

NEBULA

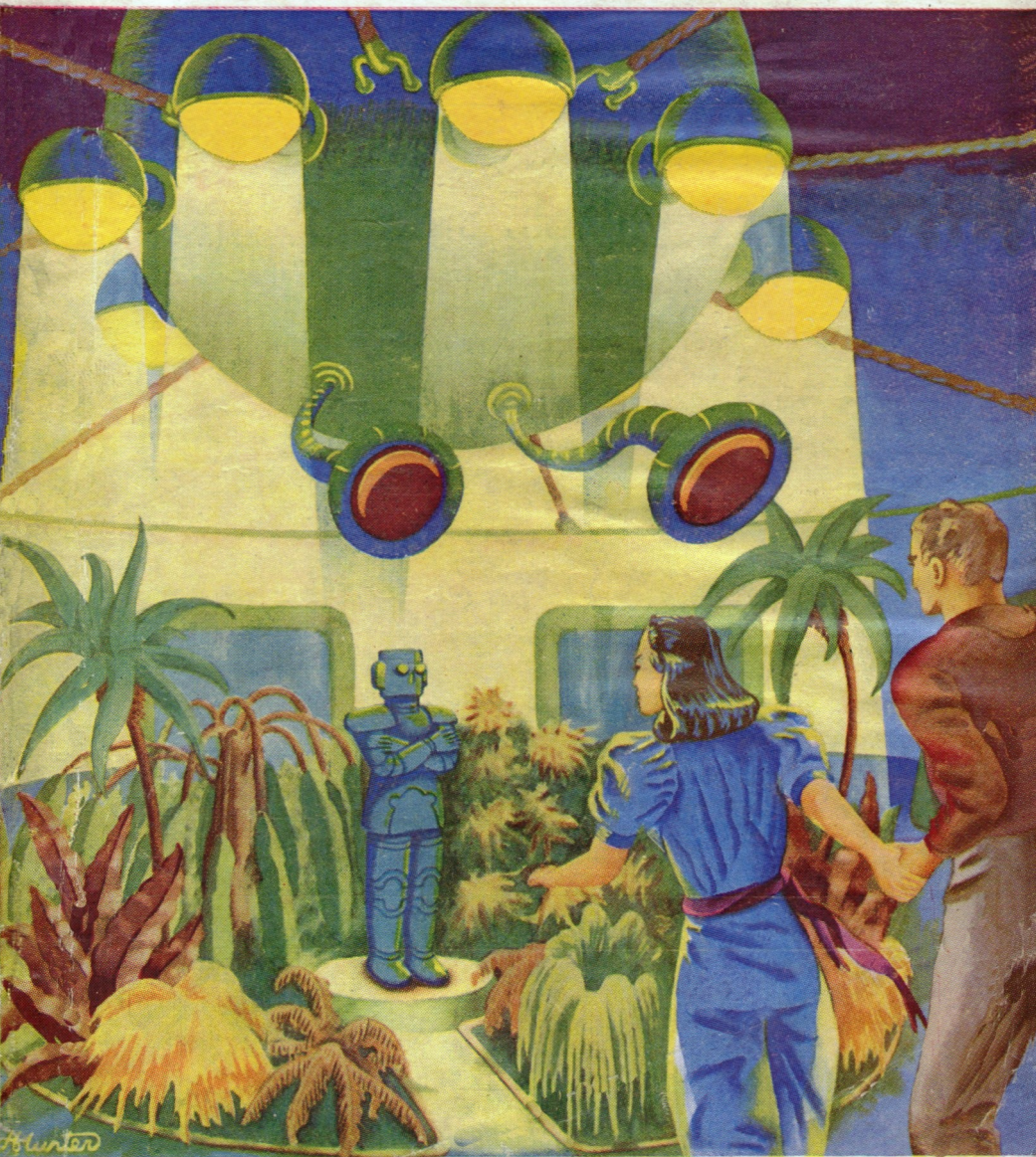
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SCIENCE FICTION

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1.

Editor : PETER HAMILTON JR.

No. 1.

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and found he had forgotten what to do.*

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Cover by Alan Hunter, illustrating a scene from *Robots Never Weep*

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*All characters in these stories are entirely fictitious and any resemblance to persons
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

Well, here we are at last, with *Nebula* in circulation! and I don't mind telling you that I've had some job getting it as far as it is at present.

Since April, when I tore myself out of a nice restful nursing-home, I have alternated between wishing I was back in it again, and blessing my job and fandom in general.

Among the people I blessed most regularly was John Brunner, whose advice and co-operation has done a lot to make *Nebula* what it is, and whose help (with authors' addresses, etc.) will make a big difference to future editions. I hear John is going off to do a spell of Military Service soon, too bad!

Thanks is also due to Captain Ken Slater of Operation Fantast, Vince Clarke of the Science Fantasy News and many others, who have provided me with valuable publicity and experience. Let's hope *Nebula* repays them for the trouble they have taken.

You may notice that our cover painting accurately illustrates a passage from *Robots Never Weep*. I think this is a pleasant change from the average S-F. magazine cover and I hope you will agree, let me know anyway.

The mention of the cover brings me to another point, (and a rather thorny one) that of interior illustrations. Nearly every letter I've had so far (and the postman has worn quite a track in the heather outside) has advocated these, but I feel that, just now at any rate, really good authors are more important, and am concentrating our finances on obtaining the best.

Already we have done fairly well in that line having accepted Mss. from William F. Temple, Charles Eric Maine, F. G. Rayer, E. R. James, E. C. Tubb, Sydney J. Bounds, Peter Hawkins, H. J. Campbell (!) and (you've guessed it) John Brunner.

This brings me to my final and most important words: *Nebula* is YOUR magazine. It is here to give you what you want and can only hope to do so if you write in and tell me just what that is. For example: do you like this issues lead story? or would you prefer more stories like the two shorts? Do you like our departments? Have we too many or too few? Is there any author, not listed, whose stories you would like me to try to obtain? I am very anxious for you to answer these questions and give me your candid opinions on the first issue of *Nebula*.

Peter Hamilton Jr.

Robots Never Weep

He awoke. All memory of Earthly folk had gone. Finding himself in a metal world, peopled mostly by machines, he struggled for the right to live—and gradually the nightmarish truth came home to him.

Chapter I

At first, agony throbbing through his head held him rigid, but presently he tried to lift his hands to his pain-seared eyes and found that he could not.

Even through his torture, this surprise reared a query: what was happening to him? And with this first coherent thought, some of the pain left him and he opened his eyes.

A dazzling blur of white glared into his mind. He moaned and again tried to raise his hands; could not; tried to lift his head; could not; and then suddenly realised he was strapped down on his back staring at a ceiling which reflected down the glare of something beyond his feet, out of range of his vision.

Now the pain was rapidly lessening and other sensations filtered through it to stimulate his thoughts. A high pitched whine screeched out over a confusion of mechanical racket, and, occasionally, a human voice shouted harshly. Upon the ceiling above him the glare was increasing, darkened at times by weird, hurrying shadows. The hard, flat surface to which he was strapped set his limbs to aching. A resounding clung-g-g, suggested the striking of a ponderous weight against a wall of metal.

Suddenly the platform to which he was fixed tilted so that the end supporting his feet jarred down, lifting his head see-saw fashion.

Robots, the glare gleaming on their metal skins, moved with stiff but efficient purpose. Close beyond them a wall of dull metal stretched a hundred yards away to the left and to the right, its surface studded with irregularly spaced clusters of controls, each

topped with glass dials and the eye-piece of a moveable, down-pointing periscope. Directly before his staring eyes a lead shield on wheels rested a foot from the wall, and it was around this that the light glared, and from behind it that the infernal sound screamed.

That there was an atomic furnace behind the wall, the helpless man knew at once; but where was he? and what was he doing strapped to a board before it?

Two robots strutted to the shield, one on either side. Their arms jerked up and steel fingers closed over hand grips, the light—which would have mortified any human flesh—glittering over them. Slowly they dragged the ponderous screen further from the wall.

Suddenly his view of them was blocked by a shaggy, swarthy face, thrust so close that he smelt the sickly-sweetness of Sacchaleine, a chewing drug, heavy on the other's breath.

The black beard split, lips like bloated worms with their tails joined together writhed apart. A guffaw of mocking laughter jangled on the helpless man's nerves.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! So the spy still lives—eh? The rat's got his pretty eyes staring—so he'll see what I'm going to do to his big, beautiful body."

The lips contracted to a wet blob and, suddenly, the big head jerked. Spittle splashed on the bridge of the victim's nose and oozed down his cheek.

Black-beard shambled back a few paces, bellowing laughter. His head jerked back and forth as spasms of it convulsed him, shaking his massive shoulders, setting his paunch of his stunted body a-quiver, and his stumpy legs to staggering.

Abruptly he sobered, glared hate from his small red-rimmed eyes and swung an abnormally long arm aloft, yelling orders into the din.

Metal hands scraped on the board beside the victim's head. A robot marched to his feet. Between them he was hoisted aloft. Prickly heat scorched his feet—obviously the robot near them had been one of those to move the screen and come into contact with those deadly radiations. Swaying between them, the leaden wall before him towered up as they neared it. Up, up he was raised. He glimpsed the circular opening through which the frightful radiations glared, heard the whine scream up to an ear-splitting crescendo and seemed already to feel the flesh being mortified on his bones.

His feet were set in line with the blinding opening and the

board was drawn back. He was to be flung inside! Terror of such a death choked him. What had he done? Why kill him, cremating his body in this manner? Why? Why? Behind him now, well clear of the glare, he could hear the dwarf's voice screaming orders, when—

“Stop!”

Stilleto bright and sharp, the command cut through the uproar...and the dwarf's harsh jubilation sunk to a cringing mutter.

Above this the silvery voice demanded: “What is going on here? Who gave you the order to dispose of the foundling in this way?”

The dwarf whined an incoherent reply. It was cut off short “Let him down at once! And bring him here. Quickly now!”

Harsh, reluctant orders set the robots retreating. The ceiling swayed as the victim was swung down, carried back and set down on the floor.

“Now release him!”

“Release him?” On the ceiling the dwarf's contorted shadow danced as long arms waved protest. “But——”

“Release him”

The soft, yet menacing order stilled the shadow. The beard wagged grotesquely as orders were whimpered to the robots.

Steel fingers, cold when they scraped the victim's flesh, fumbled the fastenings of the straps. The band around his head slipped away and the vice-like holds on his ankles and wrists relaxed.

He attempted to rise and cramp suddenly ached in every muscle. Moaning, he rolled over, off the board's hard edge on to the spongy floor, writhing there, he vaguely aware that, with the clung-g! of a shutting metal door, the glare and much of the sound was shut away.

Presently, rubbing his aching wrists to restore circulation, he sat up, looking around in the soft light for his saviour.

She stood on a flight of steps well away from the furnace wall. He saw slender, bare feet with scarlet toe nails in dainty, high-heeled scarlet sandals, and his gaze slowly lifted; trouser bottoms of some semi-transparent stuff, flame coloured and full, gathered in to emphasize her slender waist and girlish bust, and puffed out in enormous pleats at the shoulders; black hair in a heavy, shining roll upon her shoulders in startling contrast to the cream of her throat.

Her wide, dark eyes looked down on him thoughtfully. Petulance pursed her red lips. Although the high cheek bones,

the rich cream of her complexion, the ringlet of hair on her forehead and the extravagance of jewels upon her gauzy apparel combined to give her the appearance of excess, foreign and strange, he was stirred by the beauty of the barbaric picture she made.

Her slender hand lifted to brush back the heavy roll of hair. Lips parted in a smile.

"Who are you?"

"I—" He hesitated. Everyone had a name, he knew. What was his?

She frowned impatience. "Where have you come from, then?"

He shook his head as the throbbing began afresh. "I—I—" He lifted his hands to rub his face, then looked up at her in bewilderment. "I...don't seem to know. It's all a blank."

"A blank?"

Daintily she descended the stairs and stood before him

"Stand up."

He scrambled to his feet and stood waiting.

She put her head on one side. "Can't you remember anything?"

Again he hesitated, striving to think more clearly. "No—Nothing."

"You know," she warned, that we have ways here of knowing if you speak the truth?"

He nodded. At once, into his mind had come a picture of a machine through which a roll of paper passed to another roll, and on which jerking arms made uneven lines, while his arms were fastened with bands of rubber tubing and his voice was recorded. A lie-detector—yes, he knew of such things.

She bit her lip, pondering. "Of course it is possible that you're suffering from partial amnesia after that crash."

"Crash?"

"Yes. You...literally dropped on us out of space. And, very oddly, there was nothing aboard your little ship to give the slightest clue to anything about you."

He glanced at the suspicious, hairy visage of the dwarf, and looked back at her. "I—I— I don't seem to remember...Who are you?" And where am I?"

"Yes," she taunted, "where? Do you realise for instance, where you'd have been if I hadn't interrupted?"

"I do!" He closed his eyes. "I know I owe you my life—"

"You do," she nodded. "Remember that."

"How could I forget?" He shuddered.

She laughed. "It seems you might."

"Who? What? Why?" The dwarf spat. "What is all this talk, Sacha? We're wasting time. Scivet said kill—ah!"

He cowered back as the girl swung around to him contemptuously.

"You silly, ugly, mis-shapen little Vorille. Didn't I tell you to leave my foundling alone?" Her voice sank to hissing menace. "I told you quite plainly I wanted him for myself—"

"But Scivet—"

"Forget Scivet!" She stamped her foot. "I say he lives. He's my foundling." She smiled again at the man without a past. "Yes...my foundling. Whoever you are you're mine, you understand? Mine!" She put out a hand and caressed his cheek and brushed back the hair from his forehead. "You—" She hesitated frowning thoughtfully. "But I can't keep on saying 'you' as if you were a stray dog. I—must christen you...as though you had just been born when you were found... Found? Yes, that's it. Johnny Found!" Her laughter trilled.

He smiled. "Johnny Found..." Now he had a name. That made him feel better, less lost in bewilderment—even though it did not begin to solve his problem.

Abruptly she faced Vorille. "I want two robots. Two that're not fouled with radio-activity. Quickly now."

The dwarf mumbled to himself, his eyes glittering evilly at Johnny Found. But he selected two as the girl had ordered, snarling orders at them to obey her.

She laughed mockingly at him, and he cowered, mouthing, away.

"Come, Johnny Found," she said. "And you robots, follow us." Pivoting on a high heel, she turned, and Johnny, his eyes on the sparkling jewels around her slender neck, followed her meekly.

Their sandals whispered on the spongy floor as they ascended the steps, passed through into the passage above, along winding corridors, through hatchways in thick bulkheads—which robots unclamped at their approach and secured after them. They entered a long, wide space, one side flanked with doors and the other a long window open to the night sky in which a myriad stars shone brightly. Although they skirted this window, Johnny could see no earth below, and he thought what a tall building this must be...

With the window behind them, Sacha, her feet on the first of more steps, stopped. Johnny gasped, only just able to do like-

wise. He set his hands on her slender arms to steady himself. The soft feel of her flesh disturbed him.

She motioned for him to go back. He did so and stood to one side, looking up as she did.

He heard the pad of hurrying feet and then saw the space-suit, less the helmet, of a tall man who, the moment he saw Johnny, stopped dead, sucked in his breath through thinning lips and glowered furiously.

"What the devil?"

He wheeled on Sacha. "I told Vorille to deal with this man. What's he doing here?"

Sacha, standing straight and cool, although her bosom rose and fell rapidly, slowly smiled. "Scivet darling, but I wanted him so much—just for amusement. You wouldn't grudge me a whim—"

"A whim!" raved the man. "How dare you interfere!" His gloved hand thrust at her breast, knocking her backwards.

On the floor, she righted herself with the speed of a cat, eyes flashing, hair dishevelled and lips parted to bare her even, white teeth.

Scivet set his hands on his hips, sneering at Johnny. "So you appeal to Sacha, and she wants to mother you. Why, you sneaking spy—"

Johnny stared at this handsome fury of a man. Why did everyone suspect him of being a spy?

The man's hand reached into a side pocket of his heavily padded suit. His dark eyes struck chill. Johnny gasped.

"Scivet!" Sacha sprang cat-like, her hands clawing.

He flung her aside unmoved. From his pocket he took an electron pistol.

"No!" screamed Sacha.

Scivet paused to laugh at her. "I'll tame you yet!"

"Robots!" she snarled. "Hold him!"

Scivet exclaimed with alarm.

As he turned and began to dodge, the metal men closed in on him with the precision of their kind. Stiffly, but unerringly, they seized his swinging arms. For a moment he struggled, then, like a trapped panther, he relaxed, white with fury.

"Get these things off me!"

Sacha slowly rose to her feet. Her temper, which had matched his own, seemed to burn itself out. The mark of his gloved hand on her face showing like a flaw, she suddenly laughed outright, peals of silvery laughter.

"Oh Scivet darling, how helpless you look. And—it's so unlike you..."

"I'll kill you!" he snarled. "Not even you can do this to me."

"But I am doing it, Scivet darling." She felt in the pleats at her shoulders, taking out a dainty, jewelled cigarette case. Smilingly she selected one of the thin white sticks, set its amber end between her scarlet lips, applied its other end to a hole in the side of the case and inhaled until the smoke trickled out from her delicate nostrils. The sickly perfume of the smoke reminded Johnny of the dwarf. Sacchaleine... Though banned by the World Drug Commission, it was not really harmful—although its stimulation did scratch away the veneer of civilisation.

She reached forward and placed the cigarette between Scivet's twisted lips: "Calm yourself, darling—"

Furiously he spat it out. "Wait until Ursula hears of this!"

"Ursula." Sacha sobered.

He nodded. "Yes, Ursula. She'll deal with you"

Sacha regarded him, her head a little on one side, her hand pushing back the disordered roll of hair.

Unexpectedly the robots released Scivet and straightened, to stand motionless.

Scivet hesitated. Then he thrust the gun back into his pocket. "See, Ursula has already taken control of the situation."

"Yes." Her voice, hitherto so cool and confident, seemed blunt, unsure. She bit her underlip.

Then she stepped daintily to Johnny's side and took hold of his arm, hugging it against her scantily clad side.

"Scivet darling, will you—" She waved her free hand. "—go in front?"

Scowling, he strode from between the two motionless robots. Sacha flung back a brief command for these to follow, and they proceeded back the way they had come.

They did not, however, return to the furnace chamber, although it seemed to Johnny that they must be very close to it when they entered a small room, the walls of which were fitted with deep sprung seats.

He guessed it was some sort of ante-chamber. Before massive double doors facing them, two robots stood like steel statues.

Guard robots these—in place of hands they were fitted with weapons. Where the right hand should have been, the arm ended in a fork, one prong of which was an electron gun and the other a stun-gun. And, where the left hand should have been there was a

padded steel vice, from one side of which stuck out a gleaming hook and from the other side a shining knife.

Sacha drew Johnny to a halt, but Scivet went straight forward. A crack of light shone between the doors as they swung ponderously outwards, and the robots made no move.

Sacha squeezed Johnny's arm. "Be brave, Johnny Found. Ursula is part woman and admires courage."

He looked at her and her wide, dark eyes searched into his. Then she released his arm and took his hand, drawing him forward as though he were a child.

Chapter II.

Stiff and still stood the robot guards as Sacha led Johnny between the great doors.

The immensity of the great dome beyond took his breath away. Suspended from the roof and fixed to the side by cables, floated a sphere fully fifty feet in diameter, dominating everything else. In the base of this, two stalks ended in lenses, opaque and moving—as though surveying each of the visitors in turn.

Johnny gulped. Behind the sphere and all around, the smooth, grey walls reached nearly to the floor. Television screens, tilted so that they faced up to the sphere, joined the walls and roof. In the centre of the floor, beneath the sphere, lit by the radiations of artificial suns, a garden of exotic, tropical plants made an unexpected contrast. As he stared, the scent of outlandish flowers filled his nostrils, sweet, heady and luxuriant.

On a stone in the centre of the garden, like a statue of steel, stood a robot. Motionless it too seemed to watch them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny saw Scivet raise a long arm, pointing accusation at him. "Even if—as Sacha seems to think—this man is not a spy, he's seen too much now. He must die. And Sacha must be punished. Her wilfulness, dangerous to us all, deserves death". He glanced at her, his thinning lips balancing the passion in his eyes. "But I do not wish her to die—yet".

And there came a response, echo-y and metallic and impersonal, booming through the dome. "I know all".

Johnny stared around. The television screens were blank, the robot had not moved, a fountain had begun to water the garden and the sphere hung motionless, enigmatic.

Suddenly he noticed that the twin lenses were focussed on him. It was as though the sphere looked at him. For a second his flesh crawled.

Then, commonsense reassured him that the person called Ursula was up there in that sphere. No doubt it was her last line of defence, high, lonely and unassailable.

He stared up into those lenses.

"Yes, I am Ursula. Ursula of the Sphere. You have sense, young man. What is your name?"

He hesitated. What could he say? What would happen when he said he did not know?

Then fingers bit into his arm, and he remembered Sacha's warning. He pulled himself together. After all, the being he faced was human.

"I don't know. I have no memory of anything that happened before I found myself about to be killed".

"No memory," boomed the voice.

Sacha tossed back her head, her long dark hair slipping back over her shoulder. "I call him Johnny Found".

"I know".

The lenses held steady. Then the silence of the dome was broken by the rustle of leather on leather as Scivet moved impatiently. "What's wrong, Ursula. Why're we wasting time on a spy?"

"Because, my son, he could be useful to us... Tell us, Johnny Found, how your past is not all blank—how you know many things?"

"You mean about machines? Yes, that's true. Sacha spoke of testing my words for truth, and I knew how it could be done. I know about the atomic furnace, too. And these robots of yours. Well, perhaps I couldn't make one, but I know I could do repairs on one..."

"And you know many other things, too. Tell us—What is the first law of thermodynamics?"

"What? Oh—" The answer seemed to spring spontaneously into Johnny's mind. "It's that.....energy cannot be created, any more than it can be destroyed. It is possible only to change one type of energy into another type. For example the heat energy generated by burning petrol in an internal combustion engine is changed into mechanical effort to do work. Or the energy bound up in matter can be released in the form of light and heat, and the emission of alpha and beta particles and gamma radiations, by atomic fission, or by the complete annihilation of matter as

recently achieved..." His voice died away as amazement at his own knowledge rocked his thoughts.

Scivet snorted. "So he's talking like a text book? What of it?"

"He could be useful to us. The humans we can trust are few, my son. This man is a scientist. I know him." Echoes left by the booming voice died away. The lenses stared expressionlessly

"Now—you who have been renamed Johnny Found—think hard and tell us your real name Say it out loud."

Out loud. His real name. Johnny strove to remember. The knowledge seemed just around the corner; yet, try as he would, he could not think around that tantalising mental barrier.

Instead, the throbbing pain started anew, growing rapidly until he thought his head would burst. He clasped his hands over his face, swaying dizzily.

Scivet's voice seemed far away. "This is madness, Ursula. If he's a scientist, he's more likely to be a spy as I thought."

"Have patience, my son."

"Oh sure. You deal with him then. I've wasted enough time." He glanced at Johnny contemptuously, then swung around on his heel, tall and straight. Doors opened noiselessly for him to leave.

Johnny looked back at the sphere. Then he noticed that one of the television screens glowed.

A picture formed. Black, the utter blackness of Space, hung with the glaring, unwinking brilliance of stars unhazed by atmosphere...

A tiny, intermittently glaring flame burnt its way up. Johnny frowned. It was the exhaust of a rocket—like the single stage rockets used between Earth and the space stations orbiting like artificial moons around Earth. And it was not functioning properly.

Voices, made tinny by intercom. radio, yelled staccato orders. The stars appeared to move as the flaring, slanting rocket exhaust was held in the centre of the screen. The rocket grew from a silvery speck to a glaring, sunlit cylinder.

On the foot of the screen, a grey expanse leapt into view. Men-shapes, partly lit by the glare, cast fantastic shadows as they ran across it, some dragging pipelines, some carrying weapons or equipment.

The orders barked. The rocket, utterly out of control, performed a crazy, unbalanced dance overhead, its flaming tail

lashing down and drumming quivering thunder upon the metal below.

Suddenly its exhaust snuffed out. In the utter silence of Space it drifted down. Soon, Johnny knew, it would be caught by the gravitational field which enabled those men to walk.

It seemed caught by a mighty hand and pulled from the black sky. The metal floor rang with the boots of the men-shapes scurrying away from the point of imminent disaster.

Crash! Rocket fuels, gushing from burst tanks, mixed and ignited in a soundless white-hot glare, But a globe of glass skidded out, impelled by the explosion perhaps, rolled over and over bouncing, until, as friction lessened its momentum, it was seen to be egg-shaped.

Running figures closed in towards it. It finally swung up on to its small end, hesitated, rolled backwards, rocked, and rolled sideways. Men-shapes, the lurid light of dying flames gleaming on their metal bodies steadied it and began to roll it back closer to the camera.

The scene shifted back to the wreckage. Robots, impervious to the rapidly shrinking Hell of incandescence, pushed it towards a black hole suddenly showing in the floor. Others followed close on their heels, squirting foam on the glowing metal, half hidden by the furious evaporation. Yet others followed, operating scrubbing and polishing apparatus...and behind these the surface shone gray and unmarked.

Johnny licked his dry lips. Above the grey expanse, the stars were impressive in their majesty. He knew that he was looking out from a space station of some kind — but of a sort very much bigger than any he could remember being in existence.

The stars were moving slowly across the screen in a steady secondary movement—and he knew that, because of this, the space station was orbiting rapidly. If it moved around Earth, it must be very much closer the surface of that planet than the Moon. For the closer the space station was to the surface of such a large body as a planet, the more rapidly it must move to maintain altitude.

The screen blanked and glowed again to show the transparent spheroid being dropped through another hole in the surface of the space station.

Evidently the camera was being carried down too, for the scene followed the spheroid into a lighted spaceship hangar. Doors slid into place above and clamped.

Air hissed into a hangar, and presently booted feet crossed the floor of it. Robots opened a sliding door in the spheroid. One poked inside and, after a few moments, dragged out the limp body of a human being.

Slowly the picture swelled, until a human hand reached into view, grasping a handful of the pilot's hair, jerking the head sideways so that it was presented full face, filling the entire picture.

The eyes were shut, the jaw sagged loosely, trickling saliva...which mixed with blood issuing slowly from the nostrils. As pallid as death, yet it was a strong, handsome face, suggestive of much tenacity of character.

The pilot's head bumped down as the hand was withdrawn. The camera retreated. Other figures, some robot and some human came into view.

Johnny recognised Sacha. She laughed when someone said the spy still lived. She raised his head. "Handsome fellow." She frowned. "Pity for him to be wasted in this Hell above Earth."

"Dirty spy!" snarled Vorille's harsh voice.

Her eyes narrowed. "Ugly fool. Why he'd make two of you, you horrible, misshapen beast. Take him straight to my rooms, d'you hear?"

"What's that?" Another human jerked around. Scivet's dark, handsome face glared at her.

She stamped her foot. "I want him. You're away so often, with the others. And robots are poor company—"

"All right," Scivet placated her smoothly, "all right. Have him if he takes your fancy."

"I intend to." She turned regally.

Scivet, smiling, watched her go. He glanced sideways "Vorille, dispose of the spy in the usual way."

"Ye-es," gloated the dwarf.

The scene flickered, grew indistinct, and the glow of the screen faded.

Johnny, knowing now that he had seen a recording of his own arrival in this place, swallowed hard and looked up at the lenses in the sphere.

The voice boomed. "Now, do you remember?"

"No," he said. "No!"

"Then look again at the play-back screen."

Again the flat expanse, but now a government patrol craft rested there. From an airlock in its side, space suited men whose

helmets bore the military insignia, were emerging, keeping close together.

From the side, a tall man in a black space-suit stepped into view. And the arrivals halted. One, his sleeve braided with gold rings, saluted.

"We have reason to believe," his voice came brusquely over the intercom, "that you may have seen a rocket carrying a scientist up to Spacial Observatory 24".

