NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

BI-MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 5

TEMPLE ★ M'INTOSH ★ ROCKLYNNE ★ TUBB

THE STARS LIKE NEBULA!

Photographed on the set of "Time Of Terror," by Tetsu Yano

While falling into the sun on their rocket's lifeboat, Marjorie Lord and Myron Healy (seated), stars in Canterbury Productions new scientifilm, "Time of Terror", accompanied by Rocket Stowaway, Forrest J. Ackerman, take time out to peruse Nebula 4, a collector's item which has somehow survived to the year 2000!

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE CONNOISSEURS OF SCIENCE FICTION BY READING NEBULA REGULARLY

NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 2 Editor: PETER HAMILTON No. 1

Novel:

Novelette:

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Look here . . .

It is already evident at the time of writing that NEBULA 4 was the most controversial in content of any in the magazine's short history. I've received over fifty letters of comment on it already, but while everyone liked *some* of its contents, there are not more than two of my correspondents in anything like complete harmony regarding the individual items.

I believe this is a good sign, as it proves that NEBULA 4, unlike its predecessors, contained *something for everyone*, which is, after all, the goal of all editors everywhere.

This time I have another mixed bag which, I hope, will contain something for all tastes. First on the list is WILLIAM F. TEMPLE (who has now appeared in three out of our five issues) with a gripping undersea adventure which as well as bringing in some new and unique ideas should meet with popular acclaim. Next in line is our old friend FORRY ACKERMAN who has an original idea for the origin of his hero's wife. J. T. M'INTOSH makes his first appearance in NEBULA this time, adding his contribution to the semi-political series which commenced 'way back in issue 2 with the unforgettable "Dark Solution." Mr. M'Intosh is now writing almost solely for the U.S. market, but took time out to give NEBULA readers an unusual and enjoyable experience with "War's Great Organ". Why not drop me a line telling me whether you've liked this series and whether you would like more stories of the type in future? Another milestone in the progress of NEBULA is laid by the appearance of "Alphabet Scoop" by one of America's foremost science-fiction writers, ROSS ROCKLYNNE. This is Mr. Rocklynne's first appearance in a British magazine and I'll be interested to have the reaction of a British public to an author who is well established "over there." Following the present popularity trend in science-fiction E. C. TUBB gives us another of his masterly "human interest" novels which I am sure will be very popular.

Well, that, with the various departments and the introduction of my great new cover-artist discovery KEN McINTYRE is my offering for this time. Be sure to let me know what you think of it.

. . . .

By the time you read this a representative of British fandom will be on his way to the 11th World Science-Fiction Convention in Philadelphia. This, as was mentioned in last issue's "Electric Fan" has been arranged, financed and, in short, made possible by the generosity of our American counterparts and is certainly an extremely friendly gesture on their part.

Now I don't know how they choose who is to represent Britain,

Continued on Page 128

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Destiny Is My Enemy

Out of the depths of space it came
to foretell the destiny of Earth

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

IT was all very beautiful.

This was the border land on the extreme fringes of sunlight. On one side it was black night, broken only by the occasional dim flashes of phosphorescent fish. On the other side it looked as though a watery dawn was breaking over the undulating fields of E. 4 plants, which were in full flower.

Daniel Defoe, who was no relation to anyone of the same name, reflected again that the E.4 plant was as unimaginatively named as himself. "E. 4" meant "Edible Weed, Class 4."

The sub-lieutenant had remarked jokingly that the E. 4 looked good enough to eat, and the skipper had said "Functional beauty." The sub. said: "Not wholly. The flowers are so much waste: you can't eat 'em or use 'em as raw material for anything. People like Defoe here ought to concentrate on breeding a flowerless species."

Dan had said, quietly: "No, Mister, they wouldn't live with-

out their flowers. I guess you don't understand them the way we marine botanists do. You can't treat them just as fodder—that's where we went wrong with the first three classes, that's how they died off. E. 4's have feelings—which can't be explained, only sensed—and they feel they want to exist in their own right. Strip their glory from them and you kill them. Anyway, why should we? It's always a sin to quench beauty, and it's our loss if we do."

The sub had said: "You're a queer bird, Defoe. They're only weeds."

"*Only*!" exclaimed the skipper. "Just remember this, Mister —if it weren't for them you and your family would be starving, with the rest of the world."

The sub smiled. "Okay, I give in. They can have their flowers."

The skipper said: "They deserve 'em as much as the Admiral deserves his chestful of ribbons."

But the flowers were an even more colourful array than the Admiral's ribbons. Here, where Defoe stood, at the end of light, they were but shadows among shadows. But far up the slope towards the sandy beaches, where the sea was as transparent as glass, they were revealed in their full splendour as they lay on the close-woven carpet of green leaves: petals of scarlet and ameythyst, gold and indigo, orange and turquoise, russet and emerald, rose and gamboge, here shading into each other and there, by deliberate arrangement, it seemed, in striking contrast.

It was a coat of many colours laid on the floor of the sea.

But where Dan stood it was but the hem of the coat, and the faint watery dawn was the full blaze of the noonday sun dimmed by many fathoms of salt sea-water. And the night-land was unknown territory which it was his duty to explore.

A voice spoke in his helmet. "Skipper here, calling Defoe. You haven't reported for a good half-hour, Defoe. Not day-dreaming again? Anywhere near the border yet?"

Dan jumped. He had been day-dreaming. He switched on the transmitter and answered via his throat microphone: "Defoe here, answering skipper. Yes, I have reached the border, sir. I am just about to prospect."

"Good. Slow but sure, eh? Yet you're still the first one to get there. Hear that, you other slugs? Pull your socks up. Keep in touch, Defoe. Off."

There were eleven other marine botanists approaching various

points on the circumference of the great ring of E. 4 plantations around the island, surveying the ground for possible enlargement of that ring. For the world needed many more E. 4 plants.

Dan switched on his powerful hand-torch. The beam cut into the unknown land like a searchlight. He advanced slowly, waving it back and forth, quartering the area of sea-bottom before him. It looked promising at first. There was very little mud, no sand, but soft cohesive earth. There was no reason why, when the ultra-violet ray lamps were fixed, the E. 4 plants shouldn't take firm root here.

He went on, lifting ponderous weighted feet, stopping every now and then to thrust his steel probe into the earth or to scoop up a handful of it and test its quality with his rubber-gloved fingers. He put some of the loamy stuff in a specimen jar.

A bit farther on, the ground rose slightly, and here it was not so good. The probe jarred against rock only two inches down—not nearly enough room for E. 4's roots. The rocky bed was widespread from this place on, and as he went he began to feel its hardness with his feet, through the thinning skin of earth, and presently he was on the naked rock.

Bare rock extended as far as the torch-beam radius reached. He stopped and tested his direction-finder. The thin, high note sang comfortingly as he took a few steps back. He veered to one side and the note was punctuated by the warning pips: that's not the way back to the shore base, they said. When he straightened course the high note sang again free and pure.

But it was not yet time to go back. There was another hour's air in his cylinders. Time enough to see whether this rock was merely an outcropping or the general condition out here in the darkness. He switched off the finder and resumed his journey outwards.

The air was full of voices now, lining up one behind the other to report findings. Most of them spoke of more favourable conditions than he had discovered so far as earth was concerned, but it seemed that the terrain in these other directions fell sharply away from the island, and on such steep slopes crop-gathering would be very difficult.

He decided to wait until he had more definite information to impart. He went on. The comparatively smooth rock began to lift itself, at first in foot-catching knobs and then in swelling humps. It was tricky going. He found no more earth, and at last he

thought it was time to report and start back. Some of the others had already started back.

He stopped and waited for a break in the babble of voices. Standing there, beginning to daydream again, his eye was caught by a luminous fish swimming slowly back and forth outside the ambit of his light. Like most of these deep-sea creatures, it looked like merely the skeleton of a fish, all spikes and bristles, but to his experienced eye it was entirely distinctive: an unknown type. Carefully, not taking his eyes off the fish he unfastened and prepared his fish-net on its collapsible rod.

He directed the torch beam behind him, because these fish, though fascinated by light, fled from its direct glare. He advanced slowly, feeling his way, net extended. Just as slowly, but in a zigzag manner, the fish retreated before him.

The slow chase went on for a few minutes, but long enough to show Dan that it could go on like that for a few hours. He decided to stake all on one throw. He bent his knees, then impelled himself up and forward through the water, jabbing the net ahead of him at the fish, which eluded it with so little effort that his own effort was made to appear clumsy and ludicrous.

Dan's leaden-shod feet landed on a smooth hump of rock and then skated from under him. He whirled giddily, his torch taking off in one direction and his net in another. At first he wasn't sure which direction he was taking himself. And then he became aware of it. It was downwards, steadily downwards. Into the freezing blackness.

That hump of rock had been the verge of an undersea cliff.

He was not frightened at first. He didn't imagine he'd fall far. It was going to be a devil of a struggle to climb back, especially without his torch. But there was always the direction-finder, not to mention the two-way radio. The real danger lay in the shortness of his air supply: there wouldn't be much time for cliff-climbing.

Surely he must touch bottom at any moment now? His weighted, encased feet reached for it. But he went down and down, gathering speed, and now his spirits began to sink with him, and fear came creeping in from the darkness, from every direction, particularly from the unknown depths below him.

He had fallen so far now that it seemed impossible that he could ever get back alive. If a rescue party from the shore base set out with all speed at this very moment, it would be unlikely that they could both locate and reach him in time to do any good.

If he didn't touch bottom soon, the water pressure would burst in his quartz face-plate: he would be pressed to a jelly inside his suit.

His ears began to buzz and sing, and intermittent flashes jumped before his eyes. Consciousness was draining out of him.

" . . . Defoe, skipper calling Defoe. Where are you? Answer, damn you! Skipper calling Defoe . . ." The voice came from an immense distance.

Dan tried to answer. He opened his mouth, but couldn't articulate.

Then he hit the bottom with an impact that laid him flat on his back. For some minutes after that he still couldn't speak, because he had become quite unconscious. But it didn't matter then, because there was no voice to answer.

He came to, stiff, aching, frozen. He tried to move, and the terrific water pressure enfolded him as though he were a fly in amber. The blackness of the tomb was on every side, the weight of the world itself crushed upon him. The radio was dead.

"Defoe calling skipper, Defoe calling skipper," he croaked. His voice sounded loud and hollow inside the helmet. When he stopped, there was only silence. A total silence, the like of which he'd never experienced, because never before had he been on the sea-bottom without the friendly, live murmur from the radio speaker sounding constantly in his ears. That link was gone. He was cut off from his kind.

Perhaps not quite. With a great effort he pushed his hand through the water (it was almost like trying to push his hand through solid ice) to the direction-finder switch, and turned it. The high, oddly sweet note of the beacon sang. It was like unexpectedly hearing the voice of an old pal when one was lost in a strange place.

It'll probably sing my requiem, thought Dan.

All he had to do was to lie there and wait to die. That is, if he were a sensible person who knew when he was beaten and accepted his fate with calm resignation. If he were really a mature person, he might even see the humorous side of his position, pinned immovably in a ridiculous posture under a million tons of sea-water.

But Daniel Defoe had little sense of humor. He was a very serious and earnest man. His reason told him plainly that he was going to die, but it also told him that he would only be beaten when he was dead. Meantime, he was not dead, and therefore not beaten. So he gritted his teeth and with a terrific heave rolled himself over

on his stomach.

He discovered, by feeling, that the sea-bed here was much the same as it was at the top of the cliff—hard, uneven rock.

Then he braced himself and wriggled with infinite slowness along the homeward path laid down by the direction-finder, carrying the world on his back. The siren song led him, blind and groping, over the few yards to the abrupt wall of the undersea cliff. From what he could feel of it, that wall was perpendicular. There was no way up.

Very well, then, there might be a way round. He inched along the base of the cliff. Presently, he came to a corner. It was sharp and regular, as though a doorway had been cut into the cliff. And when he got his head round it, his heart leaped: there was a stationary beam of white light, from a circular source, striking through the water.

His torch must have dropped over the cliff with him but taken a divergent course. No doubt it was resting on some rocky hump. Now he had a goal indeed, and wriggled steadily towards it. It was getting stuffy inside his suit. The moisture from his breath was condensing on the inner surface of the quartz window-plate. The air was running low. Still, he would not now die in the dark, which he had dreaded. Death was easier to face in the light.

It was odd, it might be an illusion, but the circular light-source seemed both larger than his torch and not so bright. When he got closer he realised it was not his torch. This was a paler, more diffuse sort of illumination, not directed by any parabolic mirror. In the weak reflected light from the slimy rocks, it appeared that the light-source was a port-hole of some kind in the cliff-face, about shoulder-high.

It was a pity that he wouldn't be able to solve this complete mystery. If he could stand up, he could peer through the window at whatever lay beyond. But even if he were twice as strong as he was, he would yet not be able to gain his feet under this appalling weight of water.

Nevertheless, he inched nearer.

And then he was halted by a further surprise. To the right of the window a thin, vertical strip of light had appeared suddenly. Steadily it widened, and just as steadily the port-hole flattened into an ever-thinning elipse. It became obvious that the port-hole was set in a door which was opening. The door opened wide, and then stopped. Behind it was revealed a small cubicle cell, white-lit,

and bare of anything except water—and a man.

Dan lay on his stomach gaping at the man. He could see him only indistinctly because of the moisture filming his window-plate, but one thing was quite obvious: the man standing there in the cell was completely naked. What sort of creature was this, who could live on the sea-bottom without a diving suit, without air?

It seemed an ordinary sort of man: he had the thick, curly black hair common to the natives of the Malinesian group of islands, though his skin was a pale yellow rather than the normal dark brown. He was thin, and looked undernourished. He stood there gazing with wide-open eyes at the dim seascape outside the cell, swaying slightly on his feet. Then he began to move towards Dan, slowly, with a peculiar motion.

Then Dan realised with a little thrill of horror that the naked man was not walking, but drifting. His feet were barely touching the ground: they were limp, the toes curled under. And the staring eyes were those of a corpse.

He shuddered as the dead man approached him in shallow bounds and with an eerie slow-motion. He tried to wriggle out of the body's path, but he couldn't move even so fast as a floating corpse. A shrunken yellow foot kicked against his face-plate, and then the body was over and behind him, lost in the black deeps.

He turned his head painfully and glimpsed a silver shower converging like a volley of luminous arrows upon a point not far in the rear. Sickened, he faced the front again. The corpse's journey had not been long. If he stayed here he would soon share its fate. If he could get into that cell perhaps there yet might be some chance. It might be a trap, but what did it matter now? There was no alternative.

He wormed his way on to the doorway and as he reached it the door began to close. With a vision of being cut in two by its sharp edge, he struggled on desperately. The door swung behind him, pressing on his leaden soles, pushed him into the cell, and shut tight. He was a prisoner—where?

Before he could think about it, a heavy, continuous booming started vibrating through the water and through his helmet. At the same time he felt a lightening of the pressure upon him. The cell was emptying itself of water. The level fell steadily, and presently he found he could stand up, his head above water. He was dizzy, and breathing with difficulty, and the condensation smeared his vision.

But he examined his surroundings as best he could, and noted with no great surprise a small peephole set on the inner wall. He was more interested to perceive an eye regarding him from that peephole. Immediately it was observed, the eye vanished. He looked down to see the last of the sea-water gurgling out of a row of slots set along the wall-bases. Then the slots all closed simultaneously, and the booming ceased.

Pumps had forced the water out of this submarine lock. Had they let any air in? Or was he standing in a vacuum?

A door opened, and very cautiously a figure presented itself: a young, good-looking fellow, white, wearing nothing but a loincloth. He was a thin chap, rather underdeveloped, and he looked anxious and undecided. However, he appeared to be breathing without difficulty, so Dan began unscrewing his helmet and removing it.

Instantly, the figure leaped back, and was replaced by the sharp end of a spear poking through the open doorway. The spear quivered slightly, and Dan guessed that the young fellow at the other end of it was not feeling particularly happy about things.

He got his helmet off and breathed pure, clean air. It was fine. It was like coming out of some overcrowded, smoke-filled dive into the crisp evening air of the waterfront.

He said: "You don't have to point that thing at me, young man—I'm quite harmless."

The young man's face appeared again. Anxiety had been replaced by surprise.

"You speak English? Was your father a missionary?" His accent was most strange.

Although not given to reading fantasy, Dan had once long ago got through *Alice in Wonderland*. The complete non sequitur of immediately recent events now reminded him of that crazy book.

"No," he said, starting to remove his suit. "Was yours?"

"No."

Dan felt at a loss. "Well, that makes two of us," he said, presently, as the young man didn't seem inclined to enlarge any further on his family history. He examined his radio set. There was a hole in the casing large enough to put his thumb through and certainly large enough to let plenty of sea-water through. When he landed after his fall, a spur of rock must have penetrated the casing. The water had shorted the whole works. There were bits of broken glass rattling about inside, and he had no spare tubes.

This didn't look like the sort of place where he could get any, either.

"By the way," he said, "what is this place?"

"Yuami," said the young man, as though that explained everything.

"Indeed," said Dan, who'd never heard of it. "I presume there's more of it than this room?"

The young man appeared to think about it. "Yes," he said, finally.

"Good." Dan stepped out of his suit, and carrying it on his arm went towards the door. "I'd like to see it. What's your name?"

The young man stood aside to let him through. "Smith," he said.

Dan was beginning to get used to this juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

"Not John Smith?"

"Yes. Not John Smith."

Dan stared at him for a moment, then shrugged, and looked about him. They were standing in a bare stone passage. "Lead on, Not-John-Smith," he said.

The young man went ahead. They emerged, to a murmuring of voices, in a great bare cavern lit, as the passage and lock had been lit, by a white light which seemed to have no source. There were ledges and alcoves cut in the cavern walls, occupied by perhaps a hundred yellow-skinned natives, male and female, with a sprinkling of children. Most of them were sitting or lying down. They were all watching him as he followed young Smith across the cavern floor.

Dan was not an unduly selfconscious man, but he felt a certain relief when Smith led him into another passage out of the concentrated regard of all the curious eyes. The two were now mounting stone steps. At the top they came into a chamber which, in contrast to the cavern, was furnished almost luxuriously.

There were crude frescoes on the walls: galleons and seascapes, green fields and village churches, human figures dressed in slashed doublets and knee-breeches, or wide gowns with lace collars, or not dressed at all. There were tapestries, a couple of very worn carpets, a lot of coconut matting, a wooden table and some stools, vases and clay pots.

But the thing which first caught one's eye was a thin rod of

some glass-like substance, enclosed by a wire protective grid, which ran vertically from the centre of the floor to the ceiling. It sprang from a point on the circumference of a circular crack in the floor, which was some six feet in diameter. The circular area appeared to be something on the lines of a manhole cover, for there was a sunken handle in the centre of it.

Dan wondered about it for a moment, and then forgot it, because two people entered the room through a curtained doorway opposite. A middle-aged, powerfully-built man with a strong face. A young girl, slight but shapely, and decidedly pretty. The man wore only a loin-cloth, the girl little more. They were both as white as the youth, and bore a facial resemblance to him, especially as at the moment they were both looking astonished.

The man eyed Dan up and down, and then said, imperially, to the boy: " Who is this, Mark? " He had the same queer brogue as the youth.

" A man, father," said Mark, simply.

His father tut-tutted impatiently. " Well, I scarcely thought it was an octupus." He returned his gaze to Dan. " Who are you? How did you get here? "

Dan explained, conscious of the girl hanging on his every word.

At the end of it, the man said: " Well, I'm sure I don't know what to believe. It's odd that Obolar didn't inform me of this. I must consult it and discover what the outcome will be. My name is Smith. I'm the guardian of Obolar, and therefore the ruler of Yuami. This is my daughter, Helen. My son, Mark, you have met."

Dan made the slightest of bows towards them.

" I'm glad to have met you. Now perhaps you'll be good enough to show me the way out of here. I must report back to my base."

" The only way out of here," said Smith, " is the way you came in, Defoe. It's an exit we all use sooner or later, I'm afraid: that is how we dispose of our dead."

" It's not much use to me, living or dead," said Dan. " First, that cliff, from what I experienced of it, seems near enough unscaleable. Second, I've no means of compressing air into my cylinders to sustain me for the attempt. And talking of air, how come there's plenty of it here, if there's no way in or out? "

" Obolar provides," said Smith, sententiously. " In what way,

we know not. It provides our light, our food, our very life."

"Obolar?"

Smith pointed to the circular cover in the floor.

"Obolar."

"I suppose it can't provide radio tubes?"

"What are they?"

Dan looked at the spear the youth was carrying, the clay pottery, the general crudeness of everything.

"Never mind," he said, dodging the task of trying to explain radio, which he felt would be futile anyway. "With your permission, I'd like to sit down—I've had rather an exhausting time."

"Certainly. Would you like something to eat? We were about to have a meal."

"Sure. Thanks."

Smith and his daughter drew chairs up to the table and indicated that Dan should do the same. Mark also pulled a chair to the table and sat down. "Mark!" exclaimed Smith, and Mark jumped. "Do you expect me to wait on you? Get along to the kitchen at once and have the cooks prepare us a meal."

Mark got up and went out silently.

"I have to apologise for my son," said Smith, frowning after him. "Sometimes he seems to be little better than a half-wit. I fear for Obolar when he takes over the guardianship from me. Indeed, I fear for all of us in Yuami. For unless Obolar is kept well-supplied, we shall all be undone."

"Supplied with what?" asked Dan, turning to regard the circular stone.

"Sea-water. See, it comes down through that glass pipe, from outside. In the course of time the pipe begins to get clogged with salt and with small, miscellaneous particles which have slipped through the filter. The Guardian's duty is to remove such obstructions, and keep the water running freely. Also, to learn and publish the daily program."

"I see," said Dan, and didn't. Helen noted his bewilderment.

"Father, you'd better tell our guest something of the history of Yuami, else what you say is a mystery to him."

Her voice was a surprise. It had the deep, bell-like tone of a contralto, mature and confident. Dan had expected such a slight wisp of a girl to have a slight wisp of a voice.

"Yes, of course," said Smith. "To a stranger I must seem to be speaking in riddles. Though from whence the stranger comes is

to me a far greater riddle . . . Never mind. Obolar may explain. Perhaps there are islands which escaped the Flood or which have since emerged from it. Do you know, Defoe, of the Flood? "

" Yes, we have records which seem to indicate a Flood in the very far past."

" Since we have lost the means of telling when it is night or day outside, and live by the hour-glass, calling ten turnings of it our ' day,' we have little sense of the years and seasons of your world. We live day by day—indeed, it is always day here, for the light never dies. But we have it on record that the Flood was ten generations ago.

Dan frowned. " Ten generations? That's only, say, three or four hundred years ago. It can't be the Flood I'm thinking of."

" It was a Flood which drowned the whole world," said Smith, and told the story of Yuami. Mark and a servant came and served a meal in the middle of it—it was fish of some kind and most palatable.

About four hundred years ago, it seemed, Yuami had been one of the Malinesian group of islands, though it was an outlying member, nearly eighty miles from its nearest neighbour. To this island, from England, came a Christian missionary, Richard Smith, and his wife. The present family group were their direct descendants, ten generations removed. The English tongue had been preserved within the family and handed down. They regarded it as their own private tongue, the privilege of the rulers. The natives knew nothing of it, and still spoke only Malinese.

One day, in Richard Smith's time, there swept down out of the blue a " sky-ship." It arrived with flame and thunder, coming down in the sea a few miles off-shore. It was a large cylindrical ship with a pointed nose, " with no sails and made of bright metal." (Dan made a mental query note: a rocket-ship?)

It lay off-shore all day, floating motionless. The natives were frightened to go near it, and when Richard Smith wanted to go alone to investigate they refused to let him have a canoe.

As the sun set, a peculiar boat " with no oars, and also made of bright metal," was observed coming from the great ship. It drove steadily through the waves towards the shore, and behind it, as it came, the sun and the big ship sank slowly beneath the sea together. From this affinity the natives reasoned, in native fashion, that the ship must have come from the sun. As they were disposed to sun-worship, and Richard Smith's religion had made little impres-

sion on them as yet, they regarded with awe the two tall, thin, and queer-looking men who got out of the metal boat and beached it: they were, they decided, messengers from the sun.

The two men, who wore light, shimmering clothing of some sort which covered them to the neck, moved very slowly. The skin of their faces was red and rough, as though they'd been long exposed to salt-sea air. Their hair was thin and white, and their eyes round and very black. They didn't speak to each other, they never made a sound. They conveyed their meaning by most eloquent gestures.

There was a large and delicate piece of apparatus in the boat. They wanted it carried, with extreme care, to the natural caves high up on the island's central mountain. "*These* caves," said Smith, with a circular wave of his hand.

They themselves prepared the sunken well and the covering for it, and ran the pipe from it up through the roof and out through the cliff. They also prepared, with material carried from the boat, many other things, including the cages which ran on rails through tunnels and compartments in the mountainside to the outer slopes and returned at the press of a button. "They seemed meaningless then," said Smith, "but now those cages are our fish traps, and bring us our daily food with no effort on our part."

The two men walled up the entrance to the caves and built the submarine lock ("So that we should not be embarrassed by the accumulation of our own dead") and coated the walls and ceilings of the caves and chambers with some preparation which emitted a permanent white light. ("Cold light," reflected Dan. "I must look into it sometime"). They moved only slowly, this pair, but they kept moving. Their endurance was remarkable. They seemed to be able to do without sleep. And they were first-class mechanics.

Richard Smith was eternally tagging along at their heels, trying to discover from whence they came, what their mission was, what they were preparing the caves for. For the most part they ignored him, treated him as one of the natives. But sometimes, if they were in the vicinity of it, they would answer his questions by pointing dumbly at the apparatus in the well.

