human, Dr. Lynn. Agent Breckenridge has done a great deal."

Presidential Assistant Jeffreys cut in. "Let us say we have a certain amount of time. If action at the instant were necessary, it would have happened before this. It seems likely that they are waiting for a specific time. If we knew the place, perhaps the time would become self-evident.

"If they are going to TC a target, they will want to cripple us as much as possible, so it would seem that a major city would have to be it. In any case, a major metropolis is the only target worth a TC bomb. I think there are four possibilities: Washington, as the administrative center; New York, as the financial center; and Detroit and Pittsburgh as the two chief industrial centers."

Macalaster of Security said, "I vote for New York. Administration and industry have both been decentralized to the point where the destruction of any one particular city won't prevent instant retaliation."

"Then why New York?" asked Amberly of Science, perhaps more sharply than he intended. "Finance has been decentralized as well."

"A question of morale. It may be they intend to destroy our will to resist, to induce surrender by the sheer horror of the first blow. The greatest destruction of human life would be in the New York Metropolitan area—"

"Pretty cold-blooded," muttered Lynn.

"I know," said Macalaster of Security, "but they're capable of it, if they thought it would mean final victory at a stroke. Wouldn't we—"

Presidential Assistant Jeffreys brushed back his white hair. "Let's assume the worst. Let's assume that New York will be destroyed some time during the winter, preferably immediately after a serious blizzard when communications are at their worst and the disruption of utilities and food supplies in fringe areas will be most serious in their effect. Now, how do we stop them?"

Amberley of Science could only say, "Finding ten men in two hundred and twenty million is an awfully small needle in an awfully large haystack."

Jeffreys shook his head. "You have it wrong. Ten humanoids among two hundred twenty million humans."

"No difference," said Amberley of Science. "We don't know that a humanoid can be differentiated from a human at sight. Probably not." He looked at Lynn. They all did.

Lynn said heavily, "We in Cheyenne couldn't make one that would pass as human in the daylight."

"But They can," said Macalaster of Security, "and not only physically. We're sure of that. They've advanced mentalic procedures to the point where they can reel off the micro-electronic pattern of the brain and focus it on the positronic pathways of the robot."

Lynn stared. "Are you implying that they can create the replica of a human being complete with personality and memory?"

"I do."

"Of specific human beings?"

"That's right."

"Is this also based on Agent Breckenridge's findings?"

"Yes. The evidence can't be disputed."

Lynn bent his head in thought for a moment. Then he said, "Then ten men in the United States are not men but humanoids. But the originals would have had to be available to them. They couldn't be Orientals, who would be too easy to spot, so they would have to be East Europeans. How would they be introduced into this country, then? With the radar network over the entire world border as tight as a drum, how could They introduce any individual, human or humanoid, without our knowing it?"

Macalaster of Security said, "It can be done. There are certain legitimate seepages across the border. Businessmen, pilots, even tourists. They're watched,

of course, on both sides. Still ten of them might have been kidnapped and used as models for humanoids. The humanoids would then be sent back in their place. Since we wouldn't expect such a substitution, it would pass us by. If they were Americans to begin with, there would be no difficulty in their getting into this country. It's as simple as that."

"And even their friends and family could not tell the difference?"

"We must assume so. Believe me, we've been waiting for any report that might imply sudden attacks of amnesia or troublesome changes in personality. We've checked on thousands."

Amberley of Science stared at his finger-tips. "I think ordinary measures won't work. The attack must come from the Bureau of Robotics and I depend on the chief of that bureau."

Again eyes turned sharply, expectantly, on Lynn.

Lynn felt bitterness rise. It seemed to him that this was what the conference came to and was intended for. Nothing that had been said had not been said before. He was sure of that. There was no solution to the problem, no pregnant suggestion. It was a device for the record, a device on the part of men who gravely feared defeat and who wished the responsibility for it placed clearly and unequivocally on someone else.

And yet there was justice in it. It was in robotics that We had fallen short. And Lynn was not Lynn merely. He was Lynn of Robotics and the responsibility had to be his.

He said, "I will do what I can."

HE SPENT a wakeful night and there was a haggardness about both body and soul when he sought and attained another interview with Presidential Assistant Jeffreys the next morning. Breckenridge was there, and though Lynn would have preferred a private conference, he could see the justice in the situation. It was obvious that Breckenridge had attained enormous influence with the government as a result of his successful Intelligence work. Well, why not?

Lynn said, "Sir, I am considering the possibility that we are hopping uselessly to enemy piping."

"In what way?"

"I'm sure that however impatient the public may grow at times, and however legislators sometimes find it expedient to talk, the government at least recognizes the world stalemate to be beneficial. They must recognize it also. Ten humanoids with one TC bomb is a trivial way of breaking the stalemate."

"The destruction of fifteen million human beings is scarcely trivial."

"It is from the world power standpoint. It would not so demoralize us as to make us surrender or so cripple us as to convince us we could not win. There would just be the same old planetary death-war that both sides have avoided so long and so successfully. And all They would have accomplished is to force us to fight minus one city. It's not enough."

"What do you suggest?" said Jeffreys, coldly. "That They do not have ten humanoids in our country? That there is not a TC bomb waiting to get toegther?"

"I'll agree that those things are here, but perhaps for some reason greater than just mid-winter bomb-madness."

"Such as?"

"It may be that the physical destruction resulting from the humanoids getting together is not the worst thing that can happen to us. What about the moral and intellectual destruction that comes of their being here at all? With all due respect to Agent Breckenridge, what if They *intended* for us to find out about the humanoids; what if the humanoids are never supposed to get together, but merely to remain separate in order to give us something to worry about."

"Why?"

"Tell me this. What measures have already been taken against the humanoids? I suppose that Security is going through the files of all citizens who have ever been across the border or close enough to it to make kidnapping possible. I know, since Macalaster mentioned it yesterday, that they are following up suspicious psychiatric cases. What else?"

Jeffreys said, "Small X-ray devices are being installed in key places in the large cities. In the mass arenas, for instance—"

"Where ten humanoids might slip in among a hundred thousand spectators of a football game or an air-polo match?"

"Exactly."

"And concert halls and churches?"

"We must start somewhere. We can't do it all at once."

"Particularly when panic must be avoided?" said Lynn. "Isn't that so? It wouldn't do to have the public realize that at any unpredictable moment, some unpredictable city and its human contents would suddenly cease to exist."

"I suppose that's obvious. What are you driving at?"

Lynn said strenuously, "That a growing fraction of our national effort will be diverted entirely into the nasty problem of what Amberley called finding a very small needle in a very large haystack. We'll be chasing

our tails madly, while They increase their research lead to the point where we find we can no longer catch up; when we must surrender without the chance even of snapping our fingers in retaliation.

"Consider further that this news will leak out as more and more people become involved in our counter-measures and more and more people begin to guess what we're doing. Then what? The panic might do us more harm than any one TC bomb."

The Presidential Assistant said, irritably, "In Heaven's name, man, what do you suggest we do, then?"

"Nothing," said Lynn. "Call their bluff. Live as we have lived and gamble that They won't dare break the stalemate for the sake of a one-bomb headstart."

"Impossible!" said Jeffreys. "Completely impossible. The welfare of all of Us is very largely in my hands, and doing nothing is the one thing I cannot do. I agree with you, perhaps, that X-ray machines at sports arenas are a kind of skin-deep measure that won't be effective, but it has to be done so that people, in the aftermath, do not come to the bitter conclusion that we tossed our country away for the sake of a subtle line of reasoning that encouraged do-nothingism. In fact, our counter-gambit will be active indeed."

"In what way?"

Presidential Assistant Jeffreys looked at Breckenridge. The young Security officer, hitherto calmly silent, said, "It's no use talking about a possible future break in the stalemate when the stalemate is broken now. It doesn't matter whether these humanoids explode or do not. Maybe they *are* only a bait to divert us, as you say. But the fact remains that we are a quarter of a century behind in robotics, and that may be fatal. What other advances in robotics will there be to surprise us if war does start? The only answer is to divert our entire force immediately, *now*, into a crash program of robotics research, and the first problem is to find the humanoids. Call it an exercise in robotics, if you will, or call it the prevention of the death of fifteen million men, women and children."

Lynn shook his head, helplessly, "You *can't*. You'd be playing into their hands. They want us lured into the one blind alley while they're free to advance in all other directions."

Jeffreys said, impatiently, "That's your guess. Breckenridge has made his suggestion through channels and the government has approved, and we will begin with an all-Science conference."

"All-Science?"

Breckenridge said, "We have listed every important scientist of every branch of natural science. They'll all be at Cheyenne. There will be only one point on the agenda: How to advance robotics. The major specific subheading under that will be: How to develop a receiving device for the electromagnetic fields of the cerebral cortex that will be sufficiently delicate to distinguish between a protoplasmic human brain and a positronic humanoid brain."

Jeffreys said, "We had hoped you would be willing to be in charge of the conference."

"I was not consulted in this."

"Obviously time was short, sir. Do you agree to be in charge?"

Lynn smiled briefly. It was a matter of responsibility again. The responsibility must be clearly that of Lynn of Robotics. He had the feeling it would be Breckenridge who would really be in charge. But what could he do?

He said, "I agree."

BRECKENRIDGE and Lynn returned together to Cheyenne, where that evening Laszlo listened with a sullen mistrust to Lynn's description of coming events.

Laszlo said, "While you were gone, Chief, I've started putting five experimental models of humanoid structure through the testing procedures. Our men are on a twelve-hour day, with three shifts overlapping. If we've got to arrange a conference, we're going to be crowded and red-taped out of everything. Work will come to a halt."

Breckenridge said, "That will be only temporary. You will gain more than you lose."

Laszlo scowled. "A bunch of astrophysicists and geochemists around won't help a damn toward robotics."

"Views from specialists of other fields may be helpful."

"Are you sure? How do we know that there *is* any way of detecting brain waves or that, even if we can, there is a way of differentiating human and humanoid by wave pattern. Who set up the project, anyway?"

"I did," said Breckenridge.

"*You* did? Are you a robotics man?"

The young Security agent said, calmly, "I have studied robotics."

"That's not the same thing."

"I've had access to text-material dealing with Russian robotics—in Russian. Top-secret material well in advance of anything you have here."

Lynn said, ruefully, "He has us there, Laszlo."

"It was on the basis of that material," Breckenridge went on, "that I suggested this particu-

lar line of investigation. It is reasonably certain that in copying off the electromagnetic pattern of a specific human mind into a specific positronic brain, a perfectly exact duplicate cannot be made. For one thing, the most complicated positronic brain small enough to fit into a human-sized skull is hundreds of times less complex than the human brain. It can't pick up all the overtones, therefore, and there must be some way to take advantage of that fact."

Laszlo looked impressed despite himself and Lynn smiled grimly. It was easy to resent Breckenridge and the coming intrusion of several hundred scientists of non-robotics specialties, but the problem itself was an intriguing one. There was that consolation, at least.

IT CAME to him quietly.

Lynn found he had nothing to do but sit in his office alone, with an executive position that had grown merely titular. Perhaps that helped. It gave him time to think, to picture the creative scientists of half the world converging on Cheyenne.

It was Breckenridge who, with cool efficiency, was handling the details of preparation. There had been a kind of confidence in the way he said, "Let's get together and we'll lick Them."

Let's get together.

It came to Lynn so quietly that anyone watching Lynn at that moment might have seen his eyes blink slowly twice—but surely nothing more.

He did what he had to do with a whirling detachment that kept him calm when he felt that, by all rights, he ought to be going mad.

He sought out Breckenridge in the other's improvised quarters.

Breckenridge was alone and frowning. "Is anything wrong, sir?"

Lynn said, wearily, "Everything's right, I think. I've invoked martial law."

"What!"

"As chief of a division I can do so if I am of the opinion the situation warrants it. Over my division, I can then be dictator. Chalk up one for the beauties of decentralization."

"You will rescind that order immediately." Breckenridge took a step forward. "When Washington hears this, you will be ruined."

"I'm ruined anyway. Do you think I don't realize that I've been set up for the role of the greatest villain in American history: the man who let Them break the stalemate. I have nothing to lose—and perhaps a great deal to gain."

He laughed a little wildly, "What a target the Division of

Robotics will be, eh, Breckenridge? Only a few thousand men to be killed by a TC bomb capable of wiping out three hundred square miles in one microsecond. But five hundred of those men would be our greatest scientists. We would be in the peculiar position of having to fight a war with our brains shot out, or surrendering. I think we'd surrender."

"But this is impossible. Lynn, do you hear me? Do you understand? How could the humanoids pass our security provisions? How could they get together?"

"But they *are* getting together! We're helping them to do so. We're ordering them to do so. Our scientists visit the other side, Breckenridge. They visit Them regularly. You made a point of how strange it was that no one in robotics did. Well, ten of those scientists are still there and in their place, ten humanoids are converging on Cheyenne."

"That's a ridiculous guess."

"I think it's a good one, Breckenridge. But it wouldn't work unless we knew humanoids were in America so that we would call the conference in the first place. Quite a coincidence that you brought the news of the humanoids *and* suggested the conference *and* suggested the agenda *and* are running the show and know exactly which scientists were invited. Did you make sure the right ten were included?"

"Dr. Lynn!" cried Breckenridge in outrage. He poised to rush forward.

Lynn said, "Don't move. I've got a blaster here. We'll just wait for the scientists to get here one by one. One by one we'll X-ray them. One by one, we'll monitor them for radioactivity. No two will get together without being checked, and if all five hundred are clear, I'll give you my blaster and surrender to you. Only I think we'll find the ten humanoids. Sit down, Breckenridge."

They both sat.

Lynn said, "We wait. When I'm tired, Laszlo will spell me. We wait."