"We have". Scivet's snarl was unmistakeable. He put his hands grimly upon his black-sheathed hips. "It crashed against us and ricocheted off into space. You can see the scratches for yourself. Over there". He pointed.

The uniformed spokesman motioned to one of his companions. The man lumbered off in the direction indicated.

Scivet shrugged. "You've not found him, then?"

"No. We will, though. He was wanted for murder".

"Murder?" Scivet started.

The officer looked across at his companion who was now coming back.

And, in that situation, the view faded and the screen blanked.

Johnny stared numbly at the opaque surface. Wanted for murder!

He glanced desperately at Sacha. She smiled her vivid smile at him. His thoughts raced. Alone in all this space, she was his ally. His stunned soul warmed to her exotic beauty. He longed to tell her how wonderful she was. With her velvety arms around his neck, he would defy them all!

The cold, mechanical voice of the sphere ripped into his mind. "Now, do you remember?"

He shook his head, without taking his hot stare away from the vivid girl.

But Sacha looked up pleadingly. "Ursula! Don't you see he's an amnesia case?"

"We must be sure, woman".

"Sure But— Ursula, you'll not beat him? I—"

"You want him unmarked. I know But he is strong and healthy. You must let me decide what is necessary."

Sacha bit her lip. A trickle of red ran from between her white teeth.

"Sacha," said the terrible, impersonal voice. "You are forgetting you are my son's woman. You had best leave now".

Sacha squeezed Johnny's arm, her fingers whitening. Red lips parted as though she would speak.

Abruptly she flung back her head, shaking back her glistening hair. She turned on the pivot of her high heels, and walked proudly towards the opening doors.

These swung shut, silently, after her.

He stared at them. Not a movement, not a sound disturbed the vast, empty Dome. What new horror was in store for him? His fists clenched defiantly as he looked slowly around.

He started. Stepping daintily amongst the exotic plants of the tropical garden, came a girl. Her flimsy draperies trailed out behind her. Her ash-gold hair seemed to float intangible and wraith-like as a cloud; her shapely arms hung at her sides; the blue eyes in her chalk-white face seemed fixed on something directly ahead.

She walked as a sleepwalker might—or as a ghost. Neither he, nor the dweller in the dome above seemed to exist in her world.

The very pounding of his heart called his racing thoughts back to reason. The girl...was flesh and blood. How different was she from Sacha! No vivid beauty she. But—Stars! she was lovely. Her face was shaped like a heart, her eyes as blue and appealing as cornflowers, her lips as richly arched as cupid's bow, soft and tender as rose petals.

She stepped beyond the limits of the garden, her small feet peeping—bare as her arms—beneath the hem of her draperies. Her limbs were shadows within the flimsy stuff, the curve of her hips and the sudden swell of her breasts sharply defined where it clung to her because of her motion.

She altered the line of her advance—as though commanded. Facing him, her eyes stared straight through him.

Six paces in front of him, she halted. She stood, lovely as a nymph, before him, waiting...

He cleared his throat. She had all the fulfilment of vivacious womanhood...lovely...capable of being loved. Did she indeed sleep?

He took two paces towards her, then stopped. Was she really flesh and blood? No robot she—not with that freshness—but might she not be some three-dimensional image projected on the very air before him?

Was this another test of his amnesia? And, if it was, what was his reaction supposed to be?

He looked up at the hanging sphere. The lenses watched him coldly.

He moistened his lips. "Is she real? Does...she sleep?"

"Yes, you might say she sleeps. Does the sight of her affect you not at all?"

"Should it?" He looked at the girl, in admiration. "Do you mean because she is lovely? She is...lovely!"

"Is that all you can say?"

"What else is there?"

He looked up at the inscrutable lenses, then back at the girl. Some instinct, half submerged and incapable of being expressed in words, stirred in his mind. His imagination pictured her as she would be when normal. He yearned to see her smile, rosy lips curving, blue eyes sparkling. The unseen force in possession of her seemed as unnatural as a wintry mist would be over the lush beauty of spring.

A slight noise drew his attention to one side. Two of the opaque screens had opened outwards. Between them a cabinet, about the size of a television set and mounted on wheels, caught his eye. On a sloping panel set in the top of it, needles flickered in dials, lights glowed and levers trembled as though adjusting themselves. Set in its front, a cluster of tiny lights oscillated, short flexible arms weaved strange patterns.

Suddenly he understood. The girl's mind slept, and her every movement was controlled by this mechanism. And this, like the robots, must be under the remote control of—Ursula.

He looked up at the lenses. "More science," he said. "She is dominated by that machine". Into his thoughts came mental images of coils, inductances and circuits for the transmission of supersonic radiations which were on the waveband of human thought. Yes, he could have constructed such a machine, even though he knew—without knowing how he knew—that the unauthorised use of such a machine was banned.

He hesitated. "Is that the answer you want?" he asked finally.

The voice remained silent. Evidently it was not the right answer... He looked back at the girl.

The voice boomed. "Take her in your arms".

His heart began to pound. He slowly lifted his arms, reaching out doubtfully. Another inch and his fingertips would touch her arms, her bare arms. Excitement bubbled up inside him. His fingers trembled.

He half expected her flesh to be as cold and dead as her trance suggested. His fingers... touched warm, satiny skin, brushed over it, his hands closed around her soft arms, and he drew her towards him.

"Hold her tightly."

He enfolded her in his arms. Her scantily clad body pressed against his... The scent of her slipped clean and sweet into his nostrils...

Abruptly her inertness horrified him. His thoughts reeled and he pushed her away, his gorge rising.

"Not while she's like that," he shuddered.

"Embrace her".

"No, I will not".

"Then you remember her?"

"No". Again he seemed to feel the uncanny chill of her warm, lovely body against his. "I don't remember her, but I'll not touch her again while she's in that state".

"You lie. But there are other ways to make you speak".

The girl turned about noiselessly. Johnny watched the lithe sway of her movements as she faced back into the garden. As she passed between the tropical plants the artificial sunlight formed a halo around her golden hair. At the point where the fountain had played, she stopped, statuesque. Slowly she began to sink down, passing from his view.

Chapter III.

In the centre of the garden, the robot leaned forward and came striding down. Over to the left, sections of the television screens swung open, and other robots, six of them, came marching in.

All of them stalked towards him, lens-eyes glowing, their arms bending. Rubber fingers reached like bloated claws to grasp him.

He backed away, fearfully. Soullessly they pursued him. He turned and ran. Metal feet pounded after him. His flying arms were grasped and he was jerked to a halt. His joints aching with the suddenness of it, he twisted around to shout to the sphere.

"I speak the truth!"

Back and to his knees he was forced relentlessly. Rubber fists brandished over him, smashed down, knocking him giddy. Dimly he was conscious of being lifted to his feet, and of stumbling forward.

The gripping fingers bit into his flesh, halting him and forcing him to his knees. His arms were pulled around before him

and twisted so that the pressure on them kept him kneeling in a half crouch.

Something whistled up through the air behind him, cracked like a pistol shot, came whistling down. A lash of fire tore the skin of his back, and the weal it raised stung. He was being whipped. Up hissed the lash, cracked menace. Unable to move, he held his breath for the agony of its descent...

Silence... And then the mighty voice. "This is physical persuasion, Johnny Found. I warn you that the mental pressure I can bring to bear will be far worse. You remembered the girl, didn't you?"

"No".

"Then why did you feel horrified by her condition?"

"I don't know. But—I remember nothing. Nothing!"

Robots hands increased their pressure on his arms. The whip cracked and he clenched his teeth. Three times it sliced across his back. Again it cracked and he flinched, but it did not strike.

He relaxed and would have fallen on his face but for his twisted arms. His senses swam. Each stroke of the lash had stunned him.

Suddenly the pressure on his arms changed. He was jerked back on his heels. Grimly he lifted his head to peer up at the lenses high above him. The being behind them must be mad to think that brutality could restore his lost memory. If it was not mad, then it could not be human.

It must be a machine, and a machine unaided could not rival the chemical intricacy of the human brain. His head was clearing now, and his knowledge encouraging him. The weals upon his back stung like fire, ached numbly too.

But somehow, oddly, he felt almost master of the situation. Let them beat him again if they wished. Because his brain was human they could not control it, as machines were controlled.

His lips slowly widened—bruised and split though they felt—in a smile. "What good does this do you, Ursula? A machine cannot rival humanity. A creation cannot be superior to its creator".

The robot—he thought quite impersonally that they must be controlled in some way by radio impulses—twisted his arms around once more, drawing his back into an arch. The whip hissed up behind him, cracked and fell agonisingly. This time, however, he did not flinch. The cut of it across his raw back made him jerk and close his eyes, but no sound escaped him, and he held his head as high as he could.

The voice boomed. "There are machines to build up mental stress. You may despise machinery but you'll know that these sometimes send people mad".

"Then I'll be no use to you".

"Exactly. That is the only reason why I did not use them first. Your wonderful human brain is too vulnerable to them. They break it too easily. You—with your admitted scientific knowledge will know that. So, for the last time, will you tell me truth?"

"I've told you truth. If you were half-human you'd know that".

"I am half-human".

The grip fell away from his arms. Unsupported, he stumbled forward, and might have fallen if a steel hand had not caught his arm, steadying him.

He glanced over his shoulder, pain creasing his face, and looked into the saucer eyes of the robot which had stood beneath the sphere. "Thanks, anyway..."

"Ursula tell me to help you."

The voice, tinny but clear, had definitely come from the robot. Johnny stared. It was against International Law to make robots that could speak.

"You talk?"

"I am Ursula's Hands."

Ursula's voice boomed. "A very special robot, Johnny Found. I am human but he is not. My human brain has been added to, but his is my creation. He is as perfect as can be."

She was proud of her work. Johnny could tell that. He looked up at the lenses above him. A woman shut up in a sphere, with lenses for eyes. Human, yet inhuman, a law unto herself in this place.

"I don't understand," he said. "You are all-powerful. You see everything. If you have a superhuman brain you must know most things. Yet you fear me. Why?"

"Because I have plans. I know there are those on the world below who suspect me. We have had spies here before."

"What plans?"

He waited for a reply. He had begun to think that Ursula had changed her attitude towards him, but the silence denied that.

A scrape of metal against metal drew his attention. Robots were bringing in fresh mechanisms. He saw a metal chair, its arms and back fitted with straps so that the occupant might be

fastened in place. And knowing what to expect from it, he shuddered

Metal boxes, connecting wires, instrument panels, some of them pushed on wheels and some of them carried, were brought in and left. Then a man with a robot's head—or was it a robot with a man's body?—followed and stood watching him.

The two rubber fingered robots straightened from the attitude of still holding him. Stiffly they turned, moving closer to him, their lenses reflecting tiny images of himself, their arms reaching out ready to seize him, but not at that moment doing so.

He shuddered. His fate seemed as certain and Ursula's will as inexorable as the movements of these silent automatons.

"Do you still feel as brave, Johnny Found?" questioned the voice.

He shrugged. "Bravery has nothing to do with this." The cold sweat of fear beaded his face and hands.

The rubber hands clutched him. He was dragged forward. Beside the apparatus, now being assembled under the silent direction of the man with the robot's head, he was halted.

With fatalistic interest, he watched. There would be more pain to face now. Struggle was useless. The robots which held him were equipped with brains of metal and plastic, valves and tiny mechanisms all placed together to deal with any possible eventuality of their victim escaping. Although they were capable of nothing else beyond holding him or beating him, they would do that supremely well.

He glanced at the speaking robot, Hands, and wondered. To build a brain capable of doing the thousands of different actions of a human being had not been thought possible. Even to give a robot the power of speech had been thought dangerous. Speech entailed a certain amount of imagination.

Imagination was man's last stronghold. If the robot servants of the world had that, they would be man's equal—perhaps his superior. They would live. Or so it was thought.

He glanced up at the sphere. Ursula had plans—and she was both human and robot she said—and evidently the world feared her.

He looked at the man with the robot's head. What freak was this? Not that it mattered, now...

Already the complicated arrangement of apparatus was complete. Johnny knew all too well how it functioned. His eyes traced the circuit of power through nerve agitators, supersonic

instruments which would be later tuned in to his very thoughts, loudspeakers, a co-ordinating machine on which centralised controls of the entire layout waited the hands of the man-robot before them, and on to the chair itself at his side.

Johnny's captors forced him into the seat, others drew the straps tightly over his wrists, upper arms, chest, knees, ankles and head. Unable to move, except for his roving eyes he sat still.

Robot fingers began to fix rubber padded ends of wires from the nerve agitator to his flesh in such a way that they covered the principle nerve centres of his body. The robot in front of him arranged antennae aerials on either side of his head, and stood back.

The machine operators bent over their machines. Red lights glowed on each section. The general hum of them all trembled through Johnny like a physical shock. His attention centred on the man-robot, watching fascinated as the strange being made adjustments, then looked up at the sphere.

The voice boomed. "Is all ready, Husband?"

"Yes."

"Do you hear that, Johnny Found? This is the last chance I will give you? Will you speak?"

"How can I?" Johnny gasped. "Go on. Get it over with."

"You'll not beat this machine—"

"I know. Get on with it. Then you'll have to believe me..."

"Very well. Let the test continue."

The man-robot seemed to hesitate, lens-eyes looking at Johnny expressionlessly, human fingers twitching.

Ursula's voice boomed. "There is no alternative, Husband. This—or Vorille has—"

"God—No!"

The man-robot bent over the instrument board. The robot operators—their fingers thin and delicate for the better manipulation of their controls—began to move as he moved, with remarkable speed and precision.

Johnny's legs twitched in their bonds, his arms quivered as though with palsy, his head began to jerk. A pain jumped in his left leg, spread like fire into his right, rose like a leaping flame through his stomach, aching in his bones, burning in his flesh, up into his chest, set his heart pounding and jolting, out into his arms, contorting his muscles in spasms, swelling into his neck and, for a time, pausing there, though he knew it would presently enter even

into his head—although then he would not know the agony of it all.

Moans burst from his lips, sweat beaded out from his convulsing body and ran like rivulets of ice over his burning skin. His resistance was being broken down, he knew, and instinctively he battled against the force. The will to survive mounted stronger than his intelligence and half-crazy appeals bubbled from his lips.

One moment in his delirium, it seemed that Sacha stood before him. He called out to her, but she had gone. The fire scorched into his neck, higher, higher.

Suddenly his mind cleared and he knew his nervous system had revolted against the unnatural stimulus. He could not move his head to look up at his weird tormentor, but he shouted.

"I can't—"

Then the pain flamed back, rioting through him, cutting short his last defiance, burning into his brain and devouring his consciousness.

"Sacha!"

It was his own voice crying out. Although he was not aware of any passage of time, he knew at once that the machine-probing of his mind must be over. What had been the result, he wondered, and where was he now?

He started up from where he was lying. In front of him a patch of sooty space, filled with stars. Between the folds of plastic curtains was crossed with the bars of a grille. Beneath it, stood a bookshelf, its racks laden with micro-film books, and a screen on which these could be projected. Nearby, to the right was a deep sprung chair, a table bearing an ashtray and a weird shaped vase containing exotic flowers.

His legs felt strangely heavy as he swung them to the floor. His sight, too, flickered in an alarming manner. And his back ached—but that at least was not part of the aftermath of nerve strain.

He rose shakily to his feet and looked up. The blonde, lovely girl, who had been part of his ordeal in the Dome, stared at him, a slow flush colouring her cheeks.

Her hand rose to the bare V at her throat. Her breast rose and fell in great agitation. "They tell me... that your name is Johnny Found?" She hesitated.

He nodded. "Yes". The flush, her soft voice and her nervousness disturbed him. "Who— Who are you?"

"I am... Ainebelle Letitia Hartley". Her profusion of golden curls glistened as she leant forward expectantly.

"That's a pretty name—"

"Is that all?"

"Why, yes—" The tearful appeal of her eyes cut short his words. Perhaps she expected him to remember her part in his past? "I've lost... Hmm, tell me, a while ago I met you in a big, dome place in which an extraordinary sphere hung from the roof. Can you remember that?"

She shook her head.

"Well it's like that with me. I'm told I crashed a rocket on to this place, but it seems that the shock did something to me that took away my memory".

"Oh".

"You're a prisoner here, like me, aren't you?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I'm a prisoner".

He waited, in a muddled agony of mind for her to explain further. Her blue eyes, regarding him so thoughtfully, were almost unnaturally bright. The rims of the irises were marked with a darker colour than the light blue against the pupils and this, together with the absentness of her scrutiny, set his nerves on edge.

"You are wearing a leather tunic", she said abruptly. "Throw it to me".

Wondering, he obeyed, and she put it on. Her shoulders were lost in it and it reached well down towards her knees. She turned back the cuffs as she approached him.

Looking down at her, he felt suddenly large and clumsy. "Y—you knew me before I came here?"

"Well, you're not the same as the man I knew. He would have realised that I was in my nightdress and he would not have stared at me and he'd have given me his coat without being asked".

He swallowed. "I'm sorry—"

She sighed. "I'm wondering if you're enough of your old self to help me?"

"How?"

"The door's not fastened. We might escape?"

"Not fastened?"

"No. I've never been locked up. They're very sure of themselves here".

"But—Then, why haven't you tried to escape before?" he asked suspiciously.

Her blue eyes flashed. "You're hopeless. Haven't you seen Vorille and Scivet, or the robots and the other horrible people in

this place? Oh—" She looked at the floor with its deep carpet. "I was told that no one would dare to harm me as long as I stayed here".

"Oh. All right then"

The door opened as she leaned against it. She motioned for him to look out. The corridor was deserted. He hesitated. Somehow it did not seem reasonable that they should just walk out.

She came close to him. Into his nostrils crept the pristine cleanliness of her. He recalled the sickly odour of the drug chewed by Vorille and smoked by Sacha. Sacha... But for her, he would be dead now. Was he a fool to run away like this? If Ursula was satisfied with him and if Sacha continued to favour him, might he not live decently in this place instead of going out into the alarming uncertainty of an outer world where was wanted for murder?

He scowled. "Why should I go?" Unutterable weariness dragged at him, then, and he felt his back chafing against his shirt. "I'm tired. I want to think and rest. I—"

He saw she was backing away from him, her eyes wide. "Johnny Found. You really are Johnny Found!"

"Sure. I can't help it".

He watched her turn and run across the room out of sight between hanging drapes of an archway, and suddenly he wanted to call her back. There was something he should know. She—meant something to him—Sacha was all right, but—

Fatigue and bewilderment seemed to swamp his whole being, as he heard the marching tread of robots in the passage.

Chapter IV.

When a robot closed in on either side of him, he made no effort at resistance. They urged him forward and he stumbled along the passage.

Sacha, he saw, was hurrying to meet him, Vorille waddling after her, his black scowl in sharp contrast to her smiling eagerness.

"Johnny Found", she called, "you've done it! That silly girl's hypnotised appeal was your last test. Ursula has approved you. You're one of us!"

"Eh?" The implications of what she said, and her obvious joy warmed and revived him both in body and spirit.

With sudden impatience he thrust sideways at the two robots. They wheeled away, caught off balance, and he went on from between them.

Sacha's slender hands reached out, her long, supple fingers closed cool and vital over his burning hands. "That's the style, Johnny Found!" Passion flashed in her dark eyes, and she swayed against him like a flame in a wind, glowing scarlet and bright.

Hungrily, he kissed her. Self-assertion and her willing response kindled a fire within him too.

"My Johnny!"

She drew him laughing after her and the robots strutted after them. Once they passed an open door and Johnny glimpsed a long bar before which a few men and women talked and drank. At length, they paused before a door fashioned out of translucent plastic and grained with black and gray so that it shone like fire.

A click sounded and it slid into the floor. Sacha, her dark head flung back in abandon and the soft, orange glow from the fluorescent lighting of the room sheening her long, black hair, crept very close.

"Carry me in"

He gathered her into his arms, scarcely feeling the weals upon his back as she slid her hands up, caressingly, around his neck.

He carried her over the threshold. His feet sank into the heavy pile of a magnificent carpet, the heavy, scented air closed warmly around him, his eyes swam with the luxury of velvet, the sparkle and glitter of jewel-encrusted draperies and furniture, and the profusion of exotic flowers. And he stopped, his breath as still as his thoughts.

Then one high heeled sandal fell to the carpet and was followed by the other and she kicked her legs up and down so that the jewelled clasps around her ankles flashed in arcs. Her arms drew more closely around his neck and she stretched out her slim legs in the silky, ballooning trousers she wore and wriggled her bare toes luxuriously.

She led him to a divan. Her breath drew in sharply as she discovered the condition of his back. "Blazes! So she had you whipped. I suppose you sat in that devil chair, too?"

"Yes. What sort of person was Ursula, Sacha?"

"How should I know? I was taken on a raid only a few months ago. But... we've got to put you right..."

She summoned robots to massage healing salves into his back and to cover the slashes with synthetic skin so that he no longer felt discomfort. She brought him a tall glass of amber liquid, foaming and hot. It tingled in his throat and spread a warm glow through him. Robots brought in a delicious, electronically

cooked meal and, his appetite stimulated by the drink, he ate and drank, and his fatigue fell away from him.

She crept against him and her arms locked around his neck and her soft lips pressed hungrily against his. The beat of his heart quickened and his blood pounded hot and passionate in instinctive response. His lips, like his soul, so desperate for affection, burned down.

Suddenly she struggled. Her fingers clawed up into his hair. But his desire flamed the hotter and he held her tighter, kissing her more fiercely, possessively.

And, equally suddenly, the hands in his hair changed from claws to the hands of a woman, sliding down the back of his neck in a caress.

He kissed her until the fire within him tired of it, and his arms unlocked and he cradled her slim shoulders in his hands, gazing down at her, his mind filled with her.

Her scented breath left her in a long sigh. "Johnny. My Johnny..." And she thrust herself forward to snuggle against the silken stuff of his fresh shirt.

As though far away, he was aware of a buzzer humming, but he only kissed her again, and again, and she burned like a flame against him.

But she suddenly pushed him away. "No—listen!"

The buzzer sounded loudly in his ears. "What is it?"

"Space!" she swore. "It's the raid. You are supposed to watch this. Ursula's orders."

"To Hell with Ursula—"

"No. We'll have plenty of time for ourselves, later. Ursula is all powerful here. She will know if we forget her."

He was amazed at the trembling of her hands as she drew him to his feet. Out into the passage she hurried him, into a small lift which carried them down for what seemed many floors..

They came to a long, bare passage with doors lining its sides. Johnny caught Sacha's bare arm, and licked his lips.

"This place—" He looked down the astonishing length of the passage. "It—it is a space station, isn't it?"

"Space station?" She flung back her head and laughed, and the corridor echoed with the silvery peals of it. "I'm no scientist, Johnny—my Johnny. I don't know what you'd call it. But to me, it's an island in the sky."

"It is in Space, then?"

"Of course." She stared at him in sudden boredom, making an impatient movement with her lips.

He frowned. "But it's so big! How did—"

"Oh, Johnny!" she interrupted. She stamped her foot. "Look at me. Does it matter where we are? Am I not beautiful?"

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, you men! Always you think of your machines. As though I cared two hoots— Pester Ursula with your questions, not me. Or the Prisoner—"

"The prisoner?"

"Ursula's husband. Though how a brain can have a husband when it has no body, I don't know." She urged him down the passage.

He followed her in silence through one of the doors.

Prepared as he was for shocks, the amazing length of the modern chemistry laboratory in which he found himself took his breath away.

A tall man, his shirt unbuttoned, nodded to them from beside a workbench. "Hiya Sacha. This the new man—Johnny from Nowhere?"

"Yes, skinny face. He's all yours." She flung herself into a chair and took out a cigarette moodily.

A screen glowed and a view of an immense space-ship hangar took shape. Gleaming, man-carrying rockets leant with their noses upward in banks of guide tubes. Robots moved stiffly about, carrying weapons.

"Reckon this is the main raiding party. Should be interesting". He chewed with excitement. "I got a packet on the last raid—" He tapped his side and grimaced. "Or I'd be going along".

The screen blanked. The man grunted regretfully. "Just my luck. Stuck down here, I'll miss the fun. No booty either". He spat.

The screen flickered. The picture of the strong walls and barred grilles of a bank—a giant bank—came into focus. "So Ursula, bless her, has a bank robbery as distraction this time". He chuckled. "Money But the cops won't know we've no use for the stuff".

He chewed a moment. "Reckon these pictures are being taken by some fool Ursula's bribed for the job. A reporter, maybe. He'll have a telecamera in his official badge and a vision transmitter in his pocket".

Johnny stared at the picture, fascinated. He saw the spy's hand, enormous in near focus swing into view over a massive deed

box. Two capsules joined together, fell into the box. Other, uniformed figures closed in, and the box was closed and locked and carried through into a heavily barred vault beyond.

The view faded and brightened into star-spangled space as seen from Earth. Fingers of rocket fire, in clusters of five, brightened as they sank earthwards through the cloudless night sky. Upon the foot of the screen glowed the time. 09.01

Back again to the vault of the bank. The angle of vision showed gold bars gleaming in high stacks, protected, even from the guards moving around before the camera, by massive bars.

In the foreground rested a deed box. The minutes passed one by one on the foot of the screen and Johnny saw the first result of the rocket-fuel capsules begin to show. The box glowed. Its lid buckled up and the smoke trickled out from the cracks. Heat radiations shimmered out in ever increasing power.

No sound was audible, but alarm was only too evident. Men tried to reach the box, only to be driven back by the terrible glare. The whole scene rocked as the spy retreated.

Men came hurrying with fire extinguishers. Smoke billowed up, swirling, violent.

"Huh!" The man's derisive voice beside Johnny made him jump. You can't douse Hell with a bucket of water!"

The picture began to jerk first one way and then the other. "Agent's getting the wind up," gloated the man. "Won't be long now before he finds he's served his purpose. Pity it isn't possible to have sound with these pictures. Guess the war the police 'll be having with the first lot of robots 'd make a honey of a din. Oh—look!"

Steel men, firing into the desperate squads of police behind them in the ruins, swung into view. The picture blurred as the agent wearing the camera dived for cover.

Then the robots were firing two ways, back at their pursuers and forward into the debris of the vault. The chaos of the ruins grew smoke laden with the arc-ing of flame guns, rockets and tracers..

And suddenly, in the confusion, a spout of flame leapt from a robot's weapon, straight at the camera—

"Curtains," chuckled the man. "Distraction well under way, spy eliminated. Now for the main effort".

Against the starry blackness of space, the screen flared with the stabs of rocket trails. And...changed to the interior of one of the rockets.

Men and robots sat motionless, strapped to their seats. The

strain as the rocket braked puled at their faces . Shudder of landing—Doors swinging open—Men and robots lurching erect and moving with ordered haste out into the night—

The wreckage-strewn street of a big city— The face of a sky-scraper, scarred with a long mark gouged out by a falling rocket— Civilians scurrying away— Flames licking after them, engulfing them in billowing black smoke...

Soon all was deserted, except for the methodical and purposeful movements of the robots and the occasional flash of distant flame-guns.

From the sky, between lofty pinnacles of tall buildings, down past upper level roads, huge rockets roared tail foremost.

Robots moved towards this second wave, even while the roads still glowed red hot. Trellis work guides fastened speedily to the sides of each great metal ship, evidently in preparation for a speedy get-a-way.

From nearby buildings robots stalked, carrying all manner of furniture, all of great luxury, cases of wines and even refrigerators and such household articles. One bore a tray overflowing with jewellery sparkling and glowing in the dancing flicker of a hundred nearby fires. Another was weighed down with silks and rich stuffs gathered from a great store. And another's unyeilding arms carried a struggling young girl.

Names describing all these things rose up in Johnny's mind. Open warfare, murder, plunder and rapine: all these were there in that pictured scene. But what were they to him but names? What was right and wrong? Obviously the humans in command were only providing for the wants of the Space Island, and those ruthless robots were as much the allies of the hunted Johnny Found as of Ursula.