One of them later managed to make a few vocal sounds, very awkwardly, as though his mouth were solely a thing for eating with, and to speak with it was using it for a purpose for which it was not designed. He would point to the well and emit a noise which sounded like "Obolar."

So the covered apparatus came to be called Obolar.

It became obvious that Obolar was the centre of everything to the two strangers—the centre of their lives, their work, their devotion. From it they seemed to receive their inexhaustible strength. They would commune with it, and then rise and go to some fresh task with a steady, tireless energy.

"Commune with it?" repeated Dan. "How do you commune with a piece of apparatus?"

"You shall see presently, Defoe," said Smith. "To continue . . ."

One day one of the two men was working on the submarine lock, bent to pick up a tool, and fell dead across it. The other looked at him for a moment expressionlessly, then went to consult Obolar. When he came out, he beckoned Richard Smith and led him to Obolar. The missionary looked down into the uncovered well and saw—

At this point Smith broke off his narrative to go over to the well and lift off the lid— it was thin and seemed fairly light. Dan went and peered into the well.

It was six or seven feet deep. He could make no sense of the apparatus on the floor of it. His main impression was that it was flimsy and fragile in the extreme. A web of the thinnest wires, mere threads, pegged over a base of seeming crystal. A small forest of finger-thin crystal spires, a thread springing from the pinnacle of each and joining on to the main pattern of the web. The most solid thing in it was an opaque cubical tank, to which the sea-water pipe led. The tank seemed to be fairly embedded in the crystal base, fused into it in some way.

Two tall metal rods, each no thicker than a pencil, stood up near the edge of the base, reaching up to within an inch or so of the top of the well. They were of the same height and about a foot apart. Each was topped by a small nodule containing a speck of white crystal. Their bases fused into the crystal base almost imperceptibly. It seemed that at some point the crystal and metal could become one substance which was not either.

"You see why it must be covered," said Smith. "It could so easily be damaged." His voice was low, almost reverent.

"I don't get it," said Dan. "There are no moving parts that I can see. What does it *do*?"

Smith shrugged. "Nothing—and everything. Come, let me finish my story."

They returned to the table, where Helen and Mark sat over the

remains of the meal. Helen didn't seem much interested in Obolar, but enormously interested in Dan: she watched his face continuously, although her father was doing all the talking. Mark seemed interested in nothing except discovering fish-bones which still had some flesh adhering to them.

Smith resumed: "The remaining stranger lay down on the floor with his head just protruding over the lip of the well, and then he lowered his head so that it was between the nodules on the tips of the rods. For that's how one communes with Obolar. Then he arose and motioned my ancestor to do as he'd done. Richard Smith did so, no doubt feeling a little foolish. Almost at once he seemed to hear a voice speaking in his mind. According to the record my ancestor left, it said:

"'I have come from the skies to save you and your mate and the people of this island. For the day after tomorrow the sea will rise in a great flood and submerge this island and all other islands and lands in the world. There will be no land above the sea—anywhere. I have caused my Guardians to build this safe place for you and the island people. Here in these caves you can live always—I have made arrangements for your every need. In return I shall require from you only a minor service. One of my Guardians has died, as I foretold he would. And my remaining one will die a week from to-day. He, like the other was not meant to live in this world: its weight slows, and will eventually stop, his heart. He knows that: I have told him. When he is dead, I should like to appoint you in his place. He will prepare you for the small task that is needful for me.'

"The missionary was astonished, naturally. This apparatus was either a mind in itself or else an instrument which a mind could use for conveying its thoughts. Because of his religious upbringing, he feared that it might be the voice of Satan. But whoever's voice it was, it spoke truth. When the next tide came in, it did not ebb. And it kept coming in, steadily. The sea was rising.

"The small population was driven up the mountain, and as a matter of course took refuge in the prepared caves. The water-tight doors were shut, and the ocean rose above them and drowned the island. And here we have been ever since, provided for by the wisdom and foresight of Obolar, whose Guardian the Smith clan has provided since the appointed day when the second original Guardian died. Of course, my ancestor realised that Obolar was no voice of evil—far from it. It was the voice of omniscience itself, sent from on high to prepare the Ark for the second Flood. We are the child-

ren of Obolar now. Obolar is the voice of our destiny. We are sure now that we're not at the mercy of a blind Fate, but we are part of a great plan, and every act and incident of our lives is predestined. We have only to ask Obolar what the future holds for us, and it will tell us, because it knows everything—everything that has happened, everything that will happen."

"Yet it didn't tell you I was coming?" said Dan.

"No. It knew, of course. It must have had some reason for withholding the information. We don't question its reasons—who are we to question destiny? We're grateful for what it does tell us of the future, for then we can anticipate pleasures, and anticipation whets the appetite. And we can brace ourselves to meet with fortitude the more unfortunate events, like deaths among our number. The body you saw committed to the fishes was that of Kanati, our story-teller. It's a sad loss, because no one could invent and tell such wonderful tales as Kanati. But we were prepared for it, and so was he, because Obolar told us when it would happen."

"Has it told you when you'll die?"

"Oh, no. I haven't asked it. We don't seek to know the whole of our future. We live from day to day here. All we ask to know is of the morrow's events, so that we may prepare for them. And this is granted to us, daily."

"H'm. Like reading tomorrow's newspapers to-day, keeping one jump ahead of yourself. Personally, I'd rather wait and see."

"You mean, wait and fear," said Smith. "That's because you've been denied the blessing of reassurance, and can't imagine how comforting it is. One can go to one's bed and sleep calmly, sure that no tragedy can strike one unawares. Faith in Obolar is the crown of life."

"I'm not afraid of tomorrow," said Dan. "I have no faith in destiny, but I have faith in my powers to deal with anything it may serve up."

Smith shook his head sadly.

"You blaspheme in ignorance. In your pride you think you are the master of your own destiny. It's a pitiful illusion. Actually, you know nothing."

"Well, I know more about you than you know about me. You condemn me without knowing who I am or where I'm from. You say the outside world is drowned, that no land remains. Yet I come from it. How do you account for that?"

"I can't—at the moment," said Smith. "Perhaps you'll tell us

your story now."

"Yes—please," said Helen, eagerly. Mark said nothing, because he'd fallen asleep during his father's discourse.

"I'd rather see Obolar in action," said Dan. "If it's omniscience itself, it can tell you all about me, what my past was, what my future will be. I'm curious about its powers."

"Very well," said Smith. "I shall ask, and accept with gratitude what is vouchsafed me."

"Which may be nothing."

"Which may be nothing," concurred Smith. "If Obolar remains silent, we're sure of one thing: that the knowledge is withheld because it would be harmful to us."

Dan shrugged, and let the argument drop.

Smith rose, and went to the well, and slowly, as if performing an obeisance, laid himself full-length on the floor. He bent his head down over the edge of the well, bringing it between the tips of the two rods. Dan moved to a point where he could see better. Smith's lips moved, silently. Then they were still, and he appeared to be listening intently. Dan watched the spidery rigging in the well, but there was no tremor, no movement or change in any part of it.

Presently Smith got up, his face inscrutable.

Helen waited eagerly, Dan curiously, and Mark slumbered on.

Smith said: "It appears that since the Flood two new lands emerged from the sea, and life returned to them. But it was an evil life, divided against itself. The two lands have carried on a fearful and continuous war with each other, with ever more lethal weapons. In its madness this life will exterminate itself almost entirely very soon, and the few survivors will not long survive, for the sea will rise and swallow their lands again. You, Defoe, are from one of these lands. You've been brought here by destiny as an example of the unhappiness and misery of the outer world, before that world perishes, to show us how fortunate we all are here in the security of Yuami, by the grace of Obolar. For we have taken too much for granted. We have accepted happiness and security as our deserved lot. It's only by the presentation of contrasts that we can assess anew the benevolence of Obolar. That is the reason for your coming hence."

"You say you lost your best story-teller," said Dan. "I think you're mistaken—Obolar here can think up better stories than Kanati ever did."

Smith gasped. Colour crept into his pale cheeks.

" Obolar is right. You're an evil man indeed," he said, shortly.

" I may not be a saint, but I'm not a liar: Obolar is. There was no world Flood four hundred years ago, no Flood even here. The Malinesian Islands are a volcanic group, liable to sudden sinkings. This island merely sank a thousand feet or so. It's not entirely submerged: there's plenty of it left above. I know, because I've just come from there. There's a green, fertile land up there in the sunlight for all of you. By believing this lying instrument you're denying yourself it, condemning yourself for life to the prison of these caves."

" Obolar also said you had been brought here to tempt us with false promises, so that we may prove our worth," said Smith, gravely. " And if we fail, and weaken, and follow you, our destiny will be death in the war-torn world outside."

" Half a century ago," said Dan, " I certainly shouldn't have invited anyone to the outer world, and if I'd have found a nice, safe hideout like this I'd have stayed here. For vast and idiotic wars of destruction *were* ravaging our lands. But suddenly we all took a step forward and grew up. It wasn't a reasoned step—we'd reasoned for years before that modern war was pointless. Men act emotionally, not reasonably. But emotions also mature, in stages. Almost overnight our chief emotion became sick disgust at our own stupidity. We threw the few power-maniacs out of office, and organised the world sensibly. We've thrived ever since. Indeed, our thriving presented us with another problem, which formerly we should have tried to solve by the lunatic convulsions of war."

Smith was scarcely listening. He'd seated himself at the table again and appeared busy with his own thoughts. Mark had awakened, and was regarding Dan curiously. Helen said: " What problem? "

" When Richard Smith came to Yuami—around the year 1630, I'd guess— the population of the world was 400 million people. Two hundred years later it was twice that number. But it took only seventy years to double again. In 1950 there were 2,200 million people in the world, and the number was still rising rapidly. The wars killed many, but like all other wars they did nothing to ease the population problem: for during and directly after wars the birthrate takes a leap up, as if Nature is eager to counterbalance our slaughter. We ended the war threat, and were faced with imminent and seemingly inevitable starvation. For there was not enough land to raise food for this enormously swelling population. The extremely

thin layer of topsoil, which alone can grow food, had been grossly wasted and misused in the past. We'd allowed Nature to wash or erode it away, and we ourselves had sucked fertility out of it by unremitting greed, instead of nursing it and resting it periodically. And Nature takes a thousand years to replace an inch of it."

Smith said: "I don't see any other way out of it. You'll have to go back in the sea the way you came. We cannot tolerate evil in our midst."

Dan ignored him, and gave his whole attention to the girl. But Mark was listening too.

"Our destiny seemed to be inescapable doom. We could have resigned ourselves to it, doling out the food on ever-shortening rations until the end. That's how we'd have ended had we let destiny run our lives. But we believed our lives were *our* affair, not destiny's. We recognised destiny as an enemy and took arms against it. The crux of our problem was land shortage. We looked at our world and saw that only one-fifth of it was land: four-fifths was sea. Very well, we would turn the sea into land also. As the Dutch reclaimed the Zuyder Zee, so we reclaimed vast areas of shallows from the sea. Moreover, we grew food *on* the sea itself. Our seas now bear for us millions of square miles of edible plankton, intersected by narrow shipping lanes for transport."

"What is plankton?" asked Helen.

"Small floating plants and animal organisms. After that, we began on the millions of square miles of the sea-bottoms. Our ancestors had forgotten that the sea was only a covering for four times as much land as they possessed. Good earth, too, nourished by the bodies of sea-creatures for millions of years. So we cultivated edible sea-weeds, and planted them on the ocean floors, and invented mechanical undersea reapers to gather them.

"There was one difficulty about this. All growing plants must receive a certain amount of sunlight, so that their chlorophyll can absorb from it the energy to build up sugar. Therefore, we could only plant to a depth where some sunlight, if only a little, reached. Even so, we've opened up millions of acres of new land in this way. And now we're working on 'Project Sunray.' You see, we've long had lamps which produce artificial sunlight. We're manufacturing huge, powerful lamps of this kind and spreading them on a circuit over the more fertile patches of the deep, sunless sea-bottoms. We've mastered atomic energy and so have almost endless power to keep them running. Erecting them and keeping them maintained

is going to be one heck of a job, but it's not impossible. I happen to be a marine botanist working on that Project, choosing the sites which will produce the best crops of weed. That's how I literally fell into this place."

" Your language is strange," said Mark, suddenly, " and I can understand only some of it. I'm not clever, like my sister or my father. I don't know what you mean by atomic energy. But if it's difficult to set out your lamps under the sea, why don't your people use instead the sort of light which comes from our walls? It is eternal, and I'm told has much of the quality of the sunlight our ancestors knew, and it shines even in water, as you saw in the cell— "

" Be silent, Mark! " exclaimed his father, starting up out of his reverie. " The light was given to Yuami by Obolar, and Obolar will not permit evil men to use it."

But Dan was gazing at Mark with with new respect.

" Thanks, Mark," he said. " I must have been wrong about you. Actually, I had noted the light and its possibilities in that direction. It's one of the two ideas I'm taking back with me from here which might help to answer our food and population problem."

" If you leave here alive, it will not be of your own volition but by permission of Obolar," said Smith, coldly. " And I don't see how you will return to your world, let alone take information with you."

" Nor do I—yet," said Dan. " But there's always a way to do a thing if you want to do it hard enough. I haven't been telling you the history of our people just to hear myself speak. I've been holding it out to you as an example; if you only muster the will, you can make your own destiny, and it's the only real destiny. Anything else is a fake.

" A fake? " echoed Smith.

" A counterfeit, then. You're obeying the orders of a counterfeit destiny, and robbing yourself of your own true one."

" Yours is the voice of a sinful and false pride," said Smith. " You misunderstand completely. We do not *obey* Obolar: it is the instrument of destiny itself. It merely tells us, if it chooses, what is fore-ordained. We are helpless. We cannot choose or avoid events: they are interlocked, and every series of events arises naturally and logically out of the series of events which preceded it. That's obvious. It's common sense. We can't choose events—all we can choose is the attitude with which we meet them. We have no freedom of action, only attitude. And foreknowledge of unhappy

events helps us to steel our attitude against them, to meet them with courage, as foreknowledge of happy ones makes our attitude one of relish. That's how Obolar helps us. It does not intervene, it does not order—it reveals. Now do you understand? "

" I understand that Oblar reveals what it chooses to or what it is able to," said Dan. " Why didn't it reveal that I was coming? I'll tell you why. It didn't know. If it did know of me, it had written me off as dead. I came because *I* chose to come. After my fall out there, my death seemed predetermined, unavoidable. If I'd have resigned myself to it, I should have been dead by now. But I chose to fight against destiny, because it was my enemy. I got up from my death-bed and walked—or crawled. It's always by that sort of effort that we make our destinies, and it's the sort of effort you seem to have lost the capacity for in Yuami. Your ancester, Richard Smith, had this spirit—else he wouldn't have set out from England to preach in savage, unknown islands. Just how Obolar managed to quell it in him, I should like to know. In you, Smith, it seems quite dead. But I have hopes of Helen, and—yes, I think so—of Mark, too. You've all got to wake up around here and tell that thing where it gets off."

He walked over to the pit and looked down at Obolar again Just flimsy wires and crystals, motionless, innocent.

" It may reveal facts," he said, " but it also knows how to conceal them. Partial revelation can mislead, and therefore amount to a lie."

He pulled gently at his ear lobe, and then decided. He lay down, preparing to put his head between the two rods.

Smith jumped up in alarm, protesting. " You must not do that. Only the Guardian can do that."

Dan looked up at him. " Surely if I'm destined to do it, I shall do it, and if not, then not? If you stop me, you may be contravening destiny. But you say that's impossible. Therefore, why not leave it to destiny to stop me? "

Smith stood irresolute.

Mark said: " Surely, father, if you are to stop him, you *will* stop him. Don't you know what you are to do? "

Smith said uncertainly: " Go, son—bring the guard."

Mark rose unhurriedly, and went. And, as Helen watched anxiously, Dan lowered his head between the rods.

At once, as if the machine had been waiting for him to do just this, a mouthless and quite toneless voice spoke in his mind.

" You think you are mature, but you will never be so until you realise the futility of all endeavour. All optimism is an illusion, youthful lack of perspective, doomed to be crushed by the feet of unalterable events. I know. I am as old as Time itself. I am the oracle of Destiny."

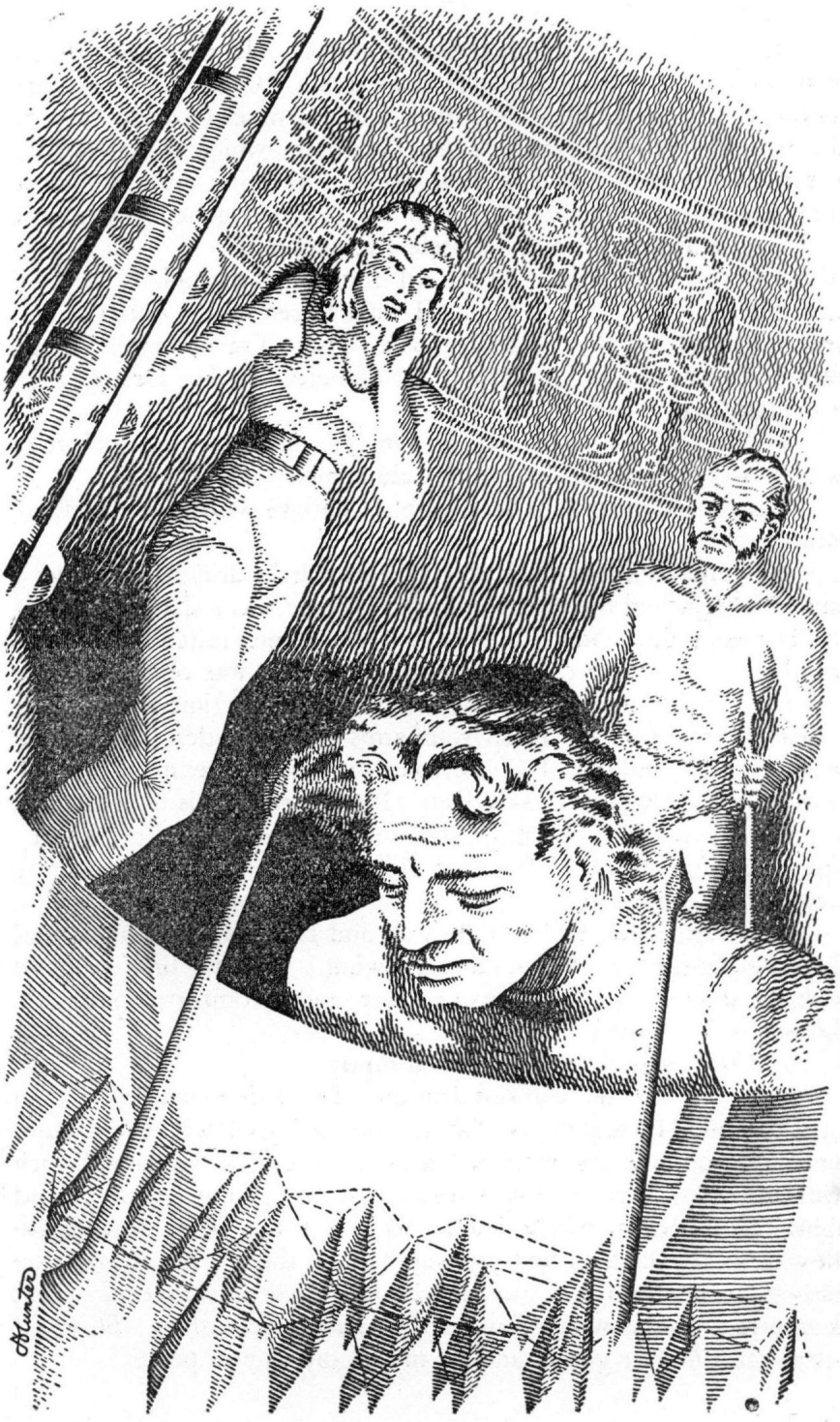
Dan listened in silence. After a pause, the voice continued.

" All your labours have no more point than Sisyphus eternally pushing his stone up the hill. You sweat constantly to grow more food for your kind. Yet your sweat will always be in vain. Every new source you open up means only that you will keep more mouths alive to devour the extra, for humanity eats like the locust and breeds like the rabbit. Whatever you do, therefore, millions of people will always live on the edge of starvation. For Nature's law is population restriction by starvation, and you cannot change it. The wider you push the boundaries of your food-growing area, the greater the number of people lined along those boundaries, starving. You are only increasing the sum of suffering. Do you understand this now? To answer it is necessary only to think."

Dan thought: " What I understood, Obolar, was that we are free only to determine our attitudes. Very well, then, I don't share your attitude. You choose to emphasise only the hungry fringe. I emphasise the far greater number of people within the area whose hunger is satisfied. The more people we have, the more brains we have to work on this problem.

The silent voice answered: " Quality, not quantity, of brains is what matters. It is a fact, as you know, that unintelligent people breed faster than intelligent ones, and the average of intelligence is therefore declining. So if you obtain more and more food, you will automatically become a race of morons. It is a vicious circle, which worsens with every effort on your part. Therefore I advise you to make no effort. Merely accept and prepare yourself for what comes, as do these people of Yuami, who are happy in the light of my wisdom."

" Happy? " echoed Dan. " They lead a pointless life if ever there was one. They're no better than caged animals, with the spirit and fight gone out of them. The only point to life *is* to fight—to fight starvation, cruelty, ignorance, the blind urges of Nature, and the doctrines of despair like yours. These people are not happy. They're bored sick—I saw it in their faces at once. Except Smith, Senior, here, who thinks he's significant in being your Guardian and interpreter."



The voice said: "Remember Sisyphus. He fights to get his stone up the hill. It merely rolls down again. Only a fool is happy fighting to get nowhere. Stay here and learn resignation. If you do, you will replace Smith as my Guardian, which is the nearest anyone can hope to get to significance in this dying universe before the stars grow cold and dark and all life has gone back to the nothingness from which it so uselessly emerged."

And Dan thought: "Yes, I'll remember Sisyphus. But I'll remember the hill, not the stone. I want to see what's over the hill, and so would Sisyphus if he had any sense. I'm not interested in being your yes-man. I'm getting out of here, whether Destiny likes it or not."

He jerked his head out of Obolar's thought-orbit before a further gloom-impregnated reply could come.

He got to his feet. There were six natives with spears flanking him.

He turned and strolled back to where he'd dropped his diving suit. He detached the direction-finder. There was a sharp command in Malinesian from Smith and the half-dozen men raised their spears simultaneously to the casting position, and Dan was obviously their target. He thought "This is it," and at the same time Smith said: "Don't move, Defoe. Keep your arms to your sides. If that's a weapon you're holding, I advise you to make no attempt to use it."

"It's not a weapon," said Dan. Imperceptibly, his finger moved to push the switch. The high, sweet note sang out, and the guards tightened their muscles. But they didn't throw. They were waiting for Smith's command.

Dan turned the finder slightly to and fro within his hand, and the note changed in pitch with each swing. It was a link of sound with the skipper and the others up there, and it comforted him. He did not feel so alone.

"What's that?" said Smith abruptly.

Dan let the modulations continue for a few moments, then switched off. He said: "As Obolar can tell you, we of the outer world can communicate with each other over long distances with such instruments. I was sending a message to my people on the island above, telling them where I am and that I was being threatened. Now, I merely wish to find my way back to them. But if you stop me, or harm me in any way, they'll find their way to *here*. And they have weapons which could kill you all in an instant. So you'd better call off your guard, and let me go my way in peace."

Mark leant silently against the table, watching him, but Helen said: "He has done us no harm, Father. You're taking the wrong attitude altogether. We should help him to return to his people."

Smith rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then gave a little sigh. "Let us see if Obolar can assist us," he said, and went through the ritual of communing with the apparatus in the well.

When he arose, he looked grim. He motioned to the guards to lower their spears, and said deliberately to Dan: "Obolar has revealed that for three days you will endeavour to escape from here, but you will fail, and anyone who tries to help you will die. And on the third day you yourself will die. That is your inescapable destiny."

There was a subdued "Oh!" of dismay from Helen.

"Good enough," said Dan. "I'll back myself against destiny any day."

He walked out of the chamber. It was time to begin reconnaissance. He surveyed the main cave with its population of lounging natives. All these people were consuming oxygen, yet the air was fresh. Had Obolar's original Guardians installed somewhere an oxygen-producing plant? Or . . . ?

He paced the winding, branching passages until he turned a corner and encountered a slight but distinct breeze. He walked against the breeze, which grew steadily stronger, until he reached the end of the passage, which was blank save for a foot-wide crevice near the roof. The air was coming in through the crevice with force enough to stir his hair. The crevice seemed a natural formation and strengthened his hope that the air was not artificially produced, but coming through fissures from the island above.

If this were so, there must be a similar outlet somewhere, else the air wouldn't circulate so freely as it did. He went looking for it: it might be larger than this one, and so offer a better chance. The place was a maze, and he kept emerging in the great central cave. At first the natives eyed his sudden reappearances askance, and then began to ignore him.

At last, when he was striding along a passage with a suspicion that he had been this way before, he met Helen. She stopped and smiled at him.

"Does this passage come out into the central cave?" he asked.

"Yes. Just around the corner there."

"I was afraid so. I'm going around in circles. Can you show me the place where the air is drawn out of these caves?"

" Yes. It's not far."

It wasn't. It was down a narrow side-passage that he'd passed a dozen times and ignored. The crevice here was quite a lot larger and the current of out-going air therefore more dispersed. He stood staring up into it. The wall-paste emitting light ran a short way into it and then faded out. Beyond was an incline of flaky grey rock, narrowing into a funnel farther on and twisting away into darkness.