PROFESSOR Manuelo Jiminez of the Institute of Higher Studies of Buenos Aires exploded while the stratospheric jet on which he traveled was three miles above the Amazon Valley. It was a simple chemical explosion but it was enough to destroy the plane.

Dr. Herman Liebowitz of M. I. T. exploded in a monorail, killing twenty people and injuring a hundred others.

In similar manner, Dr. Auguste Marin of L'Institut Nucléonique of Montreal and seven others died at various stages of their journey to Cheyenne.

LASZLO hurtled in, pale-faced and stammering, with the first news of it. It had only been two hours that Lynn had sat there, facing Breckenridge, blaster in hand.

Laszlo said, "I thought you were nuts, Chief, but you were right. They *were* humanoids. They *had* to be." He turned to stare with hate-filled eyes at Breckenridge. "Only they were warned. *He* warned them, and now there won't be one left intact. Not one to study."

"God!" cried Lynn and in a frenzy of haste thrust his blaster out toward Breckenridge and fired. The Security man's neck vanished; the torso fell; the head dropped, thudded against the floor and rolled crookedly.

Lynn moaned, "I didn't understand, I thought he was a traitor. Nothing more."

And Laszlo stood immobile, mouth open, for the moment incapable of speech.

Lynn said, wildly. "Sure, he warned them. But how could he do so while sitting in that chair unless he were equipped with built-in radio transmission? Don't you see it? Breckenridge had been in Moscow. The real Breckenridge is still there. Oh my God, there were *eleven* of them."

Laszlo managed a hoarse squeak. "Why didn't *he* explode?"

"He was hanging on, I suppose, to make sure the others had received his message and were safely destroyed. Lord, Lord, when you brought the news and I realized the truth, I couldn't shoot fast enough. God knows by how few seconds I may have beaten him to it."

Laszlo said, shakily, "At least, we'll have one to study." He bent and put his fingers on the sticky fluid trickling out of the mangled remains at the neck end of the headless body.

Not blood, but high-grade machine oil.

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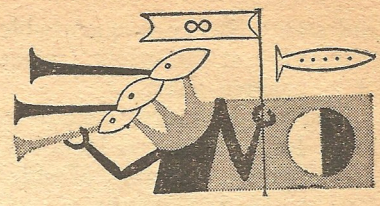
DAMON KNIGHT fans will be glad to know that a collection of his book reviews has just been published in hard covers, under the title, *In Search of Wonder*. These reviews, which originally appeared in INFINITY and other magazines, have been carefully revised and expanded, and the book constitutes one of the most valuable and entertaining bodies of criticism of science fiction ever published. The volume includes an introduction by Anthony Boucher and illustrations by J. L. Patterson. It is available from Advent: Publishers, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 13, Ill., at $4.00 a copy.

Fanfare



BREAKING POINT

by ARTHUR H. RAPP

Whenever something of suitable quality can be found, INFINITY *will reprint an item from a "fanzine"—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. "Breaking Point" originally appeared in* UNIVERSE, *which was edited and published by Ray Nelson.*

I DO not like you, General Henkle.

I do not like the arrogant way you bark orders at your cringing subordinates; I do not like the faultless perfection of your well-tailored uniform with its breastful of ribbons and neat pentagons of stars. The uniform should be ill-fitting, torn and bloodstained, General Henkle—then you would look like a soldier.

I do not like your wonderful invention for the defense of our country, General Henkle. I do not like these tiny artificial satellites endlessly circling, circling, in the blue-black stratosphere above the blue-green earth. I do not think any of those people down there like the feeling that, day or night, wherever they may go, they are never out of range of your atomic cannon, General Henkle, your Damoclean swords dangling on the tenuous filament of international diplomacy.

I do not like the lines I see in the faces of those who spend a week riding one of your satellites, alone, alone with the controls of death and desolation, knowing that when you give the word, General Henkle, theirs must be the hand which looses the deadly fission-blast upon their fellow men. I do not like the thought of the neuroses which those satellite-passengers develop, General Henkle—fear of space, fear of atomic power, fear of height, fear dredged from deep in the subconscious

and eating like an unquenchable atomic fire at the bright surface of a sensitive mind.

You need sensitive minds in these death-globes you launched, don't you, General Henkle? You could find plenty of soldiers with insensitive minds, plodders who could withstand the solitude of space, couldn't you? But no, you must have more than a robot-mentality, mustn't you? You must be able to trust that your switch-throwers will never forget, never make a mistake, accidentally release the ravening destruction upon "our fair and noble nation," rather than upon "those rapacious foreign aggressors, tensed to strike."

That problem worries you, doesn't it, General Henkle, Commander - in - Chief Henkle, Would-be Dictator Henkle? You want to know how much you can strain a sensitive mind, a fine steel sword, before it snaps under the stress, don't you? You *need* to know that, don't you? Until you know that, you cannot risk precipitating the actual crisis which will throw your war machine into action, to let you strike first—"in defense" —you cannot do that without knowing the measure of a mind, can you?

So, General Henkle, worried and impatient Henkle, you have taken men like me—inoffensive, peace-loving citizens—and by means of your power and your intimidation, have "persuaded" us to ride in your tiny metal moons. You want to know if we can stand a week alone, alone in space with the steady-burning stars and the corona-haloed sun. And, in fact, we were honored to accept the task, weren't we, General Henkle? After all, it would mean rewards for us later, when you became ruler of the world, wouldn't it? And we were serving our country, weren't we?

That was long and long ago, General Henkle. That was six days ago. In six twenty-four-hour periods a man can do a lot of thinking, General Henkle. A man can think many thoughts in one hundred and forty-four hours, General Henkle — in 8,640 minutes. A man can think a thought a second, General Henkle, and a man can think of almost everything in 518,400 seconds of solitude, hurtling above the green fields and blue waters and misty clouds of Earth. A man can think of history, General Henkle, of how the progress of the ages has been interlined with bloodshed and ever more bloodshed. A man can watch the tiny specks appearing and disappearing as the Earth rolls beneath him, and know those specks are cities, metropoli filled with men and

women and children who would not appreciate dying in your "glorious war," General Henkle.

A man can watch your own capital city roll into view, as he has watched the capitals of Russia and America and Belgium and Brazil, and reflect that, from here, they all look the same. A man can watch the parade of cities beneath the blunt, ugly muzzle of the atomic cannon which protrudes through the plastiglass, and realize that it is as simple to flip that red switch when *you* are beneath the cannon, as when the Russians, or Americans, or Belgians or Brazilians are under the sights.

A man's fingers can twitch with the intensity of his thoughts, Murderer Henkle—a man can think of the minds your mad scheme has already shattered, and your war not even begun. A man can think of all you plan to do, and wonder if such a militarist should not be exterminated. A man can brush his fingers against the red toggle switch, gently, caressingly, feeling its cool plastic under the skin of his fingers, feeling a slight burr at one edge, where the two molded halves are joined.

Murderer Henkle! Killer! Madman! You cannot control the destiny of the world! You are not the Supreme Power on Earth! The Supreme Power is sitting at this control panel, hand on the red toggle switch which can blast you into atomic ruin.

Mad Dog Henkle! Die! Die like the beast you are! *So!*

FILE: XP2137-21/3-a24 TO: Commander-in-Chief FROM: Psych

SUBJECT: Atomic Satellites, Selection of Personnel.

1. Experimental Project 2137 has been carried out as planned.

2. Results show that personnel normally succumb to acute schizoid paranoia after five days in the Satellites, and close the "firing switch" about twelve hours after first symptoms appear.

3. In view of Par. 2 above, it is recommended that tours of duty in the Satellites be 48-hour periods, beginning as soon as the simulated cannon are replaced with the real armament. This should leave an ample safety factor so far as mental stability of personnel is concerned.

—E. J. WOOTEN, Colonel, Med. Corps., Chief Psychologist.

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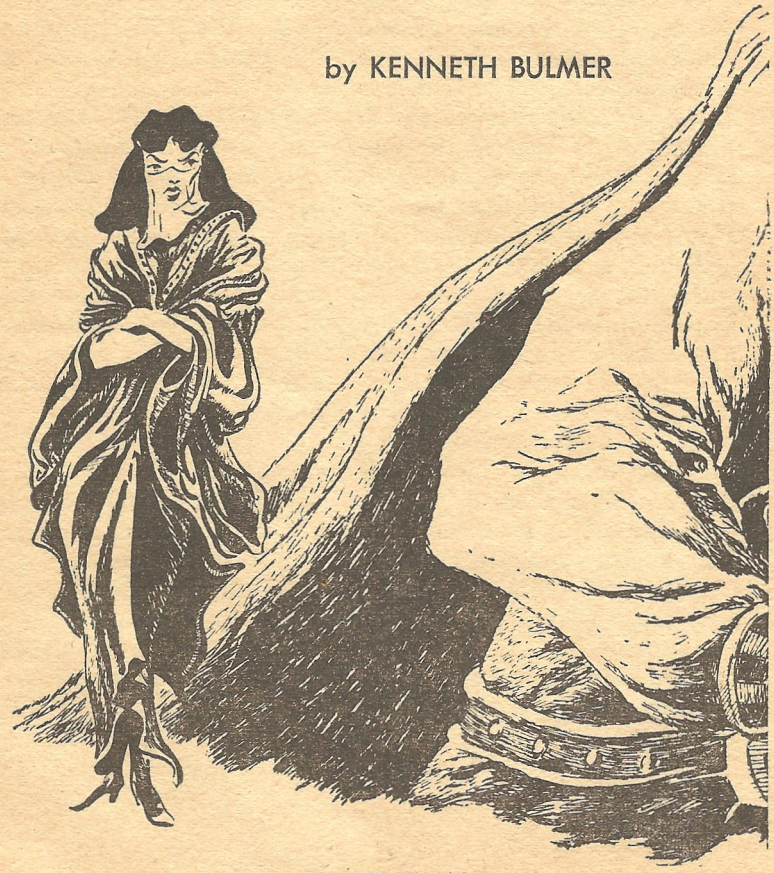
THREE-CORNERED KNIFE

He had two assignments—to protect and kill the same man—with death as the penalty if he failed either!

by KENNETH BULMER



Illustrated by BOWMAN

TELL ME I should have known better, brother, and I'll open a mouth in your throat to laugh with. I took the job in good faith and got stuck with it.

They'd just found an air gun on Stanton Purvis —the slipshod fool had simply hidden it in a double pocket in his cloak— and the police had his arms doubled up his back and were bludgeoning him into the waiting wagon. He might have been only a very young aspirant, but nobody should be that stupid.

I stopped coming out of Rafferty's, with my last soldar still comfortably wedged in the toe of my boot, and stood in the doorway to watch. If Purvis was green enough to carry and be found carrying an unlicensed and illegal weapon—well, they needed men on the penal asteroids. And it lessened competition in my profession by exactly a unit.

The flics weren't being gentle with Purvis, and a couple of Company Aristos, out slumming, stopped by to see the fun. The Pool crowd outside Rafferty's was quiet, but their mood was like strange dog smell. They shared my view that Purvis was an idiot, but they didn't like to see him beaten up by police lackeys with a couple of Employed Aristos looking on.

I ducked back into the bar and slid onto a stool. Bucking Company men and the police was no game for me—unless I was paid for it.

SHE MUST have been reading my thoughts.

I didn't see where she came from. When she spoke she could have risen from the plastifloor for all I knew.

"You're Raphe Bartram." The way she said it made me feel like a boy from the wrong side of the spaceport.

"Could be." I stuck up a finger before I remembered my financial situation, and Rafferty brought my usual. Bang went my last soldar.

"I'm Susan Weymouth," she said. "I've got a job for you."

"That's nice," I said. "You're this Weymouth dame like I'm Napoleon Bonaparte." I waved an arm. "But no matter. Proceed."

She flushed a trifle, enough so that the lights in her eyes did things to her face. She was a real looker, and the rest of her was even harder to look away from. Those violet eyes of hers were staring pointedly at my glass. I sighed in resignation and stuck up another finger. Rafferty obliged.

She said: "Mr. Bartram. I need your help very badly. I wish to engage your services, professionally, but . . ." She paused. Her slender fingers played with her glass.

In my profession you get used to that. Even today, with civilization blooming among the stars, with the great Monopolies and the Companies—and the Pool—, people hate to make the plunge when they want a case handled quietly. It's just human nature, I suppose. Typically, it never shows more markedly than when a traditionally Company Employed or an Aristo is forced to make a deal with one of the Pool. What she was, what

she represented, was something I could never have unless I walled up my own personality in a Company job wearing a Company badge and using a Company mind.

That's why I tell folks I don't need an office. Truth, of course, is that I don't need one. The big boys in the business, like Granger, Shostache, and G. W., have palatial office suites to impress the peasants. Me, I stick to Rafferty's and a black-bordered insert in the Directory.

The muffled cough of the midday rocket drifted down, mingling with the clinking sounds in the bar. She roused herself, took a sip, stared at me. "Listen, Mr. Bartram. I need your services. I cannot pay much . . . That is—I am not a rich woman." She finished the drink without looking at me. "But this case must be handled by an expert."

In my profession you quickly learn not to let the peasants who employ you make you sick to your stomach. They pay. They want quick, clean jobs. No questions. Above all, none of the dirt. But this girl didn't look that sort—and then I cussed myself for a sentimental dodderer. You never can tell. The subconscious sprouts monstrosities.

"Who?" I asked quietly.

"My brother—" She put a hand to her mouth, then, with the realization that her own identity could no longer be concealed. After the rocket it was very quiet in the bar.

"Your own brother," I said.

"I—that is—someone wants to kill him. I want you to be his bodyguard."

That threw me off balance.

"Hey, sister. Hold on. I don't handle bodyguard jobs. They take too long. Why don't you go to the professionals? Kramer, Tsiu Luin, Shield Bearers Inc.—they're all available."