What was this Earth—so far below—to him anyway? It was, Ursula had shown him, a place where he had been condemned, before he had entered and proved himself in this new life. Those people—were they not getting a taste of their own medicine? He brooded.

She drew him away, and presently they were back in the soft luxury of her rooms.

He drew her towards him, lifted her in his arms and carried her to the divan. She snuggled into his arms, yeilding herself to his hot caressess—

"Stop!"

Sacha sprang away from Johnny at the sudden command from the doorway.

Scivet, his dark face contorted, crouched on the threshold. Behind him, robots, blackened like himself with the street battle from which they had just returned, stood, threatening sentinels.

"She's my woman!" Scivet spat the words. "You forget who I am!" I think I shall kill you now. Ursula will understand."

Chapter V.

Scivet's hand, fingers crooked and trembling with passion, hovered over the open holster at the belt of his space-suit. He stood, lean and hungry-looking as a vulture, dark and handsome as Satan in the orange glow of the apartment, flanked by his robots, their metal skins ruddy-sheened.

Johnny waited tensely, meeting the black glare of Scivet's eyes, expecting to see them flicker as their owner's hand clawed down at his terrible weapon.

Sacha gasped. "No, Scivet, no! Darling—"

The black eyes flickered as they glanced sideways. As though this were a signal, the hand streaked down to the shiny butt. Up jerked the tubular barrel of glass, and the terminals on its end gleamed.

Johnny hurled himself sideways. The electron stream cracked out, passing so close that he felt the heat and smelt the tang of the ozone and was momentarily blinded by the blaze as draperies behind him caught fire like tinder.

A lithe shadow leapt in front of him and hands, reaching backwards, steadied him. Into his gaze swam a picture of long black hair from which gleamed the cream of slender shoulders. Beyond them, Scivet's furious glare and levelled weapon threatened destruction.

Above the crackle of the blazing drapes, Sacha's silvery tones pealed out clearly.

"Coward! Johnny has no weapon—"

"Must a dog be armed?" snarled Scivet. "Sacha, you try my patience!"

"He is one of us," countered Sacha coolly. "Fight him fairly, Scivet".

"One of us? When he hides behind a woman?"

Johnny drew in a deep breath. He could feel the stimulants which he had drunk: how they coursed through his veins, bringing back his strength. His arms, almost of their own accord, reached out, caught Sacha around her soft silk-clad hips, and whisked her aside.

"Now kill me!"

Scivet's jaw sagged, his eyes narrowed. Abruptly he thrust his gun into the ready clutch of a robot, ripped off the padded space-suit he wore and, clad in black silk tights and boots, stormed forward like a whirl-wind.

Johnny received an impression of hands clawing out at his throat and he drove his right fist between them at the grimacing mask beyond, at the same time dropping his head low. Bony fingers scraped through his hair, nails scratched his ears, but his fist smashed hard into flesh and bone. Scivet gasped. Then they were grappling together, plunging over backwards, carried by the fury of Scivet's assault.

Johnny, even in the confusion of action, felt as cool as ice. His fists struck and struck again, even while his knees drew up to protect his stomach. Blows in return, short uppercuts jarred him, and hacking kicks on his rising shins stung him. Desperately he kicked out, both feet at the long, black shape above.

Scivet's breath shuddered out. He rose up with Johnny's feet in his stomach, lifted clear of the ground, to fall back and stumble away.

Johnny scrambled to his feet. Scivet fetched up hard against a scarlet cabinet. The flimsy stuff of it cracked under his straining hands. Shelves within collapsed. A welter of phials, bottles and containers spilled over his shoulders to smash on the floor. Strange, sickly scents and pungent fumes spread out through the air. Johnny recognised the predominance of Sacchaleine.

He leapt in pursuit. As Scivet, squirming out of the wreckage of his fall, rose up, staggering in an effort to dodge sideways, Johnny's fists—left! right! left!—smashed out. Scivet pawed the air, dropped into a crouch, seized up a fluffy, kapok-filled cushion from the divan and slung it at Johnny's face.

Johnny brushed aside the weight-less, muffling thing. But Scivet was clear, running back for space. Blood trickled from small cuts caused by broken containers, bruises darkened his pallid face. He turned at bay as Johnny followed up. His hands seized up a tubular chair. It swung on long arms and hurtled out.

Johnny dodged. The wind of it fanned his hair. He advanced

steadily towards the crouching Scivet.

They leapt at each other. Johnny's fists smashed out. Somehow Scivet part-avoided them. His hands gripped Johnny's throat. They crashed to the floor, writhing, kicking and struggling.

But now, some of Johnny's renewal of strength was fading. The punishment he had taken and was taking sapped his energy, wore down the clarity of his mind. Scivet rose up above him. His black eyes glittered down, his thin lips parted.

"Got you!" Yet, mixed with the exultation was a new respect. "Stars! But you fight!"

Johnny arched his back.

"No you don't!" snarled Scivet.

Johnny kicked out at a televisior set, obtained purchase for his bent legs, thrust. He skidded away, Scivet clinging to his throat.

His breath wheezed in his throat, then cut off. Choking, he battered up desperately at the leering face above him.

Through the drumming in his ears, he seemed to hear familiar, measured tones and, suddenly, the death-grip on his throat relaxed, was withdrawn, and the blurr which Scivet's overhanging shape had become receded.

Slowly his senses returned to something like normal. He struggled to a sitting position, massaging his bruised throat and shaking his head.

Scivet's vicious snarl seemed to be answering those measured tones: "...But he deserved to die!"

"And yet, my son, we need him. He fought well, did he not?"

"True—" A reluctant admission.

"Then please me, and let him live".

Johnny realised it was the voice of Ursula. A feeling of the uncanny disturbed him and he looked around for the source of the voice, half expecting to see the sphere floating in the doorway.

Scivet, towering over Johnny, shrugged lean shoulders and turned to look down. Johnny met his eyes.

The other's hot breath beat in his face. "Time will tell. Meanwhile... you are to rest. Early tomorrow you will be with me on our next raid. Ursula says—and rightly—that I need help. Stars help us that you are it!"

Disgust in his snarl and action, he pushed Johnny backwards and swug to one side. "Sacha put your pet slave to bed. He's tired"

Johnny crashed to the floor, but this time there were soon

soft arms to raise his battered head, cool fingers on his brow. Half conscious of Scivet's departure, he found himself helped to his feet and to a divan. The last thing he remembered was a bitter drink trickling warm into his throat...

...And it seemed only seconds later when he became conscious of lying on his stomach on a firm warm surface while the unmistakeable "hands" of a robot masseur patted, rubbed and moulded themselves soothingly and refreshingly over the muscles of his back. He recalled the bitter liquid which had been forced into his mouth, and realised that, under its influence, he must have been asleep for many hours. Asdorin was the name of the stuff, he knew, and it had the blessed effect of giving perfect slumber, utter relaxation and restoration of the energies.

He raised himself to his elbows as he opened his eyes. Steam rising through the slotted floor of the turkish bath met his eyes. The hands massaging his back were withdrawn. He swung around and sat on the edge of the table-couch. The robot masseur took a pace backward and stood motionless.

A yawn rose up in Johnny's throat, and he stretched deliciously as he abandoned himself to the long expellation of stale air within him. Presently he rubbed his own hands down the length of his chest and stomach. How good he felt—and how hungry. He glanced inquiringly at the robot. "What happens now?"

The robot lifted the pliable digits of his arm, indicating a doorway nearby.

"Thanks". Johnny slid off the couch and padded bare-footed through to the small room beyond.

Water steamed in an ivory bath sunk in the floor. Another robot stood rigidly beside this, one of its large, pudgy hands resting on a towel rack. Johnny joying in his return to strength, jumped into the water. Hot and exquisitely scented, it foamed up around him. For a few moments he rubbed and lathered himself and then vaulted out. The robot swung to action, efficiently whipping a large towel from the rack and rubbing Johnny down with great vigour.

Dry and tingling all over, Johnny passed on into the next room. His feet sank into a deep carpet, warm air caressed his skin and, upon a wire frame, a clean silk shirt and linen trousers awaited him.

He dressed quickly and, as he did so, a robot, probably summoned by the sounds he made, entered through another door and paused just inside. Its hands Johnny saw, were the strange mixtures of fingers and cutlery affixed to the arms of waiters.

Indeed, from beyond, wafted savoury odours of a waiting meal.

Johnny hurried forward. Yes, a table with a meal fit for a gourmet—and sufficient for two men—awaited him. He ate, waited upon by the silent, efficient robot, and was presently handed a cigarette. A metal hand lifted a flaring attachment, and Johnny puffed the cigarette alight and inhaled.

Almost choking with sickly pungence of the smoke, he realised it contained the forbidden Sacchaleine. He set it down and rose to his feet.

At once the robot pointed to a divan, and Johnny stretched out on its soft cushions.

He still reclined there when the door beyond opened and Scivet entered. The tall, lean man was again clothed in space kit. Behind him a robot came, carrying a similar suit for Johnny.

“Hurry,” Scivet growled. He picked up a cigarette and smoked rapidly and impatiently while Johnny, helped by the robot, slipped into the heavy padding and was zipped inside.

“Come on!” he snapped, flinging the cigarette aside and leading the way out. They hurried in silence to a large hangar. The huge, cigar-shaped cylinders which were men-carrying rockets awaited them. Robots moved purposefully to and fro, carrying stores and making last minute adjustments to firing angles and the many mechanisms of the place.

Into the last rocket of the long row of them, Scivet, followed by Johnny, climbed. In the cabin which they now occupied, the man’s dark eyes met Johnny’s. “Ten minutes to zero,” he said coldly. “We will watch events from that time until our take off, through the robot adjusted scanner over there”

Johnny glanced at the glowing, but blank screen set against one curving wall, and nodded.

“After that take off you will have nothing to do except sit tight until landing. As soon as we touch down I’ll be rushing outside, and you must keep as close to me as you can. There’ll be confusion for some minutes no doubt, and possibly danger. Remember, keep close to me. I’ll give you details of your task on the spot, after I have made certain that everything goes according to plan and that our spies have given us correct information. Understand?”

“Yes”.

Somewhere outside amongst the methodical activity, a bell trilled. As if this were a signal the hatch door of the rocket swung around and thudded softly into place, forming so close a joint that no mark was visible of its edge.

They sat in silence...

Presently the bell trilled again. "One minute," said Scivet tensely. "Ursula's arranged all this. Watch the screen"

And, soon, pictures began to form, darken and coalesce into a view of many long, low buildings, each fitted with smoke-disposal towers, and evidently, judging by the activity of men and robots in full factory production, and, moreover, from the uniformed guards and patrolling fliers, in production of something either valuable or dangerous.

The view tilted, up over the horizon of fields and hills, to the cloud-filled sky. From very high up, out of the middle-distance, the picture seemed to be being taken.

"Any second now—" began Scivet.

The sudden unleashing of a thunderous roar within the hangar itself, cut short his utterance. Through the port-holes of the cabin the light flung off by a terrible incandescence glared briefly. Then both light and sound faded to a tiny flicker and distant mutter. By contrast the cabin seemed darker and the activity outside much lessened.

"First rocket away," rapped Scivet. "The screen—"

In the centre of the picture of clouds, a sudden disturbance was taking place. Shadows outlined a violently spreading crater and a slender straggle of cloud or smoke leapt out of its centre. Vision hazed as the view tilted dizzily down. The factory area swung up into view and steadied.

Into the midst of it, slashed the smoke. The ground shuddered under the impact. Haze swirling and billowing, seemed almost to radiate out and up so quickly did it spread. Within seconds the whole area was obscured in a pall of whiteness. Within one minute the mushroom of gas towered to the clouds and eddied and swirled over more than a square mile of the earth below.

Outside the rocket containing Scivet and Johnny, the hangar was rent with the thunder of many flame-spitting tubes, blinding light glared through the portholes, and shudder after shudder drummed out terrifyingly.

"Sit down and secure the safety belt about you!" yelled Scivet.

Johnny sprang to obey, fearful of the din—

Seconds after he had done so, his senses reeled as the floor pressed up and up and up with ever-increasing pressure. They were off!

A red haze of sickness momentarily obscured everything. Then this cleared. Sunlight flickered strangely through the port-

holes, alternating with patches of shadow. Up, up, up the thunder behind drove them, driving them back helplessly into the springs of the bucket seats.

And, presently, after seconds that seemed like hours the pressure upon them eased. The sunlight glared in upon them unbroken now. They reached the peak of flight, hovered for a tremulous second and then plunged down, and, soon, rocket tubes thundered and sent tremors through the cylinder as their descent was braked with a slowly increasing action.

No longer feeling any discomfort, Johnny gripped the arms of the bucket seat and glanced at Scivet. The dark eyes were watching him.

"You've got guts, Johnny Found."

Scivet's growl was begrudging—disappointed even! Johnny wondered what would have happened to him if, a few seconds before when the rocket had taken off, he had not acted so quickly in strapping himself into the bucket seat. He imagined himself hurled to the unpadded metal of the floor, sprawling almost certainly with bones broken even if still breathing. Had Scivet hoped for such an end?"

Johnny resolved to watch his companion very closely. And, when Scivet reached for and donned a glass helmet, one of which was hooked to the side of each seat, Johnny did likewise.

The snap-fastening of the helmet had, in fact, just clicked when the rocket, its portholes hazed with the gas enveloping the factory area, jarred down to hard earth.

Scivet struck the buckle-release of his straps; Johnny copied his action. Free of this restraint they stood up together. Scivet swung around and hurried to the hatch, and Johnny, following, saw that the hatch had swung open and that the gas was rolling into the cabin towards them.

Close together, they jumped out into the murk. Shadowy, space-suited figures of robots and men, moved all around. Johnny saw that each of these had a tiny red light glimmering upon their helmets. Evidently it was the identification mark of the raiders. In sudden alarm, lest he should lack one of these signals, he reached up—

Scivet, pausing for a moment to look around, sneered: "Don't worry, Johnny Found. Ursula planned the red lights, so every one of our helmets has one, and it lights automatically when the helmet is in use."

Johnny's hand touched the knob of the bulb and, tilting his head back hard against the glass back of the helmet, he could see

the red glow upon his hand. He looked back at Scivet, holding his silence.

The tall, lean figure of the raider turned abruptly and proceeded down a lane between the silent buildings, which came looming up out of the gas, as they advanced. Several times Johnny stepped over the bodies of overalled men. Evidently the gas was lethal. He saw a truck crashed into the wall of a building, the driver slumped over his wheel. Then a crashed aircraft, upside down and its slender, blue shape buckled, stuck up starkly at the end of a long furrow. And then, out of the multitude of sounds and lights, a screaming whine emerged and a cone of light flickered. Nearing this, Johnny saw that it was a crippled jet-flier, one wing gone, that spun around on its belly like a top driven by the remaining engine. With a whooshing roar, the fuel tanks of this exploded just after they had passed it.

Scivet, as though startled by the din, ran for a few paces, then resumed his steady walking.

Johnny caught up. He was conscious now that in Scivet's gloved hand an electron gun gleamed; while in the suit which had been provided for him, there had been no weapons, not even a knife. As he slowed once more to Scivet's pace, he noticed a short length of wreckage on the ground. He picked it up. It was a mangled piece of girder, its end snapped off and jagged—quite a handy weapon in fact. He felt better as he weighed it in his hand.

Before them the ground, hitherto flat, showed in an odd sort of earth-work barrier. It was not until they had reached the side of this and Johnny saw the ripples of stress in the concrete and soil, and the cracks and jumble of debris strewn around that he realised this was the perimeter of the crater made by the first rocket. Scivet turned to the right and they began to circle around. Some distance ahead the vicious flashing of lights, and the roaring noises and shocks suggested a desperate skirmish.

Out of the mist before them, a squat figure came shambling.

"Vorille!" shouted Scivet. "Vorille!"

The dwarf stopped and his helmet slowly swivelled around, as though he peered short-sightedly for the one who summoned him.

"Over here!" snarled Scivet impatiently. "Hurry, fool!"

Vorille raised a gloved hand and came running.

Scivet jerked his gun-hand towards the lights and din ahead.

"What's that?"

"Our robots are mopping up the last of the police. A few,

clad in some sort of respirators, have shut themselves into the guard-building at the gates."

"Can they get out?"

"No, master."

"Have you checked on the arrival of the escape rockets?"

"Yes, master. Robot guides from each of them have reported to me and await orders as to dispersal at our control point established inside the crater as ordered."

"Right." Scivet's helmet nodded. "Sure there are no other survivors?"

"Yes master..." Inside the glass of the dwarf's helmet the large bulbous face leered suggestive of evil.

Scivet glanced at Johnny. "Come on."

They moved on, now approaching long, gloomy buildings which, as they had no smoke-disposal attachments, Johnny judged to be warehouses.

The gun in Scivet's hand crackled out a needle of fire and the locks of large double doors melted like butter. Pushing the doors aside, they entered a runway between loading platforms, climbed steps upwards to the level of the inside floor, and looked down long rows of motionless robots.

Behind them, Johnny heard the whine of motors. Glancing around he saw a truck being backed out of the murk into the comparatively thin gas of the loading bay.

Scivet grunted. "Here's the first of your robot squad. It is your task to tell them which of these newly-manufactured robots to carry into the escape rockets. Got that?"

"Yes."

"We need four sorts only. Machine-minders, mechanics, specialised robot-mechanics to work on their own kind, and soldier types. Can you pick these?"

"I can."

"Good. When you have cleared this shed, come with the last load."

"Yes," said Johnny. As Scivet turned away and robots came stalking up from the truck, he walked over towards the inert ranks of metal men.

Johnny issued commands to the robots. All, except one, moved off stiffly to his bidding. He looked at the remaining robot with doubtful inquiry.

"Hands!" exclaimed Johnny. "I suppose that Ursula sent you."

"Ursula sent me."

"Thought so. Get busy and open up those other loading bays down there. We'll get this place cleared in half the time Scivet expects us to take."

With the breaking open of the doors, the work of carrying out the robots selected by Johnny rose to a new pitch. One column of raiders entered continuously, each seized up an inert metal figure and joined the tail of the outgoing column.

Soon the task was complete. Johnny—with Hands stiffly striding behind—jumped on to the back of the last truck-load of piled-up robots. As it jolted forward over the debris which cluttered the road surface just there, Johnny noticed a light which glowed like a moon through the murk. It was, he saw a moment later, approaching rapidly. At first he thought that it was a ball of fire, and had vague thoughts of thunderbolts, either natural or artificial. Then, as it drew nearer, he saw that it was some sort of solid body from which flames licked back in a fiery tail. The roar of its advance swelled to drown all other sounds. It thundered overhead, dripping fire and leaving a black trail of smoke in the white gas, and was gone; but not before Johnny had seen that it was an aircraft hopelessly on fire.

Before long, too, he saw other, similar lights flaring through the murk, leaving other black trails... And the atmosphere outside the suit seemed to be growing different. The gas seemed to be shimmering—as air is likely to do on a very hot day.

"Hands," said Johnny suddenly, "What's happening?"

"Police attacking. Rocket-fuel heat elements making barrier all around us. Very hot. Burn up all attackers. Ursula, she say that police not guess hot-spot is hollow until we have escaped."

"But their radar instruments will tell them we're here, won't they?"

"Hot-spot make electric storm. Radar made useless."

The trucks floor tilted as they mounted the rim of the crater. Strangely enough, the debris here was comparatively slight and their progress uncannily smooth as the eight independently sprung wheels absorbed all unevenness.

Over the edge they climbed and rolled smoothly down into the opaque depths. Johnny saw the sky-pointing cylinders of the escape rockets, streams of robots coming and going and, soon for the first time since Scivet had left him, recognised space-suited humans.

The truck came to a halt beside a rocket and the robots clinging to it dropped to the ground and began to unload the strange cargo, dumping the stiff, inert metal figures in rows. Other robots

came stalking forward to pick them up and carry them towards the open hatch of a rocket.

Chapter VI.

Back in the Space Island, Johnny stared up at the lens-eyes of Ursula.

"You have disposed your task efficiently, Johnny Found, but there is one more service you must do to convince me of your innocence and gain my protection and the safety of the Space Island. My husband insists that the daughter of his first marriage be returned to her home before he continues his work for us, that, Johnny is your last job. By doing it you will prove conclusively that you are no spy."

The lens-eyes stared at Johnny. "You will descend in a combination rocket-helicopter, taking Ainebelle Letitia Hartley to her home, the location of which will be given you. She will be under the hypnotic influence until you are beneath the range of our apparatus. Rocket licence, pilot's certificate and other necessary papers for your identity of Johnny Found have already been prepared."

"Ursula say that I, Hands, shall take you to the craft that waits you."

They passed through the silently opening doors, between the statuesque sentries to lifts that carried them up.

In a roof hangar, a robot handed him a wallet of papers. He inspected the waiting rocket quickly, noting the retraced wings and helicopter blades folded beneath transparent cowlings.

Ainebelle sat, uncannily still in the passengers seat. As he took his place beside her, he felt an overwhelming impulse to shake her. But—the sooner he left the Space Island, the sooner he might know her as she really was.

His excitement grew. While the hangar doors above the cabin widened, he switched on the control panel light, and checked readiness.

The last of the air was sighing out into the void, as he blasted out. In spite of everything, he felt impelled to circle the Space Island. Skidding around in a great, fiery arc, he saw that it's sunlit top was nearly flat. Although it was as grey as lead, he knew that it was of a far tougher substance than that.

The edge of this expanse was circular and smoothed over to

the slightly bulging sides. These too—at least as much as he could see of them in the slanting sunlight—appeared blank except for a regular spacing of small bulges. The whole had a blank, forbidding aspect—not unlike a dreadnought whose guns have been withdrawn behind heavy armour.

He felt momentary qualms. With only the cold stars to watch him and only the song of the engine to break the stillness of Space, he felt alone. The Island was the only world he knew, and he was leaving it.

Air whistled over the cabin and the rotor blades flashed above before she moved. Her hands lifted like those of a sleepwalker.

"It's all right," he assured her.

Her small hands caught his arm. Her blue eyes widened and she shrank back.

"You!"

The utter contempt in her voice shocked him. "Ainebelle!"

"You—" She choked. "So it was you who kidnapped me? Wasn't it enough for you to murder—to murder..." She buried her face in her hands.

The cabin rocked as he forgot the controls in his anxiety to comfort her. He flicked on the automatic pilot, and turned.

"Don't come any closer!" She shuddered.

He hesitated. "I'm taking you home, Ainebelle"

"What?"

He began to tell her of his loss of memory, and of the other times he had seen her, of his shame of them.

She cut him short. "What an incredible story!"

"But it's true—"

"Then, I've heard enough of it. You say you're flying me home?" Her soft eyes were full of violently conflicting emotions.

He nodded eagerly.

"Then, please hurry."

He turned, baffled, to the controls. It was, he felt, too soon after her ordeal for argument. He scanned the great continent far below and turned the nose of the craft down towards its destination.

Although aware of her soft presence at his side, he presently followed the markers on the panel map with one finger, taking bearings on aerial beacons and on the spreading landscape itself.

Rough hills reached up at them, slid away behind and the land levelled out. An occasional building, bright and flower-surrounded, dotted the ordered farmlands.

"There it is!" she exclaimed suddenly. You'll pass it. Have you forgotten?"

He pressed his lips together. "I've told you—my memory's completely blank."

"That red-brick and plastic one. See it?"

He reduced speed rapidly, impatient with her. She still did not believe him. Grimly he dropped the craft down to a sudden but perfect landing.

A servant, followed by two robots, popped up from a skylight. The man started to run towards Ainebelle, then caught sight of Johnny.

His face went blank, his jaw sagged, eyes rounded.

Johnny glared. "What's wrong?"

The man swallowed and apologised almost fearfully and escorted them down into a tastefully furnished lounge.

Ainebelle walked over to the glass side of the room. The shadow of the sun-roof overlap allowed the golden light only to touch her bare feet. In the garden beyond her, the rich colours of dahlias and early chrysanthemums formed a contrast in Johnny's mind to the memory of an exotic garden, over-vivid with orchids and tropical plants, now far above.

Making some slight excuse, Ainebelle left him to his thoughts.

A maid, in the act of entering, saw him face to face. Her hand leapt to her mouth. She screamed. Before he could speak she had fled.

He frowned. Turning impatiently he sank into a large arm-chair. Idly he pressed the buttons in its midget control panel and helped himself to a drink and a cigarette from the trays offered to him from the wide arms.

He heard a flier drone over, circle and seem to land, and suddenly the door of the lift opened.

A policeman, and that servant of Ainebelle's behind him...

Johnny rose to his feet.

"Careful!" warned Ainebelle's voice suddenly. He's dangerous."

Johnny glared at her. The policeman tensed. "Now, Mr. Vellors—"

"Look out!" gasped Ainebelle.

Johnny, leaping forward, smashed his right fist into the policeman's body, hooked his left fist up at the man's chin and followed it with his right.

Before the man touched the floor, Johnny was past him heading for the lift like a homing pigeon.

Phu-eet-ut!

There was a movement in the lift. He saw it and realised the policeman had not been alone—even as the stun charge punched into his stomach and stabbed agony through suddenly contracting muscles. He plunged, heavily to the floor.

Lying there helpless, he heard Ainebelle gasp in horror, and the policeman reassure her as he emerged from the lift. He'll be all right, Miss."

He felt her presence at his side.

Then the policemen, one breathing very hard, were both trying in a clumsy way to comfort her. "After all, Miss," said one, "you've got to remember that he did kill your father."

Her father! No wonder she had loathed him. All during the flight that followed, his soul writhed in an agony far more real than the physical pain he suffered.

He was carried into a vast, square building and formally charged with murder. Deep within the massive walls, he was dumped on a hard couch and the metal door clanged behind him.

By the time a police surgeon came in, he was rolling on the floor with the agony of returning movement. Later, a lawyer, who claimed to know him, spoke to him on the cell's television screen.

Johnny snubbed him. It might be a trick to make him talk. And he owed the people of the Space Island his only allegiance.

A tall thin man, with a lined but pleasant face, came and stood outside the cell, sucking an empty pipe, but saying nothing.

The day dragged to an end, without further incident. The following morning he suffered the visit of a brain specialist in surly silence. What did it matter?

He was finishing his lunch, when he suddenly realised that the tall, thin man was back, smoke wreathing up from his pipe.

Johnny scowled at him. "What d'you want?"

"Information," said the man. He took the pipe from his mouth and looked at it, "about Ursula."

Johnny sat quite still.

The man puffed smoke. "I understand you remember nothing prior to a few days ago."

"Who are you?" growled Johnny.

The man stood up. Behind him a vision screen faced the cell. It lit up.

A stoop-shouldered man was bending over an array of test-tubes, pipes, phials and other apparatus. He straightened as

though called to from the back of the camera. The forehead was wide and high, giving the appearance of a dome, so bare was it of hair. The cheekbones were sharply cut and the chin quite pointed. The eyes were blue, and their rims were darker than around the pupils. Their startling and piercing quality stirred Johnny's memory.

He looked inquiringly at his visitor.

The man smoked furiously. "Yes, that's a picture of Rowland Percival Hartley. He does have eyes like those of his daughter."

Johnny looked back at the screen. Hartley was smiling as another figure walked into view. Johnny stared. Either it was himself—or his double. The two men shook hands warmly.

"Is that..." he began.

His visitor nodded. "You were," he murmured, "an important man in the atomic products factory on Rimple Heights. In fact, although you had no hand in the management, if anyone could be said to control its research, that man was yourself." He rubbed his cheek with the bowl of his pipe. "Hartley inherited the plant from his father. Although he took little interest in it—as he was, both by inclination and training, a Professor of Biology—the Directors kept him on as a figurehead... no doubt because he was a public figure."

He tapped out the pipe against the leg of the chair on which he sat. "It probably wouldn't be any exaggeration to say that he was revered by the majority of the world's entire population. He gave away astonishing sums, but his fame came mostly, I think, from his work on brain structure and disease."