" Thanks for the help, Helen," he said, and then was struck by a realisation. " I shouldn't have asked you, after Obolar— "

" I'm not afraid," she said, and the confined space made music with her voice. " I shall die when I'm destined to die, neither sooner nor later. Anyway, what is there to live for here? "

He leant against the wall and wished he had a cigarette.

" Nothing that I can see. There's sunshine and unlimited freedom, the moon and stars, the clouds and beautiful flowers up there, Helen. Poor child, you've never seen a sunset or smelt a rose—or eaten a juicy orange."

" I've seen paintings of them," she said, wistfully.

" Come with me," he said, on impulse. " This is a volcanic island, with shafts and vents all over it. I'm pretty sure that if I could enlarge that crevice a bit here and there, so that we could squeeze along it, it wouldn't be long before we'd strike a way out."

" Do you really think so? " she said, with a faint flush of excitement.

" Of course. Look, do you have anywhere some sort of implement, a crowbar or — ? "

" I know just the thing—it belonged to Richard Smith. I'll go and get it."

She went back down the narrow passage. " Don't let your father see you," Dan called after her, and a faint " No " floated back from the distance.

Pacing up and down the empty passage, shining coldly in its own light, he longed more than ever for a smoke. He began to think about Obolar. Everything—the rocket-ship, the thin Guardians moving slowly under a gravitation that proved too great a strain for their hearts, the thought-transference, and the totally alien nature of Obolar—pointed to the conclusion that it had come from another planet. A planet of less gravity than the Earth, and yet not too unlike the Earth, for the Guardians had roughly human form. The best guess would seem to be Mars.

Why had it left Mars? The answer that seemed to be sticking

out was that its existence depended upon a steady circulation of salt water, of which there could be scarcely any left on Mars. All life came from the sea. All life, from the amoeba to man, needed a salt solution in its bloodstream. Starve the bloodstream of salt and you die.

Obolar was a mind of some kind, but how much of it was organic and how much apparatus?

The more he thought about it, the more he visualised a tiny intelligent creature enlisting the aid of electronic calculators and detectors, building them like coral reef about itself, entombing itself entirely in these extensions to its brain. Becoming immovable at last, a blob of protoplasm exerting its will through thought-transmitters and securing power by its prophecies, which were merely its predictors handling vast quantities of facts and figures and extrapolating them.

Perhaps it needed only microscopic electrical energy to work these things. Even so, where did it get it? Picked it up from the animals about it? Or from cosmic rays? Or converted some of the water to energy? It was a puzzle that could wait.

Perhaps once it had had warm emotions, which had lost response and died in the circuits of the cold mechanical mind about it. Perhaps all that was left was the basic animal instinct—self-preservation.

Where had it originated? How many planets had it seen die before it gripped the Martians and made them its servants? For how long had it sapped the will of other creatures with the ingenious mixture of truth and misstatement it presented as " destiny " ?

He imagined Obolar slowly using up the scattered pools of water on the near-dry sea-bottoms of Mars, coldly counting the dwindling population of Martians and foreseeing its own end, untended, parched of saline solution, if something were not done.

And so it foretold that its destiny lay on Earth and the Martians, to fulfill that destiny, had built the rocket-ship (perhaps on an ancient pattern?). And two of the Martians had accompanied Obolar to launch it upon its new existence under the largest sea in the Solar System, where its life-blood could be fed to it automatically—almost.

Yet it could not go too far under the sea, because air must also be supplied to keep alive its attendants. What better spot than the caves on the island of Yuami, which, it calculated by the movements and stresses of the Earth's crust, was due soon to sink largely beneath the sea? What better manoeuvre than to preserve for itself

a supply of Guardians, while giving the impression that it was concerned only for *their* safety, binding them to its vicinity by chains of gratitude and the suggestion that it was the only place to be?

Yes, he thought, Obolar had got it all doped out. It was handling people who'd surrendered their wills to it, who were so many puppets predictable in their behaviour. And it was handling elements subject to the laws of physics, and therefore also predictable. But there was just one sort of intractable material: a man who did not allow things to take their own course if it was not his course, but fought them. A man like himself and his own kind. It was up to him to win his way back and, if possible, to release these unwitting slaves and introduce them to life. He was sure that their hypnosis was only partial, especially in Helen's case.

And as he thought of her, she returned, bearing a light pick-axe. He seized on it with joy.

"It's made for the job," he said. "Now, stand back."

He swung at the lower edge of the crevice and it broke away in small lumps, in a cloud of dust. The pieces lay on the floor, each shining from one facet. He picked up a handful and stuffed them in his pocket for later analysis.

"It's going to be easy," he said. "Perhaps too easy. It's crumbly stuff, and we may not be able to cut durable steps. Let's try, anyway."

He set to work, and the brittle rock came flaking away like coal.

After an hour he was kneeling in the crevice and a good five yards into it. Behind him, Helen was busy carrying back the larger lumps of debris to leave a clear passage. Also, from somewhere she'd procured a biggish clay pot and a scoop, and used them to collect and take away the heavy dust.

Dan came out to stretch his cramped legs and rest his aching arms. For a little while he watched her busily going to and fro.

"All right, Helen, take a rest . . . You really mean to come with me?"

"Of course—so far as I'm able to."

"You needn't be afraid of Obolar stopping you. If you've really made up your mind, it can't do a thing. And speaking —"

He stopped as he saw a figure appear between the two rows of debris lining the foot of the passage walls. Helen followed his gaze.

"It's Hubri," she whispered. "Captain of the guard. He'll

report to Father that I'm helping you — "

Dan bounded past her, and the native turned and fled. Dan pounded along after him. " Stop! " he yelled, and his voice went booming and resounding along the passage. Perhaps it was the sound vibrations which started it, or perhaps the heavy work with the pick had disturbed a potential landslide which would have fallen sooner or later anyway. Pieces of rock began to detach themselves from the roof and splinter about the feet of the running men.

Dan thought of Helen, and immediately stopped and turned. Through a thickening hailstorm of falling rocks he caught a glimpse of her climbing into the widened crevice.

Then a rock thumped against his temple, and sent him reeling, cut and stunned. Before his vision had cleared, the whole of the roof between himself and the crevice thundered down and piled itself up incredibly quickly into a wall twenty yards thick, completely blocking the passage.

Then it was still. But the sound of its fall went on and on, echoing through cavernous Yuami.

Hubri had vanished way ahead. But there was no hiding the news now—all Yuami would come to investigate.

Dan stared unhappily at the blockage, his head aching abominably, and his hands trembling so badly that he'd dropped the pick-axe. Was Helen alive or dead? He hadn't had time to see whether the curtain of falling rock had caught her. There was a chance that the crevice had held up. But she might be badly injured in there.

He grabbed up the axe and started attacking the mass of interposing rock with all the vigour he could muster.

He'd only been at it for a few minutes when Smith came hurrying along with the guard at his heels, and behind them struggled a crowd of hesitant, yellow-skinned natives.

Smith was highly agitated. He grabbed Dan's shoulder. " Is it true? Is it true? "

Dan shook him off and continued working. " Is what true? "

" That Helen was helping you. Where is she? "

" I'm trying to reach her. She's on the other side of this lot."

" She was helping you? "

" Yes."

Smith's agitation fell from him, because for him the uncertainty had ended. He just stood there with the tears beginning to stream from his eyes.

" Then she is dead," he choked.

" I hope not. I don't think so. For heaven's sake, don't all stand there like dummies. Get tools. Help me clear this stuff away. It's quite loose, but there's too much of it for just one man. Come on."

" It's useless," Smith sobbed. " She's dead. Obolar said— "

" To hell with Obolar! " Dan roared, straightening up. " Doesn't Helen mean more to you than that lying collection of junk? For Pete's sake do something for her if you can't do it for yourself. Get some men on this."

Smith tried to say something, but couldn't get it out for grief. He spread his hands helplessly, shook his head with the tears running down his cheeks, and turned and began to trail away.

Dan swore mightily, and started after him.

" Listen — "

The old man wouldn't look at him, but gestured to the guards to restrain him, and tottered on. As the guards moved to obey, Dan sprang at them wielding the pick-axe like a berserker. They scattered before his mad onslaught, and then he was through them and running. As he passed Smith he yelled: " I'll show you what Obolar is worth—I'll smash it to pieces! "

He ran on. A spear shot past his ear, glanced off the wall and went sliding up the shining floor. He overtook it, and heard the padding of many naked feet behind him. But no more spears came.

He outran these unexercised people but lost ground because he was unsure of the way and hesitated at each fork. Always he'd been arriving back in the large central cavern when he'd least expected it, and now that he was looking for it he couldn't find it. His head was throbbing, and the right side of his face was wet with blood. He was getting short of breath, but he gripped his axe tightly and forced himself on.

Suddenly he was in the central cave, and then bounding up the steps to the Smith's chamber. At the entrance he bumped into Mark.

" What's happening? " said Mark. " I was asleep — "

" Oh, go back to bed," gasped Dan, pushing ungraciously past him. He went over to the well, hooked his axe in the sunken handle, and heaved the large circular cover up. He sent it bowling like a great hoop at the door, and the first of the guards coming in leaped out of its path with little yelps. It rolled on through the doorway, and he heard it go crashing down the steps outside to a chorus of alarm.

Axe in hand, he moved purposefully to the lip of the well. He stood on the brink for a moment looking down on the naked filigree of wires and the frozen crystal fingers. Then he swung the axe.

" Stop! " came Smith's hoarse and panting voice. " Stop—or you're a dead man! "

Dan checked the axe in mid-swing.

" Turn round slowly, Don't try to harm Obolar—I warn you."

Dan turned slowly, so that he stood on the edge of the pit and with his back towards it.

Smith stood just inside the doorway, his face smudged and streaked. Behind him the sleepily puzzled face of Mark peered over his shoulder. On either side of them stood the six guards, spears at the throwing position, with all the shining points directed at Dan's heart. The populace buzzed outside the doorway, but none showed their heads inside.

" Well? " said Dan.

Smith took a pace forward, and froze as Dan exclaimed:

" Don't *you* move, or it'll be goodbye to Obolar."

" My men's spears would reach you before you could touch Obolar," said Smith

" If they did, their force would send me backwards into the pit—I'm teetering on the edge, as you see. A hundred and sixty pounds falling seven feet would do 1120 foot-pounds of work on Obolar, and I dont' think Obolar is built to survive it. So tell your guards to hold their horses."

Smith muttered: " They won't throw unless I tell them to. Come away from there and we'll talk this over."

" I'll do my talking from here. And fast, because I'm thinking of Helen. I tell you, not only can we save her but we can all save ourselves too—there's a way out on the other side of that block."

" Save ourselves? "

" From bondage to this thing," said Dan. " Believe me, it's little more than an intelligent machine which has made you its slaves. It can predict the future to a limited extent, yes. But we have bureaux of prediction which function just as well: there's no magic in it—only observation, collation, and calculation. If people merely follow the beaten track, without ever using their initiative, their actions are as predictable as those of machines."

" Even their deaths? "

" Obolar predicted deaths, yes—but some of those predictions

were based on medical knowledge and the rest on pure suggestion. These natives were always susceptible to the prognostications of witch-doctors, and if they were told they were going to die at a certain time they swallowed it whole and duly give up the ghost at the appointed hour. And Obolar has more prestige than any witch-doctor. Its suggestion is fatal—except to people who use their heads, as I do, and as I'm trying to make you do."

Smith said: "If theres' anything in that, why should Obolar predict that you would die in three days' time? It knows that mere suggestion can't affect you."

"No, but it can affect *you.* It would suggest that I killed Helen, and that my lot therefore is execution for murder. It would say that you are the instrument of destiny in this execution, and that you will order it done. It wouldn't order you to do it. It would merely forecast it as something that *will* happen, and you would find yourself doing it because of your innate belief that destiny can't be bucked."

"If you mean that destiny cannot be interfered with, that is so."

"Well, I'm going to interfere with it," said Dan. "In exactly one minute, *unless you promise to leave me free and supply labour to clear that block immediately,* I'm going to smash Obolar with this axe. I'd regret doing it, because I'd like to examine it to find out more about its nature. But if I do nothing Helen will die, and so, no doubt, shall I—and my sense of self-preservation is as strong as its own. For Obolar is working to prevent my getting out of here and bringing my kind to investigate it. At first, it tried to keep me here by bribing me with your job, and when that didn't work it decided to have me die . . . It has thirty seconds left."

"If you move a muscle, I'll order my guard to kill you," said Smith rapidly, in a trembling voice.

"But then you'd be doing the impossible—interfering with destiny—don't you see? I'm not due to die until the day after tomorrow—you just *can't* kill me now."

"He has you in a cleft stick, Father," said Mark. "Promise him help—quickly."

Smith wavered. He turned to address the guard, opening his mouth.

"Don't tell them to try to wound me only," Dan warned swiftly. "If I'm not badly hurt, I'll smash Obolar, anyway. And if I am, I'll fall upon it and crush it. Think again."

Smith closed his mouth. He eyed the two rods of Obolar in

agony, longing for its unobtainable counsel. Whatever they sensed, they were rigid, unmoving.

"Five seconds," said Dan.

"Father!" exclaimed Mark.

"I promise," said Smith, dully.

Natives working by torchlight in relays without pause cleared the block. Dan worked alongside them, and it was he who pierced the last yard. Through the gap, a handspan wide, he called: "Helen!" Helen!"

Her answering voice was very faint and seemed to come from a distance. "I'm here. I'm all right."

"She's all right," Dan flung over his shoulder to Smith. He heard Smith make some sort of shaky answer, but he was not concerned with Smith now. He started enlarging the gap with his hands.

Presently, he managed to crawl through, and Mark handed a torch in after him. He could see the crevice, and it was choked to within a few inches of the top with fallen rock. Alarm went through him. Was she under that? He lifted his torch and peered over the top of the debris, deep into the crevice. He could see no sign of her.

"Helen," he called again, huskily.

Her answer came at once: "I'm right at the back of the crevice. I managed to wriggle in here before the worst of the stuff came down. I'm not hurt. But I can't get out."

"Don't worry, we'll soon get to you."

"I have something to show you when you get here."

They found her crouched around a corner, at a point where the horizontal vent turned suddenly into a vertical one—a natural cleft reaching up and up to a thin, pale ribbon of light. Helen indicated the light, and Dan sucked in his breath at the sight of it.

Smith, his face dust-grimed and streaked with rivulets caused partly by sweat and partly by tears, crawled in.

"Helen, my dear."

"Oh, Father!"

They embraced, as Mark thrust his head in. He watched his father and his sister for a moment, and then said: "So you're not dead, after all, Helen. Father would have it that you were."

Smith said apologetically: "Well, Obolar said anyone who helped . . . I mean, perhaps it wasn't meant to happen yet. Oh, Helen, why did you do it?"

"Don't be a fool, man," said Dan, roughly. "Must you still

threaten her with Obolar's nonsense? Can't you see it has lied right and left? Look—see that streak of light up there? That's daylight! That's the island. Obolar said I'd never get out—why, we'll *all* get out! "

" Has our air been coming from that hole all this time? " asked Mark, peering up.

" From it or from another like it—for four hundred years. And you never bothered to wonder about it or look for it," said Dan.

" That proves that Obolar lied again, Father," said Mark. " It said that the sea had *entirely* submerged the island—yet it knew these air-holes were open all the time."

" I . . . I must have been a fool," muttered Smith.

" No comment," Dan. " Well, let's not waste time."

He found his axe and cut the first step. As he worked on, he thought: Obolar was wrong about everything. That argument about the omnipresent starving fringe, for instance, with which Obolar tried to take the heart out of him. The ignorant and the ill-educated tended to have too many children, certainly. But the answer was obvious: inform and educate them, raise their standard of civilisation. It was a fact that as the level of civilisation rose, so the birth-rate fell. Civilise, then, with all possible might!

He was glad he'd had this adventure, unpleasant as some of it had been. It had given him Helen, and he felt that their futures were interlocked from now. It had given the idea of using the cold light as undersea illumination for the E.4's. It had given him an even greater idea—to institute a search and a salvaging operation for the Obolar's interplanetary rocket, which must still be lying on the sea-bed in these waters.

For although the world had long had atomic power, it had never yet hit upon a satisfactory working fluid for an interplanetary rocket drive. If Obolar's ship had indeed come from Mars (he wondered how much of his supposition was true) then the secret of its working could be wrung from its structure.

And then there would be new land on a grand scale for agriculture—whole planets of it! There would be no end to Man so long as he kept trying and trying. This was an example of it: he'd come seeking the way to open up the unlit sea-beds, and because of that he'd probably opened up the Solar System as well.

He was glad, also, that he'd not destroyed Obolar. There must be endless information stored in that mind—for example, about the working of the rocket-ship and its location under the sea.

It had power only over the ignorant and superstitious. Before strong-minded and sceptical adults it was more helpless than a baby, since it was quite inanimate. They'd have it on a string—"Tell us this, Obolar, and tell it *right*—or it's no sea-water for you to-day."

So, with optimism in his heart and ideas rampant in his head, he led them all upwards. Up to the daylight.

And up to his death, too, and Helen's death, on the third Yuami day, as Obolar had foretold. They swam for pleasure, and the rip-tide caught them and drained them of strength, until they sank silently to the bottom. And there the flowering E.4 plants closed over them and covered the ugliness of death with beauty.

Later, the E.4 plants spread steadily out towards the night in the sea which ever receded before them, for with them came a new, cold light splashing over every rock and making it a sun.

Very much later still there was the year when nobody came to harvest the crops, for there was plenty of tastier food elsewhere. Plenty for everybody—all through the busy solar system.

Obolar still had its servants, but now it was a servant too. Destiny had learned to co-operate.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

THE NEXT ISSUE

Have you ever wondered just who (or what) it is that causes all the really important changes in Society? Projected out into space and forward into the future, this is the fascinating central theme of ERIC FRANK RUSSELL'S latest novelette, to appear for the first time in the next edition of NEBULA.

In the same issue there is an extremely suspenseful tale from popular American author, L. MAJOR REYNOLDS, plus an extremely poignant short from inimitable E. C. TUBB. Other stories are handled very competently by A. C. THORNE and others to make a varied and absorbing issue.

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

Sabina

Hal Chibbing's wife came from the oddest place!

Illustrated by Jack Wilson

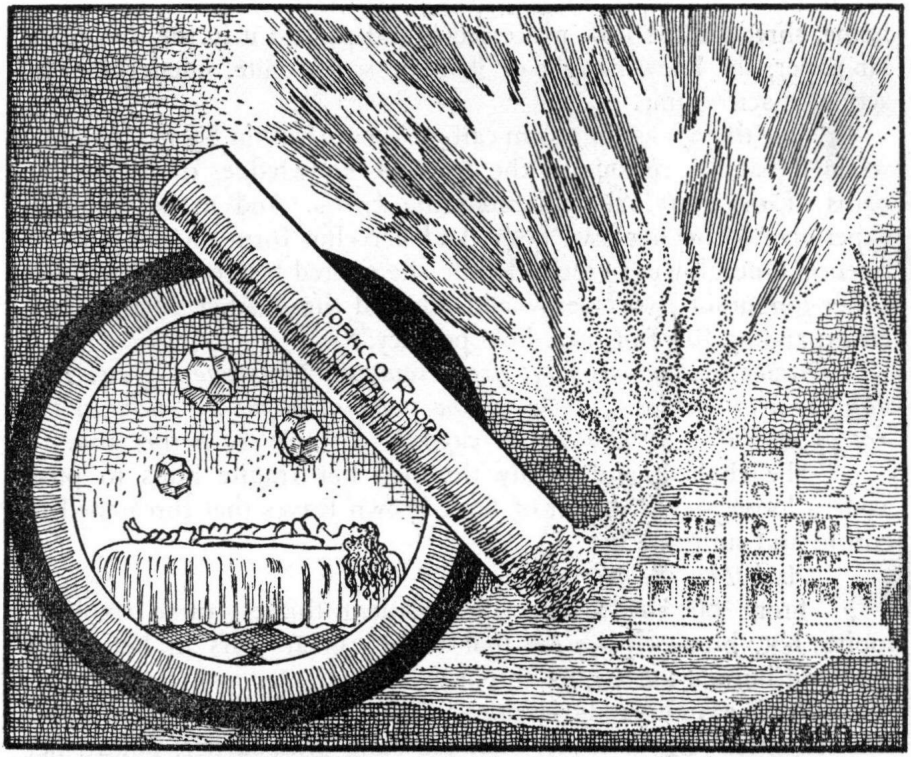
"Cigaret life if you don't weaken!" punned my incorrigible pal, Cornel Ward. Cornel, as you will know if you're not a teevee-totaler, scripts for Jack Hope on the Coke-a-Smoke program, EBC's Thursday nite telecast for "Tobacco Rhode". Rhode, who in this latter half of the '50's has made roasting, toasting, treating, testing and all his boasting competitors' processes as passé as any skirt over 18 in. below umbilicus. And you know how he did it: with the innovation of his *Unique, Exclusive but Equicosting COLA BEAR Discovery—It Airconditions Your Inhibitions—Gives you a Lift without a Letup!*

Cornel pursued his advantage. "Well," he quipped, as he was well equipped to do, "you heard my fag gag—can you match it?"

"No, Corny," I admitted, biting my tongue as I shoved it into my cheek, "you're matchless!" (I'm Hal Chibbings, who coined *Smokease*: *the Cigaret that Whiffs You out of a Sag,* and retired to a little glass shack in Malibu. If you don't know me at least you will be familiar with my wife (known professionally as Binny Bikini, the strip-teeveeser). Facetiously I added, "You should be exiled to the punitentiary and rationed dehydrated water and hot cross puns!"

Cornel blew a deliberate cloud of smoke—dense as an airmada in a 21st Century-Fox sky-war spectacle—in my direction and reparteed: "Anything within ration!"

I choked on an imaginary bread crumb in my gullet. Then,



mock-seriously, quoting a character named Passworthy in the favorite scientifilm of my youth, I counselled, " Oh, and Cornel you've been smoking too much. You're not . . . you're not . . . *eupeptic.*"

" I recognise the source of your quote," he replied. " *The Shape of Things.* Too calm! "

" Too calm, eh? H'm . . . Did I ever tell you about Sabina—Sabina of the White Cylinder? "

" Blond or brunet? "

" Hush the mush—you know what gentlemen have preferred from time immoral."

" Sure—suicide blonds: dyed by their own hand. But surely, Halitosis, old chub, you aren't classifying yourself as a gentleman? "

" That pun, gent, has an aroma."

" OK, so I'm the perfect type for smellavision. But what's this about a gal named Subpeona? "

" Sabina! " Assuming my conscious pose, I continued narrationally: "Tiny beyond the vision of a microscope, she dwelt in a world where man-made heat nor flame could not reach her. Thus it was that when they plucked the broad leaf that contained her atomic

home, shredded the leaf, processed it and packed it in the thin tubular paper, she knew naught of it. Microscopic mite, uneffectable by actions macrocosmic.

" But there was the storm-call of science within Sabina, strange, so-small Sabina, curious in the ways of knowledge, daring in the paths of discovery. She mixtured the *kristls.* And in her ultralab experimented on her own body, laid her elfin form on the altar of Science. One glowing green globule she melted between her tongues —her tongue of two layers—and released thruout her vibrant body an expanding force of incredible potency."

Dizzily the human mote from remotest minuteness grew. Big, now, as a molecule . . . now as the point of a pin . . . now as the dot of an " i " . . . now as the capital " I " you see before you.

" She choked, and wildly threshed her fragile arms to push aside a loose-packed prison of huge brown leaves that threatened to enfold and suffocate her.

" *And then she felt the flame*!

" From far ahead, thru the redolent thicket, came smoke— moist, hot, blue-grey smoke that welled great tears in her violet eyes and burned her tender throat.

" And a monstrous, cyclonic rush of heated vapor attacked her violently. An invisible, body-big band grasped her, pinned her against the leafy background. The heat scorched like a torch. And with each wind-rush the redness rapidly was advancing!

" Swirling smoke . . . crushing current . . . mounting heat— and the leaves igniting before her eyes, a wall of living fire advancing toward the cowering Sabina! Man-made heat and flame could harm her now, could blister, burn Sabina grown to cigaret-circumference size."

The maid from micro-smallness, trapped in the tube! *The fire curtain, inexorably approaching, red carrier of dreadful death.*

" Holy smoke! " Cornel's humor was, I think, unconscious. " What happened, Hal? "

" She had one more kristl."

He suspected now, but it was too late. I switched on my Rainbeau video and there, on the 50 in. screen, in technicolor, was Sabina, the most beautiful striptease on The Striparade, star of " A Stripper Named Desire."

Sabina's millions of fans, of course, know my Bikini baby as Binny.

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

J. T. M'INTOSH

War's Great Organ

They had a weapon which could ensure immediate victory for their country— they couldn't know that their country didn't want it.

Illustrated by Bill Price

FROM the way Jack Nicol came up the hill to the village they knew he had failed again. They fell into step with him silently, Cartwright and Holt and May, as he strode along moodily, kicking every stone he saw on the dusty road. Already in the short distance from the depot his shoes were white, clashing with the neat town clothes he wore.

They asked no questions, but Nicol had to talk. Resentment was surging in him, and it had to overflow into words. "Same as ever," he muttered savagely. "Red tape. One petty official after another. At last someone listens long enough for me to think I'm really getting something over. Then suddenly he asks a polite question that shows he hasn't heard a word."

They walked in silence for a while, May on the sidewalk, the other three in the street. Then Nicol was talking again in the same cold, angry tone.