"Mr. Bartram. Have you heard of George Wotan Caron III of Caron Spacecraft?" At my nod she went on: "He is my brother. Someone is out to kill him—legally or illegally. I cannot tell you any more unless you agree to work for me." I started to say something but she cut me off. "Wait a moment, please. I have my allowance, a few jewels. My fortune is tied up, tight. Ready money in sufficient quantity is hard to come by. It's often that way in wealthy families. I looked in the Directory, found your name and recommendations, and made a decision."

Her softly deceptive mouth was firm and unsmiling. "I realized that you were a man who could be hired within my resources. You looked to be the best I could hope for. If you don't take the job I cannot pay a professional bodyguard."

I felt injured. I kept my voice level and impersonal. I said: "So you come to the cheapjack, is that it? You think you can buy me cheap, so you come here slumming in the Pool, wearing an assumed name, and hope to drive me into working for you under the prod of a fluttering eyelash and a Fifth Avenue corset. Sorry, sister. No deal."

HER HAND came 'round quite slowly to my eyes. I even glimpsed the time by her finger-watch. 1325. Then her palm tried to go on through my cheek-bone and I let out an indignant yell.

"Hey! You don't hit the hired help!"

Then she was dabbing at the gash on my face where the finger-watch had excavated; the slip of synthisilk got spotted with blood.

I smiled at her, wearily.

"Sorry. Guess I asked for that one, Miss Caron."

"It was my fault." She wadded the handkerchief away. "I told you the truth, but not very graciously." Her eyes met mine, fleetingly, then she became deadly serious again, her face clouding with the fear that pressed her.

"You must help me. Please."

I hesitated. "Why doesn't *he* hire pro bodyguards? It's a legitimate business expense."

She leaned forward, breathing a little harshly. "George—doesn't know, and mustn't know. But if he is killed, the family and the Company will be ruined. I can't tell you the details. But please, please help me."

I tried once more. "Doesn't he have personal guards on salary?"

"That's part of the problem. I don't trust them. You don't think I'd be asking your help if I thought they were capable of protecting him, do you?"

I guess old Adam was no fool. When he took that bite of apple he had his eyes open to the main chance. Like me. Big, tough, blustery, Wing-Knife Raphe Bartram. Hell—she had me wound around her little finger.

"All right, Miss Caron. I'll bodyguard for your brother. It'll cost you two thousand soldars."

She began to laugh. Reaction and relief, I thought.

Then: "Two thousand! I had no idea your fees were so reasonable, Mr. Bartram."

I bit my tongue from keeping the retort in my head. Her "little allowance" was probably a thousand workers' yearly salaries per month. "Sketch the picture." I sighed.

"I do not intend to tell you the motives behind this. My brother is the mainstay of the family. There is a man—a man called Azo—who would take

over control of the Company if my brother were to die. George has just returned from Centauri. His life is in danger from the moment he left the starship until he can reach the plant in Cleveland and—and finish up some business there. After that, I feel sure the opposition will have failed."

While she was talking I had absently signalled Rafferty for another. Now he stood just out of easy earshot glowering at me. I sighed again. I lifted up my right foot and began carefully to work off my boot. I had to wiggle a little to pull my foot out, because the steel support bar running from toe to heel made the sole rigid. There was a hole in the artificial-fiber sock —that showed how long since it had been I'd bought clothes. I pulled the soldar out and tossed it on the counter. Rafferty lifted his lips and let me see his molars.

"Mister Bartram!" She sounded offended. "Do you usually take your boots off in public, before a lady?"

"Only when I go to the bank," I said.

She wrinkled her nose.

"What spaceport?" I asked, working the boot back on.

"Prestwick. He had to use the regular starlines. His own starship was sabotaged."

I considered this. "Prestwick. Cleveland. Oh, Miss Caron—that two thousand was my fee. Expenses on top of that."

She pouted. "All right, chiseler. But you won't have to go to Prestwick. George is on his way to Cleveland now, stopping over in New York. Here." She drew a handful of soldars from her bag and threw them rattling across the counter. "I'll buy you that drink."

I stopped doubling up my foot and took the boot off again. I scooped up some of the money, dropped it in, and shoved the boot back on. "Thanks. Now scram and let me get to work. New York ain't in the next block."

She stood up with the grace of a column of wine.

I decided not to look too closely at her. They don't make them like that around the Pool.

"I'll see that your check is sent to the Guild." She went out. I'd swear I heard silver trumpets sounding a fanfare.

Rafferty lounged over, leered and said: "In the big time now, hey, Wing-Knife?"

"Yeah."

I picked up the soldars, let a few dribble through my fingers onto the wet counter. "This'll clear my bill. I ought to take a regular office. Why should I bring you customers?"

He gave me his snaggle-toothed guffaw. "Maybe some of your clients don't like too much

publicity, hey, Wing-Knife?"

"Could be." I stood up, wriggled my toes into a comfortable grip around the soldars, and went out. Overhead the sky was massing with clouds beyond the crisscrossing traffic ramps and a few skycars were beetling for cover before the scheduled 1340 rain shower. I slung my cape forward, pulled the cord tight, and began to walk.

JUST OUTSIDE the Pool area, where cracked concrete pavements stop and the strips begin and life jumps forward half-a-dozen centuries, Central Records throws a hundred-story chunk of unlovely architecture at the sky. I went in as the first drops of rain fell hissing, and dialed History. An hour later I knew quite a bit about the love-lives and deaths of the Caron family —and about how their personal fortunes had all been neatly tied up when the old man died, leaving the Company to be handled by George Wotan Caron III with his two sisters as sort of provided-for furniture. I wondered which of the two was the one who had hired me, Alicia or Helen. They didn't sound the sort of family anyone living in the Pool would want to own as relatives. But then, a steady income—either earned or inherited —did that to people.

Outside, the rain had stopped, and I decided to take a quick drink before hitting the strat for New York. I could see the black bulks of the solar power stations ringing the city. Rather, I could feel their omnipresent majesty pressing almost personally upon my spirit—their hunkering strength stark against a blue-washed sky, with the sun blinding off their serried upturned bowls like a field of flowers. Which beautiful thought reminded me that I could now afford to get my personal flier out of hock.

Standing at the top of the ornate steps, luxuriating in the thought of a smoke, I noticed a wide-eyed Pool arab, all fluid motion and fluttering rags, cower away with a black hating look across my shoulder. I put my hand under my cloak for my cigarette case before turning, and two policemen closed quietly and quickly upon me. I looked at them in silent disgust.

Deliberately, I took out the case, selected a selfig and drew in. I didn't quite dare let the smoke out towards them in a contemptuous puff. Not when I was on a case. One flic quartered me from the rear, hand near belt holster. The other spoke to me quite pleasantly.

"Identity card, peasant."

I took out the transparent plastic and showed them.

"Raphe Bartram, hey?" He

flicked his thick fingers over my body, found my knife case. His face went stiff.

I took out my Assassin's license.

"Let's see." He wasn't gentle about taking the case. He would have bent the hinges if I hadn't released the clasp. The two of them stared down at my four knives, each with its long slender blade, winged quillons and straight, narrow haft. Their faces would have done duty for a pole-axed cow.

"What are you doing out of the Pool Area, peasant?"

"Visiting Central Records," I said. You don't bandy words with the police.

"Licensed to carry four knives." He sounded as though he were sniffing an open sewer. "I think we'll have a little better look at you, Bartram. Turn out your pockets."

"What, here, on the steps of—"

The other flic backhanded me casually across the face. His knuckles opened the scratch the Caron girl had carved. Blood ran down my chin. "Turn 'em out, quick!"

I began to lay my gear out on the stone steps.

They watched like boys eager to step on a spider, yet awaiting some inner signal to begin. First I put the cigarette case down, then a pack of tissues, my steel folding footrule, my ball-point and pencil, notebooks—which were blank—and a dog-eared collection of visiting cards. The goons read through each one. They were all different. When my wallet went down they pounced on it. Inside was the usual government rubbish: driving license, medical history, certificate of non-employable status, birth certificate, the usual paper-chase that keeps a million zombies working and in funds.

"This creep stinks to me, Jock," said the first flic.

"Open him up," said Jock.

They did. They pried in every corner and seam of my clothes. They found my dark glasses which I'd forgotten. When they reached the steel supports in my shoes they made rude remarks but passed them over. I wasn't exactly worried, but I wasn't too happy, either. This was the normal sort of reception any non-employed received if he stuck his head outside the Pool, especially just outside. But it got up my nose, all the same.

Finally they shoved all my stuff over with their flat feet and sneered a little, did a spot of chest bulging, and strutted off. I kept a straight face and retrieved my possessions.

I was careful with the knife license. I didn't want to go the way Purvis had for carrying an unlicensed weapon — although

the blot never should have thought he could get away with it, and with an illegal projectile weapon, too. Only Employees and Aristos are allowed to carry real weapons—flame-guns, needle-squirts and suchlike. The seething mass of putrescence that lives and breeds in the Pool may be shot on sight if seen wearing a weapon. Without a license, that is.

Being an Assassin gave me the dubious privilege of being allowed to carry knives. It didn't make me exactly popular on either side of the economic fence.

ONCE you concede the notion that a pool of unemployed is necessary to the well-functioning of the economic system, then you're bound to end up with the traditionally employed and the festering mob of the traditionally unemployed.

Just a simple matter of finding a job in a keenly cut-throat economic society. But where automation makes jobs precious and trade unions struggle merely for existence—and when all industry has resolved itself around a few giant monopolies across the world and the little man is so little his squeak when he is squashed is inaudible — well, finding a job isn't so simple.

Not that I'd have wanted to wear the badge of any of the great Companies—Caron included. I've always, perhaps fatuously, prided myself on being the independent sort. But then, I'd never had to try to land a job. If I had, I might feel differently.

I got my belongings back in place and wiped the blood from my cheek, with a silent curse at the departed flics. I ran down the steps and headed for the nearest bar. The urchin I'd noticed before scampered after me. Just as I realized he'd been waiting for me, and had faded on the arrival of the police, his piping voice caught my full attention.

"Hey—Wing-Knife! Wing-Knife—I gotta talk to you."

I swung round so fast he almost fell over his own rags pulling up. His thin face was all eyes and mouth. His hands and feet seemed enormous until you noticed the sticklike leanness of his limbs. "Well?"

"I'm Tommy Ardizzioni."

"Rudolf Ardizzioni's boy." Ardizzioni was in the same trade as I was. He was a good egg, a fine knife-fighter, and we often farmed out heavy assignments to each other. His mistake was getting married. "How's your mother?" I said.

"Ma's all right. It's my father. He's pretty bad. He wansta see you, Wing-Knife."

I cursed under my breath. I didn't hesitate, however. A Guild brother is a Guild brother no

matter how inconvenient it may be. Especially if it's inconvenient, in fact.

"Lead on, Tommy. I'm right with you."

"Gee, Wing-Knife!" Something was shining in his too-large eyes. "Ma said you'd come!" And he darted off confidently, not bothering to look round to see if I was following.

Walking back into the Pool was like walking into a mid-summer street from an air-conditioned lobby. We passed the outer fringe of broken shreds of humanity and penetrated into the secret, inner recesses where some of the chronically unemployed have little parks laid out, with flowers carefully tended, and where they luxuriate—if they're lucky—in thirty minutes' sunshine a day. The Ardizzionis lived on the seventieth floor of a building that should have been condemned at the end of the century. It probably had been, but no one cared. The pneumo-lift gave me the willies going up. I was stuck half a day in one once with a claustrophobic bearded lady.

Rudolf Ardizzioni was in a bad way. Someone—probably Greta, his wife—had cleaned the wound and spread neoflesh over it. The damage was deeper than that, though, and Ardizzioni's face was gray and drawn, each hair of his two-day beard a minute spear point. They were relieved to see me.

"I'm no doctor, Rudy," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. The wall at my back was cracked and plaster flaked down every time a rocket passed. "How can I help?"

His pale lips moved tiredly. "I was on a job—a good one. Thought it was easier than it was."

"So you got carved. Plenty of brothers do."

"Yeah. Yeah, Wing-Knife, guess you're right."

He made a little grimace and moved awkwardly on the bed. Greta moved with a starchy rustle, smoothed out the clothes, held his hand for a brief contact.

"So you want me to take over the contract, hey, Rudy? Well, it's not exactly convenient right now; but if it can humanly be done, you know I'll do it."

His face tried to smile. His eyes glittered with the onset of fever. "Thanks, Wing-Knife. I knew I wouldn't have to ask. It's easy, all right—" then he stopped.

I laughed harshly. "It looks easy."

"Client told me the subject's guards weren't worth a busted drive-plate. They turned out plenty tough." He winced, either at memory or present pain. "I gotta have the money, for Greta and the kids, and the new one,

and you know what clients are like. . . . But the pay's pretty good and we'll split, natch."

"Sure." I glanced at Greta. She was staring at Ardizzioni with the world in her eyes. This would be her fifth—or was it sixth? "So you need the cash—who doesn't—and no client will pay until the subject he's paying for is all properly tied up and affidavited. Righto, Rudy. I'll take the case. You've my word on it as a Guild brother. Shoot me the info fast."

There was an appreciable lightening of tension in the room. They'd been metaphorically holding their breath, and now, on my acceptance in such a way that I could not break my word, the suspense-held breaths whooshed out like spring rivers unfreezing. Ardizzioni began to speak.

And in no words flat the rosy atmosphere of friendship that had built up dissipated in clanging strokes of laughter that resounded in my head.

"They ain't a lot of work around the Guilds right now, as you probably know, Wing-Knife. I was plenty glad to get this job. Big Company business that they didn't want handled by the Company trade. Secrets get out there, you know, Guild silence and all. Fella wanted the business for George Wotan Caron III."

CHAPTER II

THE ROOF and walls seemed, suddenly, to contract. It grew difficult to breathe. Someone was banging at my heart with a sledgehammer and stuffing up my nostrils with cottonwool. This should happen to me, Wing-Knife Bartram, the slickest in the business.