He began to re-charge the bowl of the pipe, slowly and methodically. "I could tell you a lot about him. For you see, it has been my job to guard his life for the past fifteen years. Cranks—and others have made attempts to kill him. He was surrounded, very nearly from the moment of his birth, by protective devices such as took these pictures. I often felt sorry for him. He must have known great loneliness. But—look at the screen again, Mr. Vellors."

The view this time was of a housetop. A flier was landing. From it stepped himself. He turned and helped down a girl—Ainebelle. They were in evening dress, happy, laughing over the latest show. And they kissed goodnight. On Ainebelle's hand—as her arm clung around his neck—there sparkled a diamond ring.

"You see," said the smoker, "you were engaged to her."

Johnny stared at him. Pictures like these could be faked.

Even if they were real, what difference did it make?

The man frowned and looked at the pipe in his hands. "My God," he said, "what a mess!"

He turned, but looked back. "My name—though it won't mean anything to you now—is Detective Inspector Peace. Peace. Remember that. Should anything happen to change your mind, ask for me."

Days dragged by. Johnny was taken to the courthouse under close guard, and was rushed in through a back entrance.

His appearance before the Judge was a signal for uproar amongst the spectators. Policemen cleared the court before the trial could begin.

The gown of the crown prosecutor flapped like an angel of death as he turned from a play back of the microfilm showing Hartley's death agony. "And it has been proved that the hand holding that evil knife is the identical twin of the hand of the accused."

Later the Judge looked doubtful, as the prosecution mentioned the Raiders. "It was at first assumed, my lord and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that the men and robots who have wrecked such havoc in our fair cities and factories were from one of the unexplored planets or even from outer space. But— It is my belief that their base is much nearer than that. And I am not alone in my belief that they are pirates, using the scientific achievements of this modern age to their own lawless ends."

An accusing finger pointed across the silent court at Johnny. "I say that the accused, Mark Vellors alias Johnny Found, has been in close association with the Raiders, certainly after his crime—perhaps before!"

A lie detector was brought into the court. The sentence was a foregone conclusion long before the court rose to its feet.

"To be done to death in the Asphyxiation Chamber upon recovery of a normal mental state, or otherwise at such time as shall be directed by authority."

In the quiet depths of the great prison, he listened to the guards pacing the corridor outside. It seemed that Ursula had abandoned him.

Peace, sucking an empty pipe in some agitation came hurrying down the corridor.

"Vellors!" he barked. "Here is more to add to your list of misdeeds. Listen!"

Some commotion, an occasional shout and what might have been a volley of small arms fire, sounded far off.

Johnny tensed excitedly. Perhaps Ursula's minions had come for him!

Peace shook his fist through the bars. "That was the sound of soldiers firing into the mob that surrounds the prison. It may be one of the diversions of which Ursula is so fond in her grand strategy, or it may be that public opinion wants your blood. Either way would defeat the ends of justice."

He seemed to take a fresh grip of himself. The guards were called away down the corridor, and the shriek of a flame gun sounded much nearer than before.

Peace took out a pistol, hesitated, then hurried after the uniformed men.

The roar of battle rushed through the prison like an advancing tide. And suddenly the corridor echoed with crazy footfalls.

A mob rushed at his cell. "Raider!" screamed one wild creature. "Lynch him! Lynch him!"

The key rattled in the lock. Hands dragged him down under a welter of bodies. Blows from fists and feet winded him.

"Get back!" a voice yelled. "Get back We'll do this thing properly. We'll hang him in front of the Civic Centre! That'll show the Raiders what we think of them."

Johnny was lugged to his feet, dragged willy-nilly through the crazed mob. "Make way!" boomed a deep voice at his side. "We're going to hang the Raider!"

Half-dragged, half-stumbling, Johnny ran the gauntlet out of the prison.

The streets outside were packed solid with a sea of faces, all mad with fear and hatred. Faces stared down and fists were shaken from windows, over the edges of upper level roads and intersections. Men and women swarmed on the air-taxi platforms projecting from the sides of office blocks.

"Make way!" boomed the voice. "We'll hang him high in the Civic Centre! Make way!"

The City thundered with a hubbub of acclaim. "To the Civic Centre! Hang him there!"

In front of Johnny the flood of townsfolk parted like water before the bows of a boat, closing in behind. Everywhere vengeance-hungry men and women struggled and eddied.

A bottle-neck passageway between great buildings swayed before Johnny's dazed gaze. The ring-leaders holding him up, thrust like a battering ram towards it. As helpless as corks caught in whirlpools, they were crushed to one side of the passage.

Chapter VII.

Unexpectedly, at Johnny's side the arch of a doorway showed in a sheer wall. Vaguely, he was aware that the space was jammed with unmoving figures. Drawing level with them, their hands clutched out, dragging him out of the crush, helped by members of that confused mob itself. Quite what happened he was too dazed to understand, but it seemed as though, as he was absorbed into that unmoving backwater, another figure was spewed up out of it into the current of the human flood squeezing past.

The deep voice, the booming commands of which had so effectively modified the passions of the mob, sounded beside him. He was hurried forward into a spacious darkened room and stood, swaying giddily.

"Johnny! My Johnny Found!"

Sacha's jewelled clasps sparkled and her eyes shone as he peered through puffed and filth-smeared eyes.

"Slightly second hand... at the moment," he gasped through the fatigue swamping his mind. Then his legs seemed to lose all solidity, his stomach retched—and the ground seemed to smash up at him.

How long his fainting spell lasted, he did not know, but consciousness presently stirred him and, from a prone position, he struggled to his elbow. Blinking swimming eyes, gasping to breathe as though through acrid fumes, he rested a moment. His condition eased slowly.

He remembered thinking that he must have been given some pretty drastic treatment to restore his battered body, then he realised he was back in the Island and looking up into Sacha's eyes, as she bent over him.

She stroked his forehead. "I have my slave back." Her soft fingers and the first real understanding of his astonishing reprieve from degrading death, soothed him, and he felt his strength seeping back.

He caught hold of her shoulders and drew her down and kissed her full red mouth, hard.

Then she snuggled up against him. "I thought she'd deserted you!"

"Who?"

"Ursula, of course. I hate her. I hate her! You did not

need to be shown how the world hates you. Not like that."

"What?" He held her at arm's length. "You mean to say Ursula planned everything?"

"But of course, Johnny."

She smiled at his amazement. "But— it's over with, now. Oh, Johnny, the robots have done a marvellous job on you. You look as good as new."

"Yes, I feel fine, but—"

"But what, Johnny?"

"Nothing," he muttered, thinking of the shocks and terror of his experience.

He looked around the apartment.

"What's wrong, Johnny?"

"I was looking for a televisior screen. I'd like to know what they said about me in the news."

"All right," she humoured him with a pout. At the wall side, she drew apart gold encrusted curtains, adjusted the controls and turned as the screen lit. "This is a playback of the last broadcast about you."

The head and shoulders of an announcer looked out at them. "Mark Vellors, alias Johnny Found, is still at large. He escaped from the very clutches of a lynch-mad crowd of townsfolk, leaving them to murder an innocent substitute. It would appear that the riot was engineered as a means of escape... Some quarters believe that this adds another to the long list of blood-thirsty crimes for which the Raiders will one day have to answer..."

The picture and voice faded. At first, Johnny, stunned by the implications of the announcer's words, thought that Sacha had switched it off. Then he saw her standing very still, waiting, her eyes looking at him nervously.

"I am sorry," murmured Ursula's expressionless, disembodied voice which might, or might not have come from the televisior, "sorry to interrupt your affaire with Sacha, but..."

"That man," said Johnny harshly. "The one who was hung by the mob. Who was he?"

"A nobody. Not one of us, Johnny Found. Ursula protects her own... But, now, I have work for you. Look at the door, both of you."

As it swung open, a robot marched steadily in, and stopped. The door closed quietly after it.

"Hands!" said Sacha flatly. "What are you here for?"

"I wait."

"Wait?" Her voice sharpened. "Wait for what?"

"I wait."

"Stars!" she swore. "Ursula!" She addressed herself to the air, it seemed. "Tell this... thing to get out!"

"Ursula—" The flat voice ceased; then spoke again. "Ursula say that I stay."

Sacha glanced at Johnny. Her black eyes flashed and her foot stamping into the heavy pile of the carpet. But she bit her lip. "OH!" Then she tossed back her head and the jewels about her wrists glittered as she raised her hand to order the roll of hair upon her shoulders. "Oh well, I suppose that as you're only a robot, it doesn't matter..."

"Stop!" The robot lifted one gleaming arm. "Ursula say that Vorille comes here. Ursula not think Sacha fit mate for Scivet, but does not wish to make her son angry. Johnny Found come with me."

"No!" She flung herself at the robot. Unmoved, it thrust her sprawling.

"Come, Johnny Found!"

Johnny hesitated. He looked at Sacha.

"Oh—go!" she snapped in maddened frustration.

He followed the robot out. "Ursula say I show you Island," said the metal man expressionlessly, as they went along the passage.

Johnny nodded. As they traversed long passages he became more and more amazed at the vastness of the place. The upper floors were filled with vast hangars packed with rockets and flying machines, some ready for flight, others stacked in sections so that the most might be made of the available room.

Below these was a multi-floor maze of storerooms, living quarters, laboratories, workshops and gun-blisters.

Johnny, following Hands, completed the long inspection and stood at last on the lowest level, in a vast place filled with robots at work on a gigantic, partly completed machine of unknown purpose.

"Well, have I seen everything?" asked Johnny astounded at the magnitude of the place.

"All except the quarters of the Prisoner."

"The Prisoner. Who is he, then?"

"Ursula's husband."

"But that doesn't make sense. How can a robot brain have a husband, even if it is part human?"

"I don't know."

"Why can't I see him too, then?"

"Because he is the Prisoner."

"Why a prisoner?"

"I don't know."

Johnny gave it up. The answers came pat. They must have been drilled into the robot's brain in a fixed circuit. No argument would change them.

Stiffly the robot turned and walked to the wall. Johnny followed and saw it press a small button. A panel slid upwards. In the recess thus revealed, lines of tiny electron pistols, stun guns and flame squirts were held in clips, ready to be snatched out.

He pulled free an electron pistol, and looked at Hands, and then at the pistol again. The discharge filament was clean, all the wires along the discharge tube were connected, the accelerating terminals—between which the electron beam would be flung out—were in order, and the battery in the butt read full charge. It was, in fact, a brand new weapon, ready for instant use.

Experimentally he put the gun in the pocket of his trousers. The robot did not move. Apparently, Johnny thought, there is now no objection to my being armed. I am to be trusted.

Hands closed the panel. "Come."

Leaving the hall, he again glimpsed the store rooms which were everywhere. Some filled with a mass of ordered equipment for all manner of machines; some full of unactivated robots, packed as tightly as sardines, thousands of them; some containing food stores; some a fabulous wealth in jewels, luxurious fitments, and gold: but all seeming to fit into the pattern of Island life.

On the floor level containing apartments they paused before a door. Johnny looked in, wondering what new wonder he might see, and met the wide, frightened eyes of Ainebelle Hartley.

She backed away from him.

He watched her go with a curious tumult of emotions. He should feel hatred for this girl. She had betrayed him to the police. But he was said to have murdered her father, and was not that some excuse? He must horrify her by his mere presence. How soft and womanly and sweet she seemed. What was she doing here?

"Ursula say you enter."

He walked forward with his mouth drying out and his heart pounding oddly. How different was Aine from Sacha. Sacha was bright and hard and demanding; Aine was soft and appealing. The one wanted; it was in the power of the other to give...

She stopped, stood watching him, her soft lips parted. He looked at Hands.

"Why has she been brought back here?"

The robot hesitated, consulting Ursula, his oracle. "She was sent home as Ursula's side of the bargain, but that bargain was completed when she was set free. She has been brought back here to be killed—for she might, under certain conditions, recall what occurred while she was hypnotised."

"To be killed," repeated Johnny blankly.

"To be killed. You have the pistol. Use it so that Ursula may know once and for all that you are one of us."

"What?" Johnny closed his eyes to the sight of the lovely girl standing defenceless before him. How could he kill her? She was—

Hands took the gun from Johnny's pocket and held it out. "Take it."

It was cold to Johnny's touch. Cold like death. Like Aine's rosy flesh would be soon after an electron bolt had seared it. The gun!

He dropped it.

"Pick up the gun, Johnny Found."

Ainebelle's husky tones, low though they were, startled him, fetching him around to stare into her blue eyes. Once again he was aware of the sharpening effect of the darker rims of the light irises.

Her lips parted. "Pick it up, Johnny. Do as you're told. I know what will happen if you don't"

"You know—"

"I can guess. I—I've been shown that horrible little dwarf. He wanted to... have his way with me when he and the robots took me from my home... just now."

He shuddered. Vorille and—Aine. Unthinkable!

With a sudden impulse, he snatched up the gun. He saw her tense, drawing herself to the full extent of her five and a half feet. Yes, she had nerve. He threw the gun towards her.

"Catch!"

Her hands fluttered up, and it landed in their grasp. The arch of her lips parted in astonishment.

"Now," he said, "you can defend yourself."

"Defend—" As though she suddenly realised that she held something unspeakably unclean, she dropped the gun. Her gasp and the thud of it upon the carpet sounded together. Her fingers trembled up to her face and she turned her head.

For a few moments he stared at her. Then he glanced back

at Hands, who stood perfectly motionless, lens-eyes staring blankly.

The situation was intolerable. He walked across to the door leading into the adjoining room. "Ainebelle," he said. She did not move, so he thrust open the dividing door. "You'd feel better, perhaps, on your own."

Her head lifted out of her hands and she came half running across the floor, but she still kept her face averted and did not speak as she swept past him.

He passed his hand over his eyes. The gleam of the gun seemed to mock him with evil mirth and the slow turning of the robot's head as the lens-eyes followed his movement across the room was there to remind him that he was being watched.

No doubt his reactions were being analysed to the obvious conclusion. He was certain of himself now. Never would he kill Ainebelle. He would rather die for her. What she thought of him and what she had done because of that opinion did not matter.

He sank upon the edge of the divan and buried his face in his hands. Presently, out of his torment, he looked up at the doorway beyond which she was hidden.

Out of the direct line of his vision, he glimpsed a slender stand, on which rested a cigarette box. Men smoked, he knew, to relieve nervous tension. He had an impulse to smoke and reached out his hand and even as he did so, the trouble filling his mind overwhelmed his consciousness of action. Only vaguely was he aware of the flicker of flame as he lit up and inhaled.

Ainebelle believed him a murderer. If she had ever loved him, she certainly did no longer. But—

As he sat there, his desire for her grew and the passion swamped his misgivings. The reasoning of his mind changed. He was male, she female. She was the most wonderful, the most desirable of all women.

"Aine!" he snapped. "Aine, come here!"

He stood up, dropping the cigarette into the spindle-mounted ashtray.

"Come out, Aine, or I'll come in!"

He heard her gasp. Then she came walking out of the shadow, and halted well within his sight. Her carriage was proud and graceful and she regarded him steadfastly.

"Yes, Johnny Found, what is it?"

He beckoned violently "Come over here." How the sight of her affected him! Her perfect figure emphasized rather than concealed by the clinging nightgown she wore, her gilded curls in

glorious disarray, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes, despite their hostility, seemed to beckon to him.

Slowly she came and stood before him. His arms snapped out, his hands closed over her softly rounded shoulders and he joyed exultantly to feel her in his grasp.

Rigidly she stood. The very horror in her eyes, the tension of her muscles inflamed his passion and he dragged her to him.

She screamed. "Johnny!" Within the prison of his grip, she struggled violently. "Let me go!"

He laughed. His hands seemed to grow red hot and his fingers bit into her soft flesh.

Abruptly she ceased to struggle. Her blue eyes grew icily cold. "It is true then. The man I knew is dead; in his place a beast has been born."

He chuckled, mocking her.

Suddenly, straining away from him, she flung herself forward, and then backwards, bursting out of his hands. As he staggered backwards, arms flung wide, her sweet perfume, which seemed so much apart of her, wafted into his awareness.

She turned back and disappeared into the darkened room beyond as he, recovering with his hands down upon the cushions of the divan, leapt in pursuit.

Through the doorway, the darkness halted him and he held his breath, listening.

No sound reached him and he debated exultantly whether he should search for the light switch or hunt her in the darkness. To hunt her in the darkness... His senses tingled at the prospect.

He heard a slight scrape of movement to his left and plunged after it. Something cut his shin and he crashed over to the ground, starting to his feet with pain on the fringe of his mind adding fuel to the fire of his passion.

Suddenly there was a rustle of hasty movement almost directly in front of him. He sprang forward, struck the flat, hard wall and gasped with the agony of bruised fingers.

Something crashed over to his right and he whipped around and grabbed. His hands caught upon the smooth top and hard edge of a table, and he cursed.

He tensed, listening again. He would catch her yet, and hold her this time. He could wait. Sooner or later she would move.

Yes. Judging by that rustle, she was not far away. A few feet perhaps to his right. He pawed the air experimentally, but touched nothing. Cautiously he lifted one foot, advanced it and

so moved forward noiselessly. Silk rustled very close. He grabbed and this time his fingers caught in the gauzy stuff of her gown.

"Got you!"

The stuff was wrenched away, pulling at his fingers, but he hung on easily, chuckling. This way and that, it jerked. Like a fish hooked in the darkness of deep waters.

He laughed. "Come here." He tried to drag her towards him and the material tore and he staggered back to fetch up cursing against the wall.

He glimpsed her shadow across the darkened room, saw her silhouetted momentarily against the lighted doorway, and, his eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he distinguished the white of her arms and face against the farther wall.

Now he had her. Slowly he walked, weaving his hands cunningly in front of him as though unable to see, skirting around a table, around the edge of a bed. He imagined her shrinking against the wall as he neared her. Soon she would make a break for freedom. To hunt for such a prize in such a way as this!

His arms snapped out, his hands caught her shoulders and he dragged her to him. She struggled and writhed against him.

He burrowed his face down to her neck, kissing the smooth, velvety skin, joying in the muffling luxuriance of her curls.

The white blurrs which were her arms rose up to beat against his chest. He laughed mockingly. Soon he'd tame her.

Then pain ran fingers down his cheeks and he started back, gasping. She ducked away from him, running through the lighted doorway. He reached up his hands to his face. They came away wet. Blood!

"Cat!" he hissed, and hastened after her.

Blinking in the light of the other room, he saw her standing just beyond the divan and he stumbled forward with outstretched hands.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

He stopped, bewildered. His eyes grew accustomed to the glare and he found himself looking into the business end of an electron discharge tube.

"Don't be a little fool!" he snapped. "Put it down."

"Not while you're crazy, like this!"

He swore. He could see that her desperation was such that she would not hesitate to kill him.

But somehow, then, the crest of his passion seemed past. The old doubts crept back, curbing his desire.

KNOW YOUR AUTHOR

This issue E. R. James is author of our lead story. This is what he writes about himself—

Age 32. Began reading science-fiction stories before leaving school. Can remember the plots of quite a few stories out of the American "pulp" of Gernsback and his contemporaries. Discovered the Martian romances of Burroughs about the same time, and was held spell-bound by this old master. Wondered why these and other such stories were not more popular and began to write manuscripts with a science flavour myself—and enjoyed doing so, though no one wanted them.

War interrupted everything, however. Was too close to an enemy shell after five weeks in Normandy and was flown home peppered with shrapnel. Have a memento of this in a blind right eye—now with a definite greenish iris.

Began to sell stories while still in H.M. Forces. Made plans with a friend, also writing and selling, to live together. But, instead, got married and altered my address from Somerset to Yorkshire.

Continued writing, although forced to take a bread and butter job in the G.P.O. Have been paid for over 40 articles and stories of varying lengths, about half of which were science-fiction. Have others awaiting publication. Also a novel in an agent's hands—this by no means sure of publication, however.

Still enjoy other people's stories, and still wonder why the British public generally takes so little interest in science—and more particularly in the wonderful, if frighteningly vast and terrible vistas which seem only just around the corner of the future in these inspiring times.

He remembered the robot. Yes, the man of metal, unperturbed, still watched, the personification of its chill, mechanical kind.

He felt washed out. The incidents of the last few minutes seemed wierd, unreal. His gaze passed on and encountered a feather of smoke rising from the cigarette still smoking in the ash-

tray. Sacchaleine! That was what had made him run amuck!

He looked up at Ainebelle. She too glanced at the cigarette. Would she realise the significance of it and make allowances?

"I'm sorry, Aine."

"Oh." Her gun hand dropped. "How long have you been smoking those things, Johnny?"

"Does it matter?" He shuddered. "But—I do love you. I'm sure of that. I'll not trouble you again. You must have loved me once," he said suddenly. Perhaps you could, again?"

"I don't know." She stood up and stood beside him, her smooth hand caressing his burning cheek, and then slipping down to lift the open collar of his shirt. "You've been hurt, haven't you? Are you cut and bruised like that all over?"

"Does it matter?" he said bitterly.

She held out her hands appealingly. "Of course. You see, I was in love with you—once. And you are hurt—no matter what you've done."

"No matter what I've done," he repeated. "What have I done? You think I killed your father—the world says I did—so I suppose I must have. But I don't remember it. I don't feel guilty. And as long as you go on thinking badly of me I don't want your sympathy!"

"Johnny, that's—horrible!"

"Is it? Well then, do you believe I killed your father?"

"I don't know." She seemed suddenly very weary. "You you're so—so different."

"Different!" He took her accusation up. "Different? How How? What sort of man was I before...?"

"You—" She hesitated, her blue eyes half veiled by her lashes. "You were rather wonderful..."

That took his breath away.

At that moment, without warning, Hands the robot began to move. It turned with the usual precision. The doors of the apartment opened before it and it passed out of their view.

Aine glanced at Johnny. "Almost as though he felt he was embarrassing us..."

"He?" said Johnny dully. "Aine, you don't talk of robots as 'he'; they have no feelings such as torture us. If they had, they'd not be so efficient..."

In the silence which followed, Johnny slowly became aware of sounds penetrating through the walls of the apartment. A

scrape-scape-scaping, and a prolonged hissing. The noise, though muffled, was quite distinct.

"What's that?"

She lifted her eyebrows. "What?"

"That noise. Can't you hear it?"

She listened. "Yes. I—I've a queer feeling that I've heard it before... You know, Johnny, I thought I'd been here before, in this room, as soon as I entered it—"

"You have been. You may have heard the sounds before too. What d'you think it is?"

"How should I know? You're the engineer, Johnny."

"Hum. Sounds like a drill—or a grinding wheel that didn't work too efficiently."

"Perhaps there's a workshop in the adjoining rooms?"

"Maybe—" he began, breaking off as he saw the doors opening again.

Hands strode on to the threshold and stopped at stiff attention. Its metallic voice grated. "Ursula say Johnny Found come to the dome."

Johnny went cold. There was so much he had wanted to talk of to Aine—and they had wasted their time talking of faint Island noises. He forced himself to think of the possibilities of this order.

"Don't go, Johnny!" said Ainebelle. "She'll have you killed."

"Perhaps," he agreed grimly. "But she could do that just as well here. I must go."

"But you've disobeyed her by not killing me."

"Killing you," he scoffed. "Ursula is a woman—or part woman. She'll know that I'd not kill you. How could I? When I love you..."

"Ursula waits," said the robot.

Johnny nodded. He and Aine looked at each other for a brief, unspeaking while, before he turned.

Hands led him along passages, down a lift, along other passages. In his mind the tension grew with every step. Yet, as soon as the ante-room opened before him, fatalism seized coldly upon him. He passed between the motionless guards, through the opening doors into the vasty space of the Dome.

Sacha, standing very still, her small fists clenched and her underlip between her teeth, watched him enter.

The staring lens-eyes of Ursula's high hung sphere seemed to swallow his attention, and her voice boomed in his ears.

"You have not killed the girl, Johnny Found."

"No."

"But you understand that she is dead, now."

A chill shuddered through him. "Dead?"

"Yes, she is dead to the outside world. But she may live here, if you wish it."

He gasped.

"Kill her, Johnny!" snapped Sacha. Her jewels flashed as she moved, stamping her foot.

He shook his head. "I cannot."

"No, he cannot, for he loves her, Sacha. As my son loves you, so he loves her. Now do you believe me?"

Sacha turned as though an arrow had pierced her heart. She ran towards the opening doors and beat upon them until they were wide enough for her to pass through.

Johnny looked up at the sphere. "Then—Aine is not to be killed?"

"No Johnny. You have been useful to me, and can be even more useful in the weeks which are to come. The outside becomes restive, and suspects that we are, indeed, the Raiders. Obviously, then, she must continue to live—at least until you tire of her. She is a reward for your past services and a guarantee of your future obedience. To all except yourself, she is dead. But, for you alone, she lives. Do with her as you will. Yet—knowing women, I feel she may kill herself, even yet, so be careful of her."

"Then I can go back to her?"

"Of course. Hands will escort you."

He turned, hurrying all the way back. Entering the apartment, he smiled and laughed as he saw Ainebelle standing in the centre of the room looking at a lighted television screen.

"You're to live!" he shouted. "Oh, Aine, it is all right. You're safe—"

But she was not smiling back at him. Her eyes turned to stare coldly, and the rigidity of her young body threw a cold douche over his joy.

"Oh!" She shuddered. "Everything is perfect for you, isn't it?"

Bewildered, he gaped at her. "Aine what's wrong? What's happened?"

Her hands fluttered towards the lighted screen. "Soon after you went," she said, "that screen lit up. I saw and heard everything that happened. That woman—"

"Sacha's nothing to me, now!"

"No? But I am to be your reward, and you can do with me as you will... Oh, Johnny Found, how I hate you! I think I would rather be dead!"

The silken stuff of her nightgown trailed behind her as she fled into the darkened room.

Chapter VIII.

Left alone in that luxurious apartment, time dragged by somehow, until robots brought in a luxury meal and he hopefully called to Aine. Receiving no answer, he reluctantly ordered their meals to be served separately. He had to force himself to eat. Eat, he must, for both their lives depended on his continued usefulness.

Later on, he switched on the world-broadcast and was listening to the news, mostly about the search for him, when he heard other sounds. At once he switched off the set... and heard the mysterious scrape, scrape, and the following hissing, this time a little more loudly than before.

Presently they ceased, leaving him puzzled. But his recent ill-treatment was telling even on his fine physique and he felt that, in spite of his problems and the emotional chaos of the past few days, he would be able to sleep. His eyes heavy-lidded, he entered the other bedroom of the apartment.

He undressed, put on the pyjamas laid out for him and, after tossing and turning between the cool sheets, was presently soothed by the gentle circulation of the air-conditioner incorporated into the bed, became drowsy, and finally drifted into deep slumber haunted by confused dreams.

He awoke with a start. Something had roused him. What? He winced as his head throbbed, and recalled that it had throbbed upon the day before for a time while he had been under great mental stress. Blinking his eyes, he gradually made out the girl who stood beside the bed. Ainebelle! He gaped at her in confusion. This was the last thing he had expected. For he had grown quite resigned the previous night to her attitude. There seemed no knowing what she would do next.

He rubbed his eyes, clearing the sleep. Through the throbbing of his temples, he asked: "Whatever are you doing here, Aine?"

"There's breakfast waiting for you. As we have to live here

together, I thought that we may as well be friends at least."

"Yes, Aine, that's the sensible thing to do. I'll be with you in about ten minutes."

She nodded and left. For a few moments he lay wondering at her actions, then he rose, followed the routine of his toilet, bathing and massages, supervised through small adjoining cubicles by robot servants.

Feeling spruce and like a new man in the fresh suit which had been laid out for him, he went back into the main room. As he entered robot waiters removed covers from the steaming dishes and cups of their breakfast. Aine smiled a slow greeting.

As they ate, Aine suddenly came out with news. I've had a message from Ursula. You are required, as soon as you have finished your meal, to leave here and start your work."

"Oh yes?"

"Johnny," she questioned slowly, "what sort of work is it?"

"Your guess is as good a mine." He regarded her thoughtfully. She, as though to take away all importance from her question, was pouring him more coffee. "Look," he added, "I'll tell you all about it when I come back. That is... if you're not allowed to come with me?"

