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SCIENCE FICTION

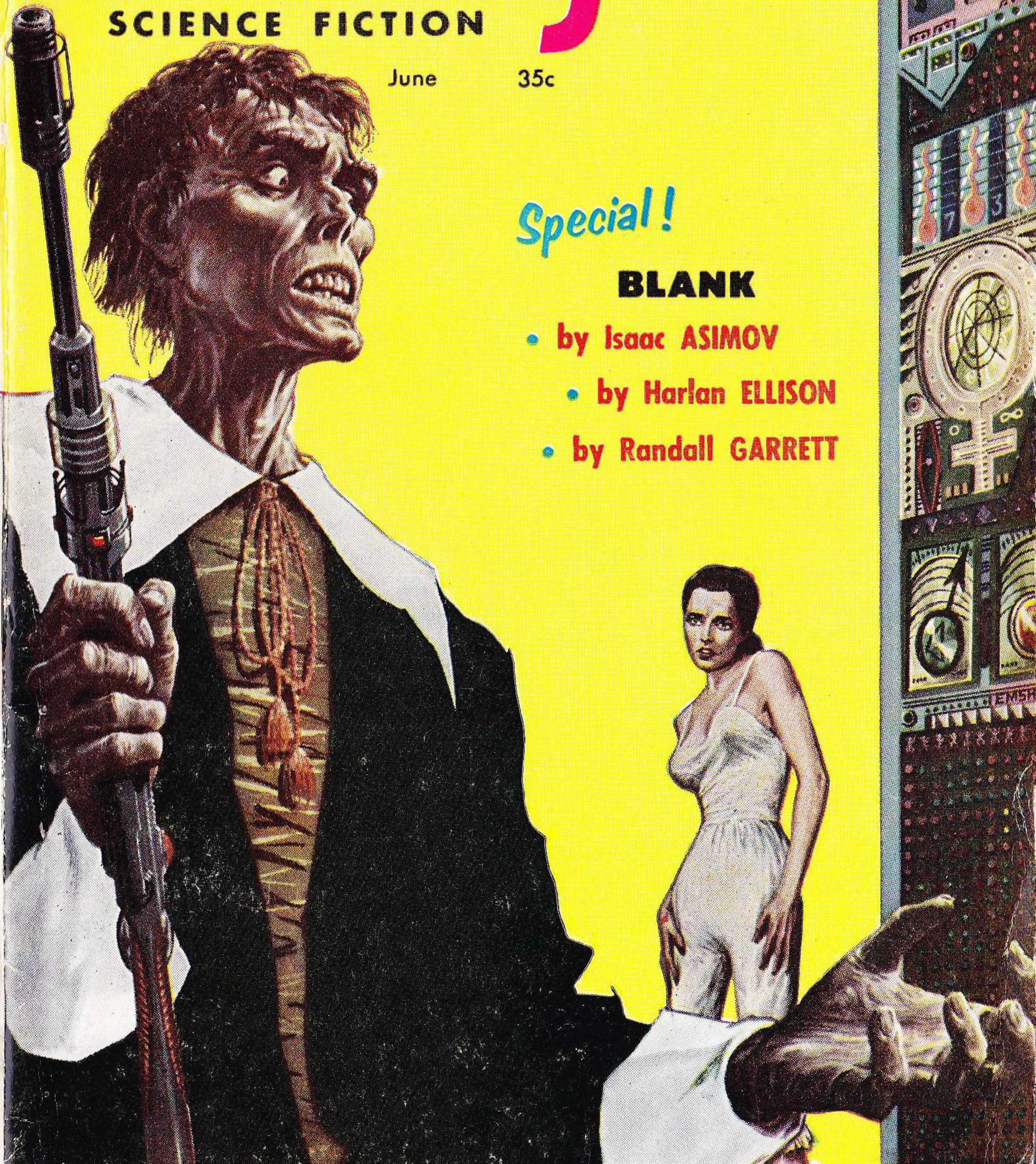
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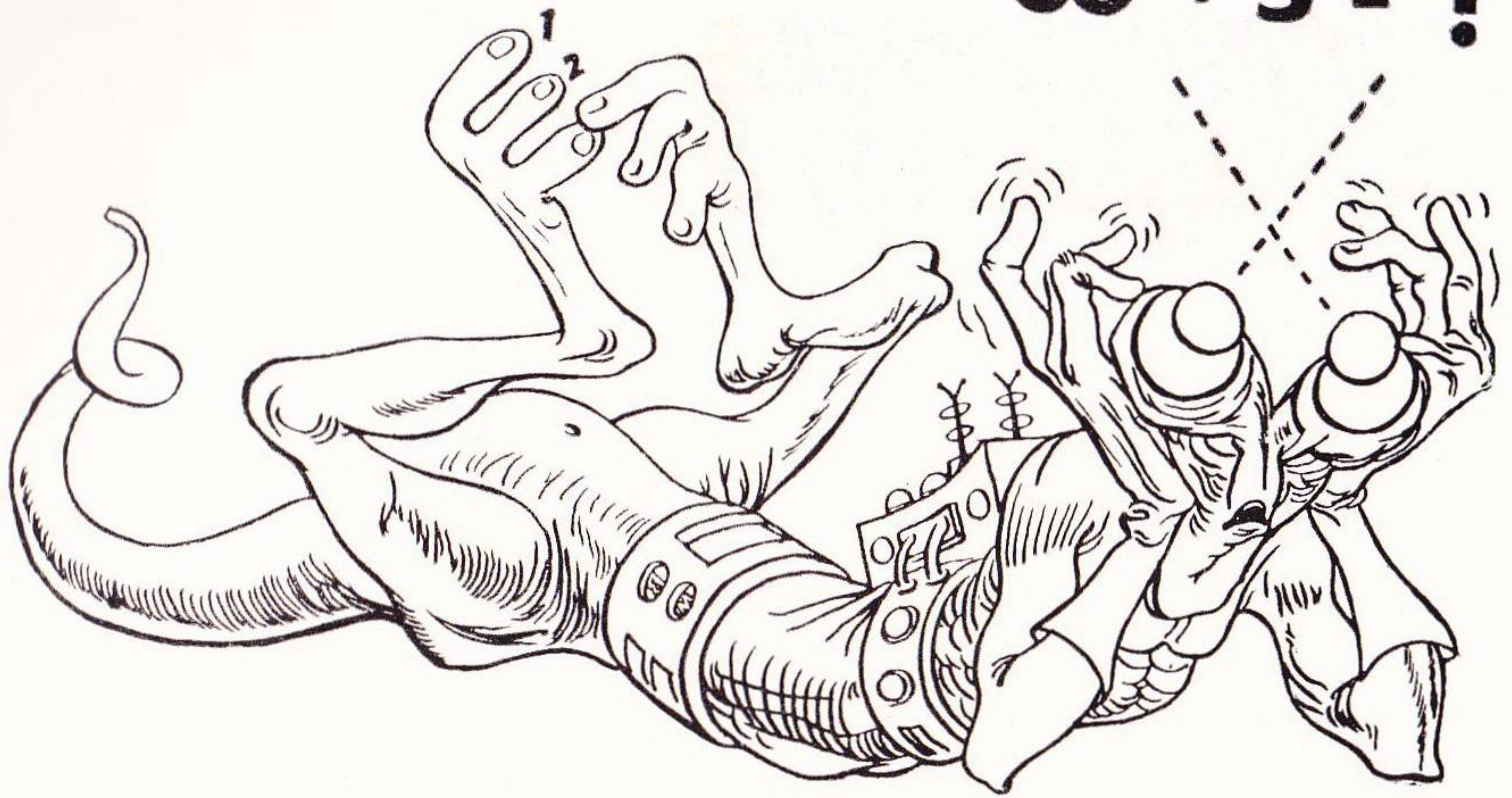
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SCIENCE FICTION

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Assistant Editor—LEE HOFFMAN	Art Associate—WILLIAM BOWMAN

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INFINITY

The Band Played On

by LESTER DEL REY

**The Heroes' March was
fitting for most space-
men. Somehow, though,
it just didn't apply to a
space-borne garbage man!**

Illustrated by SCHOENHERR

CHAPTER I

INSIDE the rocket grounds, the band was playing the inevitable *Heroes' March* while the cadets snapped through the final maneuvers of their drill. Captain Thomas Murdock stopped at the gate near the visitors' section, waiting until the final blatant notes blared out and were followed by the usual applause from the town kids



in the stands. The cadets broke ranks and headed for their study halls, still stepping as if the band played on inside their heads.

Maybe it did, Murdock thought. There had been little parade drill and less music back on Johnston Island when his group won their rocket emblems fifteen years before; yet somehow there had been a sense of destiny, like a drum beating in their brains, to give them the same spring to their stride. It had sent most of them to their deaths and a few to command positions on the moon, long before the base was transferred here to the Florida coast.

Murdock shrugged and glanced upwards. The threatening clouds were closing in, scudding across the sky in dark blobs and streaks, and the wind velocity was rising. It was going to be lousy weather for a take-off, even if things got no worse.

Behind him, a boy's voice called out. "Hey, pilot!"

He glanced about, but there was no other pilot near. He hesitated, frowning. Then, as the call was repeated, he turned doubtfully toward the stands. Surprisingly, a boy of about twelve was leaning over the railing, motioning toward him and waving a notebook emphatically.

"Autograph, pilot?"

Murdock took the book and signed the blank page automatically, while fifty pairs of eyes watched. No other books were held out, and there was complete silence from the audience. He handed the pencil and notebook back, trying to force a friendly smile onto his face. For a moment, there was a faint ghost of the old pride as he turned back across the deserted parade ground.

It didn't last. Behind him, an older voice broke the silence in disgusted tones. "Why'd you do that, Shorty? He ain't no pilot!"

"He is, too. I guess. I know a pilot's uniform," Shorty protested.

"So what? I already told you about him. He's the garbage man!"

There was no vocal answer to that—only the ripping sound of paper being torn from the notebook.

MURDOCK refused to look back as the boys left the stands. He went across the field, past the school buildings, on toward the main sections of the base—the business part, where the life-line to the space station and the moon was maintained. A job, he told himself, was a job. It was a word he would never have used six ships and fifteen years before.

The storm flag was up on the control tower, he saw. Worse,

LESTER DEL REY says: "I've grown more and more unhappy about the trend to stories laid a thousand years ahead and a megaparsec away. So every once in a while, I like to sit down with an idea where I can be pretty darned honest about probable facts and see if some of the old, basic, simple ideas can't be twisted." He has a good point there, and we think you'll agree he has succeeded in his aim in *The Band Played On*.

the guy cables were all tight, anchoring the three-stage ships firmly down in their blast deflection pits. There were no tractors or tankers on the rocket field to service the big ships. He stared through the thickening gloom toward the bay, but there was no activity there, either. The stage recovery boats were all in port, with their handling cranes folded down. Obviously, no flight was scheduled.

It didn't fit with predictions. Hurricane Greta was hustling northward out to sea, and the low ceiling and high winds were supposed to be the tag end of that disturbance, due to clear by mid-day. This didn't look that way; it looked more as if the weather men on the station had goofed for the first time in ten years.

Murdock stared down the line toward his own ship, set apart from the others, swaying slightly as the wind hit it. Getting it up through the weather was going to be hell, even if he got clearance, but he couldn't wait much longer. Greta had al-

ready put him four days behind his normal schedule, and he'd been counting on making the trip today.

There was a flash bulletin posted outside the weather shack, surrounded by a group of young majors and colonels from the pilot squad. Murdock stepped around them and into the building. He was glad to see that the man on duty was Collins, one of the few technicians left over from the old days on the Island.

Collins looked up from his scowling study of the maps and saluted casually without rising. "Hi, Tommy. How's the hog business?"

"Lousy," Murdock told him. "I'm going to have a hungry bunch of pigs if I don't get another load down. What gives with the storm signals? I thought Greta blew over."

Collins pawed the last cigarette out of a pack and shook his head as he lighted up. "This is Hulda, they tell me. Our geniuses on the station missed it—claimed Hulda was covered

by Greta until she grew bigger. We're just beginning to feel her. No flights for maybe five days more."

"Hell!" It was worse than Murdock had feared. He twisted the weather maps to study them, unbelievably. Unlike the newer pilots, he'd spent enough time in the weather shack to be able to read a map or a radar screen almost as well as Collins. "The station couldn't have goofed that much, Bill!"

"Did, though. Something's funny up there. Bailey and the other brass are holding some pow-wow about it now, over at Communications. It's boiling up to a first-class mess."

One of the teletypes began chattering, and Collins turned to it. Murdock moved outside where a thin rain was beginning to fall, whipping about in the gusts of wind. He headed for the control tower, knowing it was probably useless. In that, he was right; no clearances for flight could be given without General Bailey's okay, and Bailey was still tied up in conference, apparently.

He borrowed a raincape and went out across the field toward his ship. The rain was getting heavier, and the *Mollyann* was grunting and creaking in her pit as he neared her. The guying had been well enough done, however, and she was in no dan-

ger that he could see. He checked the pit gauges and records. She'd been loaded with a cargo of heavy machinery, and her stage tanks were fully fueled. At least, if he could get clearance, she was ready to go. She was the oldest ship on the field, but her friction-burned skin covered sound construction and he had supervised her last overhaul himself.

Then he felt the wind picking up again, and his stomach knotted. He moved around to the more sheltered side of the ship, cursing the meteorologists on the station. If they'd predicted this correctly, he could have arranged to take off during the comparative lull between storms. Even that would have been bad enough, but now . . .

Abruptly, a ragged klaxon shrieked through the air in a series of short bursts, sounding assembly for the pilots. Murdock hesitated, then shrugged and headed out into the rain. He could ignore the signal if he chose, since he'd been on detached duty for years, except when actually scheduled for flight; yet it was probably his best chance to see Bailey. He slogged along while the other pilots trotted across the field toward Briefing on the double. Even now, covered with slickers and tramping through mud, they seemed to be on parade

drill, as if a drum were beating out the time for them.

MURDOCK found a seat at the rear, separate from the others, out of old habit. Up front, an improvised crap game was going on; elsewhere, they were huddled in little groups, their young faces too bright and confident. Nobody noticed him until Colonel Lawrence Hennings glanced up from the crap game. "Hi, Tommy. Want in?"

Murdock shook his head, smiling briefly. "Can't afford it this week," he explained.

A cat could look at royalty; and royalty was free to look at or speak to anyone—even a man who ferried garbage for the station. At the moment, Hennings was king, even in this crowd of self-determined heroes. There was always one man who was the top dog. Hennings' current position seemed as inevitable as Murdock's own had become.

Damn it, someone had to carry the waste down from the station. The men up there couldn't just shove it out into space to have it follow their orbit and pile up around them; shooting it back to burn up in Earth's atmosphere had been suggested, but that took more fuel in the long run than bringing it down by ship. With nearly eight hundred men in the doubly expanded station, there

was a lot of garbage, too. The job was as important as carrying the supplies up, and took just as much piloting skill. Only there was no band playing when the garbage ship took off, and there could never be a hero's mantle over the garbage man.

It had simply been his bad luck that he was pilot for the first load back. The heat of landing leaked through the red-hot skin of the cargo section, and the wastes boiled and steamed through the whole ship and plated themselves against the hull when it began to cool, until no amount of washing could clean it completely; after that, the ship was considered good for nothing but the carrying of garbage down and lifting such things as machine parts, where the smell wouldn't matter. He'd gone on detached duty at once, exiled from the pilot shack; it was probably only imagination, but the other men swore they couldn't sleep in the same room with him.

He'd made something of a joke of it at first, while he waited for his transfer at the end of the year. He'd finally consented to a second year when they couldn't get anyone else for the job. And by the end of five years of it, he knew he was stuck; even a transfer wouldn't erase his reputation as the garbage man, or give him the pro-

motions and chances for leadership the others got. Oh, there were advantages in freedom, but if there had been anything outside of the service he could do . . .

The side door opened suddenly and General Bailey came in. He looked older than his forty years, and the expression on his face sobered the pilots almost at once. He took his time in dropping to the chair behind the table, giving them a chance to come to order. Murdock braced himself, watching as the man took out a cigarette. Then, as it was tapped sharply on the table to pack the end, he nodded. It was going to be a call for volunteers! The picture of the weather outside raced through his mind, twisting at his stomach, but he slid forward on his seat, ready to stand at once.

"At ease, men." Bailey took his time lighting the cigarette, and then plunged into things. "A lot of you have been cursing the station for their forecast. Well, you can forget that—we're damned lucky they could spot Hulda at all. They're in bad shape. Know what acrolein is? You've all had courses in atmospheric. How about it?"

The answer came out in pieces from several of the pilots. Acrolein was one of the thirty-odd poisons that had to be fil-

tered from the air in the station, though it presented no problem in the huge atmosphere of Earth. It could get into the air from the overcooking of an egg or the burning of several proteins. "You can get it from some of the plastics, too," one of the men added.

Bailey nodded. "You can. And that's the way they got it, from an accident in the shops. They got enough to overload their filters, and the replacements aren't enough to handle it. They're all being poisoned up there—just enough to muddle their thinking at first, but getting worse all the time. They can't wait for Hulda to pass. They've got to have new filters at once. And that means—"

"Sir!" Hennings was on his feet, standing like a lance in a saddle boot. "Speaking for my crew, I ask permission to deliver whatever the station needs."

Murdock had been caught short by Hennings' sudden move, but now he was up, protesting. His voice sounded as hollow as he felt after the ringing tones of the younger man. "I'm overdue already on schedule, and by all rights—"

Bailey cut him off, nodding to Hennings. "Thank you, Colonel. We'll begin loading at once, while Control works out your tapes. All right, dis-

missed!" Then finally he turned to Murdock. "Thanks, Tom. I'll record your offer, but there's no time for us to unload your ship first. Afraid you're grounded for the storm."

He went out quickly, with Hennings following jauntily at his heels.

THE OTHERS were beginning to leave, grumbling with a certain admiration at Hennings' jumping the gun on them. Murdock trailed along, since there was no chance for him to change the orders now. He wondered what excuse would have been used if he'd been first to volunteer and if his ship had been empty. The choice of pilot had probably been made before the token request for volunteers, and he was certain that his name hadn't been considered.

The storm seemed to have let up when he started across the field, but it was only a lull. Before he could reach the shelter of the weather shack, it began pelting down again, harder than ever. He stopped inside the door to shake off some of the wetness. Collins was intently studying one of the radar screens where a remote pickup was showing conditions, alternately working a calculator and yelling into a phone. He looked up, made a desperate motion with his fingers for a cigarette, and

went back to the phone.

Murdock shoved a lighted smoke toward him, then pulled a stool up to the window where he could watch the field. By rights, he should be heading back to his farm, to do what he could there; but he had no intention of leaving before the take-off. Lifting a ship in this weather was mostly theory. It had been done once on the Island, but the big ships were still too unstable to make it anything but a desperate emergency measure. He'd discussed it with the pilot after that trip, and he'd spent a lot of time trying to work out a method in case he had to try it, but Hennings had his sympathy now. It took more than courage and confidence to handle this situation.

He studied the storm, trying to get the feel of it. During his first two years back here, he'd spent a lot of his free time flying a light plane, and some of the weather had been fairly bad. It gave him some idea of what Hennings had to face; he wondered whether the younger pilot realized what was coming.

Sodium lights were blazing on the field, he saw, clustered about Hennings' *Jennilee*, and men were slipping and sliding around in the mud, getting her ready and loading the filter packs. Two men were being run up on a lift to the crew en-

trance; Hennings carried both a co-pilot and a radio man, though many of the pilots now used only a single crewman.

Collins looked up from the phone. "Fifteen minutes to zero," he reported.

Murdock grunted in surprise. He'd expected the take-off to be two hours later, on the next swing of the station. It must mean that orders for loading the ship had been given before Bailey came into Briefing. It confirmed his suspicion that the pilot had been picked in advance.

A few minutes later, Hennings appeared, marching across the field toward the lift in the middle of a small group. Several of them rode up with him. As the lift began creaking backward, the pilot stood poised in the lock, grinning for the photographers. Naturally, the press had been tipped off; the service had learned long before that maximum publicity helped in getting the fattest possible appropriations.

When the lock was finally sealed and the field cleared, Murdock bent over the counter to study the radar screens. The storm was apparently erratic, from the hazy configurations he could see. Zero would be a poor choice for the take-off, though, from what he could estimate. Hennings would be smarter to

delay and make manual corrections on his tape.

Then the klaxon went on, signalling the take-off. The last man on the field was darting for cover. From the blast pit, a dull, sickly red began to shine as the rockets were started. Murdock swore. The fool was taking off on schedule, trusting to his tapes!

The smoky red exhaust ran up the spectrum to blue, and the ship began to tremble faintly. The sound rose to crescendo. Now the *Jennilee* started to lift. Wind hit it, throwing it toward the side of the pit. The wings of the top stage caught most of the force, and the whole ship was tilting—the worst thing that could happen. They should have swivelled the ship around to put the wings parallel to most of the storm, instead of bucking it.

Murdock heard Collins' breath catch harshly, but suddenly the worst danger was over. A lull for a second or so gave Hennings his chance. He was at least riding his controls over the automatics. The blast deflection vanes shot the blue flame sideways, and the ship shifted its bottom, righting itself. It was beginning to make its real climb now. The wings near the top literally vibrated like the arms of a tuning fork, and the blast trail was ragged.

Yet she rose, her blast roar rising and falling as the wind altered, blowing some of the sound away from the watchers.

Now the Doppler effect began to be noticeable, and the sound dropped in pitch as the *Jennilee* fought her way up. The overcast of scudding clouds hid all but the bright anger of the exhaust.

Murdock turned with the technician to another radar screen. Unlike those in Control, it wasn't set properly to catch the ship, but a hazy figure showed in one edge. "Right into some of the nastiest stuff blowing!" Collins swore.

CHAPTER II

HE WAS right. The timing had been as bad as possible. The blob of light on the screen was obviously being buffeted about. Something seemed to hit the top and jerk it.

The screen went blank, then lighted again. Collins had shifted his connections, to patch into the signal Control was watching. The blip of the *Jennilee* was now dead center, trying to tilt into a normal synergy curve. "Take it up, damn it!" Murdock swore hotly. This was no time to swing around the Earth until after the ship was above the storm. The tape for the automatic pilot should have been cut for a high

first ascension. If Hennings was panicking and overriding it back to the familiar orbit . . .

As if the pilot heard him, the blip began rising again. It twisted and bucked. Something seemed to separate from it. There was a scattering of tiny white dots on the screen, drifting behind the ship. Murdock couldn't figure them. Then he forgot them as the first stage let go and began falling backward from the ship, heading on its great arc toward the ocean. Recovery would be rough. Now the second stage blasted out. And finally, the ship was above the storm and could begin to track toward its goal.

Abruptly the speaker in the corner snapped into life, and Hennings' voice sounded from it. "*Jennilee* to Base. Cancel the harps and haloes! We're in the clear!"

Collins snapped his hand down against a switch, killing the speaker. "Hotshot!" he said thickly, and yet there was a touch of admiration in his voice. "Ten years ago, they couldn't build ships to take what he gave it. So that makes him a tin god on wheels. Got a cigarette, Tommy?"

Murdock handed him the package and picked up the slicker again. He'd seen enough. The ship should have no further trouble, except for minor

orbital corrections, well within the pilot's ability. For that matter, while Collins' statement was true enough, Hennings deserved a lot of the credit. And if he had to boast a little—well, maybe he deserved credit for the ability to snap back to normal after the pounding his body and nerves must have taken.

IN THE recreation hall, some of the pilots were busy exaggerating the dangers of the take-off for the newsmen, making it sound as if no parallel feat had been performed in all history. Murdock found a phone where he had some privacy and put through a call to let Pete and Sheila know when he'd be back—and that he was returning without a load. They'd already heard the news, however. He cut the call short and went out across the soggy field, cursing as his shoes filled with water. From the auditorium of the school, he could hear the band practicing; he wondered for a moment whether the drumbeat could make the cadets feel like heroes as they moved through mud with shoes that squished at every step. It had no such lifting effect on him.

The parking lot beyond the drill grounds was almost deserted, and his big truck seemed to huddle into the wind like a

lonely old bull buffalo. He started the turbine and opened the cab heater, kicking off his sodden shoes. The dampness in the air brought out the smell of refuse and pigs from the rear, but he was used to it; anyhow, it was better than the machine-human-chemical stench of the space station.

Driving took most of his attention. The truck showed little wind-sway and the roads were nearly deserted, but vision was limited and the windshield kept steaming up, in spite of the silicone coating. He crawled along, grumbling to himself at the allocation of money for tourist superhighways at the expense of the back roads.

A little ways beyond the base, he was in farm country. It was totally unlike the picture of things he'd had originally. He'd expected only palm trees and citrus groves in Florida, though he'd known vaguely that it was one of the major cattle-producing states. This part wasn't exactly like the Iowa section where he'd grown up, but it wasn't so different, either.

Pete Crane had introduced him to it. At the time, Pete was retiring after twenty years of service and looking for something to do. He'd found a small farm twenty miles from Base and had approached Murdock with the hope of getting the sta-

tion garbage for food for the hogs he planned to buy. The contractor who took care of the Base garbage wouldn't touch the dehydrated, slightly scorched refuse, and disposal had always been a problem.

They ended up as partners, with permanent rights to all the station wastes. Pete's sister, Sheila, joined them to keep house for them. It beat living in hotels and offered the first hope for the future Murdock had. Unless his application for Moon service was accepted—which seemed unlikely, since he was already at the age limit of thirty-five—he had no other plans for his own compulsory twenty-year retirement. The farm also gave some purpose to his job as garbage collector for the station.

For two years, everything went well. Maybe they grew over-confident then. They sank everything into new buildings and more livestock. When the neighboring farm suddenly became available, they used all their credit in swinging the mortgage, leaving no margin for trouble. And trouble came when Pete was caught in front of a tractor that somehow slipped into gear; he was hospitalized for five weeks, and his medical insurance was only enough for a fraction of the cost. Now, with Hulda cancel-

ling the critically necessary trip to the station . . .

THE TRUCK bumped over the last half mile and into the farmyard. Murdock parked it near the front door and jumped out. He let out a yell and made a bee-line for the kerosene heater, trying to get his feet warm on the floor near it. The house was better built than many in Florida, but that wasn't saying much. Even with the heater going, it was probably warmer in their new pig sty.

Sheila came through the dining room from the kitchen, spotted his wet feet, and darted for his bedroom. In a second she was back with dry clothes. "Change in here where it's warm. I'll have lunch ready in a couple of minutes," she told him, holding her face up for a kiss.

Sheila wasn't a beautiful woman and apparently didn't care. Murdock's mother would probably have called her plain good looks "wholesome," and referred to her slightly overweight body as "healthy." He only knew that she looked good to him, enough shorter to be comfortable, eyes pleasantly blue, and hair some shade of brown that seemed to fit her.

He pulled her to him snugly, but she wriggled away after a brief kiss. "Pete's in town, try-

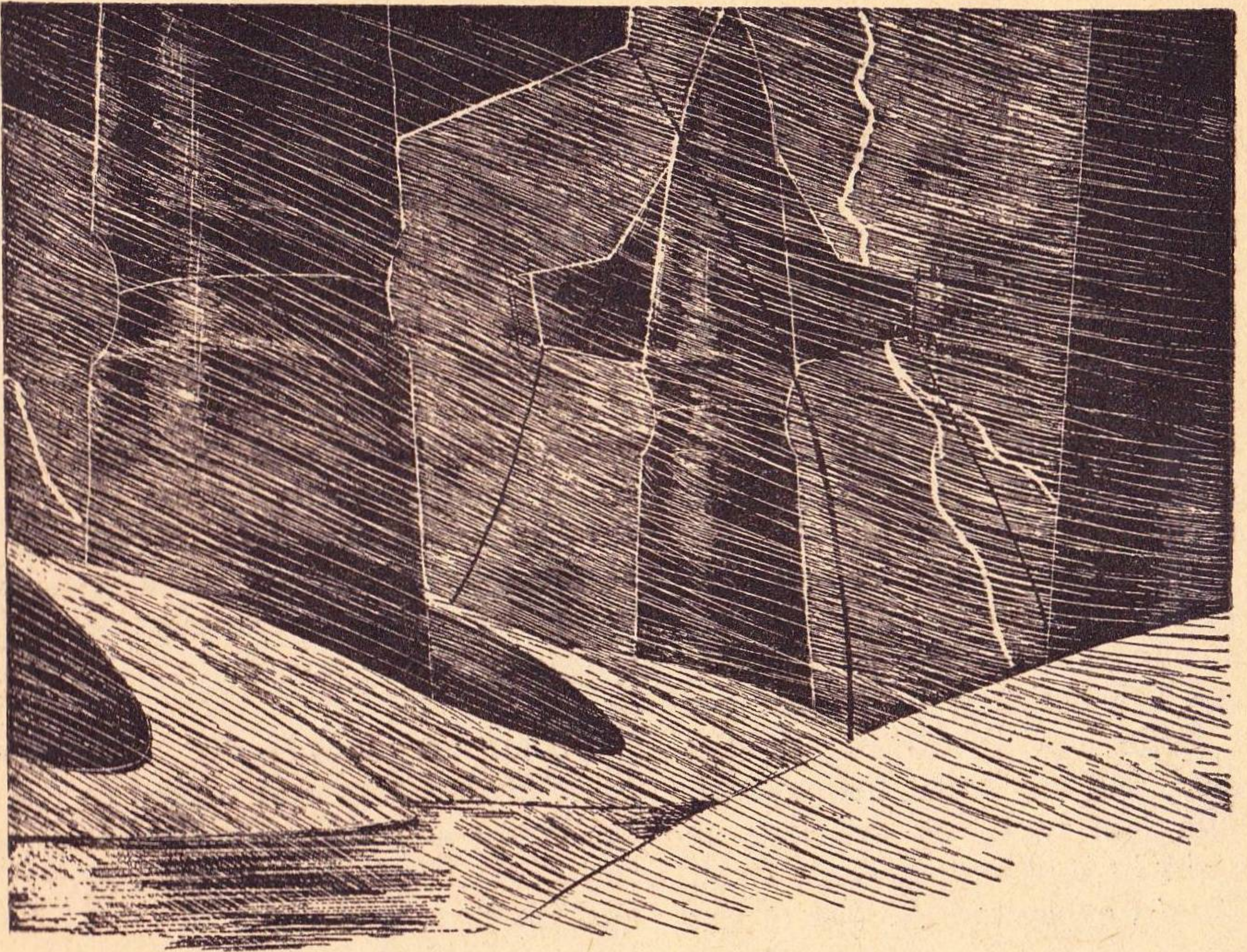


ing to get help. He'll be back any minute," she warned him.