It should happen to a dog.

"But," I started. Then stopped. There was nothing to say.

They were looking inquiringly at me. I could guess at their thoughts. In my profession your word is your bond. Otherwise, how could you trust anybody?

A few centuries of concrete-encased corpses in the river and suchlike when people who did not keep their word—a workable, practical, scientific method soon evolves based entirely on word-of-mouth promise.

"Here's a drink, Raphe," Greta said, holding out a plastic goblet. "It's good stuff. A friend's father brews it in the basement. Health."

"May you be jobless," I responded automatically, and downed the stuff. It was no more burning than my thoughts.

"This character came into Prestwick," Ardizzioni went on talking through the interruption. "That's where I tried it, copped this wound and came on home. Only just made it. Now he's tak-

ing the strat to New York. Business there, before going on to Cleveland."

"Okay," I said. I was trying to force some life into my mind, to unscramble the thinking muscle. "Who's paying?"

"Guy who hired me tried to remain incognito. Aristo. Stunk of it. I did a spot of checking—fellow called Azo. Works for Caron. Knock off the boss—presto, he's in. Simple."

"That's how we earn our living," I said, thinking. "But it isn't as simple as that. All right." I stood up. "Forget about it. Look after yourself, and Greta. I'll call you sometime."

"Thanks, Wing-Knife," they were saying as I took that dangerous pneumo-lift contrivance down.

I'm not a vindictive man. In my profession you can't afford to be. And I wasn't thinking as much of what had been done to Ardizzioni as of my own peace of mind, when I stopped the pneumo-cage halfway and drove the contraption back up. They were still standing as I'd left them.

"Rudy," I called from the door. "Who were the guards? His own?"

"No. I was surprised. He'd hired Shield Bearers."

"Thanks. I'll remember."

Ardizzioni had said there was not much work around the Pool; that was something I knew all too well, and a very strong reason for taking on the job of bodyguard. And Rudolf Ardizzioni was known as a good workman. Me—well, I claim to be the slickest in the business. So it wasn't too wild an improbability that our lines of occupation should cross and tangle. But it was damned inconvenient.

Coming out of the building I noticed a flier. They were rare in the Pool. Probably Aristos out getting a big charge from watching the scum below. It reminded me that not only could I get my flier out of hock, I could even get the batteries charged. That didn't cheer me up any.

Crossing the last choking alleyway and swinging wide past a blackened shell of a building that had exploded a year or so back, I headed across the weed-encrusted court. Kids were playing Venusian jungle games. A black flier was standing motionless by the curb. As I went on by the door opened.

A man got out. He had a gun in his fist.

He said: "Step inside, Mr. Bartram."

I didn't say anything. I stepped inside.

ALL I COULD see at first was the hole in the end of the gun. I didn't want my gravestone to fall on me from that tiny open-

ing. Then my eyes adjusted and I saw the man's padded shoulders under the gilding and the way his cloak was carelessly flung back, exposing a costly synthivelvet doublet. He also wore a brilliant reflecting domino. Aristo.

The girl had a black veil across her face and only her eyes, deep, penetrating blue, told me anything about her. But they told plenty. Here was one of the *femmes fatales* you see on the stereos. Her body was shapeless in some monochrome cloak.

The man said: "I'll make this short. You're Raphe Bartram. We hired Ardizzioni and he fell down. He tells us you're handling the contract for him. But you'll do this job right, just like it was a regular business deal."

"I didn't come here to be insulted," I said, ignoring just how I had got there. "What's in it for me?"

"What should be in it for you? You're taking over from another man. The fee we agreed on will be paid. Scared you won't make it this time?"

They'd heard of me all right. Probably they knew I was good. And they were desperate enough to pull off a stunt like this in daylight. But then—for Employeds and Aristos—it was no stunt.

"Bartram," the girl said. And that was where I heard her voice for the first time. Husky, vibrant, alluring. The sort of voice you'd hear through the express rocket taking off for Mars. And I was sunk. Scuppered.

"We want him dealt with tidily," the big guy was saying. I surfaced and took in the conversation again. "We're rather particular about that. No mess. And—we'll pay you a bonus of a hundred soldars — which should satisfy you."

If I hadn't had to both kill and protect the same character, I'd have been chuckling. After all, this was the way I earned my living. And no unprofessional conduct would have been involved—I could have knocked off this second case and then gone on to meet Caron at New York. I could have breezed through it and still maintained my reputation as an honest businessman. But when both cases were the same man?

"Make it two hundred and it's a deal."

"Haggling," the girl said. Her voice made it a throbbing sound of pure beauty.

"Hundred and fifty," the Aristo said.

"Two hundred."

"Hundred and seventy-five and not a soldar more. This is a bonus, don't forget."

"All right. Hundred and seventy-five. A deal." I drew myself up in the confines of the

flier. A delicious scent was all about me. The girl seemed to be floating in a rosy cloud of perfume. I made the formal declaration. "The word of a member of the Guild of Assassins is his bond. I shall not fail you and remain alive and unwounded."

"So I should think," grumbled the man I had decided must be Azo. "We'll pay your check through the Guild offices with Ardizzioni's." He seemed to make up his mind and went on: "And remember, cheapskate, we're only using you because we're hard up. Don't get big ideas of opening up your own office and moving into the Company trade."

I didn't bother to reply. That last remark was in keeping with the rest. So they wanted a guy knocked off, just as many people did every day. And, like anyone else, they'd approached an accredited member of the Guild of Assassins. That meant that, if discovered, they would pay no penalty, run no risks. It was a purely routine business transaction. But this couple were Aristos; why hadn't they gone to one of the big Employed Assassin firms specializing in the Monopoly business? Why come to Ardizzioni and me, small time bums working out of a tavern on the fringe of the Pool? Money? It was the only excuse they'd offered, and it was a feeble one by any standards.

I still hadn't dared think what I was going to do.

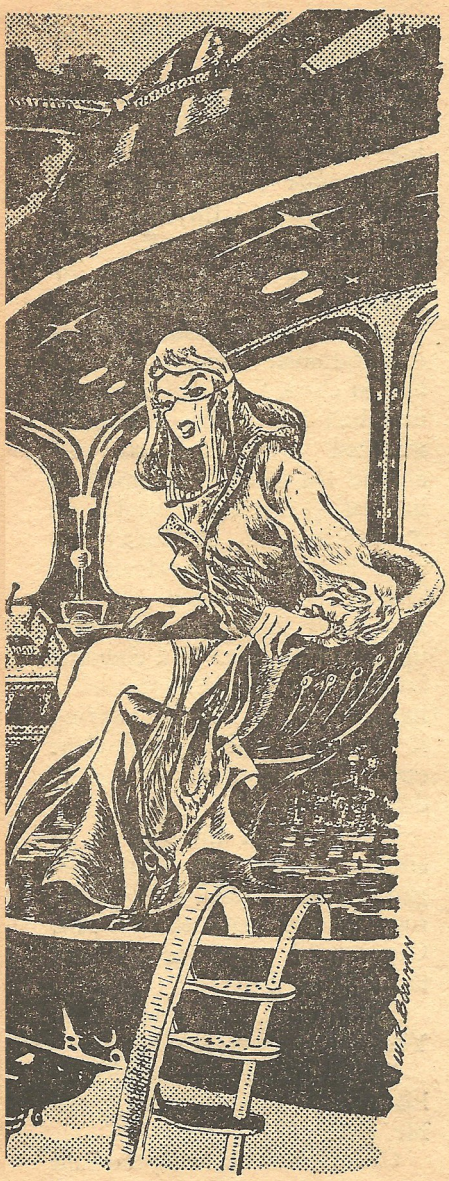
"One last thing, Bartram." The girl was speaking and I had to concentrate on her words through the distraction of listening to her voice. "We're paying you and registering this deal with Assassins' Guild Records. That puts us all in the clear." Her eyes flashed at me in the gloom of the flier. "But just remember—if you goof off on us we'll carve you methodically, efficiently—and very messily. Understood?"

I didn't bother to explain that you couldn't hire an assassin to take care of a Guild brother. That's where the Bodyguards' Lodge come in. I just looked at her. What I saw convinced me that they'd find a way to get me if they wanted to.

I said: "I understand."

The guy opened the door and I got out.

Which was the end of the first part of a beautiful friendship. I could see the dame spelled trouble. Like most of her sex, she'd been born to it. I began to wonder if Azo was the real brains of the outfit trying to oust Caron from his job. Women, incidentally, provide a great proportion of the work for my profession. I stood moodily kicking the flagstones, watching the flier climb out of the Pool



area and join the homeward bound procession skittering above the flying ramps, and thinking about it.

After all, the Assassins and the Bodyguards only grew up as it became more and more difficult to keep an organized rein on commerce. Geriatrics meant that one man could handle the affairs of a combine for fifty years or more, gathering more power into his hands each year. By the time the world ran out of easily available power, with coal worn as costly jewelry and nucleonics dying from strangulation, an iron-bound rigidity held the economic machinery in thrall. Either you were Employed and wore a Company badge; you were Unemployed and didn't, which meant you scraped a bare living around the Pool; or you were like me, and lived on your wits.

And my wits had led me into contracting, under a legally binding form, both to protect and kill the same man.

I went in for a drink.

A LITTLE business I had to complete in the Pool made me miss Caron in New York. Contacts I have there are able to turn out Company badges and uniforms at an hour's notice—hell, they could forge a G.M. share certificate—but even so I was late and had to trail up to Cleveland on the shuttle. It was

raining but no one seemed to know if it was Weather-controlled or just normal. No one seemed to care.

I barrelled into Caron's hotel with my Company badge stiff and sneering on my cloak. The lobby was full of the usual hotel lobbyites and I bee-lined through them to the bar and hid behind a double Scotch. I was safe there as long as I didn't try to use the private bar—I couldn't risk an identity check there.

Touching the Caron insignia made me wonder if I'd been a fool to chance it. But the feel of the gun against my belt comforted me. I don't believe in guns. They make too much noise and, if they're nucleonic, they're far too spectacular. But, assuming that I had to work through the protection racket first, this would prove useful.

What I was going to do about the situation was still part so far of an unpredictable future. I just wanted to grab this Caron guy away someplace quiet and think things out.

Presently a stir circulated in the hotel and what looked like a flying wedge of ball-players swept out of the elevators and went like a whisk broom through the lobbies and out onto the street. Talk about crew cuts and bull necks!

My man was a bouncy ball of nerves, balding, with a slim brief case and baggy trousers. He had useful shoulders, accentuated by the Centaurian flare of his cape. He was easy to spot from my position above the flying wedge although to anyone on the same level he would have been invisible. I threw a soldar on the bar and took off.

I caught the gratuitous information from a lobbyite that Caron was on his usual evening constitutional. Being clever, I had to check that, and spent the next half hour tailing him as he marched briskly around and around the block. I planned on infiltrating that flying wedge on its inward leg. It wasn't too easy; but the Caron cloak and badge and my own outward appearance helped and we went up in the elevators in a chummy bunch. The guards assumed I had a message, and, by playing it carefully, I didn't get close enough to Caron to be able to deliver it.

We all went through to an anteroom. Here the guards began to peel off until three of the roughest and toughest were left. One turned to me as I kicked the door shut.

"What's on your mind, bub? You from the plant?"

"Sure, pal," I said, mimicking his speech. "Got a message for Mr. Caron."

Caron lifted his head, the bald spot shining. "Let's have it

then," he said, in a voice which oozed exec.

"Private," I said.

The guard who had been standing a little to one side now moved forward. I had a hazy idea I knew his face from somewhere; it wouldn't be surprising if these were men from Shield Bearers Inc. That this worked both ways hit me suddenly as he said: "Well, well, well. If it isn't Wing-Knife himself. Fancy meeting you here."

THAT was his mistake. No doubt he was trying to impress Caron with his personal toughness. Caron glanced up, startled. All the same, it was a mistake.

I kicked the smart guard in the groin. Immediately I dropped flat and the blackjack the other guard threw went over my head. I lashed back with my foot, caught an ankle, and dragged the guard over on top of me. The third Shield Bearer danced around, a blur in the corner of my eye. I jabbed a thumb in the bottom character's neck and twisted. He went limp. I jackknifed, swung from the floor as I came up, smeared the last guy's chin over his forehead. He fell on Caron. They all fell to the floor. I was the only one standing. I felt like a Sunday School kid in a tableau.

Hauling Caron to his feet I showed him the point of my knife. Then his eyes tried to play billiards as I let the point lie against his throat, resting on the Adam's apple.

He gulped. "Assassin?" he asked. He had guts.

"Sure," I said. "Sure. But you're not booked yet." I prodded him to a chair and he sat as though in a dentist's extractor. "Know a fellow called Azo?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"How dumb can you get, brother?"

"You don't mean—I don't believe it! I've made him everything he is today!" Caron's face went bleak. "He owes me everything."

"That's typical. Now don't get maudlin, and listen. Your sister—"

"My sisters—what have they got to do with it?"

"Shut up. Close the mouth and open the ears. Your sister hired me to wet-nurse you, more or less. She doesn't trust your guards. Oh, I know you hired Shield Bearers' little guardian angels—and now you've seen how useful they are."

He looked around at the littered floor. I'd swear a quirk pulled at his lips. "Very instructive."

"I checked with your sister. I'm not going into details, broth-

er, but you're in very hot water. I've been hired to dispose of you, as well as to look after you. You're causing me quite a bit of bother, one way and another. Personally, you don't mean a thing to me. It just happens I don't like to see dirty play, even among you Aristos. And I mean to collect, both ways, and retain my professional honor."

"What are you going to do?" He didn't sound afraid, just interested.