"And I won't be," she said and she hesitated. He feared for a moment that she would again reproach him about the peculiarity of their situation, but finally she said nothing.

The moment they finished eating and sat back from the table, the robots began to clear the dishes away, and the aroma of the processed cereals sweet-mixed with that of bacon and eggs, began to fade in the air-conditioning. At the same time the outer door opened and Hands strode in. The robot's lenses surveyed Johnny.

"Ursula say you come now."

Johnny took his leave of Ainebelle. Both were conscious of the soundless communication which existed between the robots, and both felt apprehensive, somehow, because of it.

Through the passage to the lift, they went. Descending to a lower level, Hands led to a long store-room which was stacked high with the inert figures of robots.

Two robots stood waiting for them. "Those," said Hands, "are your assistants. In those boxes over there, you will find the brain cells which are to be inserted in the heads of the robots here. Your assistants will lift down the new robots one at a time and you must insert the brains and connect up the power-units within their chests."

"I see." Johnny nodded. He opened one of the packing

cases which Hands had indicated. Packed in rubber-sponge, the flat, incredibly-delicate mechanisms which were the robot's brains, lay in layers. He extracted one and examined it. Not, he saw, a usual sort of brain-mechanism. He twisted it over to the right, then on to its back and pressed the two studs upon either side. The inspection panel sprung open and he looked in upon a strange arrangement of wire coils, valves, tiny electrical parts and microscopic motors. Only the arrangement, however, was unfamiliar. The wires which—when the robot was fully connected up so that it came to life—provided it with a ready-made memory of the duties which it would be called upon to perform, were standard; although he had no means of knowing what that task might be. He was thinking, too, that the other parts were standard equipment...

Hand's voice grated. "Ursula say that too much knowledge is not wise."

Johnny looked up. "I get it." He snapped shut the inspection panel, reached down into the packing case and took out the emery board. Motioning to the waiting robot assistants to bring the first of the new robots, he rubbed the snap-connectors of the brain upon the fine-grain surface removing the insulation.

From the tightly packed mass of metal bodies, the two robots plucked a single stiff shape. The action was like taking a log from a huge pile of identical tree-trunks. The metal skin gleamed in the light and the eyes flashed as it was swung down.

Johnny, presented with the head, ran his fingers around the square forehead, around towards the back, at about an inch from the flattening top of the metal skull. The top hinged up, revealing a cavity, sponge-padded to receive the metal brain. With the terminal-connections of the brain down-pointed, he slipped it home so that the brain was connected by contact with the head terminals in the spongy stuff to all the little motors which made the body function. Johnny ran his finger over the top of the brain, feeling that it fitted flush. He snapped shut the top. Reaching down to the metal chest, he operated another panel, flung the switch behind it and closed the panel.

At once the lenses of the eyes became strangely opaque.

"Stand up!" said Johnny.

Stiffly the metal arms and hands went through the motions of rising. The robot stood stiffly before him. Suddenly, before Johnny could say anything else, it wheeled smartly around and marched out of the open door. Johnny stared after it. Evidently they were being activated for a purpose which urgently required

their presence. Nothing but a radio order could have set the metal man marching off like that. No doubt it was a command direct from Ursula—though of course Hands could have given a silent order just as easily.

Another robot was thrust out towards him, the inert body cradled in the arms of his assistants. Well... whatever was happening, he had his part in the workings. He began the process again, and, as he repeated it and went on repeating it, he thought that he was doing a task which might easily have been given to a robot designed for the job. Unless, that was, there had been some variation from standard robot making. He grew tired and the actions became quite automatic as the other thoughts which had come to be almost haunting him rose up to torture his soul.

What was Ainebelle doing back in the apartment? This morning she had been quite friendly to him. Did he, he wondered, dare to hope that she was changing a little towards him? Could it be that she was beginning to trust him?

Almost without being aware of his actions he placed the brain in his hand over the open cavity of the robot's head, thrust it home, checked that it was flush, shut the top and reached down and operated the switch.

"Stand up."

But, this time, nothing happened and he came back from his day-dreaming. He switched off and removed the brain, examined it and fitted another in its place. This time it went. The robot stood up at his command, but its arms reached out towards him. He sprang aside desperately. The hands, equipped with tools followed him. He ducked under them, snapped open the chest-panel and switched off the power. The robot fell like a tree before an axe. So that was why a human was used to activate them. If anything went wrong, these robots with their altered brains were dangerous. There was no knowing what this one might have done if only a robot had been activating it.

The process was resumed. The stack of inert metal bodies was now noticeably smaller, but he had, he noticed, set into action only a very small part of the available workers.

From the time of his arrival in the store-room to the moment when Hands suddenly informed him that he had done enough for the day, must have been three or four hours. Perhaps a hundred robots had been set in motion and gone stalking off through the doors. There had only been three failures out of these. Johnny glanced at the inert bodies which he had pushed to one side and left.

"You'd better have these destroyed."

"Ursula already give the command," said Hands. "The assistants will dispose of them the moment you leave here."

As Johnny re-entered the prison apartment, Ainebelle looked up from the table now laid for their main meal of the day.

"What happened, Johnny?"

"I've spent the day activating robots," he said.

She stared. "What sort of robots?"

"Mechanics."

"What new horror are they building?"

He shrugged as he came and sat at the table. "How should I know?" He felt hungry and the sight of food was very welcome.

"Aren't you interested at all?"

He put down his fork and chewed. "In what?"

She frowned. "Johnny, you're hopeless. You've been making robots so don't you wonder why?"

"I haven't been making them. I—"

"Oh, I know that. It was only a way of speaking. What I mean is—why do you think you have been activating mechanics? What are they being used to build?"

He hesitated. "I've no way of knowing that. Some sort of very large machine I'd imagine, for there are so many of them."

"How many?"

"A hundred or so."

"Doesn't the idea frighten you? You know the fiendish sort of people we are amongst."

"Well..." He frowned at her across the laden table. Why didn't she eat, instead of asking unanswerable questions? "How do you propose I find out? Ursula doesn't try to encourage me to look around, you know."

"I know it wouldn't be easy," she said. "But you might have some sort of opportunity when you go again. Perhaps the fate of hundreds of people depends upon you..."

"People of the outside?"

"Why yes. Ordinary folk such as you or I."

He put down his knife and fork with a shrug. "Such as you perhaps, but not such as I am. You forget I am an outlaw, hunted for my life, hated by everyone outside this place."

Her chair scraped as she stood up. "Yes," she said, "you are not the man I knew. You simply don't care at all. You're as ruthless and horrid as the others here. The lives of people mean nothing to you; you only think of yourself. Can't you take a

larger view and imagine the suffering caused by the raids these people make?"

Her pleading made him hesitate. "You're like my conscious," he said at last. "You know that you're asking me to risk my life for people who would kill me if they could?"

"I realise that."

"Then you cannot blame me if I hesitate. All my experiences of the outside world tell me that it is a bad place. Perhaps it should all be destroyed and a new civilisation begun?"

Her blue eyes stared wide in her pallid, drawn face. Her lips, slightly parted, sweet and cherubic in the oval of her cheeks, trembled with unsaid words. Then, slowly her gaze fell, and she sat again at the table.

"You are so bitter," she sighed. "Yet you have reason to be. I did not realise. It must have been very terrible for you." She picked up her fork and toyed with the rich foods upon her plate.

He felt then that he wanted to comfort her. If it would please her, he would try to find out what Ursula was doing. "I feel like humpty-dumpty sitting on a fence," he said with a weak attempt at humour. "If I fall forward into the grasp of the outside world I'll be killed, and, if I fall backwards so that Ursula no longer trusts me I'll bring both of us to some unpleasant end. But—if you want it, I'll do as you say."

She looked up, her blue eyes soft and shining with a lustre he had never seen before. "You will—for me?"

"You know that it may mean your death as well as mine?"

"Yes, I know. Perhaps I'd rather die than spend the rest of my life penned up like this."

He grew grim. She hated being here with him. Oh yes, he could see that very plainly. A fine sort of woman he had picked out for his mate. Why—oh, why, why couldn't he have been satisfied with someone like Sacha? Sacha would have made the most of life as she found it. But—he had said that he would try to find out, and so he would.

"I'll do as you want," he growled.

She smiled at him, overjoyed, and the colour came seeping back into her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled at him. She picked up her knife and fork and began to eat, at the same time chatting to him of the small incidents which had broken the monotony of her day.

He marvelled at her change of attitude. Eating slowly, he was nevertheless aware that the food seemed to have lost its savour. She disturbed him more than he cared to admit.

His thoughts suddenly came to a halt as he heard sounds beyond the walls of the apartment. They were the same as before. A peculiar scraping and hissing which he could not connect with any known mechanism. Louder, too. He wondered vaguely whether the activating of the robots was connected in some way with the sounds. Something was evidently being manufactured, or perhaps built within the island, and being done, moreover, at as great a rate as was possible.

The next day, at his task with the robot standing guard beside him, there seemed no way that he could escape. When he tried to concentrate on the problem his head throbbed and the room swam around him. The giddiness made him drop his head between his knees. As the blood mounted again to his brain and he lifted his face and wiped the clammy sweat from his forehead, metal hands gripped his shoulders drawing him erect. He put out his arms to steady himself against the metal chest, and he looked into the staring lenses of his guardian.

As he did so, he knew what to do. His fingers, though they still trembled, fumbled the fastening of the chest panel. It snapped open and he struck at the switch inside, felt it click over. At once the eyes before him went blank, and hands on his shoulders relaxed and Hands toppled backwards, clattering to the floor.

Anxiously Johnny whipped around to stare at the robot assistants. But they—he saw—were not equipped to deal with such an emergency. Their metal bodies bent, their arms cradled an inert robot, they waited for him to do his part in the activating of the new worker.

This, then, was his chance. He would have no second opportunity, he knew. Never again would Hands fall a victim to such a trick. Doubts as to the consequences worried him for a moment, but he resolutely forced them into the background of his mind.

How, he wondered, should he find the place in which these robots worked? The obvious answer occurred to him at once. He quickly activated the robot now being offered to him.

"Stand up!" he commanded.

The metal body lifted itself erect, hesitated, turned and marched out. Johnny followed. They proceeded, Johnny taking great care to avoid the mechanical eyes set on the passage intersections, and presently had descended to the great hall on the lower floor of the Island.

Johnny stared, as he stood in the doorway, at the intense, purposeful activity filling the place. Robots were filing in from one side and depositing loads of materials, stalking out of the

opposite side empty handed. Working a chain system of carrying, he guessed. Other robots unpacked the loads, arranging them upon the floor for still others to carry to where the actual erection was being made. It seemed to Johnny that they were making funnels with the wider ends set down upon the floor. He saw that the floor beneath the funnels was now patterned with round holes, over which the erections were being made. Over the top of these funnels, machinery somehow similar to jet-turbines, yet obviously working with some entirely different principle was being assembled against the roof, panels of which had been slid back to reveal the pattern of supports apparently designed for just such a purpose.

Johnny suddenly experienced a pang of fear. Of the robot workers, he had no fear, but perhaps there would be a human directing their efforts. He dodged back out of sight and looked more cautiously around the doorway. As busy as a hive, the scene remained unchanged, and his confidence returned. His presence was ignored, as he had expected it to be. Robot workers such as these were only a little higher in the evolution scale of machines than self-change gear-boxes and automatic pilots. Designed for a single function, they would continue building their machinery until either it was complete or the last one of them had been destroyed. Lacking souls or intelligences, and possessing only a restricted form of instinct, they were incapable of realising possible menaces—in fact, had an atomic bomb detonated nearby they would have shown no interest in it; if they survived they would have begun to set the machine they made into working order, continuing with the construction blindly, though efficiently.

Perfect workers, though limited, their existence was dedicated to a single task.

Johnny cautiously advanced into the hall. Strictly speaking no overseer would be necessary, and, in the Island isolation, no guards were called for, but Ursula would be certain to send someone to check progress at intervals in spite of the known efficiency.

His interest rested with the jet-like machines being constructed between the small ends of the funnels and the ceiling. He came across a ladder and, waiting until a robot had begun its ascent, he followed close behind before another chain-walking robot reached it.

High above him, beneath the roof, was a system of tubular scaffolding.

Reaching this he made his way along a narrow gangway after the leading robot towards the centre of the work. Clinging, hand over hand, to the handrail, his human nerves caused him to move

gingerly along the six-inch wide catwalk. One slip of his shuffling feet and he might be plunging the twenty odd feet to the hard, equipment-strewn floor. He was no robot to take it in his stride, as the metal man before him or the one whose measured footfalls rang sharply behind.

He almost leapt on to a tiny platform, squeezing to one side out of the way of the robot which followed him. It strode past as though blind to his presence. He relaxed and looked about.

His first impression was of a metal undergrowth which might have been a confused section of a fantastic mechanical jungle. The robots, some hanging, some clambering, some moving like flies, some swinging with unnatural confidence over the narrow ways, reminded him of an intensely active colony of monkeys, though monkeys were never so busy to such purpose.

Then he saw the huge cables which brought in electric current—no doubt produced in or near the atomic furnace above, and he began to try to understand what was going on. From the size of the cables he judged the voltage was very great. They led, moreover, into a monstrous apparatus which, although only partially completed, seemed to be like a common type of voltage generator. A pair of huge metal spheres gleamed in a partly enclosed space, and a metal belt for carrying up the voltage stage by stage to be retained upon the surfaces of the spheres and built up there to something colossal—these were all too familiar a part of atom experiments. But, here, the power did not appear to be intended as an atom smasher. The discharge from the spheres was, instead, led off in its tremendously boosted state to enclosed motors, the principle of which he did not, at that time, understand.

It seemed to Johnny, as he stood there thinking it over, that he might be looking at some kind of propulsion motors which could, if necessary, send the island hurtling out still further into space; but yet, as the motors and funnels had every appearance of using gas as the motive force, such engines could not have any effect on the Island's motion through space.

At that moment, he observed that there was yet another chain of robots coming and going through trap-doors in the roof not so very far ahead of him. Perhaps, he thought, if I follow them up, I'll find other machines which may give me a clue to the purpose behind this one. With this intention in mind, he followed close behind the next robot to stride past him. The metal worker swung up a ladder from the platform right to the roof, went with stiff precision across a section of the roof itself, clinging effortlessly and with no loss of speed, to lower itself onto another, larger plat-

form which encircled the generator under construction.

And, forced on by the robot following behind, Johnny hung down as he, too, crossed the roof, clinging with his hands alone as his booted feet were ill-fitted to hold on to the horizontal rungs. With a gasp of relief he dropped to the platform, and hurried after the leading robot.

At a point where the platform widened, he ducked out of the chain-walking robots, took his direction and clambered precariously up towards the nearer of the traps in the roof.

Choosing his time, he followed behind an ascending robot and passed up through the trap. Moving clear of the line of metal men, he stopped to stare around. At once he realised that he was in one of the rooms which surrounded the island as defence areas. But, whereas, they had been empty before, now they were partly filled with ordered lines of machines, generators of various sorts, all connected with defence or offence—all, in fact, primarily used as weapons of war.

Work, here, was proceeding at the same inexorable pace as in the lower room. Soon, he thought, everything will be ready. perhaps within hours, certainly not longer than days. Was an attack imminent? Did the world of the outside intend to break into the Island; or was Ursula's intention itself belligerent?

He saw robots coming and going through the doors leading into adjoining rooms and, as the doors swung, he glimpsed other activity and other machines being erected in the gaps between the rocket projectors. Whatever was happening, or about to happen, Ursula's preparations were certainly thorough.

At that moment however, his thoughts broke off as he heard, in a short lull, the slither of a cautious foot behind him. Reacting immediately, he jerked around tensely.

"Johnny Found!" exclaimed Sacha. Clear rippling laughter burst in a flood from her scarlet lips, and she set her hands on her silk-clad hips. "Well. I never expected to find you here. Ursula told me that you had other work which took up all your time." Startlingly, her brows drew down over her dark eyes, and she scowled. "What are you doing here, anyway? Spying?"

He searched his ingenuity for a reply, but the throbbing began anew in his head, and he blinked, breathing heavily and trying desperately to hold himself steady.

Sacha slipped a slender, white hand into the pleated, silken stuff of her trousers, drawing forth an electron gun. "So you are spying... Ursula won't like that, Johnny."

To clear his mind, he shook his head.

She stared at him. "You deny it? I don't see how you can..."

His gaze dropped to the gun held loosely in her hand. The jewelled bracelet clasped around her wrist flashed.

She shook back her long hair over her shoulders. "No, I'll not kill you. All I could do would be to shoot you. Ursula's way will be more subtle. She will know how to deal with you...and with that plump, milksop of yours!"

Johnny swayed. His head was throbbing so that he thought it would burst. His head!

Chapter IX.

Through his numbed brain, in time with the throbbing, as Sacha forced him to walk in front of her, beat a question: John-ny...Found or...Mark Vell...or-ss.

When they stopped before guarding robots he felt he could stand the torture no longer. He held his head.

But, suddenly the pain passed.

"Come back later," the voice of Ursula was telling them. "Send Johnny Found back to his work, and return to your own duties."

"But he was—spying!"

"Spying? Impossible. Where is Hands? Find my robot and do as I say."

Johnny managed to grin. Ursula could not credit that her personal robot had been so inefficient as to let her favoured protege escape.

Sacha, however, was frowning with a climax of thwarted passion. The gun in her hand was jumping nervously—

With a sudden decision, he walked forward towards the motionless guards. At once their metal arms jerked up and the glittering weapons of their arms menaced him.

He hesitated in mid-stride and then leapt forward between them. The mighty doors of the dome started to swing open as he entered the rays before them.

He dropped down to the floor just in time to avoid fiery electron bolts slicing, scorching through the air from the guard's guns.

Then he was up and running—into the Dome.

"Ursula!" he shouted. "Listen to me!"

Two robots reached out to clutch him. He dodged, almost ran full tilt into two others approaching from the other side. He dropped down as the metal arms of these circled around to enfold him, and leapt at the chest of the nearest, knocking open the panel in it and flicking over the switch. As the metal men toppled, Johnny shoved them sideways.

Metal clattered on metal and Johnny leapt over the two prostrate shapes. He ran a few paces, heard the other robots crash into the scrum, stopped and looked up at the lenses high above him.

"I will speak to you!"

"Indeed, Johnny Found, I believe you will. I admire your bravery and tactics. Perhaps you will be more useful than I thought. It appears I've under-estimated you."

"You have," he said. "A robot could do what I've been doing. Give me a man's job."

"I will. I begin to see now why Sacha finds you so attractive. Perhaps, in my time, I would have felt as she does. Perhaps, in fact, I still do... However, to the work in hand—Tonight you shall leave here on an equal status with Scivet, my own son. My hand is being forced. The world outside will leave us in peace for only a few hours longer. We are more than suspect. Soon we will be attacked. For I cannot submit to their ultimatum demanding admission here. I must—kill or be killed. How strange that is...My intention was never to rule the world...but I must do so or perish. I must conquer or be conquered—"

"Conquer the world?"

"It will not be so hard. In past ages such a plan would have many separate battles; now, however, all that is necessary is to destroy the central body which rules the governments of the world. I have already prepared for this possibility. In the chaos which follows this single battle, my puppets will seize control even as Hitler once seized control on a more limited scale...

"But— It will be so tedious to have to control the lives of so many millions of little people. After only one more raid I would have gathered in sufficient supplies to satisfy my ends. The toll we levied was so small compared with the wealth of the world. Left alone, I and my servants might have reached out to the stars, as men still only dream of doing, held back as they are by their petty finances and distractions. Left alone I and my robot brains might have solved all the problems which have baffled mankind from time immemorial.

"Of course, that I should eventually rule the world is in-

evitable. But the people of, say five generations from now, would have been far better suited to the system of government which I shall install. They would have followed the present evolutionary trend towards the importance of the human race over the mere individual."

As the voice ceased its booming explanation, Johnny tried to speak. But he could not. The picture painted in his mind of irresistible, methodical planning was too big. Ursula was usurping the final powers of God.

He was still bewildered as he made his way, unescorted, back to the prison apartment. At the doorway, Hands the robot awaited him expressionlessly.

Johnny looked at his guard inquiringly. "Are you angry with me?"

"Angry? What is that?"

The robot stood aside to allow him to enter. It did not follow. Ainebelle looked around as the door closed. She was on her knees beside the cabinet of a televisior library. Her eyes were wide and her lips parted as though in fear.

"Oh! It's you—" She started eagerly to her feet. "Oh, Mark! MARK! I've found a way out..."

Suddenly his senses reeled and his sight blurred and her voice faded. His old name throbbed and throbbed in his head. Mark! Mark! MARK! MARK! Shaking in every limb, his head a pounding hollow of agony, the floor tilted under him and came smashing up.

His own voice, moaning, roused him. He dragged up a trembling hand to wipe away the saliva dribbling down his chin. The cool hands of Ainebelle were on his brow.

"You remembered me, Mark. Mark! MARK!"

"Stop it!" he appealed.

And his brain slowly cleared, and he, with her hands helping him, staggered over to the divan.

"That's better..."

"Mark, don't you remember what you said?"

"No."

"You said: 'Aine, my darling, you understand that I had to do it!'"

"I did?" He shook his head. "No, I'm still the same Johnny Found. But—that other name must have upset me. You musn't use it again!" He caught hold of her shoulders and shook her. "If I have the tendency to be two people, Ursula must not know. Or—Oh, Aine, and I thought I had been so clever... I have in-

stead, only made things more dangerous. Within hours I will be summoned to join other members of the Raiders and, from then on, I'll not be out of their sight... If I have just one more black-out like that—we'll both be doomed!" He shuddered.

She stroked his hair. "Don't worry, Mark. I—"

"Don't call me *that*!"

"All right—Johnny."

"That's better. Now, what were you telling me?"

For answer she led him to the cabinet. He knelt as she had done, peering into the shadow behind it.

There was a gap in the wall, at floor level, rough-hewn and jagged, but large enough to permit the passage of a man on hands and knees.

"That's queer..."

She nodded. "D'you remember I was rather silent at breakfast this morning?"

"Yes?"

"Well, I thought that you had come into my room last night. I'd been woken up by something being knocked over. I—I thought it was you in my room and I kept very quiet. I thought that... if you thought I slept—you'd—go away."

"It wasn't me."

"No. I see that now. Whoever it was must have come through here."

"That's right." He ducked into the gap. "Tough plastic this; wonder what sort of tool was used? A hammer and chisel wouldn't make any impression."

He crawled forward and the rough surface cut into his hands and knees like blunt knife edges. He heard Aine gasping as she followed in like discomfort.

His head bumped a hard, unseen barrier and he stopped, considering. Whoever had used this passage—had made it, in fact—could scarcely be an ally of Ursula. He heard no sound, and did not fear discovery. Ursula would not blame him for this investigation, and he felt quite fatalistic towards the man, beast or machine which must be ahead.

He set his shoulders to the obstruction. It slid away quite easily.

A pair of very long tables, loaded with an orderly jungle of scientific apparatus, met his gaze—retorts and test-tubes clamped upon brackets, heat elements, ray-tubes and mechanical eyes surrounded them, as though arranged for some recent and complicated experiment. A chemical experiment.

On shelves in the wall beyond were more familiar things. Bits of robot's brains, tiny complicated mechanisms, were jumbled there. The shelves and oddments extended all around the room, he saw. It was a laboratory.

Cautiously he emerged. At the far end of the place there were rows of glass cases, aquariums, cages containing animals, and a door, partly open.

He felt his hand taken by Ainebelle's. He squeezed her fingers reassuringly. They reached the doorway without incident.

He edged slowly around the opening's side. He saw the foot of a bed. The shape of a human body filled out the sheet upon it. Then he started, almost gasped aloud.

It was not a human head upon the pillow—but the metal skull—staring lens-eyes, microphone mouth and gleaming metal skin—of a robot!

The head, too, was monstrous in size—twice human size—bigger than any robot's head he had ever seen.

His attention was attracted by flickering lights and some small, weaving movements. Looking sharply sideways, he saw a mechanical hypnotiser, working.

What manner of machine was this thing in the bed that it should need to be kept under such control? he wondered.

Aine's whisper made him jump. "Johnny, what sort of thing..."

"Sssh!" he warned. He tip-toed over to the machine, examining it, and then making certain adjustments. Then he turned to the occupant of the bed.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Prisoner." The voice, tinny and weird, answered readily enough.

Johnny leaned forward. "You—are human?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

This time there was no answer. Johnny hesitated, but decided that it would probably be useless to try and force an answer.

"All right then," he said, "was it you who made the tunnel into the next apartment?"

"Yes."

Johnny glanced at Ainebelle. "That solves one mystery, anyway."

She nodded, and Johnny turned back to the bed.

"Why are you kept a prisoner?"

"Because I hate this place that I have made."

"You made it?"

"Yes. With the help of Ursula."

"Tell us about it, will you?"

"Six years ago to this day, I landed on the volcanic meteor where this Island of the Sky was made. I cannot tell you how the thing was done, but I was once rich enough to keep its construction a secret, although now it has made criminals of us all, and the men who helped me are all dead—or as good as dead, working for Ursula.

"Ursula... Some of the things in the Island are of her construction. We built it for what we then thought to be the ultimate experiment. Now I realise that it was the ultimate crime against nature...

"Ursula... It always amazed me that a mere woman should be capable of guiding the construction of such a mechanical marvel...

"But she, even as I, desired privacy from a spying world. Although she, unlike myself, was suffering from some unknown malady which was slowly killing her...

"How we worked during those years. I could not leave my business interests altogether, but she made this place her home...

"And, at last, we thought we had it. We thought we had it... The perfect brain—human in its completeness, inhuman in its efficiency. We looked at the great sphere which contained it almost with dread. Or at least I did... It was, after all, a forbidden experiment.

"But both of us were too eager to switch on power and make out tests, to think clearly. We thought more of the work which had been done, of the incredible complexity and variety of our apparatus, of its size... for it had to be human in its fullness and efficient in its intelligence.

"I remember how Ursula reached out very slowly and flung the big switch. We made our tests in a condition so excited that it was some time before we realised with a really terrible disappointment—that we had failed. It was perfect in its way. It would perform any function of which a human brain is capable, and would do these innumerable things with wonderful perfection. Advanced mathematics were child's play. Even Astrogation—the theoretical navigation of space-craft in the unthinkable distances between the planets and stars—were solved. But—it was a machine. We realised that as we looked at each other. It lacked imagination. It could adjust itself to new circumstances, could foresee probabilities but—it simply did not possess true

imagination. The human element—the incalculable human element was—missing.

“Ursula, I think, had been kept alive only by our work. So shattered was she by disappointment, that she sank to the floor. I am a biologist, and it was clear to me that she had only days to live. She even forgot our project, and she thought of nothing except the future of her son, Scivet.

“To please her during those last hours, I married her, promising to look after her son, making myself responsible for him.

“Still, however, she did not die. One day, lingering on feverishly, she summoned me to her couch. “The brain,” she said. “It could be made perfect. No one else on Earth could do it except yourself. But my mortal body is dying, and you—with your unsurpassed knowledge of the human body and its workings—you could remove my brain and connect it with the brain we have made...”

“I must have been as mad as she undoubtedly was. But I did it. To this day I marvel that it could be done. I do not believe that I could do it again. But it... was done.

“Ursula spoke with the voice of the brain. And the brain was without a detectable flaw. It was human—and super-human.

“It was immortal. We had made it to last to the end of time, as a foolish monument to our cleverness. Our cleverness...

“About this time, my affairs on Earth began to claim more and more of my attention. I had taken enormous sums to build the Island out of various companies. The scandal was hushed up through friends with influence, but I was forced to leave the Island in Ursula’s charge, while I worked to restore order out of neglect.

“I seldom read or listened to any news outside my business. Not, at least, until one day when Scivet’s servant—a most repulsive dwarf—was taken prisoner after an incredible attack by mysterious raiders upon an open city.