"In the end they got me talking automatically, not believing

a word I was saying. That's what they always do. Beat a man down with civility. I think I finally saw a man who was somebody. But of course by then what I had to say sounded a cock and bull story because it was that to me, too."

"So what do we do now?" asked Holt.

"I don't do anything," said Nicol moodily. "I'm finished."

No one paid any attention to that. Not one of them was thirty, and they had known each other for twenty-five years. They knew by now just how long Nicol's fits of depression lasted.

"Come in and I'll fix you some coffee," said May brightly, as if it were a new idea and she had not said the same thing a thousand times before.

May was one of them, and when someone stared at her and whistled it wouldn't be Nicol, Cartwright or Holt. When they thought of girls they didn't think of May. Likewise she had turned outside the group when it occurred to her that it would be nice to be married.

"Maybe I should have blown up the White House," said Nicol. He meant it, but that was his dark, bloodshot mood talking.

"I keep telling you—Berlin," Cartwright said. "We're at war, aren't we? We can't sell the equaliser. Seems we can't even give it away. But after we turned it on Berlin . . ."

May shuddered. "Any more of that, Bill, and I'm out," she murmured. "We're not fighting the war."

She went through to the kitchen and they heard crockery rattle. "How did you explain it, Jack?" she called through. "One more try won't hurt you. Pretend we're another committee and you're trying to sell us the idea."

"I told them it was a ray," said Nicol, shaking out a cigarette. "I knew that was a bad start. Some of them grinned whenever I mentioned the word. But I couldn't get away from it. It *is* a ray. I told them it could bend round the Earth's surface and be focussed anywhere. Sometimes I tried to explain how the path of the ray was controlled, sometimes I didn't bother. Once when I said that only the furtherest tip of the ray was active, the man I was talking to said, 'Like a hand on the end of a long arm?' I said yes, and he laughed. He was still laughing when I went out."

They didn't tell him not to be bitter. They were pretty bitter themselves, except May, who didn't know how. They understood her invariable good humour, counted on it, loved her for it, but couldn't emulate it. It wasn't so much that they had the ulti-

mate weapon and nobody wanted it. It was that people were dying when there was no need for them to die.

" I told them the ray turned all attack the other way," Nicol went on. " That it could take all the power for defence screens and trip circuits and S-fields, let alone projectiles or explosives, and turn it all loose. I used words of one syllable to get the idea across. Or if they showed the least technical knowledge, I became technical. I told them how we discovered a field in which all violent chemical reaction equalised itself over the whole volume of the field. How we looked for, and found, a field with a similar effect on electric discharges. Oh, I gave them plenty of opportunity to see that what I was saying might be true, and it was up to them to see if it was."

May came back with the coffee. " But what did you tell them," she asked, " about the application of the equaliser to the war? "

" Simply that it would finish it in twenty-four hours."

" Maybe you should have said six months," said Holt thoughtfully. " People are suspicious when you say a thing's too easy or too quick."

" You'd think they were scared they might win the war," said Cartwright furiously. " Turn it on Berlin, I tell you. Or London or Paris or Rome. Turn it on the whole damn lot."

Cartwright had said this before. May made her usual reply. " Maybe they want to win it their own way. They could be right. Who ever understood wars? They're like getting behind a boulder and pushing. Once you get it to move, you can't stop. it. It's just as difficult to stop it as it is to start it. More, if you want to stop it at a certain time, in a certain place."

The others shook their heads impatiently. They were at least as intelligent as May was, but to them a war was a thing that had to be won without subtlety, without waste of time, the easiest way there was to win it.

May sighed. " And maybe it's all just as simple as it looks," she said. " In every war there have been hundreds of cranks who had some scheme that would finish it in next to no time. You can't blame them for being sceptical."

The phone bell rang. May dropped her cup with a clatter and dashed out into the hall, hair flying, skirt swirling.

" That must be Bob Sheppard," Holt remarked. " Can't think what she sees in him. How can such an intelligent girl be so dumb? "

Nicol and Cartwright shook their heads slowly in complete agreement. But Cartwright stopped shaking his head when it oc-

curred to him that if he didn't dash to the phone like that when Marge Simpson called, he at least wanted to. For a moment they forgot that they were the inventors of the ultimate weapon, not just three ordinary people.

• • • •

Captain Megginson was a beautiful man. Unfortunately he knew it. But now and then he was able to forget for a while that he was God's gift to women and concentrate on his job. He was doing that now.

" Say, Major," he said, looking across at the man with the bigger desk in the large, comfortable room, " did it ever occur to you that if there were a ray like that hick claimed, it would behave exactly as he said it would? "

Major Unkel sighed. It needs a big man to sigh effectively. Unkel was a big man. Sitting down, he was absolutely shapeless. He had a small round head with small round cheeks and a small round chin. But somehow he didn't look a fool.

" As usual, captain," he said, " I'm about three steps ahead of you. Which is sad, for when I retire soon you'll probably get my job. How are you at the moment? Mind thoroughly off women? "

Megginson grinned. " Until you put it back."

" I had that thought long ago," said Unkel. " So I asked questions. Captain, when someone comes to you as the inventor of a perpetual motion machine, but without a model, so that you can only ask questions, what questions do you ask? "

" How it overcomes gravity, friction and air resistance," said Megginson promptly.

Unkel shook his head. " Wrong," he said sadly, " quite wrong. You should ask him everything else. Take his answers as truth and make deductions from them. Then see what you have. That's what I did. The results were these."

He groped on his desk and found a very small piece of paper. He read out from it: " Air conducts electricity. The human body functions without chemical action. Light rays can be bent round the Earth. There is no such thing as insulation. Heat can be instantly conducted through stone walls. Combustion of explosives— "

" Hold on," protested Megginson, laughing. " Young Nicol

didn't say anything like that."

" I told you," said Unkel equably, " these are scientific deductions from what he did say. Perhaps not all of them are justified. Most of them are."

" He could still have something entirely new."

Unkel waved a fat hand. " And the inventor of a perpetual motion machine could walk in and tell us about it."

" That's entirely different, and you know it."

" Not at all. Some day someone will beat gravity or friction, one or the other. Doing either would enable him to make what we would be prepared to call a perpetual motion machine. A wheel in a vacuum with no friction. Spin it and it goes on for ever. Or an anti-gravity plate under one half of a wheel. It will spin as long as gravity pulls the other half down."

" I still think someone should keep an eye on Nicol."

Unkel blinked at him thoughtfully. " Even if this small-town ray were all young Nicol said it was," he remarked, " would we want it? "

" It's not really a matter of whether we want it or not," said Megginson carefully. " It's rather a question of whether we've got to take it."

Unkel leaned back happily. " Now that, captain," he said encouragingly, " is much better. That's almost constructive thought."

• • • •

Probably never before in the history of Lavista had as many as three and a half experimental scientists lived in it. In a sense everyone is a scientist, but in sheer qualification there had never been anyone in the town to approach May as a scientist, let alone Nicol, Cartwright and Holt.

At the local school Nicol had already shown a bent for physics, and his two friends were dragged in his wake by circumstance. When Nicol went on a scholarship to take a scientific degree, Holt followed by the same route, and Cartwright, whose parents had money, didn't need financial help.

Top of the corresponding girls' section at school had been May Playfair. She went to the university quite independently, and not for a scientific training, but for English. Once there, however, she

drifted more and more into the company of the three serious young men from Lavista, and if she never actually studied science, a lot of it rubbed off on her.

So that made four enthusiastic youngsters thinking the same way, with the same talents, ready to take any sort of job anywhere so that they could stay together.

But jobs aren't advertised for teams. Their country somehow didn't seem to want them. Twice they had volunteered in a body, May included. But this was a war of few soldiers, few scientists, few key workers, and many officials. Twice they had been told they would be called when they were needed. Apparently they had never been needed.

So May taught at the local school, Holt ran a radio repair shop, Nicol took photographs and sold articles to technical journals, and Cartwright lent them all money. And incidentally they built a weapon which nobody wanted.

• • • •

Nicol and Cartwright called on Holt just as he was closing. He merely raised his eyebrows when he saw them. He was the taciturn, phlegmatic member of the group. He carried the ballast for the four of them.

" About May," said Cartwright, taking the bull by the horns. " We can't use the equaliser until she agrees. We've worked on her. No soap. Let's work on Bob Sheppard and her old man."

Holt liked things to be presented to him like that, briefly and without preamble. It made it easier to reach a decision in the same way. He considered the matter for fifteen seconds.

" Okay," he said.

They went to see old Sherry Playfair first. It had been something of a feat when he fathered May. He was well past the age for such an achievement. And he was twenty-five years older now. But he didn't intend to become senile without a struggle. When they found him he was working on an outhouse.

" Mind if we talk to you? " Nicol asked.

Sherry put down his hammer and started planing instead. " Hammer might distract you," he said. " Go right ahead."

" Suppose Bill and Walter and May and I had a pretty powerful

weapon," said Nicol. " Suppose we could turn it on Berlin and demonstrate that it could end the war in a couple of days. Think we should do it? "

" Suppose," said the old man thoughtfully, planing with a slow, easy movement.

" That's it. Just imagine it. Suppose this weapon would knock Berlin right out as an arsenal and administrative centre. But of seven million people it would kill only about forty thousand. A lot of people to kill, maybe, but no more than one in a hundred and eighty Perhaps less. Suppose it went for weapons, not people."

" That would be a pretty good weapon," said Sherry. " I suppose you call it the ultimate weapon? That's what they always call things like this."

" We would call it the equaliser," said Nicol blandly, " if we had it."

" And what was it you asked me? "

" Just—should we use it? Assume we've already tried to interest the government in it and failed."

The old man knew how often Nicol had been to Washington. " Where do I come in? " he asked.

Holt took over. " Well, you know how Jack and Bill and May and I always got on. Seems we can't agree about this, though. We wondered if we could get you on our side, sort of, or on May's side. It's a deadlock as it is."

" May says don't use it? "

They nodded. The old man picked up the hammer again and drove in a few nails. He seemed to be thinking. Then he started planing again.

" This is a funny war," he said. " I've seen a lot of wars. Wars where everyone knew what they were fighting for. Wars where nobody knew. Wars where nobody cared. And this is the queerest war of all. I think this war is a chess game. Maybe America and Europe mean to put all the pieces back on the board when it's over."

He stopped planing and lit his pipe. " But there's some pieces they can't put back," he said. " My grandson Peter. My nephew Will. They're dead. I saw Peter buried, after he was brought back. He was only a pawn, and he went early. Maybe this is a cold, careful war, not wasteful like the wars I used to know. But that doesn't matter one tiny tinker's damn to Peter and Will."

He turned and faced them. " If you have a weapon like the one you've been telling me about, turn it on Berlin. Maybe it'll tear a

hole in the curtain and let a little light through. The more we know about the truth, the less truth there is. I'll talk to May. I wont' tell her what she should do or think. I'll tell here what *I* think, and she can take it or leave it."

They went in search of Bob Sheppard. Old Sherry had been philosophical, but not nearly as philosophical as they had thought he would be. They should have talked to him long ago.

Bob Sheppard was even easier. Bob couldn't see the question. If they had such a weapon as they described, of course they should turn it on Berlin. He didn't know how May could think anything else.

They were more careful with Bob than they had been with Sherry not to indicate that they actually had the weapon. Sherry might be old, but he had brains. Bob hadn't.

Three days later May told them she had changed her mind.

• • • •

When they assembled at the old hut two miles from Lavista where they had done most of their work they all brought a few pieces of equipment with them. America might not be interested in their work, but Europe would be, if they knew about it. Their apparatus was never left complete, in an ordered and comprehensible whole. When Holt had some of it, and Nicol carried a few parts in his pocket, and Cartwright had a coil or two in his car, and May had a few curious little pieces in her handbag, there was little danger of anyone's curiosity being satisfied, even if they found the equipment left at the hut.

Holt, Cartwright and Nicol looked covertly at May. She might resent the pressure that had been put on her.

" Did you send the wires, May? " Nicol asked, merely because he felt he had to say something when she looked up and caught his eye.

" Sure. Timed 12.30. That gives us an hour yet. They wouldn't pay much attention to the wires at the time, I suppose. But they will afterwards."

She shuddered. " I hope we're right," she said in a tone which inferred she was still pretty sure they weren't. " It would be a nice solution, wouldn't it, if the equaliser didn't work. We've only tried

it over two thousand miles. Perhaps . . ."

"Don't count on that," said Nicol. "And don't start on the old stories that we're going to start a chain reaction or a new disease or upset the world't orbit. This is a very small thing, really. Just another test."

"Estimated loss, forty thousand human beings," said May bitterly.

"*Estimated gain,*" corrected Cartwright grimly. "Don't let's have any more loose thinking. You bomb an arsenal if you can, and if any innocent civilians are killed, no one can say you didn't play according to the rules. Berlin's own defence screens will do most of the damage. If somewhere in this cockeyed world there's an entirely peaceful city, and we turned the equaliser on it, hardly any damage would be done, and maybe no one would die. That's the beauty of the equaliser."

Holt grinned wryly. "We might have called it 'Serves you

right'," he observed.

They put in some hard work, assembling and testing the machine which was to reach out to Berlin from the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and strike with Berlin's own offences and defences.

It was just a few minutes off deadline when they heard a plane. It was over Lavista, stunting frantically.

"They've wakened up," said Cartwright jubilantly, shaking hands with himself. "That plane must be from Defence."

"Then hadn't we better wait?" May asked. "That was what we wanted."

Nicol shook his head. "They still don't really believe us," he said. "They just think there might possibly be something in it. If we wait now, we'll be back where we started. We still need that demonstration."

Everything was pre-set, once the installation was complete. They had nothing to do but press a switch.

"They may have turned off the power in Lavista," Holt remarked.

"Just as well we don't need it, then," Nicol said. The tubes glowed. He put his hand on the button.

"No!" exclaimed May suddenly. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have listened to you and Sherry and Bob. I knew we should never—"

"Too late to start it again," said Nicol. "We can't argue for ever." They saw the needles swing, a tube tried to shine like an electric light and then burned itself out. But it didn't matter. It had lasted long enough. There were twenty-five big batteries in the back of the hut, but by now there would hardly be enough power left in them to light a flashlight bulb. The field around Berlin would gradually die, but it would take its time.

Nicol switched off, took out the tube and ground it under his heel.

"That did something to Berlin," said Cartwright, cold exultation in his voice. "The screen would be on. It's always on. That means millions of amps looking for some damage to do. Every wire, every electric installation in Berlin burned out like that tube. Every shell exploded."

They all saw Berlin in their minds, though none of them had been there. They saw men struck by lightning where there was no storm. Insulated wire picking up power like aerials collecing waves. Circuits shorted, racing engines, fires suddenly blazing where there had been no spark. That was only what they knew. They were all

uneasily aware, even Cartwright, that more than they could possibly know must have happened. They had tested the ray, Nicol and May in Maryland and Cartwright and Holt in California. But they had tried it on no cities. They had tested clinically, secretly, not destructively.

They had made up for it now.

The plane over the town had somehow got scent of them. Perhaps it had merely neared the hut in a random sweep and happened to pick out the four figures as they emerged. At any rate it began to look for a place to land.

Nicol waved and pointed to the grassland to the left of the track leading to the hut. There was a good strip there.

" They may put us in jail," said Holt.

" Perhaps. Let's smash the machine up a little anyway, so as not to take chances. Could be anyone in that plane."

But when five men ran from it Nicol recognised Captain Megginson at once. He grinned as the handsome captain came up, panting, and cast an involuntary glance at May.

" Hello, captain," he said. " Ready to listen now? "

" He doesn't know what happened," May murmured. " Berlin will clamp down on news. It'll be hours before they hear anything."

" On the contrary," said Megginson grimly, " we'll hear almost at once."

Nicol frowned. He tried to put himself at his ease by introducing the others to Megginson. Gradually he felt better as he began to sense Megginson's attitude. The Government man was hardly older than they were. He wasn't pleased, but his attitude wasn't frigid or furious either. He looked more as if he had caught four children stealing cookies than anything else.

" You should have waited," he said at last.

It had to be Cartwright, the impatient, who answered that. " If you knew how long we've waited . . ." he began, breathing deeply.

" I do know." Megginson sighed. " No, you couldn't know. And yet, you must be intelligent, all of you. You might have worked out . . . Have you ever really thought about this war? "

" So it's a phoney war," said Nicol disgustedly. " I always thought "

" No," Megginson insisted. " Nothing like that. It's a very real war. You think I could just say it was a mock war, all very simple, and you could understand the whole situation in five minutes? The one thing it's not is simple. There have been other wars. Hundreds

of them. And only the first ones, the mere battles in a field, were simple. This time we realised that wars were inevitable. Literally inevitable."

He paused, and automatically May said: "Come into the hut, all of you, and I'll fix you some coffee."

All nine of them went inside. Megginson's colleagues were grim but silent, leaving it to him. Only one of them was in uniform.

"When this war started," Megginson went on, "we were really beginning to understand wars. We knew—though we couldn't tell everyone—exactly who was going to be in the war, how long it would last, and what would be agreed at the end."

Cartwright bellowed inarticulately. Then gradually words came out. "Why should we listen to this bull?" he demanded angrily. "As wars went on people knew less and less, not more and more. We used to hang little labels on peoples and say we were fighting fascism or nazism or communism or socialism and there was even a time when it looked like we were fighting democracy. If you fight, God damn it, you fight, and if the Germans or the Russians or the New Guinea head-hunters are trying to kill you, you kill them first, don't you—or isn't that sense any more?"

Megginson, unruffled, accepted a cup of coffee from May.

"Regrettably," he said, "it is. All that was new about this war, which otherwise is the same as any other, was that we—and 'we' means Europe as well as America—were mainly concerned not to spend too much money and not to get too many people killed. We didn't know who would win, but no one ever has at the end of any war, so why should we know at the beginning?

"This, in fact, is the first 'controlled' war. Why have one at all? We don't know the answer to that yet. It was enough that if we stuck to our bargain, Europe would stick to hers. Both of us had to. Both of us did."

"And we blow up Berlin," said May quietly.

"Thank heaven you sent those wires," Megginson remarked feelingly. "I was going to investigate you anyway, though this war has only two months to run, but I hadn't time to get started. We got in touch with Berlin. Told them to switch off their defence screens, all other defence installations and any live attack installations. To divert all possible power . . ."

"Told them . . ." Nicol murmured helplessly.

"Sure. I don't say you did no harm. You may have done, you may not. I'm inclined to think you have done something. Any-

way, I'll arrest you on the chance. But with luck you'll—"

"Arrest us? What for?"

"Call it disturbance of the peace," said Megginson unsmilingly.

It wasn't as easy as Megginson apparently thought. Several people had died in Berlin, and the worst of it was, they were Government men. Europe, incensed, declared peace prematurely and demanded reparations.

But the world was really getting somewhere with the problem of war. The three-and-a-half scientists saw that, particularly after Major Unkel had talked to them. They were left with the feeling that they must have missed something. But that was apparently quite common.

The gift of the equaliser somewhat mollified Europe. It would help to make the next war even cheaper.

And anyway, that wouldn't be for twenty-four years and two months yet.

J. T. M'INTOSH

WHICH STORY DID YOU LIKE BEST?

So that we can give you the kind of story you like best, please complete the ballot form opposite. Number the stories in the order of your preference, your favourite first, and so on. Mail the completed form to the publishers as soon as possible.

After two months the votes will be counted and the author of the story you liked best will be asked to write another yarn for NEBULA immediately. If any story gets more than 40 per cent. of the votes cast, it's author will receive a cash prize depending on the length of the story concerned.

Destiny Is My Enemy	
Sabina	
War's Great Organ	
Alphabet Scoop	
Troublemaker	

The result of the poll on the stories in NEBULA 4 will appear in No. 6, the result of the poll in this issue will appear in No. 7.

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Alphabet Scoop

Georgie was a mathematical marvel—the trouble was that no one would listen to him!

Illustrated by Bob Clothier

I'M not so sure about this literary jetwash they call science-fiction. Being the strong-minded first mate on a solid, fast-moving sky-lugger like the *Aphrodite* has taught me that out in space you don't find any fairy princesses saving the universe with four-dimensional tweezers. Spite of that, someday I'll go through the dusty files of the Philadelphia Science Institution and look up the Fall, 1930, issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY.

It all started in a commonplace enough way when our skipper waked me up out of my snore-watch with a yell. This is commonplace.

"Sandy," Old Scratch raved, "you got to do something about it. That quadruple-damned mathematical prodigy of ours don't like our orbit!"

Georgie Periwinkle again. Twice as much I wanted to sleep now.

"He says it ain't efficient. I'll efficient him. I'll tear him up into ecotrons!"

Ecotrons being one of the sub-atomic particles dear little Georgie discovered a few years back.

" We spent days on that orbit! " Old Scratch howled pathetically. " He don't like it because it's a forced trajectory. He said he could figure a better one in two seconds. He said we should be on a planetary orbit and we'd get to Io nine-ten hours faster."

" Mr. Flabberty! " Old Scratch's round nose was red like an overheated jet. He smacked his hammy fists together an inch from my groggy face. " You keep him out of my hair. Tell him I'm captain of this ship, and if he don't like it he can go back to the Philadelphia Science Institution! "

He lumbered out. And I was sore. Six months ago Georgie Periwinkle tricked us into giving him a job as a cabin boy. We didn't know his real name then or that he actually was a ward of the Philadelphia Science Institution. But he did have brains, and he saved our hides in a crack-up on a wobbly planet. In the process, he had to tell us who he was. As a return favor, we agreed to keep him on as cabin boy and not let anybody know where he was.

Trouble was, the kid didn't mind letting us know he had brains. It burned us up. Everything we did was wrong. Him only sixteen years old and knowing things we'd spent half our lives learning!

Now he was criticising our forced trajectory—that's when a ship climbs straight up from the Sun instead of coasting easy in an expanding planetary orbit. Sure, nobody likes the Wittenberg howl in his ears all watches, but it was the best way and the quickest to get to Io. And I wasn't letting any half-pint, straw-haired, neon-eyed kid tell me any different!

I went down the quarter-beam tunnel, shrugging on my first-mate's coat. Then I heard the hiss of air from the starboard airlock. I got mean, and swung the big valve open. Sure enough, the kid was inside, blue eyes popping at me from behind the face-plate of a pressure suit.

" Come out of there, you eclipse-gone-wrong! " I yelled.

Sure, I liked the kid. But being rooted out of a sound sleep by an ornery-tempered skipper *and* being forced to listen to that double-damned Wittenberg howl put hooks in the ends of my nerves.

The kid came, his lips shoved out, defiant. But first he scooped up a complicated metal gadget and a bulging sack and a small oxygen tank.

" Please don't take them away from me, Sandy," he begged. " Anyway, you'd better not. I'll snitch on you. I'll tell my friend,

the President of the United States! "

I snapped, " What are these gadgets for? "

" It's sky-writing," he bleated. " Why, what if a ship should be stranded, and they can't radio for help—"

" Huh," I said, sour.

He took that for interest, which it was. " I knew you'd listen to me, Sandy. You're not like the rest of these stuffed olives. You see, the ship's headed right into a funny electronic field, and we're on the wrong orbit—*Awrk*! "

Suddenly he scooped up his gadgets, and streaked into a branching corridor. I felt sure he'd been pulling some bluff and couldn't live up to it. Then I saw our passenger coming down the tunnel.

" That young man who was just here, Mr. Flabberty." His fishy eyes had a habit of moving around you slow while his lips said words. " He seemed to be in somewhat of a hurry."

" Him? Yessir. He's our—er—cabin boy. Very busy."

I couldn't tell him our cabin boy was Georgie Periwinkle, because this thin beanstalk was a director of the Corporation.

" Yes, he did seem busy," frowned Gawkins, which was the beanstalk's name. Then he cleared his throat. " Well, Mr. Flabberty. Will we make it on time? "

" Make what, sir? "

" Make it to Io, on time, of course," he said sharply. " Remember, Mr. Flabberty, if our rivals get in a prior bid on the new Ionian tellurite fields, it will mean the ruin of the Corporation. Your job, your captain's, and mine, depend on a successful run. Good afternoon, Mr. Flabberty." And he stalked away.

I stared after him, sore. But then nobody's ever sweet-tempered on a forced trajectory.

* * * *

Georgie Periwinkle came scooting onto the bridge three hours later. His voice had a natural screech worse than the wail from the drive-machinery.

Old Scratch's face puffed up redder than usual.

" Did you want something, Captain Periwinkle? " he demanded, real polite.

" Yes, sir." The kid's face was determined. " You have to

change your orbit, sir. I've made some new calculations. The *Aphrodite* won't get through that electronic—"

Old Scratch yelled and made a dive for him. The kid struggled, screeching bloody murder, but Old Scratch got him across his beefy knee and lighted into him. Then he put the twerp on his feet.

He snapped, "Georgie, you get to your cabin. I don't want you around no more the rest of this run —"

There was murder in the kid's eyes. Then he scrammed—out the emergency exit. Gawkins had just opened the door to the control room. His eyes were frosty. His long coat-tails flapped.

"I think," he said coldly, "it is against the rules of the Corporation for the captain of a ship to personally administer punishment to one lower in rank—particularly a helpless child!"

Old Scratch paled and gurgled, "Helpless?"

Gawkins sniffed. "Any more of this kind of action, and I assure you I'll report you to the Board. Get back to your work, gentlemen."

So we sat down, miserable and sore, and I played with an integrator, and Old Scratch hunched over the dials watching our course. Gawkins walked up and down behind us, hands behind his back, like a school-teacher ready to slap our wrists if we stepped out of line.