He grinned and let her go. They'd gone through the romantic binge of discovering each other long enough ago to be comfortable with each other now, except for the occasional arguments when she didn't want to wait. Mostly, though, she had accepted their agreement. In eight more months he'd be thirty-six and too old for assignment on the Moon; if he didn't make that, they'd get married. But he had no inten-

tion of leaving her tied to him if he did leave, since the chance of taking her along was almost nil. Pete had backed him up on his decision, too.

He slipped into coveralls and dry boots and went out to the dining room, where a hot meal was waiting. At least their credit was good at the local grocery between paydays. He filled her in on what had happened while they ate. At the hour mark, he switched on the television to the news. It was filled with the station emergency and rescue, of



course. Most of it seemed to be devoted to pictures of Hennings entering the ship and a highly colored account of the flight. But at least he learned that the flight had been completed. It made good publicity for the service. A sound track of a band playing the *Heroes' March* had been spliced into the movies. Maybe that was good publicity, too. He had to admit that Hennings fitted the music better than he could have done.

For a moment, the racket of the wind outside died, and an-

other sound reached his ears. The hogs knew it was past feeding time and were kicking up a fuss. Murdock grimaced. He shoved away from the table, feeling almost guilty at having stuffed himself, and dug rain clothes out of the back closet. He hated going out in the weather again, but the animals had to be pacified.

They heard him coming and set up more of a racket. He bent against the wind and made a dash for it, getting his feet wet again in a puddle. But the in-

side of the building was warmer than the house, as he had expected. He lifted the cover of the mash cooker and began ladling out the food into the troughs. His pail was scraping the bottom of the cooker, while the sleek Poland China hogs fought and shoved toward the spot where he was emptying it. They'd been on half rations since yesterday, and they were obviously hungry.

He stopped when he had used half of what was in the cooker and headed for the next building. On the way, he paused for a futile look in the big storage shed, but he knew the answer. Pete had used the last bag of grain in cooking the day's food. They'd exhausted the last of the waste from the station earlier and had to fall back on the precious commercial feed usually only used as a supplement. Damn Greta and double damn Hulda! If the weekly predictions had been right, he could have wangled clearance for a flight ahead of schedule, before the storms, and they wouldn't be in this mess.

It was worse in the brooder house. The sows seemed to know that milk for their sucklings depended on their feeding. They received a somewhat larger portion, but it disappeared from the troughs as he watched. The animals fought for the last

scraps and then began rushing about looking for more. They were smart enough to know he was the source of it, and they stared at him, expressing their demands in eloquent hog language. They weren't like other animals. Cows were too stupid to realize they'd been gypped, sheep were always yelling even when things went well. But hogs could pretty nearly swear in English when they felt robbed, as these did. Even the sucklings were squealing unhappily in sympathy with their mothers.

MURDOCK heard the door open behind him and turned to see Pete coming in, drenched to the skin. He looked worn out, and his back was still stiff from the accident, though he'd made a fine recovery. "Hi, Tom. Sis told me what happened at the field. Good thing, too. This stuff's no good for flights. How long till it clears?"

"Five days!" Murdock told him, and saw the older man flinch. The hogs might not starve to death in that time, but they'd suffer, as well as losing weight that would be hard to put back. He had no idea of how it would affect the milk supply for the little pigs, and he didn't want to guess.

They left the squealing hogs and slogged back to the house to change before Pete would re-

port on his luck in town. It seemed to be all bad. They could get a loan against the mature hogs or they could sell some, but with the week-end coming up they would have to wait for money until they would no longer need it. Their credit at the only feed and grain store was used up.

Murdock frowned at that. "You mean Barr wouldn't let us have enough to carry us over in an emergency like this? After all our business with him?"

"Barr's gone north on some business," Pete reported. "His brother-in-law's running things. Claims he can't take the responsibility. Offered to lend me twenty bucks himself if I needed it, but no credit from the store. And he can't locate Barr. Darn it, if I hadn't had to get in front of that tractor—"

"If!" Sheila snorted. "If I hadn't insisted you two pay the hospital in full, or if I hadn't splurged on spring clothes . . . How much can we get for my car?"

Pete shrugged. "About half enough, but not till maybe Tuesday or Wednesday, after title transfer. I already asked at Circle Chevy. How about getting the weather reports, Sheila? With our luck, the center of Hulda might pass right here!"

There seemed no immediate danger of that, though. Hulda was following Greta, due to

swing out to sea, and they'd miss the worst of her. Anyhow, Murdock knew that Bill Collins would call them if the farm was in danger. But with predictions gone sour from the station, they couldn't be sure. The new buildings were supposed to be hurricane proof, but . . .

They spent the afternoon trying to play canasta and listening to the rain and wind, until Pete slapped the cards back in the drawer in disgust. They ate early, dawdling over the food to kill time. Finally, the two men went out reluctantly. This time they scraped the bottom of the cookers dry. There was no sense in trying to spread the little food further and thinner.

How would a hero feel when a hog looked at him with hungry eyes? Or would the band playing destiny in his head drown out the frantic squealing of the animals? Murdock sighed and turned sickly back toward the house, with Pete at his heels.

Sheila met them at the door, motioning for silence and pointing to the television set. More news was finally coming through on the rescue flight by Hennings. And there was a picture on the screen showing the little third-stage rocket as seen from the station. It was obvious without the announcer's comment that the wings had been nearly

wrenched from it and that it was in no condition for the return flight. Murdock's respect for Hennings' courage went up another notch. After a buffeting like that, it was a wonder he'd been able to make the effort of speaking to Base at all.

Then the rest of the news began to penetrate, and even the carefully chosen words couldn't make it sound too good. ". . . loss of filters when the airlock was sprung open on take-off was considerable, but it is believed that the replacements will be adequate until another flight can be made. Dr. Shapiro on the station reports that the men seem to be bearing up well, except for the two children. Plans are being made to isolate them in a special room, with extra filtration . . ."

Commander Phillips' kids, Murdock thought. The man had no business keeping them up there, anyhow. But the business about the sprung airlock . . .

Then he remembered the smaller blips on the radar screen that had separated from the *Jennilee*, before the first stage broke away. He frowned, trying to figure things more carefully. Just a few filters couldn't have made that much trace on the radar! But with the hasty packing, as he'd seen it, and the ship beginning to turn so the airlock was down, enough could have

spilled to account for the trace—nearly the whole cargo, in fact!

He started for the phone, then shook his head. This would be better in person. He grabbed for the zipper on his coveralls and headed for his bedroom, while Pete frowned in slow comprehension.

"Tom, you can't do it!"

"I can try," he called back.

"Warm up the truck, Sheila."

The zipper stuck. He swore at it, then forgot it. He wasn't dressing for parade drill. He dragged on his uniform cap, slipped into boots that might give some protection from the mud on the field, and stuffed his necessary papers and cards into the pockets of the coveralls. The service slicker was dry now, and he used it to hide most of his appearance.

"Any word of another flight planned?" he called out. It would be a sorry mess to reach the field just as some young pilot was taking off, ending any chance he had.

"None." Pete had the door open, and one of his big hands slapped against Murdock's shoulder. "Luck, you idiot!"

CHAPTER III

MURDOCK jumped out and into the open door of the truck. He started to shove

Sheila out of the driver's seat, but she shook her head and began gunning the turbine. "I can handle this as well as you can, Tom. I won't have you starting *that* after wearing yourself out driving in. And stop looking at me like that! I'm not going to say what I'm thinking about this!"

He settled back in the passenger seat, reaching one hand out to touch her briefly. "Thanks, Hon," he said, as the truck swung out of the driveway and picked up speed on the road. She'd never been the kind to talk about worrying over his life, as some of the wives of the pilots did. She took it as part of him, and accepted it, however she felt. Now she was pushing the big truck to the maximum safe speed, as if sharing his eagerness.

After a second, she caught his hand in hers and smiled, without taking her eyes from the road. He relaxed on the seat, letting the swish of the wipers and the muffled storm sounds lull him into a half trance, resting as much as he could. He should be thinking of what he'd say to Bailey, but the relaxation was more important.

He was half asleep when the truck stopped at the guard house. He began fumbling for his papers, but the guard swung back after flashing his face and

called out something. A corporal darted out of the shack and into the truck, reaching for the wheel. "General Bailey's expecting you and the young lady, sir," he said. "I'll take care of your truck."

Murdock grunted in surprise. Pete must have managed to get through to Bailey. It might make things more difficult, but it would at least save time; that could be important, if he were to take off while the station was in optimum position.

Bailey's aide met them at GHQ, escorting them directly to the general's private office, and closing the door behind them. Bailey glanced at Murdock's appearance, frowned, and motioned them to chairs. His own collar was unbuttoned and his cap lay on the desk, indicating that formality was out the window. He lifted a bottle toward three waiting glasses. "Tom? Miss Crane?"

He seemed to need the drink more than they did. His face was gray with fatigue and his hand was unsteady. But his voice was normal enough as he put down the empty glass. "All right, Tom, I know what you're here for. What makes you think I'm crazy enough to send another ship up in this weather?"

"A couple of kids who may be dying up there," Murdock answered. He saw the general

flinch and knew he'd guessed right; the service wouldn't want the publicity of their deaths without further effort to save them, and the pressure on Bailey must be terrific by now. "How many filters got through?"

"Two bundles—out of thirty! But losing a man and ship won't help anything. I've turned down about every pilot here already. I'd need at least three good reasons why you're a better choice before I'd even consider you, in spite of the hell Washington's raising. Got them?"

He should have been thinking of them on the ride here, Murdock realized. "Experience, for one thing. I've made almost a thousand flights on the run I was assigned," he said, making no effort to conceal the bitterness that crept into his voice. "Has any of your hotshots made a hundred yet?"

Bailey shook his head. "No."

"How about ability to operate solo without help from the automatic pilot? You can't trust machinery in unpredictable situations, and there's no time for help from a crew." The combination of improved ships and the difficulty of getting a crew for the garbage run had resulted in Murdock's operating solo most of the time for nearly five years now. He saw two of Bailey's fingers go up, and

groped for something that would finish his case. Again, he heard the bitterness in his voice. "Third, expendability. What's a garbage man and an old ship against your bright hopes for tomorrow?"

"I've thought of the first two already. They're valid. The third isn't." Bailey filled a second glass halfway, his eyes on the liquor. "I can get plenty of pilots, Tom. So far, I haven't been able to find one other reliable garbage man, as you call it—after fifteen years! You'll have to do better than that."

Sheila's heels tapped down on the floor sharply. "After fifteen years of doing a job nobody else will take, don't you think Tom has any right to a favor from you? Isn't that good enough a reason?"

Bailey swung his gaze to her, surprise on his face. He studied her for half a minute, nodding slowly. "My God, you're actually willing to have him go!" he said at last. "I thought . . . Never mind. If you're willing to trust his ability, it's no reason I should. Or maybe it is. Maybe I want to be convinced. All right, Tom, we'll unload your ship and get the filters in. Want me to pick a volunteer crew for you?"

"I'll take it solo," Murdock told him. The fewer lives he was responsible for, the better;

anyhow, there would be no time for help through the critical first few miles. "And leave the machinery in. Your filters are all bulk and no weight. She'll pitch less with a full load, from what I saw today. I'll be better off with that ballast."

BAILEY reached for the phone and began snapping orders while Murdock turned to say good-bye to Sheila. She made it easier than he'd expected.

"I'll wait here," she told him. "You'll need the truck when you come down." She kissed him again quickly, then shoved him away. "Go on, you don't have time for me now."

She was right in that, he knew. He started for Control at a run, surprised when a covered jeep swung beside him. Lights came on abruptly, showing the *Mollyann* dimly through the murk, with men and trucks pouring toward her. He sent the driver of the jeep after them with orders to see about turning the base so the wings of the third stage would be edge on to the wind. In Control, he found everything disorganized, with men still dazed from sleep staring at him unbelievably. But they agreed to set up the circuit that would give him connection through his viewing screen to the weather radar. Over the phone, Collins' language was

foul and his voice worried, but he caught onto what was wanted almost at once.

The *Mollyann* was shaking against her guy cables as the jeep took him out to her; removal of the cables would be the last thing before take-off. Half a dozen tractors were idling nearby, and Bailey came running toward him, waving toward the top and yelling something about turning her.

Murdock shrugged. He hadn't expected things to be smooth in this last-minute rush; if he had to take her up wrong, he had to. "Okay, forget it," he said. "So you can't turn her. I'll manage."

"Take a look," Bailey told him, pointing up again, a tired grin on his face. "The way the wind is now, she's perfect. We finally checked, after getting all set, and there she was."

It was true, and Murdock swore hotly at his own stupidity in not checking first. The big wings were parallel to the wind already, saving them precious minutes. It still left the steering vanes on the upper stage at the mercy of the wind, but they were stubbier, and hence considerably sturdier.

The portable lift was running up the filter packs. He climbed on as a flashbulb went off near him and began going up. He heard some sort of cry from the

photographer, but there was no time for posing now, and he couldn't have looked less suitable for pictures, anyhow. There'd be time for that on his return, he hoped.

He checked the stowing of the packs and made sure that they were lashed down well enough to ride up, even if his airlock broke open. The technician in charge pointed out the extra dogs they were installing on the lock, swearing it would hold through anything. It looked right. The ship was swaying and bobbing noticeably up here, and he could hear the creak of the cables. He tried to close his ears as he crawled up the little ladder to the control cabin and began the final check-out. There was a yell from the speaker as he cut on connections to Control, but he paid little attention to it. After fifteen years, he had little need of them to tell him the exact second of ideal take-off. He found the picture of the weather on the screen as he settled into the acceleration couch under the manual control panel, designed to swivel as a unit under changing acceleration.

The weather image was his biggest hope. Here, his study could pay off and give him the advantage he needed. It might look showy to take off on the split second and fight whatever

the weather handed out; he preferred to pick his own time, if possible. With luck, he could spot a chance to ride up without being tipped for the first few seconds.

He glanced at the chronometer and began strapping himself down, while trying to absorb the data on the storm Collins was sending into his earphones. The weatherman had several screens to work from, and could give a better general picture than the single one Murdock was able to watch.

He began to get the feel of it. The wind, this far from the center of the hurricane, was erratic; there were moments of comparative quiet, and some measure of prediction was possible from the pattern on the screen. The real trick of taking off was to take advantage of every break. Once he began ascension, he'd have to trust to the automatic reflexes he'd developed and the general plan he'd worked out over the years as pure theory, with little help from reasoned thought. But until then, he could use his brains to make it as easy as it could possibly be.

He had no desire to take what was coming as a personal challenge. The kids in the station and the pigs on the farm were interested in results, not in his show of bravery.

COLLINS' VOICE cut off as Control interrupted to notify him that loading was complete and that the lifts, trucks and men were all clear.

He put one hand on the switch that would unlock the guy cables simultaneously. With the other, he started the peroxide pump for the fuel and threw the switch to ignite the rockets. He could hear the whine of the pump and feel the beginnings of power rumble through the ship, but he kept it at minimum. His eyes were glued to the weather picture on the screen that indicated his best chance coming up. Control was going crazy. With their count-off already finished, they wanted him off! Let them stew! A few seconds' difference in take-off was something he could correct for later.

Then his hand depressed the main blast lever all the way, a split second before he released the cable grapples. The *Mollyann* jumped free and began to walk upstairs on stilts, teetering and yawing in the wind. But his choice of take-off time had been correct. For the first hundred feet, she behaved herself, though the wind was driving him away from the blast deflection pit.

Then hell began. Acceleration mauled him backwards until only muscles toughened by a

thousand previous flights could stand the power he was using. His fingers and arms could barely move against it. Yet they had to dance across the controls. The ship twisted and tilted, with every plate of her screaming in agony from the torsion and distortion of the pressures. Somehow, automatically, his fingers found a combination that righted her. His ears were clogged with the heavy pounding of his blood, his sense of balance was frozen, and his eyes could barely manage to focus on the dials in front of him.

He had stopped normal thinking and become a machine. The ship spun crazily in the twisting chaos of pressure differences. Unaccountably, she stayed upright as his hands moved with an unwilling life of their own, while fuel poured out at a rate that should have blacked him out from the acceleration. It was wasteful, but his only chance was to get through the storm in the shortest possible time and hang the consequences. If he could make the station at all, there would be fuel there for his return kick-off.

He was making no effort to tilt into a normal curve. A red light on the controls sprang into hazy existence before his eyes. The ship was going too fast for the height, heating the hull. He had to risk that, though.

Then surprisingly, the ship began to steady. He'd climbed over the storm.

He cut power back to normal, feeling a return of thought and hearing, and began tilting slowly to swing around the Earth toward his destination on the other side and a thousand miles up. It would make a rotten imitation of a synergy curve, but he'd survived! He felt the big first stage let go, followed by a brief moment with no pressure, until the second stage roared out. Only a little over a minute had passed in the storm, in spite of the hours of torture he had felt.

A voice started shouting in his phones, but he paid no attention to it. Now was his chance to say something heroic, to make the jest that was the ultimate in braggadocio!

"Shut up, damn it! I'm all right!" he screamed into the microphone. How could he figure out a proper saying for the papers when they wouldn't let him alone? Then slowly he realized he'd already answered, and it was too late for pretty phrases.

The second stage kicked off finally, and the third stage went on alone. He set up the rough corrections for his atypical take-off, hoping he hadn't missed too much, while the second hand swept around until he could cut

off all power and just drift. Then he lay back, welcoming weightlessness. He was trembling now, and his whole body seemed to be a mass of bruises he couldn't remember getting. Sweat poured from his forehead and goose pimples rose on his arms. He barely made it to the little cabinet in time to be sick without splattering the whole cabin.

He made a lousy hero. The only music in his head was the ringing in his ears and the drumming in his heart!

Yet the trip up was by far the easier part of his job. He still had to bring his cargo down in its unpowered glide through a storm that would be closer to its worst, or the whole trip would be useless for him, no matter how many lives it saved.

He was feeling almost himself again, though, when he finally matched orbits with the station. As far as he could determine, his wings and stabilizers were still sound, and air pressure in the cargo space indicated nothing had sprung there. He even had a few drops of fuel left after making his final corrections. At least he'd done an adequate job of piloting on the ascension.

With luck, he'd get the *Mollyann* down again intact. But he'd need that luck!

CHAPTER IV

THE BIG multi-tube affair into which the station had grown looked normal enough in the sunlight. But the men who came out in the little space ferry showed the hell of slow poisoning they'd been through, even over their jubilation at the sight of the filters. When they made seal-to-seal contact and he released the lock, the smell of their air was positively foul. They must have been reporting their plight as a lot better than it really was.

Commander Phillips came through first, almost crying as he grabbed Murdock's hand. He seemed at a complete loss for words.

"Hello, Red," Murdock greeted him. Phillips had been part of his own class, fifteen years before. "How are the kids?"

"Shapiro says they'll be okay, once we get some filters that aren't plated with contaminants. Tommy, I'd invite you over for champagne right now, but our air would ruin it. Just figure that anything I've got . . ."

Murdock cut him off. "I'll call it quits if you'll get this cargo out and my usual load in here on the double, along with some fuel. And you might have one of your engineers look over

my wings for signs of strain. I've got to ride the next orbit back, two hours from now."

"Go back into that! You're crazy!" Phillips' shock drove everything else from the man's face. "You can't do it! I won't clear you!"

"I thought you were just offering me anything you had," Murdock pointed out.

It took five minutes more of heavy arguing to arrange it, and he might not have succeeded even then if he'd waited until the commander had recovered from his first burst of gratitude, or if the man hadn't been worn down by the poisons in the air and the fatigue of their desperate fight for survival. Phillips was hoarse and sick when he finally gave in and stumbled back to the loaded ferry. He croaked something about idiocy and grateful humanity and took off. Murdock tried, idly, to untangle it in his mind, but at the moment he was again more concerned with hungry pigs.

It was too busy a stretch for him to have time to worry. The square magnesium cans of dehydrated garbage began to come out, along with fuel. Sick men were somehow driving themselves to a final burst of energy as they stowed things carefully to preserve the trim of the ship. From outside, there was a steady tapping and ham-

mering as others went over the skin of the controls with their instruments.

At the end, there was another visit from Phillips, with more arguing. But finally the man gave in again. "All right, damn it. Maybe you can make it. I certainly hope so. But you're not going it alone. You'll take Hennings along as co-pilot. He volunteered."

"Send him over, then," Murdock said wearily. He should have expected something like that. Hennings apparently reacted to the smell of glory like a warhorse to gunpowder.

He took a final look at the cargo, nodding in satisfaction. There was enough waste there to keep the farm going until they were over the hump. If Barr got back and they could enrich it with commercial food on temporary credit, Pete and he would be in clover. He pulled himself about and up to the control cabin, to see the ferry coming out on its last trip.

A minute later, Hennings came through the connecting seal and dogged it closed. "Hi, Tommy," he called out. "Ah, air again. How about letting me run her down for you? You look beat."

"The automatic pilot's disconnected," Murdock told him curtly. It had begun malfunctioning some twenty trips back, and

he'd simply cut it out of the circuits, since he seldom used it.

Some of the starch seemed to run out of the younger man. He halted his march toward the controls and stared down at them doubtfully. Actually, little automatic piloting could be done on the down leg of a flight, but pilots were conditioned into thinking of the automatics almost reverently, ahead of anything else on the ship. It dated from the days when the ascension would have been physically impossible without such aid, and Murdock had felt the same for the first five years of piloting.

"Better strap in," he suggested.

Hennings dropped into the co-pilot couch while Murdock ran through the final check. The ship began swinging slowly about as the gyroscopes hummed, lining up for the return blast. "Ten seconds," Murdock announced. He ran a count in his head, then hit the blast lever gently. They began losing speed and dropping back toward Earth, while the station sailed on and away.

Then, with power off, there was nothing to do but stare at what was coming. It would still be night at Base, and even the sodium flares and radar beacons wouldn't be as much help as they should be in the storm. This time, they'd have to depend on

lift, like a normal plane landing. It would be tough for any plane, for that matter, though possible enough in fully powered flight. But they had to come down like a glider. If there were any undetected strains in the wings . . .

"You came up *without* a tape?" Hennings asked suddenly.

Murdock grimaced, resenting the interruption to his brooding. He liked Hennings better as a cocky hero than as a worried young man. "A tape's no good for unpredictable conditions."

"Okay, if you say so," the younger man said doubtfully at last. He sat staring at the controls with an odd look on his face. Then surprisingly, he laughed and settled back loosely in his seat. "I guess maybe you don't need me, then."

He was snoring five minutes later. Murdock scowled at him, suspecting it was an act at first. Finally he shrugged and turned back to his worrying. He knew there'd been a good measure of luck to his take-off, in spite of all his careful efforts. He couldn't count on luck for the landing.

HE COULD still put in an emergency call and ask to land at some large airfield out of the storm, in theory. But it would do no good. Hulda was blanketing too great an area; any other field would be so far from the farm

that trucking the garbage back would be out of the question. He might as well have remained at the station. Besides, he was already on a braking orbit that would bring him near Base, and changes now would involve risks of their own.

He watched the thin haze of the upper atmospheric levels approach, trying to force his muscles to relax and his nerves to steady. The worst part of the return was the chance for nervousness to build up. Hennings went on snoring quietly, floating in the co-pilot's couch. His relaxation didn't help Murdock any.

It was almost a relief when they finally hit the first layers of detectable air, where the controls became effective again, and where he could take over. The ship had to be guided steadily now, its dip into atmosphere coördinated with its speed to avoid the dangers of skipping out or of going low enough to overheat. Murdock eased her down, watching his instruments but depending more on the feel of the *Mollyann*. A feeling of weight began to return along with noise from outside, while the hull pyrometer rose to indicate that friction was working on them, turning their speed into heat. This part of the descent was almost a conditioned reflex to him by now. Outside,

he knew, the skin of the ship would be rising slowly to red heat, until they could lose enough speed to drop into the lower layers of air where they could cool off.

The heat in the cabin rose slowly. The *Mollyann* was an old model among the ships; her cabin was less completely insulated and airtight than most of the others. But for the brief period of high heat, she was safe enough. Slowly the air picked up a faint odor, that grew stronger as the hot hull radiated into the cargo space. He hardly noticed it, until Hennings woke up sniffing.

"Garbage," Murdock told him. "There's still enough water in it to boil off some. You get used to it."

They were dropping to denser air now, and he could feel perspiration on his palms. He dried them hastily. His head felt thick, and his stomach began to knot inside him. "Contact Control and have them shoot me the weather," he told Hennings.

When the pattern of it snapped onto the screen, he felt sicker. There was going to be no area of relative calm this time, and he couldn't wait for one to appear. He tried to get the weather pattern fixed in his mind while their descent flattened and they came closer to

the storm area. He'd have to turn and follow the course set by the wind, heading into it; it meant coming down on a twisting curve, since there was some local disturbance near the field.

Then the first bumpiness registered. The ship seemed to sink and skid. There was no pressure of acceleration now, but his fingers felt weighted with lead, almost too slow to adjust the controls. The *Mollyann* dipped and tilted, and his stomach came up in his throat. He heard Hennings gasp, but he had no time to look at the other. The top of the storm was a boiling riot of pockets.

Things were getting worse by the second now. The last few miles were going to be hell. Lift wasn't steady, and eddies in the driving storm shook and twisted the ship. Her wing-loading wasn't bad, but she lacked the self-correcting design of the light planes he'd flown. The wings groaned and strained, and the controls seemed frozen. He was on the weather map now, a white blip that scudded along the edge. It gave him orientation, but the sight of his course offered little reassurance.

They hit a larger pocket and seemed to drop a hundred feet. The wings creaked sickeningly, and something whined from the rear controls. The elevators abruptly bucked back at him,

catching him unaware, and he had to brace himself and fight against them, putting his muscles into it. Obviously, the servo assist had conked out. Probably something had happened during take-off. He was left with only his own strength to buck the currents now, operating on the mechanical cable. If that couldn't hold . . . !

He was sweating as he fought the buffeting. In spite of his best efforts, they were pitching more now. Another violent swoop came, and was followed by a thump and scraping from the cargo section. The ship lost trim. Some of the cans had come loose from their fastenings and were skidding about!

HE SAW Hennings jerk from his couch and fight his way to the hatch. He yelled angrily, knowing the fool could get killed by something grinding into him down there. Then he had no time to worry as the heavy odor told him the boy had already gone through the hatch. He fought to hold the ship steady, but there was no predicting its behavior. His muscles were overworked and unable to handle the controls as smoothly as they should. Now the field was only a few miles away, and he had to buck and twist his way through the wind to arrive within the limits of the landing

strip. To make things worse, the wind velocity must have been higher than he had estimated, and he had lost more speed than he could afford. It was going to be close, if he made it at all.

Then the ship began steadying as he could feel the trim restored. He had only time for a single sigh of relief before Hennings was up, dripping with sweat and garbage odor as he groped his way back to the couch. Murdock tried to call his thanks, knowing the courage it had taken to risk the cargo hold. But Hennings' whole attention was focussed sickly on the weather map.

The field was coming at them, but not soon enough. Too much speed had been lost to the wind resistance. Murdock tried to flatten the glide, but gave up at once. They were already as near a stall as he dared risk in this stuff, and they'd still miss the field by a mile! They'd land and go crashing into trees, rocks and maybe even houses down there!

Murdock swore and grabbed for the blast lever. There was no time to warm up properly, but he had to have more speed.

He heard Hennings' voice yell a single shocked word before his hand moved the lever. Behind them, sound roared out for a split second and the ship lurched forward. Power such as

that wasn't meant for minor corrections in speed, and there was no way to meter it out properly, yet it was the only possible answer. He cut the blast, then threw it on again for a split second. Then he had to snap his hand back to the elevator controls, fighting against them to regain stability.

He couldn't risk more speed. If they undershot, they were lost. And if their speed were too high, there would be no second chance to try a landing. They couldn't turn and circle in the storm. They were only getting through by heading straight into the wind, jockeying to avoid cross currents. Beyond the field was the ocean, and these modern ships weren't designed for water landings—particularly in the seas they'd find running now.

A glint of yellow caught his eye. The field markers! And he was too high. He threw his weight against the sloppy controls and felt the ship beginning to go down. He'd picked up too much speed in the brief burst of power, but he had to land somehow at once.

He could make out some of the flares now, and he had to aim between them. He kicked out the landing wheels and fought her down savagely. He was already past the near edge of the field. Too far!

Suddenly the wheels hit. The

ship bounced as the wind caught it from below and began slewing it around. Then it hit again, while he fought with brakes and controls to right it. It staggered, skidded, and went tearing down the runway. Ahead of them, the crash fence loomed up in the yellow light. Ten feet—another ten—

Murdock felt the ship hit and bounce. He was just feeling his relief that their speed was too low to crash through when his head struck against the control panel, and his mind exploded in a shower of hot sparks that slowly turned black.

HE HAD a vague period of semi-consciousness after that when he realized Hennings was carrying him out of the ship, with rain pelting on him and the sound of the gale in his ears. Something bright went off, and he had a vision of the photo they must have taken: Hennings carrying a body from the *Mollyann*—Hennings, immune to all accidents, standing poised and braced against the storm, marching straight toward the photographers, smiling . . .

There was another vague period when he seemed to hear the voices of Sheila and Bailey. The prick of a needle . . .

He swam up from a cloud of dark fuzz at last. There was a dull ache in his head and a bump

on his scalp. The light hurt his eyes when he opened them, and he clamped them shut again, but not before he saw he was on a couch in the recreation hall. At least that must mean no concussion; it had been just an ordinary bump, on top of the strain and nervous fatigue.

From outside, there was a confused mixture of sounds and a hammering that seemed to be against the building. He started to pull himself up to look for the cause, but it was too much effort for the moment. He started to drift off into a half doze, until he heard steps, and Hennings' voice.

"... absolutely magnificent, Miss Crane! I'll never forget it. He didn't even try to kid around to keep his spirits up. He just sat there without a sign of worry, as if he was doing a regular milk run. He didn't bat an eyelash when he had to decide to use power. So help me, he was like one of the heroes out of the kids' serials I used to watch. And that lousy reporter writing that *I* brought the ship down. If I find him—"

"Forget it, Larry," Sheila's voice said quietly.

"I won't forget it! It was bad enough they cut him down to a quarter column on the take-off and had to call it a lull in the storm! But this time I'm going to see they print the facts!"

"That should give them another column on how you're modestly trying to give credit to someone else," Sheila answered quietly. "Let them print what they want. It won't change the facts that we all know. And Tom won't mind too much. He's used to the way things are."

Murdock opened his eyes again and sat up, cutting off their conversation. He still felt groggy, but after a second his vision cleared. He smiled at Sheila and pulled her down beside him.

"She's right, Hennings. Let them print what they like. It's good publicity for the service the way they probably have it. Besides, you did your share." He reached out a hand for the younger man's arm, conscious that he couldn't even do that with the right flourish. "It took guts, trimming the cargo when you did. I meant to thank you for that."

Hennings muttered something awkwardly, and then straightened into his old self as he marched out the door to leave them alone. Sheila smiled after him with a mixture of fondness and amusement.