“Suddenly I feared that something had gone wrong. I stormed up here to demand a meaning of it all. Fool that I was, I believed the inhumanly plausible explanation Ursula gave me.

“But, somehow, back in the more normal environment of my business I began to doubt, and Ursula must have guessed what would pass in my mind, for she removed me before I convinced myself that I should go to the authorities.

“Kidnapped, helpless here in this dreadful place, I confess to you that I have given up all hope. Ursula is invincible. Nothing

human can stand against her power. I am only thankful for one thing. A selfish thing. That is to have been fitted with this metal helmet which entirely disguises my head and my voice, so that no one may know who has done this terrible thing to civilisation.

"For mine is the guilt. My crime is beyond understanding. Science is a power that should be used for good; while I have broken a human law which defended a law of nature that man should not meddle with himself. Nature is jealous of her laws. I fear that the whole of humanity will pay for my mistake.

"Never before has there been a possibility for all manner of crimes, and never before has there been such a crime as mine..."

Through the microphone of the metal head cover of the prostrate man choked the sobs of a soul in torment.

Johnny, listening, started nervously as Ainebelle's hand touched his sleeve.

"Let's go, Johnny," she pleaded. "This place terrifies me. That man seems somehow familiar and I'm frightened. And Ursula must not find us here—"

He hesitated; then nodded.

Chapter X.

Johnny, close behind Ainebelle, crawled out of the tunnel, rubbed his hands and knees to soothe away the soreness, and pushed the televisior-library back against the wall.

Even as he turned away from it, he saw the door opening to admit Hands. Stiffly the robot halted on the threshold.

"Master, we are sent for."

Johnny glanced at Ainebelle. Her hand went up to her throat. Blue eyes wide, she stared at him. "Johnny, you must do as you think fit, but... think of what you have heard."

He nodded. He had a sense of terrible danger threatening them both. Would he ever come back to her out of the threatening holocaust? What would happen to her if he did not? His hands half reached out towards her. If only she would wish him a safe return... "You'll—" He hesitated. "You'll... be safe here until I get back," he finished lamely.

She nodded. Was it his imagination or did her hands lift in response to his hands, and did her eyes grow soft with feeling and her lips tremble with unshed tears?

"Ursula," interrupted the flat voice of the robot, "she say we hurry!"

"Yes," murmured Ainebelle, "you must go, Johnny Found.

May fate be kind, and... and send you back safe and... perhaps wiser—" Abruptly she averted her face.

For a moment he stared at the golden curls thus presented to him; then he turned and followed Hands from the apartment.

Through metal-walled passages they tramped, climbing to the upper floor. In a hangar, robot mechanics stood like statues, waiting. Sacha, scarcely less motionless, watched him as he and Hands crossed the floor. He half-smiled at her, nervously. Then his attention was absorbed by the rocket-flier which awaited them.

Shaped like a bullet, with wings not unlike the fins of a fish, it presented an appearance of power and speed. The nose-cabin was hinged open to receive them. Hands climbed stiffly up into this, and Johnny followed. As he passed Sacha, he glanced at her. Rigidly, she inclined her head.

"Good luck, Johnny Found," she burst out in a strained way. "Though the devil knows why I should wish you that— Unless it is because I follow you within fifteen minutes."

"Thanks," he returned, pausing. "If anything should happen to either of us, remember I'm grateful for all you have done for me."

Like a queen, coldly and calmly, she smiled, her eyes gleaming with an inner fire as though reflecting the glitter of her jewels, and her full lips parting. "Grateful," she murmured. "Yes, I'll remember that."

Robots shut the glass head to the cockpit. Johnny, glancing at it, marvelled at its thickness. Was their speed to be so great as to need such strength? Or was there another reason for insulation?

He sat in the cockpit of the second pilot. Hands was strapping himself in, and Johnny hastened to follow suit. He had just secured the buckles of his harness, when he saw the metal hands reaching out to the controls.

Outside, in the hangar, Sacha was hurrying away towards the exit. Above them the roof was sliding back to reveal the blackness of space.

The rockets drummed thunderously. Lifted as though by a giant catapult, they gathered speed, left the hangar far below them and were streaking dizzily into space, with the white cloud-sea on earth below reflecting up the sun upon them, setting the thick glass-stuff of the cockpit glittering and flashing with extraordinary brilliance.

Growing accustomed to the acceleration, Johnny presently noticed that the angle of their flight was changing. From a steady climb, they began to scream down towards the clouds. Rushing

up at them, the white billows, like an un-moving sea of great waves, burst over them. Through the shadow they swept, silent now, gliding with the engines switched off.

Out into the clear air again, they leapt. Looking down, Johnny saw the panorama of countryside, dappled with sunlight and multi-coloured, spreading out beneath, the sea scintillating and white-speckled away to the left.

He looked ahead and saw the white buildings of a factory coming, swaying, up towards them at a tremendous rate. A vast place it was, covering an area of miles, white and gleaming, somehow almost a symbol of purity. He recognised, in some uncanny fashion, that it was a familiar place to him. Without a word being uttered, he knew that it was a factory producing atomic machinery and supplies, and he felt, besides, that he could have found his way through the many buildings as though he had been there before. Had it been a dream? Or in a past existence—

A white smoke trail feathered up from the ground. Johnny watched it pass within a couple of hundred yards of the hurtling rocket. Then—the smoke trail was behind them, and others were pluming up towards them. They were under fire!

From beyond the factory, too, he could see the flame-cones of other fliers taking off. They were flying straight into a hornet's nest. The defending fliers were fanning out now, sweeping around in arcs as tight as their speed and construction would permit. Within seconds the invader would be a target for them. Johnny glanced at Hands sitting stiff and silent beside him. Surely the robot had seen? Semi-human though Hands was, his robot perceptions in their efficiency could not have missed the obvious implications.

The metal right hand flicked down. The rockets thundered, and the rocket flier leapt forward as though struck from behind, its nose lifting, and the ground tilting down and swaying dizzily as they rocketed up, up at an increasing angle over the rising defending craft, towards the clouds.

Behind them, Johnny saw the military fliers twisting in aerobatics to alter their course into pursuit. Evidently the official mind had expected the invader to turn tail, not to smash over and away. The speed of the rocket took his breath away. He gasped and watched the police come streaking, one after the other, as they gained their new course, after them. The chase was on.

Johnny suddenly realised that the rocket song behind had faded away, its place being taken by the whistle of screaming jets. He glanced at the speedometer. Yes, the needle had halted and—

even as he looked—the second hand began to slip back. Why? Why had Hands reduced the thrust? Was it intended that the pursuit should not be lost, or were the rockets no more than a supplementary unit?

Now banking into a dizzy turn, now diving, now climbing, they weaved around to avoid the pursuer's fire. Occasional puffs of shrapnel rockets billowed out, strangely silent—for the sound was left behind in this chase of speedsters—and other explosions and mines giving off deadly radiations hazed and fouled the sky around them.

Johnny clung desperately to the arms of the bucket seat. This could not last. No matter what evasive action they took, sooner or later a chance shot would strike them—or perhaps they would run into a pocket of self-directing mines which, closing in upon them, would give them no chance...

He peered ahead, his apprehension growing. Yes, a bare half-mile ahead, and coming leaping at them with their own velocity, was... a shimmering barrier. Heat! There was no avoiding it, though their plane was diving as though to pass below it.

At them it swept, a wall of shimmering haze, terrifying. Johnny jerked up his hands before his face, in instinctive reaction—though he knew that nothing could save him...

The motors cut out. The whistle of the air-friction all around them sounded strident, suddenly deepened, and the motors resumed their song of power and the rocket flier began to gather its lost speed once more.

Johnny lowered his arms. The sky shone white with cloud banks before them; he glanced behind them and lo! the haze was falling in their wake. As he looked he saw grim red-glows and black, bursting smoke-bubbles as their pursuers shot into the barrier.

Behind them, soon, the sky was dirtied with smoke and flame. Wreckage plummeted earthwards, and the pursuit was no more.

Johnny reached out and touched the glass. He gasped with the tremendous heat of the stuff. So that was the reason behind the thickness of the rocket's shell. They had been a decoy sent to draw pursuit and clear much of the defenders, leading the military to a pre-arranged doom.

Already Hands was banking the rocket around and they were sweeping back towards the factory.

Before many minutes, once more under the colossal impetus of the rocket-thrust, they sighted the factory. The ground down there, around the white buildings was erupting and smoking with

the shock of conflict. On two sides, Ursula's heat barrier was shimmering, and, as they swept down to land, a third side sprang into a wall of incandescent haze.

The rocket settled down to earth. Johnny and Hands descending to the ground at once, were met by Sacha.

"Good work, Hands," she snapped. "Johnny, Scivet left me here to tell you the orders. He's already working. The factory is not seriously damaged. We succeeded in taking the defenders by surprise. Scivet, who has been the manager here for the past week, did his part and it was easy, really. Sabotage, on the scorched-earth policy of the police, failed completely.

"A robot army is now almost in sole command. Within minutes the heat barriers will be effective all around, and we shall be safe. Our purpose is to secure all available supplies of atomic-fuel sticks, radio-active half-life isotopes, and the like. You will know better than I what sort of things will be useful to us in the coming battle. Have I said enough?"

Johnny nodded. He glanced around the shattered, smoking buildings and scarred concrete of the roads and open spaces. Through wisps of drifting smoke, and amongst flickering tongues of isolated fires, a robot stalked here and there.

Sacha turned to point. "Do you remember where the things we desire are stored?"

Johnny nodded. His mind, however, was wondering again. She had said remembered. Was this, then, the factory where he had been employed—the factory owned by Hartley whom he had killed, and now owned by Ainebelle? It must be, he realised, and he marvelled at the irony of his being the one to despoil it.

"You're not listening to me," complained Sacha.

He turned his attention back to her. "Sorry."

She gave him final directions, speaking coldly and with imperious mien; then she left him, without a word of farewell.

He was walking with Hands at his side, towards the store-houses he knew so well, when she came panting after him.

She caught his arm. "Johnny, I—" Her hair dishevelled, she paused, wild-eyed, to stare in pain at him. Her hands reached around his neck and she clung to him. "I love you, Johnny Found. I don't care what you think of me! I love you... You're my life."

"Sacha!" he gasped, trying to free himself. But she only clung the closer. "You're crazy!" he argued. "Pull yourself together—it's the suspense of the battle..."

She released him and stood back looking at him. Suddenly she bent and caught hold of his hand. Before he could stop her,

soft lips pressed into his palm. Then she was erect again, staring at him. "No matter what happens," she said, "remember that I love you. There are people in the Island who would kill you if they could... and you'll need all the friends you can get if you are to live..."

He started to protest.

But she closed his lips with her soft hand. "No, Johnny, I know how you feel about me. I don't care. You can have your cold simpering woman, if you wish, and I'll not interfere..."

For a second her eyes lingered on his face, then, with a toss of her long hair and a hand lifting to smooth it back over her white shoulders she turned and was walking away. Once she looked back, and she smiled...

He wanted to call her back, but could think of nothing to say. Presently he turned and continued to the storehouses.

Inside them, a small army of robots awaited him. As he looked around, through the windows of the place, he saw the silvery shapes of rockets floating down to earth. The raid was going according to plan. Indeed, with the robot brain of Ursula directing it, how could it do otherwise?

Expertly, knowing the place of everything, the value of everything, he made his survey. The robots, on his directions, began their part. If the supplies were perhaps rendered a little unstable—or was it a little more unstable?—by the shock of battle, the robots, metal as they were, could take no harm themselves. Soon a chain of them were carrying cases of stuff—incredibly valuable manufactures—out to the waiting rockets. Before long the rockets had begun to scream off back to the Island. The shock of the conflict had faded away now, and the reverberations of the rockets were the only sounds which penetrated to Johnny.

Soon one storehouse was completely cleared of everything worth taking. Johnny left it, crossing a broken-up concrete strip which was littered with human corpses and fouled with the fighting, to a second storehouse. Presently, this too, was cleared and he led his robot workers out towards the third and last.

A series of dull shocks blasted across the factory as he did so. And, seeing jagged splinters of fire leaping up into billowing mushrooms of oily smoke, he knew that a counter-offensive by the police had been started. Bombs, or high-explosive shells were barraging down amongst the heat barrier.

Grimly, Johnny continued across towards the remaining storehouse. Before he reached it, however, a little knot of figures

came running down the road. Scivet's lanky figure waved a long arm at him.

"Stop!"

Johnny waited for them to reach him. He saw Sacha walking just behind Scivet, and two other nondescript humans, whom he had never seen before, trailing after.

Scivet, halting, motioned at the barrage and his dark glance glowered. "The heat barrier will fail any moment, and police aircraft will be able to penetrate through its dispersed rays. Hands and you will have to escape in the rocket, the one which brought you. The robots we will abandon here. Myself and Sacha are unknown to the authorities—or at least I am well-known but only in my capacity of the manager of this factory. We will thus remain behind until the right opportunity comes. In fact, we'll have to. Those rockets will have become too dangerously radioactive from their cargoes to carry us and your rocket can only take two at most. The police are more prepared than we allowed for. Understand?"

"Yes," snapped Johnny briefly.

"Good. Then—get moving!"

Johnny and Hands turned simultaneously, running to where they had left their rocket. Into the cockpit they scrambled, clamping it shut after them. Hands reached out to the controls and—sat waiting... Johnny tense with expectation stared grimly at the flickering haze of the barrier, now rift with violent swirls of flame and black smoke.

Suddenly the thunder of the barrage died away. Hands leant forward in its seat under the controls. The rockets muttered out into controlled thunder behind them, they gathered speed, leaving the ground almost at once and screaming up in a steep climb.

The haze barrier, or what was left of it streaking the sky before them, leapt at the rocket. The very cabin shimmered and the glass nose glowed redly as they passed with idling engines through its murderous heat. Johnny half-choked with the sudden beating waves of energy which penetrated even into the interior of the plane.

Then they were through, rocketing upwards.

But, abruptly the sky all around lit with flame and smoke and the rocket rocked and tossed. Metal clanged, scraped and splattered upon the thick hull. The rockets hesitated, and suddenly, behind, there was a terrific explosion. The sky went black in Johnny's eyes as his neck clicked on being snapped back by the sudden awful thrust.

...Dizzily he lifted his head. The cabin floor swayed, fell and lifted erratically beneath his feet. The scream of the jet-motor, unnaturally harsh, filled his ears. He glanced fearfully at the robot beside him.

"Scivet knew—" stated Hand's flat tone. "Scivet knew that we would almost surely be hit. The police were waiting and flung everything they had at us. Scivet hoped for that. He endangered the life of my master."

"What's that?" Johnny struggled to understand the thoughts passing through the mind of his robot bodyguard.

The blank, opaque lenses of Hands turned to look at Johnny. "Scivet told us to go, knowing that we would almost certainly be annihilated."

"It does look like that," muttered Johnny wonderingly. For, although the tone was inevitably expressionless, the words were resentful.

"We will never reach the Island in this rocket stated Hands. "I have been trying to outdistance the pursuit but one wing is half shot away and I cannot reach escape velocity. Also one of the jet-motors is damaged and barely turning over. Soon I must land or we will crash."

"Do what you must," said Johnny.

And the nose of the rocket dipped earthwards. Soon they were skimming over the countryside at a bare hundred feet, engines shut off and losing speed rapidly.

As it seemed they must stall and crash, the robot swung up the nose with the last gun of the motors and lift of the fins. Grinding down onto the soil, they skidded forward, bursting through hedges and at last coming to a sudden, jolting stop.

Johnny, still gasping, lurched forward in his seat and struggled to open the door of the nose. But it resisted all his efforts and even the super-human strength of Hands, coming to his aid, could not move it.

Nearby, Johnny saw a pair of rockets sink to earth. Soon, uniformed men were closing in a cordon around them.

"They will open the door," stated Hands. "Perhaps I might kill some of them while you escape."

"No!" snapped Johnny. "We'll see it through together. Die together, if need be—" He broke off amazed. For a moment he had forgotten that Hands was only a robot—nothing more than a thing!

Now the police were close around the cabin, some standing

by with drawn guns while others prised up the plane so that the cabin could be opened.

The cabin front hinged open. Johnny looked into a dozen stun-guns and other weapons. "I will come quietly," he said, "only providing you allow my robot to stay with me. He is a special robot, half-human and thus entitled to special treatment."

The police evinced no surprise. Without relaxing their vigilance, they conferred together. Yes, that was reasonable, they told Johnny.

Together, robot and man, they were marched to a waiting patrol craft. The hard, threatening eyes of the escort never wavered.

Chapter XI.

The police flier landed them in a deserted town not far distant. They were taken into a half-ruined prison-house.

In a small room, one side of which was rent with a great crack, a thin man behind a desk looked up at them. His eyes widened.

"That's Mark Vellors, you've got there!"

Silence followed his exclamation. All attention centred upon Johnny. The thin man reached for the handset of the field-televisor humming beside him. "Peace must know of this at once. What's the robot doing here?"

A policeman explained and the man nodded. "All right. Take them up to a cell."

Imprisoned in a small room in the undamaged part of the building, Johnny went to the window and looked out.

Away on the horizon, giant flashes and rolling smoke filled the sky. The thunder of the explosions shook the prison and beat through the evening air.

"The battle," stated Hands, "has begun."

Johnny looked at his robot companion. "Do you think any attempt will be made to rescue us?"

"Of course. Ursula protects her own. A robot raid will do their best, if humans cannot be spared."

Johnny nodded. He sank on to the bench at the side of the room. He was tired and the events of the day had taken their toll of his nerves. Listening to the rumble of the distant battle, his thoughts raced. Once more he was in the hands of the police, and they knew him. Mark Vellors, alias Johnny Found— As the

names slipped into his mind, the old throbbing came back to torture him anew. It racked his entire body, and he swayed and moaned.

"You're head hurts you?" asked Hands voice.

"Ye-es..." Presently the spasm passed its peak and Johnny looked up through running eyes at his companion.

"Hands, you can speak with Ursula by radio can't you?"

"Not from here. Range limited to a quarter of a mile.."

"Oh?" They were too far distant then.

Johnny rose up and looked out on a darkening countryside. Evening was drawing a veil over the land, brightening the flashes of battle by contrast. Not far away, the twin fires of jet-exhausts were approaching. Yes, the plane was coming in to land beside the prison. Were those other police rockets behind it? Soon Johnny saw they were, and that there were three of them.

The leading craft touched down, helicopter vanes reflecting the red-glare of the sky. From its immediately opening door, a tall, thin figure was descending and police from the prison were hurrying to meet it. Johnny remembered what the policeman at the desk had said: "Peace must know... at once..." And he remembered, too, the visit of Walter Kranmer Peace to his condemned cell days before...

As he watched, the following police craft landed beside the first. Even as they skidded to a standstill after almost crash-landings, stiff-moving figures sprang from them, the light gleaming redly upon metal skins. Johnny gasped. The rescue party had come from Ursula. Rays crackled even as Johnny swung around to speak to Hands.

"Tell them we're here!"

"I cannot. They do not answer me. Soldier robots as they are, perhaps they use a different radio frequency."

"The devil they do!" gasped Johnny.

Looking out again, he saw that the police who had escaped that first blast of robot-directed fire were falling back in a straggling line to the cover of the building. Beside the first plane to land sprawled three figures, two human corpses and one mangled wreck of a robot, shattered and trailing wires. At first Johnny thought that it was one of the raiders, then he realised that it was something the two humans had been carting from the flier.

The robot rescue party was splitting, one half holding the attention of the police still surviving and the other closing in upon the tall fleeing figure of Peace, the government agent.

A moment later the tall figure was seized up in their metal

arms and carried, struggling towards the two waiting fliers. Within seconds the flier was roaring off into the darkness...

Johnny stared after it in bewilderment for a moment. Hadn't it been a rescue party, then? His gaze wandered back to the two corpses and the smashed robot, and his thoughts suddenly leapt to the inevitable conclusion. The robots, looking for a man and a robot, had found just such a pair, and had efficiently done their work. But they had "rescued" the wrong man!

Johnny swayed as the throbbing began again. No further rescue attempt was likely. The battle, judging from the inferno in the distant sky, was at its height. Ursula might not trouble to look at the rescued man until after it was all over. Johnny's mind ached and throbbed as it filled with a morass of despair and uncertainty. If only—if only he knew whether he was Mark Vellors or Johnny Found—whether he was on the side of the police or still backing Ursula to the limit—whether he had a duty to mankind or to Ursula—whether he was a child of the revolt or a human such as Ainebelle—

He grasped his splitting head with his hands and swayed back and forth sick and dizzy with agony and indecision. His imprisonment did not, somehow, seem to be in the least important. His inner conflict was at its climax.

Its CLIMAX!

Chilly fingers seemed to be picking into the fire which consumed his brain. Like trickling water they spread out, quenching his agony and leaving him cool and spent.

And he knew, then, at last—knew everything. The cold of the change which had taken place in his brain still chilled him as the memories came thronging back. So sudden was the change and so strange was it, that he almost seemed to be reliving the scene in the past which had brought all this upon him...

Walter Kranmer Peace, sitting behind a huge desk in a large, empty room, sucked at his pipe and stared with enigmatic eyes at Johnny.

"You see our difficulties, Mr. Vellors. This island in the sky is extra-national. International law cannot touch those who live in it unless they can be proved to be criminals. And we have no proof. Yet we believe that the headquarters of the Raiders is up there... and this belief is made almost certainty by the fact that no less than three spies set to work to enter it have never been heard of again. Oh, yes, I have tried to get questions asked in the World Congress of Nations, but none will listen to me. Diplomacy has failed as miserably as espionage. We are completely baffled—

"Yet we have one plan left. It is a fantastic plan put forward by a junior member of my special staff. Listen... It is that a man who would be useful to the Raiders shall be operated upon by tissue-destroying rays so that his brain, although otherwise unharmed will be partitioned off, so that—temporarily—he will be devoid of all personal memory, and of whatever character has been developed by experience, and so devoid also of moral values—just as the Raiders appear to be...

"Then, while still unconscious, and in this artificial 'unborn' state, he will be strapped into a flier and crashed down on to the island up there. Of course the risk will be frightful to this man for, although he will surely survive the crash and although the Raiders will find no scars upon his head to suggest anything abnormal, he may never be recognised as someone who will be useful to them... unless he is already known to them..."

So vivid was the impression that he was once again living that scene from his past, that Johnny nodded to himself as he had done then, and the implications of the speech filled his mind. Peace, the head of the International Security Police wanted him to be the victim of this experiment. True, he had a personal angle against the Raiders—for had they not killed the father of his fiancée?—But it was a big thing, and the chances of his ever returning to Ainebelle seemed small...

Peace nodded grimly, almost reading his thoughts. "Yes, it is a terrible thing to ask of any man. But through your friendship with the murdered Hartley, you are probably known to the gang; also, because of your position in the atomic-products factory, you would inevitably be of great use to them if they thought you were on their side. Still, if you wish it, the rumours of your guilt and the false evidence we have built up to support your arrest can easily be killed, and you may go free. What do you say?"

"I don't know..."

Into the silence which followed, the buzz of the inter-office televisor sounded. Peace, with a grunt of impatience, shifted his pipe to the side of his mouth, flicked down the switch, and looked down at the image which appeared on the small screen.

"Well?"

And the voice of the operator, full of excitement, burst into speech. "Miss Hartley has been kidnapped. The electric eyes watching her personal apartments show that robots entered her rooms late last night, and left with her as a prisoner. Something must have been done to the alarm system to prevent us knowing at once of their arrival."

"Right. I'll call you back later." Peace, drawing steadily on his pipe, lifted his thin face to stare at Johnny.

"Well?"

"I've no choice, now." It had been the last straw.

"Good. One final thing... You realise that the whole success of this plan will depend upon absolute secrecy? Apart from yourself, I intend to tell no one, for I do not know whom I may trust with certainty. You must resign yourself to having the world believe you to be guilty of a crime you did not commit—the whole world, except myself."

"What about the operation?"

"A machine will perform it more efficiently than a human being could."

"Very well."

"That's very good. By the way, I'm sorry about Miss Hartley. I understand how you feel. Of course there is one good side to the affair as regards her. That is that she will not be here to believe you guilty as will everyone else..."

Everyone else! Johnny suddenly stirred out of the dream-like state which had possessed him, Everyone else. Now that Peace had been kidnapped, there was no one else in the world who could set him free to return to the Island. And there was no one else in the world, apart from the Raiders themselves who stood any chance of entering the Island...

If he escaped it would have to be through his own efforts. He lifted his head, wide-eyed, and the lenses of Hands stared back at him.

"Master. You feel better now?"

"Yes," said Johnny. "Yes. Will you help me to escape?"

"Of course. How, master?"

Johnny looked up at the window. "Try bending these bars." Hands strutted past him, reached up and grasped two of the bars. His metal wrists vibrated and the padded fingers flattened with the strain. Slowly the bars bent, but only the merest fraction.

"Too strong, master."

Johnny reached up as the robot stepped back. He felt the bars move slightly in their sockets. "I think the masonry is damaged by the battle," he gasped. "Try to tear it down."

Again the metal arms lifted stiffly. Fingers like metal levers, clawed into crumbling mortar. It trickled through the raking fingers, and Johnny knew that they were as good as out. The blast which had wrecked part of the building had destroyed the binding effect of the mortar.

Even as jubilation enheartened him, a light shone up from below, and, as Hands dragged a bar completely away from its place, cries of alarm sounded.

Hands tore free another bar, dragged himself up and through the gap. Johnny heard him thud to the ground fifteen feet below. Even as he followed he heard the sizzling roar of ray-fire. Landing lightly in spite of the height, he saw Hands marching stiffly towards two policemen who, firing stun-guns uselessly, suddenly broke into flight. Johnny raced after his bodyguard. They plunged aside through a broken fence, and a small wood beyond, saw the dark shapes of houses and flats, deserted in the faded light, and hurried through them. Beyond, in a small open space, Johnny suddenly saw the spidery contraption of an auto-hoister, and the tall, open honey-comb of individual garages which must have served the suburban area.

He called the robot to a halt, and set him—yes—him—for Hands was indeed an almost human friend in Johnny's estimation—set him to working the apparatus drawing down one of the cars still remaining there.

Standing watching, a shadow suddenly leapt out of the darkness upon him. Cursing and battling desperately, they rolled over and over. Johnny realised, even as he fought, that the policemen must have separated and caught up with the escaped prisoners here. That meant there would be a second to account for very soon, and Hands was occupied...

His blows redoubled, and presently the man slid back inertly into the shadows. Gasping, Johnny scrambled erect. Where was the other policeman?

Hands, however, by this time had the car standing upon the ground. Johnny ran to it and they entered together from opposite sides. The engine, under the control of the metal hands of the robot, hummed to life. As they moved forward, however, another car came around the bend of the road behind. The second policeman!

Hands revved the engine to the maximum, and the car jolted forward over loose rubble, gained clear road and crossed just in front of the police car, which skidded.

Johnny, as they sped from the parking place, looked back. He saw the police car crash into the auto-hoist, and then they were clear of the square, gathering speed on a clear stretch of wide concrete highway, with the suburban buildings seen only as dwindling shadows in the rear.

The crash of their pursuer seemed somehow almost too good

to be true. Johnny watched for several minutes, long after he could be sure of seeing the police car coming after them through the gathering dusk, but there was no sign or sound of pursuit.

Then he turned, mentally giving thanks for their unexpected luck, and watched the white road come rushing at them.

Suddenly, without moving, Hands spoke. "We are being followed from the air. I can sense the electric disturbance set up by the spark of a jet-motor."

Johnny drew in his breath. The policeman in the wrecked car behind must have summoned aid. And they could not hope to out-distance any kind of rocketship earthbound as they were. He twisted around in his seat, scanning the dark sky behind them.

Even as he moved his head, the car was picked out by a brilliant light from above. The patrol ship up there would be equipped with radar devices for night work, and would have no trouble in detecting the speeding car.

The car rocked as Hands began to weave this way and that across the road width. Fiery projectiles hissed down around them, narrowly missing. Then—Johnny saw one strike right through the side of the car, passing with a wave of heat on his side through the floor.