Suddenly Gawkins cried:

"Well! This is remarkable! Who's Old Scratch?"

"Huh?" Old Scratch swivelled around. "Hell—dear me, I mean, I never heard of anybody named Old Scratch!"

And he didn't, either.

"Astounding! Out there, a message—with a reference to Old Scratch!"

We whirled to the vision plate. Our eyes gogled. Out in space, fifty feet away, drifting away from the ship, was a sentence, in white, yard-high capital letters:

OLD SCRATCH IS A PICKLE-PUSS.

With an exclamation point yet.

"Most remarkable piece of sky-writing," said Gawkins. "And in open space! Gentlemen, I must commend you. Doubtless this is an experiment carried out under the auspices of the *Aphrodite*? Gentlemen, I assure you that the Philadelphia Science Institution —"

"*Philadelphia Science Institution?*" I italicised, yelling.

"I am, as you may not know, on the Board of Directors of that admirable organisation. If you will tell me who the inventor— "

Holy Smoke! Old Scratch got it at the same time I did. Nobody else but the kid could have invented that sky-writing gadget. And if Gawkins and the kid ever came face to face, we'd be charged with usurping the guardianship of a minor, with kidnapping, with child slavery and Antares knows what all!

I scrambled a step ahead, forcing a wild grin. " Me. Sure, I'm the inventor. That is, I had one of the crew—if I could show you—no, I can't! "

Gawkins frowned annoyedly. " Mr. Flabberty is the inventor? "

I said proudly, " Sure it was me," while Old Scratch sagged helpless. I streaked for the door and yelled back like a lunatic, " I'll go get it for you! "

Ye gods, I burned up space getting to the airlock. The red signal light was on warning me the outer door was open. I pressed the signal button a dozen times, and finally the inner valve opened and the kid came out grinning pleasedly.

" Did you see it, Sandy? Did you see it? The pressure in the oxygen tank forces my ' hard gas ' through this stencil—the whole message complete in a fraction of a second! "

I grabbed him, blatting out what had happened. " Get to your cabin! " I snapped. " You want us charged with kidnapping? "

Georgie gulped, turned and ran—smack into Gawkins.

Gawkins said, " Oof! " and grabbed at Georgie. Georgie squirmed like three dozen eels. Then Gawkins' breath hissed.

" Georgie! " he cried. " What are you doing here? "

Georgie struggled. " I ain't going back! I ain't. I ain't."

" Silence, you little brat! " Gawkins snarled. " What kind of language is that? Doubtless it comes from associating with your kidnappers! "

He turned on us, mean. " I hope you gentlemen know what this means. You have taken over guardianship of a ward of the Philadelphia Science Institution. What may be worse still, you have stopped the progress of science! At the time he disappeared, he was to have been questioned by a group of eminent scientists in the hope of resolving some of the most baffling questions that confront us today."

" You mean," said I, putting my foot in my mouth, which is an uncomfortable position to get into, " you were going to exploit him! "

Georgie kicked Gawkins in the shin.

"Yah!" he blasted. "I'm not going back and have a lot of stuffed olives with stringy hair yelling questions at me. Let me go! I'll tell my friend the President of the United States on you!"

"A delusion of his," said Gawkins. "He ate dinner with the President on one occasion. In the meantime, gentlemen, be assured you shall not only lose your jobs, but shall face charges of contributing to child delinquincy as well!

"Now return to the bridge and proceed at all possible speed to Io."

Georgie snarled, "We'll never reach Io! The controls are going to go wrong. We're going to slide helpless through space and the proton blasts aren't going to —"

Gawkins was purple-faced. He shook the kid so his teeth danced on top each other. "So! Sabotage! Free, this child would have wrecked the ship, merely to escape being returned to the refined, cultural atmosphere of his legal home!"

Old Scratch looked funny. "What he means is, we should change our orbit," he said huskily. His face was rolling sweat.

"Change our orbit? Stuff and nonsense! Captain, you will have Mr. Flabberty incarcerate this child at once."

And so help me, that's what I did. I felt like a heel, but I put the kid in his room, and double-locked the door on him. Then me and Old Scratch slunk back to the control turret, and we didn't look each other in the eye for hours afterward. Judases; that's what we felt like.

So the next day passed, and the old *Aphrodite* sailed along through space on her forced trajectory, with Mars two hundred million miles astern. We were over the asteroid belt, every once in awhile deflecting ourselves out of the path of one of them jagged hunks. The Wittenbergs howled, never stopping. It was ghastly. We couldn't think. We stuffed oiled cotton in our ears while we slept, and walked around like dummies during our watches.

So I went bats.

I was glumly watching the board, pretty miserable because me and Old Scratch were going to get kicked out of space, when every needle on the gauge-panel swung over hard against the checks. Then they swung back to where they had been.

That couldn't happen! Not unless the Wittenbergs stopped, and they hadn't.

"The needles," I croaked at Old Scratch. "They just swung

over! "

Old Scratch's chair legs hit the deck. His big clumsy feet came down off the control board. " Huh? " said he.

" And then they went back where they were! "

He looked at me funny. Then he looked at the gauge-panel. The needles were behaving peaceful as you please.

" Hmm! " said Old Scratch, looking at me cautiously. " Hmm! "

" Don't you hmm me! " I yelled. " I know what I'm talking about. Them needles swung over! "

Well, Old Scratch let me go raving on. The quartermaster got up and I saw him come across the room towards me. It was funny. He looked misty. He looked like he was wobbling. And he had a quiet look in his eyes. I backed up, my fists out.

" I knew that howl would get him some day," I remember hearing the quartermaster mutter, and then him and Old Scratch came for me. Well, I must have gone crazy at that. It ended up with Old Scratch's grey old fist giving me a cold-meat punch on the jaw. That was that. I woke up with our renegade Dr. Ran Tabor hoisting a bottle to my lips. When I spluttered and opened my eyes, he made a nasty face and upended the bottle to his own lips.

I lay there, remembering. Then I made a dive for my pants.

"Oh, no, you don't, you neurathenic idiot, you!" roared our Dr. Ran Tabor, and he shoved me back on the bunk. " Orders is orders. You stay here another eight hours. Figure a big strong man like you going wobbly on a forced curve." He swung the empty bottle in an arc, scowling.

So I stayed there, and the longer I did, the sillier I felt. Ye gods, I thought them needles swung over! No wonder Old Scratch slammed me.

When I finally got up, I was in a bad humour. I dressed and opened the door and ran into Lane, the chief engineer.

He was coming fast down the corridor, shaking his head.

" Jumpin' Ursus Major! " he was whispering. " Oh, my dear Lord in Hallelujah! "

Then he was gone. I stood staring after him, my face hanging out. What in blamnation was the matter with him?

So I went toward the bridge and ran into one of the Holloway vac feed men. He looked as if he was passing out.

" What ails you? " I yelled, straight into his face.

He shook his head dazedly. "It just don't make sense, I guess."

"Sure doesn't!" said I.

He looked furtive. "The Wittenbergs are going full blast, aren't they, Sandy?"

"Yeah!"

"Then it don't make sense," and he went mumbling down the corridor.

Well, this was more than the strong-minded Mr. Flabberty could stand. I hot-footed it for the bridge. When Old Scratch saw me, he shook his fist under my nose.

"Just when I need you," he said bitterly, "you're off laying down somewhere like a sissy."

His face fell into helpless lines. "I'm going crazy," he said hoarsely. "First it's the kid, then it's Gawkins, then it's the kid again, and now it's this. Sandy, our forced orbit's gone screwy!"

I followed him to the course chart. Sure enough, the old *Aphrodite* was off her course a full three degrees, east, and five degrees, north.

So the howl had caught up with Old Scratch, too. I grinned at him politely. "Do I have to run your ship for you, dear captain?" asked I. I pointed at the plungers. "All you got to do is inch them down till we swing. That's all!"

"I done that," he said hollowly. "I done that."

I blubbered, "Like hell you did. Because if you did, then we'd be back on course!"

He got sore. "Then you try it, smart aleck. Go ahead—try it!"

So that's what I did. I depressed starboard and port plungers. And depressed them. And nothing happened. The Wittenbergs were working. Everything worked. The *Aphrodite* stayed off course. Very depressing.

The control board was hexed. "It don't make sense," I groaned.

For once in his ornery life, Old Scratch agreed.

"What seems to be the trouble?" I turned around. There was Gawkins, frowning suspiciously.

I gave him a fool ah-life-is-grand look, told him nothing was the matter, and sauntered out of the control room. But man, you should have seen me when I got into the corridor. My feet pumped and I sailed into the engine room in a cloud of dust.

I yelled at Lane, "What did you do to them Wittenbergs?"

He was reading my lips, because you can't hear voices with that howl around you.

He snarled, "Don't make insinuations. They're working pretty as you please."

"The proton blasts, then!"

"They're clear. They're hot. Protons are babbling down them like Tennyson's brook, if you'll excuse my reference to my education. See?" He looked mean.

I cooled down. "Must be in the lead cable, then!" I pointed to the big coil of lead cable where it was unwinding about an inch an hour into the Holloway vacuum feed.

The Holloway vac feedman got sore, too. "Yah! That's good cable."

"Well," I yelled, "how about the accumulators?"

Bogart said, "Grow up, Sandy. What could happen to the accumulators?"

"Check them!" I blasted.

"It'll take hours," he protested.

"Check them!"

Then I picked a half dozen of the general repair men and told them to follow the control cables clear up to the bridge and report to me when they found something wrong.

I went back to the bridge. Old Scratch was in a trembling panic. "We ain't goin' to get to Io on time," he moaned.

In the next two hours I tried every trick under space to coax the *Aphrodite* onto her course. I was able to move her a fraction of an arc, that's all. I ordered the Wittenbergs up one, two, three, four notches. The whole ship shook from the howl. But the harder the Wittenbergs blasted, the smaller became that fraction of arc.

Then the telescope observer called. "Asteroid coming up, he blatted. "Big baby. Two hundred thirty-forty miles altitude. Three hours!"

"Okay, we'll land!" I told Old Scratch. I called Lane, told him to get busy trying to force our speed down slow enough so we could land. In three hours, we might do it. Then I walked the deck, clawing at my finger nails. Then I whirled on Old Scratch.

"We been plain fools," I told him bitterly. "The kid *told* us something like this would happen. And we didn't pay

any attention! "

Then Bogart called me.

" Sandy," he moaned, " you was right. It's the accumulators. They're burned out. Empty. They don't register. They're a mess inside."

Right then, I was getting a pretty good idea what was wrong with this blamed ship. When I saw those needles swing over, I wasn't wobbly at all. The *Aphrodite* had just hit that electronic field. For two seconds it hit it—and the accumulators burned out. They couldn't hold electrons any more.

I explained that to Old Scratch, but he started making funny gestures. Too late, I zippered my lips. Gawkins came in between us.

" So," he said, pursing his mean lips. " The ship is on a wild course. We'll fail to make Io on time! "

Old Scratch hunched up his big shoulders in a deep breath. Honest, it did my heart good the way Old Scratch lit into Gawkins.

" And if it hadn't been for you," he finished up, almost weeping, " that poor kid would have had a chance to tell us what was wrong. But you had to interfere! "

Which statement had a high eccentric anomaly, but which left Gawkins speechless.

Then Old Scratch and me went sailing for the kid's room.

To put it briefly, we apologised. And apologised. The kid let us, too. When he figured he had us where he wanted us, he condescended to give us the story. He'd discovered the electronic field one day trying a new kind of filter on the telescope. The electronic field was so super-charged it overloaded the accumulators and blew them out.

The accumulators? They're special types of storage batteries. The Wittenbergs disrupt atoms into protons and electrons. The protons leave by the proton blasts and shove the ship through space. The electrons are reflected off into the accumulators, which can hold millions of volts.

" So now," Georgie said scornfully, " you lemon-faces are listening to me when it's too late. The *Aphrodite* has taken over the job the accumulators can't do any more."

" You mean — " Gawkins started to say. He was sweating.

Georgie grinned at him maliciously. " Sure. The ship, and everything in the ship, is carrying millions of volts."

Gawkins turned green. He looked as if he expected to be

electrocuted any minute.

" And naturally you can't direct the ship," Georgie piled it on. " Electrons have a negative charge, protons a positive. The harder the Wittenbergs blasted, the bigger the ship's negative charge got and the harder it was for protons to leave the proton blasts. First thing we have to do is shut off the Wittenbergs."

Old Scratch spluttered. " We can't do that, Georgie! There's an asteroid coming up, and we're trying to slow down so we can land."

The kid's neon-blue eyes flared up.

" Land? Why—why, you can't! The minute we touch that asteroid we'll complete an electric circuit. We'll go up in a flash! "

Believe me, we got it. Landing on that asteroid would ground our charge. Like throwing a hundred-million volt switch!

Old Scratch was desperate. " So we got to get rid of the charge, Georgie! "

Georgie had us where he wanted us, no question of that. The three of us stared at him helplessly while he paced back and forth on the deck, fondling his chin.

" I should make you guys call me Captain Periwinkle," he mused. " Or Skipper. Or—uh—Old Scratch." He grinned real bright. " But I think I've got it. Naturally, we can't get rid of the charge in a vacuum. Mr. Flabberty! "

I jumped, and so help me, I almost said, " Yes, sir! "

" Mr. Flabberty, you go up to the bridge and see if you can't slow the ship down so she takes up an orbit around that asteroid. Then *maybe* — " he was eyeing Gawkins thoughtfully, " — I'll tell you the rest of it."

Old Scratch winked at me real broad. " You go ahead, Sandy. Georgie knows I'm his friend. He'll tell us how to bleed off our charge."

And so that's what I did. And was it a tough job? It was. When I think of how close we missed making connections with that asteroid, I figure there's more than one way of getting kicked out of your job. You can die.

The asteroid came rushing up, a big grey circle cutting out a big area of the sky. Sweat rolling down my face, I ordered the Wittenbergs up past the danger point. I had to! Even if we did increase our charge by another hundred thousand volts, we had to coax more protons out of the blasts. I thought the disrupters would explode any minute. They didn't!

" We're orbiting! " Wilkes yelled it out.

Fifteen minutes later we were circling that asteroid pretty as you please, just ten miles away from the surface.

I sank back, my first mate's coat sopping wet. I was happy. Now all we had to do was wait for the great Georgie Periwinkle to tell us what to do.

Yeah, that was all . . . and you won't believe what happened next. The kid wouldn't co-operate.

" Blackmail! " cried Gawkins excitedly. " The child's morals have gone entirely by the board. He threatens to let us starve unless I promise not to return him to the uplifting atmosphere of the Institution! "

" And," said Georgie, loftily, " unless you promise not to snitch on anybody for anything they did."

Old Scratch had the shakes.

" Now listen here, Georgie," he blubbered, " it's the skipper's responsibility to get everybody out of a fix like this alive. It don't matter so much even if Mr. Gawkins is going to prosecute us — "

Georgie snapped, " I'm not going back to a fate worse than death. If this pickle-puss wants to promise me — "

Just outside the door, the intership communicator buzzed. I switched it on. Wilkes' voice blasted:

" Sandy, we're falling! We're not on an orbit. We're spiraling down. In six hours we *have* to land! "

Old Scratch rung his hands. " Six hours," he moaned.

" Six hours," said the kid blankly.

" Six hours? " said Gawkins. " You mean we have to get rid of our charge in six hours or we die? "

" Die? " I cracked. " Naw. We just stop existing."

We all moved in on the kid. He backed up, his face sullen.

" It doesn't make any difference," he said. " If I told you to drop a cable — " He clapped his hand over his mouth. And I got it.

" A cable! " I yelled. " That's it. We'll drop a thin cable down to the surface of the asteroid. We could ground the charge slow, that way. The end of the cable would arc away and we'd get rid of our charge! "

Old Scratch said, heavily, " Sandy, that's a good idea. A mighty fine idea. Except that the old *Aphrodite* don't carry that much cable."

I sagged. Georgie snickered.

"I said a cable, and I mean a cable. But do you think I'm going to tell you what *kind* of cable, unless he —" he pointed at Gawkins disdainfully, "— promises to forget everything that happened on this ship?"

Gawkins drew himself up. "I feel," he said stiffly, "that death is preferable to demeaning oneself to such a demand. I shall remain adamant!"

He stalked off. And Georgie, his face white and determined, stepped into his room and slammed the door on us.

Old Scratch went lumbering after Gawkins. And I broke into the kid's room before he could lock the door. I pleaded with him. I begged him. For two hours I argued. The kid's lip trembled.

"It's no good, Sandy," he gulped. "Let him give in. This is the only lever we've got to use against him."

Old Scratch came back. Gawkins wouldn't budge. Some of the other officers crowded in.

"Four hours to go," Lane chattered. "Four miles above the asteroid." So they took over the job, while me and Old Scratch gave up and dragged ourselves to the bridge.

Old Scratch mumbled brokenly, "Sandy, I wisht I was dead!"

"Which you will be," I said encouragingly.

We sat there for an hour, watching that asteroid get bigger every minute.

Then we heard the sound of big feet in the corridor.

"Sandy!" Lane's bull voice blasted in my ear. "He done it!" he yelled. "He gave in!"

We scrambled to our feet. "Who gave in?"

"*He* did!"

"Gawkins?" We grinned all over our fool faces.

Lane looked at us blankly. "No! The kid!"

My stomach went cold.

"You mean the kid—gave— up?" whispered Old Scratch.

"Sure. Ain't that what you wanted him to do?"

Old Scratch looked at me, sick. "Damn Gawkins," he said. He choked up in his pouchy throat.

I said, sick, "How long ago?"

"About fifteen minutes. The kid practically busted into tears and said something about a deadline. Then he reached under his bunk and drawed out five or six bulging sacks of something. He yelled at some of the crew and they picked the sacks up. Then the kid hoisted an oxygen tank under his arm and told somebody

else to get more oxygen tanks, and then he picked up a gadget that looked like it had an alphabetical index on top, and he run for the airlock and got into a pressure suit. We didn't know what the hell he was driving at. We still don't! But he had the sacks of stuff and the tanks put in the airlock and then he went in and closed it after him. Few seconds later, the red light came on, and we knew the outer valve was open on empty space. And that's — "

Lane's eyes went past us, popping.

" Look! " he yelled, pointing at the vision plate.

We turned around so fast we were facing in two directions at once.

The sky was full of alphabet!

The high I.Q. of your Mr. Flabberty went into a spin, I'll have to admit. The intelligent gleam that normally lights my eye was a moron's glaze. How do you get rid of a hundred million volt charge by writing a scrambled letter to God?

Well, maybe prayer was the only way, I remember thinking.

Everything from ' a ' to ' z ' was there, nice yard-high shiny white capital letters spuming out from the rear of the ship and spinning down toward that looming asteroid. A regular gush of Alpha to Omega, hundreds, thousands of them, disappearing into the darkness.

Old Scratch's breath came out in a disappointed sigh——but just then the kid must have taken the stencil slides out of his sky-writer, because the alphabet stopped coming.

Now there was just a fanning jet of fast-driving white stuff that looked like a comet's tail behind us. It was an expanding tail, hundreds of feet wide and then thousands. And it was being forced on a steep spiral down toward the asteroid.

Suddenly I yelled, " It's going to hit! That's our cable! Get set! "

It hit, all right. That broad fanning " cable " spumed against the metallic black of the asteroid, practically covering it. And then —well, our charge began to bleed off. And bleeding a heavy charge off even through a cable thousands of feet thick at its base isn't any quiet picnic. You can get a better idea of what happened if you stick your finger in the socket of an electric outlet, and hold it there ten minutes while 110 volts wham through you.

That's the way it hit us. We turned stiff, our teeth clamped.

" Turn it off! " somebody yelled—I think it was Wilkes—and he fainted. The rest of us held up under it.

Gawkins was staring at us warily. "What—what seems to be the trouble? You gentlemen are acting very —"

Through my agony, I had sense enough to get a look at his shoes. Gum-shoes!

I grinned at him, a death's-head grin, and walked on my leather shoes toward him. I stuck out my hand. Maybe he thought I was trying to be friendly. I was! He had to get rid of his own personal charge just like the rest of us. He shook hands, got a look of horror in his eyes as the charge hit him, danced and jiggled for a second, and then quietly fainted. That took care of him.

Georgie's "cable" took care of us, too. We didn't much know what was going on.

I guess it was ten minutes. By that time, it wasn't so bad. We were over the shakes, without more than ten volts tingling through us. We were all crowded close to the vision plate, watching our comet's tail. It was glowing fiery white like a comet's tail. But it had thinned down considerably, and looked more like a cable, tying us to the asteroid.

I knew it was made of the stuff the kid called "hard gas," whatever that was.

"It's dimming," Old Scratch muttered hoarsely. "The kid done it. We all owe him a vote of thanks. But I'll murder that Gawkins!"

I looked around. Gawkins was standing behind the crowd, looking completely done in. When I caught his eye, he looked scared, but he stood his ground.

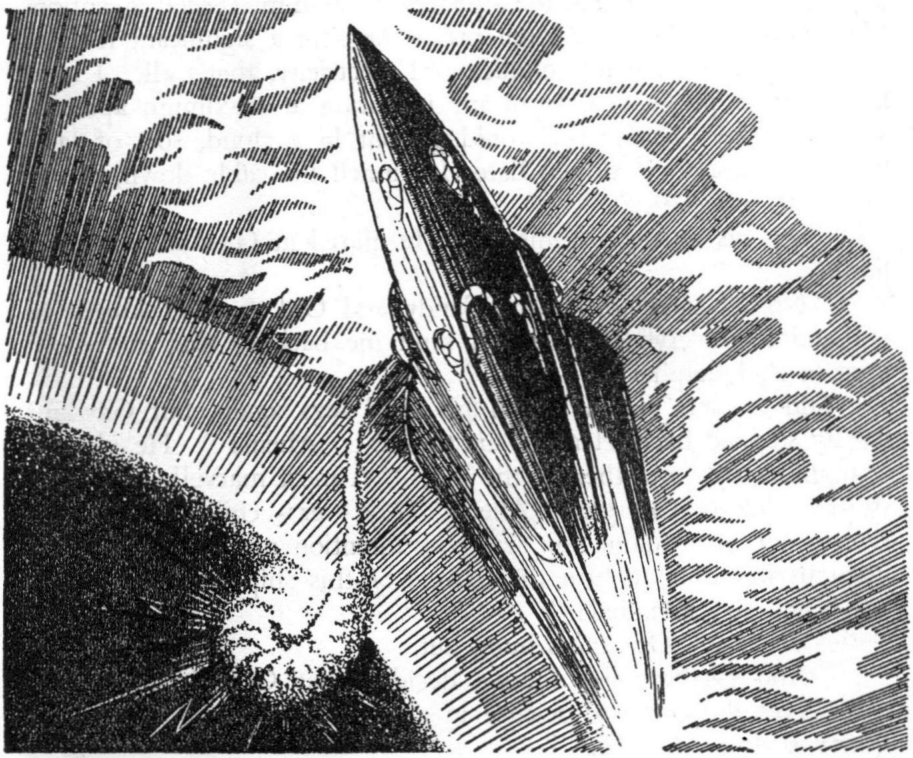
It took maybe twenty minutes for the "cable" to turn into just a half-mile-long rope of the kid's "hard gas." The glow was gone. Then Georgie must have turned off his oxygen tanks, because suddenly it wasn't attached to the ship any more. The "cable" dropped away as the ship left it.

We all let loose a big breath.

Bogart said, "I move we all give the kid a vote of thanks. He sure knowed his onions—if I do say it who kicked him in the pants a half-dozen times!"

There was a chorus of yeahs. Then Old Scratch turned around, grinning all over his fool face.

"I'm gonna do more than that," he said. "I'm going to let the kid figure out that orbit we should have followed in the first place—the one that'll get us to Io in time. I ain't gonna have the blood of the Corporation on my hands."



Then he looked at Gawkins and started rolling up his sleeves. "But I don't mind having *his* blood on my hands!"

Gawkins backed up, scared to death. "I assure you," he panted, "if you lay a hand on me —"

I grabbed the skipper. He shook me off. "I'm going to tear him into pieces!" he raved. "And then I'm gonna tear *them* pieces into littler pieces and then I'm gonna tear *them* pieces —"

And just then the kid came into the room. Everybody swung toward him, yelling congratulations and thanks at him. Bogart picked him up and started parading him around the room on his big shoulders, with the whole crew playing up to him big.

I watched the kid, felling mighty choked up inside. His eyes were going like a million watts, but I could see he was just about to bust out bawling behind his happy grin. Finally they put him down and began bombarding him with questions.

"It was easy," he said. "Course, I did make a mistake at

first and shot out letters of the alphabet through my special invention. My 'hard gas' — " for some reason he shot a significant look at Gawkins " — is a good conductor of electricity, that's all. I used high oxygen pressure and put my invention at maximum aperture at first so my 'hard gas' would go out in a cloud, sort of, and bleed the charge off slow. Later I thinned the cable down, if you could call it a cable."

Then his underlip trembled. He glared at Gawkins, blinking hard.

" Now I guess *he'll* send Sandy and Old — the skipper to jail and fire everybody else and send me back to that stuffy old joint in Philadelphia! "

Old Scratch reared up on his hind legs again, but Gawkins hastily stepped back, clearing his throat. " Ahem! " He glanced at us nervously, and then at the kid. " A most marvellous demonstration indeed, Georgie! Ahem! My - er - child, I believe it is in order to acquaint you with my intention not to—that is, my previous intention to turn the officers of this ship over to the law has been - ah - amended! "

" What? " Our faces hung out.