"What happened to the *Mollyann* and her cargo? And how's the farm making out?" Murdock asked her a moment later.

"The farm's safe enough,

from the latest reports," she told him. "And the ship's a little banged up, but nothing serious. General Bailey sent the cadets out to load the cargo into our truck. He said a little garbage smell should be good for them." She smiled again, then glanced at her watch. "He should be back now, for that matter."

Murdock grinned wryly. It was a shame the hogs would never know the attention their food was getting. It must have been something to see the cadets practicing being heroes while unloading the smelly cans. He glanced out the window, but the storm was still too thick for clear vision. Someone scurried past, just outside, and there was more banging and a flurry of activity beyond the door, but apparently it had nothing to do with Bailey's return.

It was five minutes more before the general came in, walking over to stare at Murdock. "Your truck's outside, Tom. And don't bring it through the gates again until you're wearing a proper uniform!" He chuckled. "With eagles on the collar. I've been trying to wrangle them for you a long time now. Congratulations, Colonel! You earned them!"

Murdock pulled Sheila closer as he accepted Bailey's hand, feeling the strength of her against him. There were other

strengths, too—the words he'd heard Hennings saying, the recognition and security the new rank offered, the awareness that he hadn't failed his job. But he still found himself awkward and unable to rise to the occasion. He didn't try, but silently let Bailey guide them toward the door.

Then he turned. "There's one other thing. That application for Moon service—"

He felt Sheila stiffen briefly and relax against him again, but his words brought the general to a complete standstill.

Bailey's head nodded, reluctantly. "All right," he said at last. "I hate to let you go, Tom, but I'll put it through with a recommendation."

"Don't!" Murdock told him. "Tear it up! I've got a lot of hogs depending on the garbage run."

He threw the door open and saw the loaded truck waiting outside. He started toward it, drawing Sheila with him. Then he stopped, his mouth open in surprise, seeing what had caused all the banging he had heard.

There was a wide, clumsy plywood canopy built over the doorway now, running out to the truck. Lined up under it were all the pilots, with Hennings at the front, moving forward to open the door of the truck with a flourish. Precisely as Mur-



dock's foot touched the ground, the band struck up the notes of *Heroes' March*.

Feeling like a fool, Murdock stumbled forward, awkwardly helping Sheila in and getting into the driver's seat, while fifty pairs of eyes remained zeroed in on him. Hennings shut the door with another flourish and stepped back into the ranks.

And suddenly Murdock knew what to do. He leaned from the window of the truck as Sheila settled into position beside him.

He grinned at the pilots, raised his hand, placed his thumb against his nose and wriggled his fingers at them.

Hennings' face split into a wide grin and his arm lifted in the same salute, with fifty others following him in the gesture by a split second.

Murdock rolled up the window, and the big truck began moving across the field, heading toward home and the hogs.

Behind him, the band played on, but he wasn't listening.

∞ ∞ ∞

A rough planet, Boyd III—where

survival of the fittest gave way

to survival of the worst tempered!

Illustrated by ORBAN

The Night of No Moon

by H. B. FYFE

THE MAIN TROUBLE with the planet Boyd III was one satellite too many.

Had there been no third moon, large and close, the tides might have been less confused and the weather more predictable. Certain peaks of atmospheric wildness, recurrent coastal catastrophes, logical but distressing customs of the natives—lack of these factors would have made Boyd III a much more attractive world.

The same lack, however, would not have tempted Pete Guthrie to survey such condi-

tions from the surface of the planet as part of his exploratory and mapping duties. But it was too late now to be sorry he had not secured his rocket properly against the incredible tides of the shoreline he had rashly chosen for a landing.

He mentioned this, for about the hundredth time, to Polf.

"Huh! Cables! Braces! No matter when wind-spirits want you," retorted the local humanoid, darting a cowed glance at the sky from beneath his heavy brow-ridge. "They want you stay, we will keep you."



"And I'll be stuck with you forever! Don't you have to make a living?"

"I am appointed. Like Retho, who sleeps at your door in the nights."

Guthrie scowled and examined the sky. It was a clear blue. One of the moons, named Jhux, was a yellow-white disk, faintly blurred at the edge by its thin envelope of air. The spacer wished he had remained on Jhux to do his observing. With an oxygen mask, a man could be fairly comfortable there.

The clear blue sky above him, on the other hand, would be a fearsome sight in a month or so when the storms closed in.

"It is good some spoke for you," said Polf, nodding in quiet satisfaction.

Guthrie frowned at him. Every so often, his companion's thought pattern eluded him. The Skirkhi, as they named themselves, used a typically developed humanoid language, and he had managed to learn enough for communication. It was the way they thought that baffled him.

"Last season was not as bad as some," continued Polf, staring over the flat plain from their trifling eminence on the hill. "Elders say living will be hard this storm. It is a time of heat."

Guthrie also stared off into the distance, toward the seacoast

beyond the plain. He tried to show no expression, for he suspected that these people were cunning at reading faces.

His looks, to be sure, must be a handicap to them. He was long and lean of face where they tended to be round and pudgy. His reddish hair and blue eyes were certainly outside their experience, for they had aroused much frightened comment when he had first been discovered near his landing site.

He turned his head slowly to study Polf. The Skirkh crouched with bowed legs folded under him and his big head thrust forward. His profile was flat against the blue sky, for his nose was a wide-nostriled snout. The eyes that gazed moodily at the horizon were black glints between brow and cheek ridges.

The lower part of the native's face, though the chin receded, completed the design of blunt, durable strength. It symbolized, Guthrie reflected, Skirkhi life. The delicate had simply not survived on this world.

On the other hand, Polf was not very large compared to the Terran. Guthrie guessed him to be an inch or two over five feet, although his squat, straddling stance made the estimate a rough one.

I wouldn't have much trouble with him, Guthrie thought. Of course, the whole gang would

be something else. . . .

The village of two hundred was part of a tribe of six or seven times that number. There were other tribes in surrounding areas, but Guthrie had learned little about them. The Skirkhi said they were evil people. He assumed that that meant they treated prisoners with the same eager cruelty he had seen his captors display.

I should complain! he reproved himself. *If not them, it might have been me. I wonder when the Service will check about the reports I'm not sending?*

"Gaah!" exclaimed Polf, springing half erect and assuming a bare-toothed posture of defense.

His naturally tan face flushed to an alarming coppery hue, a process Guthrie had previously observed when village arguments came to blows.

The flaring light streaked deliberately across the sky, pulsing repeatedly, and descended in a direction Guthrie fancied was southeast.

He realized that he, too, had risen at the sight. He turned to follow the vapor trail in the sky, and noticed that the lower end wavered erratically.

"That's no meteor!" he muttered. "But look at the knot-heads! If they land that way, they'll spread like a ton of boil-

ing butter and I'll never get away!"

He realized that Polf had scampered back after a few steps downhill, and was now crouched at Guthrie's feet more like an animal than a man. The Skirkh uttered a sound between a snarl and a whimper.

"Get up, Polf!" said Guthrie. "It's a spaceship. I told you what mine was like. Go tell the elders! They will think well of the bearer of such news."

Polf bobbed his thick head and took a step downhill. Then duty halted him.

"Oh, all right; I'll come with you," sighed Guthrie. "Maybe they'll appoint us to lead the search if you tell them there will be other Terrans."

He hoped that there would be other live Terrans. Even more, he hoped that their ship would be in good condition. He was good and tired of Boyd III.

TWO DAYS LATER, about noon, a sound of excited voices approaching roused Guthrie and his shadow, neither of whom had been permitted to join the search. They sat up, where they had been sunning themselves on the roof of their house.

"They're back," exclaimed Guthrie, poking Polf eagerly.

Then, as he caught sight of two taller figures with the search party, he slid down from the

roof and started to run as soon as he hit the ground.

Polf let out a squeak and tumbled in pursuit. By the time Guthrie and his shadow reached the end of the single, irregular street boasted by the village, the new arrivals had been surrounded by half of the population.

At first, Guthrie found his approach deliberately blocked by several of the village elders.

"What do you fear in this moment?" he snarled in Skirkhi, as he shoved his way through the inner ranks. "Who else will tell you what they say?"

He managed to jab old Kilki on the side of his thick skull with one elbow, a limited satisfaction because Kilki ranked only about fourth in the Council of Elders. Guthrie wished he could get at Thyggar, who had ruled that he be kept inside one of the cramped stone huts for several weeks following his capture.

Kilki rubbed the knobby side of his head philosophically and said, "How we know they are not good spirits called to steal you back to the sky, Gut'rie?"

"Huh!" snorted the Terran, pointing to the disheveled pair with the search party. "They don't look like good spirits to me!"

"That is what *you* say," grunted Kilki. "Maybe we burn—then be sure!"

The man was Guthrie's height or an inch taller, and broad of shoulder. He had a strong face with bold, regular features slightly spoiled by a thick stub of a nose. High cheekbones gave his eyes a masked expression. Though sweat-darkened, his hair appeared to be blond and wavy.

The girl did not stare at Guthrie with the same blend of irritation and expectancy. Instead, her gray eyes shone with a trusting relief that caused the spacer to grimace uncomfortably. He thought she was probably pretty, if a trifle thin, but could not be sure. Somewhere on the way—he guessed in the marsh about a mile south of the village—she had fallen flat in the mud.

"Who'n'ell *are* these monkeys?" demanded the man. "I couldn't get anything out of them except signals to go faster."

He almost succeeded in controlling a querulous note in his voice by trying to assume the buddy-to-buddy tone of one Terran discussing with another the universal peculiarity of aborigines. He watched Guthrie carefully.

"What did you come down in?" asked the latter abruptly.

The other stared. The girl, who had been sagging wearily against the stocky form of the

nearest Skirkh, straightened up with a hurt look.

"It was an emergency rocket of the *Mount Pico*. Mr. Trent piloted it down here after the others . . . passed on . . . from their burns—"

"Explosion and fire just before we were to pass this system on the way to Altair," explained Trent rapidly. He had retreated from hope to a worried expression. "I don't know what did it; they braked from interstellar drive to give the rockets a chance at these planets. It all went pretty fast."

"*Then there's no ship to pick us up from this mudball?*"

Trent glanced at the jostling Skirkhi, then at Guthrie. His brow furrowed.

"Well, of course the government and the spaceline will send ships to search this volume of space. I *think* the crew got off a message. . . ."

"Aw, hell!" grunted Guthrie contemptuously.

Trent's voice trailed off. Then, ignoring Guthrie's scowl, he tried to pick up where he had left off.

". . . but I thought, perhaps . . . couldn't you send a message about us?"

Guthrie regarded the crowd of Skirkhi, who gaped back with gleaming eyes and hanging jaws. Old Thyggar raised a thick, four-fingered hand at him

and demanded, "What do they say?"

"Later, Old One," retorted Guthrie, turning to look at the girl.

"Oh—this is Miss Norsund," Trent explained. "Listen, if you don't want to send a message, couldn't you have some of these people guide us?"

"First," said Guthrie, "travel is dangerous. You might get eaten or made into window-flaps. Secondly, I don't know where they could guide you to."

He let them absorb that, then went on.

"And I can't send any message because I don't know the right spells and incantations to summon any good spirits to carry the message."

Trent and Miss Norsund began to develop glassy stares.

"And finally," growled Guthrie, "they won't let me send a spirit message because they're saving me for the first night with no moon!"

A subdued chattering sprang up among the Skirkhi when they heard his voice rise to a shout. Guthrie controlled his accumulated frustration with an effort. Meeting the girl's shocked glance, he felt a twinge, and knew he had better stop.

"Are they good spirits?" demanded old Thyggar impatiently.

"Ask them, Old One!" said

Guthrie, turning on his heel.

He seized the unguarded moment to jab the heel of his hand under the short chin of the nearest Skirrh, propelling the latter against his fellows. Through the narrow way thus cleared, the spacer stalked out of the crowd.

"Thyggar wear sour look," mumbled Polf, trotting doggedly at his heels.

He sounded more respectful than at any time during the day. Guthrie reminded himself to watch out. He seemed to be earning too much admiration; it might be wiser to slack off before it drew retaliation. Through experience, he was learning to keep the score even, but . . .

Polf somehow managed to trip him as he turned into the doorway of the house assigned to him. He plunged through the low, dark entrance head first, displacing a crude but sturdy bench someone had left in the way.

"Your father was undoubtedly a good spirit who stole your mother's wits with a dream of soft summers," said Guthrie, sitting up just in time to thrust a boot between Polf's ankles.

The Skirrh sprawled in his turn upon the hard-packed floor. The two of them sat there for a long moment, raising both palms in the ritual gesture to the sky spirits and glaring at each other in mutual respect.

ON THE second morning after the arrival of Trent and Miss Norsund, Guthrie judged the time ripe for a longer talk.

When he and Polf approached the hut in which the newcomers were quartered, signs of obstructionism appeared; but the spacer sneered them down. By the time he found himself seated on the ground facing Trent and the girl, the onlookers had been reduced to Polf and a trio of glum guards. The former seemed to take pleasure in his comrades' loss of face.

"Sorry I took so long," Guthrie apologized. "There's a certain act you have to put on around here. They been treating you all right?"

He looked at the girl as he spoke, reflecting that a little cleaning up had improved her immeasurably. With the mud off, she displayed a glowing complexion and a headful of chestnut curls; and Guthrie was no longer sure she was too thin. He determined to check the first time she stood up in the short, borrowed dress of Skirrho leather.

"Look here, Guthrie—that is your name, isn't it?" Trent asked peevishly.

"That's right. Pete Guthrie, currently employed, I hope, by the Galactic Survey. And you two are Trent and Norsund?"

"George Trent and Karen

Norsund, yes. But what I want to say is that we find your attitude very strange. How can we expect co-operation from the natives if you throw your weight around the way you do?"

"And what," asked Karen Norsund, turning her big gray eyes on Guthrie, "was that remark about the natives saving you from something?"

"It's *for* something. I think I'd better tell you the local superstitions."

"If you don't mind," Trent interrupted, "I'd rather know how far it is to a Terran settlement. We tried to treat the crowd like humans after you left, but we'd prefer not to stay *here* until a rescue ship arrives."

"As far as I know," said Guthrie, "*we* are the only Terrans on this planet."

He watched that sink in for a few moments, then explained how the system had fallen within the volume of space allotted to him for general survey, how it had never before aroused any great interest beyond being noted in the Galactic Atlas for the benefit of space travelers in just such a situation as theirs.

"I hope your rocket is in good shape," he finished. "Did you land well?"

"Oh . . . well enough," said Trent. "What about it? Why not stay here until we think a

rescue ship is near, then go back and televise for help?"

"It's not that easy," said Guthrie. "If this ship we're hoping for stops to scout for other survivors, we'll be in a real unhealthy situation."

They looked puzzled.

"The seasons here," he explained, "tend to wild extremes. They have tidal waves you wouldn't believe. In a few weeks, the storms will begin and the Skirkhi will go to the hills to dig in. It's a bad time to be caught in the open."

"Oh, come, man!" Trent snapped. "We shouldn't be here that long."

"It's only two or three weeks. The trouble is that on a certain night shortly before they leave the village to the mercy of the sky spirits, the Skirkhi have a nasty custom—"

"I don't care about your low opinion of the local customs," interrupted Trent. "From what I've seen of you, Guthrie, it is obvious that you are not the sort to represent Terra on the frontiers. Just tell me—if you can't get along with the natives like a civilized being, where do you expect to get?"

"Up to Jhux," said Guthrie. "Where?"

"Jhux, the largest moon. It has a thin atmosphere. We could pump enough air into your rocket to live on, and wait to

signal any approaching ship."

"But why go to all that trouble?"

"Besides," Karen Norsund put in, "I think I've had enough travel in a small rocket for the time being."

"It'll be better than the hurricanes here," Guthrie sighed. "Now, if you'll just let me finish about the Skirkhi—"

Trent screwed up his face in exasperation until his eyes were slits above his cheekbones. He shrugged to Karen in a way that turned Guthrie's neck red.

"All *right!*" the latter choked out. "You seem to want to make me look narrow-minded! Wait till you know the Skirkhi! They believe very seriously in these sky spirits. They try to buy them off, to save the village and their own skins—and they pay in blood!"

He waited for the shocked exclamations, the suspicion, then the exchange of glances that agreed to further consideration.

"Until you two came along, I was the goat. Now there are three of us to choose from, but your rocket gives us the means to make a run for it."

They thought that over for a few minutes.

"How do you know they won't . . . use . . . all three of us?" shuddered Karen.

"The Skirkhi have learned to be frugal. They'll save some-

thing for next season. Otherwise, they'd have to raid some other tribe or elect one of them."

"But, before then, either a rescue ship or one from the Survey will have arrived, don't you think?" suggested Trent.

"What are you getting at?"

"Well . . . this: assuming that you are not exaggerating your distrust of the natives, if they actually feel it necessary to . . . er . . . sacrifice to these sky spirits, that will still leave the remaining two of us a good chance."

Guthrie wiped a hand slowly over his face. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Polf and the Skirkhi guards, wondering if they could guess the drift of the conversation.

"And what will your next idea be?" he demanded bitterly. "Want us to draw straws to see which of us goes out and commits hara-kiri for them?"

"Now, now! We must be realistic. After all, nothing serious may come of this. Merely because you and the natives share a mutual antipathy—"

"You make me sick!" growled Guthrie, rising to his feet.

"I don't know what you mean."

"But I know what *you're* figuring," said the spacer. "The excuse will be that you're willing to take your chance with the Skirkhi choice, or that you don't want to stir up trouble because

of the girl; but actually you think I'm the natural candidate!"

"Mr. Guthrie!" exclaimed Karen, jumping up.

"Pardon me! I have to go and commune with the spirits of the sky!"

He pivoted toward the street and bounced off one of the guards who had crept closer to eavesdrop. Automatically, he shoved the Skirkh into the wall.

Behind him, he heard a muttered curse in Skirkhi, then another thud as a thick skull clunked yet again into the wall. He deduced that Polf was following both his footsteps and his example.

THEY WALKED out toward the hill where he and Polf had sat the day the rocket had flared down from the sky. Two pale crescents hovered on the horizon.

"There will still be Yiv in the night," muttered Polf, "but soon he will follow Jhux and there will be no moon. Then come storms."

Guthrie recalled his surprise at the natives' awareness of Yiv, a small satellite whose distance made it appear merely an enormous star. He had noted it from space, but they must have realized its nature from regular observation.

They walked a few minutes, when Polf peered slyly at him.

"I think these sky ones good spirits, not like you."

"What do you mean?" asked the other suspiciously.

"When in hard talk, you get red in face almost like human. They not. The she-spirit a little, yes. But the other . . . I think he is best spirit of all!"

"Aw, what do you know about Terrans?" demanded Guthrie uncertainly.

"What are Terrans?" Polf leered at the effort to take him in by a trick name. "You, Gut'rie, you act like us. You learn fear evil spirits like smart man. Maybe was trick of good ones—send you here so we make mistake."

Guthrie stared down at the stocky Skirkh, trying to follow that chain of thought and wondering how many in the village would find it logical.

Most of them, I'm afraid, he thought. I wonder . . . what if I just kept quiet and let him dig his own game? If I read Trent right, he'll do it!

They sat for a while on the crest of the low hill, in the warmth of the sun. Polf seemed not to mind Guthrie's brooding. Patience was a Skirkhi forte. At times, the spacer pitied the natives, with their harsh and precarious life.

Maybe something could be done here, he reflected. A good, thorough survey would tell.

After all, G. S. engineers have controlled temperatures on some planets by diverting a few ocean currents. And there's cloud-seeding . . .

"Huh!" he grunted. "Already thinking as if I were safe on Jhux."

He began to question Polf as to what the search party had reported, and derived a good idea of the route to the rocket. Tortuous details of Skirkhi trail directions baffled him every few minutes, so that it was twilight before he was satisfied that he could find the craft on his own. With Polf trailing, he strolled thoughtfully to his quarters, bracing for supper of fish or lizard.

AT INTERVALS during the next three days, he saw the new couple about the village. Trent, especially, did not seem eager to speak to him, and they were always accompanied by at least one Skirkhi couple.

In a moment of relaxation, Guthrie permitted himself to observe Karen with pleasure, when she appeared in her own clothes. With the mud washed out, it became apparent that she had been wearing a smart pair of lounging pajamas when interrupted by the spaceliner's alarm.

Trent had also cleaned his sport shirt and baggy slacks,

and now went about making himself buoyantly pleasant to the natives. Once or twice, turning away from this spectacle with a frown, Guthrie chanced to encounter the black, analytical stare of old Thyggar. A sardonic grin quirked the elder's wide mouth.

"Retho tell me Trent learn speak Skirkhi fast," Polf reported, glittering eyes nearly hidden by the contortion that passed for a smile on Skirkhi faces, "so he can tell what a *good* man he is. He says is kind. He says is friend. You would laugh, Gut'rie—he call you names!"

"So will he laugh," growled Guthrie, "on the other side of his face. He's begging for it, all right."

He chewed his lip for a moment, then shrugged. With a nod to Polf, he started down the street to the huts assigned to Trent and Karen. He found the girl behind the squat stone house, doing her best to comb out a mop of freshly washed chestnut hair.

"You'd do better to leave some mud in it," he advised her.

This drew a hard gray stare. Guthrie turned to Polf.

"Can't you do something with this one sitting beside her?" he demanded.

Polf grinned, showing a sturdy set of broad teeth.

"It would be like sacrifice to those who sent down these others," he said. "Last night, when leaving Retho at your door, I kill *chivah* lizard in street. With club. But was only a little blood and we are full of thanks."

After a few minutes of conversation under the glowering gaze of the Terran girl, he enticed the Skirkhi woman around the corner toward the entrance of the hut. Guthrie turned to Karen.

"Listen!" he said urgently. "What is this I hear about Trent going around like a cock-eyed good-will ambassador?"

"I can't help what he does," Karen said defensively. She had trouble meeting his eye. "I told him I didn't think he should talk that way, but he said . . . well . . . that you—"

"I can imagine," said Guthrie. "Well, he'd better stop it, and not on my account. This is a queer, dangerous place."

He took a few steps to the corner of the hut, to check that the space between adjoining houses was empty of spies. The guards loitered in the street.

"It may sound strange," he continued, "but it makes a distorted kind of sense for people who live on a planet like Boyd III—this belief in sky spirits. I told you about the bad season, I think, and the uproar raised by coinciding tides."

Karen, having brushed her hair into some sort of order, eyed him watchfully.

"I would expect them to protect themselves from the rains," she remarked.

"Rains!" snorted Guthrie. "You don't know! Hurricanes! Tidal waves! Floods! They lose people every storm. This is a very bad place to live. So what do you suppose they worship?"

"Sky spirits, you keep telling me."

"Yes," he said, lowering his voice instinctively. "But not good ones, naturally—spirits of evil."

Karen looked at him sidelong and clucked her tongue.

"It's not funny; it's perfectly logical. They spend their lives one jump ahead of freezing or drowning. Their world's against them. Other savage races have figured it that way, even on Terra."

"All right, it's logical. What has it to do with us?"

"It has this to do," said Guthrie. "That clown, Trent, is going around making friends like a puppy. He's cutting his own throat, an' I'd bet he thinks he's cutting mine. But you don't think they'd sacrifice a *bad* person, do you?"

The thought penetrated, and she rose slowly to her feet. He reached out to her shoulders and gave her a little shake.

"The Skirkhi spend weeks before the stormy season making sure the evil spirits notice what nasty people they are. Like Terran kids before Christmas, in reverse. And there's that apple-polisher making a gilded saint of himself while the natives are spitting in their friends' faces and trying to steal their wives or cheat old Thyggar on their taxes."

The girl stared at him in horror. The flesh of her shoulders was soft but firm under his fingers. He suddenly wished there were no Skirkhi hanging about.

Suddenly, Karen's gray eyes widened with a new wariness.

"Let go!" she ordered.

"Maybe I shouldn't," Guthrie teased her. "Maybe I ought to let the Skirkhi see that you have claws. It would help your reputation here."

She began to struggle, and he had a hard time holding her but somehow hated to let go. He was conscious of a padding of feet in the alleyway as a couple of guards drifted in from the street.

Karen tried kicking him in the shin, then wound the fingers of one hand in his hair and yanked. Guthrie, who had by then clasped both hands in the small of her back, let go with his left to grab her wrist.

Immediately, the nails of her

other hand raked past his right eye.

He muttered a curse, let go completely as he felt a sudden fury well up in him, then grabbed a handful of her long hair in his left hand. He half raised his other hand, undecided whether to slap or let her go. She screwed up her face and tried to turn away.

"Guthrie!" shouted a man's voice.

Trent ran between the huts, trailed by a score of Skirkhi.

Well, this ought to be it, thought Guthrie, releasing the girl. *He can't let this pass. I suppose I have a poke in the snoot coming.*

Trent hauled Karen aside protectively, frowning at Guthrie. The latter stood with his hands waist-high, shoulders slightly forward, waiting. Watching Trent's eyes, he saw them flicker toward the expectant Skirkhi.

"I realize that there can be only one explanation, Guthrie," said the other, "but this is obviously neither the time nor place to argue it."

"I didn't offer any explanation," said Guthrie, ashamed but irritated.

"We are being observed," Trent reminded. "Show a little Terran dignity!"

He raised his chin with dignity and Guthrie punched it as hard as he could.

THINKING it over later, he realized that he had entirely wasted the quick feint with his left. Trent was still posing as a saint when Guthrie's fist sent him flying into the solid stone and clay wall of the house behind him.

The spacer stared at Trent as the man slid limply down the wall to a sitting position. He flexed his numbed fingers thoughtfully, as Trent peered glassily up at him without seeming to know where he was.

Karen slipped behind a rank of thick-shouldered Skirkhi as a hum of comment began to rise from the gathering. Guthrie turned and pushed his way through to the street. Out of habit, he took the direction to his quarters, vaguely aware that Polf had reappeared to follow him.

Disgusted with himself, he tried to see Karen's side of it.

It must have looked just wonderful! he told himself. *I think I might have really tried it—guess she saw that in my face, so I can't blame her for ducking. How could I? This place is getting me. Pretty soon, I'll be a first-class Skirkh!*

He kicked moodily at the dust outside his doorway, then climbed the projecting stones at the corner. Polf grunted and followed him up to the roof.

"He is too good," said the

Skirkh. "It will be easy. I will do it for you with Retho. My brother, Kror, will come too."

"Do what?" asked Guthrie.

"Steal his woman for you tonight. It will be a bad thing to do and the best time to do it. Elders say no moon tonight."

"But what makes you think—?"

"Your face. Do not say to Polf you not want. And if you not admit she is his woman, it is not bad enough a thing to do."

"You don't understand, Polf," said the spacer. "I couldn't . . . that is, it's not the same for me . . ." *My God!* he thought. *I'm beginning to sound like Trent!*

"The storms come," murmured Polf. "You want the wrong spirits for friends? If it is tonight, elders stay with Trent. Will be easy."

"Won't you have to be there? And your friends?"

"Gah!" exclaimed Polf. "Whole dumb village be there. What better time to do bigger spirit work? You want Thyggar steal her first?"

Guthrie sat up abruptly, and almost slid from the roof.

"Well, why not?" he muttered after a moment. "She must have warned Trent by now. If he can't think of a way out, I'd better save what can be saved. That was his own idea. I can't

help it if he wouldn't listen to me."

It did not sound quite right to him, but time was running out. The thought of being transformed lingeringly into a few pounds of hacked and burnt meat crossed his mind once again, and he could feel himself beginning to sweat. He glanced over his shoulder at the broad, expectant face.

"All right," he whispered. "Tell Retho and your brother."

What else can I do? he asked himself. *If it has to be one of us—*

LATER, he tried to convince himself that he could sleep for a few hours.

Still later, following Polf down the torch-lit street, trying to look nonchalant before the unusual gathering of Skirkhi, he asked himself again, *What else can I do?* He avoided the amused glint in old Thyggar's eyes.

The doing drove out the thought, and it was some hours before it occurred to him again. When it did, he was stumbling up a pitch-black slope miles to the south of the village.

Behind him, he could hear the sounds of panting and of dragging footsteps as Karen, Polf, and two other Skirkhi followed. The slope leveled off to a plateau. Something too big and

solid to be a tree loomed up against the horizon.

"There it is!" Guthrie gasped.

The darkness was relieved only slightly by the stars, but there was no mistaking that silhouette. Guthrie stumbled the last hundred yards and came to a halt beside one big fin.

He stretched out a hand and accounted for the others by touch as they arrived. The rocket was canted slightly because one of the fins had sunk a little way into the ground, and the hatch halfway up the hull had been left open with the exit ladder extended to the surface.

"We'd better catch our wind before trying to climb up," he said.

He knelt on the grassy ground and rolled wearily over to a sitting position.

"How could I do it?" he murmured.

"What? You speak wrong talk, Gut'rie," panted Polf. "Like you talk to the good one before they start celebration. What you say to fool him?"

"What does he say?" whispered Karen anxiously.

"Wants to know what I said to Trent," he answered, tugging the frayed cuff of his trousers away from his leg. He seemed to be mud to the knees.

"When you came along as he was getting ready for the ceremony? You told him to dump

the fancy costume and run for it."

"I did?" mused Guthrie. "Yes, I forgot. Well, he wouldn't listen, would he?"

"No, and he wanted me to go with him. You got mad because he thought they were taking him into the tribe."

"He's being taken, all right," muttered Guthrie. "There's no moon up yet."

He crawled to his feet and groped through the dark to the ladder.

"What are you doing?" asked Karen.

"Gonna take a look. Hope there's fuel to bounce her off this mudball."

He told Polf of his intention and began to climb. The metal rungs were cold. Reaching the open airlock, he swung himself inside the cramped chamber and closed the outer hatch in order to open the inner. Lights came on automatically.

He found a shorter ladder inside and climbed up to the passenger compartment. There were padded seats for about two dozen people, well packed, but they had swung to an upright position for landing. Guthrie climbed them to the pilot's position, where he seated himself to look over the instruments.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "This can has just enough to get along on."

After noting the amount of fuel left in the tanks, he searched the drawers of the little control desk for information. He discovered a booklet of data on the rocket and a set of simple charts. To these, he added his memory of the mass calculated for Boyd III back when he had facilities for such work.

"We ought to get off okay," he told himself. "My God! A hand-crank calculator—they don't waste power in these things! Well . . . later."

There was power provided, he saw, for "beacon" and "auto. radio" as well as for a few essentials like ventilation. A distress call could be broadcast automatically, at intervals regulated to economize on power, and the same could be done with the beacon. He looked up details in the booklet. The rocket possessed, at least, means to make a loud noise and show a bright light if any rescuer should approach. It remained for them to take it where these could be effective.

He went to work calculating firing data to blast the rocket into a course for Jhux. His figures lacked the polish he might have obtained in his own ship, but anything would have to do in this pinch.