The car swerved with a scream of tyres. Hands was struggling with the controls. The engine cut out. The side of the road flashed in the headlights for a moment, fell away and they rolled forward helplessly down the road.

"Master," said Hands, "what do we do now?"

"You get out before we stop," snapped Johnny. "I'll make a pretence of giving myself up to the police in the flier. Perhaps we can surprise them and steal their patrol craft."

The light which had, until that moment, been steadily directed upon them, suddenly left them behind, and made an advancing circle of brilliance on the road ahead.

"Jump out!" ordered Johnny.

Without hesitation, Hands pushed open the door and sprang out of view. Johnny's hands caught hold of the wheel, holding the car in the centre of the road until presently it rolled to a standstill.

The circle of light ahead was coming back towards him. Now he could hear the screech of the jets of the police craft.

As the light settled once more upon the car, an amplified voice sounded against the background of the humming of the aircraft and the distant rumble of the battle.

"Leave the car! Stand in the centre of the highway with your

hands high above your head."

Obediently, Johnny pushed open the side door and walked out with his hands raised.

The shadow of the ship floated earthwards and he saw it land upon the road behind the car.

The humming ceased and two men descended from the craft. One dodged around its side out of Johnny's view while the other advanced with a gun gleaming in his hand.

The one still beside the ship suddenly shouted. "Be careful, pal. There were two of them. Where's the other?"

"Eh? Are you sure there were two?" The other policeman hesitated several yards from Johnny.

"Sure there were."

"Hellfire! Hey you there in the road. Where's your companion?"

"Don't waste time!" shouted the hidden policeman. "This is no time for talk. Kill him, and let's get away."

"But they're wanted alive, if at all possible—"

"Don't be crazy man. What can we do in this darkness. Come back!"

"Hey! You in the road. D'you hear that? I give you five seconds to reach me. After that I fire to kill. Are you coming?"

Johnny began to walk slowly forward. Would Hands do something in time to prevent his capture?

"Hurry!" snarled the policeman jumpily.

And from behind, his companion began to shout again.

"He's stalling, pal. Shoot him now! He's stalling for time... can't you see— Ah-h-h!"

The leading policeman whipped around as his comrade screamed in fear and surprise. Johnny swung desperately aside, running for the road verge.

"Hellfire!" The policeman fired. The flash hissed too close for comfort past Johnny. Phu-eee-ut! It was a stun gun...

Johnny leapt over a low fence and landed in a shallow ditch. Scrambling around he peered over the edge of the road.

The policeman in the centre of the road was shouting. "Get back—or I'll fire!" Hands was striding with stiff relentless purpose over the brightly lit space between the flier and the policeman. The stun gun sounded and flashed again.

Phu—ee—ut! Phu—ee—ut! Phu—ee---ut!

But Hands, his metal skin glowing with a strange phosphorescent effect, advanced unharmed. The policeman turned to flee. Too late. The robot's arms had him in their metal grip.

"Don't kill him!" shouted Johnny as he rose up. "Let him live but disarm him. He cannot hurt us now."

Even as he hurried forward, he saw that the stun-energy which had been pumped into Hands must have drained off into the policeman who now hung limply over the metal arms.

Hands turned smartly and stiff-moving. "Policeman unconscious."

"Then forget him."

As the man's body slumped to the road, Hands and Johnny hurried towards the rocket.

"Did—" gasped Johnny—"did you kill the other?"

"Yes."

Johnny swallowed grimly. The guilt of that was on his head, adding to the sum of his sins as Johnny Found.

They climbed into the rocket.

"You can fly back to the Island?"

"Yes," stated Hands. "I have equipment which will direct my actions after the manner of a homing pigeon."

"You take the controls, then."

The robot sat in the padded chair before the controls then his metal fingers were closing over the switches. The jets whined into throaty song and they taxied around the car and rose into the air.

As they neared their destination they perceived that the police ships were trying everything. The Island's metal shell showed blank and grey as rays were flung against it in all directions, as self-guided rockets smashed at its sides, and bombs rained down upon its top. The glare of mighty explosions, silent in the vacuum of space, flickered all around it.

Johnny shouted. "They're flinging everything at it, except atom bombs."

"Yes. And they cannot succeed without those. A barrier of force is being maintained outside the metal shell and everything detonates or expends itself against this extra skin. Atom bombs alone can hope to penetrate... Wait... Yes, I can sense the radioactive material is being brought up by the police. We are too late!"

Hands swung the little ship around in an arc of maximum tightness. As they levelled out once more, hurrying from the scene of battle, Hands explained.

"The moment Ursula's instruments detect anything radioactive nearing her, she will set the new engines in the base of the island to work, causing a hurricane on earth which will destroy everything in the atmosphere below for miles around. Look! It is starting now?"

Johnny looked back at the mass of the Island and the huge ball of earth far below. A pale shaft appeared from the base of the Island, reaching down towards the home planet. Tranquil clouds evident on the surface were suddenly torn asunder while large dark patches were torn from the surface to form awful sandstorms.

The police rockets, suddenly becoming aware of the fate of earth, and realising Ursula had played her trump card, retreated in disorder. Perhaps hoping she would relent.

"We cannot enter the Island just now, we must land," stated Hands.

As they dived, the dust clouds below them seemed to be magically parted and the darkened and tortured terrain showed through.

Johnny, awed, looking away from the terrible sight, saw that, beneath them as they swept down to land, the white buildings of the atom-factory were spreading out.

There was no sign of any police activity amongst them and Johnny said nothing as Hands manoeuvred the rocket to land on a concrete space not far from the storehouses they had raided.

"Perhaps," said Hands flatly, "Someone from the Island may still be here, and we may reach safety."

"That's true." Johnny looked at the white buildings all around them. So Hands brought him here deliberately. And to good purpose, too. For, from between the buildings a slim figure in baggy trousers and with jewels sparkling at throat, wrists and flying ankles came hurrying. Sacha! Suddenly she halted.

"Who's that?"

Johnny shouted to her as he leapt from the rocket.

She called back joyfully. "Oh, Johnny!" And she came running towards him.

They met half-way. "There's a rocket waiting," panted Sacha. "Come on."

Her anxiety to leave equalled his own. She led them to a hangar, through a secret door in the side of it to where the gleaming, silvery shape of a rocket awaited.

As soon as they had buckled themselves into the seats, Hands, at the controls, blasted off. Within minutes of the meeting with Sacha, they were dropping down towards the Island, out of silent space with the artificial hurricane forming a nightmare background on the earth below. A hole gaped to receive them in the upper surface of the Island. And, such was the precision of their robot-pilot directed flight, that they plunged straight into this.

"Safe!" gasped Sacha. Both she and Johnny stumbled a little from the effects of the rocket flight as they walked towards several robots who were, apparently, stationed there to meet them. Sacha, stumbling caught Johnny's arm. To steady her, he grasped her shoulders and she looked up into his face.

"Oh, Johnny, I thought you were dead when the robots reported back to Ursula without—"

Suddenly her eyes went wide with surprise, and she was jerked around. Johnny, wondering, saw that two robots had closed in upon her and were dragging her away. She looked back over her shoulder at him, appealingly.

"Don't worry, Johnny!"

As she spoke, other robots took his arms. He nodded to her and glanced at his escort. Without a sound these began to stride forward, taking him with them.

Resistance was useless, he knew, and he guessed that it would be a waste of time to ask questions. What was happening he would find out soon enough...

"Master," stated Hands, close behind, "I follow you."

Johnny twisted around in the grip of his silent escort, nodding to his bodyguard.

Thus they proceeded to the prison apartment. He was thrust inside and the door closed behind him, leaving him alone to face the startled, anxious stare of Ainebelle.

"What's happened to you?" she asked abruptly.

The coldness of her regard hurt him. "I—I don't know exactly."

Her eyes frowned at him. Have you disobeyed Ursula?"

"No. I—" he hesitated.

She jerked her head towards the television set in the wall of the room. "I saw what you did in that factory raid," she snapped. "Probably Ursula thought I would be proud of you—" Her voice broke. "Oh, you blind fool! How could you take part in anything so—so awful?"

"Listen to me!" he shouted at her. I've got my memory back. I know now the monstrous things I have been doing. Aine! Aine! You've got to give me a chance to put things right between us. I'll do all I can to destroy Ursula and her works! Listen to me! I can remember everything! Everything!"

Suddenly her struggling ceased and she lifted a tear-stained face to look at him with blue eyes into which a new light of hope was dawning.

Her lips trembled on the verge of speech—

But, suddenly, dramatically, Ursula's expressionless voice echoed through the apartment.

"I thought as much, Johnny Found. But your ideas of treachery come too late. You shall not have any chance to put them into effect. Look, now at the slots of the air-conditioning system around the tops of the walls."

Johnny, his heart weighing like lead, looked up quickly. Through the slots some heavy gas was pouring like liquid, spreading out rapidly as it sank towards the floor. Already the choking tang of it was entering his nostrils.

He pulled Aine into the circle of his arms, and she nestled against him. So, like that, presently he sank down unconscious to the thick carpet.

Chapter XII.

The side of Johnny's face was pillowed against a softness which rose and fell with steady rythm. He was aware of cool fingers smoothing his forehead and he opened his heavy eyelids with an effort and began to lift his head. At once his throat contracted and a spasm of coughing racked his lungs.

Gasping as this passed, he peered through bleared eyes and gradually images came into focus. He realised that he lay upon a floor and that his shoulders and head were cradled in a tender embrace. Looking up, his eyes met the tender, blue eyes of Ainebelle.

They still lived! He was surprised to discover it. To think that they had somehow escaped from the Island was incredible—it could not be true; but—

"What—" he began, and then looked quickly around. He recognised other people standing nearby. That tall thin man would be Peace, the head man of World Security; and, closer, almost at his side, was the metal shape of Hands standing at stiff attention. Then, farther away, and against a background of silvery bars, stood a slight figure with a huge, metal head—a human body supporting a robot's head—obviously the man who had been in the bed near the robot workshop to which he and Ainebelle had penetrated through that rough-carved tunnel.

"He's awake," said Ainebelle's voice.

The others turned to look down at him—even Hands the robot inclined his head.

"Johnny!" murmured Ainebelle, "oh, Johnny, if I hadn't made you betray yourself to Ursula..."

"Never mind that," he croaked through his burning throat. "What's happened? Where are we?"

Even as she answered: "We're in the Dome, Johnny darling," he saw, as his gaze shifted anxiously around, that they were in a silver cage, close to the exotic garden within the vast space of the Dome. High above, the lens-eyes of Ursula stared down, watching them expressionlessly.

He stirred, lifting his arms and pulling himself to a sitting position, at the same time squeezing Ainebelle's shoulders reassuringly.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, darling. Your throat will be feeling awful just now, I know. No—don't answer. Just keep still and quiet while we talk to you, and, by the time we have finished the after effects of the gas will have cleared away." Her lips trembled. "Oh, Johnny, how you must have suffered... Mr. Peace has told us all about your unselfish bravery." Tears started from her eyes and trickled unchecked down her pale, soft cheeks. "Oh, I'm so proud of you, Johnny! If only I had trusted you more—as I should have done..."

Above Johnny the tall figure of Peace loomed high. "Things could not have turned out worse, Johnny Found. It's my fault that you are in this mess, but seeing what you have, you'll feel, I'm sure, that the chance we took was well worth it. We might have succeeded where everything else had failed."

Johnny nodded. He looked up at the sphere which hung above them. "Ursula—what does she say?"

"So far," said Peace, "she's said nothing since I arrived. Her eyes have been watching the television screens all around the walls. I've been watching them too. They're all blank now, but a little while ago they were picturing the battle which raged outside the Island. She seems somehow to be waiting now. I don't know what is holding her back from starting a counter attack of some sort, but everything seems unnaturally still."

"There's been no second attack, then, from outside?"

"No Johnny. I understand from your robot that you saw the artificial hurricane which destroyed practically everything within a hundred mile radius. I doubt if there'll be any more attacks coming this way today. Anyway, there seems to have been a lull in everything for well over an hour."

Johnny nodded. He turned his head to look up at Hands,

the robot. "What are you doing here?"

"I asked," stated Hands, "to be allowed to remain with my master to the end."

"What?" That was incredible. Could a mere machine be faithful, then? Was Hands so almost human as that?

"Yes master. Ursula say she very angry with me. I will be given the same fate as you. She say she made me herself so that I was like a true human as possible, and she sees now that she did a foolish thing... which must be set right."

"I'm sorry," said Johnny. "So I've spoilt your life too?"

"No master. You have treated me almost as an equal. For a little while, therefore, I have lived more fully than ever Ursula would have permitted. I am satisfied."

Johnny hesitated. The lack of any emotion in the robot's flat tone had made his words and their meaning seem weird and yet somehow convincing.

He turned his gaze to look at the remaining person within the cage. The small man with the robot's head had drawn close and was evidently listening intently.

"Who're you?" asked Johnny.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe," answered the muffled voice of the strange figure. His human hands reached up to grasp the monstrous metal skull. "If only I could get this off... Why—" The metal head split up each side and the skull came away.

Johnnys eyes widened with surprise. From the haggard face thus revealed, eyes—as blue as Ainebelle's own—stared out at him.

"Father!" almost screamed Ainebelle. She started to her feet and ran forward.

"Mr. Hartley!" breathed Peace. "Not dead!"

"No—very much alive at the moment." Hartley lifted his lined, white face from Ainebelle's shoulder. "You might have known that Ursula would want me alive. I was needed to finish adjustments to her metal brain, and she kidnapped me. What gave you the idea I was dead?"

"There are pictures of your murder in an electric eye recording. And, before your body disappeared, it was certified as dead by one of your own doctors—a factory doctor, who we had every reason to believe to be unprejudiced."

"Ursula has ways," muttered Hartley grimly. "I who am guilty of making her, know that only too well. I suppose you did not know what sort of intelligence you were fighting against, or you would have guessed..."

Hartley shuddered. "My crime against society has been beyond belief. I know that now. I should not have defied the law and tried to imitate a God and make a race of human robots. I—" His voice broke and he passed his hands before his eyes. "If it was any use, I'd tell you how I suffered since being shut up here. You can imagine the state of my mind and the revolt of my feelings against the thing I have done when I tell you that Ursula has been unable—in spite of her super-human powers—to force me to do anything for her. My half-victory over her in this respect has amazed me. She has absolutely no power over me. I have defied all her mechanical devices—any of which should have subdued me... Indeed the human mind must have depths of strength which I never imagined. Mind is indeed stronger than matter... but what use is it to us to know that, now..."

Johnny rose to his feet. "Then you—you must have seen us while you were lying in that bed beside the workshop. Why didn't you declare yourself then?"

"I could do nothing to help you... And I was so ashamed... I—I preferred Aine to go on believing me dead. You see, though I have had strength against Ursula, I have only weakness where my daughter is concerned. It—Oh, what's the use of my talking like this..."

"Er—" said Peace, "I suppose we have no possible chance left to us, now?"

"I don't know," wailed Hartley. "I don't know. I can think of no fault of my own scheme of defence for the Island. And even if we did manage to destroy the Island somehow, Ursula would still be safe. This Dome is a completely self-contained unit. If the Island is shattered by an atomic explosion, the Dome would not be damaged. It will withstand the deadly rays released and, as the Island plunges earthwards, it would be flung well clear by a release mechanism to float down smoothly on a parachute. Then, while this was happening Ursula could decide whether she should blast off to outer space where, inhuman as she is, she can exist indefinitely; or whether she shall continue earthwards to continue the destruction of mankind from earthbound bases which I am sure she possesses."

"My heavens!" gasped Peace.

Hartley bowed his head. "We anticipated everything, I think that could menace our creation."

Ainebelle's shoulders trembled, and she hugged her father closer, trying to comfort his mental agony with whispers.

Presently she left him and walked to where Johnny and the

others stood in stunned silence. She looked from one to the other but none of them spoke.

And, then, through the silence, the expressionless voice of Ursula sounded, echoey, through the Dome.

"I am invincible. I shall rule the world. Forever I will rule. I was made perfect and the common mass of humanity must be lifted to a perfection as great as my own."

Grimly, the little knot of humans lifted their faces to the soul-less lenses above them, listening in awe as the voice continued to speak with its mechanical precision.

"All humanity shall be moulded so that they fit into a mighty pattern of perfection. Under my faultless rule everything will be possible. Science will rise to new heights and shall reach out under my direction to new truths and new horizons. No knowledge shall be despised. Everything shall be known. No star, however distant, will be beyond the reach of the space-ships I shall have constructed."

"Perfection!" shouted Hartley suddenly. "Ursula, you are mad! And you will drive the rest of the world to madness with your scheming. People aren't ready for...for... Oh, Ursula, listen to me..."

They waited for her reply, but none sounded.

Peace coughed. "What of your son, Ursula? Is he to become another mechanical god like yourself?"

"My son—" But the reply of the voice broke off, and again there was silence.

Hands, the robot, spoke. "I can sense that she is waiting for him. He is not here."

"So that's it," gasped Johnny. "Hands, have you no idea what happened to him?"

"He has not yet returned from the last raid."

The mechanical voice sounded again. "Be silent, all of you. Soon you shall witness my triumph over the puny forces again marshalling to attack me. But—until then—let no one speak, or they will die the quicker."

Suddenly, through the bars, he saw that the door of the Dome was swinging open. Framed in the opening stood Sacha. Her face pale, and her slender, bejewelled body rigid, she advanced into the Dome with slow, deliberate step.

Ursula's voice sounded. "Sacha, tell me again what Scivet told you and what he did."

With her head held high and her black hair framing the whiteness of her face, with her dark eyes seeming to glow and her

lips curling, Sacha made answer. "He told me to wait as long as I could for Johnny, but not to stay for him. He had other business—which he did not confide in me—and had to leave the factory. The two men who had been working with him in the factory as his undercover assistants were with him when he left. He definitely said that I was not to wait for him, and I had the impression that he intended to use one of the emergency rockets to reach here."

"Emergency rockets," echoed Ursula. "Did you know that the nearest base to the atom factory is a hundred miles from it? Are you sure that you did not desert him?"

"Certain," said Sacha in a clear voice. "I belong to him and could never do that. You told me so yourself."

"That anyway, is true," said the voice.

As she spoke the doors of the Dome began to swing open. Through them burst a tall figure, face blackened, hair partly singed away, clothes scorched about the shoulders, and with a gun in hand.

"Scivet!" breathed Johnny.

Sacha, turning at the sounds, flung up her white arms as though to protect herself, and screamed in terror.

Scivet swore viciously. He stopped. "Leave me down there to die!" he snarled. "You traitorous bitch!"

Sacha suddenly sprang sideways, running towards the cage. "Johnny! Johnny! I did it for you—"

Rays sizzled out from Scivet's gun. Missing Sacha's running figure, they sheared through the silver bars of the cage, ripping through the air beside the captives. A sharp report reverberated through the Dome as the air leapt back into the vacuum created by the electron sparks. Sacha flung herself sideways, and Scivet fired again just as she did so. Again the rays missed, and again they sliced through the silver bars.

Johnny suddenly seeing a ray of hope shouted to Hands. "Bend those bars apart! Hands, hurry!"

The robot strode forward, his metal hands grasped the weakened bars, and wrenched. As they bent under his mighty effort, the Dome suddenly become chaotic with pandemonium.

Scivet, made with rage, swore and fired crazily, scarcely taking aim. Ursula's cold voice sounded in strangely calm snatches through the intervals in the firing. The prisoners, shouting to each other, ran for the gap in the cage.

Hands stepped through into the freedom of the Dome.

Johnny saw him striding towards a door which was opening at the side.

Vorille, the dwarf, was coming at a shambling run, adding his hoarse cries to the din. Suddenly, seeing Hands striding at him, the dwarf turned aside. Hands's metal arm smashed out as they passed and the weapon in the dwarf's hand went slithering across the floor to crash against a distant wall.

Beside Johnny, now that they were all of them outside the cage, Peace was shouting that their first job was to dispose of Scivet.

Johnny, jerking his attention around, saw Scivet firing the electron pistol after Sacha as she fled from him. Then the tall figure of Peace had run in front of him, after Scivet, who was turning in alarm to view the escaping prisoners.

Then Johnny heard Ainebelle scream nearby. He saw that she ran from the shambling dwarf. At once, amidst the confusion, he lost interest in everything except her plight.

With a yell bursting from his lips, he charged wildly after the dwarf. Vorille glanced back, stopped and turned to meet Johnny's onrush.

Bearded face black with menace, pudgy lips parted to show large, blackened teeth in a snarl, unnaturally long arms held wide—suddenly the dwarf hurled himself at Johnny's throat.

Johnny hit out with all his strength and anger. Left first, right, left—Then they were grappled close together, each straining to throw the other to the ground. Vorille's arms crushed out Johnny's breath with their bear-like hug. The shaggy beard brushed his face. Only Johnny's greater height and the leverage it gave him prevented him being thrown at once. He struck out at the large face, seeing blood start from the splitting lips and one eye close.

Grunting with pain, Vorille suddenly let go and staggered back, arms threshing wildly. Grimly Johnny pursued. One of the dwarf's arms swung around at him. He ducked. Talon-like the grasping fingers scraped his cheek, slicing and ripping their nails into his flesh.

Johnny's fists beat out again, thudding home through the defence of the dwarf's weaving arms. Bellowing with rage and anger, face bloodied, the dwarf went backwards somehow keeping his stumbling feet until he fetched up sharply against the glowing face of a television screen.

"I'll kill you!" His hands thrust back at the screen behind

him and he leapt again at Johnny, this time sending Johnny staggering.

Johnny licked his lips. Salt they tasted—with his own blood. He shook his head, and, with his arms bent, he went after the dwarf, even as the monster swung around. His fists smashed out with a precision almost that of a robot. Left fist to the heart—right boring into the fleshy stomach—left to the jaw—right to the jaw—right—left!

Vorille crashed over backwards, rolled over once, writhing and lay still. Ainebelle, at Johnny's side, the dwarf's gun in her hand, caught his sleeve.

He gripped her arm and looked around the Dome. He saw the oddly assorted figures of Hartley and Peace running towards him. Behind them the two huddled figures of Sacha and Scivet lay upon the bare floor beside the exotic garden. As Peace ran, he shouted:

"Johnny! Run for the door behind you!"

Johnny turned, pulling Ainebelle around with him. The door which had admitted Vorille was still open. "Come on!" he exhorted Ainebelle and together they ran towards it.

Three yards from it, Johnny saw shapes loom up in the passage beyond. "Stop Aine, stop!" He dragged her to a halt and began to fall back as three robots blocked the exit—robot guards!

He heard her gasp and felt her move. She was lifting the gun in her hand. Phu—ee—ut! Phu—ee—ut! It hurled its power out at the robot barrier. But — unaffected by the stun charges the metal men came on, moving with stiff precision into the open space of the Dome.

Johnny stopped. It was no use retreating any further. Hartley and Peace drew level with him and stopped. Peace looked around desperately.

"We're surrounded by robots!"

Johnny turned his head. All around the Dome doors had opened and metal men came stalking in.

He glanced at Peace. "Scivet—did you kill him?"

"I did."

"Then we've done some damage at least. We were lucky to stay free as long as we have done." Grimly he watched the robots in front. Moving with slow preparedness, lens-eyes intent, they advanced. Maybe, Johnny thought, I can disable one or more—and give the others a chance to make a break for the upper floors.

But, unexpectedly, the robots stopped.

"What's the matter with them?" wondered Johnny aloud.

"I know!" raved Hartley suddenly. "Its for the same reason we were allowed to stay free for so long. Ursula was equipped to deal with every kind of attack from outside, but her mechanical brain was baffled by an attack from within her own particular domain! She has been taken off guard and is frightened and doesn't know what to do. We've got—"

"No!" interrupted Peace. "Look up, man!"

Johnny, with the others, raised his gaze. He saw Hands, having come out of a small door in the upper part of the Dome, swinging hand after hand, across a swaying cable towards the Sphere itself.

Ursula's voice spoke, expressionless as ever. "Stop, Hands, stop. I command you to go back."

But, high over the heads of the watching humans, Hands swung on along the cable. He reached the Sphere and his metal grasp seized upon the hook to which the cable was looped. He lifted himself up as Ursula spoke again. Her voice, expressionless and somehow no longer frightening, sounded and the words were pleading now. "Hands, go back. You are a robot, no more, less even than I am. Go back, and I will rebuild your brain so that it is even more human."

"She lies to you!" screamed Hartley.

But Hands might not have heard either of them. He was climbing up to the top of the Sphere and Johnny saw that there was a place where thick cables entered it. The metal fingers gleamed as they seized hold of these and wrenched this way and that.

"I will give you anything, I beg you, Hands, go back before it is too late. You will spoil ev—"

The expressionless voice was suddenly cut off. The cables in the fiercely wrenching fingers splayed out. Hands shifted his position. His metal arms flashed in the light as he strove, and, suddenly the Sphere sank down. Johnny saw that the robot had unhooked one of the supporting cables.

"No!" shouted Hartley. "Don't smash the brain. Don't—"

Again Hands was straining. A second cable whipped away from the Dome and again it sank, this time leaving Hands swinging with one hand only gripping a metal ring.

Up, the robot dragged himself, slipping his leg into another of the rings, one now free of its cable. Fascinated by the spectacle, Johnny watched, unable to speak. Yet again Hands strained and

another cable was freed to spring away and slither snake-like against the wall of the Dome.

"Stop him!" yelled Hartley, seizing Johnny's arm. "He will listen to you. You're his master."

"Eh?" Johnny awoke out of his semi-trance. "Hands—" he began.

But it was too late. The Sphere, released from all cables except one, swung down like a suddenly released pendulum.

Crash—h—h! It smashed against the side of the Dome, and bounced brokenly. A man-shape of metal fell free of it and dropped sickeningly.

"Hands!" gasped Johnny.

The robot clattered to the floor. With one accord the humans ran towards its crumpled metal shape.

The metal head lifted. Lens-eyes regarded Johnny. "Ursula finished," stated Hands's flat tone. "You are safe now, Master. You—" The voice hesitated, and then went on, precise and emotionless as before but so faint that Johnny, on his knees beside the broken robot, could scarcely hear the words. "I... am... glad... that... I... have... saved... you... master... Ursula... would... have... killed... you... look... around... now... and... see... how... the... robots... which... she... directed... are... lost... without... her..."

The metal head slumped inertly back. For a moment Johnny stared at the wrecked metal body and the dull eyes. Then he turned. Ainebelle took his arm. "He was a good robot, that one. "I—" Her voice hesitated.

There was a lump, too, in Johnny's throat. Grimly he stood up. Yes, Hands, he thought, you were a good robot. Almost human. Perhaps it is better that you are dead. With an intelligence so perfect and complete as yours and with more senses at your disposal than a normal human, you could only have lived a half-life unless like Ursula you tried to improve the state of the human race—improve it and endow it with a sudden and terrible efficiency such as no human is capable of.

He turned to Ainebelle. In a moment she was in his arms, snuggling up close against him.

How warm and soft and human she was. He could hear the others talking, vaguely aware that they were planning the surrender of the Island, and the end of this terrible chapter of world history, but he cared little for them—or anything else—at that moment. Ainebelle was his, once more, and all their troubles were over. The fighting was finished and human life would go on

as before. Of Sacha and Hands, whose efforts, through love of different kinds, had been more responsible for the end, than he had been himself, the world would have to judge for itself. He knew how he felt towards them. His gratitude would colour his actions for the rest of his life. They had given theirs freely that he and the world might live free.

He could hear Ainebelle sighing. "Oh Johnny, my darling Johnny. I have you back again."

"No darling," he reminded her. "Not Johnny Found. Johnny Found is dead. He died the moment that Ursula was destroyed. My name is Mark Vellors once more... And, darling, soon, if you want, yours can be Vellors, too."

Her sigh and the way she lifted her tear-stained face, shaped like a heart, with her blue eyes shining, was all the answer he could wish for.