I told him what I was going to do, and what he had to do. It didn't take long, although my plan was somewhat tricky. There were a lot of ways in which it could go wrong, especially if he didn't cooperate. But even though it had come to me in a flash of inspiration, I knew that hours of thought would never produce anything better—and I didn't have hours, anyway.

This had to work.

Caron stared at me, wide-eyed. "I never heard of anything so cold-blooded," he protested. "I won't—"

I felt myself going stiff. I couldn't do anything about it. I slapped him hard across the face, twice, once forwards and once backhanded. I didn't move the knife a millimeter. "You have damned little choice! We're all in this business to earn a living. It's his turn today, mine tomorrow. These guards adorning your carpet wouldn't have stopped killing me because of sympathy."

"Just business," he said through puffy lips.

"All right." I took the knife away. "See to it. The showdown'll be at the plant. You'd better have some flics on hand, too."

"Isn't there some other way—" he began.

"Maybe there is," I cut him off rudely. "But we're playing it this way. I want Azo to pay up, for personal reasons. After that—he's all yours." How could I explain to this upper-crusty Aristo about Assassins' honor, and how Rudy Ardizzioni needed the cash for the new baby? He'd string along, or else.

They let me out through the anterooms easily enough on a casual say-so from Caron. Down in the lobby I dropped in for a quick drink. The glass was halfway to my lips when a hand reached over and caught my arm. I turned angrily to stare into the ugly face of Azo.

"What's the idea, Fatso?" I said sharply.

He *was* fat, too, without the mask. His lips moved nastily. "I thought the idea was for you to take care of him. Looks to me as though you're fumbling."

"I'm handling this job. Suppose you let me do just that?"

"It's got to be done quick.

At the plant he'll be safe."

That brought me up quivering. But there might be things Azo didn't know, I reminded myself.

"I'm going to do it there, though."

"You'd better be right. He's got to be knocked off."

I was about to be rude to him when the flying wedge sirened through the lobby. He whispered fiercely: "Get him tonight—or you'll be carved." Then he turned on his heel and loped off after the Caron circus.

CHAPTER III

THEY WERE headed out to the plant by the lake, and from what I'd gathered, once inside that place you were in a separate kingdom. I trailed them by half an hour, and used the Caron cloak and forged credentials to ease past the gate guards. Inside, the place was like a labyrinth, with shops and furnaces and assembly plants scattered clear down to the Lake. I went straight towards the central administrative office and found a ball in progress. The noise of drinking and singing and canned music drowned out the distant clang of machines.

At the door a character with a belly stopped me.

"No one in here tonight below executive rank, bud," he said, enjoying pushing people around. I didn't bother to argue with him. The little grooves around his nostrils told me he'd as soon bust me in the face as say another word. I turned away, seeing beyond him the bank of elevators and weirdly dressed people waiting. I had to get in —even if I didn't like the method.

I found a pay phone and called information. The robot said: "Which Miss Caron, sir?"

That stumped me. Which was the one who had hired me, Alicia or Helen?

I had to chance it, and guessed alphabetically.

The phone rang. Then a woman's voice: "Miss Alicia Caron's apartment. Who is this?"

"I'd like to speak to Miss Caron personally, please."

"I'm afraid that is not possible. She is dressing for the ball tonight. Who shall I tell her is calling?"

I sweated. If it was the wrong dame, I'd be thrown out of the plant—or worse.

"Tell her I'm doing a job, a personal job, for her. One with not much money in it," I said at last. "She'll understand."

"Very well." The maid sounded disapproving.

A few heartbeats and a lot of sweat later I heard a click. A voice said: "Bartram?"

My mind did a flop-over, fried

crisply and seasoned with salt and pepper. I swallowed. *That voice*—husky, controlled, putting an unscratchable itch just below the collarbone— Hell, what was *she* doing, wanting her brother knocked off?

"I need to get into the clambake tonight, honey," I said, working hard to keep my voice from shattering. "I want an in."

"How did you know I'd hired you?" She sounded worried.

"My job," I lied. "Do I get in?"

"All right." She thought. I could hear her breathing, softly and steadily against the mouthpiece. My hand holding the earpiece trembled. "A pass will be waiting for you in the name of Krewson," she said finally. "And don't fall down on it tonight. Stay away from the liquor."

"If you're there I will," I leered.

She cut the connection. Giving her ten minutes, I went back to the gate. The Krewson gag got me in and I went upstairs. I had to check the gun in at the desk, though.

I'd heard of these chummy get-togethers before. When a man is supreme master of thousands of working people, running a system of factories covering square miles, handling millions of soldiers daily—luxury is just a commodity. The government, moral practice, social custom—nothing is sacred. Anything — literally anything — is possible for him. When to get to speak to the man who wipes the tenth vice-president's nose takes three weeks and a dozen ante-rooms, meetings may be held in perfect safety, meetings that defy the bacchanalian imaginations of medieval romancers. I walked into the superb crystal room and, for the first time in a very long while, saw a sight that clogged the breath in my throat.

Science had been pressed into service, too. A Company that made auto and flier parts, radios and refrigerators on the side, as well as turning out its branded spaceships, had the pick of engineers and technicians leaving universities all over the system. That power had turned this great hall into a fairyland of wonder, of hidden fluorescents that called forth blends of color that the next moment were lost in the blaze of brilliant new compositions. Sound washed from concealed speakers in hi-fi amplification that allowed a whispered word to be clearly heard. Robot waiters scurried everywhere. Automatic servers scuttered to and fro bearing wine and liquor and fruits. I stood for a long moment, dazed by the sounds and sights, the heat and scents, the swirling chiaroscura of naked shoulders and pirouetting feath-

ers and the gleam of gems.

Then I went quickly into the mad throng and found a drink.

ALMOST at once Alicia Caron was at my side, her body sheathed in some synthisilk thing that hid nothing. Her voice, resonant behind a gem-encrusted domino, was urgent with fear and desperation.

"Bartram, you must finish him tonight! You've delayed and delayed—God, why didn't I go to a reputable firm?"

"You didn't have the money, sister, remember?"

"I should have pawned my jewelery."

It's nothing to an Assassin what the clients' motives are. But the idea that the two sisters were so diametrically opposed intrigued me. One wanted him killed. The other wanted him alive. The way I'd got this set up, Alicia was coming out with the sticky end. I wondered where Helen was. She'd be around, that was for sure.

"I'll do the job," I said. "Where is he?"

"In his private bar. He hates this sort of thing, the namby-pamby idiot! I'd suggest you—"

"Leave the suggestions to me, sister," I said, meaning more than that. "Where is this hidey hole?"

"You can't get in there. Guards stop everyone they don't know personally. That's why I've been—"

"I see. Well, point me in that direction and push."

It wasn't a straight walk there. I had to dodge laughing girls and half-drunk men, avoid prancing lines of singing people, duck beneath wildly tossed showers of artificial blossoms. And all the time I could see Alicia's liquid eyes, hating me behind the mask. I staggered a little, to blend into the background—and then Helen, the first sister I'd met in this crazy family, caught my arm.

"Look after him, Bartram," she whispered. "I'm afraid—" She stopped, and then said: "What did my sister want?"

"Passing the time of day," I said affably.

"Watch him when he leaves his private rooms. . . ." Giggle gas balloons plopped and we walked away from the sweet scent. Seeing Helen, with her sister's white-hot image still burning my retinas, made me wonder what I'd seen in her at Rafferty's. She was pale, eclipsed, by the contrast. And yet—she was wonderfully, vibrantly alluring still.

"I'll look after him, honey," I said. I decided not to tell her about my plan. She just might make a slip and give it away. Sure, I liked the girl, and I liked Alicia: but my loyalty lay with

Rudy Ardizzioni and his wife, people like myself, from the Pool. They were the ones I was faking up this whole situation for. Aristos! Bah!

Maybe I *was* just the hired help, but I chucked Helen Caron under the chin, told her to cheer up, and watched as she was swept up by carousing Aristo youths from a giddy zambo line. She went, leaning voluptuously to the music.

Negotiating the party was a strenuous business. I was propositioned three times and had five drinks in me before I won through. But I made it. I came out onto a tiny balcony, vine shaded, projecting starkly from the sheer drop of a thousand-foot wall. Somewhere below, scattered lights flared and hooters sounded mournfully. Above, visible as a band terminating the building-buttressed slot, the night sky was clouded in gray cloaks of vapor.

DIRECTLY before me, in the slab of masonry and glass that formed the next building, I could see into the golden radiance of a room where men talked quietly, holding drinks, smoking cigars and pipes, relaxing away from the frenzy snowballing in the crystal ballroom. The distance was beyond knife throw.

I held my breath and squinted my eyes against the glare to scan the scene in the room across the way, a scene camera sharp, like a film projection on the darkened wall.

Finding my man was difficult. Finally I spotted his bald head in the angle of a mirror. I stared closely.

Ever notice how a reflection emphasizes idiosyncrasies that are never noticed in the flesh? A slight muscular tic of the eyelid, lost in a person, can be picked out like an H-bomb cloud in a mirror. Little things like that show up. Enough showed up here to make me feel sure that Caron was going through with my plan.

I took a deep breath of the night wind, the artificial scents behind me crisped by flat oil smell it carried from below. I felt better than I had since hearing just who Rudy Ardizzioni had contracted to handle.

" 'Licia, honey," I said aloud, savoring the words. "This is where I earn your money—and yours, too, Helen."

With that I began to take off my boot.

They don't call me Wing-Knife for nothing, even if they don't know how I do it. I always get a kick out of the old routine. I laced the boot tight again once it was off—if it collapsed under my hand the effect would be ruined—and took one screw from the metal tip so that it

pivoted outwards easily. I pried loose the slot of rubber athwart the heel and felt for the collapsible foot-rule in my pocket.

Opened, the spring steel, gleaming blue and silver, fitted the slot snugly. The double-looped cord from my cloak, slipped over each end of the rule with a quick, practiced jerk, completed the cross bow. I slapped the boot leather softly. Neat, not gaudy, silent and incredibly efficient—the arbalest contains the quality of power denied to loud speaking guns.

Often, I'd toyed with the idea of using a flier window gear, the ratchet and toothed rod part, as a cranequin to give greater power to the bow. So far, I'd never got around to it. In my job, when you have a license to carry a knife—and no other weapon—things like a foot-rule and dark glasses need no explanation. But a window ratchet, now. Why would a man carry that?

I took out the dark glasses. One ear piece came off, was rehooked alongside its mate. The two curved ends fitted snugly against the boot sole and I slid the cord over the middle, hauled back at the top of the glasses and the cord came sweetly to rest under the metal toe tip. As a goat's-foot lever, the dark glasses worked out fine.

Putting them away, I took out the knife case.

Many people had marveled at the shape of the knives. Such a slender hilt, they'd said, surely a hand would find difficulty grasping—? I'd smiled, and argued, and in the end said nothing. Carefully, with a feeling for the fitness of the occasion, I selected a knife. Setting it in chase, with the short-winged quillons delicately free of obstruction, I knew no one could ever see it as the crossbow bolt it was. An arbalest quarrel, plain and simple and deadly. And yet—no one else ever had seen it, like that, just there, waiting to be sped by the power stored in the blue spring steel bow laid across the heel of my boot.

Ready, with the cross-bow held pointing forward, I waited. Beside the window I watched a second, dimmer, window shine into the night. The glass had been swung open at the top, allowing a partial view just about head level. Pretty soon, at the rate he'd been drinking, the man I'd been watching would visit that room.

Wind cannoned damp and gusty between the walls. A deflection shot, with plenty of allowance for windage. Life is a gray-silver, streaky sort of place. You start on a job, thinking you know exactly what the score is, and before you've got set for the throw all kinds of variables sneak in to

louse up the picture completely.

I don't bother my head about the motives of those who hire me. Professionally, it is against the ethics of the Guild. But this situation was a honey. Although, very strictly speaking, I had interfered in other peoples' business, the important thing was to do my job, collect the cash, and then, perhaps, visit my kid sister on her farm on Venus.

My victim stood up, stretched, vanished from the mirror. He appeared a moment later in the second room. His bald head bobbed a moment, and light reflected from it dazzlingly. I waited for the angle to change, for his head to become a head again and not a damned searchlight, and lifted the cross-bow. My finger on the nut, the pivoting metal toe-tip, contracted almost without conscious effort.

The man stood a long heartbeat with the knife just under his ear, the quillons jammed hard against the flesh, then he fell from my view.

The sweet singing noise of the bow had been lost in the wind rushing between the buildings. Rain spattered stingingly as I dis-assembled the arbalest, until the weapon was once again a foot-rule, a cloak-cord and a boot. Bunching my foot to get the boot with its metal stiffener on was second nature. I straightened up and quietly, grimly, *professionally,* choked back emotion until mentally I was just a hard, featureless steel ball.

Funny thing—I don't like killing one little bit.

WITH a last look at the room opposite, I opened the door and left the balcony, knowing that very quickly now the news of George Wotan Caron III's death would spread like thunderclouds on Venus throughout the Caron plant and into the intoxicated bedlam stampeding through the crystal room. I hoped that the deception would not be discovered until after Azo had sent his payment authorization through to the Guild bank. And that, of course, brought up the interview I was probably going to have to endure with the Guild. But I knew they'd have to accept my reasoning when they heard it.

Noise, confusion, odors, glitter and flash and sparkle battered at me as I went through the crystal room. Drinks showered on me. Semi-nude girls, trailing wisps of silk, tried to drag me into a prancing zamba line. I saw pretty well there the way Aristos have a good time.

I began to think that perhaps science hasn't made too good a job of gene selection. The people who, through the widespread use of electronics and plastics and nucleonics, have risen to vast power, economically and

politically, haven't always proven the best suited for their haughty positions. Perhaps a semi-scientific culture, where more people would be in the manufacturing business and power would not be so tightly bundled in a few huge corporations, might make for happier living for all. I couldn't decide for sure. All I knew was that I wanted my pay, and out.