"Maybe I ought to figure a closed orbit," he muttered. "Once up, we can pick the right

time to edge out to Jhux . . . maybe put out a few signals first."

He stared reflectively at his arithmetic, chin in hand.

After several minutes, he leaned back and thought, *Pete, my boy, maybe you won't have to do it after all! There might just be an out if there's still time.*

He grabbed up the pencil he had been using and feverishly undertook another course calculation. In the end, after making a few corrections and comparing the requirements with the fuel gauges, he decided it would be possible.

"Now, let's see . . . how do I get a distress call taped and set for broadcast . . .?"

When he scrambled down the ladder a little later, he brought a flashlight with him. Karen squinted and the three Skirkhi cringed in its beam.

"Polf, how long till day?" Guthrie demanded.

Polf found enough voice to guess that a third of the night remained.

Guthrie reached up and strained to unhook the ladder. As it came loose, he let it fall and said, "Let's get out of here before the jets light!"

"What are you *doing*?" protested the girl, grabbing his arm.

"Sending it up on automatic to broadcast a distress call."

"But I thought—"

"Well, I thought of a better one," snapped Guthrie. In Skirkhi, he added, "Move your feet, worms, before *we* become a burning sacrifice!"

SHOVING the natives ahead and towing a Karen whose voice showed signs of turning shrill, he got the group over the crest of the hill in plenty of time before the sky flared and thundered with the sudden roar of rockets.

The horrid noise departed toward the upper atmosphere. Presently, Guthrie's eyes readjusted to the dark until he could make out the trees through which they had groped and bumped heads an hour earlier.

"Might as well start," he said. "We might make it back in time for lunch."

"But the rocket!" wailed Karen. "After that awful trip to find it!"

"I set the controls," he explained, "to blast it up into an orbit around the planet, where it can broadcast our location until we're picked up."

"Oh," said Karen. "Well, I hope you can handle your friends till then."

"We should be able to see it in a little while. I set the controls to flop it over when it's high enough and send it around east to west."

"Why?"

"So it will match the apparent motions of the moons."

Karen walked perhaps twenty steps in silence, then stopped dead.

"*Guthrie! Do you really mean we can see it?*"

"Sure. I did it a bit roughly, but I'm hoping for under two thousand miles and two or three periods a night. Even when it isn't catching any sunlight, that beacon ought to show. Dimmer than Yiv, maybe, but moving and easy to spot."

With the flashlight, making their way through the woods took less time. They were half-way across a grassy plain when Polf exclaimed and pointed to the sky. Guthrie whooped.

"There's a moon for tonight!" he yelled. "And every night, for quite some time, until the pulls of the real ones spoil its orbit."

He felt so good that he threw an arm about Karen's waist. It must have felt good to her, too, for instead of pulling away, she leaned closer.

"They'll wait now, won't

they?" she asked. "I mean, unless there's no moon. . . . Wait till George finds out what you've done for him!"

"I don't know why I'm so good to him when I like the Skirkhi better," said Guthrie. "Of course, we can't explain until I think up a suitably rotten excuse, or it would ruin my reputation with *them*!"

They stood motionless for a few minutes, watching the bright light creep perceptibly along its path in the heavens.

"Is it Yiv?" asked Krór, puzzled. "It should not be, now."

"Gah!" exclaimed Polf. "You mud-head! Of course, it is not Yiv. Our Gut'rie has made a new moon. Be grateful to Polf for bringing you, for we shall be big in the village after this!"

He looked proudly at Guthrie. The latter turned off the flashlight to see if the sky were actually beginning to show a pre-dawn lightening.

"We will be very big," Polf repeated. "Are we not friends of the vilest spirit of them all?"

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PILGRIMS' PROJECT

by ROBERT F. YOUNG



CHAPTER I

A man under sentence

of marriage would be

lucky to have a girl

like Julia assigned

to him—or would he?

Illustrated by EMSH



"I'D LIKE to apply for a wife,"
I said.

The Marriage Administration girl inserted an application blank into the talk-typer on her desk. Her eyes were light blue and her hair was dark brown and she was wearing a Mayflower dress with a starched white collar.

"Name and number?"

"Roger Bartlett. 14479201-B."

"Date of birth?"

"January 17, 2122."

"What is your occupation, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Senior Sentry at the Cadillac Cemetery."

She raised her eyes. Her hair was combed tightly back into a chignon and her face looked round and full like a little girl's.

"Oh. Have there been any exhumings recently, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Not at Cadillac," I said.

"I'm glad. I think it's a shame the way the ghouls carry on, don't you? Imagine anyone having the effrontery to rob a sacred car-grave!"

Her voice sounded sincere enough but I got the impression she was ridiculing me—why, I couldn't imagine. She could not know I was lying.

"Some day they'll rob one grave too many," I said flatly, "and earn the privilege of digging their own."

She lowered her eyes—rather abruptly, I thought. “Last place of employment?”

“Ford Acres.”

The longer I looked at her, the more she affected me. The little-girl aspect of her face was misleading. There was nothing little-girlish about her lithe body, and her stern, high-bosomed dress could not conceal the burgeoning of full breasts or the breathless sweep of waist and shoulders.

Illogically, she reminded me of a landscape I had seen recently at a clandestine art exhibit. I had wandered into the dim and dismal place more out of boredom than curiosity, and I had hardly gone two steps beyond the cellar door when the painting caught my eye. It was called “Twentieth Century Landscape.”

In the foreground, a blue river flowed, and beyond the river a flower-flecked meadow spread out to a series of small, forested hills. Beyond the hills a great cumulus formation towered into the sky like an impossibly tall and immaculate mountain. There was only one other object in the scene—the lofty, lonely speck of a soaring bird.

An impossible landscape by twenty-second century standards; an impossible analogy by any standards. And yet that’s what I thought of, standing there in Marriage Administration Head-

quarters, the stone supporting pillars encircling me like the petrified trunks of a decapitated forest and the unwallled departments buzzing with activity.

“Can you give us some idea of the kind of wife you want, Mr. Bartlett?”

I wanted to say that I didn’t want any kind of a wife, that the only reason I was applying for one was because I was on the wrong side of twenty-nine and had received my marriage summons in yesterday’s mail. But I didn’t say anything of the sort. It wasn’t wise to question Marriage Administration procedure.

But I didn’t take it lying down. Not quite. I said: “The wife I want is a pretty remote item from the one I’ll probably get.”

“What we want consciously is invariably different from what we want unconsciously, Mr. Bartlett. The Marriage Integrator’s true benefit to humanity arises from the fact that it matches marriageable men and women in accordance with their unconscious rather than with their conscious desires. However, any information you may care to impart will be entered on your data card and *might* influence the final decision.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

And I didn’t. The celibacy I had endured rather than apply for a wife before reaching the

ROBERT F. YOUNG works in a machine shop by day, and at night goes home and writes anti-machine stories! Pilgrim's Project is different: not so much anti-machine per se, it is still a vigorous argument in favor of the individual human spirit and against standardization. It is also, of course, a thoroughly exciting story—with one of the most intriguing villains in all sf!

maximum age of twenty-nine had resulted in the total sublimation of my sexual desires. Women had lost reality for me—at least, until this morning.

I LOOKED around the huge chamber in search of inspiration. The various departments were cramped with desks and marriage officials, enlivened here and there by gray- or black-garbed secretaries. The department next to the one in which I stood constituted the headquarters for the Marriage Enforcement Police and less than ten feet away from me a gaunt MEP captain brooded behind an austere marble desk.

Apparently he had been fasting, for his charcoal gray coat hung loosely on his wide shoulders. His cheeks were cadaverous, his thin lips pale. His thin nose jutted sharply from his narrow face, giving him a bleak, hungry look, and his deep, somber eyes intensified the impression.

Those eyes, I realized suddenly, were gazing directly into mine.

So far as I knew, there was nothing about my appearance to pique the interest of an MEP official. My Roger Williams suit was conventional enough; I had doffed my black, wide-brimmed hat upon entering the building and now held it at my waist in the prescribed manner; I was above average in height, but not noticeably so, and if my yellow hair and gray eyes failed to match the dour decorum of my clothing, I could hardly be held responsible for the defection. Nevertheless, there was something about me that the MEP captain found disagreeable. The disapproval in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Do you have any ideas at all, Mr. Bartlett?"

The girl's cool blue eyes were a relief after the somber brown ones. It was like returning from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the carefree *L'Allegro* of his youth. Abruptly, the inspiration I'd been searching for materialized—almost at my fingertips.

"Blue eyes," I said. "I'd definitely want her to have blue eyes—and dark brown hair to go

with them. And then I'd want her to have a round, full face, and shoulders that look good even in a Mayflower dress."

I saw the telltale pinkness come into her cheeks and I caught the tiny fluttering of a pulse in her white temple. But all she said was: "What else, Mr. Bartlett? I presume she would have intellectual as well as physical qualities."

"Naturally." I knew I was being presumptuous, that I was probably violating some of the law-enforced mores of the Age of Repentance. But for once in my life I felt reckless.

I concentrated on the piquant face before me. "I'd want her to be a little on the sophisticated side," I said softly (the MEP captain had big ears). "Well-versed in the Five Books of course—and perhaps acquainted with one or two of the forbidden ones. And then I'd want her to like children and maybe be willing to have three—or even four—instead of one or none. But most of all I'd want her to be able to freeze any wrong thoughts a man might have about her, not by recourse to the law, or by saying or doing anything; but just by looking the way she does, by being the way she is—if you know what I mean."

The pinkness of her cheeks had darkened to deep rose. "Is that all, Mr. Bartlett?"

I sighed. My recklessness had netted me nothing. "Yes," I said.

She withdrew the application from the talk-typer and initialed it. She raised her eyes. "I censored your reference to the forbidden books," she said. "It would have rated you at least two years in Purgatory if the Marriage Administrator had seen it. You really should be more careful about what you say, Mr. Bartlett."

I'd forgotten all about the meticulous little machine tapping silently away on the desk. I felt like a fool. "Thanks," I said.

"One of the reverend psychiatrists will interview you on the top floor. You'll find a waiting room at the head of the staircase."

I started to turn, then paused. I didn't know why I paused; I only knew that I couldn't let it end like that.

"I wonder," I said.

"Yes?"

"You obtained a lot of information from me but I don't know a single thing about you. Not even your name."

The blue eyes had become arctic lakes. Then, suddenly, they filled with the sparkling warmth of spring. A smile dawned on her lips and her face became a sunrise.

"Julia," she said. "Julia Prentice."

"I'm glad to have known you," I said.

"And I, you, Mr. Bartlett. And now if you'll please excuse me, there are other applicants waiting."

There were—a whole benchful of them. I walked past them glumly, hating them, hating myself, hating a society that would not permit me to choose my own mate; but most of all hating Big Cupid, the mechanized matchmaker that would choose for me.

I paused at the foot of the stone staircase, turned for a final look at Julia. She was interviewing the next applicant. She had forgotten me already.

But someone else in the departmented chamber hadn't. The gaunt MEP captain was more absorbed in me than ever. And, judging from his expression, he no longer merely disapproved of me—he despised me.

Why? Had he overheard my conversation with Julia? I did not think so. With the confused murmur of hundreds of other voices all around him, he could scarcely have singled out mine, especially in view of the fact that I had spoken softly.

But perhaps not softly enough. In any event, he was looking at me as though I were a hopeless habitué of Vanity Fair desperately in need of an Evangelist. I felt like walking over to his desk and asking him the

way to the Coelestial City. But I didn't. You don't make flip-pant remarks to MEP officers, particularly when those remarks involve one of the Five Books. You don't, if you want to stay out of Purgatory.

Instead, I turned and started up the stairs to the eyrie of the reverend psychiatrists.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS LATE afternoon by the time I got out of the Marriage Administration Building. The sun, red and swollen from the spring dust storms, was just disappearing behind the distant elevators of the plankton conversion plant, and the sky was beginning to lose its coppery haze. I hailed a rickshaw, leaned back in the plastic chair and let the June wind cool my face.

The street murmured with the whir of rickshaw wheels and the rhythmic pounding of runners' feet. The Marriage Administration Building faded into the lengthening shadows. The Cathedral drifted grayly by, the tiny windows of its serried chapels glinting red in the final rays of the sun. Then the massive pile of the Coliseum, silent and somber and brooding. In the distance, the hives towered darkly into the sky.

The Coliseum gave way to the parsonage apartments. Prim

façades frowned down on me with narrow-windowed righteousness. I shifted uneasily in my rickshaw seat. If my surreptitious reading of the forbidden books had given me a new perspective on the Age of Repentance, it had also given me a troubled conscience.

Just the same, I knew that as soon as the next book "collection" got under way, I would offer my services to the Literature Police just as I'd done a dozen times before. And if my luck held, and I was assigned to sentry duty in the book dump, I would read just as many forbidden volumes as I could every time I got the chance. Moreover, this time I would risk Purgatory and try to save a few of them from the flames.

The parsonage apartments petered out and the noisome market area took their place. Rickshaw traffic densened, competed with hurrying pedestrians. Plastic heels clacked and ankle-length skirts swished in the gloom. The hives occulted the sky now, and the stench of cramped humanity rode the night wind.

I dropped a steelpiece into the runner's hand when he pulled up before my hive. I tipped him a plastic quarter when he handed me my change. I could feel the loneliness already, the crushing loneliness that comes to all men who live in faceless crowds.

But I didn't regret having come to the hives to live. They were no lonelier than the YMCA had been. And three rooms, no matter how small, were certainly preferable to the cramped little cubicle I had occupied during the years immediately following my parents' suicide.

A long time ago—a century perhaps, maybe more—the hives bore the more euphemistic name of "apartment houses." But they had corridors then instead of yard-wide passageways, elevators instead of narrow stairways, rooms instead of roomettes. Those were the years before the metal crisis, before the population upsurge; the years that constituted the Age of Wanton Waste.

Deploring the appetites of one's ancestors is a frustrating pastime. I did not indulge in it now. Climbing the four flights of stairs to my apartment, I thought instead of my imminent marriage, hoping to take the edge off my loneliness.

I concentrated on my wife-to-be. A wife, according to the pamphlet that had accompanied my marriage summons, guaranteed to be my ideal mate, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. A wife who would personify my unconscious conception of a goddess, who would fulfill my unconscious standards of feminine beauty, who would

administer faithfully to my unconscious emotional needs. In short, just exactly the kind of woman I had unconsciously wanted all my miserable lonely life.

I tried to picture her. I threw everything out of my mind and left my mental retina blank. It did not remain blank for long. Gradually, the twentieth century landscape came into focus—the river flowing in the foreground, bluer than before, the green sea of the meadow spreading out to the exquisite forested hills, the impeccable cumulus mountain, and finally, the solitary bird soaring in the vast sky. . . .

I PREPARED and ate a frugal meal in the kitchenette, then I shaved, went into the bedroomette and changed into my sentry suit. I was combing my shoulder-length hair when the knock on the door sounded.

I waited, listening for the knock to sound again. I knew practically no one in the city, save the members of my own guard detail, and it was unlikely that any of them would visit me. They saw enough of me on the graveyard shift.

Who, then?

The knock sounded again, rising unmistakably above the background noises of the hive—the dull clatter of plastic pots and pans and dishes, the nagging

voices of wives, the strident ones of husbands, and the whining of children. I laid down my comb, left the bedroomette, stepped across the parlorette, opened the door—and stepped back involuntarily.

The MEP captain had been seated when I had seen him at Marriage Administration Headquarters, and I hadn't been particularly impressed by his size. Standing, he was an arresting sight. The top of his high, wide-brimmed hat touched the ceiling of the passageway; the charcoal coat that hung so loosely on his shoulders could not conceal their striking width; large bony wrists with huge arthritic hands protruded from their cuffs. He looked like a giant who had never had enough to eat.

As I stood staring, he removed his hat and, reaching into an inside pocket of his coat, produced a stained plastic badge. He waved it briefly before my eyes, then replaced it. "Captain Taigue," he said in a voice as thin and unpleasant as his face. "I have a few questions to ask you, Mr. Bartlett."

The shock of finding him on my doorstep had left me numb. But I remembered my rights. "You've no right to ask me questions," I said. "I'm a single man."

"I was invested with the right today when you applied for a

wife. A husband-to-be is as securely bound to the laws of matrimony as an actual husband is."

He began to move through the doorway. I either had to get out of the way or be pushed aside. I got out of the way. Taigue shut the door behind him and sat down in the parlorette chair. He fixed me with his brooding eyes.

"Tell me, Mr. Bartlett, do you accept the basic tenets embraced by the marriage amendment?"

I still wasn't sure whether he had jurisdiction over me or not, but I decided to cooperate. I was curious to know the reason for his visit.

"Naturally I accept them," I said.

"Then you devoutly believe that enforced monogamy is the final answer to the deplorable serialized polygamy that characterized the sexual relationships of the twentieth century and brought on the conjugal chaos of the twenty-first; that strict adherence to the monogamous ideal is mandatory if it is to be perpetuated; that the marital unions computed by the Marriage Integrator can never be questioned because they are the ultimate in emotional, physical, and intellectual rapport—"

"I said I accepted the tenets," I said. "What more do you want?"

"That adultery," Taigue went on implacably, "is the most despicable crime a citizen can commit against his society; that adultery has many subtle phases, among the subtlest being the proclivity on the part of some husbands and husbands-to-be to look at women other than their wives or wives-to-be—and lust! You *do* devoutly believe these things, do you not, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Look, Captain," I said. "I spent the whole afternoon being cross-examined by a reverend psychiatrist. He knows more about my sexual nature now than I do myself. If you doubt my marital fitness, why don't you read his report?"

"Psychiatrists are fools," Taigue said. "I investigate applicants in my own way. Now, for the last time, Mr. Bartlett, do you devoutly believe the tenets I have just enumerated?"

"Yes!" I shouted.

"Then why did you look at the girl who took your application this morning—and lust?"

The question staggered me. It betrayed a fantastic overzealousness in his pursuit of his duty—an overzealousness so consuming that it had warped his perspective, had made him see sin where no sin existed. Julia Prentice was one woman whom you could *not* look at and lust. It was that particular qual-

ity, I realized now, that had attracted me to her in the first place.

I knew my face was burning; and I knew that Taigue was just the kind of a man who would deliberately interpret a manifestation of anger as a manifestation of guilt if it suited his predilections. The knowledge infuriated me all the more. In his eyes I was guilty, and nothing I could do would prove I wasn't.

I waited until I was sure I could control my voice. Then I said: "I think you've been fasting too long, Captain. Your hallucinations are getting the best of you."

He took no offense. In fact, he smiled as he got slowly to his feet. But his eyes burned with a sort of crazed satisfaction that was either the essence of dedication or the flickering of incipient insanity.

"I did not expect you to answer my question, Mr. Bartlett," he said. "I merely wished to apprise you of the alertness of the MEP, and to warn you that any further attention you may bestow on Julia Prentice will not go unobserved—or unpunished."

"You can leave any time," I said, opening the door.

"I can also return any time. Remember that, Mr. Bartlett. And remember the new commandment—*Thou shalt not look at a woman and lust!*"

HIS TALL starved body swayed slightly as he moved through the doorway. It was all I could do to keep my fists at my sides, all I could do to hold back the violent words and phrases that swirled in my mind. When the door swung shut, eclipsing the charcoal shoulders, I collapsed against it.

I had heard tales of the zealots who guarded the matrimonial sanctity of society; I had even visited the Coliseum when a stoning was taking place and seen the battered bloody bodies of the victims lying in the dirt of the arena. But somehow neither the tales nor the bodies had driven home the truth that overwhelmed me now.

When the inevitable metal crisis followed the production-consumption orgy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the material world began to fall apart, the people turned to religion for succor. The subsequent merging of the two main churches was a milestone in religious progress. But then the trend went so far that the people elected church officials to represent them and began to stress outward manifestations of virtue by regressing to Puritanical dress and by voluntarily limiting their literary fare to the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, *The Pilgrims' Progress*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Divine Comedy*.

The first clergy-congress was as zealous as the first ordained president in the drafting and the passing of the marriage amendment. And the frugal way of life already adopted by the people was ideal for a world down to its last inch of topsoil. The Marriage Integrator fitted into the new scheme of things nicely, for it justified the stern enforcement of the new marriage laws. And so marriage became a duty rather than a privilege.

I'd been profoundly distrustful of machine-made marriages ever since my parents' suicide, and the surreptitious reading I'd done on the various occasions when I had access to the book dump had increased that distrust. Marriage, according to all the old literature I'd read on it, was a pretty complex undertaking, so replete with subtleties that it was difficult to imagine a computing machine, no matter how intricate it might be, capable of dealing with them.

There was another aspect about Big Cupid that didn't quite add up. Logically, compatible marriages should result in many children. But most of the married couples in the apartments around me had only one child, and many of them were childless. The condition held true throughout the rest of the city, probably throughout the entire country.

A possible explanation lay in the popular conviction that sex was sin. But it was far from being a satisfactory explanation. The original Puritans identified sex with sin too, but they still raised large families.

No, there was something about Big Cupid that didn't make sense. Moreover, there was something about the Age of Repentance itself that didn't make sense either—when you used books other than the sacred Five for criteria.

The sex orgies which climaxed the Age of Wanton Waste and were influential in bringing about the mass regression to Puritanism, were unquestionably a blot on the scarred escutcheon of civilization. However, they only represented one extreme: the monogamous fanaticism of the Age of Repentance represented the other, which was just as remote from normalcy. Both were wrong.

The society in which I lived and moved was an inconsistent and a rigid society; I had known this for years. But, until now, the knowledge had never bothered me, for I had created the illusion of being a free man by avoiding personal relationships, especially marriage. Now that I could no longer do that, I realized my true status.

I was a prisoner—and Taigue was my keeper.

CHAPTER III

I STOOD by the yawning mouth of the newly exhumed grave and swore. I had only been on duty two hours, but I had lost a Cadillac-corpse already.

I shifted the beam of my pocket torch from the deep impressions made by the 'copter feet to the tumbled earth around the huge grave mouth, then into the empty grave itself. The gun metal casket had left a neat rectangle in the blue clay when the cargo winch had yanked it loose. Staring down at the smooth, mute subsoil, I felt like Christian wallowing in the Slough of Despond.

I had lied to Julia. Things were *not* under control at Cadillac. This was the fourth car-corpse I had lost during the past month, and I shuddered when I thought of what the Cadillac Sexton would probably say to me in the morning.

The fact that I'd lost no time in notifying the Air Police was small consolation. The half dozen decrepit 'copters they had at their disposal were no match for the streamlined jobs of the ghouls. The ghouls would get away just as they always did and one more car-corpse would be dismembered and sold on the black market—or contribute its vital steel, copper and aluminum

to the clandestine manufacture of newer and swifter 'copters.

I kicked a lump of loose dirt. I felt sick. Around me, tall lombardies formed a palisade so dense that the light of the gibbous moon couldn't penetrate it. Above me, Mars shone like an inflamed red eye. For a moment I wished I were up there, a member of the abandoned colony in *Deucalionis Regio*.

But only for a moment. The ordinary rigors of colonial life were as nothing compared to the rigors that must have faced the Martian colonists when the metal crisis terminated the building of spaceships and brought about the colony's isolation. Perhaps those rigors had eased by now, and then again, perhaps *Deucalionis Regio* had turned into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

I turned and began walking back to the ganglion tower whence Betz's alarm had summoned me. Betz hailed me when I approached tower 6, and I paused. I could see his round youthful face in the moonlight. The silvery albedo made it seem like a small moon itself as he peered down at me from his eyrie. I had never thought much of him—probably because he had applied for a wife nine years before he needed to and was already a married man. I thought even less of him now.

"I can't understand how they got down without my seeing them," he said.

"I can't understand either," I said.

"It's these damn trees," Betz said. "Some of them are higher than the towers. I don't see how the Sexton expects us to do a good job of guarding when we can't see what we're trying to guard."

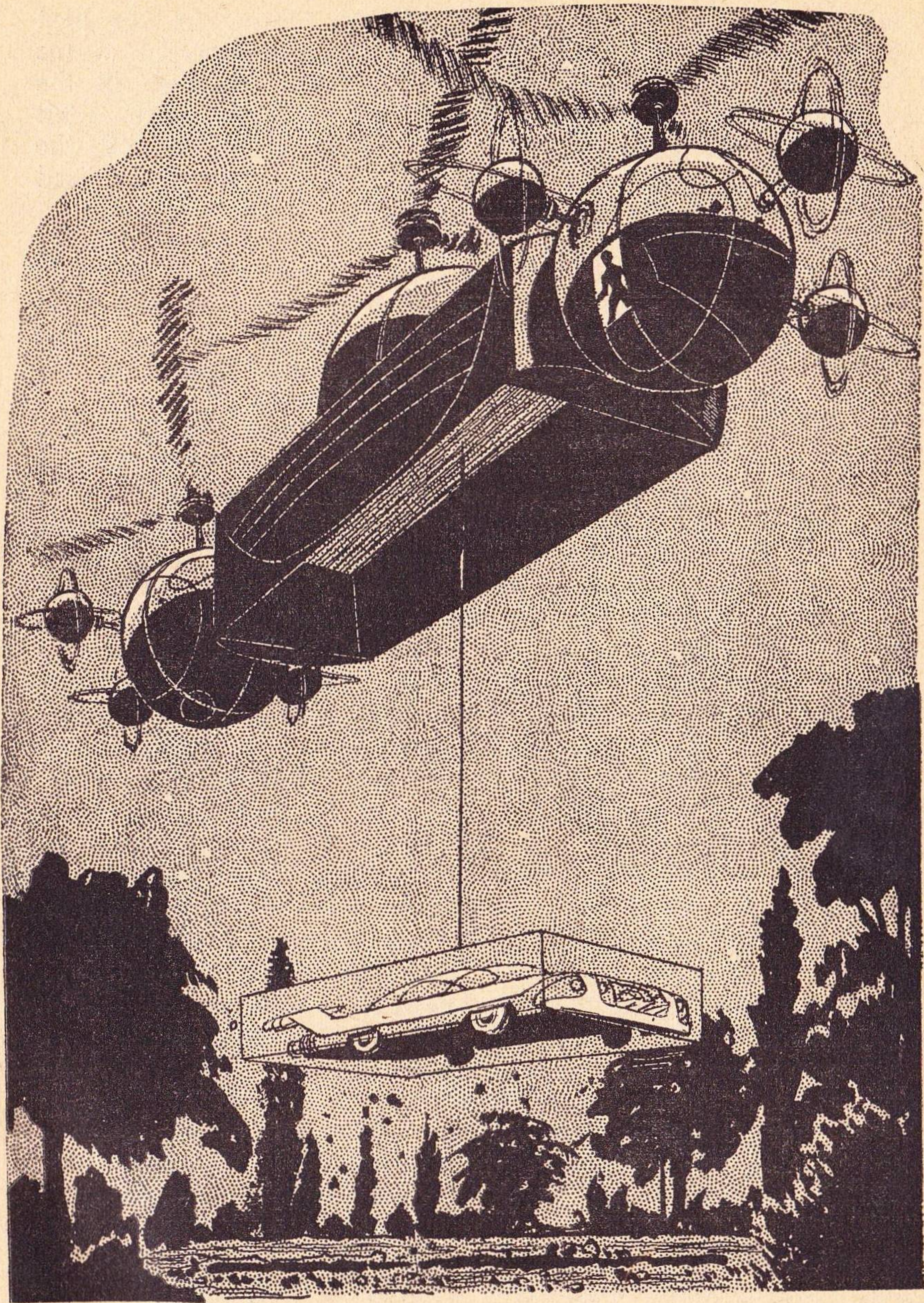
"It helps if you keep your eyes open," I said, and walked away.

But whether I liked it or not, his objection was valid. While the Cadillac Cemetery had none of the sprawling vastness of Ford Acres, its decorative landscaping made the deployment of

a limited guard detail a difficult proposition. The ancient automakers anticipated neither the future value of their enshrined products nor the sacrilegious exhumings that were to begin a century later, and when they laid out their car cemeteries, they stressed beauty rather than practicality. I could not feel any kindness toward a long dead manufacturer with a penchant for lombardy poplars, weeping willows, and arborvitae; who, seemingly, had done everything in his power to make it easy for twenty-second century ghouls to dig up car-corpses right under sentries' noses and whisk them away in swift cargo 'copters.

As I made my way toward the





ganglion tower, I thought of what I would say to the Cadillac Sexton in the morning. I prepared my words carefully, then memorized them so that I could deliver them without faltering: *The time has come for the authorities to decide which is the more important — the scenic beauty of the ground itself, or the security of the sacred corpses beneath the ground. No sentry, however alert he may be, can be expected to see through trees, and now that the rains are over and the new foliage has reached maximum growth, the situation is crucial and will remain so until fall—*

I went all out. The more responsibility I could foist on the time of the year, the less I would have to assume myself. The Ford Acres Sexton had given me a glowing recommendation when I'd applied for the post at Cadillac several years back, and I hated to lose face in the Cadillac Sexton's eyes. The money was good, much better than at Ford, and with a wife on the way I couldn't afford the cut in salary that relegation to an inferior cemetery would entail. Anyway, the time of the year *was* to blame. What other reason could there possibly be for my losing so many car-corpses?

BUT THE Cadillac Sexton took a dim view of my suggestion

when he showed up the next morning. He glowered at me from behind his desk in the caretaker's office and I could tell from the deepening of the creases in his bulbous forehead that I was in for a lecture.

"Trees are rare enough on Earth as it is without wantonly destroying them," he said, when I had finished talking. "And these particular trees are the rarest of the rare."

He shook his head deplorably. "I'm afraid you don't quite understand the finer points of our mission, Bartlett. The scenic beauty which you would have me devastate is an essential part of the mechanistic beauty, the memory of which we are trying to perpetuate. There is a higher purpose behind the automobile trust funds than the mere preservation of twentieth century vehicles. In setting those funds aside, the ancient automakers were endeavoring to return, symbolically and in a different form, the elements they had taken from the Earth. It was a noble gesture, Bartlett, a very noble gesture, and the fact that we today disapprove of the Age of Wanton Waste does not obviate the fact that the Age of Wanton Waste could—and did—produce art. The symbolic immortality of that art is our responsibility, our mission.

"No, Bartlett, we can never

resort to the sacrilegious leveling of trees and shrubbery in an attempt to solve our problem. Its solution lies in greater vigilance on the part of sentries, particularly senior sentries. Our mission is a noble one, one not lightly to be regarded. It behooves us—"

He went on and on in the same vein. After a while, when it became evident that he wasn't going to relegate me to Chevrolet Meadows or Buick Lawn, I relaxed. His idealism was high-flown, but I could endure it as long as the money kept coming in.