" And furthermore, I have decided that Georgie Periwinkle best serves the cause of science in a free and untrammeled atmosphere such as this ship "

The kid began to glow all over. " You mean I can stay here? I don't have to go back to that creeping old joint? "

That is precisely what I mean. So far as I'm concerned, the whereabouts of Georgie Periwinkle will remain forever unknown."

The kid yelled. The crew grinned. But me and Old Scratch? We have learned if somebody gives you onions, you still got 'em to cry over when frying time comes. We exchanged looks.

Then Old Scratch said, belligerent, " All right, Gawkins. What's the strings?"

Gawkins coloured, nervously picking at his finger nails.

" Since Georgie will - ah - naturally be unable to secure patent rights on his remarkable invention, I have - ah - decided to offer to secure them for him, in - ah - my name."

Well, that floored us. All of a sudden, everybody was bellowing. They wanted to pulverise him, from what I could gather, and shoot him through Georgie's stencil.

The kid broke it up, his yellow hair standing up like it was

on a scarecrow. He turned on Gawkins.

"You can have the invention, you stuffed olive," he bleated. "I can invent things like that in my sleep."

While we watched him goggle-eyed, he streaked into the corridor outside the control room, and came back in a minute with his gadget. Gawkins took it eagerly.

"Now," he said, "the formula for the 'hard gas!'"

Georgie scrawled it on a piece of paper. Gawkins stuffed it into his pocket, looking pleased. Then he looked around at us slow, triumphant. "The incident," he sniffed, "is closed," and he stalked out.

We stared after him, feeling low. The goof had gotten the best of us. And of the kid, too.

Most of the crew left the room for their posts. The kid left, too, looking mighty happy and pleased.

"Okay," said Old Scratch, in a funny, half-hearted tone, "I guess we can get them Wittenbergs going so we can get away from that asteroid. We'll have to get busy then and fix up them accumulators. Then we'll let the kid figure out that there orbit he was talking about."

I knew how he was feeling. Ashamed of the kid. Like we all were.

Going down to the engine-room with Lane, he said what we all felt. "The kid's got brains, Sandy," he said, speaking slow. "But I guess he just ain't got guts. Letting Gawkins steal his invention the way he did."

An hour-and-a-half later we were sailing toward Io smooth as you please on the planetary orbit those howling Wittenbergs were building up for us. I was dragging off to my bunk, feeling let-down, when Georgie stuck his head out of his cabin.

"*Psst!*" he whispered blastingly. "Sandy!"

I stopped. "Well?"

"You sore at me for something, Sandy?" His face fell.

"Why shouldn't I be?" I snapped. "You turning yellow!"

His arms semaphored. "That's what I wanted to tell you about. Come in here, Sandy! I don't want the rest of the crew to hear about it, or they might tell Gawkins."

So I went in.

"Yeah?" said I, mean. "So you gave him the invention and you gave him the formula for the 'hard gas.' Explain that, Mr. Calculating Kid!"

" Aw, Sandy! " He was snickering. " I give him the formula for pulverised, magnetised Monel metal. That's hard, isn't it? Metal dust will hang together and skywrite."

I blinked. I have to admit things were getting hopeful. " What about the sky-writer? He can still patent that! "

He shouted with laughter. " That's the joker, Sandy. He can't patent it. It was invented a hundred and fifty years ago! "

" You're wobbly," said I, slowly, " wobbly in the bobbly. A hundred and fifty years ago space travel wasn't even invented yet. They hadn't even reached the Moon."

He was still having his fun. " *Oh, yes, they did*! Lots of times, Sandy. Science-fiction stories! "

I sniffed. If there's anything I can't take, it's science-fiction. But I think I was beginning to get it. Yessir, it doesn't take Mr. Flabberty long. You see, it's this way. Jules Verne invented the submarine periscope in one of them science-fiction books of his. After that, nobody else could patent it.

I began to grin.

" So it was invented in a science-fiction magazine, and Gawkins can't patent it anyway—especially after I write the Patent Office! "

Georgie beamed. " That's right, Sandy. We own the sky-writer just as much as he does."

Well, *that* took a load off. " Georgie," said I solemnly, " you're a genius. Let me be the first to barely admit that you have some possibilities as a member of the personnel of this ship."

If you ever get around to it—Page 49.

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

E. C. TUBB

The Troublemaker

Caught in a trap the logical thing to do is to get out, fast. But sometimes the trap is better than what lies outside

Illustrated by Bill Price

CURT GREGSON was doing fine until he broke his leg, then, if he'd had a gun, he would have shot himself.

It was that bad.

He lay, the cold sweat of pain glistening on his thin, slightly irregular features, and cursed the infantile urge which had made him take a last walk out into the rust coloured desert of Mars. He had been so close. So near to getting back home. Then a hidden rock, an unlucky fall, and his own weight had sapped the bone despite the weak gravity.

Now he floundered helplessly in the arid dust, five kilometers north of the settlement, and stared with sick eyes towards the slender tower of the spaceship standing, ready for take-off, next to the squat domes of the colony.

He should have been on that ship.

His ticket was bought and paid for. His gear packed. He had quit his job and said goodbye to what friends he had found

worth keeping during the past ten years. He had finished with Mars. Finished with the cut-throat competition, the knife-in-the-back colonists, the whole money-hungry bunch of them.

But Mars, it seemed, hadn't finished with him.

He groaned at a fresh wave of pain from his broken leg, staring hopefully towards the settlement, bitterly regretful at having sold all his equipment at minimum cost before taking his farewell stroll. He could have used the Verey pistol now, the squat emergency pistol carried by all who wandered about the dry wastes of the desert. A watcher in the tower would have seen the smoking red flare, would have sent help to get him back to the settlement, or perhaps some lone prospector would have seen it and carried him in.

He shrugged. The pistol had gone with the rest of his gear, sold for what it could bring, the money helping to buy his passage back to Earth. A passage he wasn't going to use.

After what seemed a long time the slender tower of the distant ship jerked a little, quivered, rose slowly on a pencil of lambent flame, then, with increasing acceleration, soared upwards to the dark blue, almost black sky, the dim points of eternally shining stars, and the faint, almost too-faint, smudge of green that was the Earth.

It left, and hope left with it. It left, and somehow Curt just didnt' care what happened to him. The day ended, the sun slipping below the horizon and the stars burning with a cold brightness through the air. A freezing wind whispered over the rust coloured sand and dust plumed beneath the impact of the thin air, hovering almost like a mist over the desert floor. Dawn came, and mid-day, then afternoon and night again.

When they finally found him, Curt was more dead than alive, his pulses racing with fever and his lips cracked and broken from the too-dry air. He didn't feel them pick him up, bundle him into the back of a prospector's waggon, then drive him to the one hospital on Mars. He didn't feel the pain of surgery as they clamped Stader splints on the broken bone, filled his veins with penicillin, and pumped saline into his body.

But when he finally awoke he learned all about it.

A nurse checked his temperature, looked at the dressing on his wound, then fetched his clothes and hinted that the quicker he was out of the bed the better she would like it.

He shrugged, wincing a little as he dressed, then stood cautiously

on his injured leg, the metal splints clamped to the bone enabling him to use the limb as normal. Before he could leave the building he had to see the Almoner, and before he could leave the Almoner . . .

He glowered at the man's office door, already feeling the bite of tenuous chains. He knocked, then entered at a call, and stared at the man sitting behind the desk.

" Ah, Mr. Gregson? "

Curt nodded.

" Won't you be seated? " The little, dried-up looking man waved to a chair, and Curt sank into it, stretching his throbbing leg. " A nasty accident, Mr. Gregson, very nasty. You were fortunate that a prospector found you when he did. A few more hours . . . " He let his thin little voice rustle into silence and reached for a sheaf of papers lying before him.

" Let me see now. Gregson, broken femur, emaciated condition, fever . . . " He glanced at Curt over the top of the papers and shook his head. " Staders. Surgery. Pre-operative and post-operative hospitalisation. Saline and prophilactic injections. Transportation, dressings, nurse-attendance, food and water, air, pre and post-operation X-rays, anasthetic . . . "

" How much? "

" I beg your pardon? " The little Almoner stared at the young man, shaken out of his normal routine. " What did you say? "

" I said, ' how much,' " repeated Curt wearily. I can't say that I'm interested in all the details."

" I see." The little man pursed his lips and stared down at the papers before him. " Well, Mr. Gregson, you owe the hospital exactly three hundred and seventy credits."

" What! Three seventy? " Curt glared at the little man. " What is this, I could have bought a tractor for less. Where do you get the three seventy from? "

" I have a fully itemised bill here if you should wish to protest the figures," said the Almoner stiffly. Curt stared at him, then shrugged.

" Would it do me any good? "

" No," admitted the little man, " but we like to do things in a methodical manner." He coughed and carefully replaced the sheaf of papers back in their tray. " About payment, Mr. Gregson? "

" Well? "

" Well we naturally contacted the bank and it seems that you

have no credit there. You had no cash on you when you were brought in, so . . . ?"

"So you want your money, is that it?"

"The mere fact that you had no money did not prevent us from operating on your leg and saving your life." The little Almoner sounded genuinely hurt. "We deny to no man the benefits of hospitalisation merely because he cannot pay for them, but, as is only natural, we do expect some recompense for our labour, our materials, and our skill. However, even though you have no money, yet there is a way in which you can settle the debt."

"Don't tell me," said Curt bitterly, "let me guess." He began to tick off the items on the fingers of one hand.

"First, I sign a contract agreeing to pay you the money at a set rate of interest. Then I agree to have the money deducted from source, as I haven't got a source of income, you will then offer me a contract with one of the mining companies and if I don't take it, then you will arraign me for debt. As a debtor I'll be forced to work at whatever the court decides—and you will still get your money from source."

He glared at the little man. "Am I right?"

"Yes, but surely you have no objection to paying a just debt?"

"None. But I do object to being caught up in a rat-race that will keep me working for the rest of my life for bed and board."

"Then what do you intend to do?" For the first time the Almoner seemed worried. "Unless the debt is paid you will be arraigned, I can't help that, the owners of the hospital decide the policy, not I."

"The fact that the owners also happen to be one of the biggest mining companies on Mars has little to do with it of course." Curt was deliberately sarcastic. "All right then. I'll pay the debt, but I'll do it my way."

"How? You have no money."

"Are you quite certain of that?" Curt grinned at the little man's worried expression. "How long have I got?"

"Three days before first payment, then one payment a week after that. The interest of course will be the normal one per cent."

"Per month?"

"No. Per week, and of course your instalment must be large enough to both pay the interest and a little off the capital." The little Almoner coughed and stared down at his hands. "I must warn you that the hospital reserves the right to sell the debt if it

so decides. It would be far better for you to pay it off in a lump sum." He stared hopefully at the young man. "Can you do that?"

"Maybe." Curt rose painfully from the chair and headed towards the door. "I'd better try hadn't I?" He grinned at the Almoner, then, as the door swung behind him, lost his grin.

He had really nothing to laugh about.

CHAPTER TWO.

Mars had been colonised in a flush of wild enthusiasm shortly after the first rockets had reached the Moon. A military base naturally, the military were the only ones able to afford the stupendous cost of spaceships and equipment, and for a time they had justified the expense by reclaiming radioactive ores from the dessicated sand of the arid planet.

For a time.

Then a Senator, eager for an election slogan, hungry for personal power and not caring too much how he got it, sprayed the newspapers and radio with facts and figures. Mars had cost the country so much. Mars had not been able to repay one cent of the billions that had been poured into the colony. Mars was robbing the overworked peoples of Earth so that a few could live in idleness. Mars was more than could be afforded. Mars . . .

It went on and on. Facts, undeniable facts, which proved that the conquest of the planets was turning out to be a financiers' nightmare. At first the newly strong Interplanetary Group held their own. They played on the immensity of the undertaking, appealed to popular enthusiasm, and promised pie-in-the-sky—someday.

The Senator countered by pointing to Venus, to the rich soil and accessable minerals, to the immediate promise of rapid gain once a few minor difficulties had been smoothed away.

Difficulties such as the planet already having inhabitants who didn't take kindly to the idea of giving their world to Earthmen. Or the minute spores which had an unpleasant habit of settling in the lungs and growing there. Or the mist and eternal rain which made progress a stumbling nightmare.

But Venus had everything which Mars lacked and the Senator wanted his power.

So he found backers, rich companies with their own private axes to grind, and by radio, television, the newspapers and by a highly effective whispering campaign, he persuaded the people to vote him into power and promptly cut off all supplies for the Red Planet.

Only to find that he couldn't do it.

The colony had long outgrown its purely military beginning. Civilians had settled there. Miners, technicians, their wives and their children. They had been featherbeded of course. With all their supplies guaranteed by the military they had had a sublime contempt for the little economies and so had grown a loose-knit happy association of people, who had found life hard, but who at least were sure of food and shelter.

The problem now was what to do with them.

Transportation back to Earth was out of the question. It would take too many ships and because of the complex social structure necessary on a world where every bite of food, every drop of water, had to be provided by the hand of man, the last fifty or so had to be returned at once or they would die as the machines broke down from lack of attention.

Also the expense was enough to make the Senator, now President, squirm and mutter in his sleep.

At this point the companies made a suggestion. It was a good one from both their viewpoint and that of the harassed President who found himself tied to promises he couldn't fulfill. They would buy the equipment now on Mars. They would buy spaceships and supplies. Cheaply, of course. War surplus is always cheap and the equipment on the Red World would cost millions to bring back to Earth, even if it was of any use other than where it was.

They would refund a few of the billions already poured down a bottomless drain—if!

If they were granted a Charter granting them territorial rights to the Red Planet. If they were given a free hand to conduct their business in their own way. If they were left alone to develop Mars without any interference.

In return they guaranteed to employ all personel on Mars, to provide transportation, hospitals, social services, to uphold the Law and to respect the inalienable rights of man.

All of which sounded very nice and provided a comfortable way out of what was becoming a difficult situation. So the Charter was

granted, the fact that no one country could dispose of a whole planet to private companies was ignored, and Mars became private domain.

And the holiday was over.

For the companies existed for one purpose only—to make money, and so everything in the colony was geared to that end. No more free food and water. No more free issues of clothing and medication. No more free shelter. The companies had bought and paid for everything, and they wanted some return from their investment. They wanted the personel to work for them, work at the reclaimation pits, the open-cast mines, recovering the radioactive ores from the thin dust. They paid good wages, paying in company credits, and then took it back by means of the good old system which says that a man must work today in order that he may live tomorrow.

The did it quite nicely. No whips, guards, savage imprisonment or brutality, though naturally they had police to enforce the Laws. None of that was necessary. If a man didn't pay his rent then he had to move out into the desert. With the night temperature well below the freezing point, the sand-blast effect of the storms, and the general moisture-sucking dryness of everything, life in the deserts was far from pleasant.

A man didn't have to eat of course, he could always starve, but if he did want to fill his stomach he had to buy food from the companies, and even the insipid, once-free, yeast products had to be paid for. Water the same. Heat, clothing, everything..

In short, Mars became just like Earth— and the colonists didn't like it one little bit.

• • • •

Curt leaned against the wall of the hospital building, resting his throbbing leg, and trying to plan his next move. A man walked past, almost shapeless in the thick coveralls, general on Mars, his outworker's mask hanging low on his chest. He stared at the young man, surprise on his bearded face, and stopped.

"Curt! I thought you were going home?"

"I was," said Curt bitterly, "until I broke my leg. I've just been released."

"That's bad," said the man, and shifted uncomfortably, scraping his foot on the hardened dust. "What are you going to do

now? "

" Get a job, pay my bill, save up again. What else can I do? " Curt stared at the man, not liking what he had to do, but knowing that it had to be done.

" I don't suppose . . . "

" Sorry, Curt, but I just can't." The man pulled at his beard with shamed embarrassment. " My wife is expecting again and what with doctor's bills and everything . . . you know how it is."

" Yeah." Curt tried not to sound bitter. He had long learned that gratitude just didn't count when compared to money in the bank. " Forget it, I'll make out."

" Sure." The man edged away. " If I hear of anything, Curt, I'll let you know." He shuffled away, glad to escape without a lot of argument, a little shamed that he had to refuse a loan, yet almost angry that the young man had asked.

Curt shrugged, a bitter taste in his mouth, then headed for the low dome of the Administration building squatting next to the landing field.

The official was polite, he had learned that it didn't pay to be rude. He had three teeth missing to remind him of the lesson, but polite or not the answer was the same.

" I'm sorry," he said, " but it is impossible to refund the cost of your unused ticket. Space was reserved for you, and naturally, you can't expect us to stand the loss merely because you didn't arrive."

" I had an accident, broke my leg, couldn't you have sold the space when I didn't appear ten minutes before blast off time? "

" No. We didn't even have cargo waiting for shipment, and certainly no passenger hoping for a last minute cancellation. I'm sorry, but there it is."

Curt breathed hard as he forced himself to keep his temper.

" Look," he said urgently. " Isn't there anything you can do? Can't I get a rebate or something? "

" Well . . . ? " The clerk glanced over his shoulder, then at the young man. " I'm not too certain about it, but . . . "

He let his voice trail into silence and Curt nodded as he caught the unspoken hint.

" Anything you can do will be appreciated," he promised. " Highly appreciated."

" One moment." The clerk vanished into an inner room, and Curt heard the low mutter of conversation. After what seemed a

long while the clerk emerged with a file of papers in one hand. He smiled at Curt.

" I've managed to persuade the Director to allow you a rebate on unused food and water for the duration of the trip." He shuffled the papers and pushed one across the desk. " Seventy credits. Sign here please."

" Seventy! Is that all? "

" Yes. Don't forget that the rebate is based on Earth prices. If the trip were the other way it would be more, but this is a token payment, and frankly, you're lucky to get anything at all. Sign please."

Curt shrugged and scrawled his signature at the bottom of the sheet. The clerk examined it, then slowly counted out fifty credits.

" Satisfied? "

" Yes. Thanks." Curt slipped the money into a pocket and stared curiously at the official. " I sign for seventy and get fifty, something tells me that you've got troubles too, friend."

" Who hasn't? " said the clerk bitterly, and Curt smiled, feeling a sudden sympathy for the man.

On Mars everyone had troubles.

CHAPTER THREE.

Outside the sun had passed the zenith and was sinking towards the near horizon. Curt hesitated on the steps of the Admin building, fingering the few notes in his pocket, and wondering what to do next. An empty feeling in his stomach decided for him and he stepped into the hardened dust of the street.

He jerked back as a long file of men came lurching down the road.

They were a sullen-faced lot, all dressed in the same drab coveralls, their feet dragging at the sand and their eyes fastened on the boots of the man in front. Police walked beside them—armed police—with small, high-velocity pistols at their belts and long clubs swinging from their wrists. They yelled sharp commands and, like the crippled body of some injured snake, the file of men wove into a long hut next to the Admin building.

Curt shuddered and moved away.

He felt no sympathy for the men. They were the criminals of

Mars, the men who had tried the get-rich-quick route back home, the muggers and hold-up artists, the robbers and pickpockets, the card-sharps and murderers. They served their time at forced labour, for, on a world which couldn't spare material or labour to build prisons, or guards to watch them, prisoners had to work.

There was nothing wrong in that. What sent cold shivers goose-pimpling his flesh was the knowledge that the step from merely owing money to serving in a chain gang was very small. Most of the prisoners had started just that way, and once branded, they could never get back home.

He shuddered again, and turned into a restaurant.

The menu was the usual assortment of local and imported foods. The yeast dishes, soy bean sprouts, soy bean soup and bamboo shoots were all local, either grown or cultivated in the settlement. They weren't cheap. Nothing on Mars was cheap, but next to the astronomical prices of eggs, steak, green vegetables and other imported foods they were almost given away.

Curt ordered a bowl of soy bean soup, a second dish of disguised yeast, and a mug of a repellent brown fluid erronneously called "coffee." The food warmed him and settled the nagging fear in his stomach, but the bill made him think of his predicament, and he sat brooding over the half-empty mug.

He had now exactly forty-seven credits left and he owed three hundred and seventy. Even if he got a job, and that was easy enough, he still couldn't get out of debt. The rate of interest would see to that—the one per cent. per week—and he had to buy food and rent shelter as well.

He didn't have a chance.

Some managed it. Some hoarded their wealth, had a stroke of luck, or had the foresight to arrive on Mars with something saleable. Others, mostly the old timers, took a gamble on prospecting the deserts, hoping to find a few of the very rare artifacts from the vanished Martian civilisation, or scraped a bare living as water carriers. A few gambled and won. A few experimented with rot-gut liquor and tried to stay one jump ahead of the police. Some just cut their throats.

For Mars was a trap.

Curt looked up as a shadow fell across the table and nodded as a man slipped into the seat opposite. He was a tall, thin, rangy looking man, with a seamed face and eyes that were almost lost in a nest of wrinkles. He was an old timer, one of the pre-company

men, one of the original colonists of Mars.

"Hello, Doc," said Curt. "Busy?"

"Fairly." The old man looked at him with bright eyes. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be half-way to Earth by now."

"Broke my leg. Lost the ship and got into debt as well."

"Tough," sympathised the old man. "You should have come to me."

"Sure. I can crawl five kilometers with a broken thigh." Curt savagely swallowed the last of his coffee. "If I could've done that I'd have crawled to the ship and made them take me, broken leg and all. Now I'm stuck."

"What did they charge?"

"Three seventy."

"Dear enough. Staders?"

"Yeah." Curt looked at the old man. "You should get in that racket, Doc. All you have to do is to fix a man up and then sit back and let him work for you for the rest of his life. How is it that you're not in the hospital?"

"I run my own practice," said the old man quietly. "No operations of course. I haven't got the equipment, but I can help a baby into the world and bandage a cut. You should have sent for me."

"Thanks, Doc, but I'd rather owe money to the hospital than to you, and anyway, you couldn't have used Staders."

"Maybe not, but it would've cost you a lot less." He called across the almost empty room to a man standing by the counter buying a yeast-bread loaf. "Sam! How's it going?"

"Hello, Doc." The man set his loaf on the table and sat down. "Hello, Curt. I thought you were going back home?"

"Broke my leg," said Curt wearily. He felt a fool whenever he explained why he hadn't gone. "What are you buying bread for, don't they feed you now in the bachelor quarters?"

"Not me." The man grinned, the expression covering his entire face and creasing his stubble-covered chin. "I'm married."

"You're what!" Curt half-rose from his seat then slumped back at a twinge from his injured leg. "Man, are you crazy? You almost had enough to get you back home."

"This is home," said Sam quietly. "Now."

"For how long? Until you have a baby or the wife wants a new dress, or until you get to hate the sight of each other and buy a radio. Then what? Then you'll be in debt up to your eye-

brows and have to work for the companies until you drop. Is that what you wanted? Is that worth giving up going back home for? "

" I think so, Curt." Sam rose and picked up his loaf. " Come and visit us sometime, maybe the wife can dig up a friend for you. We've got more space than we need and it's time you got settled down anyway."

" No thanks," gritted Curt. " I know what I want." He swallowed, then forced the words past clenched teeth. " Look, Sam. We used to be pretty good friends. How about lending me a few credits? I've run up a bill at the hospital and I cleaned myself out buying the ticket back home."

He knew the answer before he asked. Knew it from the instinctive recoil, the hardening of the eyes and mouth, the sudden shift towards the door.

" Sorry, Curt, but I just can't spare it. Some other time, eh? "

" Sure," said Curt bitterly. " See you in jail."

Sombrely he watched as the man left the restaurant, the loaf held tightly beneath his arm, and his head shifting as he stared down the street. The old man touched him gently on the arm, and he turned, his mouth twisted in a wry grin.

" You know, Doc," he said. " There's only one quicker way of losing friends than lending them money—trying to borrow it."

" You can't blame him, Curt. You had your cash and spent it as you wanted to. He has the same right, and if he doesn't want to lend it, why should he? "

" No reason, but sometimes a man expects loyalty from his friends, if he has friends."

" You still have friends, Curt, but once you start valuing friendship in terms of what you can get out of it, then you must expect to lose them."

Curt shrugged, toying with the empty cup, his eyes bitter as he stared through the scratched plastic of the window into the street. The old man watched him, noticing the hard lines dragging their way from nose to mouth, the brittle hardness unnatural for one so young.

" You know, Curt, I think that you're making a big mistake."

" How so, Doc? "

" Wanting to go back to Earth. Why do you, Curt? "

" Why? " Curt stared at the old man as if he were insane. " Are you serious, Doc? What else would any man want but to get back home? You think we like it here, here on this ruin of a

dead world?" He shook his head and stared at his hands as they twisted around the thick mug.

"Earth has snow, Doc. Green fields, rivers, seas, high mountains and deep valleys. Earth has cattle and pets and crawling things. Earth is Paradise, and you ask me why I want to get back home!"

"If you like it so much then why did you leave in the first place?"

"Money." The young man made the word sound like a curse. "The companies offered big money and cheap transportation and like a fool I fell for it. The transportation was genuine, so was the offer of high wages, but what they didn't tell us was that they took every damn credit back one way or the other. I did my five contract years, saving every credit I could, and I knew then that to get back would take a miracle. It took another five years before I could raise the rest of the fare home. Five years of risking my life in the deserts, prospecting for artifacts, praying to find something I could sell. It took a while longer to work in town, to wait until my credit mounted, and even then I was lucky. One illness, one step out of line, and I'd have been back where I started."

"Well?" The old man didn't smile, but his tone was unmistakable.

"So I made a mistake." Curt clenched his hands as regret clawed at his stomach. "I had to be a sentimental fool! I had my ticket, paid for with the sweat and hardship of ten years. I had my ticket and nothing else, not a single credit to show for my labour and wasted life. I was all ready to go back home—and then like a fool I had to take a walk in the desert."

"Why, Curt? Why did you take that walk?"