Spreading like lava ripples on Jupiter, the news went the rounds. Alicia's eyes, as she approached me, glittered no less brilliantly than her gem-encrusted domino. Her red mouth was damp, inviting, like a Venusian fly-trap.

"You did it, Bartram! I don't know how, but you did it!"

Her figure burnt itself, line by line, into my mind. Shutting my eyes was no good—the voice followed.

Then Azo, big, bluff, burly—a tasty target for a hungry knife—was condescending to the hired help from the Pool. His check was on its way to the Guild bank. I breathed comfortably. Rudy Ardizzioni and Greta and the new one were all right now.

Without seeming to be rude, which would not have been clever until I was in the clear, I left them and eased towards the exit. Flics and other official vermin would be underfoot all too soon. I wanted out.

From a shadowed alcove a slender, white arm reached out. It beckoned. Like a stuffed dummy, I obeyed. I entered the alcove, my stomach curling with anticipation. The girl's other hand held a gun, pointed at my navel.

"He's dead, Bartram. Dead." Helen's eyes were wide and glittering, like her sister's; but these shone with unshed tears.

"Listen, honey," I said desperately. "Your brother is safe. Safe, you understand?" She tried to interrupt, and my voice beat her down. "You told me Azo was trying to get him; you didn't tell, maybe because you didn't know, that your sister Alicia is Azo's boyfriend and all for carving your brother as well!"

The look in her eyes made me feel just what I was, a hired heel from the Pool. But I plunged on.

"Those two have no obligations from me! You can't threaten an Assassin, and expect him to work for you. That's elementary Guild ethics. Maybe they weren't aware of it. Maybe you don't know that that gun you're prodding at me relieves me of any responsibility to you?"

She tried again to speak. This time something in her throat stopped her. She swallowed. Her face was like a pansy, raised to the sun, blinded, hurt, bewildered.

"Brother George is all right," I said harshly, trying to rouse her. "Don't you breath a word of this to a living soul, but I told George to send a double to take his place at the party. I knew he'd have one on his staff who could play the part well enough—and not question his boss' motives. It meant sacrificing a man—but it gave George all the proof he needs that Azo was gunning for him. Your brother will come charging in a moment with the flics. And at the same time, I've kept my promise to you. You hired me to do a job, and I've done it."

HER ANSWER, when I later came to think about it, was eminently satisfactory. The gun fell down somewhere behind the cushions. I was just making myself comfortable, when brother George made his entry into the crystal room, stilling the clamor and turning intoxicated faces sober with the shock of seeing a ghost. We disentangled ourselves, and went to look.

Helen moved towards the front of the growing crowd. I eased out the back, moved smoothly towards the door. Azo and I had no further business. If he wanted me, he could always contact me through the Guild, or read my advertisement in the Directory and come slumming down to Rafferty's. If he lived long enough, that is.

Whatever Caron did about Azo was his own affair. But I couldn't see myself taking the business. Far better that Caron should go to a big Company firm. Too much bother had come my way already from Aristos with tied-up money trying to hire good Assassins cheap. And as for Azo—well, how would it have panned out with him in control?

I certainly wouldn't be sitting here now, on my kid sister's farm on Venus, savoring the high silver sky and the buoyancy your limbs take from the lessened gravity.

I've temporarily left the profession, for reasons of health. I think of Helen, sure; but I also still hear that damned husky voice of 'Licia Caron, and dream that the Pool no longer exists. . . . But that must wait until the economy has sorted out automation and the power shortage and eliminated the need for a Pool of Unemployed—and with it, I hope, the need for Assassins.

I still carry my foot-rule, and my cloak still has a double-looped cord, and my boot its metal stiffener. But I'm carrying a reel from a fishing rod now—I have high hopes it will make a fine cranequin to draw a more powerful bow.

And you don't need sunglasses on Venus. ∞ ∞

(*Continued from page* 4)
ond, third and *n*th to see their friends, make new ones, attend the parties, and generally have a wonderful time with people who think in a similarly off-trail fashion.

Back before World War II, these informal activities were the main business of the conventions, and no one expected the gatherings to be anything more than opportunities for having fun and exchanging purely science-fictional ideas. Since the war ended with the A-bomb's big scientific bang, however, conventions have grown enormously in size and have succumbed to a creeping disease I call Greatest-Show-on-Earthism.

Two ideas seem to have governed the people who have run many recent conventions (with notable exceptions like the 1955 affair in Cleveland). One is the theory that science fiction has become a literary field that anyone can—and should—enjoy, and which therefore deserves the respectful attention of newspapers, radio and TV. The second is the idea that the purpose of conventions is to do a high-pressure job of advertising and selling s-f to the general public through such media.

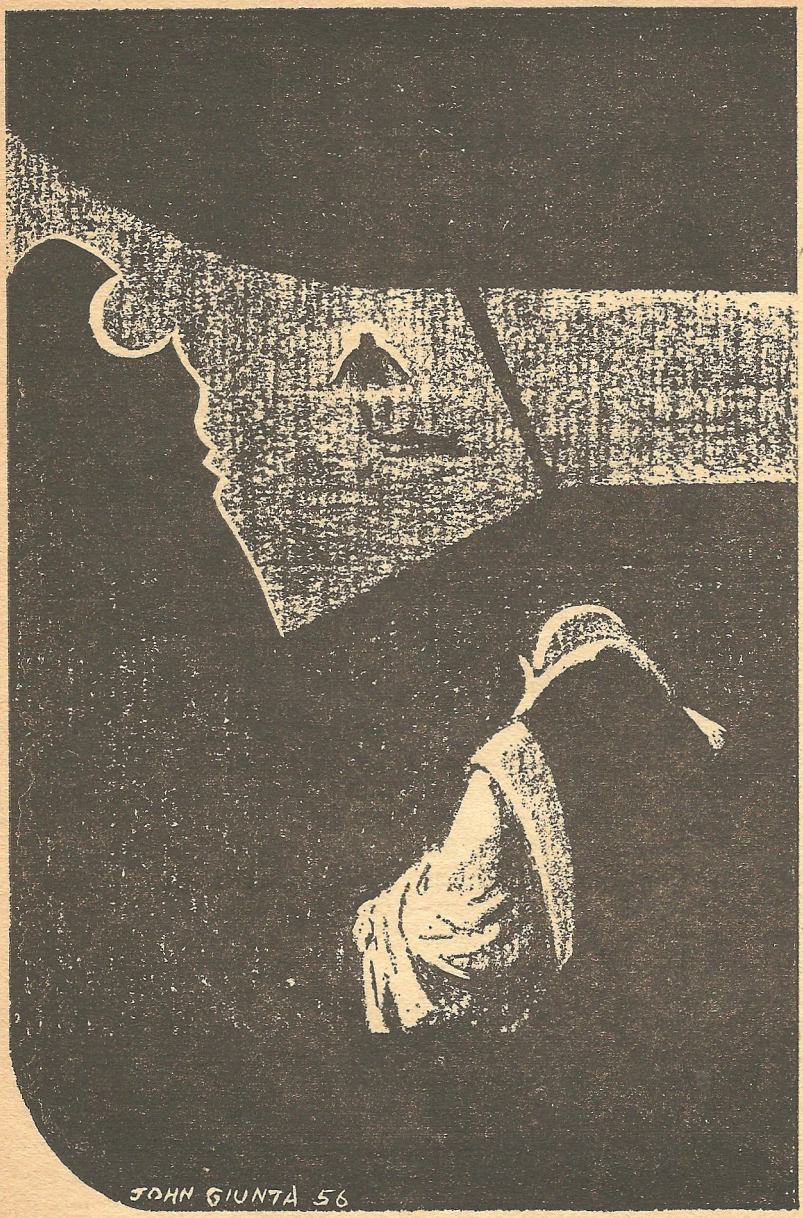
The first of these ideas is, flatly, untrue. Science fiction always has and always will be a specialized field appealing to a specialized audience. If you water it down enough to appeal to the same people who like "The Lone Ranger" and "I Love Lucy," it isn't going to be science fiction any more.

The second results in conventions that are too expensive for many fans to attend, exceptionally dull formal programs with the emphasis on present-day science instead of on science fiction, and large groups of the most sincere fans shoved off into corners by themselves to gripe about how shabbily they are being treated.

The New York Convention was a lot of fun in spite of this drawback, but it does seem that the entire conception of conventions is due for some drastic overhauling.

Meanwhile, don't blame any individuals. It's the A-bomb's fault.

THE CONVENTION was also marred, for me and Ed Emsh at least, by the theft from the art display of his original painting which was used on the cover of the October, 1956, INFINITY. Information leading to its return would be very much appreciated. —LTS


JOHN GIUNTA 56

Carthule was not the Earthman's

god, but Carthule protected him

while he was a guest in the temple

—even if he tore the temple down!

THE GUEST RITES

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by GIUNTA

IT WAS TIME for the after-meal meditation. Marik, First Priest of Carthule, finished his frugal meal and went outside to sit in the mid-day breeze and watch the sands blowing gently over the bare flat plains. The problem of the Revelation occupied his reveries: why had Carthule, in His infinite wisdom, waited so long to reveal to His people that they were not alone in the universe?

Marik looked up at the glowing dot behind the gray wall of the sky. That, he knew, was the Sun. And there were other planets, some inhabited, some not. Carthule was not alone; He was one of nine. And His people had never suspected the truth until the flaming ships of the third planet—Earth, was it?—had broken through the skies, and the small white people had told them of the other worlds.

The problem was one which the greatest theologians of the time—in whose number Marik, without pride, deemed himself —had discussed at great length, never coming to a solution. Marik and Polla San, of the neighboring temple, had finally concluded that Carthule moved in ways too complex for His mortal people to understand.

Marik lowered his gaze from the sky and looked out across the dry expanse of desert. He could make out, dimly, Polla San's temple far across the sands. Polla San was due to visit him shortly, he recalled. Or was it the other way around? Marik frowned; he was getting old, and soon would have to relinquish his duties to one of the younger acolytes and spend his remaining decades sitting dreaming in the afternoon.

Calmly Marik settled into the semi-somnolence of the after-meal meditation, fixing his gaze on the far-off temple of Polla San but turning his vision inward. The sand blew in widening circles, until it seemed to Marik that there was a small, dark figure wandering out in the desert. Sleepily he watched the circlings of the small figure as it pursued a crazy path through the desert.

Then perception broke through his meditation and he realized something was in the desert that had no business there. Carefully he lifted the transparent nictitating lid that protected his eyes from the sand and focussed sharply on the figure in the desert.

It was an Earthman! Lost in the desert, apparently. Marik, somewhat annoyed at this interruption of his meditation, rang for Kenra Sarg.

The young acolyte appeared immediately. Marik nodded. "Look out there," he said.

Kenra Sarg turned and stared. After a moment he turned back to Marik.

"That's an Earthman lost out there! We'd better bring him in here before he gets buried by the sand. What do you say, Father?"

"Of course, Kenra Sarg, of course. Bring him here."

The younger priest bowed and trotted out to the desert. Marik watched him as he ran. He was tall and powerful, and his skin was deep blue, almost purple. His powerful thigh muscles clenched and unclenched as he ran. *He reminds me of my younger self,* Marik thought, as he watched Kenra Sarg pound effortlessly over the sand. *He will be a fine successor when I am ready to go.*

He sank back into reverie, hoping for some repose before Kenra Sarg returned with the Earthman.

HE WAS SMALL, even smaller than the other Earthmen Marik had seen, and his mouth worked curiously and constantly. His face had been dried by the desert. He shook sand from his hair, his eyes, his ears.

"I thought I was finished that time," he said, looking up into Marik's eyes. The Earthman's eyes were bright and hard, and Marik found the contact unpleasant.

"You are safe here," Marik said. "This is the Temple of Carthule."

"I've heard of you people," the Earthman said. "Understand you're a sort of hotel and religion combined."

"Not exactly," Marik said. "But the strongest tenet of our faith is that the Guest Rite is inviolable. Our greatest joy is giving sanctuary to wanderers. You are welcome here so long as you care to stay."

The little Earthman nodded his head. "Sounds fine with me. But I won't trouble you long. I was just passing through this region on my way back to New Chicago — I mean Corolla — when I got lost in your desert. Dropped my compass in the sand and couldn't find my way after that."

"Yes," Marik said. "It is very difficult."

"You're telling me! It would not be so bad if you had stars here on Venus—Carthule, I mean—but you don't, and so there's no way to get your direction. I could have died out there before I found my way back to Corolla. I'm shipping back to Earth," he said. "I can't wait to get back. No disrespect meant, of course," he added cautiously.

Marik looked down at the Earthman. *I'll never get used to their pale skins,* he thought. *And they talk so much.* "Yes," he said. "I know many of your people find our planet a difficult one to live on. We are better adapted for such life than you."

"Sure," the Earthman said. "Say, could I get some rest now? I'm pretty well shot after that tour of your desert."

"Certainly," said Marik. "Kenra Sarg, will you show our guest to one of our rooms? Feel free to stay as long as you care to," he said to the Earthman. "Carthule's generosity is unbounded."

"Oh, don't worry about that," the Earthman said. "I'm not going to stay for long. Just a day or so to recover my bearings, so to speak, and once I'm in traveling shape again I'm heading straight for Corolla." Kenra Sarg led him away, and he followed, still talking.

Marik looked briefly up at the sky, but Carthule made no answer. For some reason Marik

felt suspicious of this Earthman, and as he moved toward the room of prayer to perform the service customary upon the arrival of one seeking sanctuary, he uttered a small, silent plea to Carthule to keep his mind free of groundless hatreds.

WHEN MARIK finished his devotion before the great purple figure of Carthule, he kissed the blazing eye of the statue as was his private custom, humbled himself before the altar, and turned to leave.

"I waited till you were through, Marik," said a tall figure in priestly robes who had been standing at the door. "I didn't want to interrupt your service."