When he finally dismissed me, I started back to the hives. I couldn't help thinking, as I walked along the crumbling ancient highway, that if the manufacturers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries had been a little less zealous in their production of art, the Mesabi iron range might be something more than a poignant memory and there might have been enough ore available to have made mass 'copter production something more than an interrupted dream. There was an element of irony in using a super-highway for a footpath.

I hailed a rickshaw at the outskirts of the city and rode in style to my apartment. There was a letter in my mail receptacle. The return address said: MAR-

RIAGE ADMINISTRATION HEAD-QUARTERS. I waited till I got to my roomettes before I opened it. I wouldn't have opened it then if I'd dared not to.

The message was brief:

Report 1500, City Cathedral, Chapel 14, for marital union with one Julia Prentice, cit. no. 14489304-P, as per M. I. directive no. 38572048954-PR.

I read it again. And again. It still said Julia Prentice.

I knew my heart was beating a lot faster than it normally did and I knew my hands were trembling. I also knew that I was reacting like a fool. There were probably a hundred Julia Prentices in the hive sector alone and probably a hundred more in the other residential districts. So the chance that this Julia Prentice was the one I wanted her to be was one in two hundred.

But my heart kept up its rapid pace and my hands went right on trembling, and I kept seeing that beautiful flowing river with the green sweep of meadow just beyond, the lovely forested hills and the white white cloud; the dark and forlorn speck of the soaring bird. . . .

SHE WAS there waiting for me, standing in the Cathedral corridor before the little door of Chapel 14, and she was *the* Julia Prentice. I asked myself no ques-

tions as to why and wherefore. The reality of her sufficed for the moment.

She looked at me as I came up, then quickly dropped her eyes. The blue polka dots of her new sunbonnet matched her new Priscilla Mullins dress.

"I never thought it would be you," I said. "I still can't believe it."

"And why not me?" She would not raise her eyes but kept them focused on the lapel of my John Alden coat. "Why not me as well as someone else? I had a right to apply for a husband. I'm of age. I had nothing to do with the Marriage Integrator's decision."

"I didn't say you did."

"You implied it. I think you are conceited. Furthermore, I think you're being quixotic about a perfectly prosaic occurrence. There's nothing in the least romantic about two pasteboard cards meeting in the digestive system of the Marriage Integrator and finding themselves compatible."

I stared at her. I'd been under the impression, during the brief interval I'd talked with her the preceding day, that she liked me. But perhaps liking a total stranger whom you never expected to see again was different from liking a near total stranger who was very shortly going to be your husband. For the second time

during the past twenty-four hours I found myself wallowing in the Slough of Despond.

"I didn't have anything to do with the Marriage Integrator's decision either," I said flatly. I turned away from her and faced the chapel door.

It was a real wooden door, with a stained glass window. The design on the window depicted a stoning in the Coliseum. There were two people standing forlornly in the arena—a man and a woman. They stood with their heads bowed, the scarlet letters on their breasts gleaming vividly. The first stone had just struck the ground at their feet; the second stone hovered in the air some distance away. The encompassing stoning platform was crowded with angry people fighting for access to the regularly spaced stone piles, and high above the scene the Coliseum flag fluttered proudly in the breeze, its big red letter proclaiming that a chastisement was in progress.

There were a dozen other couples waiting in the corridor now, shyly conversing or staring silently at the stained glass windows before them. I wondered if they felt the way I felt, if they had the same misgivings.

The minutes inched by. The silence between Julia and myself became intolerable. I pondered the meaning of the word

"compatibility," and wondered why unconscious rapport should manifest itself in conscious hatred.

I remembered my own lonely childhood—the long evenings spent in my parents' hive apartment, the endless dissension between my mother and my father, my father's relegation to the parlorette couch and my mother's key in the bedroomette door, their suicidal leap twenty stories to the street when I was nineteen years old.

I thought of how crowded the hive school had been when I attended it and I wondered suddenly if it was crowded now. I thought of the increasing number of empty apartments in the hive sector, and the cold breath of a long dormant suspicion blew icily through my mind. The world quivered, began to fall apart—

And then Julia said: "I was very rude to you. I didn't mean to be. I'm sorry, Mr. Bartlett."

The world steadied, came back into proper focus. "My name is Roger," I said.

"I'm sorry, Roger."

The marriage chimes began to sound, appending a tinkling ellipsis to her words. I opened the door with trembling fingers and we stepped into the chapel together. The door closed silently behind us.

Before us stood a life-size TV

screen. At our elbows, electric candles combined their radiance with the feeble sunlight eking through the narrow stained glass window above the screen and made a half-hearted attempt to chase away the gloom. A basket of synthetic flowers bloomed tiredly at our feet.

Julia's face was pale, but no paler, probably, than mine was. Suddenly sonorous music throbbed out from a concealed speaker and the TV screen came to life. The Marriage Administrator materialized before us, tall, black-garbed, austere of countenance.

He did not speak till the marriage music ended. Then he said: "When I raise my left hand the first time, you will pronounce your own names clearly and distinctly so that they can be recorded in the tape-contract. When I raise my left hand the second time, you will pronounce, with equal clarity and distinctness, the words 'I do.'"

"Do you—" He paused and raised his left hand.

"Julia Prentice."

"Roger Bartlett."

"Take this man-woman to be your lawful wedded husband-wife?" He raised his left hand again.

"I do." We spoke the words together.

"Then by the power invested in me by the marriage amend-

ment, I pronounce you man and wife and sentence you to matrimony for the rest of your natural lives."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS some time before I remembered to kiss my bride. When I did remember, the twentieth century landscape spread out around me and I had the distinct impression that the world had stirred beneath my feet, had hesitated, for a fraction of a second, on its gargantuan journey around the sun.

The voice of the Marriage Administrator was deafening, his face purple. "There will be no osculating in the chapels! The chapels will be cleared immediately for the next applicants. There will be no—"

Neither of us had known that the screen was a transmitter as well as a receiver, and we moved apart guiltily. A shower of plastic rice poured down on us as we stepped through the doorway. We ran laughing down the corridor, picked up our marriage contract at the vestibule window, and stepped out into the Cathedral court.

The afternoon sun was bright in the coppery sky but the shadow of the pulpit platform lay cool and dark across the eastern flagstones. We walked across the congregation area to the vaulted

entrance that led to the street. I hailed a double rickshaw and we rode to the YWCA and picked up Julia's things. Then we headed for the hives.

I'd called in the converters, of course. They'd done their work rapidly and well. I noticed the changes the moment I opened the door.

There were two chairs in the parlurette now, both smaller than the old one had been, but charming in their identical design. A table had replaced the table-ette in the kitchenette and an extra stool now stood by the enlarged cupboard. Through the bedroomette doorway I could see one of the corners of the new double bed.

I stepped into the parlurette, waited for Julia to follow me. When she did not, I returned to the passageway. She was standing there quietly, her eyes downcast, her hands folded at the waist of her new blue dress. It struck me abruptly that she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and simultaneously it dawned on me why she hadn't followed me in.

The custom was so old—so absurd. It was almost a part of folklore, a tattered remnant of the early years of the twentieth century when newlyweds had tried to insure by fetish the conjugal permanence that was now enforced by law.

And yet, in a way, it was beautiful.

I stood for a moment, memorizing Julia's pale fresh loveliness. Then I lifted her into my arms and carried her across the threshold.

GUARDING interred Cadillacs was far from being an ideal way to spend my wedding night, but after the way things had been going I hadn't dared to ask the Sexton for an extra night off. I donned my sentry suit in the darkness, moving quietly so as not to awaken Julia, then I descended to the street and hailed a rickshaw. It was past 2300 and I had to ride all the way to the cemetery in order to get there on time.

After posting the other sentries, I relieved the 1600-2400 senior sentry in the ganglion tower. He had nothing of interest to report and I sent him on his way. Standing beneath the big rotating searchlight, watching him descend the ladder, I envied him his night's freedom.

The searchlight threw a moving swath of radiance over artificial hill and dale, shone like an ephemeral sun on arborvitae patterns, blazed on the green curtains of lombardy stands. I cursed those noncommittal curtains for the thousandth time, deplored my inability to do anything about them.

The size of the cemetery precluded any practical patrol of the grounds. All I could do was hope that I, or one of the other sentries in the strategically located towers, would spot any unusual movement, hear any unusual sound.

I touched the cold barrel of the tower blaster. My fingers were eager for the feel of the trigger, my eyes hungry for the spiderweb of the sight. I had never brought down a ghoulish 'copter—for the simple reason that I had never had a good shot at one. But I was looking forward to the experience.

It was a cool night for June. The wind had shifted to the northeast, washing the haze of the western dust storms from the atmosphere, and the stars stood out, bold and clear. Mars was no longer an inflamed red eye but a glowing pinpoint of pure orange. *Deucalionis Regio*, however, was as much of an enigma as ever.

An hour passed. The sentries phoned in their reports and I recorded them on the blotter.

0100—all quiet on the Cadillac Front.

My thoughts shifted to Julia, and the magic of the night deepened around me. I pictured her sleeping, her hair dark against the pillow, the delicate crescents of her lashes accentuating the whiteness of her cheeks; her sup-

ple body curved in relaxed grace beneath the sheets. I listened to the soft sound of her breathing—

Soft? No, not soft. My Julia breathed loudly. Moreover, she breathed with a regularity hard to associate with a human being—a regularity reminiscent of a machine. Specifically, a malfunctioning machine, and more specifically yet, the turning of a borer shaft in a well-oiled, but worn, sleeve.

Alert now, I tried to locate the sound. At first it seemed to be all around me, a part of the night air itself, but I finally narrowed it down to the northeast section of the cemetery. Tower 11's territory.

I called 11. Kester's lean young face came into focus on the telescreen. "You should be hearing a borer," I said. "Unless you're deaf. *Do* you hear one?"

Kester's face seemed strained. "Yes. I—I think so."

"Then why didn't you report it? I can hear the damn thing way over here!"

"I—I was going to," Kester said. "I wanted to make sure."

"Make sure! How sure do you have to be? Now listen. You stay by your blaster and keep your eyes and your ears open. I'm coming over to see if I can locate the 'copter. If I do locate it I'll throw a flare under it, and if they try to rise, you burn

them. If they don't try to rise and we can take them alive, so much the better. I'd like to see a real live ghoul. But otherwise, you burn them! If we lose another car-corpse, we'll all be out on our ears."

"All right," Kester said. The screen went blank.

Descending the tower ladder, I wondered what kind of a guard detail I had. Last night, Betz's negligence had cost me a Cadillac. Tonight, Kester's negligence had very nearly cost me another—and might yet, if I wasn't careful.

I couldn't understand it. They were both newly-married men (Kester had applied for a wife the same day Betz had) and, since women were forbidden to work after marrying, both of them certainly needed the better wages Cadillac paid. Why should they deliberately jeopardize their status?

Maybe Betz really hadn't seen or heard anything until it was too late. Maybe Kester really hadn't been sure that the sound he was hearing was the turning of a borer.

But I was sure, and the closer I got to Tower 11, the surer I became. I timed my approach with the swath of the searchlight, made certain there was plenty of concealment available whenever it passed my way. That wasn't hard to do, with all the

lombardies, the arborvitae, the hills, dales and gardens that infested the place. But for once the ancient automakers' passion for landscaping was benefitting me instead of the ghouls.

Tower 11 was a tripodal skeleton stabbing into the cadaverous face of the rising moon. It loomed higher and higher above me as I neared the source of the sound. I swore silently at Kester. He was either stone deaf and blind as a bat, or a deliberate traitor to the Cadillac cause. The exhuming was taking place practically under his nose.

I crept beneath the hem of a lombardy curtain and lay in the deep shadows. I could see the cargo 'copter clearly now. It squatted over a grave mound less than twenty feet from my hiding place, its rotating borer protruding from its open belly like an enormous stinger. The grave mound was already perforated with a score of holes, spaced so that when the casket was drawn upward, the hard-packed earth would crumble and fall apart.

The borer was now probing for the eye of the casket. Even as I watched I heard the grind of steel against gun metal, saw the borer reverse its spiral and rise swiftly into the hold of the 'copter. A bright light stabbed down into the new hole, was quickly extinguished. I thought

I heard the sound of a breath being expelled in relief, but I wasn't sure. Shortly thereafter, I heard the almost inaudible hum of a winch motor, saw the hook dangling on the end of the steel cable just before it disappeared into the hole.

I pulled a flare from my belt, broke the seal. My aim was excellent. The flare landed in the center of the grave mound, went off the minute it hit the ground. The light was blinding. The whole northeast section of the cemetery became as bright as noonday, the interior of the 'copter leaped into dazzling detail. I could see the dungaree-clad ghouls standing on the edge of the open hatch. I could see the winch operator's face——

It was a striking face. It was a twentieth century landscape. The smear of grease on one of the pink cheeks had no effect whatsoever on the white cloud. The blue eyes, blinded by the unexpected light, flowed their blue and beautiful way along the green lip of the nonpareil meadow. The forested hills were more exquisite than ever——

But the solitary bird was gone, and the sky was empty.

And then, suddenly, I could not see anything at all. The ground erupted as the casket broke free, and a shower of dirt and broken clods engulfed me. I staggered to my feet, shielding

my eyes with my arms, gasping for breath. By the time I regained my vision the 'copter was high above the lombardies, the exhumed car-casket swinging wildly beneath the still-opened hatch.

Don't shoot! my mind screamed to Kester. *Don't shoot!* But the words were locked in my throat and I could not utter them. I could only stand there helplessly, waiting for the disintegrating beam to lance out from the tower, waiting for the 'copter and the ghouls—and my conniving Julia—to become bright embers in the night sky.

But I needn't have worried. Kester missed by a mile.

I TURNED him in. What else could I do? I'd spent nine years languishing in lonely towers through long and lonely nights, faithfully guarding the buried art of the automakers. I couldn't throw those years away out of foolish loyalty to a man as obviously indifferent to the cause as Kester was.

But I didn't feel very proud of myself, standing there in the Cadillac Sexton's office the next morning, with Kester, his face cold and expressionless, standing beside me. I didn't feel proud at all. And the Sexton's praise of my last night's action only turned my stomach.

I was cheating and I knew it.

I should have turned in Julia too. But I couldn't do that. Before I took any action, I had to see her, question her myself. There had to be a reasonable explanation for her complicity. There *had* to be!

After the Sexton dismissed me I waited outside for Kester. He didn't seem like a chastened man when he stepped into the morning sunlight. If anything, he seemed relieved—if not actually happy.

He would have walked right by me without a word, but I touched his shoulder and he paused. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to turn you in but I had no choice. But the Sexton let you go?"

He nodded.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he said: "Bartlett, you're a fool," and turned and walked away.

CHAPTER V

JULIA wasn't in the apartment when I got home. But Taigue was.

He was sitting in one of the new chairs as though he owned the place. This time he hadn't come alone. The other chair was occupied by an MEP patrolman armed with a bludgeon gun.

"Come in," Taigue said. "We've been expecting you."

I don't know why I should have cared after the events of last night, but the thought of what he might have done to Julia crystallized my blood. "Where's Julia?" I said.

"Why, what a unique coincidence, Mr. Bartlett. Truly, our minds run in the same channel, to coin a cliché. I was about to voice the same plaintive question."

He was still fasting, and the increased gauntness of his face accentuated the fanatical intensity of his eyes. "If you've hurt her," I said, "I'll kill you!"

Taigue's ugly, dolichocephalic head swiveled on his thin neck till he faced his assistant. "Look who's going to kill someone, Officer Minch. Our esteemed candidate for the Letter himself!"

That one set me back on my heels. I felt the strength go out of my legs. "You're out of your mind, Captain. I'm legally married and you know it!"

"Indeed, Mr. Bartlett?" He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, withdrew a folded sheet of synthetic paper. He tossed it to me contemptuously. "Read all about your 'marriage,' Mr. Bartlett. Then tell me if I'm out of my mind."

I unfolded the gray document, knowing what it was and yet refusing to accept the knowledge. All warrants for arrest are un-

pleasant to the recipient, but an MEP warrant is triply unpleasant.

In addition to being a warrant, it is an indictment, and in addition to being an indictment, it is a sentence. A marital offender has automatically waived his right to a trial of any kind by the very nature of his offense. The logic of the first Puritanical legislators was muddled by their unnatural horror of illicit sex—an inevitable consequence of their eagerness to atone for the sexual enormities of their forebears.

I read the words, first with disbelief, then, as the realization of Julia's motivation dawned on me, with nausea:

CHARGE: *Adultery, as per paragraph 34 of the Adultery Statute, which states in effect that all unofficial marital relationships, regardless of potential ameliorating factors, be construed as asocial and classified as adulterous acts.*

CORRESPONDENTS: *Roger Bartlett, cit. no. 14479201-B; Julia Prentice, cit. no. 1448-9304-P.*

PARTICULARS: *M. I. check, suggested and carried out by MEP Captain Lawrence Taigue, disclosed discrepancy in compatibility factors of aforementioned correspondents. Further check revealed deliberate altering of data cards*

before M. I. computation, rendering said computation invalid and resultant 'marriage' unofficial and therefore adulterous.

SENTENCE: *Public chastisement in the arena of the Municipal Coliseum.*

DATE OF CHASTISEMENT: *June 20, 2151.*

AUTHORIZED ARRESTING OFFICERS: *MEP Captain Lawrence Taigue; MEP Patrolman Ebenezer Minch.*

(signed) Myles Fletcher

MARRIAGE ADMINISTRATOR
June 8, 2151

"Well, Mr. Bartlett? Must you read the words off the page to get their import?"

My mind was reeling but it still rebelled against the reality of Julia's guilt. I grabbed at the first alternative I could think of. "You changed the cards, didn't you, Taigue?" I said.

"Don't be ridiculous. The mere thought of bringing an oafish clod like yourself into even transient intimacy with a sublime creature like Julia revolts my finer sensibilities. Julia altered the cards—as you perfectly well know. But she did not alter them of her own free will. You forced her to alter them."

I stared at him. "For God's sake, Captain, use your head! Why should I do such a thing? How—"

"Why?" Taigue had risen to

his feet. His eyes were dilated. He breathed with difficulty. "I'll tell you why! Because you're a filthy animal, that's why. Because you looked at an ethereal woman and saw nothing but flesh. Because your carnal appetite was whetted and your lecherous desires had to be fed at any cost.

"But you're not going to get away with it!" He was shouting now and his trembling fingers were inches from my throat. "I myself will cast the first stone. But before I do, you'll confess. When the Hour is near, you'll realize the enormity of your lust, just as they all do, and you'll fall on your knees and ask forgiveness. And when you do, you'll automatically absolve Julia of all guilt. *All* guilt, do you understand, Bartlett? Julia's purity must be restored. Julia's purity *has* to be restored!"

I brought my right fist up into his stomach then. Hard. I had to. In another second those yearning fingers would have clamped around my throat.

But I forgot about Patrolman Minch and his bludgeon gun. Even before Taigue hit the floor, the first charge struck me in the shoulder, spun me around so that I faced the wall. The next one caught me squarely in the back of the neck, turned my whole body numb. I sagged like a cloth doll. The floor fascinated me. It was like a dark cloud,

rising. A dark cloud, and then a swirling mist of blackness. And then—nothing.

PRISON CELLS are ideal for objective thinking. There is a quality about their drab walls that brings you face to face with reality.

The Coliseum cell in which I was confined possessed the ultimate in drab walls. The reality with which I was faced was the ultimate in unpleasantness. . . .

On our wedding night, Julia had told me that she had worked at Marriage Administration Headquarters for three years. But when I mentioned Taigue's concern over her, she was amazed. She said she hardly even knew him, that he had never spoken a word to her, had never—to her knowledge—even looked at her.

But he had looked at her without her knowledge. Of that I was sure. He had looked at her a hundred, a thousand, a million times. He had sat at his desk for three years, admiring her, adoring her, worshipping her.

Beyond her physical appearance, however, his Julia bore no relation to the real Julia. His Julia was far more than an ordinary woman. She was the exquisite vase into which he had thrust the flowers of his idealism.

The celibacy vows he had taken when he was ordained an

MEP officer were only partly responsible for his attitude. The real key lay in his physical ugliness—an ugliness that had probably influenced his decision to become an MEP officer.

He had never spoken to Julia, or looked at her openly, because of a deep conviction that he would repel her; and he had rationalized his reticence by attributing it to his rigid interpretation of his duty as an MEP officer. The only way he could realize his love for her was by elevating that love to a higher plane. This had necessitated his elevating Julia also.

Taigue loathed sex. He could tolerate it only when it came as a result of a society-sanctioned marriage. With respect to Julia, he could not tolerate it at all, because the intrusion of sex upon his exquisite vase of flowers sullied both flowers and vase.

When he discovered that the Marriage Integrator had matched Julia with an ordinary mortal, he could not accept the validity of the computation; neither could he accept the fact that Julia had applied for a husband. He had to find a loophole somewhere, a means to rationalize the danger to his flowers. When he learned that Julia herself had contrived the computation, he immediately transferred the blame to me, thereby absolving Julia.

But his logic was shaky, and

he knew it. He couldn't quite believe the lies he had told himself. His edifice was tottering and he needed my confession to shore it up. Therein lay my only hope.

For Taigue would buy that confession at any price. And I would sell it for only one price—

My life.

And so I sat there in my lonely cell, through the gray daytime hours and through the dark nights, waiting for Taigue.

I thought often of Julia. In spite of myself I thought of her, and in spite of myself I kept hoping that she would continue to elude the country-wide search which Marriage Enforcement Headquarters had instigated the morning of my arrest.

I thought of her not as Taigue's vase of flowers, but as the pale girl who had said "I do" with me at the mass-wedding ceremony; as the lovely girl who had lingered in the hive passageway, waiting for me to carry her across the threshold; as the unforgettable girl who had been my wife for a dozen precious hours.

But most of all, I thought of her as the deceitful woman who had intended to use me as an instrument in the ghouls' exploitation of the Cadillac Cemetery.

As she had used Betz and Kester before me.

I had her whole *modus operandi* figured out. Her system was simple. When a cemetery sentry applied for a wife, she simply notified an available sister-ghoul, entered her application along with the sentry's, and then altered the resultant data cards so that they came out of the integrator in the right combination. It took a lot of know-how, but she hadn't worked at Marriage Administration Headquarters three years for nothing. She hadn't taken the job in the first place for nothing, either.

Being a senior sentry, I had rated her personal supervision. I had no idea as to what wiles she would have employed to make me voluntarily neglect my duty to Cadillac; but I had an uncomfortable suspicion that they would have worked.

TAIGUE didn't come until the last day—the last hour, in fact. I was sweating. The Coliseum seamstress had already sewn the big scarlet letter on the breast of my gray prison blouse and the Coliseum barber had just been in to cut my hair. I could hear the distant shuffling of feet on the stoning platform and the faraway murmur of many voices.

Taigue was still fasting. Ordinary MEP officers were usually content to fast their required day per week and to let it go at

that. But Taigue was not an ordinary MEP officer. He stood before me like a Bunyanesque caricature. Caverns had appeared above the ridges of his cheek bones and his eyes had retreated into their depths where they burned like banked fires.

"Short hair becomes you, Mr. Bartlett," he said, but his irony lacked its usual edge. Moreover, the ghastly paleness of his face could not be wholly attributed to his physical condition.

"Did you come to receive my confession, Captain?"

"Whenever you're ready, Mr. Bartlett."

"I'm ready now."

He nodded solemnly. "I thought you might be. I discounted Julia's insistence that she acted of her own free will."

That shook me. "Julia? Is— is she here?"

He nodded again. "She gave herself up a week ago. She confessed to altering the data cards—insisted over and over that she alone was to blame. I tried to tell them, I tried to explain to the Marriage Administrator that she couldn't possibly be to blame, that she was an innocent tool in the hands of a hardened adulterer. But he wouldn't listen. No one would listen. They sewed the letter on her this morning. They—they cut her hair."

I tried to tell myself that she

had it coming, but it wasn't any good. I felt sick. I kept seeing her crumpled body lying in the arena and the cruel stones scattered in the dirt and the blood on them. Julia's blood—

"Well, Mr. Bartlett? You said you were ready to confess."

"Yes," I said. "I presume you're ready to pay my price?"

"Price?" The emaciated face showed surprise. "Do you expect to be reimbursed for relieving your conscience, Mr. Bartlett?"

"You can put it that way if it makes it easier for you."

"And what do you think your confession is worth?"

"You know how much it's worth, Taigue. It's worth Julia's life—and mine."

"You try my patience, Mr. Bartlett."

"You try mine too."

"My wanting your confession is a purely personal matter. Both you and Julia will die in the arena regardless of your decision. Adultery charges are irrevocable."

"I'm not asking you to revoke any charges," I said. "All I'm asking you to do is to get Julia and me out of here alive. You can do it."

He stared at me. "Mr. Bartlett, your incarceration has affected your mind! Do you really think I'd free you, even if I could, and give you further opportunity to vitiate Julia?"

My thinking hadn't been nearly as objective as I'd imagined. I should have realized that Taigue would rather see his flowers dead than expose them to additional "defilement." I was desperate now, and my desperation got the better of my judgment. "Is my confession worth Julia's life then?" I asked.

He raised an arthritic hand to his forehead, wiped away a glistening film of sweat. Presently: "Mr. Bartlett, I'm afraid you don't understand the situation at all. Your perspective is so warped by wrong thinking that 2 and 2 fail to make 4 to you, either by multiplication or addition.

"Don't you see that Julia *has* to die? Can't you understand that, even though she is innocent, her reputation is still hopelessly tainted by your illicit affections? Can't you realize that I wouldn't save her even if I could?"

I did realize finally, though his fanaticism stunned me. He was more than a mere zealot; he was a monster. But if Julia was his goddess, marriage enforcement was his god. He could not buy a guarantee of his goddess' purity if the price involved the desecration of his god. He needed my confession desperately, but he didn't have the authority to torture it out of me and he couldn't pay the price I had asked. My one hope of escape had turned out to be a

pretty worthless item.

But it was still my only hope. If I could find another way to use it, it might still net me my freedom, and Julia's too.

There was one way. It was drastic and it might not work; but it was worth a try. "All right, Taigue," I said. "I understand your position. Bring Julia here and I'll confess."

"Bring her here? Why? All you have to do is admit you coerced her to alter the data cards. Her presence isn't necessary."

"It's necessary to me."

He looked at me for a moment, then turned abruptly and left the cell. He told the patrolman, whom he had posted by the door, to wait, then he disappeared down the corridor. The patrolman closed the cell door but didn't bother to lock it. He didn't need to. The bludgeon gun in the crook of his arm was a sufficient deterrent.

Presently I heard Taigue's returning footsteps. They were accompanied by other footsteps—light, quick footsteps. My heart broke the barrier I had erected around it, rose up, choking me.

When I saw her shorn hair I wanted to cry. Her face was more like a little girl's than ever, but the blue eyes gazing straight into mine were the eyes of a mature woman. There was regret

in them, but no shame.

I turned away from her. "Dismiss your assistant," I told Taigue. "What I have to say is none of his business."

Taigue started to object, then changed his mind. With the reassurance he so desperately needed at his very fingertips, he wasn't in the mood to argue over trivialities. He took the patrolman's bludgeon gun, sent him on his way, re-entered the cell and closed the door. He leaned against the genuine steel panels, directed the muzzle of the gun at my chest.

"Well, Mr. Bartlett?"

"You asked for this, Taigue," I said. "You wouldn't have it any other way. Julia, come here."

She stepped to my side. Seizing the lapels of her Hester Prynne prison dress, I ripped it down the middle and tore it from her body.

CHAPTER VI

JULIA shrank back, trying to cover her nakedness with her arms. Taigue became a statue, a statue staring with horrified eyes at a shining goddess who had abruptly deteriorated into a mere woman. I tore the gun from his grasp before he could recover himself and bludgeoned him beneath the heart. But his eyes were glazed even before the charge struck him. I looked at

him disgustedly as he sank gasping to the floor. The self-righteous idealism with which he had clothed Julia had been even thinner than the earthly clothes I had ripped away.

I turned to Julia. She had retrieved the prison dress, had slipped into it, and was improvising a catch to hold it together. Her face was white but her eyes were dry. I searched those eyes anxiously. I don't know why I should have been relieved to find understanding rather than anger in them, but I was relieved—more relieved than I would have cared to admit.

"Can you pilot a 'copter?" I asked.

She nodded. "I've been piloting them since I was twelve."

"There's a 'copter port on the roof. If we can reach it, we've got a chance. I don't know where we'll go, but we'll go somewhere—"

"We'll go to Mars, Roger. If you're willing." She had finished repairing her dress and stood calm and poised before me.

"This is no time for jokes," I said.

"And I'm not joking. There's a ramp not far from here that will take us to the roof. Come on, Roger!"

We peered up and down the corridor. It was empty. I followed Julia down the grim passage.

In the distance, the arena entrance was bright with afternoon sunlight. At the first intersection, she turned right. The new passage was narrow, dimly lighted. At its far end a ponderous stone door opened reluctantly to the pressure of our shoulders and we found ourselves at the base of a sharply slanting ramp.

"You seem to know this place like a book," I said. "Were you ever in the cell block before?"

She nodded. "I visited my mother often before she was stoned."

"Your mother! *Stoned*?"

"Yes. Stoned. That's why I'm a ghoul. Hurry, Roger!"

We started up the ramp. After a dozen yards, it turned abruptly, became a steep spiral. Breathing was difficult, conversation impossible. Now and then, a slit of a window looked out into the crowded amphitheater.

The port boasted one derelict 'copter and one guard. The guard had his back to us when we crept cautiously onto the roof. He must have sensed our presence, for he turned. But I doubt if he ever saw us. The charge from my gun struck him in the side before he even completed his turn, and he crumpled to the sun-drenched concrete.

We were aboard the 'copter in an instant. Julia's experienced fingers made deft maneuvers on the control panel and then we

were aloft, soaring over the amphitheater, the sky blue above us, the stoning platform a *chiaroscuro* of gray- and black-garbed men and women below us. The arena proper was a bleak expanse of packed dirt, unrelieved by a single blade of grass. I could hear the obscene murmur of the crowd above the whirring of the blades.

There was a telescreen above the control panel. I turned it on to see if our escape had been discovered. Apparently it had not been, for the scene coming over the single channel was the same I had just witnessed, viewed from a different angle. The telecamera had been set up opposite the arena entrance so that the upper echelon members of the hierarchy, who could afford such luxuries as TV sets, would have an excellent view of the expected chastisement.

The announcer was intoning the sixth commandment over and over in a deep resonant voice. I lowered the volume and turned to Julia. We were over the parsonage apartments now, headed in a northerly direction.

"Don't you think it's time you told me where we're going?" I said.

"I told you before but you wouldn't believe me. We're going to Mars, provided you're willing, of course. And I'm afraid you haven't much choice."

"Stop being ridiculous, Julia. This is a serious situation!"

"I know, darling. I know. And if the ship has already blasted, it will be a far more serious situation."

"What ship are you talking about?"