"Sentiment I suppose. I've lived here for ten years now, prospected the desert for five, and it isn't easy to turn your back on a third of your life. I wanted to see the sunset over the settlement, see the little dust clouds thrown up by the wind, see the whole damn desolation of it for one last time—and then I did something stupid like breaking a leg and now I'm worse than when I started."

"Worse?"

"Yes. I had things to sell when I arrived. Not much, but they fetched a decent price. Now I'm on the way out. No money, no gear, no roof or food or water. Nothing. Nothing but an unpaid debt and you know what that means on Mars."

"I know," said the old man quietly. He did know. Mars

operated under one basic law. "If you can't pay then you can't eat." A simple law, but one which made the colonists thin with nagging worry and constant dread.

It was so easy to get into debt. An accident, marriage, babies, a craving for a little luxury or the forgetfulness of the bottle. A man could always borrow money, borrow at the set rate of interest, and then, unless he could gamble and win, he was trapped.

The companies were quite nice about it. They merely pointed out that unless the money were paid then they would have to refuse all supplies of food and water. Some men didn't believe them—and almost dropped dead of starvation before they learned.

Almost.

But they weren't allowed to die. Labour was too scarce for that. The companies hospitalised them, restored their health—and presented them with the bill. Most men learned sense then, but some still insisted on beating their heads against a wall. They tried the other way: the get-rich-quick method, and when they were caught and sentenced to serve on the chain gangs at basic subsistance level the companies didn't mind.

They still held the ever-increasing debt and imprisonment never cancelled it.

So men had to work for the companies. Work for what seemed a fair wage, but one which had been designed to allow for life, the repayment of interest, and nothing else. They became economic chattels in an industrial feudalism.

Slaves.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Two days later Curt knew that he had no hope. He had tried every man he knew, at first with diffidence, then with a mounting sense of urgency, finally with utter desperation, but the answer was always the same.

No!

He couldn't raise the cost of his hospital bill. He couldn't even raise the cost of a new set of gear to chance his luck in the deserts. He managed to scrounge a few meals, some shelter, enough water to keep his body from dehydration, but that was all, and now he was at the end of his rope.

And a lifetime of exile stared him in the face.

He leaned against the wall of the Admin building, and stared towards the landing field and the little cluster of men waiting to meet the expected rocket.

They were always there, the officials of the company waiting for the new arrivals, a few waiting for friends, some, like himself, just waiting.

A man passed him, an elderly man, wearing the universal coverall, a company insignia blazoned on his left shoulder. He stared at the young man, then halted, his hand outstretched.

"Gregson? I've been hoping to meet you. My name is Fenris, United Atomic.

Silently Curt shook the proferred hand.

"Heard that you had a little trouble, ran up a small debt. Fenris clucked sympathetically. "We could use some good men over at the new site. Top wages, food and water supplied, accident insurance and plenty of time off at the end of each month. How about it, Gregson?"

"No thanks."

"Why not?" The man seemed genuinely surprised. "You may as well work for us as for anyone else, and we'd treat you square. Why, in a year or so you'd have worked off that debt. There's quick promotion for a good man and you've been here a long time."

"Too damn long," snapped Curt. "Keep your offer, Fenris, I've still got another day before you vultures strike, and I may beat you yet."

"Still hoping to get back home?" The elderly man shook his head. "Why? What can you get on Earth that you can't get here?"

"You want me to answer that, or are you just making noises with your mouth?" Curt glared at the man with open disgust. "If Mars is such a nice place how is it that you vultures don't stay here? I've never seen one of you yet that hasn't almost broken his neck getting to the rocket when his time's up."

"I was employed on Earth," said the elderly man quietly. "Sent here to do a job. My wife and children are still on Earth and five years is a long time to be parted." He held out his hand again. "No hard feelings?"

"No." Curt shook hands, feeling a little ashamed of his outburst. "Sorry, I'll bear your offer in mind."

He turned as a thin whistling roar came echoing down from the almost black sky.

A dot of flame blossomed among the faded stars, a brilliant blue-white flame, growing and lengthening until it stabbed at the desert with harnessed thunder. Above it rode the gleaming spindle of the rocket ship, steady on its gyroscopes as it settled on the fine red dust. Wide fins touched the sand, the thunder of the exhaust died into rumbling silence, and a port opened, a black smear against the polished surface of the hull.

Men came from the ship, treading cautiously in the unfamiliar gravity, and carrying their small allowance of personal luggage.

The new arrivals.

Young men mostly, contract men for the companies lured by the high wages or attracted by the fascination of the unknown. They halted at the foot of the loading ramp, their minimum kits in their hands, their eyes wide as they stared at the low domes of the settlement, the shrunken ball of the sun in the almost black heavens, the grim desolation of the planet-wide deserts.

A few women clustered close together, girls drawn by the hope of finding wealthy husbands, others coming to meet their men, some to work in the offices at the Admin building.

Curt ignored them, heading directly for the men. He brushed aside a uniformed policeman, ducked between two men with papers clipped to boards and lists fluttering in the thin wind, and held out his hand.

"Welcome to Mars," he said cheerfully. "Have a nice trip?"

"Fair." One of the men, a boyish seeming youth of about twenty, shook the proferred hand. Curt grinned.

"How about some food and a look around? You won't have to start work until tomorrow and I've been here a long time." He winked. "A little fun wouldn't hurt after that long trip. How about me showing you where to find it?"

The man hesitated, glancing at his companions and shuffling his feet in the sand.

"Come on," urged Curt. "You're on Mars now, relax, join in, have a little fun."

"Maybe I should check in at the company offices?" The man seemed half-eager to explore the settlement yet loath to trust himself wholly to a stranger. Curt grinned and took him by the arm.

"I'll check you in later. They won't expect you to work until tomorrow and if you check in now they'll put you in the barracks.

How about a drink?"

The man hesitated, looked back at his travelling companions, then reluctantly let himself be led off the field.

Curt took him to a sheban, a place where food and drinks were served. The alcohol was cheap, an inevitable by-product of the big yeast culture vats it was almost as cheap as water, which still made it sky-high according to Earth standards. Curt ordered a couple of drinks, paying for them out of his last few credits. The stranger paid for the next round, and the next, and the next.

Soon they were talking as if they'd known each other for years.

"What made you leave Earth, Matt?" Curt squinted at his glass and let a little of the potent spirit circle his tongue. "A youngster like you should have had plenty of opportunities of making his pile back home without coming all this way."

"That's what you think." Matt swayed a little, his eyes glazed and his speech thick. "Things aren't too good back home, not good at all. No jobs. No money. Nothing."

"Yeah?" Curt didn't trouble to hide his disbelief. "What are you talking about? I was born there you know. I know what things are like."

"Not now you don't," said Matt carefully. "Trade is blocked by the tariff barriers." Almost it seemed he was going to weep into his glass. "You'd have thought that after we'd won the Atom War everything would be roses. Well it ain't."

"Why not?"

"Cause of the people, that's why. Too many of 'em, treading on each others toes, stabbing each other in the back, cutting each others throats. Man, you don't know what it's like back there. Me, I'm glad to be out of it."

"What's your trade?"

"Dirt farmer. I used to grow things—me and the old man. We had a piece of land, good land once, and grew stuff, you know, fruit and veg. and a few cows and chickens. After the Atom War the land wasn't so good anymore, the crops were poor and didn't get any better. No matter what we did the crops didn't get any better."

He swayed and Curt caught his arm, then led him to a table against a wall.

"Thanks." Matt grinned, then looked serious as he stared at his empty glass. "Gone!"

"I'll get you some more." Curt watched the youngster fumble

with his wallet and finally drop it onto the table. He picked it up and stared at the half-drunk young man.

" I'd better look after this for you, you may lose it."

" Sure. Thanks."

Curt grinned and replenished the empty glasses. Matt stared at the pale liquid and blinked at his companion with glazed eyes.

" What was we talking about? "

" Land."

" Sure. Now I remember. The land wasn't good anymore, the damn war had ruined it, or we'd grown too many crops on it, something like that. Anyway, the old man and me, we just couldn't make it give both of us a living. What with the payments on the mortgage, the cost of fertiliser, the payments on the tractor . . . Hell, we didn't stand a chance. So I came out here. Find a piece of land somewhere and raise a few crops. Find a girl and settle down. The old man always said that a farmer should have a wife, help with the chores you know, and anyway, the kids'd be handy at harvest time.

He lifted the glass to his mouth, tilted it, and giggled at the liquid running down his chin. He dabbed at it, swayed, then, with a strange dignity, slumped on his face.

Curt swallowed his drink.

He rose, the wallet still in his pocket, and headed for the door. A man bumped into him as he stepped into the chill of the Martian dusk, an elderly man with a company insignia on his shoulder.

" Hello, Gregson. I've lost one of my boys. They told me at the field that he was with you."

" You'll find him inside." Curt eased himself around the company official, conscious of his own guilt and the other's suspicious eyes.

" Take care of him, Fenris. The youngster's still got a few illusions left."

He walked away, the wallet burning a hole in his pocket.

CHAPTER FIVE

The dice were moist in his palm as he rattled them over the spread blanket. He blew into his closed fist, muttered a short prayer, then tossed the dice against a wall. They fell, bouncing on the drab

material of the blanket, a four and a three.

" Seven! "

" Let it ride." Curt scooped up the dice, waited until the eager-faced players kneeling around the blanket had covered the little pile of notes before him, then threw again.

" Eight! "

" Fifty says he doesn't make it the hard way." A bearded man thrust notes into the centre of the ring and glared around him.

" What odds? "

" Seven to five."

" I'll take that." Curt counted out money from the stolen wallet and covered the bet. He shook the dice, blowing on them, and muttering his short prayer. " Come on babies. For Earth! "

They bounced off the wall, rolled a couple of times, came to rest.

Six! "

Curt shrugged, reached for the bones, threw again.

" Nine! "

Again.

"Five!"

A fourth time.

"Ten! "

A thin film of sweat glistened on Curt's forehead as he scooped up the dice. He rattled them for a long time, his lips moving silently as he prayed to whatever Gods watched over the luck of crap players. He drew back his arm, tossing the dice with a jerk of his wrist. They bounced, settled, and winked in the harsh glare of the naked electric bulb.

" Two fours. Eight the hard way! "

He grinned as he swept up the pile of notes, flinging ten credits to the blanket and waiting with the dice in his hand. The bearded man who had just lost fifty covered the bet, snarling as the other players tried to beat him to it. Curt shrugged and tossed the dice.

" Snake eyes. I win! " The bearded man grabbed both dice and cash. " I bet twenty who covers? ' '

" I will." One of the men threw a note on the blanket and watched with avid eyes as the bearded man threw the dice.

Curt shrugged and left the game.

Outside it was dark and the bitter chill of the freezing night air made him hunch deeper into the non-conductive coverall. The sky was a bright glitter of frosty stars and he paused for a while,

trying to spot Earth, then shrugged as he remembered that it couldn't be seen at night.

A man walked along the street, huge in his bulky coverall, and Curt blinked in a sudden flash of light.

"Gregson?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Police here. We've been looking for you. Mr. Fenris wants to see you at once.

"Tell Mr. Fenris he can wait," snapped Curt. "I'm not his lackey if you are."

"Better come quietly," said the policeman grimly. "There's a question of a missing wallet stolen off one of the new arrivals."

"Go to hell," said Curt, and struck with his gloved hand at the flashlight. It fell to the dust and in the sudden darkness Curt turned and ran along the buildings.

A pistol snapped spitefully behind him and tiny high-velocity slugs whined through the air, high at first, then low, smacking into the hardened sand of the street, then, just as Curt ducked between two buildings, waist high and aimed to kill.

The police didn't believe in playing games.

The old doctor lived in one of the old adobe dwellings to the edge of town. A relic of the initial colonisation it still served its original purpose, and the thick, hardened sand walls were glass-smooth and dully polished by the constant rubbing of fine sand.

Curt banged on the outer door, waiting as slow footsteps undid the latch, then growled a rapid identification as light flashed in his face.

"It's me, Doc. Curt. Let me in."

"Trouble?"

Curt shrugged, pushing his way past the old man and into the rough interior of the dome-like hut. He slumped on the edge of a crude bed, resting his throbbing leg and gulping at the warm air.

The old man watched him for a moment, then rested a battered pot on a glowing electric element, tipping a few grains of greasy black powder into a pint of water. He sniffed at it, then slammed down the lid of the percolator, waiting for the water to boil.

"Coffee won't be long, Curt. Have a cup?"

"Thanks." The young man grinned and relaxed on the bed. "Aren't you going to ask me what the trouble is, Doc?"

"Should I?"

"Fenris set the police after me. I didn't like the idea of going

to jail so I ducked away and came here."

"Why?"

"Why not? Aren't you a friend of mine?"

"Maybe I am, Curt, and then again, maybe I'm not. I can't hide you if that's what you're thinking. They'll comb the town before morning, you don't stand a chance." The old man sniffed at the steam coming from the percolator then poured out two cups of a thin brown liquid. "What's the trouble?"

"They say I stole a wallet, lifted it off a newcomer."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

Slowly the old man set down his cup and when he looked at Curt his eyes were blank and utterly impersonal.

"That was a pretty low thing to do, wasn't it?"

"I've only borrowed it," snapped the young man. "I wanted to chance my luck at the tables and I needed money to do it. I won."

"How much?"

"Not enough. If I pay off the debt I can't return the money, if I return the cash then I'm still seventy credits short."

"So the theft was pretty useless, wasn't it?"

"It was a loan, Doc, not a theft."

"Was it?" The old man sipped at his steaming coffee. "What if you'd lost? What then?"

"I didn't lose."

"You could have done, Curt. What if you had?"

"Then I'd have lost, so what!" Irritably, the young man rose to his feet and began to pace across the floor. "Damn it all, Doc, who's side are you on? I want to get back home, want it more than any fancy ideas of right and wrong. What did he lose anyway? A few credits and what do they mean to him? Nothing."

"You don't know that, Curt."

"I do know it. He's a kid, still wet behind the ears, wants to settle on a piece of land and raise crops. Crops! On Mars! They'll be building boats here next!"

Angrily he slumped back onto the bed and reached for his synthetic coffee. The old man stared at him for a moment, then set down his empty cup.

"What are you going to do, Curt?"

"What do you think? Pay off the debt, serve my time, then get back to Earth."

"How? Once they brand you as a convict they won't let you

on a rocket. Earth won't let you return, you know that, so how are you going to get back? "

" I'll find a way. I'll find it if I have to steal a rocket and pilot it myself! God! You don't know how much I hate this planet. If killing could get me back home then I'd do it if it meant slaughtering the colony."

" Curt! " The old man rose and stepped to the side of the bed. He touched the young man's wrist, stared at the colouration of his eyeballs, and sucked in his cheeks with a worried expression. " Have you been back to the hospital for a routine post-operation check-up? "

" And owe them another fifty credits? " Curt shook his head. " No."

" You're a sick man, Curt. Fever. I've seen it before. Not an infection of course, luckily Mars is sterile, but it's some form of radiation sickness. You'll have to have treatment, Curt."

" No."

" Suit yourself, but eventually you'll be picked up out of the street and carried there, you may as well go now, it'll be cheaper in the long run."

The old man rubbed his seamed features.

" What are you going to do about the wallet, Curt? "

The young man shrugged, a wry grin on his too-hard face, and fumbled in a pocket.

" Give it back I suppose. Here." He peeled off a little heap of credit notes. " You take these. It's the money I won, honest money, but if they find it on me they'll grab it to set against my debt. I'd rather you have it than waste it paying off the interest."

" You want me to mind it for you? "

" No. Use it, buy yourself some bandages or something, Sam's wife will probably need it when she has a baby."

The old man nodded and slipped the money into a pocket.

" I'll do that, and now, Curt, what about you? "

" Don't worry about me, Doc." Curt grinned, a hard light in his eyes and an ugly twist to his tight mouth. " I've got my own ideas. I've played it straight for ten years, ten years of sweat and heartbreak, ten years of slaving for a dream. I had that dream, Doc, had it in the hollow of my hand, and then they snatch it from me with some damn home-made regulation. They could have refunded that ticket, transferred it, they knew how long it took me to earn it. They didn't, and now it's my turn."

" What are you getting at, Curt? "

" Nothing. Nothing that need concern you, Doc. I've got to serve my time, I know that, but maybe they'll be sorry they cheated me before I'm done."

" Who, Curt? "

" Who? The companies of course, who else? Tricking a man into believing that he could make his pile by working on Mars. Trapping a man so that he doesn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of ever getting back home again. Robbing him blind for every bite of food and mouthful of water."

He spat on the pounded dust of the floor.

" They played it smart, Doc. Maybe they've played it too smart."

" Take it easy, Curt. You're not well, that fever . . ."

" I know all about fevers. I know what it is to eat your heart out for ten long years, to feel the burning fever of homesickness, to know that you're getting older and older and that time is catching up with you. Don't talk to me about fevers, Doc. I've had one for ten years now, the fever to get back home."

" Why, Curt? Why do you want to go to Earth? "

" You asked me that before," reminded the young man. " Fenris asked it, do you want the same answer I gave him? "

" I want the real answer, Curt. The real reason."

" Isn't it obvious? Look around you, look at the dust and the sand and the eternal rock. Not a green leaf, not a growing plant, not even a cactus or a bit of sagebrush. I was born in England, Doc. Everything is green there, a soft and wonderful green, and it rains, it rains almost all the time. Does it ever rain here? Does the sky ever look all soft and white with cloud? Can you stand at your door and smell the scent of growing things? Can you compare this dust heap to Earth? "

" Should I? " The old man shook his head. " I can't compare them, Curt," he said quietly. " It's been almost forty years since I left Earth, I've forgotten what it's like now."

" Forty years! Man, you must love the place! "

" Yes, Curt." The old man had a peculiar expression on his features as he stared at the young man. " I believe that I do."

He tensed to an abrupt pounding on the outer door. " The police! They must have tracked your footprints."

" Let them in, Doc, I'm ready."

Curt relaxed on the bunk, a tight smile on his face, and waited for the company police.

He didn't have to wait long.

CHAPTER SIX.

The Recorder was a qualified lawyer, a company lawyer of course, employed to dispense what passed for justice and to enforce the company administration. He listened to the evidence of Fenris, the policeman, Matt, and finally turned to Curt.

"Have you anything to say?"

"Yes. As far as I can remember my law, there can be no crime without premeditation. I did not steal the wallet. I was asked to mind it by the new arrival. I didn't want to sit and wet-nurse a drunk, so I left him, and merely by chance, I forgot that I had the wallet in my pocket."

"You passed Mr. Fenris when leaving the sheban, you could have given him the wallet."

"I forgot it I told you."

"Why did you resist arrest?"

"Why not?" Curt glared defiantly at the Recorder. "Why should I come when Fenris calls? He doesn't own me."

"I understand that you were gambling with money from the wallet. Is that correct?"

"No. I had a little money of my own and I used that." Curt licked his burning lips and wished that he could sit down. His leg throbbed and everything seemed to be blurred and swaying. He shivered, a cold sweat goose-pimpling his flesh, then gasped as the raging thirst of fever clawed at him. Dimly, as from a great distance, he heard the careful words of the Recorder passing sentence.

". . . Good character . . . recently ill . . . returned wallet with money intact . . . but must safeguard new arrivals . . three months . . ."

He stood, staring at the pale blobs of faces before him, then stumbled as a policeman jerked his arm.

"This way, Gregson."

"What happened?" He wiped his moist forehead and forced himself to concentrate on what was happening around him. The policeman stared at him, a frown creasing his forehead, then jerked his head at the empty bench.

"The Recorder gave you three months on a chain gang. Didn't you hear him?"

"No."

"What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"I don't know." Curt swayed, steadied to the grip on his arm, then swayed again.

The policeman caught him as he fell.

He was in hospital two weeks, two weeks of careful nursing, calculated diet, prophilactic injections and anti-radiation shots. He lost twelve pounds in weight and when they discharged him his total debt to the hospital was almost a thousand credits.

And he was barred from ever returning to Earth.

That was the knowledge which hurt most of all. He leaned against the side of one of the great hoppers at the mining site, the drab coverall stained with the fine dust, a mask chafing his face and neck, and a huge shovel in his hands. The other members of the gang worked around him, shovelling the dust into the hoppers leading to the refining plant where the traces of radioactive elements in the sand would be separated and purified.

It took a tremendous amount of sand to provide a small ingot of pure element. It took thousands of man-hours, expensive machinery, difficult operations and a vast quantity of water, but it had to be done.

The element was the only thing worth exporting to Earth, the only product of Mars which could justify the existence of the settlement, the only way the companies could regain their investment.

And men either worked for the companies or they didn't work at all.

A guard ploughed through the dust, his voice harsh as it echoed from the diaphram in his mask.

"Gregson! Get working!"

Curt looked down at his shovel, looked at the men labouring around him, then deliberately threw down the tool.

"Pick up that shovel!" The guard stood on wide legs, his long club in his hand, and his whole attitude one of menace. "Pick it up and get to work. What do you think this is, a holiday?"

"Go to hell!" Curt stared at the guard and around him the rest of the gang halted their labour as they sensed something happening. The guard glanced at them then stepped closer to Curt.

"Trying to start a riot?" His eyes glittered through the

scratched plastic eye-pieces as he looked at Curt. "Pick up that shovel and get to work before I slam you down." His hand tensed on the long club. "I mean it, Gregson, we've no time for wasters here."

"No?" Curt made no effort to pick up the tool. "Go ahead and beat me up, slam me down, put me in hospital with a broken skull, kill me if you like." He folded his arms. "I'm finished. If you want that dust shovelled then do it yourself."

"What's the matter here?" Another guard ploughed through the dust towards them, an officer by his insignia, and the watching men seemed to gather a little closer as they ignored the shouts of their guards.

"This prisoner refuses to work, sir. I was just about to discipline him when you arrived."

"What's this? Refusing to work?" The officer stared at Curt as if he were something indecent. "Nonsense! Everyone works here, now get back to shovelling that dust and let's have no more of this. Hurry now!"

"No!"

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"You realise what this means of course? Extended sentence, disciplining, no food or water." He rested his hand on Curt's shoulder. "Don't be a fool, Gregson, you know that we can't let you get away with this. Why not be sensible?"

He glanced uneasily at the prisoners clustered around, all work on the site had stopped by now, and the officer was experienced enough to sense that he trod on dangerous ground. There were too few guards for too many prisoners, and he knew that in a riot his men wouldn't stand a chance.

Habit kept the prisoners docile. Habit and the knowledge that to escape was useless—they had nowhere to escape to. Life was impossible outside of the settlement. Mars was too barren to provide anyone with a livelihood, and somewhere on the desert were to be found the dessicated bones of those who had forgotten that fact, or who had ignored it.

But men aren't always logical.

The officer knew it, and his voice was harsh as he snapped quick orders to his men.

"Assemble the prisoners. Return to the barracks. Quick now!"

Slowly, like a sullen group of restless horses, the work gang plodded across the dust back to their bleak living quarters.

Curt grinned as he shuffled through the dust.

He was still grinning when they called him before Fenris and the prison board. The elderly company official, like most of the officials employed on, and waiting to return to, Earth, had administrative powers and ruled the settlement, responsible only to the companies. Their one order was to maintain a continuous supply of radioactives to Earth and while they did it they were left alone. If they failed . . .

Curt grinned even wider as he saw the worried expression on the elderly man's face.

"I hear that you've been causing a little trouble, Gregson," Fenris said. "Refusing to work at the task given you. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"But why? Why did you refuse? You know that you were guilty of a crime and that you must pay the penalty. Why cause this trouble?"

"Why not?"

"I beg your pardon?" Fenris blinked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?"

"I said why the hell should I work?" Curt glared at the shocked faces around him. "You've no need to look so damn upset about it. You're all right, you've all got something to work for. Your passage home, your wives and children, perhaps even the wages you earn for doing what you do, but what have I got? Nothing. Nothing at all, not a hope of ever getting out of debt, of ever getting back home. So why should I sweat over a shovel so that you can line your pockets?"

"That isn't the way to look at it, Gregson. Everyone works on Mars, they have to in order that the settlement operates as it should. There is no room for slackers here. You know that, you've been here over ten years now. Why not be sensible?"

"You're worried, aren't you?" Curt smiled at the elderly man and then at the others sitting with him behind the wide desk. "You don't know just what to do with me."

"We can starve you," grunted a man angrily. "It isn't our fault if you refuse to earn your food."

"Fair enough, starve me then. Watch me die. Watch me waste to a shred, and while you're at it, cut off my water. No sense

in wasting water, is there? "

" You won't talk like that after a few days of thirst," promised the man. " You'll beg for the chance to work for a cup of water."

" Then what are you waiting for? " Curt shrugged and leaned against the edge of the desk. " I'm not worried. Go ahead and starve me, and while you're at it, why not starve the rest of the gang too?"

" What do you mean? "

" Look. You've got some of the most desperate men on Mars working in those gangs, men who would do anything to get away from here, to get back home. They aren't basically criminals, if they were they wouldn't be here. Criminals don't willingly sign on for five years contract work, and that is what those men did. They are criminals because you've made them so. They tried to get money because you stopped them earning it. They are what they are through you and your regulations and for no other reason."

" They broke the laws of the settlement," said Fenris stiffly. " They must pay the penalty for their crime."

" Agreed, but when does the payment stop? You aren't satisfied with making them work for bare subsistance, you've cut off their only hope, you refuse them transportation back home." He stared at them, hard lines of bitterness marring his thin features.

" What sort of crime is it that is punished by a lifetime of exile? "

" We must uphold the law."