"Polla San! Why have you come here now? I expected you next month!"

Marik looked anxiously at his fellow priest. He knew well that the old priest of the neighboring temple left his books and his meditations infrequently, and never came to visit Marik without first sending notice.

"Serious business," said Polla San. Marik noticed for the first time that the other was wearing the gold band. It was a sign of deep sorrow.

"Tell me outside," Marik said. "This is not the room for it."

"This is of His realm," Polla San said. "Listen: not long ago one of the Earthmen arrived at my temple. He said he was on his way to Corolla, and was looking for shelter and a place to sleep before crossing the desert. Of course, we welcomed him and, since we had no more beds, I gave him my room and slept on the floor in the mealroom. Last night he left, hurriedly, without telling anyone. When I found my room empty, I concluded he had gone, and I went to the room of prayer to offer my wish that Carthule protect him on his journey. I bowed before the statue, even as you did now—and when I looked up I saw that the eye had been stolen!"

"No!" Marik said. He turned and looked at his own statue of Carthule. In the center of the forehead burned the irreplaceable stone that had been set there century upon century before—a great red stone with secret fires burning in its heart. He tried to picture the eye not there, and could not. The eye was the heart of the Temple.

"Our Earthman had stolen the eye," Polla San said. "But he is still in our power. He left so hurriedly that he forgot this." He reached into his robe and took out a small metallic object.

"His compass," Polla San said. "Without this, he cannot cross the desert. He is still out there somewhere. Come: let your acolytes and mine search the

desert for him, regain the eye, and give him the death he deserves."

Marik sank to his knees before the statue. "No," he said.

"No?" Polla San put his hand on the other's shoulder. "We are within our rights. The Earthmen will agree with us; he has committed a sacrilege and we must punish him for it. Why be afraid?"

"It's not that," Marik said. "He richly deserves death. But he is not in the desert. He is here."

"Here?"

"I saw him wandering out there and sent Kenra Sarg to bring him in. He is asleep in one of our guest rooms now. I was just performing the Guest Rite for him when you came."

Polla San sank to his knees alongside Marik. "This is serious, Marik. If he is a guest of yours, he is inviolate. He will sleep here in the home of Carthule after having committed the greatest of desecrations, and we must serve him and feed him and shelter him. It's not right, Marik!"

Marik turned in amazement. "You're not questioning the Word, are you? The Guest Rite is inviolable. As long as he is our guest, we cannot harm him. To punish him for his act would be a greater violation than the act itself."

"But can we let this Earthman remain a guest of Carthule, Marik? Let him sleep down there with the eye in his pocket, and not do a thing about it! He could flaunt the jewel under our noses and we'd have to nod our heads and offer him more food."

"The way of Carthule is the right way," Marik said. "The Guest Rite is inviolable. We will continue to treat this Earthman as we would Carthule Himself."

"But what can I do, Marik? My temple is no longer a temple without the eye!"

"Carthule will show us the way, Polla San. Suppose we pray."

THE FOLLOWING morning the Earthman, after a hearty meal, stretched himself luxuriously and looked out across the desert.

"I guess I'll be moving along," he said to Marik. "I'm in fine shape now, thanks."

"I am glad you found your stay restful," Marik said, concealing his feelings for the desecrator. "Carthule is ever-providing."

The Earthman began to move idly up and down the mealroom, examining the ancient furnishings. "That reminds me," he said. "You wouldn't have a compass to lend me, would you?"

"A compass?" Marik let a puzzled frown cross his forehead. "What may a compass

be?" he asked in just the right tone of ignorance.

The Earthman glanced at him impatiently. "You know," he said, gesturing with his hands. "It's a sort of a little metal box with a magnetic pointer. You must have seen them."

"No," Marik said. "Out here we rarely have guests from your world. I have not seen any compasses."

"Don't you use them yourselves—or something equivalent, I mean? A compass is for traveling. It tells you what direction you're going in."

Marik smiled. "We of Carthule have no need of such things, friend. We need no external guides here."

The Earthman worried a tangled wisp of hair. "Nothing at all? How do you find your way around in the desert?"

"We know how to travel," said Polla San quietly, emerging from his reverie.

"But—how can I get back to Corolla without a compass? I'll just get lost again!" The Earthman looked anxiously from one impassive blue face to another.

"Carthule will help you, friend," Marik said. "Carthule helps all who love Him."

It seemed to Marik that the Earthman paled a little.

"Maybe you could lend me a guide," he said. "I can pay well. Maybe you could let me have that big fellow who brought me in from the desert? He could just show me the way to Corolla and then come right back."

"Our acolytes have no time for such journeys," Marik said. "We are busy here all the day long."

"But all you do is pray—I mean—" he broke off, realizing he had insulted his hosts. He turned and stared out at the shifting sands.

"You will have to set out alone," Polla San said.

"Can't you let me have anyone? Just a kitchen boy?" His hard little eyes flicked from one priest to the other. "Anyone at all? Otherwise I'm stuck here for good!"

"Carthule will guide you," Marik said.

The Earthman stared angrily at the tall priests. "I'm beginning to think you want me to get lost again," he said. "You talk about Carthule, and charity, but because I'm an Earthman you won't help me. But I'll show you. I'll get back to Corolla. And you'll pay for this when I do!"

He ran out. Marik and Polla, sitting quietly, exchanged glances.

"We are moving in the right direction," Polla San said. "But I think you would be wise to guard your room of prayer lest he seek to add to his collection."

"No fear of that," Marik said. "We'll see him again."

THE EARTHMAN disappeared later that morning. Kenra Sarg reported that he had set out, alone, in the general direction of Corolla, after fruitlessly attempting to bribe one of the kitchen boys to accompany him. He had offered them fabulous sums, but they had laughed at him.

The Eye of Marik's Carthule was still in place, but one of the younger acolytes, who had been praying all morning, told Marik that the Earthman had furtively entered the room of prayer and had backed out upon seeing the priest at his devotions.

With the Earthman gone, Marik returned to the calm of his daily routine. The after-meal meditation was a pleasant one; he and Polla San sat facing the desert, contemplating the grandeur of Carthule and pondering the meaning of His ways, until they sank into a transcendent peace. As the night winds began to cool the desert, they fell into a discussion of the problem of evil.

Marik maintained that Carthule had created the Earthmen out of His infinite wisdom, better to show the virtue of His people by contrast; while Polla San, wandering on the very edge of orthodox theology, suggested that the god whom the Earthman worshipped was actually independent of Carthule, representing the embodiment of evil as Carthule was the personification of good.

Marik refused to accept this, arguing that Carthule had created both His people and the Earthmen, or perhaps—as a concession to Polla San—that he had created the god of the Earthmen who, in turn, had created the Earthmen. The discussion went on through the night, while the night winds swirled the sand up around the temple, and they felt no need of sleep.

"Your theory denies the omnipotence of Carthule," Marik said, as the night winds began to lower in intensity. "If you postulate an evil force of as great power as the good, you deny the factors on which our morality—" Marik broke off, seeing that Polla San had slipped off into the near-sleep of a reverie.

He stood up, his long legs cramped after the afternoon and night of sitting, and walked up and down. The desert was settling into its morning calm after the tempestuous night. He stared out across it, thinking of the Earthman who had set out for Corolla with the priceless eye of Carthule in a pouch by his side.

There was a figure in the

distance, walking slowly and with great difficulty in widening circles, following a wild path to the temple. Marik lifted his nictitating lid to make sure his eyes were not playing him false.

Then, rather than awakening Kenra Sarg or Polla San, he did up his robe and went out in the desert to fetch the Earthman back himself.

HE HAD BEEN wandering all night, tossed by the night winds, eyes and ears and mouth choked with sand. He was still master enough of himself to throw an angry glare at Marik when the priest approached, but he suffered himself to be lifted like a child and carried back to the temple. The pouch was still hanging by his side, Marik noted.

"I see our friend has returned," Polla San said.

"Yes," Marik said. "Yesterday morning he departed without taking leave and lost his way again on the way to Corolla. After a night in the desert he found his way back to us and is once again looking for sanctuary. This is true, isn't it?" Marik said, looking down at the Earthman cradled in his arms.

The Earthman angrily spat out some sand.

"Carthule in His mercy has brought our wanderer back," Polla San said.

"I'll take him below," Marik said. "His night in the desert has left him weak and sore, and he needs rest. But he will always find sanctuary here with Carthule. Carthule shows His generosity to the lowest of creatures."

Kenra Sarg appeared at the door. "I see our guest has returned," he said.

"Yes. He has come back to us." Marik handed the Earthman over to Kenra Sarg, despite an impotent look of rage from the huddled, battered little thief.

"Take him to the room he had, and let him rest. He has traveled, and he is weary. I will go to the room of prayer, and offer up the Guest Rite for him, for he is our guest again. For as long as he cares to stay."

Kenra Sarg nodded and carried the Earthman inside.

Marik turned to Polla San. "Carthule has treated us well. I always feel happy when we have a guest."

Polla San smiled. "He still has the eye, I hope."

"He still does. I don't think he got too far last night. I've never seen anyone quite so angry."

"He will never find his way to Corolla alone," Polla San said. "Not without this." He thoughtfully fondled the compass in his hand.

"If my acolytes were not all so busy, I would allow one to guide him," Marik said, smiling.

"But I can spare none, and I enjoy offering our hospitality. He is our guest, and we must do all in our power to make his stay enjoyable. Perhaps he will never want to leave."

"No," Polla San said, standing up and flexing his legs. "He will leave often, and silently. Perhaps he will take your statue's eye as well, to put in the pouch by his side. But he will return, as he did yesterday."

"He will return," Marik said. "Again and again. He will never find his way across the desert to Corolla, and eventually he will stay here as our permanent guest. And one day he shall die, if not sooner then later—these Earthmen are a short-lived breed—and we will recover the eyes, which will still be in the pouch by his side."

"It is wonderful to have a guest," Polla San said.

"It is," Marik said. "He shall live here with the eyes by his side, and one day he will die and we can recover our treasures from him. He can never get far with them. We can wait. He has but a few decades left, while Carthule has all eternity. Come," he said.

Together they went to the room of prayer to offer the service of the Guest Rites.

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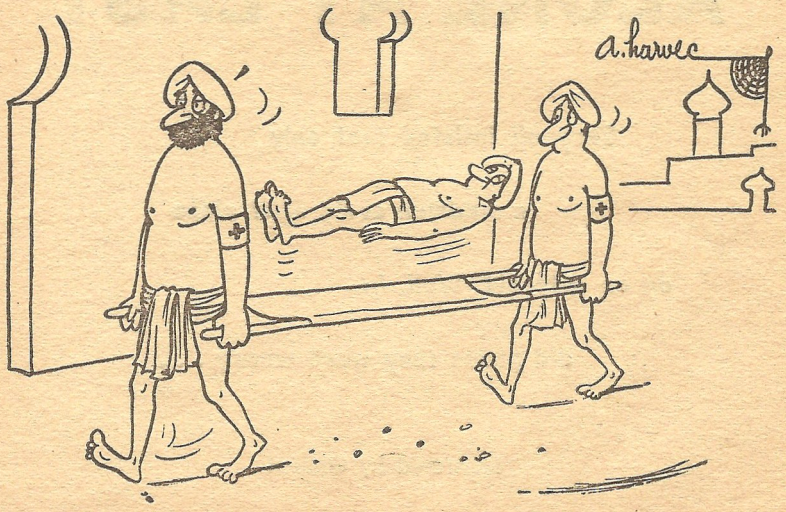

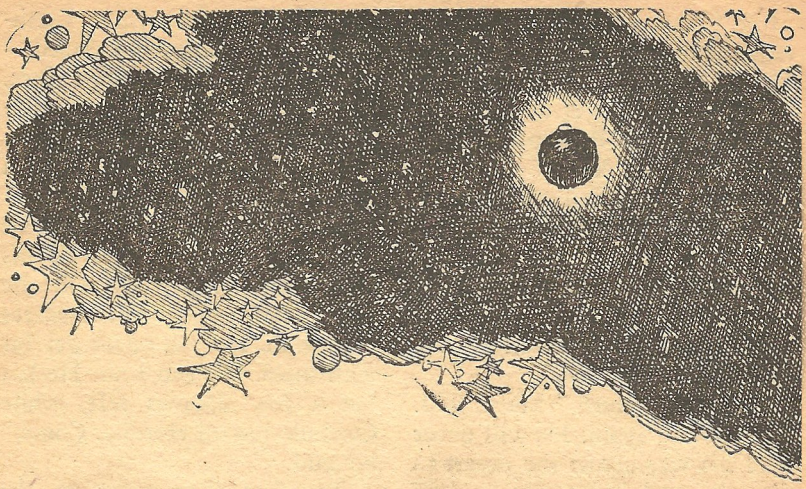

by ROBERT SHECKLEY

ALONE AT LAST

They all insisted that only a madman could exist alone on an asteroid. Well, he did prove they were wrong . . .

Illustrated by ORBAN

THE ANNUAL Io ship was already in blast position, and swarms of androids labored over the final ground details. A crowd had gathered to watch the event, to stand close together and be amused. Horns sounded, a warning siren began to shriek. Confetti poured from the last unsealed ports, and long silver and red streamers. From a loudspeaker came the hearty voice of the ship's captain—a human, of

course—saying, "All ashore that's going ashore!"

In the midst of this joyous confusion stood Richard Arwell, perspiration pouring down his face, baggage heaped around him and more arriving every minute, barred from the ship by a ridiculous little government official.

"No, sir, I'm afraid I must refuse permission," the official was saying, with a certain unction.

Arwell's spacepass was signed and countersigned, his ticket was paid and vouchered. To reach this point he had waited at a hundred doors, explained himself to a hundred ignorant flunkies, and somehow won past them all. And now, at the very threshold of success, he was faced with failure.