"The Cadillac-ship; the Ford-ship; the Plymouth-ship. Call it what you will. Cars are made of metal, so are spaceships. By applying the right temperatures, and the right techniques, dedicated people can transform Cadillacs and Fords and Plymouths into highways to the stars."

I was staring at her. "The ghouls—"

"Are people like myself—the new Pilgrims, if you like. Pilgrims sick of a society that evades population control by consigning its marriages to a computer deliberately designed to produce incompatible unions that will result in few, if any, children. Pilgrims who want no more of a civilization victimized by an outdated biblical exhortation, exploited by false prophets hiding behind misinterpretations of Freudian terminology."

The hives were flickering beneath us, gaunt precipices flanking narrow canyons. The verdure of the Cadillac Cemetery showed in the distance, and beyond it, eroded hills rolled away.

"I'm glad you did alter our data cards," I said after a while.

"But I wish you'd done it for a different reason. I wish you could have loved me, Julia."

"I do love you," Julia said. "You see, darling, I couldn't accompany the colonists without a husband and I didn't want the kind of a husband the integrator would have given me. So I computed my own marriage. That was why I was so rude to you at the Cathedral. I—I was ashamed. Not that it was the first marriage I'd computed, but all the others—like Betz's and Kester's—involved people who were working on the ship, people who were already in love. There—there wasn't anyone in the group whom I cared for myself, so I had to look elsewhere. You and I are ideally suited, Roger. I didn't need the data cards to tell me that—all I needed was my eyes."

We were high above the Cadillac Cemetery and she was looking anxiously ahead at the rolling, dun-colored hills. "If only they haven't left yet," she said. "The last Cadillac we exhumed provided enough metal to finish the ship. But perhaps they waited for us."

A sudden crescendo in the murmur of the waiting crowd in the Coliseum brought the TV unit back to life. Slowly, the murmur rose into a great vindictive roar. Glancing at the screen, I saw the reason why.

The charcoal-uniformed figure that had just stepped through the arena entrance was unmistakable. The distance was considerable, and the eyes appeared only as dark shadows on the thin, haunted face. But I could visualize the terrible guilt burning in their depths; the consuming, the unbearable guilt—

I watched the first stone with horror. It missed, rolled to a stop in the dirt. The next one missed, too. But the one after it didn't, nor the one that followed. Taigue sank to his knees, and the stones became a murderous hail. And then, abruptly, it was all over, and Taigue lay dead and bleeding on the stone-littered ground, the scarlet letter he had pinned to his breast vivid in the merciless sunlight.

Thou shalt not look at a woman and lust—

Taigue had kept faith with himself to the end.

WE WERE drifting over the hills. "There," Julia said suddenly. "There's the one, Roger!"

It looked like all the others to me—drab, scarred by innumerable gullies, lifeless. But when Julia opened the door of the cockpit and leaned out and waved, the gullies rivened, and the whole hill opened up like an enormous metallic flower.

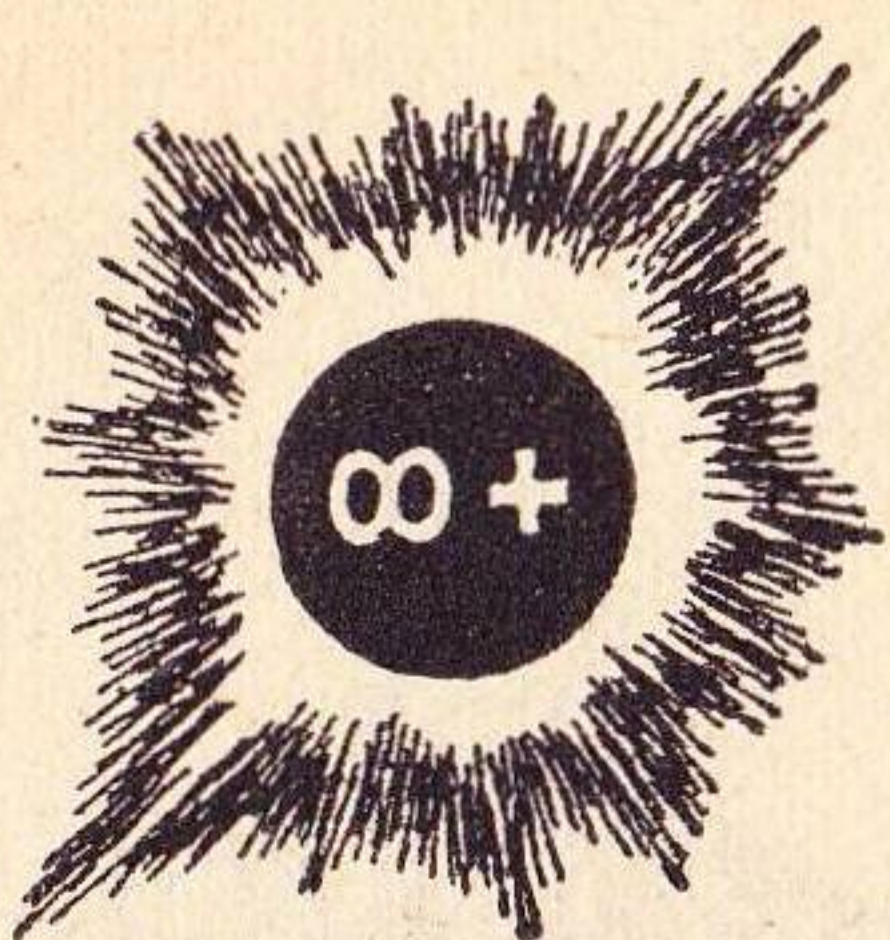
I saw the ship then, the tall burnished ship poised on its concrete launching platform. I saw its name—the *Mayflower II*.

We drifted down past the tapered prow, the gleaming flanks. The other Pilgrims were already aboard. Betz and Kester waved to us as we passed the open lock. We stepped out upon the launching platform. The ship towered above us. The lathes and presses and furnaces of the subterranean factory stood silent in the gloom around us.

I looked at Julia. Her eyes were iridescent with relieved tears, her smile tremulous with happiness. "Mars, Roger," she whispered. "The ship can make it. But perhaps the old colony has perished and we'll have to start a new one. It won't be easy, darling. But will you come?"

I felt the way Samuel Fuller and Christopher Martin must have felt five centuries ago, standing on a lonely wharf in Southampton. The way William White and John Alden must have felt—

No, not quite the way John Alden had felt. I already had *my* Priscilla Mullins. I bent and kissed her. Then, hand in hand, we ascended the spiral gangplank of the *Mayflower II* to begin our journey to the New World.



...an **Infinity-plus** feature

Challenge To The Writer

BLANK

On the following 17 pages, we present three stories by three top writers, written in answer to the most difficult challenge we could think of.

The first draft of each one was written in our editorial office. Each writer was provided with the one-word title, "Blank." Each story, we insisted, had to fit that title, and meet all the usual standards for an INFINITY acceptance.

Each of the three writers we invited to participate met the challenge with an excellent story. And each of them as you will see, is quite different from the others.

Here they are, in their final, polished versions. Be sure to let us know how you like them—and the idea behind them.



Isaac Asimov



Randall Garrett



Harlan Ellison

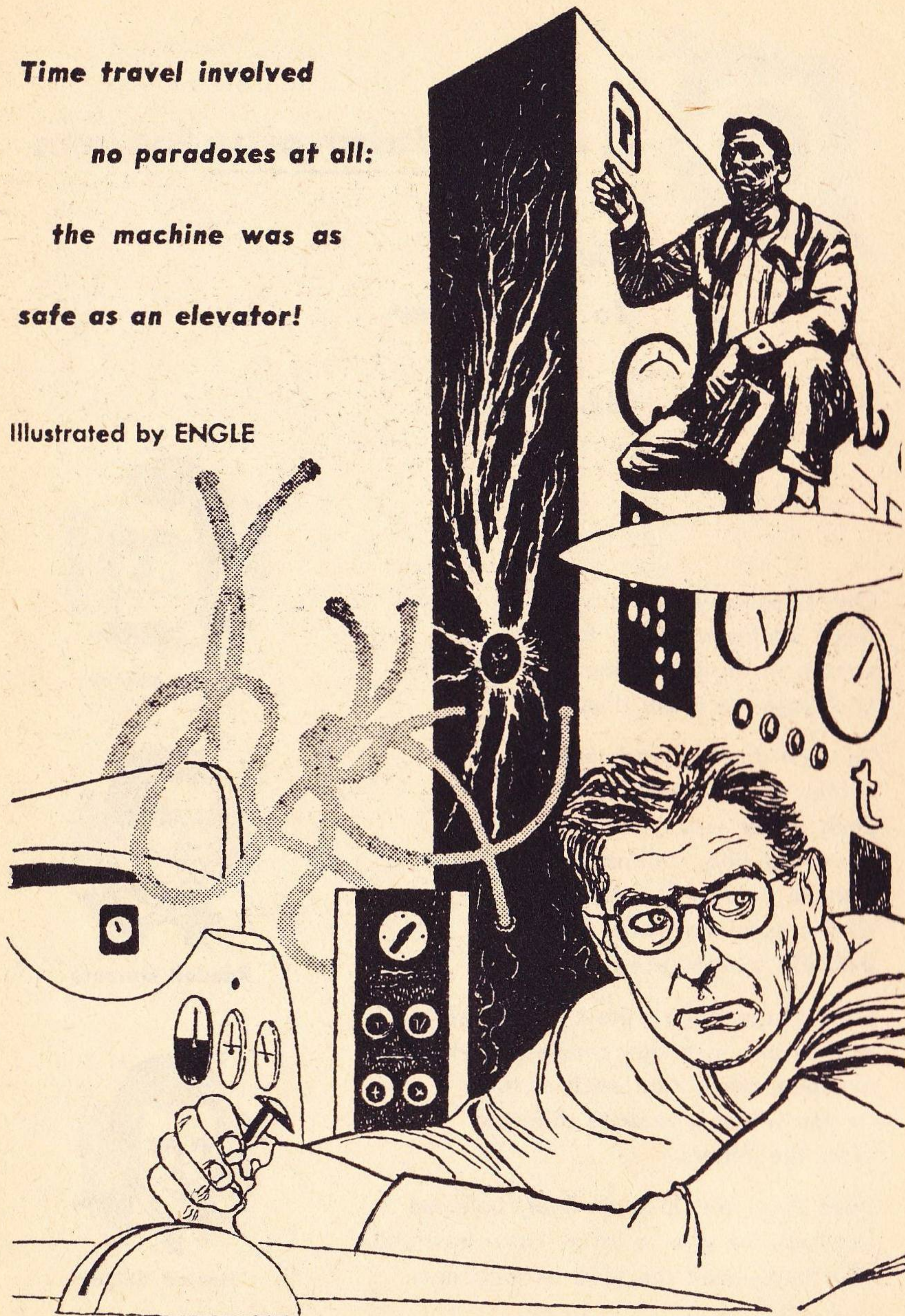
Time travel involved

no paradoxes at all:

the machine was as

safe as an elevator!

Illustrated by ENGLE



by ISAAC ASIMOV

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"PRESUMABLY," said August Pointdexter, "there is such a thing as overweening pride. The Greeks called it *hubris*, and considered it to be defiance of the gods, to be followed always by *ate*, or retribution." He rubbed his pale blue eyes uneasily.

"Very pretty," said Dr. Edward Barron impatiently. "Has that any connection with what I said?" His forehead was high and had horizontal creases in it that cut in sharply when he raised his eyebrows in contempt.

"Every connection," said Pointdexter. "To construct a time machine is itself a challenge to fate. You make it worse by your flat confidence. How can you be *sure* that your time-travel machine will operate through all of time without the possibility of paradox?"

Barron said, "I didn't know you were superstitious. The simple fact is that a time machine is a machine like any other machine, no more and no less sacrilegious. Mathematically, it is analogous to an

BLANK!

elevator moving up and down its shaft. What danger of retribution lies in that?"

Pointdexter said energetically, "An elevator doesn't involve paradoxes. You can't move from the fifth floor to the fourth and kill your grandfather as a child."

Dr. Barron shook his head in agonized impatience. "I was waiting for that. For *exactly* that. Why couldn't you suggest that I would meet myself or that I would change history by telling McClellan that Stonewall Jackson was going to make a flank march on Washington, or anything else? Now I'm asking you point-blank. Will you come into the machine with me?"

Pointdexter hesitated. "I . . . I don't think so."

"Why do you make things difficult? I've explained already that time is invariant. If I go into the past it will be because I've already been there. Anything I decided to do and proceed to do, I will have already done in the past all along, so I'll be changing nothing and no paradoxes will result. If I decided to kill my grandfather as a baby, and *did* it, I would not be here. But I *am* here. Therefore I did not kill my grandfather. No matter how I try to kill him and plan to kill him, the fact is I didn't kill him and so I won't kill him. Nothing would change that. Do you un-

derstand what I'm explaining?"

"I understand what you say, but are you right?"

"Of course I'm right. For God's sake, why couldn't you have been a mathematician instead of a machinist with a college education?" In his impatience, Barron could scarcely hide his contempt. "Look, this machine is only possible because certain mathematical relationships between space and time hold true. You understand that, don't you, even if you don't follow the details of the mathematics? The machine exists so the mathematical relations I worked out have some correspondence in reality. Right? You've seen me send rabbits a week into the future. You've seen them appear out of nothing. You've watched me send a rabbit a week into the past one week after it appeared. And they were unharmed."

"All right. I admit all that."

"Then will you believe me if I tell you that the equations upon which this machine is based assume that time is composed of particles that exist in an unchanging order; that time is invariant? If the order of the particles could be changed in any way—any way at all—the equations would be invalid and this machine wouldn't work; this particular method of time-travel would be impossible."

Pointdexter rubbed his eyes again and looked thoughtful. "I wish I knew mathematics."

Barron said, "Just consider the facts. You tried to send the rabbit *two* weeks into the past when it had arrived only one week in the past. That would have created a paradox, wouldn't it? But what happened? The indicator stuck at one week and wouldn't budge. You *couldn't* create a paradox. Will you come?"

Pointdexter shuddered at the edge of the abyss of agreement and drew back. He said, "No."

Barron said, "I wouldn't ask you to help if I could do this alone, but you know it takes two men to operate the machine for intervals of more than a month. I need someone to control the Standards so that we can return with precision. And you're the one I want to use. We share the—the glory of this thing now. Do you want to thin it out, cut in a third person? Time enough for that after we've established ourselves as the first time travelers in history. Good Lord, man, don't you want to see where we'll be a hundred years from now, or a thousand; don't you want to see Napoleon, or Jesus, for that matter? We'll be like—like—" Barron seemed carried away. "—like gods."

"Exactly," mumbled Pointdexter. "*Hubris*. Time travel

isn't god-like enough to risk being stranded out of my own time."

"*Hubris*. Stranded. You keep making up fears. We're just moving along the particles of time like an elevator along the floors of a building. Time travel is actually safer because an elevator cable can break, whereas in the time machine there'll be no gravity to pull us down destructively. Nothing wrong can possibly happen. I guarantee it," said Barron, tapping his chest with the middle finger of his right hand. "I guarantee it."

"*Hubris*," muttered Pointdexter, but fell into the abyss of agreement nevertheless, overborne at last.

Together they entered the machine.

POINTDEXTER did not understand the controls in the sense Barron did, for he was no mathematician, but he knew how they were supposed to be handled.

Barron was at one set, the Propulsions. They supplied the drive that forced the machine along the time axis. Pointdexter was at the Standards that kept the point of origin fixed so that the machine could move back to the original starting point at any time.

Pointdexter's teeth chattered as the first motion made itself felt in his stomach. Like an ele-

vator's motion, it was, but not quite. It was something more subtle, yet very real. He said, "What if—"

Barron snapped out, "Nothing can go wrong. Please!"

And at once there was a jar and Pointdexter fell heavily against the wall.

Barron said, "What the devil!"

"What happened?" demanded Pointdexter, breathlessly.

"I don't know, but it doesn't matter. We're only twenty-two hours into the future. Let's step out and check."

The door of the machine slid into its recessed panel and the breath went out of Pointdexter's body in a panting whoosh. He said, "There's nothing there."

Nothing. No matter. No light. Blank!

Pointdexter screamed. "The earth moved. We forgot that. In twenty-two hours, it moved thousands of miles through space, traveling around the sun."

"No," said Barron, faintly, "I didn't forget that. The machine is designed to follow the time-path of Earth wherever that leads. Besides, even if Earth moved, where is the sun? Where are the stars?"

Barron went back to the controls. Nothing budged. Nothing worked. The door would no longer slide shut. Blank!

Pointdexter found it getting

difficult to breathe, difficult to move. With effort, he said, "What's wrong, then?"

Barron moved slowly toward the center of the machine. He said, painfully, "The particles of time. I think we happened to stall . . . between two . . . particles."

Pointdexter tried to clench a fist but couldn't. "Don't understand."

"Like an elevator. Like an elevator." He could no longer sound the words, but only move his lips to shape them. "Like an elevator, after all . . . stuck between the floors."

Pointdexter could not even move his lips. He thought: Nothing can proceed in non-time. All motion is suspended, all consciousness, all everything. There was an inertia about themselves that had carried them along in time for a minute or so, like a body leaning forward when an automobile comes to a sudden halt—but it was dying fast.

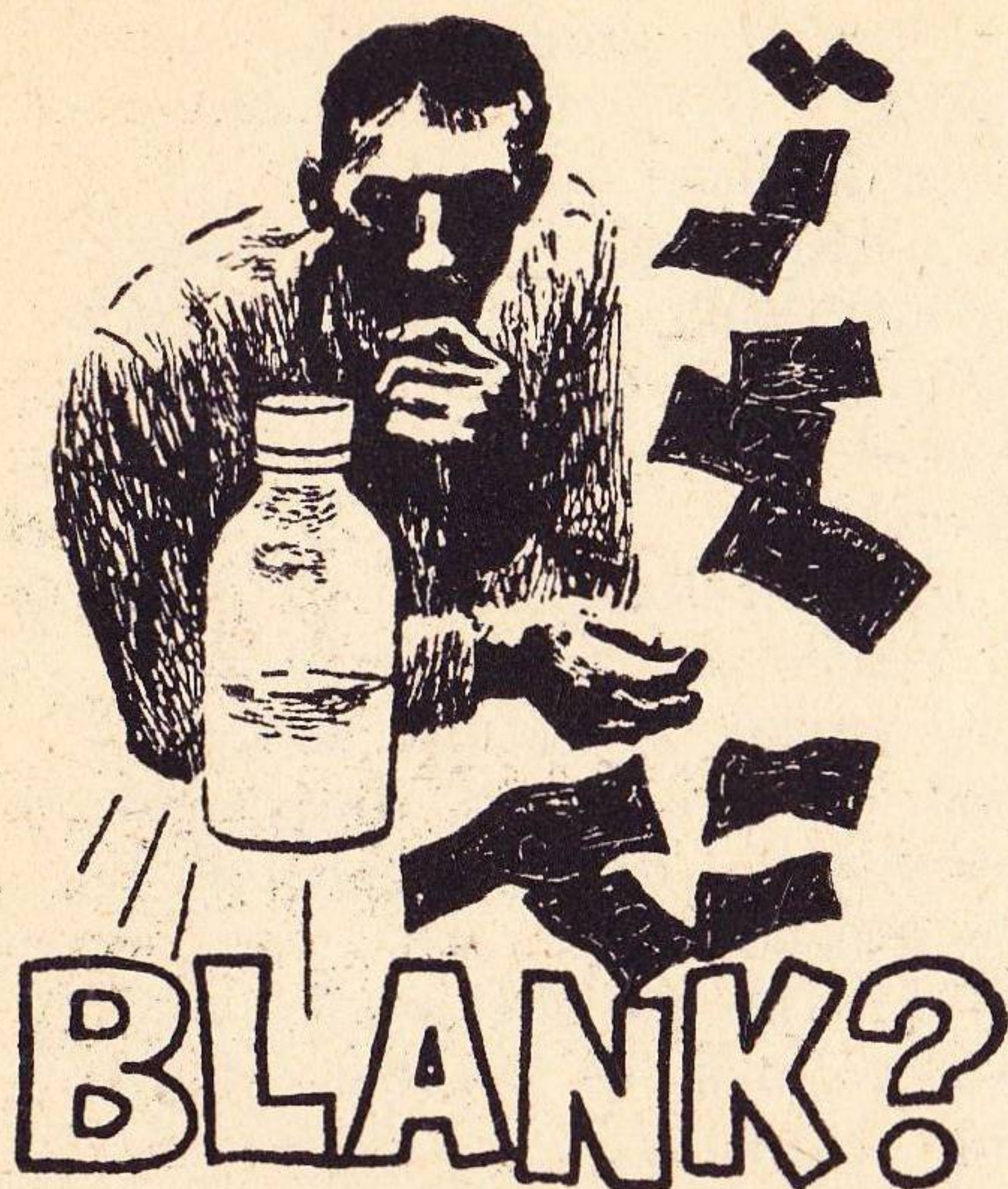
The light within the machine dimmed and went out. Sensation and awareness chilled into nothing.

One last thought, one final feeble mental sigh: *Hubris, ate!*

Then thought stopped, too.

Stasis! Nothing! For all eternity, where even eternity was meaningless, there would only be—blank!

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Amnesia? Well, maybe

—but how and where had he

earned that \$50,000?

by RANDALL GARRETT

Illustrated by ENGLE



BETHELMAN came to quite suddenly, and found himself standing on the corner of 44th Street and Madison Avenue. He was dizzy for a moment—not from any physical cause, but from the disorientation. The last thing he could remember, he had been sitting in a bar in Boston, talking to Dr. Elijah Kamiroff. After the interview was over, they'd had a few drinks, and then a few more. After that, things began to get hazy.

Bethelman rubbed his head. It wasn't like a hangover; his head felt perfectly fine. But how in the devil had he gotten here? He looked around. No one was paying any attention to him, but no one pays any attention to any-

BLANK?

one on the streets of New York. Still feeling queer, he headed east on 44th Street.

He wanted to sit down for a bit, and the nearest place was the little bar halfway between Madison Avenue and Grand Central Station. He went in and ordered a beer.

What the hell had happened? He'd had too much to drink on several occasions, but he'd never gone to sleep in one city and awakened in another. Dr. Kamiroff must have put him on the plane; the biochemist didn't drink much, and had probably been in better shape than Bethelman had been.

He glanced at his watch. Two-fifteen! Wow! The city editor would be wondering where he was.

He went to the phone, dropped in a dime, and dialed the city desk. When the editor's voice answered, he said: "Hickman, this is Bethelman; I'm sorry I'm late, but—"

"Late?" interrupted Hickman, "What're you talking about? You've only been gone half an hour. You sick or something?"

"I don't feel too good," Bethelman admitted confusedly.

"That's what you said when you left. Hell, man, take the rest of the day off. It's Friday; you don't need to show up until Monday if you don't want to. Okay?"

"Yeah," said Bethelman. "Sure." His mind still didn't want to focus properly.

"Okay, boy," said Hickman. "And thanks again for the tip. Who'd have thought Baby Joe would come in first? See you Monday."

And he hung up.

Bethelman stood there looking foolish for a full five seconds. Then things began to connect up. *Friday!* It shouldn't be Friday.

He cradled the phone and walked over to the bar where the barman was assiduously polishing a beer glass.

"What day is this?" he asked.

"Friday," said the white-jacketed barman, looking up from the shell of gleaming glass.

"I mean the date," Bethelman corrected.

"Fifteenth, I think." He glanced at a copy of the *Times* that lay on the bar. "Yeah. Fifteenth."

Bethelman sat down heavily on the barstool. The fifteenth! Somewhere, he had lost two weeks! He searched his memory for some clue, but found nothing. His memory was a perfect blank for those two weeks.

Automatically, his hand went to his shirt pocket for cigarettes. He pulled out the pack and started to shake one out. It wouldn't shake, so he stuck his finger in the half empty pack to dislodge

a cigarette. There was a roll of paper stuck in it.

He took it out and unrolled it. It was a note.

You're doing fine. You know something's wrong, but you don't know what. Go ahead and investigate; I guarantee you'll get the answers. But be careful not to get anyone too suspicious; you don't want to get locked up in the booby bin. I suggest you try Marco's first.

The note was unsigned, but Bethelman didn't need a signature.

The handwriting was his own.

HE LOOKED at himself in the mirror behind the bar. He was clean shaven—which he hadn't been when he was drinking with Dr. Kamiroff in Boston. Also, he was wearing his tweed topcoat, which he had left in New York. A search of his pockets revealed the usual keys and change. In his billfold was three hundred dollars in cash—more than he'd ever carried around in his life—and a receipt for a new twenty-dollar hat. The receipt was dated the tenth.

He took off his hat and looked at it. Brand new, with his initials on the sweatband.

Evidently, he'd been doing something the past two weeks—but what?

He remembered talking to Kamiroff about the variability of

time—something about a man named Dunne. And he remembered the biochemist saying that time travel was physically impossible. For a second or two, Bethelman wondered whether he'd been projected into the future somehow. But if he had, he reasoned, he'd still be wearing the same clothes he'd had on in Boston.

No, he decided, *it's something else. I've gone off my rocker. I'm daffy as a dung beetle. What I need is a good psychiatrist.*

But that didn't explain the note.

He took it out and looked at it again. It still said the same thing. He decided that before he went to a psychiatrist, he'd do what the note said. He'd go to Marco's.

After all, if he couldn't trust himself, who could he trust?

Marco's was a little place down on Second Avenue. It wasn't the most elite bar in New York, but it wasn't the worst dive, either.

Marco was standing near the door when Bethelman entered. "Ah! Mr. Bethelman! The package you were expecting is here. The—ah—gentleman left it." The beaming smile on his face was a marvel to behold.

"Thanks," Bethelman said.

Marco dived behind the bar and came up with a package wrapped in brown paper and an

envelope addressed to Bethelman. The package was about three inches wide, a little less than six inches long, and nearly an inch thick. He slid it into his topcoat pocket and tore open the envelope.

There should be close to ten thousand dollars in the package, the note said. You promised Marco a grand of it if number 367 won—which, of course, it did. He got hold of the runner for you.

Again, the note was in his own handwriting.

He gave Marco the thousand and left. There were some things he'd have to find out. He went to his apartment on 86th Street and put in a long distance call to Dr. Elijah Kamiroff in Boston. After an hour, he was informed that Dr. Kamiroff was out of town and was not expected back for two weeks. Where had he gone? That was confidential; Dr. Kamiroff had some work to do and did not wish to be disturbed.

Bethelman cursed the biochemist roundly and then went to his private files, where he kept clippings of his own stories. Sure enough, there were coverages of several things over the past two weeks, all properly bylined.

Two weeks before, he had written the little article on research being done on cancer at

Boston University School of Medicine, most of which he'd gotten from Dr. Kamiroff. No clues there; he'd evidently been behaving naturally for the past two weeks. But why couldn't he remember it? Why was his memory completely blanked out?

He had to know.

HE SPENT the next two weeks running down his activities during the blank period, and the more he worked, the more baffled he became. He had never been a gambling man, but he seemed to have become one over those two weeks. And a damned lucky one at that.

Horse races, the numbers game, even the stock market, all seemed to break right for him. In the blank two weeks, Bethelman had made himself close to fifty thousand dollars! And every so often, he'd come across a little note from himself, telling him that he was doing fine. Once, a note he found in his bureau drawer, tucked among the socks, told him to invest every cent he had in a certain security and then sell the next day. He did it and made another nine thousand dollars.

It was exactly four weeks to the day after he had sat in the bar with Dr. Kamiroff that he found the last cryptic note to himself. It was in his unabridged dictionary, laying right on the

page which contained the word he happened to be looking up.

Tomorrow morning, it said, you will see Dr. Kamiroff. But don't expect him to explain anything to you until you have explained everything to him.

So he would see Kamiroff in the morning, eh? He'd been trying to get hold of the biochemist every day for the past two weeks—and there had been no results.

That night, just before bedtime, Bethelman drank a glass of beer. One glass. No more.

And that's why he couldn't understand waking up the next morning with a king-size hang-over. He rolled over in bed, moaning—half afraid to open his eyes.

"Ooooooh!" he said. "My head!"

"Want a bromo?" a familiar voice asked sympathetically.

Bethelman forced his eyes open. The stocky, smiling face of Dr. Elijah Kamiroff floated above him.

Bethelman sat straight up in bed, his eyes wide. The effort made his head hurt worse. He looked around.

He was in the upstairs guest bedroom of Dr. Kamiroff's suburban home.

He turned to look at the biochemist, who was busily mixing a bromo.

"What date is this?" he asked.

Kamiroff looked at him with

mild blue eyes. "It's the second," he said. "Why?"

Bethleman took the glass of fizzing liquid and downed it. The pattern was beginning to make sense. He had gone to sleep in Boston the night of the first and awakened in New York on the fifteenth. Then he had gone to sleep in New York on the twenty-ninth and awakened on the second.

It made a weird kind of sense.

He handed the empty glass back to the biochemist and said: "Dr. Kamiroff, sit down. I want to tell you something."

HALF AN HOUR later, Kamiroff was rubbing his chin with a forefinger, deep in concentration. "It sounds wild," he said at last, "but I've heard of wild things before."

"But what caused it?"

"Do you remember what you did last night? I mean the night of the first?"

"Not clearly; we got pretty crocked, I remember."

Kamiroff grinned. "I think you were a few up on me. Do you remember that bottle of white powder I had in the lab down in the basement?"

"No," Bethelman admitted.

"It was diazotimoline, one of the drugs we've been using in cancer research on white mice. That whole family of compounds has some pretty peculiar prop-

erties. This one happens to smell like vanilla; when I let you smell it, you stuck your finger in it and licked off some of the powder before I could stop you.

"It didn't bother me much; we've given it to mice without any ill effects, so I didn't give you an emetic or anything."

The bromo had made Bethelman's head feel better. "But what happened, exactly?" he asked.

"As far as I can judge," the biochemist said, "the diazotimoline has an effect on the mind. Not by itself, maybe; perhaps it needed the synergetic combination with alcohol. I don't know."

"Have you heard the theories that Dunne propounded on the mind?"

"Yeah," Bethelman said. "We discussed them last night, I think."

"Right. The idea is that the mind is independent of time, but just follows the body along through the time stream."

"Evidently, what the diazotimoline did was project your mind two weeks into the future—to the fifteenth. After two weeks—on the twenty-ninth—it wore off, and your mind returned to the second. Now you'll relive those two weeks."

"That sounds like a weird explanation," Bethelman said.

"Well, look at it this way.

Let's just say you remember those two weeks in the wrong order. The drug mixed your memory up. You remember the fortnight of the second to the fifteenth *after* you remember the fortnight of the fifteenth to the twenty-ninth. See?"

"Good gosh, yes! Now I see how I made all that money! I read all the papers; I know what the stocks are going to do; I know what horses are going to win! Wow!"