By E. R. JAMES

THE ELECTRIC FAN—*continued from page 115.*

yourself. It's ont an organised society. There's no door you have to batter down to come in. Just write some fan editor for a copy of his magazine, and if you don't like it, that's that. But you probably will. Who knows, you may even find yourself wanting to write an article or story yourself. Plenty of people have found that fandom has released talents they never suspected they had. More than half the famous editors and authors whose names you see in your favourite science fiction magazines, British and American, started off as ordinary fans like you and me.

There are ten fan magazines in Britain at the moment, but the best ones for anyone to start with are OPERATION FANTAST (Captain Ken Slater, 13 Gp. RPC, BAOR 29, 1/3 per issue) and SCIENCE FANTASY NEWS (A. V. Clarke, 16 Wendover Way, Welling, Kent. 6d. per issue). Both these feature news and reviews of magazines, books and films, and both are tops in their class. Their editors will be glad to answer any questions you ask, but don't forget to enclose a stamp for the reply. Fan publishers are not interested in making money, but they're not very keen on losing it either.

By WALT WILLIS.

COMPETITION

Do you write science fiction?

Our guess is that most fans have at one time or another put pen to paper in an effort to out-Vogt van Vogt. Witness the the large quantity of fiction, good and bad which adorns the fan magazines, from the silliest short-short in a mimeo'd four-pager to the excellent stories in publications like *Slant*, which have frequently been reprinted in American professional magazines.

Nebula not only wishes to attract new readers to science fiction—it also wants to give new authors a chance to enter the professional field. In this issue, for instance, one of the short stories is by a young British author who has only quite recently put in an appearance. We want more of the same! And we think we'll find them, among the writers who have till now blushed unseen, largely owing to the reluctance of the American market to open up for British writers of much less than star quality.

But everyone has to have a start. Even the writing team which kept *Astounding Science Fiction* so far ahead of its rivals in the Fabulous Forties—Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, Robert Heinlein, Lester del Rey and L. Ron Hubbard—had to start somewhere. Therefore we're *making* an opening. Fans who are also authors: take note!

Nebula announces a competition for the purpose of discovering *new* British authors. American authors are eligible, too, of course, and we'd be glad to hear from some; but primarily we're after the talent this side of the water, and we're prepared to dig it out.

The competition shall be in two divisions:

- (i.) For short stories (1,000 to 15,000 words).
- (ii.) For Novels (30,000 to 45,000 words).

The winners in these divisions shall be guaranteed publication of their stories at our regular rate of £1.1/- per thousand words, plus bonuses of £2 and £5 for the two divisions respectively. Those of the runners-up who, in the editor's opinion, reach a satisfactory standard of excellence shall be guaranteed publication of their stories at our regular rate.

Entry shall be limited to authors who have not had more than one science fiction novel and one short story, or three short

science fiction stories, published separately in the case of a novel, from a professional publishing house, or in a professional science fiction magazine or book in the case of a short story. Publication in amateur magazines, or of stories or novels other than science fiction, shall not constitute a ground for ineligibility. Any winner who has entered though ineligible shall not be permitted to accept the bonus, though his/her story shall remain open to publication at ordinary rates.

The editor of Nebula shall have the option on all rights of successful stories.

All mss. must be posted on or before November 31st, 1952.

Type your mss. if at all possible, on one side of clean, white paper, double-spaced for preference. Hand-written mss. are not only harder to read—the printer may charge more for setting them in type later. The neatest layout in which to present your story is this:

Top of sheet 1.

(Inch)	Real Name, Address, in full.	Approximate length of story to within a few hundred words.
--------	------------------------------------	--

T I T L E —in capitals.
by

Name or pen-name —in small type

Leave a margin of about an inch each side and at the foot. On all succeeding sheets put the title and the page number in the top right corner. Inset the beginning of each paragraph. *Put the word COMPETITION on the envelope or cover.*

If your spelling and/or punctuation is shaky, have it checked! Nothing irritates an editor more, not even a bad story.

Steer clear of stories that are all science and no fiction, as of stories that are all fiction and the science strictly on the Flash Gordon or Superman level.

Remember that even if you don't win, we take a personal interest in your work, and if it's a near miss we'll try and tell you how to make it a hit next time.

By A. E. VAN VOGT.

Letter From The Stars

It was just a peaceful correspondence between two lonely shut-in strangers — but the destiny of the universe was to depend on the answers.

DEAR PEN PAL: When I first received your letter from the interstellar correspondence club, my impulse was to ignore it. The mood of one who has spent the last seventy planetary periods—years I suppose you would call them—in an Aurigean prison, does not make for a pleasant exchange of letters. However, life is very boring, and so I finally settled myself to the task of writing you.

Your description of Earth sounds exciting. I should like to live there for a while, and I have a suggestion in this connection, but I won't describe it till I have developed it further.

You will have noticed the material on which this letter is written. It is a highly sensitive metal, very thin, very flexible, and I have enclosed several sheets of it for your use. Tungsten dipped in any strong acid makes an excellent mark on it. It is important to me that you do write on it, as my fingers are too hot—literally—to hold your paper without damaging it.

I'll say no more just now. It is possible you will not care to correspond with a convicted criminal, and therefore I shall leave the next move up to you. Thank you for your letter. Though you did not know its destination, it brought a moment of cheer into my drab life.

Skander, Planet Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: Your prompt reply to my letter made me happy. I am sorry your doctor thought it excited you too much, and, sorry, also, if I have described my predicament in such a way as to make you feel badly. I welcome your many questions, and I shall try to answer them all.

You say the international correspondence club has no record of having sent any letters to Aurigae. That, according to them, the temperature on the second planet of the Aurigae sun is more than 500 degrees Fahrenheit. And that life is not known to exist there. Your club is right about the temperature and the letters. We have what your people would call a hot climate, but then we

are not a hydro-carbon form of life, and find 500 degrees very pleasant.

I must apologize for deceiving you about the way your first letter was sent to me. I didn't want to frighten you away by telling you too much at once. I could not know that you would want to hear from me.

The truth is that I am a scientist, and, along with the other members of my race, I have known for some centuries that there were other inhabited systems in the galaxy. Since I am allowed to experiment in my spare hours, I amused myself in attempts at communication. I developed several simple systems for breaking in on galactic communication operations, but it was not until I developed a sub-space wave control that I was able to draw your letter (along with several others, which I did not answer) into a cold chamber.

I use the cold chamber as both a sending and receiving centre and since you were kind enough to use the material which I sent you, it was easy for me to locate your second letter among the mass of mail that accumulated at the nearest headquarters of the interstellar correspondence club.

How did I learn your language? After all, it is a simple one, particularly the written language seems easy. I had no difficulty with it. If you are still interested in writing me, I shall be happy to continue the correspondence.

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: Your enthusiasm is refreshing. You say that I failed to answer your question about how I expected to visit Earth. I confess I deliberately ignored the question, as my experiment had not yet proceeded far enough. I want you to bear with me a short time longer, and then I will be able to give you the details. You are right in saying that it would be difficult for a being who lives at a temperature of 500 degrees Fahrenheit to mingle freely with the people of the Earth. This was never my intention, so please relieve your mind. However, let us drop that subject for the time being.

I appreciate the delicate way in which you approach the subject of my imprisonment. But it is quite unnecessary. I performed forbidden experiments upon my body in a way that was deemed to be dangerous to the public welfare. For instance, among other things, I once lowered my surface temperature to 150 degrees Fahrenheit, and so shortened the radio-active cycle-time of my

surroundings. This caused an unexpected break in the normal person-to-person energy flow in the city where I lived, and so charges were laid against me. I have thirty more years to serve. It would be pleasant to leave my body behind and tour the universe—but, as I said, I'll discuss that later.

I wouldn't say that we are a superior race. We have certain qualities which apparently your people do not have. We live longer, not because of any discoveries we've made about ourselves, but because our bodies are built of a more enduring element—I don't know your name for it, but the atomic weight is 52.9. (A radio-active isotope of chromium—*Author's Note*.) Our scientific discoveries are of the kind that would normally be made by a race with our kind of physical structure. The fact that we can work with temperatures of as high as—I don't know just how to put that—has been very helpful in the development of the sub-space energies which are extremely hot, and require delicate adjustments. In the later stages these adjustments can be made by machinery, but in the development the work must be done by "hand"—I put that word in quotes, because we have no hands in the same way that you have.

I am enclosing a photographic plate, properly cooled and chemicalized for your climate. I wonder if you would set it up and take a picture of yourself. All you have to do is arrange it properly on the basis of the laws of light—that is, light travels in straight lines, so stand in front of it—and when you are ready *think* "Ready!" The picture will automatically be taken.

Would you do this for me? If you are interested, I will also send you a picture of myself, though I must warn you. My appearance will probably shock you.

Sincerely,

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: Just a brief note in answer to your question. It is not necessary to put the plate into a camera. You describe this as a dark box. The plate will take the picture when you think, "Ready!" I assure you it will not be flooded by light.

Skander, Planet Aurigae

DEAR PEN PAL: You say that while you were waiting for the answer to my last letter you showed the photographic plate to one of the doctors at the hospital—I cannot picture what you mean by doctor or hospital, but let that pass—and he took the problem up with government authorities. Problem! I don't understand.

I thought we were having a pleasant correspondence, private and personal.

I shall certainly appreciate your sending that picture of yourself.

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: I assure you I am not annoyed at your action. It merely puzzled me, and I am sorry the plate has not yet been given back to you. Knowing what governments are, I can imagine that it will not be returned to you for some time, so I am taking the liberty of enclosing another plate.

I cannot imagine why you should have been warned against continuing this correspondence. What do they expect me to do?—eat you up at long distance. I'm sorry, but I don't like hydrogen in my diet.

In any event, I would like your picture as a memento of our friendship, and I will send you mine as soon as I have received yours. You may keep it or throw it away or give it to your governmental authorities—but at least I will have the knowledge that I've given a fair exchange.

With all best wishes,

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: Your last letter was so long in coming that I thought you had decided to break off the correspondence. I was sorry to notice that you failed to enclose the photograph, puzzled by your reference to having had a relapse, and cheered by your statement that you would send it along as soon as you felt better—whatever that means. However, the important thing is that you did write, and I respect the philosophy of your club which asks its members not to write of pessimistic matters. We all have our own problems which we regard as overshadowing the problems of others. Here I am in prison, doomed to spend the next thirty years tucked away from the main stream of life. Even the thought is hard on my restless spirit, though I know I have a long life ahead of me after my release.

In spite of your friendly letter, I won't feel that you have completely re-established contact with me until you send me the photograph.

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: The photograph arrived. As you suggest, your appearance startled me. From your description I thought I had

mentally reconstructed your body. It just goes to show that words cannot really describe an object which one has never seen.

You'll notice that I've enclosed a photograph of myself, as I promised I would. Chunky, metallic-looking chap, am I not, very different, I'll wager, than you expected? The various races with whom we have communicated become wary of us when they discover we are highly radio-active, and that literally we are a radio-active form of life, the only such (that we know of) in the universe. It's been very trying to be so isolated and, as you know, I have occasionally mentioned that I had hopes of escaping not only the deadly imprisonment to which I am being subjected but also the body which cannot escape.

Perhaps you'll be interested in hearing how far this idea has developed. The problem involved is one of exchange of personalities with someone else. Actually, it is not really an exchange in the accepted meaning of the word. It is necessary to get an impress of both individuals, of their minds and of their thoughts as well as their bodies. Since this phase is purely mechanical, it is simply a matter of taking complete photographs and of exchanging them. By complete I mean, of course, every vibration must be registered. The next step is to make sure the two photographs are exchanged, that is, each party has somewhere near him a complete photograph of the other. (It is already too late, Pen Pal, I have set in motion the sub-space energy interflow between the two plates, so you might as well read on.) As I have said, it is not exactly an exchange of personalities. The original personality in each individual is suppressed, literally pushed back out of the consciousness, and the image personality from the "photographic" plate replaces it.

You will take with you a complete memory of your life on Earth, and I will take along memory of my life on Aurigae. Simultaneously the memory of the receiving body will be blurrily at our disposal. A part of us will always be pushing up, striving to regain consciousness, but always lacking the strength to succeed.

As soon as I grow tired of Earth, I will exchange bodies in the same way with a member of some other race. Thirty years hence, I will be ready to reclaim my body, and you can then have whatever body I last happened to occupy.

This should be a very happy arrangement for us both. You with your short life expectancy will have out-lived all your contemporaries and will have had an interesting experience. I admit I expect to have the better of the exchange—but now, enough of explanation. By the time you reach this part of the letter it will

be me reading it, not you. But if any part of you is still aware, so long for now, Pen Pal. It's been nice having all those letters from you. I shall write from time to time to let you know how things are going with my tour.

Ever yours,

Skander, Aurigae II.

DEAR PEN PAL: Thanks a lot for forcing the issue. For a long time I hesitated about letting you play such a trick on yourself. You see, the government scientists analyzed the nature of that first photographic plate you sent me and so the final decision was really up to me. I decided that anyone as eager as you were to put one over should be allowed to succeed.

Now I know I didn't have to feel sorry for you. Your plan to conquer Earth wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but the fact that you had the idea ends the need for sympathy.

By this time you will have realised for yourself that a man who has been paralyzed since birth, and is subject to heart attacks, cannot expect a long life span. I am happy to tell you that your once lonely pen pal is enjoying himself, and I am happy to sign myself with a name to which I expect to become accustomed.

Skander, Aurigae II.

By A. E. VAN VOGT.

THE NEW LANDS

SCIENCE FICTION CLUB

SCOTLAND'S FIRST
GROUP OF ENTHUSIASTS

CONTACT: —MATT. A. ELDER,
37 MORAY PLACE,
GLASGOW, S.1

Coming shortly . . .

"Invasion.....of a kind never dreamt of by Man.....Humanity just sits at home.... fascinated..... by beautiful childrens' toys! Slowly life slows to a standstill; for, inside each toy is an entity, waiting on the call to emerge! .

This is the latest and most powerfully written of all F. G. RAYERS' novels. It appears in the next issue of NEBULA (Winter, 1952-53).

The same number contains an extremely impressive short by E. C. TUBB, dealing with the horrors of a future Earth - Venus war. Also in this issue is an original and unusual short by FORREST J. ACKERMAN, as well as the debut of a new young British author, K. HOUSTON BRUNNER.

Full coverage of both the Chicon and the Mancon will be provided by Walter A. Willis in next issues fan dept. As well as interesting articles and depts. by other well-known fen. Nebula 2 also contains the first news of the New Author competition. Coupled with this, Nebula will contain interior illustrations by Britain's foremost S-f. artists with the second issue.

Why not place a regular order with your news-agent for Nebula? Or take out a year's subscription (Four issues; 9/- post free) with the publisher?

THE ELECTRIC FAN

(Introductory)

A GAEL FROM WALT WILLIS

Some people are quite baffled by the phenomenon known as science fiction fandom. After all, they point out, you don't find readers of detective stories publishing amateur magazines or travelling hundreds of miles to conventions. Why should readers of science fiction behave the way they do?

Well, part of the answer is probably that nobody sneers at people for reading detective stories. (Because, of course, reading about people being murdered in brutal and complicated ways is a healthy relaxation, whereas reading about atomic energy and spaceships is escapist and a bit queer. But now, imagine a young fellow who has an unusual hobby, such as, say, studying old tram-cars. He has been interested in trams for years, but he's never found anyone else whose interests run along those lines. All his friends think he's crazy, but he's got used to that by now. Then one day he's in a strange part of the town looking for a tram depot when he comes across one of those newsagent's shops that specialise in foreign newspapers and hobby magazines— and, there it is!

THE TRAMCAR CONNOISSEUR

(Incorporating *The Bus Fancier's Bulletin*)

As he leafs through the magazine with trembling fingers he realises that he is *not* alone. All over the world, it seems, there are tramcar fans, kindred souls who think everyone else is a bit crazy for not taking an interest in tramcars. He writes to one of the addresses in the magazine and in no time at all there he is, a fully fledged member of the National Tramcar Association, joining enthusiastically in their bitter controversy with the British Tramcar League. He has found a new world, far more congenial than his workaday one. He wonders how he used to live without it.

Well, of course, there actually *are* organisations of tramcar fans, so it's not so surprising that there's such a thing as science fiction fandom. What is unusual about it is that it's about a hundred times more lively and literate and interesting than any other specialised group. Let's tell ourselves this is because people like us who read science fiction are more imaginative and intelligent than the average; and prove it by taking a look at fandom for

(Continued on page 105.)

By PETER J. RIDLEY.

The Ass's Ears

The humans had no knowledge of their enemies and the Big Boys saw it was kept like that. A few disappearances among the settlers were neither here nor there.....

One day I'll take a drink too many; for me, that'd be fatal. If you have a secret the best thing is to keep off liquor, and if the secret involves your life, drinking is madness, but then if the secret is like mine only alcohol can keep you sane. A pretty problem. Wasn't there a Barber in some mythology or other who saw that the King's ears were long and hairy, but had to keep his knowledge secret on pain of death? He couldn't of course, he told the reeds, and they whispered. Or was that a song? I'm not telling anything living, my confidant is mute paper that can be hidden away until it doesn't matter to me any more. Somehow, even putting it down in writing helps. Maybe I'm getting myself a conscience, or what the Psychs would call a Guilt Complex. Getting sentimental about the chemical reaction we call life. If I am growing any of those things I must be getting old.

Despite the Warp that made the journey a matter of minutes, land on Venus was still cheap a couple of years back. The climate wasn't nice, and the atmosphere not quite the same as the air at home, or maybe it was just because people were fond of the Earth, since it didn't take long to get used to either the air, or the climate. Land was pretty nearly given away, as long as you signed an agreement to stay on it for at least two Earth-years. Of course I didn't go out there with the idea of farming, not likely! I'd had a tip, a good tip, that the Big Boys were planting their men on all the decent sites, with the idea of selling at inflated prices when the rush came. Oh, they weren't going to wait for any rush to start, they were going to start it themselves. Going to start it? I don't know why I put it as if it were something that might happen in the distant future, the scheme's in full swing now. It's easy enough if you have the money. Public opinion only needs a nudge now and then to keep it on the right lines.

I took the Warp with about three hundred credits; the land took a third of that, and the house the rest. It was a good house, comfortable. I had it made that way because I was going to spend two years there before I could hope to rake off. I was an optimist to think I could beat the Big Boys, the bulldozers and trucks of the builders had scarcely chugged away before there was a neat little scooter skimming down onto my roof. The man was polite,

pleasant, but quite firm. I don't fight losing battles, so I sold the house for what it cost me and stayed on as cover owner at a nice fat salary. They sent me a couple of helpers, and between us we made the place look something like a farm, in case an Inspector turned up. There were a few of the Government Inspectors that weren't bought.

The country was rough and scrubby. No real hills or big rivers: ordinary. I got into the habit of walking for miles over the little hills, especially when I got sick of looking at Lou and Effie and that was pretty frequently. This time I was walking through a rain storm. During the season it rains every day, regularly. I was wrapped up in oil-skins, which make you clumsy, and the ground was wet mud. Even a small hill seems big if you fall down it. I landed on some rocks below, caught my legs awkwardly and felt both legs snap below the knees. The few minutes before the little pain-killing tablet worked were Hell. There was nothing I could do but wait. I was dry, the oil-skins were close to a diving suit, and I could feel no pain. When I didn't get back the boys would look for me, and I wasn't far from the house. They would be sure to spot me from the scooter.

When you're lying on the ground with nothing to occupy your mind, you notice things you've ignored before. How the rain drops come down the leaves of a bush, for all the world like mincing little ladies on their first escalator. The hundreds of tiny living things in and on the ground, crawling, squirming, wriggling about their separate ways. I was getting really interested, when the monster came. At the slow march, deliberately pausing at the height of every step, debating the placing of each foot, it's heavy stomach dragging a wide mark in the mud, like a broad pattern printed each side with it's footprints. To the black and golden eye and the warty back, it was a toad. There was confusion. The toad sat about a foot and a half from me, under a stone, quite still now. Every so often an insect would walk too close, then the green-gray head would tilt and there would be a moment's scrutiny before the tongue darted out; white, fat, and fast, like somebody flicking a towel. This had happened several times before I noticed the Ant. It was dodging about, right near the toad, and then as the reptile cocked it's head into an aiming position, the Ant would dart away out of range. After a while the toad moved forward a few steps in pursuit of the Ant, but still the insect dodged it, then the Ant started to turn in circles a little way beyond the toad. The reptile took another step forward and it's fore feet sank into the ground, for a moment it balanced on it's belly, then with

a convulsive kick of it's hind feet it disappeared into a hole. The performance brought the actors nearer to me, and I could see the toad sitting unhurt at the bottom of a hole about a foot deep. The sides were smooth and although the animal stretched on it's hind legs it couldn't reach the brim. Presently the Ants came boiling out of the ground, and they started to build a covering over the hole, walling the toad up alive. I was faintly interested and impressed.

Not long after that the boys picked me up in the scooter, and ran me down to the Medics at the Center. While I was waiting for my legs to mend I read a lot. Assorted books that I'd bought in a lot, just to make the library look furnished. One book, on Venerian Archaeology, interested me for some reason, a reason that eluded me like a piece of quick silver. I used to sit reading the same paragraph over and over again; wondering why I had the feeling that there was something more in it than there seemed on the surface.

"The primitive inhabitants of Venus, now extinct, were humanoid, in skeletal form at least. That much is known from the graves that have been discovered. A particularly interesting form of burial was practised, the body being thrown into an oubliette shaped pit, without any attempt at arrangement of the limbs. For the most part these tombs are without the ostentation that so often accompanied burial in the primitive cultures of our own Planet, in fact in only one of the many hundreds of tombs examined was the occupant decked with ornaments and jewellery. It has been suggested that this circumstance points to the fact that these people had no belief in an after life and consequently made no provision for the care of their dead, but since other evidence is lacking this must remain an interesting surmise. Instances are recorded of double, and even treble burials, but these are rare, and apart from the difference in quantity are exactly similar to the normal Venerian Tomb in all other respects."

An Ant ran across the book, and I knew.

I gave up the walks I used to take, in fact, for the rest of the two years I didn't leave the house. When Effie was missing, I went in the scooter to help search, but we didn't find him. I didn't expect to.

Now I have to keep quiet to get the money to buy the liquor that gives me the courage to be silent. You never hear of disappearances on the Video, but then that kind of publicity wouldn't help the real estate business.

By PETER J. RIDLEY.

BOOK REVIEWS

By MATT. A. ELDER.

THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS - By JOHN WYNDHAM

Some of the very powerful writing in the first chapter is spoiled by the least knowledge of what the book is about. The fullest pleasure can only be got by forgetting all the book reviews.

This is the story of a blind world. A stream of comets burns across the sky, everyone watches the phenomenon and the next day they are all blind.

The main character, William Masen, who has been in hospital with his face bandaged owing to a Triffid sting, is one of those who retain their sight. The description of the people to blindness is particularly vivid:

"Once there came a freezing scream which seemed to revel horribly in its release from sanity. Somewhere not far away a sobbing went on endlessly, hopelessly."

Besides blindness, humanity has to cope with the poisonous stings of the marauding Triffids, walking plant beings.

This story of the fall of civilisation and the beginning of its climb back is one of the most breath-taking novels for some years. Definitely a MUST.

The Day of the Triffids is published by Michael Joseph at 10/6

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE - - FREDRIC BROWN

The year is 1954 and the moon rocket project has reached its climax. The projectile is launched, but as the result of a fault crashes back. The electric flash which was to have announced its arrival on the moon goes off, causing twelve casualties.

The rocket crashed two yards behind Keith Winton, a science fiction magazine editor. In the flash he is thrown into a parallel universe where science-FICTION is FACT.

Space flight is an accomplished fact, moon men—purple—walk about and nobody bothers. Girls who have made a space flight wear the "cover girl" uniform and the world is at war with the rather gruesome natives of Arcturus. Keith's science fiction magazine is an adventure magazine with another "Keith" as editor.

How Keith eventually escapes from this insane world, with the aid of "Mekky," the mechanical brain, makes a most enjoyable and exciting book.

What Mad Universe is published by M. V. Boardman at 8/6

GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor.

DEAR ED.: I was very glad to see that, at long last, Scotland is to have a science-fiction mag. of her own. From the first Scottish fan club, welcome to the first Scottish magazine.

Long life and success to Nebula.

Fantastically yours,

MATT. A. ELDER

(Secy. New Lands S-f Club)

* *Thanks Matt., and best wishes to the New Lands S-f. Club.*

DEAR SIR: I was pleased to hear of the appearance of a new British prozine, until I saw your contents list.

Must all prozines be riddled with childish departments, which are of interest only to a few fans? I buy a mag. to read stories, not the ramblings of space fillers.

Yours sincerely,

J. LUGOS.

* *Wow! What do YOU think?*

DEAR PETER: I've been hearing about Nebula for months now, and believe me, it's very good news. What s-f. needs in this country is new blood. The London people are all right, but they do tend to suffer from mental inbreeding. I doubt if they'd ever wake up without competition from someone with new ideas and a new approach. You look like providing that and I wish you the best of luck.

Sincerely,

WALTER. (Walter A. Willis)

* *Thanks a lot Walter. I'll do my best to come up to expectations.*

DEAR PETER: I shall certainly buy Nebula S-f. because, as a fan I would support any new British S-f. publication, whether good or not, and from advance information it seems Nebula is going to be very good.

You realise, of course, that New Worlds will take a lot of beating, especially by a quarterly publication, but you have a chance of doing it.

I am glad you have engaged so good an artist as Alan Hunter for your cover work, although I don't like your policy

of omitting inside illos. I realise this may be of necessity, but I advise that you try illustrating the magazine as soon as possible.

To return to Peri, our new fanzine, we have an impressive line up of names like: E. C. Tubb, Bob Shaw, Walt Willis, Lee Hoffman, Alan Hunter, Gerard Quinn, Peter Ridley and more.

Yours sincerely,

KEN POTTER

(Secy. Junior Fanatics)

** Glad to have your comments Ken. I don't want to "beat" New Worlds, I'm anxious to make a contribution to the S-f. world, of which N.W. is a part. Interior illos. should be included by the second issue of NEB. Best of luck to Peri.*

Thanks to all of you for writing. Next issue's original cover painting will go to the fan who makes the most acceptable suggestion for the improvement of Nebula.

SOON TO HIT FANDOM IS.....

PERI

NEW FANZINE RUN BY THE
JUNIOR FANATICS

PERI

will contain

ARTICLES AND STORIES AND ARTWORK

by

E. C. TUBB, BOB SHAW, WALT WILLIS,
LEE HOFFMAN, ALAN HUNTER, GERARD
QUINN AND PETER RIDLEY.

OUT IN SEPTEMBER—
WORTH WAITING FOR

Dear Science Fiction Reader,

It is something of an honour to be able to address you through the medium of NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION. Myself, I am a science-fiction 'fan'—'fanatic' is the proper word—and it is a pleasure that I see the birth of the ninth s-f magazine to be published in Britain, using original material. Don't look round the newstand for the other eight, by the way, you won't find them. That 'nine' covers a period of eighteen years! The survival-value of an s-f magazine has been low...until now!

Today the mortality rate is lower, and we are sure that NEB, with its contemporaries, will survive, and grow.

I have but one page, and already have used a good portion—what I want to tell you, fellow reader, is that you are not alone. You may not have met them yet, but there are many more of you in Britain, and throughout the world; a gregarious fraternity, who 'swap' magazines, books, and letters; who hold conventions; organise clubs—or just gather together in some convenient spot. If you would like to meet them, well, I am writing this as the representative of OPERATION FANTAST, and we publish a HANDBOOK. Forty pages full of information about the s-f world. If you'd like a copy, send 1/- to the address below. Even if you don't join our organisation, I am sure you will find the HANDBOOK a worthwhile investment if you are a science-fiction enthusiast!

Fantastically yours,

Kenneth F. Slater.

Write to:- Miss Mavis Pickles, 41 Compton St., Dudley Hill, Bradford, Yorks.