"My papers are in order," Arwell pointed out, with a calmness he did not feel.

"They seem to be in order," the official said judiciously. "But your destination is so preposterous—"

At that moment a robot porter lumbered up with the packing case that contained Arwell's personal android.

"Careful with that," Arwell said.

The robot set it down with a resounding thud.

"Idiot!" Arwell screamed. "Incompetent fool!" He turned to the official. "Can't they ever build one that will follow orders properly?"

"That's what my wife asked me the other day," the official said, smiling sympathetically. "Just the other day our android—"

The robot said, "Put these on the ship, sir?"

"Not yet," the little official said.

The loudspeaker boomed, "Last call! All ashore!"

The official picked up Arwell's papers again. "Now then. This matter of destination. You really wish to go to an *asteroid,* sir?"

"Precisely," Arwell said. "I am going to live upon an asteroid, just as my papers state. If you would be good enough to sign them and let me aboard—"

"But no one lives on the asteroids," the official said. "There's no colony."

"I know."

"There isn't *anyone* on the asteroids!"

"True."

"You would be alone."

"I wish to be alone," Arwell said simply.

The official stared at him in disbelief. "But consider the risk. No one is alone today."

"I will be. As soon as you sign that paper," Arwell said. Looking toward the ship he saw that the ports were being sealed. "Please!"

The official hesitated. The

papers were in order, true. But to be alone—to be completely alone—was dangerous, suicidal.

Still, it was undeniably legal.

He scrawled his name. Instantly Arwell shouted, "Porter, porter! Load these on the ship. Hurry! And be careful with the android!"

The porter lifted the case so abruptly that Arwell could hear the android's head slam against the side. He winced, but there was no time for a reprimand. The final port was closing.

"Wait!" Arwell screamed, and sprinted across the concrete apron, the robot porter thundering behind him. "Wait!" he screamed again, for a ship's android was methodically closing the port, oblivious to Arwell's unauthorized command. But a member of the human crew intervened, and the door's progress was arrested. Arwell sprinted inside, and the robot hurled his baggage after him. The port closed.

"Lie down!" the human crew member shouted. "Strap yourself. Drink this. We're lifting."

As the ship trembled and rose, Arwell felt a tremendous drunken satisfaction surge through him. He had made it, he had won, and soon, very soon, he would be alone!

BUT EVEN in space, Arwell's troubles were not over. For the ship's captain, a tall, erect, graying man, decided not to put him on an asteroid.

"I simply cannot believe you know what you are doing," the captain said. "I beg you to reconsider."

They were sitting in upholstered chairs in the captain's comfortable lounge. Arwell felt unutterably weary, looking at the captain's smug, conventional face. Momentarily he considered strangling the man. But that would never bring him the solitude he desired. Somehow, he must convince this last dreary idiot.

A robot attendant glided noiselessly behind the captain. "Drink, sir?" it asked, in its sharp metallic voice. The captain jumped abruptly.

"*Must* you sneak up that way?" he asked the robot.

"Sorry, sir," the robot said. "Drink, sir?"

Both men accepted drinks. "Why," the captain mused, "can't these mechanicals be trained better?"

"I've often wondered that myself," Arwell said, with a knowing smile.

"This one," the captain went on, "is a perfectly efficient servitor. And yet, he does have that ridiculous habit of creeping up in back of people."

"My own android," Arwell said, "has a most annoying trem-

ble in his left hand. Synaptic lag, I believe the technicians call it. One would think they could do something about it."

The captain shrugged. "Perhaps the new models . . . oh well." He sipped his drink.

Arwell sipped his own drink, and considered that an air of comradeship had been established. He had shown the captain that he was not a wild-eyed eccentric; on the contrary, that his ideas were quite conventional. Now was the time to press his advantage.

"I hope, sir," he said, "that we will have no difficulties about the asteroid."

The captain looked annoyed. "Mr. Arwell," he said, "you are asking me to do what is, essentially, an asocial act. To set you upon an asteroid would be a failure on my part as a human being. No one is alone in this day and age. We stay together. There is comfort in numbers, safety in quantity. We look after one another."

"Perfectly true," Arwell said. "But you must allow room for individual differences. I am one of those rare few who honestly desires solitude. This may make me unusual; but certainly my wishes are to be respected."

"Hmm." The captain looked earnestly at Arwell. "You *think* you desire solitude. But have you ever really experienced it?"

"No," Arwell admitted.

"Ah. Then you can have no conception of the dangers, the very real dangers inherent to that state. Wouldn't it be better, Mr. Arwell, to conform to the advantages of your day and age?"

The captain went on to speak of the Great Peace, which had now lasted over two hundred years, and of the psychological stability that was its basis. Slightly red in the face, he orated on the healthy mutual symbiosis between Man, that socially integrated animal, and his creature, the serene working mechanical. He spoke of Man's great task—the organization of the skills of his creatures.

"Quite true," Arwell said. "But not for me."

"Ah," the captain said, smiling wisely, "but have you tried? Have you experienced the thrill of cooperation? Directing the harvest androids as they toil over the wheat fields, guiding their labor under the seas—healthy, satisfying work. Even the lowliest of tasks—being a foreman over twenty or thirty factory robots, say—is not devoid of its sensation of solid accomplishment. And this sensation can be shared and augmented by contact with one's fellow humans."

"All that sort of thing is lacking in satisfaction for me," Arwell said. "It's just not for me. I

want to spend the rest of my life alone, to read my books, to contemplate, to be on one tiny asteroid by myself."

The captain rubbed his eyes wearily. "Mr. Arwell," he said, "I believe you are sane, and therefore master of your destiny. I cannot stop you. But consider! Solitude is dangerous to modern man. Insidiously, implacably dangerous. For that reason he has learned to shun it."

"It will not be dangerous for me," Arwell said.

"I hope not," the captain said. "I sincerely hope not."

AT LAST the orbit of Mars was passed, and the asteroid belt was reached. With the captain's help, Arwell picked out a good-sized chunk of rock. The ship matched velocities.

"You're sure you know what you're doing?" the captain asked.

"Positive!" Arwell said, barely able to contain his eagerness with his solitude so close at hand.

For the next few hours the helmeted crew transferred his gear from ship to asteroid and anchored it down. They set up his water producer and his air maker, and stowed his basic food components. At last they inflated the tough plastic bubble under which he would live, and proceeded to transfer his android.

"Careful with it," Arwell warned.

Suddenly the crate slipped through the clumsy gauntleted hands of a robot, and began to drift away.

"Get a line on that!" the captain shouted.

"Hurry!" Arwell screamed, watching his precious mechanical drift into the vacuum of space.

One of the human crew fired a line harpoon into the case and hauled it back, banging it roughly against the ship's side. With no further delay, the case was secured upon the asteroid. At last, Arwell was ready to take possession of his own little private world.

"I wish you would think about it," the captain said gravely. "The dangers of solitude—"

"Are all superstition," Arwell said abruptly, anxious to be alone. "There are no dangers."

"I will return with more provisions in six months," the captain said. "Believe me, there are dangers. It is no accident that modern man has avoided—"

"May I go now?" Arwell asked.

"Of course. And good luck," the captain said.

Spacesuited and helmeted, Arwell propelled himself to his tiny island in space, and from it watched the ship depart. When it became a dot of light no bigger than a star, he started to arrange his goods. First the android, of course. He hoped it

wasn't bruised, after all the rough handling it had undergone. Quickly he opened the case and activated the mechanical. The forehead dial showed that energy was accumulating. Good enough.

He looked around. There was the asteroid, a lean black rock. There were his stores, his android, his food and water, his books. All around him was the immensity of space, the cold light of the stars, the faint sun, and the absolute black night.

He shuddered slightly and turned away.

His android was now activated. There was work to be done. But fascinated, he looked again into space.

The ship, that faint star, was gone from sight. For the first time, Arwell experienced what he had before only faintly imagined: solitude, perfect, complete and utter solitude. The merciless diamond points of the stars glared at him from the depths of a night that would never end. There was no human near him—for all he knew, the human race had ceased to exist. He was *alone.*

It was a situation that could drive a man insane.

Arwell loved it.

"Alone at last!" he shouted to the stars.

"Yes," said his android, lurching to its feet and advancing on him. "Alone at last."

∞ ∞ ∞

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF INFINITY Science Fiction, published bimonthly at New York, N. Y. for October 1, 1956.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Irwin Stein, 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Larry T. Shaw, 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing editor, Helen Skalet, 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Business manager, none.

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HELEN STEIN,
Secretary.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1956.

EDWARD H. GARRETT,
Notary Public.

State of New York. No. 30-6466600. Qualified in Nassau County. My commission expires March 30, 1958.

Feedback

THIS department is strictly for the readers. Ideas about science fiction in general are as welcome as discussions of INFINITY itself. Keep the letters coming to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, Inc., 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.

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How did you get Emsh to do that cover? *(Just stuck a brush in his hand and left him alone. —Ed.)* It was a masterpiece. It was about the best Emsh I have ever seen. If any cover will sell copies that one will. Emsh took top honors for inside illustrations too with the one for Ellison's story.

As we walk down the long corridor of the INFINITY building we come to a room marked "Stories, issue 5." And do we approve the contents of this little room? You bet we do! Man, you didn't hit one bad note here. Budrys got top honors although he did it just by a fraction. I will not put them in order because it is not fair for one of those stories to get a last place.

Now as we come to the last little room in the INFINITY building we find painted over the words broom closet "Departments, issue 5." Taking them in order we first stumble over Damon Knight. All I have got to say is that he is the best reviewer around and you can't do better. As for Fanfare, I readily approve of this idea but I think it would be even nicer if after you presented INFINITY's choice you had a page or two of fanzine reviews. *(See "The Fan-Space" in our new companion magazine,* SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES.*—Ed.)* Last and least the letter column. A good choice of letters but only three pages.

Well, it has been fun roaming through the INFINITY building. I hope to do it again sometime unless you lock the door. Of course there's always the servants' entrance . . . —Jerry Greene, 482 E. 20th St., Hialeah, Fla.

∞

I have before me the October ish of INFINITY, which I feel needs comment. Especially that cover. Man, there must be a better way to boost sales than by using sexy covers! I noticed

this on the last (August) issue too, but not as bad. If I was one of those who is attracted to a mag by the cover (which I'm glad I'm not) I certainly never would have bought the October INFINITY. Things like the June cover are fine. Use that kind, please!

Well, at least the contents were good. Budrys' "novel" was excellent, for the most part, if the ending was a bit weak. Very enjoyable, and if you keep printing this kind of story you'll be one of the top mags.

"A Message from Our Sponsor" was good also, although I wasn't sure just what was coming off until I re-read the blurb. Ellison's "Silver Corridor" was entertaining (another of those damned illustrations!) but certainly nothing weighted with ideas. Damon Knight is an excellent book reviewer. "The Man Who Liked Lions" was good mainly for the excellent little touches showing just how moronic and stupid people can be at times. (And if anyone wants to argue with me on this, they're welcome to!) Agberg's "Hopper" was enjoyed by me, but not as much as the others. "My Brother on the Highway" was practically nothing. A different ending would have given it a boost. Knight's story, if written in a somewhat different style (for Damon, at least), was another of his little bittersweet stories like "The Country of the Kind" in *S. F.: The Year's Best*. . . .

One thing I especially like about INFINITY is the fact that you don't take yourselves too seriously. The ad on the inside front cover is a good example of this. Could it be a parody on ads appearing in another high-ranking stf mag? *(No, just a parody of ads in general.—Ed.)* I'm not sure just which one of the monsters you are, but the one third from the top must be Yngvi (the louse) although I don't see him listed on the staff. John Champion, Route 2, Box 75B, Pendleton, Ore.

(From top to bottom, the monsters were: Shaw, Hoffman, Johnson, Bowman, Engle, Skalet and Stein.—Ed.)

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I like INFINITY. I don't like to be stupid, as Kent Moomaw says, but I'd sure like to see Doc Smith too. INFINITY needs a swap column. Another thing—short and brief—Hamilton is about the best comeback writer. —James W. Ayers, 609 First St., Attalla, Ala.

(At the New York Convention, Doc Smith renewed his promise to write for us. And did you see "The Starcombers" by Edmond Hamilton in the first (December) issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES*?—Ed.)*

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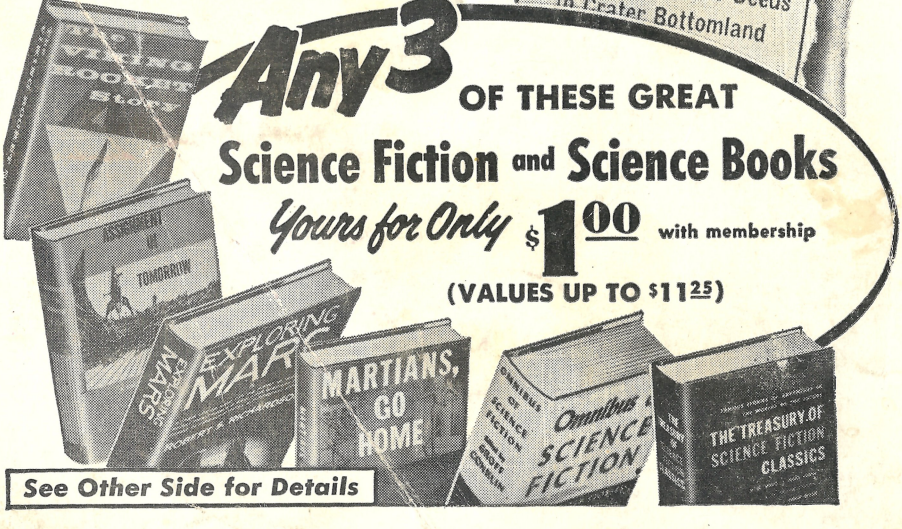

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