"That's right," Kamiroff agreed. "And you'll know where to leave all those notes to yourself."

"Yeah! And on the afternoon of the fifteenth, I'll blank out and wake up in my bed on the morning of the thirtieth!"

"I should think so, yes," Kamiroff said.

"It makes sense, now." Then Bethelman looked up at the biochemist. "By the way, Dr. Kamiroff, I want to split this money with you; after all, you're responsible for what happened."

The scientist smiled and shook his head. "No need of that. I have the diazotimoline, remember? You said you couldn't get hold of me on the phone; you said I was doing experimental work and couldn't be disturbed."

"Now, just what do you think I'm going to be experimenting on for the next couple of months?"

∞ ∞

BLANK . . .

by HARLAN ELLISON

**A clever man can
use tools that he
doesn't understand
—even human tools!**

Illustrated by ENGLE



BLANK...

DRIVER HALL was an impressive pastel blue building in the center of the city. Akisimov had no difficulty finding its spirally-rising towers, even though the psycops were close behind—but once within sight of the structure, he hesitated.

How could he do it?

No Driver would intentionally help a criminal escape. Yet a Driver was his only possible chance of freedom.

Akisimov's bleak, hard features sagged in fright as he sensed the tentative probes of the psycops in his mind. They had found the girl, and they were circling in on him, getting his thoughts pin-pointed. *Why* had that stupid urchin wandered across his path? It had been a clean escape, till he had run out of the mouth of that alley, and stumbled into her. *Why* had she clung to him? He hadn't *wanted* to burn her down. . . .

Akisimov cast about hungrily with his eyes. He spotted the service entrance to the Hall. It was a dark hole in the side of the building, and he sprinted across the street, in a dead run for it. He made the comparative safety of the entrance without being noticed, and crouched down to wait. Wildly, he pulled the defective mesh cap tighter about his ears. Poor thing that it was, it was the only thing standing between him and capture by

the psycops. Had it been a standard make, not a lousy rogue cheapie model, it would have blanked him effectively. As it was, it was the best he had.

With unfamiliar phrases he prayed to some unknown God to let the mind-blanking cap work well enough to keep the psycops off him till he could kidnap a Driver.

RIKE AKISIMOV had been sentenced to Io penal colony for a thousand years. The jurymech knew such a sentence bordered on the ridiculous; even with the current trends in geriatrics, *no* man could live past three hundred.

But after emotionless consideration of this most vile of criminals, the placid and faceless jurymech had said: "We, the beings of the Solarite, sentence you, Rike Amadeus Akisimov, to the penal colony on Io for a period of one thousand years."

Then, as the jury room buzzed with wonder, the machine added: "We feel even *this* sentence is too light. Rike Amadeus Akisimov, we find in you no identification with humanity, but only a resemblance to some beast of the jungle. You are a carrion-feeder, Akisimov; you are a jackal and a hyena and a vulture, and it is essential to the good of humanity that your kind be eliminated from the universe.

"We cannot even say, 'God have mercy on your soul,' for we are certain you have no soul!"

The jury room had been stunned into silence. Even a machine had been shocked by the magnitude of Akisimov's crimes. For they were more than crimes against society. They were crimes against God and Man.

They had taken him away, and were preparing to load him in the ferry-flit designed to convey prisoners from court to the spaceport when he struck. By a remarkable strength born of terror and desperation he had snapped the elasticords that bound him, clubbed his guards and broken into the crowds clogging the strips, carrying with him a guard's blaster.

In a few minutes he was lost to the psioid lawmen, had ripped a mind-blanking mesh cap from a pedestrian's head, and was on his way to the one escape route left.

To the Hall, and the psioids known as Drivers.

SHE CAME out of the building, and Akisimov recognized her at once as a senior grade Driver. She was a tall girl, tanned and beautifully-proportioned, walking with the easy, off-the-toes stride of the experienced spaceman. She wore the mind's-eye and jet-tube insignia of her psi-class on her left breast, and she

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seemed totally unconcerned as Akisimov stepped out of the service entrance, shoved the blaster in her ribs, and snarled, "I've got nothing but death behind me, sister. The name is Akisimov . . ." The girl turned a scutinizing stare on him as he said his name. The Akisimov case had been publicized; madness such as his could not be kept quiet. ". . . So you better call a flit, and do it quick."

She smiled at him almost benignly, and raised her hand lazily in a gesture that brought a flit scurrying down from the idling level.

"The spaceport," Akisimov whispered to her, when they were inside and rising. The girl repeated the order to the flit-mech.

In half an hour they were at the spaceport. The criminal softly warned the psioid about any sudden moves, and hustled the girl from the flit, making her pay the flitmech. They got past the port guards easily when the Driver showed her id bracelet.

Once inside, Akisimov dragged the girl out of sight behind a blast bunker and snapped quickly, "You have a clearance, or do I have to hijack a ship?"

The girl stared at him, smiling calmly and enigmatically.

He jabbed the blaster hard into her side, causing her to wince, and repeated viciously,

'I *said*, you got a clearance? And you damned well better answer me or so help me God I'll burn away the top of your head!'

"I have a clearance," she said. She added solmenly, "You don't want to do this."

He laughed roughly, gripped her arm tightly. She ground her lips together as his fingers closed about the skin, and he replied, "They got me on a thousand yearer to Io, lady. So I want to do any damned thing that'll get me out of here. Now what ship are you assigned to snap?"

She shrugged her shoulders, a gesture of seeming finality, and answered, "I'm snap on the *Lady Knoxmaster*, in pit eighty-four."

"Then let's go," he finished, and dragged her off across the field.

"You don't want to do this," she said again, softly. He struck her savagely and dragged her onward.

WHEN the invership took off, straight up without clearance coordinates and at full power, Port Central went crazy, sending up signals, demanding recognition signals, demanding this, demanding the other. But the *Lady Knoxmaster* was already heading out toward snap-point.

Akisimov, gloating, threw in the switch and knew the telemetering cameras were on him. "Good-bye, you cruds! Good-

bye, from Rike Akisimov! Stupid! You thought I'd spend a thousand years on Io? There are better things for me in the universe!"

He flicked off, to let them call the psycops, so the law would know he had bested them. "Yeah, there isn't anything worse than a life term on Io," he murmured, watching the planet fall away in the view-plates.

"You're wrong, Akisimov," the girl murmured.

Immediately the psycops and the SpaceCom sent up cruisers to apprehend the renegade, but it was obvious the ship had enough of a headstart to reach snap-out before they could catch it.

Akisimov studied the calm-faced psioid girl in the other accelocouch.

Drivers were the most valuable of all the types of psionically-talented classes. Their one capacity was to warp ships from normal space into that not-space that allowed interstellar travel—into inverspace.

Though the ships went through—triggered by an automatic function of the Driver's psi faculty—the Drivers did not. That was the reason they were always suited and ready for the snap. Since *they* did not snap when the ships did, they were left hanging in space, where they

were picked up immediately by doggie vessels assigned to each take-off.

But this time there was no doggie, and there was no suit, and Akisimov did not want the girl to survive. Dead witnesses were the only safe witnesses.

"Snap the ship," he snarled at her, aiming the blaster.

"I'm unsuited," she replied.

"Snap, damn your lousy psi hide! Snap, damn you, and pray the cops on our trail will get to

you before you conk out." He indicated with a sweep of his slim hand the radar screen where the bips that were psycop cruisers were arrowing up at them.

"You don't want to do this," the girl tried again.

Akisimov blasted. The gun leaped in his palm, and the stench of burned flesh filled the cabin. The girl stared dumbly at the cauterized stump that had been her left arm. A scream started to her mouth, but he si-



lenced her with the point of the blaster.

She nodded acquiescence.

She snapped. Though she could not explain what was going on in her mind, she knew what she was doing, and she concentrated to do it just a bit differently—just a bit specially. She drew down her brows and concentrated, and . . .

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The ship was gone, and she was in space, whirling, senseless, and the bulk of a cruiser loomed around her, hauling her in.

She was safe. She would live. With one arm.

As the charcoal-caped psycops dragged her in and lay her gently in a mesh webbing, they could not contain their anxiety.

"Akisimov? Gone?"

She nodded slowly, the pain in her stump driving needles into the base of her brain. She moaned, then said, "He didn't get away. He's being punished."

They stared at her, as her thoughts swirled unreadably. They stared, thinking the shock had damaged her mind, and damning their own inefficiency, for Akisimov had gotten away.

They were wrong.

BLANK . . .

The ship popped into inverspace.

Blank . . .

The ship popped out . . .

In the center of a white-hot dwarf star. The sun burned the ship to molten slag, and Akisimov died horribly, flamingly, charringly, agonizingly, burningly as the slag vaporized.

Just at the instant of death . . .

Blank . . .

The ship popped into inverspace.

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Blank . . .

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The ship popped out . . .

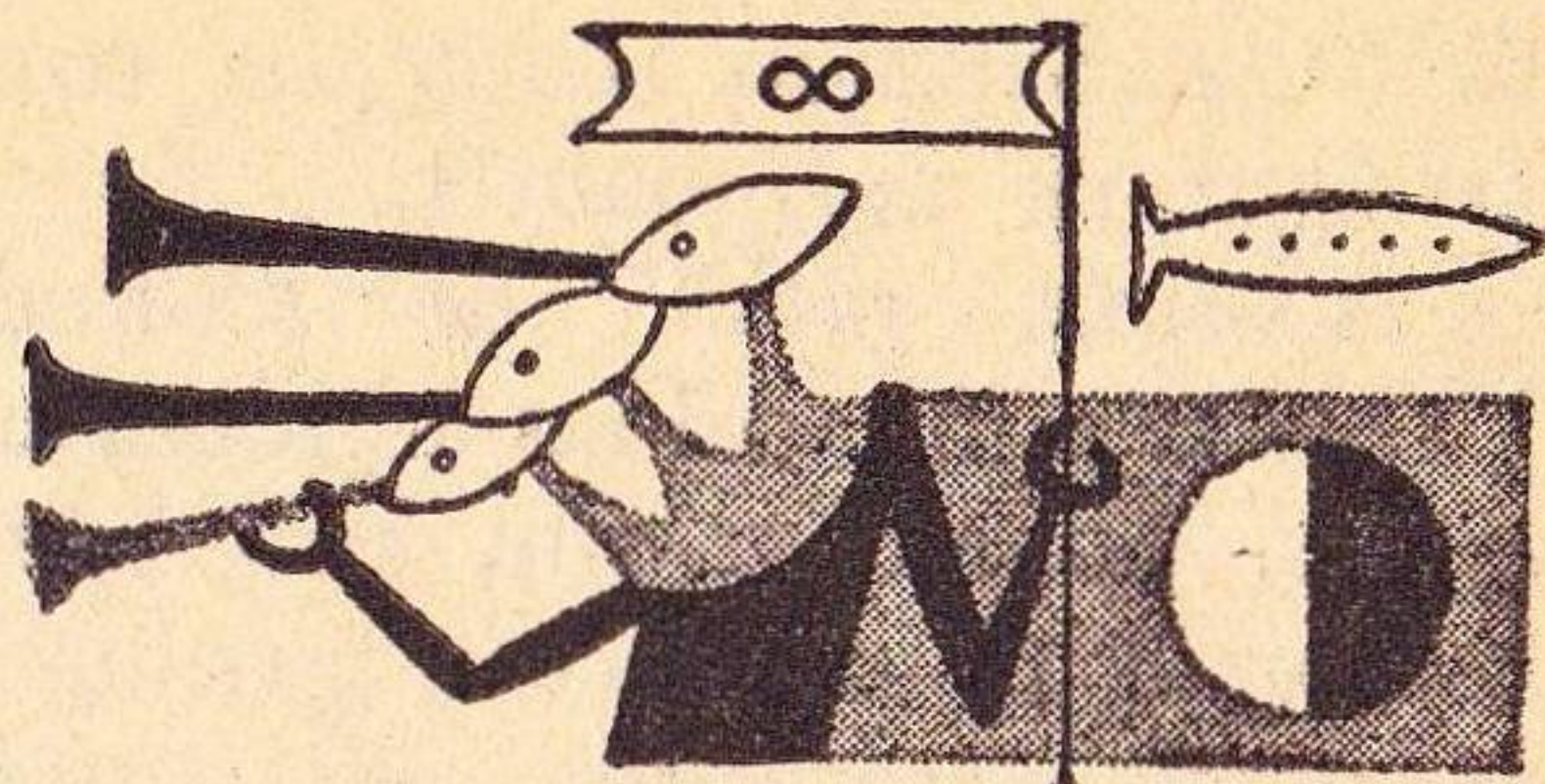
Over and over and over again, till the ends of time, till eternity was a remote forgotten nothing. The Driver had exacted her revenge. She had set the ship in a moebius whirl, in and out and in and out and in again from inverspace to normal space, just at that instant of blanking, right at that instant of death, so that Forever would be spent by Rike Akisimov in one horrible way.

Dying, dying, dying. Over and over and over again, without end to torment, without end to horror.

Blank . . .

∞ ∞

Fanfare



CYCLE

by P. H. ECONOMOU

"IT'S A six-pound girl, fine, healthy, normal in all respects," I heard the doctor tell my husband, Nel.

A minute later Nel stood at my bedside, holding my hand tightly. He was rumped and tired, but his face mirrored my relief. Relief and triumph. For ours was the first child born on Mars.

The waiting months had been long; the strain great. Despite all scientific assurances, Nel and I had been haunted by the old wives' tales about possible gruesome effects of "cosmic rays" on Mars-born children. But all was well.

We named her Anita. When she was three weeks old she spoke her first word. "Mother," she said. Quite clearly. Eight weeks later her conversation was intelligent and coherent.

Nel and I were badly frightened. Shocked—and I'm afraid repulsed. Our fear caused us to

avoid her small crib as much as possible. We dropped all our friends.

We argued incessantly. Nel wanted to confide in Doctor Crane—there were no psychiatrists on Mars then—but I was afraid. And ashamed, as women feel shame when they bear a freak. I felt it would be disastrous to have our small colony learn about my strange daughter. I hoped that by the time Anita would normally talk she would seem merely precocious.

When Anita was three months old I had to admit I was wrong. She was not precocious. She was different. My terror of the unnatural forced me to let Nel send for Doctor Crane.

Nel brought the doctor to the house, telling him only that the feared cosmic rays had—altered—our child.

The doctor examined Anita in private. I don't know what she said to him; I heard only his

first exclamation. Later he confronted us indignantly.

"Cosmic rays!" he scoffed. "This is a miraculous accident of genes. Somehow you two have managed to produce a genius!" He told us to forget our superstitious fears and to give our child the love any baby needed. "Take her out, show her off and be proud of her as you should be," he said.

Hesitantly, we followed his advice. To our surprise, the colony accepted Anita with awed delight. Their attitude spurred our developing pride in our daughter.

Anita's response to her broader horizon was astounding. At the age of six months, although still an infant physically, she had mastered reading. At her insistence Nel made a sling to help her little back muscles hold her upright for hours at a time. The book she desired was propped in front of her and her chubby fingers turned the pages with amazing rapidity. She was mostly inclined toward mathematics and chemistry at that period.

When Anita was seven months old the second Mars baby, Henry Czylewski, was born. He spoke plainly at six weeks. Then we all knew the truth.

Reaction was mixed. Nel and I were disappointed and again a bit frightened. The colony, at

first, could not accept it. A genius was understandable, but a basic change in the nature of humanity quite something else. Fear made some of them dangerous. The babies had to be guarded night and day.

Then someone—I don't know who—realized the potentialities. We of Mars were to father a "New Race." Homo Sapiens to Homo Superior. Our children would rule the universe!

The concept seized the imagination of every member of the colony. Especially Nel's and mine. Imagine being the parents of the first super-intellect!

We realized that the secret would have to be kept from Earth until the children were grown and numerous enough to defend themselves. It would be difficult when there were more babies but for the time being we simply kept little Anita and Henry indoors when supply ships landed. Life on Mars was difficult and unpleasant in those days and the infrequent ships always hurried away.

Meanwhile all efforts were concentrated on bringing women to Mars. Strong, healthy women. Selected colonists made regular trips to Earth, combing the remote areas where bitter women most missed the war-lost men they should have been marrying. They were promised homes and husbands. They came to Mars.

The colony grew. The parents nursed and guarded. Laboratories were built, miniature scaled, used by the children for purposes far beyond our understanding.

We had neither our childrens' love nor respect. They were so very far above us. Although our Anita was always kind and affectionate—in her way. But we asked only to serve. We had our dreams.

On Anita's fourth birthday the colonists arranged a magnificent party. They planned to do her honor, to express their gratitude for her development of a cure for the fatal Martian embolism.

When I pulled her ruffled pink party dress over her head and tied the wide sash, for a moment I wanted to cry. "She

looks just like any other huggable little girl," I thought.

I shook off the feeling. My baby had never permitted herself to be cuddled. Vigorously, I brushed her chestnut curls. As a special concession to my sentimental mood, Anita allowed me to tie a shining pink bow on top.

That was when I found her first gray hair.

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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. "Cycle" originally appeared in DESTINY, edited and published by Earl Kemp and Malcolm Willits, and is copyright 1953 by DESTINY.

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TALES FOR TOMORROW

This is a difficult department to write. For instance, we've been working closely with Damon Knight for several weeks now on a long novelet which we both think is one of the best things he's ever written. But Damon won't let it go until he has polished it to a high degree of perfection, and at this writing he's still revising it and adding new ideas. If it is finished in time, it'll be in the next issue. If not—it will be worth waiting for!

Otherwise, we have excellent novelets on hand by Algis Budrys and Edward Wellen, so you can be sure that the next issue will feature two unusual and exciting lead stories, in any case. The short stories and departments will maintain the general level of quality, too. *Remember the date: April 30!*





**"Choose!" said the
robonurse. "Choose!"
echoed his entire
world. But either
choice was impossible!**

Illustrated by SCHOENHERR

Age of Anxiety

by ROBERT SILVERBERG



THAT MORNING, when Larry awoke, the robonurse was standing at the foot of his bed, smiling benignly. It made no attempt to help him into his housecoat and give him his morning unworry capsule. Instead it waited, poised delicately on its humming treads, making no motion toward him.

"I'm awake," Larry said sour-

ly. "Why aren't you functioning?" He paused, frowning slightly, and added, "And where's my capsule?"

"This morning is different," said the robonurse. "This is your birthday, young man!" It clicked twice, hissed, and rolled forward at last, holding Larry's capsule-box in its grips. The box flew open as the robot approached Larry's bed, and the boy saw, within its gleaming interior, *three* capsules—one the usual light blue, the other two a harsh green and a bright yellow respectively.

"What's this?"

"*Choose*," the robonurse said inexorably.

The trigger-word echoed in the room for an instant. "*Choose*," the robot said again, and the repetition unlocked a chain of synapses, unleashed data hypnotically buried in Larry's mind years before, opened doors and brightened dark corridors.

Choose. The terrifying word held promise of conflict, pain, anxiety. Larry's fingers quivered with terror for a moment; his hand hovered over the capsule-box, wavered for a long second of indecision, while a glistening bead of sweat rolled down his smooth face.

His hand grazed the light blue capsule, the capsule that could end the sudden nightmare for-

ever. He fingered its glossy surface for a moment, then shook his head and touched the bright yellow one. A shudder of fear ran through him as he did so, and he swept up the green capsule hurriedly and swallowed it.

"Okay. I've chosen," he said weakly.

The robonurse, still smiling, closed the capsule-box and rolled away. It replaced the box on its shelf and said, "You've chosen, Larry—but all you've chosen is postponement of final decision."

"I know." His voice was dry. "I—I'm not ready yet. But at least I took a step forward. I didn't take the unworry drug."

"True enough," the robonurse said. "You can still go in either direction—back to the unworry of childhood, or on to the full anxiety of adult life."

"Let me think," Larry said. "That's why I took the middle capsule. To think this out."

"Yes, let him think!" Larry glanced up and saw the stooped figure of his father at the door of the bedroom. The robonurse scuttled away hummily, and Larry swung around in bed. His father's face, wrinkle-etched, baggy-eyed, and despairing, stared intently at him.

The tired face broke into a feeble grin. "So you've arrived at the Age of Anxiety at last, Larry! Welcome—welcome to adulthood!"

BEHIND LARRY lay an entire seventeen-year lifetime of unworrying—and behind that lay the three centuries since Koletsky's development of the unworry drug.

It was tasteless, easily manufactured, inexpensive, and—despite its marvelous properties—not permanently habit-forming. Adults under the influence of the unworry drug found themselves free from anxiety, from nagging doubts about the future, from any need to worry or grow ulcers or to plan and think ahead. Koletsky's drug made them completely irresponsible.

Naturally, the drug was highly popular among a certain group of adults with low psychic resistance to panaceas of this sort, and for a while the unworry drug was a considerable source of worry to those still clear-eyed enough to look ahead. Hundreds of thousands of people a year were yielding to the synthetic bliss of the unworry drug, returning to childhood's uninvolvement with the world.

Naturally, one of the remaining worriers invented an anti-unworry drug—and with that, a new social alignment came into being. The new tablet provided gradual weaning from the unworry drug; it took four years for the treatment to be completed, but once so treated a person could never bring himself

to touch the Koletsky drug to his lips again. There was an inflexible guarantee against backsliding built into the bonded hydrocarbons of the drug.

This second discovery left the world in possession of two remarkable phenomena: a soothing drug and its antidote, both of 100% efficiency. A new solution now presented itself—a solution whose details were simple and obvious.

Give the drug to children. Let them live in a carefree paradise of unworry until the age of seventeen—at which time, apply the four-year withdrawal treatment. At twenty-one, they were ready to step into the adult world, unmarked by the horrors of childhood and equipped to face maturity with a calm, if somewhat blank mind.

At the age of seventeen, then, a choice: forward or backward. One out of every ten elected to remain in the synthetic dream-world forever, thereby removing themselves from a world in which they probably would not have been fit to contend. It was an efficient screening process, eliminating those dreamers who would not have withstood the grind, who would have retreated from reality anyway, would have slipped into neurotic fancies. The remaining ninety per cent chose maturity and reality—and anxiety.

The light-blue capsule was the way back to dreamland; the bright yellow one, the first step in withdrawal. The third capsule was the one most frequently chosen. It was a delayer; its effect, neither positive nor negative, was to allow its taker's hormones to remain suspended during the period of choice.

"I've got three days, don't I, Dad?" The terms of the situation, implanted in each child's mind long before he could possibly understand the meanings of the words, now stood out sharply in Larry's mind.

Larry's father nodded. "You took the green one?"

"Yes. Was that wrong?"

"It's what I did when I was your age," the older man said. "It's the only sensible thing to do. Yes, you have three days to make up your mind. You can go on taking the unworry capsules for the rest of your life—or you can begin withdrawing. You'll have to decide that for yourself."

Something fluttery throbbed in the pit of Larry's stomach. It was the first sign of worry, the first agony of decision-making. He remained calm; despite his lifelong use of Koletsky's drug, its peculiar properties were such that he felt no need of it now.

Yet—how did he choose? In three days, how? Uneasily, he wiggled his feet against the cool, yielding surface of the floor for

a moment, left the bed, crossed the room, threw open the door. Across the hall, the robonurse was ministering to his younger brother. The sleepy-eyed eight-year-old was sitting up in bed while the pseudomother washed and dressed him.

Larry smiled. His brother's face was calm, relaxed, confident-looking.

"The lucky devil," he said out loud. "He's got nine years of happiness left."

"You can have the rest of your lifetime, son."

Larry turned. His father's voice was flat, without any hint of emotion or any trace of value-judgment.

"I know," Larry said. "One way—or the other."

LATER that first day, he dressed and left the house. He crossed the pedestrian-walk that led from his block to the next, feeling curiously impermanent in his between-status status.

The pedestrian-walk was empty except for a wandering vendor struggling along under a load of bubble-toys. Larry doubled his pace and caught up with the man, a short, long-nosed individual with worry-creases furrowing his thin face.

"Hello, son. Got your bubble-ship yet?" He held forth the inflatable vehicle and smiled—a forced, slick smile that faded

when the vendor noticed the luminescent armband that told of Larry's status. "Oh—a Changer," the vendor said. "I guess you wouldn't be interested in a bubble-ship, then."

"I guess not." Larry took the toy from the vendor's hand anyway, and examined it. "You make these yourself?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I get them from the Distributory." The vendor scowled and shook his head. "They keep cutting down my allotment all the time. I don't know how I'll stay in business."

"Why? Won't there always be a market?"

"There must be something new out," the vendor said gloomily. "The young ones just aren't interested in bubble-toys these days. Things were good last year, but—" he frowned dismally—"they're getting worse all the time."

"Sorry to hear that," Larry sympathized. He felt vaguely disturbed—the bubble-toys were vastly popular among his friends, and it was upsetting to learn that the vendor was doing so badly. "I wish I could do something for you."

"Don't worry about me, son. You've got your own problems now." The vendor smiled bleakly at him and turned off the pedestrian-walk into the side-road that led to the Playground, leaving Larry alone.

Those were strange words, he thought. He revolved them in his mind, getting used to their feel. *You've got your own problems.* He looked around, at the neat, clean suburb with its attractive little ten-story units and carefully-spaced splotches of green garden, and shook his head. *Problems. To be or not to be.* It was a line from an old play he had found taped in his father's library.

The play had made no sense to him at the time, but now it troubled him. He made a mental note to ask his father about it, some time in the next two days, and walked on. He wanted to see as much as he could of the adult world, before it was time to decide which he preferred.

THE CITY was a maze of connected buildings, redoubled avenues, tangled byways and confusing signs. Larry stood in the heart of the business district, watching the grownups zoom past him, each walking alone, face set determinedly as he pursued some private mission.

"Move along, boy," someone said roughly. Larry glanced around, saw a man in uniform scowling at him. The scowl softened into something like pity as the man noticed the badge of Larry's status. Hastily, Larry walked on, moving deeper into the web of the City.

He had never been here before. The City was someplace where fathers went during the day, during the pleasant hours of school and Playground, and from which fathers came, grimy and irritable, in the evening. Larry had never considered going to the City before. Now it was necessary.

He had no particular destination in mind. But after seventeen years in the unworrying world, he would simply have to investigate the world of anxiety before making up his mind.

A car buzzed by suddenly, and he leaped to one side. Out here in the City, cars ran right next to the pedestrian-walks, not on flying skyways above them. Larry hugged the side of a building for a moment, recovering his calm.

Calm. Stay calm. Make a cool, objective appraisal.

But how?

Nine out of ten people picked this world. Larry ran his fingers over the rough brick of the building, and felt the tension beginning to curdle his stomach. Nine out of ten. *Am I the tenth? Am I going to decide to go back to a lifetime of unworry?*

It seemed so. This dirty, hypertense, overcrowded place seemed boundlessly undesirable. The choice was obvious.

But still . . .

He shook his head. After a

moment of complete unthought, he let go of the side of the building and took a few hesitant steps forward. He was really frightened now. Suddenly, he wanted to be home, wanted to know again the smooth placidity of an unworried day.

He started to walk faster, then to run. After half a block, he stopped, suddenly.

Where am I running?

He didn't know. He felt trapped, hemmed in, overwhelmed by despair.

So this is the City? Sorry, I don't care for it.

"You're all alone, aren't you?" said a sudden voice from behind him. "It's not wise, on your first day off the drug."

Larry turned. The man behind him was tall and narrow-shouldered, with the pinched, baggy face of a grownup and a wide, sly smile. "Yes, I'm all alone," he said.

"I thought so. I can tell a Changer when I see one, even without the armband."

Larry glanced down at his arm quickly and saw that the identifying armband was gone. Somehow, somewhere, he must have ripped it off. He looked at the stranger, and in a hoarse voice asked, "What do you want?"

"A companion for a drink," the stranger said affably. "Care to join me?"

"No—I—all right," Larry



said with a firmness that surprised himself. "Let's go have a drink."

THE ALCOHOL stung his mouth, and the flavoring in the drink tasted rancid, but he put the whole thing down and looked across the table at the stranger.

"I don't much like that drink," he said.

"Not surprising." The other grinned. "It's one of our favorites."

"Our?"

"City people, I mean. Ulcer people. We gobble the stuff up. Not surprising you don't like it."

Larry touched his forefingers lightly together. "I don't think I'd ever like it, no matter how long I tried to get used to it."

"Oh?" The stranger's left eyebrow rose slightly. "Never?"

Larry shook his head. "Or the rest of the City, for that matter." He sighed. "I don't think I'm the City type. I think I'm going to give the whole thing up and go back home. The City isn't for me."

"Have another drink," the stranger said. "Go on—I'll pay. It'll take your mind off your problems."

"There's a capsule that'll do it a lot more efficiently," Larry

said. "I don't need bad-tasting drinks to ease my mind."

"You're definitely cashing in your chips, then?"

"What?"

"I mean, you're definitely choosing Koletsky for life, eh?"

Larry paused a while, letting the images of the City filter through his mind again. Finally he nodded. "I think so. I really do."

"Two full days more—and you've made up your mind?"

The stranger shook his head.

"That'll never do, son. You'll have to think more deeply."

"How deep do I have to think?"

"Tell me what anxiety is," the stranger countered.

Taken aback by the sudden and seemingly irrelevant question, Larry blinked. "Anxiety? Why—worry, isn't it? Fear? Ulcers and headaches?"

The stranger shook his head slowly and dialed another drink.

"Anxiety is the feeling that things are too good, that you're riding for a fall," he said carefully. "It's a sense of things about to get worse."

Larry remembered the bubble-vendor and nodded. "But they have to be pretty good to start with, don't they?"

"Right. You've got to have something pretty good—and be worried that you're going to lose it. Then you fight to keep it.

Challenge — response. That's anxiety. Fear's something different. Then you creep into the corner and shake. Or you hang onto the side of a wall."

"I think I'll take another drink," Larry said thoughtfully.

"You get what I mean? Anxiety pushes and prods you, but it doesn't make you shrivel. You've got to be strong to stand up under it. That's how our world works."

"So?"

"You haven't experienced any real anxiety yet, boy. Just fear—and you're reacting out of fear. You can't judge your response to something if you're really responding to something else."

Larry frowned and gulped his drink. It tasted a little better, this time, though only imperceptibly so. "You mean I'm deciding too quickly, then? That I ought to look around the City a little longer?"

"Yes and no," the stranger said. "You're deciding much too quickly — yes. But looking around the City won't do. No; go back home."

"Home?"

"Home. Go back to your Playground. Look there. Then decide."

Larry nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "Sure—that's it." He felt the tension drain out of him. "I think I'll have one more drink before I go."

THE PLAYGROUND was crowded on the second day of Larry's three-day period. Small children played happily near the shimmering wading pond, older ones gathered for games in the playing-field farther on, and, far in the distance, a group of permanent unworriers sat complacently in the sun, neither thinking nor moving. Humming robonurses threaded here and there through the Playground, seeing to it that no one got into any trouble. They were necessary, of course—because the unworried children would have no fear of leaping from a tree head-first or walking into the path of a speeding baseball.

Larry stood at the edge of the Playground, leaning against the confining fence, watching. His friends were there—the boys he had played with only two days before, still happily occupied with their games and their bubble toys. Walking carefully, in order not to be seen, he skirted the side of the playing area and headed for the green fields where the Permanents were.

There were about a hundred of them, of all ages. Larry recognized a former playmate of his—a boy of about nineteen, now—and there were older men, too, some well along in middle age. They sat quietly, unmoving, most of them, smiling pleasantly.

Larry entered the field and walked to the nearest bench.

"Mind if I join you?"

The man on the bench grinned. "Not at all. Sit right down, friend."

Larry sat. "You're a Permanent, aren't you?" he asked suddenly.

A shadow seemed to cross the man's face. "Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I'm a Permanent. Who are you?"

"I'm Changing," Larry said. "Oh."

The Permanent studied him idly for a moment or two, then leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's nice here," he said. "The sun's warm."

Larry frowned. "What do you do when it rains?"

"We go indoors," the Permanent said.

"Look! I think it's starting to rain now!" Larry pointed at the bright, cloudless sky. "There'll be a terrible thunderstorm any minute!"

"The robonurses should be here, then."

"Yes!" Larry said. "Where are they? Why aren't they here?"

"They'll be here," the Permanent said blandly.

"I don't think so. I don't think they're coming. They're going to let you get wet."

The Permanent shrugged. "They wouldn't do that," he said.

"Of course not," a new voice said.

Larry glanced up, startled. The copper-alloy face of a robonurse looked down at him. He goggled confusedly.

The robonurse's grips seized his shoulders gently. "You'll have to leave here, boy. We can't have you disturbing these people."

Larry stood up. "All right," he said. "I'll go." He had seen all he needed to see.

THE STRANGER in the City had been right, Larry thought, as he made his way back to his home. The place to look *had* been in the Playground. He had seen something even more frightening than the City.

His father was waiting for him as he entered.

"Well?"

Larry sat down heavily in a pneumochair and knit his hands together. "I've seen the Playground," he said. "Yesterday the City, today the Playground. What's left to see?"

"You've seen it all, son."

Larry studied his father's pale, harried face for a moment. "I thought the City was pretty horrible. I decided yesterday I'd become a Permanent."

"I know. Your Watcher told me."

"Watcher?"

"You know—the man who

took you in for drinks. You don't think I'd let you go into the City alone, do you?"

Larry smiled. "I *thought* it was too neat, the way he met me and sent me back. But—but—"

He looked up helplessly at his father. "Today I saw the Playground, Dad. And I don't know what to do." His voice trailed off indistinctly.

"What's the trouble, son?"

"Tomorrow I have to make my choice. Well, the Playground seems to be out—they turn into vegetables there—but am I ready for the City?"

"I don't understand, Larry."

"I was sickened by the place." He leaned forward and said, "Dad, why are children raised on the unworry drug?"

"We try to spare you," his father said. "Seventeen years of tranquility—it's good, isn't it?"

"Not when it ends. It's the worst possible preparation for a life in your world, Dad. I'm not ready for it—and I never will be! My childhood hasn't taught me how to worry!"

Suddenly, his father began to chuckle, first deep in his stomach, then high up in his throat, a ratchety, rasping laugh.

"What's the matter?" Larry asked angrily. "What's so funny?"

"You say you don't know how to worry? Why, you're practi-

cally an expert at it!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Suppose you tell me what you've been thinking of, the past two days. Everything."

Larry stood up, walked to the door. The robonurse was waiting in the next room, patient, unmoving. After a moment, he turned to his father. "Well—I've been thinking that I don't like the City. That I'm afraid I wasn't properly prepared for it. That I think raising me on the unworry drug robbed me of any chance I'd have to learn to stand the strains of City life. That even so I don't like the Playground either, and I'm caught between." He checked each item off on his fingers. "That—"

"That's enough, Larry. You've analyzed it nicely."

Slowly, the truth opened out before him and an embarrassed grin widened on his face. Resistance to strain could be acquired overnight—by nine out of ten. Nine out of ten didn't need a long, grueling childhood to prepare them for adulthood; the tenth would never grow up anyway.

"I've *been* worrying," he said. "I'm the worrying kind. I've been worrying since yesterday,

and I didn't even know it!"

His father nodded. Larry took the capsule-box from its shelf, opened it, stared at the three different kinds of capsule inside. "There never really was any choice after all, was there?"

"No. Your choice was made yesterday morning. If you didn't have the stuff for City life, you'd have grabbed for the unworry capsule the second you saw it. But you didn't. You stopped to make a decision—and won your citizenship right then and there. You proved it to us—and by fighting with yourself over the decision you thought you still had to make, you proved it to yourself."

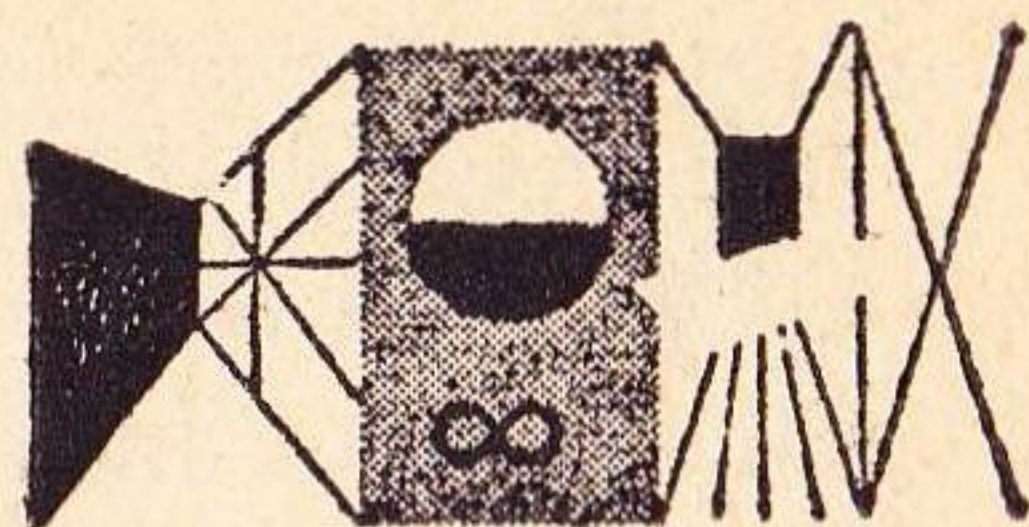
Larry's smile spread. "Sure. The ability to worry is the measure of successful City life," he said. "And I'm a regular worry wart already." The excitement of the past two days still thumped in his stomach—and it was only the beginning. "I belong *here*. Why—it won't be long before I'll get my first ulcer!"

His father was radiant with paternal pride. "Welcome to your heritage, son—the heritage of the civilized man. You've got the makings of a first-rate citizen!"

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• The next *Infinity* goes on sale APRIL 30! •

Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

In each issue, Mr. Knight will review several new books which he regards as worthy of special consideration.

THE DOOR INTO SUMMER, by Robert A. Heinlein (Doubleday, \$2.95), has a plot about as original as the Grimm fairy tale, "The Golden Bird" (in which the good brother does all the work while the bad one gets all the credit), and about as convincing as Buck Rogers: Good Guy invents a flock of useful machines; Bad Guy and Bad Girl, his partner and wife, fleece him of same and plunk him into cold-sleep to get rid of him; Good Guy wakes up in the future, finds a professor who has invented time travel (but is sitting on the discovery for reasons too flimsy to mention), goes back to his own time, gets his revenge, then cold-sleeps *again* in order to catch up.

I loved it.

Mind you, this is a shoddy novel. But look: when the story opens, the hero is a morally defeated man with a galloping case of self-pity and a cumulative

hangover, looking in the bottoms of shot glasses for the Door Into Summer. If anybody else had written it, this guy's oozing sorrow for himself would have dripped until it made you sick. (Turn the average writer onto the subject of self-pity and you have an immediate autobiography.) But Heinlein's hero, even in this sad state, has so much sheer gusto left over, it's a pleasure to identify yourself with him.

Heinlein's greatest asset, I think, is this same perennial hero—essentially he's Heinlein himself, and Heinlein likes himself. This is a thing so rare in writers-by-necessity, who are insecure, self-critical men, that every now and then a writer-by-accident who has it, as Mark Twain did, cheerfully walks away with all the prizes in sight.

As usual, this book shows the fruits of Heinlein's mature inquiring mind: he makes the

spirit and practice of engineering come so vividly alive that I almost wish I had been better at math. Also as usual, the last third of the book is scamped. Heinlein is like the young man from Japan,

Whose limericks never would scan.

When asked why this was,
He answered, "Because

I always try to cram as many words into the last line as I possibly can."

∞

BANTAM'S 35¢ edition of *THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAO* (and Other Improbable Stories, edited by Ray Bradbury) is the first edition of this famous story which has reached more than a few thousand people, and it will be interesting to see how many find it worth the price. Shoals of critics, all the way from the erudite Mr. Boucher to the bumptious Mr. Moskowitz, have acclaimed *Dr. Lao* as a unique classic of fantasy. I may as well admit immediately that I have read it three times, each time with curiosity and disappointment.

I am willing to believe I may be wrong, but I think this is a suit of the Emperor's new clothes. The story has intermittent merits; the vignettes about the mermaid, the hound of the

hedges, the magician and the medusa are effective, funny in places, even occasionally moving. The style varies from good to atrocious; the construction is awful. One of the creatures in the circus appears to some people as a bear, to others as a Russian. Finney makes this primitive joke at length, eleven consecutive times.

The dialogue, where it seems meant to be funny, is as cute as Fitzgerald's worst. The characters pass unexpectedly from scholarly speech to slang—a sophomore trick, and Finney does it over and over. He smothers what story there is in repetitions and digressions, and finally shovels a pile of disjointed definitions over it. All this has its effect, certainly—a sort of cosmic pointlessness—but it's an effect bought by sleazy tricks that wouldn't work twice.

Like *Dr. Lao*, the other eleven stories in this collection are classified by the editor as fantasies rather than science fiction. Sf, says Bradbury, is law-abiding; fantasy is criminal. Sf balances you on the cliff; fantasy shoves you off. Being shoved off, he implies, is more fun. I don't think so, and not thinking so, I naturally don't care for this collection much.

There is one superb horror-adventure story in it, James H. Schmitz's "Greenface" (which

however is science fiction by the rules I know), and two quietly effective chillers, "The Summer People" by Shirley Jackson, and "The Man Who Vanished," by Robert M. Coates. The first shoves you off, sure enough; the second pretends to, and then catches you: it has a happy ending and a rationale if you look for it, dangerous qualities in a law-breaking fantasy. "The Pond" by Nigel Kneale is a silly weird tale of the kind that makes you snort with derision when you ought to be shuddering with horror; Roald Dahl's "The Wish" is another. "Earth's Holocaust," by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a stodgy allegory, and what the *hell* is it doing here? "Buzby's Petrified Woman" by Loren Eiseley is one more of those damned *is it/isn't it* things that draw an equation between imagination and insanity; "The Limits of Walter Horton" by John Seymour Sharnik is about a fellow who turns into a piano virtuoso overnight.

"The Resting Place," a ghost story by Oliver LaFarge, is first-rate work, but has no plot—the ending simply falls over and dies. "The Hour of Letdown," by E. B. White, is funny, but the bar background is so ineptly done, you can't help thinking how much better Henry Kuttner would have written the same story—not the Kuttner of this

volume's hackwork "Threshold," but the one who wrote "Don't Look Now."

I suppose nobody will believe me, because everybody knows that eminent writers are better than magazine hacks; all the same, Kuttner learned a few things about the short story, in a hard school, that nobody can learn from Henry James.

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A SCIENTIFIC REPORT ON "THE SEARCH FOR BRIDEY MURPHY," edited by Milton V. Kline, Ph.D. Julian Press, \$3.50.

Like science-fiction writers, medical hypnotists are a small, overlooked and misunderstood group of dedicated people, whose field, every so often, erupts around them into a popular sensation. It's hard to say which irritates them more, the ten years' neglect or the nine days' wonder. Qualified members of the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis labor for years, publish textbooks, journals and annual reviews. Nobody hears about it. A parlor hypnotist in Colorado blunders into an interesting trance phenomenon, endangers his victim's sanity, misstates, misquotes, mis-evaluates, misleads. He writes a best-seller.

This volume, a symposium written by Margaretta K. Bow-

ers, M.D., Milton V. Kline, Ph.D., F. L. Marcuse, Ph.D., Bernard B. Raginsky, M.D., Harold Rosen, M. D., and Arthur Shapiro, M.D., turns Morey Bernstein's shabby conjuror's hat inside out, revealing ignorance,¹ recklessness,² egotism,³ and thinly concealed aggression. Bernstein's own records, and in particular the tapes of the Virginia Tighe sessions, demonstrate his ruthless obsession with what Bowers aptly calls "The Search For Morey Bernstein." Bowers, by the way, anticipates the discovery made by a Hearst reporter: "Is it impossible that Bridey is simply a very wonderful, meaningful memory of an old Irish neighbor who relived her youth in Cork or Belfast through the response of the child Ruth?"

Who was Bridey Murphy? (a) An Irish lady of that name who lived across the street from Virginia Tighe when she was a little girl. (b) A secondary personality, either dormant since childhood, or created by Virginia Tighe in response to Bernstein's urgent demand. Such acquiescence is typical of hyp-

¹Bernstein confuses hypnotics with narcotics, narcoanalysis with narcosynthesis, hypnotherapy with hypnoanalysis.

²He admits treating headaches by hypnosis with no knowledge of their causes.

³There are 182 pages in Bernstein's book about Morey Bernstein; next to nothing about Virginia Tighe.

notic subjects, who will obligingly produce "memories" of previous existences in Ireland, India, or even on other planets.⁴ The unconscious mind appears never to forget anything, and can turn up useful fragments to fit any story. Hence the surface plausibility of "Bridey Murphy," and hence the flimsiness of the story under close examination. The medical hypnotists, working in their accustomed obscurity, are astonished that anyone should find this kind of material extraordinary, or should be deceived by it for a moment.

Now this argues a failure of communication at both ends of the scale. Bernstein is a stupid bright boy, what the Germans call *dummschlau*, and it is difficult to find any politer word for his publishers than "crooks"; but this is only half the trouble. Bernstein and Doubleday were able to impose their hoax on the public partly because the responsible hypnotists have been buried in their laboratories. The real story of medical hypnosis, as sketched in this book, is even more fascinating than the side-show trumpery of "Bridey Murphy": is it too much to ask that somebody should have told it *before* Bernstein came along?

But the answer to that, I suppose, is partly in the gobbled-

⁴Cf. Flournoy's *From India to the Planet Mars*.

gook of Raginsky's chapter 1, and partly in a wry story told in chapter 4 by Shapiro: A young Czech, apprenticed to a shoemaker, prescribed some simple remedies for his neighbors and soon got a wide reputation as a healer. Eventually the medical authorities challenged him to produce a license to practice

medicine—and he did. He was a graduate of a Prague medical school, but the cost of setting up an office was beyond him, and so he had apprenticed himself to the shoemaker.

As soon as this became known, his popularity ended; he had been unmasked, you see, as a fake quack.

∞ ∞ ∞

COMPANIONS!

INFINITY's companion magazine is *Science Fiction Adventures*, fastest rising star in the sf firmament. In the great new issue—on sale now—three complete new novels:

YESTERDAY'S MAN by Algis Budrys

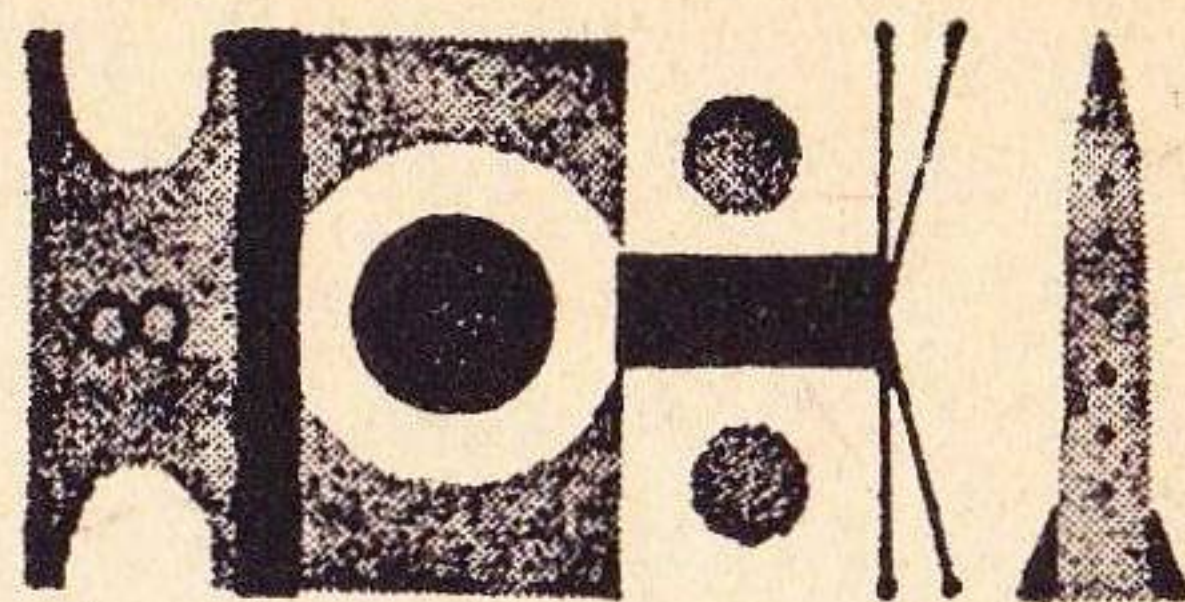
CHALICE OF DEATH by Calvin M. Knox

RUN FOR THE STARS by Harlan Ellison

PLUS bonus features

If you like Infinity, try SFA

By the editor



SOME NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

EVER SINCE the first issue of INFINITY appeared, readers have been writing in suggesting that the magazine should be published monthly. We can't say we've been snowed under by the demand, but it does pop up two or three times a week at least.

Unfortunately, it has never been a question of simply *wanting* to go monthly. All of us on the staff were sincerely anxious to do so from the very beginning. But the desire alone was not enough.

A magazine, like a person, has to make a living (the cases of those with rich uncles are rare enough to be ignored). Some cynics will tell you that magazines exist only to make money, but this isn't strictly true, any more than people exist only to make money. A publisher either makes money or goes bankrupt, certainly; but knowing that, he still has a choice of the kind of magazines he wants to publish.

We wanted to publish a science-fiction magazine. We knew

we could have made more money publishing cheesecake, but we didn't want to. In fact, we started INFINITY when the science-fiction field seemed to be in a slump—and a good many "experts" told us we were crazy to go ahead with it. They were wrong; INFINITY has definitely been successful, and now a lot of people are jumping on the s-f bandwagon again. (For further details, consult your local newsstand.)

Beginning immediately, INFINITY will appear every six weeks, or nine times a year.

The next issue will be dated July, and will appear on April 30.

If the experiment is successful, INFINITY will go monthly in the very near future. Meanwhile, we'd like to thank you for your support and suggestions—and we hope both of them will continue at the same enthusiastic level.

MEANWHILE, science fiction shows signs of advancing on

other fronts as well. It is highly unusual for *The Saturday Evening Post* to run a science fiction story; it is even more unusual for it to run an eight-part serial of any kind. But both of those things will occur simultaneously when "No Blade of Grass" by John Christopher starts in the April 23 issue of *SEP*.

John Christopher is an English writer; his fine short story, "The Noon's Repose," appeared in the April *INFINITY*. (Incidentally, three of the stories in that issue were by Englishmen—a sign of how science fiction is advancing geographically, as well as in other ways.) Up to now, his stories have appeared in all of the better science-fiction magazines. He is one of those rare writers who apparently never turns out an unsuccessful story.

What makes this even bigger news is that the novel will be published in book form, also on April 23, by Simon and Schuster. This is unique; when a magazine buys a story, the editors always insist that any book publication be withheld until after it has appeared in magazine form. So this is an event of the first order, not only for s-f enthusiasts but for the entire publishing world.

And according to advance reports, "No Blade of Grass" is definitely worth all the attention

it's getting. Those who have read it say it is downright wonderful. We congratulate John Christopher—and we urge all of our readers to buy the issues of *SEP* containing this story. Meanwhile, we'll try to obtain more of his stories for *INFINITY*!

INFINITY's companion magazine, *SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES*, is also six-weekly effective with the June issue, which goes on sale March 28. And there is a story in this issue to which I'd particularly like to call your attention. It's "Yesterday's Man" by Algis Budrys, and I think you'll find it one of the finest short novels the field has ever produced.

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, of course, is devoted to the action-adventure variety of science fiction. "Yesterday's Man" is action-adventure, but it's also a searching character study of an unusual, convincing and likeable man in a shockingly possible future. If you are one of those readers who believe all action-adventure sf must be hack, read it—and change your mind!

THAT'S ALL for now, but remember that the July issue of *INFINITY* will appear on April 30. Don't get to your newsstand late. You have been warned!

—LTS

Feedback



THIS department is strictly for the readers—a space for them to voice their ideas about science fiction in general, or to let the world know what they think of INFINITY. Keep the letters coming to the Editor, Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.

∞

You may remember in INFINITY No. 7, I praised Emsh for the cover on the October issue. You may also remember, that in the same issue a gentleman by the name of John Champion condemned Emsh for the same October cover. I feel the urge to make a few comments on what Mr. Champion so bluntly calls "sexy covers."

First, Mr. Champion, if the cover is well painted, I see no reason why you should dislike it just because it has a pretty girl on it. Also, if you will look at the cover again, you will see that it is not a painting of a girl but of a statue! My dear sir, haven't you seen at least one statue of a nude in a park in Oregon?

I did not praise that cover because there was a nude on it. I praised it because it was excellently painted, was original, and had a beautiful blending of colors. The man in the background could have been running toward a spaceship or anything else and as long as the spaceship or what-have-you was well drawn, I still would have praised it.

Now, Mr. Champion, I agree wholeheartedly that a cover that has a girl on it just to sell issues and has nothing to do in the picture should be condemned. For instance: in a recent issue of another S-F magazine the cover shows a girl being dragged in space behind a jet. Any S-F reader could think of at least five different reasons why this is completely impossible. It is quite obvious that the editor and the artist cared not one bit if the picture made sense. It is also just as obvious that their only concern was to sell copies with a "sexy cover." I do not believe Emsh painted this cover just to sell copies but also to demonstrate his talents as an excellent

artist. I also believe that Mr. Shaw would not have bought it if its only merits were that it had a nude on it. As long as magazine covers are good pictures I don't believe you should get angry whether there is a girl on them or not. I rest my case.—
Jerry Greene, 482 East 20th Street, Hialeah, Fla.

∞

Enjoyed very much the latest ish of INFINITY, especially "Hunt the Hog of Joe."

Have you thought of letting Bob Gilbert illustrate his own stories? He's pretty good as an artist too, you know. I would like to see his own interpretations of the "Hog." They ought to be interesting.

If you can, would you print this in your next ish. I would like to meet fans in the area around Colorado Springs and toward Denver. This is about the only way that I can get in touch with them. Thanks.

Keep INFINITY on its path toward the stars. It's almost there.—Pvt. William N. Beard, US55583420, B Co., 60th Inf. Regt., Fort Carson, Col.

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I am giving you the honor (you should be so unlucky) of reading my first fan-letter. I have been reading ISF since volume one, number one, and I

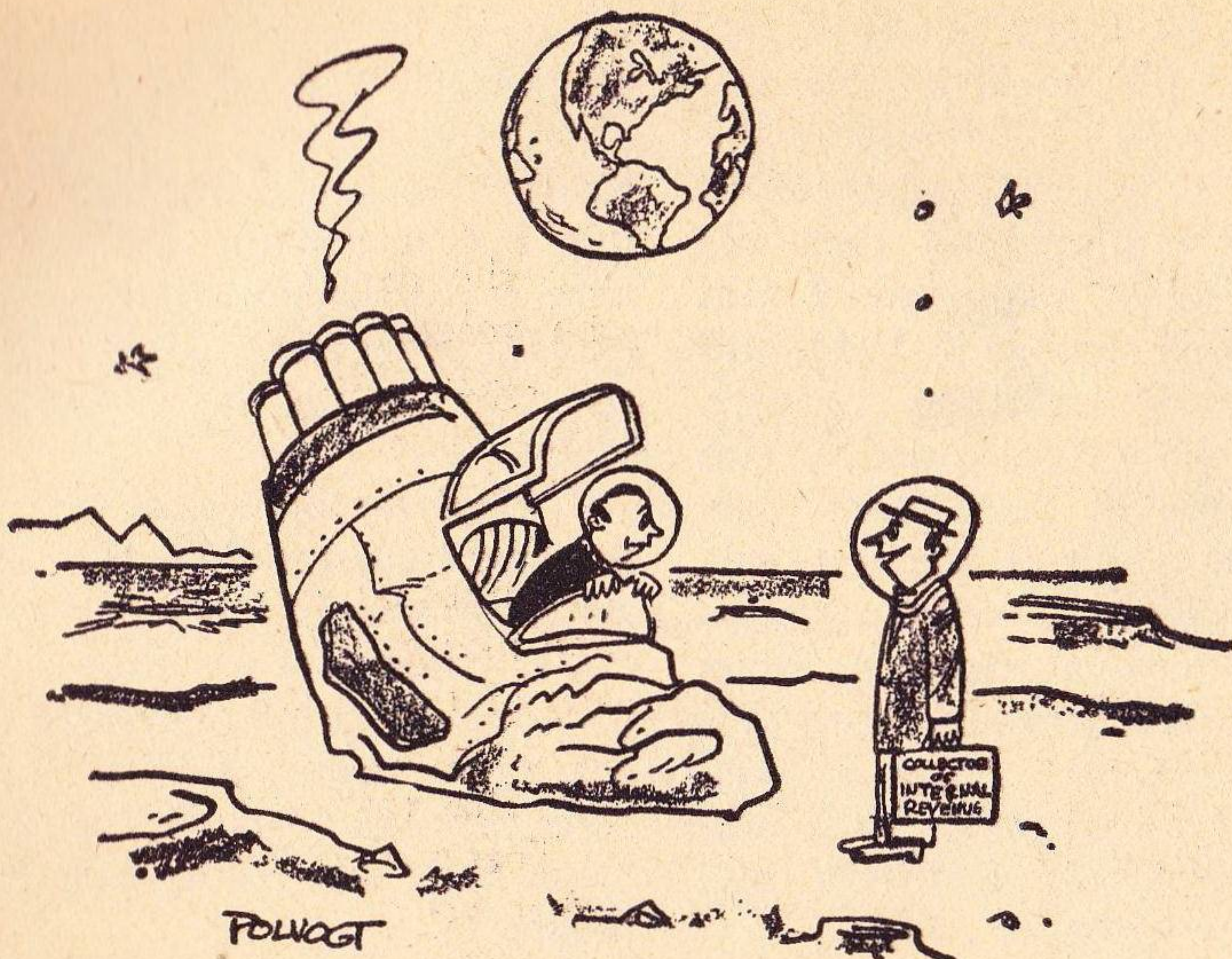
will continue to do so as long as it is printed. Time flies, you know; it couldn't have been too long ago when I picked up that newsstand copy of ISF which was the number one ish. Now, the volume number has turned up again. May it turn a million times *more!*

Unlike many of the letters in "Feedback," I have a definite and unusual reason for reading and liking ISF. Before I tell you any of this, I am ready to swear on a stack of ten-dollar anthologies that this is true.

That's right, dear editor, sit up in your chair a little. What's this, you say? Isn't he going to say he likes the stories? Yes, ever since I have started reading ISF I have never (but I missed the third ish, so I may be wrong) seen a story that was below a B-Class. Isn't he going to tell us how he likes "Fanfare?" Yes. "Fanfare," to me, is a worthwhile project, and I'm glad to see a mag who will recognize us fans for what we really are, the most organized group of fans in *any* group of literature. But the two reasons above are not the main reason I read ISF.

The reason I read ISF is because I predicted it.

Should I just leave it at that point? No, I have something to tell, and I must. I swear on my brother's grave that this story is true.



"Nice try, Dillon!"

I am a teen-age fan, and hope to be a pro-author. I started writing at the tender age of 8. I had, at that time, never read a s-f magazine, only the Heinlein juveniles. That was six years ago, in 1950. I had just finished two of the juvenile novels at the library, "Marooned on Mars" by Lester del Rey, and "Star-Man's Son," an atomic war novel by Andre Norton. I decided if I combined them, it would make a good story, so I picked at my mother's typewriter, which at that moment became a tripewriter, until I had two novels combined into one, with a total

of eight pages. The plot was simple; two boys take a rocket (they manage to sneak through the guards and the electric eye). The rocket sets off an atomic chain-reaction around the Earth and all the A-bombs "blow" at the same time. The boys by some lucky chance are not affected, they zooooooooom on to Mars, where one boy turns out to be a Martian. End of story.

What's so remarkable about this? Keep in mind what year it was when I wrote this. 1950. The hero was a s-f fan (of course). One day he was walking down the street, reading a

copy of INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION! As they took off, they saw the remains of "Project Vanguard"! One fact I managed to "predict wrong" and that was about Project Vanguard. I said it had been sent up in 1955, and it will be sometime between 1957-1958. And now I am wondering. In three more years I will find out if the last half of my prediction will come true. If they have a rocket to Mars or the moon ready, then I'll know. (*Hmm. Now if you would put that wish for a million volumes of INFINITY into prediction form . . . —Ed.*)

Last of all, and once again, I swear this to be true.—Richard W. Brown, 127 Roberts Street, Pasadena 3, Cal.

∞

I've just finished reading the latest issue of INFINITY, and in my opinion it's about your best yet. The cover is good, but I wish you would get another cover artist once in a while. "Hunt the Hog of Joe" was one of the most entertaining stories

I've read in a long time. This Gilbert shows a lot of promise.

Bulmer's "Three - Cornered Knife" was not only entertaining, but just plain good. This issue in particular strikes a good balance between the light stories and the serious type, such as this.

I have no objection to your printing two stories by the same author in one issue—other magazines do it lots of times, only they usually print one story under a pen name. If the stories hadn't been good, I wouldn't have liked the idea, but they justify it.

The rest of the short stories were also generally good. Asimov seems to be doing quite a few of these puzzle-stories lately, and this is truly one of his best. Robert Silverberg's was also good, and Sheckley's was . . . well, typical Sheckley, which from me is a compliment.

I have only one complaint on this issue—please bring back Damon Knight!—John Champion, Route 2, Box 75B, Pendleton, Ore.

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