" Who's law? Company law or the law of Earth? Tell me, how many men have managed to buy their passage home during the past ten years? How many since the company took over twelve years ago? "

" I haven't the exact figures," said Fenris, " but I could find them. They are on record."

" Don't bother," snapped Curt. " I can tell you. When you took over, there were eight hundred men, women and children on Mars, the entire personnel of the colony. There are now almost two thousand, workers imported from Earth, women and naturally children of marriages that have taken place here. Two thousand—and not more than twenty have managed to buy their passage back home."

" But that is because it takes time to work off the contract and to save money as a free-lance worker."

" Exactly. I was one of them. It took me ten years of scraping

to save enough to pay for my ticket. Ten years, and I doubt if anyone could do it in less. Ten years, and every day I prayed that I wouldn't have an accident, and when I'd got the ticket, when I'd spent all my money, I did have an accident, and now I'll never get back home."

He stared at them, a thin film of sweat glistening on his thin features and his mouth twisted into a bitter expression.

"Do you wonder why I hate the companies guts?"

Fenris coughed and rustled some papers on the desk before him. A man sitting at his right, the man who had threatened Curt with starvation, sneered and glanced at the guards. They stared down at the floor, and Curt could guess why.

Every man on Mars with the exception of the company officials who were guaranteed transportation back home after five years, every man and woman on Mars was in the same boat, and they knew it.

He was not alone.

"What happens now?" The man who had sneered glanced at Fenris and then at Curt. "Do you still refuse to work?"

"Do you still want me to work?" Curt stared at the man and smiled.

"Naturally. What else can we do with you?"

"Then I'll return to the barracks."

"I'm glad to hear that, Gregson," Fenris nodded and rustled his papers again. "I know that you aren't a bad man, just someone who has got himself a little mixed up, and that fever you had must have had something to do with it. Naturally we shall have to discipline you for your mutiny."

"Discipline me?"

"Yes. If we don't the other prisoners will be encouraged to follow your example, and we can't have that." He whispered to the men sitting beside him, then made a notation on one of his papers.

"Three days solitary confinement. Minimum water and food for that period. One month extension of your sentence."

"Thank you," said Curt. "May I go now?"

"You may, and Gregson?"

"Yes?"

"That offer still holds with United Atomic, we can use a good man."

"Thank you," said Curt, and meant it. He smiled, turned,

and left the room.

He was grinning when they put him into a tiny cell.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

One week later the entire work gang went on strike.

They sat in their bleak living quarters, the whole twenty of them, and refused to march out to the mining site. The guards threatened, pleaded, swore, then finally admitted defeat and went in search of help.

Fenris heard the news and called the other members of the prison board, the Recorder, and as many police guards as could be spared from the other gangs. They weren't many, labour couldn't be wasted in guarding men who had nowhere to escape to and no desire for escape. Three guards had always been sufficient to watch twenty men, and sometimes the gangs had worked for a while without any supervision at all.

Curt had changed all that.

He sat, a thin smile on his irregular features, and watched Fenris and the others enter the adobe hut. The elderly man looked worried, the Recorder grim, the guards uncomfortable. Only the prisoners themselves seemed to be at ease.

"What is the meaning of this?" Fenris spoke to Curt, instinctively knowing who was to blame. The young man shrugged.

"I've decided not to work anymore, and the boys have decided to join me." He stared at Fenris, not enlarging on the bare statement, not trying to justify himself, not doing anything but wait.

He didn't have to wait long.

The member of the board who had threatened starvation snarled a curse, his pudgy features mottling with rage. The Recorder thinned his lips and motioned to the guards. Fenris bit his lips.

"You know what this means, Gregson?"

"No. What does it mean?"

"Mutiny, you know that, and you know what the penalty is for rebellion against constituted authority."

"Do I?" Curt grinned, then turned to the Recorder. "You're supposed to be a lawyer. Is it a fact that the settlement and the companies operate under Terrestial Law?"

"I can't answer that question."

" Why not? I've read the original Charter. It gives the companies territorial rights on Mars, but it also gives each man the inalienable right to ' Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' In other words the Law here is based on the Law of Earth. Nothing in the Charter gives the companies the right to make their own laws or decide on their own penalties."

He grinned at the discomfited Recorder.

" Am I right? "

" What are you getting at, Gregson? " Fenris silenced the man at his side with a curt gesture. " Get to the point."

" Very well then, this is it. I am a criminal, sentenced to serve a certain length of time under duress. That I'm not arguing with and I'll serve the sentence." He paused, and the watching prisoners seemed to hunch a little closer, ignoring the club-armed police.

" I'll do my time. You can lock me up, chain me, throw me in solitary. You can make me do anything but work, and that you can't do. You can't do it because forced labour has been thrown out of the penal code for twenty years now. If you try to make me work you are breaking the law, Terrestial Law, the law beneath which the company must operate, and if you do that then you are as bad as the men you imprison."

He smiled at the startled Recorder, but when he spoke his voice held no humour.

" You can't make me work for you. You can kill me, starve me, beat me up, but you can't make me work—I'll die first. Die laughing rather than let your damn companies make another cent out of me! "

" Is he right? Fenris almost spat the words as he stared at the Recorder. " Can we make them work? "

" What does it matter if we can or can't? " The pudgy-faced man glared at Curt, his eyes glinting with angry hate. " We can take care of this trouble maker. I've met his sort before. We have enough on Earth, always whining about their ' rights.' They have no rights. They can either work or starve, and that's what can happen here. A hungry belly will bring him to reason fast enough, and his friends with him."

A mutter rose from the watching prisoners, a snarling, animal-like sound, and Fenris glanced quickly towards the guards as he heard it.

" Watch your tongue, Manson, I'll handle this " He stared

at the Recorder. "Well? You're supposed to know the law? Is he right?"

"Forced labour has been thrown out of the penal code," admitted the lawyer slowly. "But I don't know whether or not the special circumstances here on Mars warrant us introducing it to the legislature."

"Then he is right." Fenris gnawed thoughtfully at his bottom lip. "We can't legally make them work."

"No."

"Are you insane?" Manson stared at them, his pudgy face twisted with rage. "Of course we can make them work, they're prisoners aren't they?"

"That's just it." Curt leaned back and winked at one of the guards. "We are the only people on Mars that you can't make work. We're prisoners, tried and condemned by your own court. We are restrained from following our normal occupations, incarcerated, and entitled to nothing except food, shelter, and the basic necessities of life." He grinned. "You can discharge your employees and then, if they can't buy your food, you can withhold it from them. They are free agents. If they decide to starve that's up to them, not you. But we are not free agents. We are prisoners, and prisoners are entitled to be fed."

"I've heard enough!" Manson turned to the guards, his eyes glinting in his pudgy face, and his hands trembling with anger. "Lock up these men, no food or water until they agree to work at the site. I'll show you how to deal with these agitators!"

"You'll be breaking the law," reminded Curt gently.

"To hell with the law! The companies are the law here on Mars and the sooner you learn that the better. You'll work or starve!"

"Will we? Curt rose from where he sat on the edge of narrow bunk, and faced the angry man. "You fool! Respect for the law is the only thing which keeps the companies going. While men owe money and work to pay off their debt you will have labour for the mines. Once you make your own laws, ignore those the settlement has lived by for the past twelve years, then watch out! Why should men honour their debts if you treat them like cattle? Why should they go hungry, watch their wives and children grown thin and weak with a poor diet, scrape and save for year after year? Why should they do all this—if they can merely take what they want?"

He looked at Fenris, and the elderly man stared at him with puzzled eyes.

"You know what I'm talking about, Fenris. You know that the settlement is trembling on the brink of anarchy. The people know now that they can never get back home. They know that they've been caught in an economic trap, but they're putting up with it. They are standing it because they're decent people, law abiding and not prone to violence, but if Manson has his way . . ."

He let his voice die into silence, then deliberately sat down on the edge of the bunk and stretched his legs before him.

"So you threaten revolution now, Gregson." Manson stepped forward, his features twisted with arrogant hate. "You tell me that the companies will be destroyed if we don't wet-nurse the workers. Fool! Without us Mars would be a tomb. Without the companies the settlement couldn't last a month. We owe them nothing. They owe us everything. All they have is what we choose to supply."

"You hear him?" Curt glanced at the guards, at the prisoners and the silent men of the prison board. He looked at Manson, and he didn't trouble to disguise his contempt.

"I threaten nothing," he said quietly. "All I have done is to refuse to work, and that is something no company or organisation can take from any man, his right to work or not as he chooses. You are the one who has done all the threatening. I'd like to remind you of something, Manson. The settlement was here long before the companies. Men lived on Mars without your charity. They can do without you—but the companies can't do without them."

"You . . ." Manson grabbed at a guard's club, jerked it from his hand and lifted it above his head as he strode forward. Curt smiled up at him, making no move to avoid the threatened blow, deliberately folding his arms as he stared at the angry man.

"Manson!" Fenris stepped forward, snatching at the weapon, his eyes glinting with cold anger. "Get out of here. Return to your quarters."

"But . . ."

"You heard what I said. Get out! You're playing right into his hands."

He waited until the pudgy man had left the bleak living quarters, the club swinging in his hand, and his eyes thoughtful as he stared at the expressions of the guards.

"Here." He threw the club back to its owner. "Return to your duties. Two men will remain to guard the hut, the outside of the hut. I don't want any of you to communicate with the prisoners."

They left, staring at the stern features of the elderly man and the easy confident smile of the rebel. They left, and a low mutter of conversation echoed from outside the hut before they parted to go their different ways.

Fenris sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What shall we do with you, Gregson?"

"You heard what your friend suggested. Why not take his advice?"

"Starve you? Kill you?" Fenris shook his head. "No, Gregson, we can do without martyrs, you won't be allowed to die."

"Then what do you suggest?" Curt smiled at the elderly man, relaxing on the bunk, his hands resting behind his head.

"Frankly, Fenris, I can't see that you have much choice in the matter."

"No?"

"No."

"I shouldn't be too sure of that, Gregson. The companies have had to deal with strikes and trouble makers before, you know."

"But not on Mars."

"Mars isn't so different to Earth, better if anything. We are dealing with a finer type of man."

"Is Manson a finer type of man?"

"Manson is a fool." Fenris frowned as he recalled the past incident. "He is one of the men we can well do without, here and anywhere—a man without imagination. You played him well, Gregson, but then I always did think you were an intelligent man. I hope that you're not going to prove me wrong."

"I won't," promised Curt grimly. "What made you think that I was playing Manson?"

"It was too obvious. To succeed, your rebellion against authority must spread. One man can never break a system, but many men, a majority of men, can. In order to break the system we have built here on Mars it is essential for you to persuade others to follow your example. Once a majority of people refuse to honour their debts, or alternatively, force us to imprison them for failure to pay, then the whole debt-system breaks down. We just can't afford to feed and house too many prisoners, the economy won't stand for it."

"That breaks my heart," sneered Curt. "Imagine! Some shareholders on Earth are going to miss a dividend because men don't want to be treated like cattle, robbed blind, retained in exile and forced to slave at the mines." Deliberately he spat on the pounded dust of the floor.

"That for your shareholders."

"Maybe, but it is the shareholders which determine the policy of the companies and if they see the settlement costing too much instead of producing anything at all, then they will insist on withdrawing from Mars."

"So what?"

"So the companies leave. The men leave. The machines and equipment rot in the desert and the dust covers and buries them for all time. Colonisation of Mars is stopped, thrown back to before the space age—and two thousand men, women and children are

unwanted strangers on a strange world."

"Strangers!" Curt shook his head. "No, Fenris, not strangers. You forget, Earth is their home, their own planet. They would never be strangers back home."

"You think so?" The elderly man rose and brushed dust from the front of his coverall. "You're wrong, Gregson, terribly wrong. What of the children? How will they like a three times normal gravity drag? What of the women? Do they know the rush and struggle of fashion, traffic, shopping, trying to get along in a competitive world? And the men? What will they do for a living? Don't ever forget, Gregson, the workers first came here because they couldn't get a living on Earth. What chance will they stand with absolutely no knowledge of trades, conditions, skills, without experience and without any hope of getting any. No, Gregson. I know what it's like back there, you've obviously forgotten."

He headed for the door, an elderly man, one with kind eyes and an understanding heart. He left and behind him the prisoners looked at Curt with questioning eyes.

He grinned at them, winking, pleased with the trouble he had caused, then relaxed full length on the bed, his mind busy with future plans.

Earth seemed very near.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

The strike lasted two weeks and in that time it had spread over most of the settlement. Rumour carried it, the whispers of guards, officials, clerks, tradesmen, shopkeepers, gamblers and prospectors. The grapevine carried it, exaggerating and intensifying as it went.

Within two days the rest of the prisoners had refused to work. Within a week fifty men had refused to pay their debts and had been sentenced to three months each. Half-way through the second week actual robbery began, men grabbed at food and water, then stood defying the police to do anything about it. The climax came when a group of men stormed the landing field demanding to be transported home, then succumbed to arrest, grinning, and refusing even to walk to their living quarters.

At the end of the second week none of the prisoners were on

strike, for a very simple reason—there were no prisoners.

Fenris announced it to Curt, his eyes red from overstrain, his elderly features drawn and sagging from fatigue.

"Gregson. You and the rest are free to go now."

"What!" Curt rolled off the bed, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Is this a trick, Fenris. What do you mean, 'we can go'?"

"Exactly what I say. You've been pardoned, all of you you are no longer prisoners."

"You can't do this to us," snapped Curt. He had grasped the meaning of Fenris's strange announcement before any of the others. "We have been sentenced to definite periods of time, I insist that we serve those sentences."

"You can't." Fenris smiled a little at the expression on the young man's face. "You spouted law at me once, Gregson, now it's my turn. You've all been pardoned. You are free to leave, to return to your normal occupations, to earn your own food and water."

He smiled at them, his words sounding strangely loud in the sudden silence.

"The holiday is over, boys. You can stay here if you wish, but no food will be served, no water. If you want any you must go back to work and earn some."

"It's a trick!" Curt glared at the older man, then smiled, a strange expression in his eyes. "Now I understand. You've had trouble, Fenris, haven't you? What's happened out there? Rebellion?"

"Why don't you go and find out," said Fenris quietly. "You should be very proud at what you've done.

He left then, his feet dragging a little as he forced his tired legs to carry him back to the Admin building, his shoulders stooped as he shuffled through the thick dust. He left the door open and took the guards with him, leaving the way wide open for escape, or for release.

Curt stared after him, his eyes dull with thought, then he shrugged and left the prison hut. After a moment the others straggled after him, looking a little uncomfortable, not quite sure that they were really free. They followed Curt as he headed towards the settlement, a thin plume of dust rising beneath their feet and settling in a thin red film on their drab coveralls. They reached the cluster of domed huts, the cleared and levelled area of the

landing field, the assembled living and shopping quarters housing two thousand people.

They found it in chaos.

Curt stared wonderingly at the closed shops, the men lounging in the streets, the little clusters of gossiping women and the few masked and coveralled children. The place had a dead look, the look of a once-thriving village-town which had lost its mainspring of existence and was just running down. Normally the settlement was a busy place, men and women strode along the streets each knowing what they had to do and when they had to do it. Idleness was unknown on Mars. The battle for life was too strenuous, the deserts too swift to encroach on the one spot man had made his own, and everyone knew and accepted the fact.

Now?

Dust drifted into the narrow streets, dust blown from the ochre plains of Mars, the thin, fine red sand which covered the entire planet. It filtered into the shops, clogged the streets with shifting dunes, rose in tenuous plumes beneath the boots of walking men, hanging on the air like smoke clouds, like distorted streamers of roiling mist.

It caught at the nose and throat, burned at unprotected lungs, irritating and scouring with a million needle-sharp particles of grit and minerals, of crystal and stone, and it was everywhere.

Curt stared at it, guessing that the men whose job it was to keep the dust of the streets tamped and hardened, the filtering sand blown free of the area, had joined the strike. The shopkeepers too, the clerks and workers at the mines, everyone. They hung about the streets, lounging in the dust, waiting.

Waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone to tell them what to do, to guide and lead them, to save their face and let them get back to work. They had vented their built-up frustration. They had yelled their defiance, stopped work, refused to be dictated to by the system any longer, and now they felt the clawing depression of reaction.

Curt felt it. He sensed it in their attitudes, the way they hunched together or wandered aimlessly up and down the streets. He noticed it in the way they stared at him, half-accusingly, half-loyally, and he felt strangely uncomfortable.

He was glad when he reached the old section and stood outside the door of the Doctor's hut. He pounded at it, coughing a little in the drifting clouds of dust, and thrust his way past the old

man as soon as he had opened the door.

"Curt!"

"Hello, Doc." Curt coughed again then gratefully accepted the proferred water jug. "Thanks." He drank, swilling his mouth free of the irritant dust, then swallowing the essential liquid. He slumped on the edge of the narrow bunk, staring without interest at the names and dates scratched on the adobe wall, then grinned at the old man.

"They let me out, Doc."

"I know. Fenris told me."

"He did?" Curt raised his eyebrows, then shrugged. "Well, I beat them at their own game, and there just wasn't a thing they could do about it." He grinned again, relaxing on the hard cot and staring up at the single naked bulb hanging from the roof. "How are things now, Doc?"

"Bad."

Curt chuckled and stared at the old man.

"Good. Maybe the companies will begin to realise that we are human after all. This little upset will worry them, make them treat us square, stop them thinking of us as cattle, economic units, things without feeling."

"No." The old man picked up the water jug and filled the battered pot of his perculator. He dropped a few grains of synthetic coffee into the container and slammed it over the glowing coil of an electric element.

"You're wrong, Curt. I'd hoped that you would have realised that by now."

"Wrong? How do you mean, Doc? I don't understand. All I did was to prove something to them. What's wrong with that?"

"I'm not talking of what you did or didn't do. If things hadn't been ripe for it the strike could never have succeeded. I know that, Fenris knows it, and unless you're a fool you must know it too. Two thousand men can't be panicked by one loud-mouth, not within two weeks anyway. The cause went deeper than that."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"You, Curt." The old man sniffed at the perculator, then sat down on the edge of the bunk. "How you think, the way you feel. You're wrong, you know."

"Wrong! What are you getting at?"

"Don't you know? Why did you cause trouble? You worked here for ten years, worked well, and you were respected and liked.

What made you change, Curt? What made you rob a drunken man? "

"I want to go home. Can't you understand the feeling that claws my guts? The trapped feeling, the knowledge that I'll never see Earth again, the knowledge that I'm going to die here, here in the dust and sand of Mars.

"I can't stand it, Doc. I can't stand it any more. I want to smash things, strike out and hurt somebody. I want to destroy the whole damn system which turns men into exiled slaves. I don't care what I do now. I don't care what people think of me. I want to go home! "

Silence fell, a silence in which the thin whistle of the boiling coffee sounded strangely loud. The old man rose from the bed and lifted the pot from the glowing coil. He filled two cups with the odorous brown liquid, handing one to the young man and holding the other in one wrinkled claw-like hand as he sat down again on the edge of the bed. For a moment they sipped in silence, and the air was heavy with unspoken thoughts.

"What's the matter, Doc." Curt stared down at his half-filled cup. "Have I surprised you? "

"Surprised me? " The old man finished his drink and set down the cup. "Curt, I've lived here for more than forty years now, ever since I left Earth a young man of twenty, and sometimes I think that I've seen everything. No. You don't surprise me. I know just how you feel. Once I felt like it myself. It's a natural feeling, but most of us grow up, get over it, accept what is and not what we think should be."

"Grow up? What do you mean? "

"You're a boy, Curt, sighing for a lost dream. You say that you want to go home, but you can't do that. You can never do that, for you have no home now, not unless Mars is your home. You are thinking of Earth as it was when you left it ten years ago, and you think that time has stopped while you have been away. It hasn't, Curt. Earth is not the place you think it is, not the same place it was when you left. It hasn't altered. I don't mean that, but you have. You have changed and the things which once seemed perfection now would show themselves as they really are."

"Nonsense! "

"Is it, Curt? You don't think that I know what you're going through. I do, Curt. I know too well. I was here in the early days, the days when we had to fight every step of the way, when men died

from inhaling the dust, from poor diet, from the sudden storms and when some died from insane violence and some died in lonely misery by their own hand. We couldn't buy a ticket home then. We knew that. Knew we were here to stay, and we made the best of it, forcing a place to live out of a hell of sand."

He paused, and something glistened in his old eyes as his lips silently framed the names scribbled on the wall.

"Good men, Curt. Brave men. They came here and they died here. They found a waste of sand and they made a home in the wilderness. They turned their backs on Earth, exiled themselves forever from comfort and the soft things of civilisation, and they found something here they could never find on Earth. They found comradeship. They found something within themselves they had forgotten was there. They found their courage, their primitive instinct of survival. They died laughing so that other men could live, and the settlement is a monument to what they did."

"So what?" Curt pulled his mouth into a sneer as he stared at the scribbled wall. "They made something all right. They made a prison camp for others to die in. They made a fortune for money-hungry companies. They were fools!"

"Yes, Curt," whispered the old man, "they were fools. They knew it, but they were something else too. They were men!"

He turned to the younger man, and his features were seamed and strangely creased, his thin hands trembling.

"I can't convince you, can I? I can't make you see that it isn't the system which is wrong, but you. I can't persuade you to alter your outlook, to stop calling Earth 'home,' but to call Mars 'home' instead. I can't stop you destroying yourself because you're blind. Blind! And you just won't see!"

"I can see well enough, Doc," gritted the young man. "I can see that unless a miracle happens my bones will whiten on that cursed sand. To hell with all your plaudits, your history, your amateur psychology. I want to go home!"

"Do you, Curt?"

"You know I do. We all do. Even you'd go if you had the chance, you know you would."

"No, Curt." The old man smiled. "I will never go back to Earth. I'll stay here, here with my friends, and I'll die here with them."

"Just give you the chance," sneered Curt bitterly. It's easy to talk, it's cheap, and empty boasting is cheaper still."

" Yes, Curt, as you say, talk is cheap." The old man smiled as if at some secret jest. " I'm an old man now, the last member of the original colony still living, and when the companies took over they offered me passage to Earth. I refused. They wanted to do something for me, sentiment I suppose, and so they gave me an open ticket.

" I can go to Earth whenever I choose—but I can never return."

" Why not? "

" I'm too old, my bones are brittle and couldn't stand the shock of take-off. That is one reason. The other is that it's a one-way ticket, and I could never earn enough on Earth to buy a return passage."

" And you stay here? " Curt glared his disbelief at the old man. " You must be crazy! "

" Perhaps."

" If I had that ticket I'd go like a shot, nothing would keep me here, nothing."

" I know."

Curt stared at the old man, his mouth dry and his heart thudding as he fought for courage to ask the obvious question. He looked up as feet pounded at the outer door and a man entered the hut.

Fenris shook dust from his mask and nodded.

CHAPTER NINE.

The official looked even more tired than he had when Curt had last seen him, and fatigue had sagged the flesh of his cheeks making him seen more elderly than what he was.

He coughed as the irritant dust seared his throat, then gulped at the water the doctor offered him, smiling gratefuly as he handed back the container.

" Thanks." He looked at Curt. " I guessed that I'd find you here."

" Did you? " Curt shrugged, angry with the man for having interrupted him, yet trying not to show his resentment.

" How are things now, Fenris? " The old doctor took the other's mask and gestured towards the bed. " Have a seat. I'll make a cup of coffee. I guess that you could use it."

" Thank you, I could." Fenris slumped on the bed, ignoring

Curt, and spoke to the old man. " They've agreed to resume work. I've put them to clearing the dust and hardening the streets first. Unless we get that clear we'll all be down with lung trouble, and that's something we can't afford.

" Naturally," sneered Curt. " Remember the poor shareholders."

" Shut your mouth," said Fenris evenly. " There are women and children out there, already coughing and bringing up blood. Don't try to be clever, Gregson, I've stood all I can stand from you."

" Blame yourself then. If you hadn't been so damn smart I'd have been back home by now. What if they are spitting blood? Isn't a little trouble better than the iron chains of economic slavery? "

" Is that why you did it? To pay the companies back because you broke your leg? Is it? "

Curt shrugged, not answering, and the old man paused as he prepared his coffee.

" Was that the reason, Curt? I thought you were trying to help the colony."

" And so I was."

" No you weren't." Fenris stared at the young man with undisguised contempt. " At first I thought you were, and in a way I admired you for it. But that wasn't the reason you stirred up trouble. You're not interested in what happens here, all you want is to get back to Earth, and you'd destroy the entire colony to do it."

He took the steaming cup the old man handed to him and nodded his thanks.

" I'll admit the system here isn't the best possible, but reform takes time, and we had to feel our way. And when you think of it, is it so bad? What does it matter how much a man owes? He can always work, get medical attention, get food and water. The only thing he can't do is to return to Earth, and is that so bad? "

" You tell me." Curt glared at the elderly man. " Would you stay here? Even if you had no wife or children, would you stay? "

" I have sent for my family," said Fenris quietly. " Mars is my home now."

" Very noble of you," sneered Curt bitterly. " Just think of all the cheap servants they will have."

" Stop it, Curt! " The old doctor grated. " Stop using your mouth and try using your brains for a change." He looked at Fenris. " How about those reforms, did anything come of your propsals? "

"Yes. The rate of interest has been cut to one per cent. per

month instead of per week. I managed to convince the directors that it was advisable, we can thank Gregson here for that, the strike worried them quite a bit. Anyway, the personnel owe the companies more than they could ever repay if they worked for half wages for twenty years, so it makes little difference."

"And the other things?"

"The cleansed dust from the refining machines is to be spread, mixed with humus from the waste products of the settlement, and a team of agronomists are coming to find out whether it's possible to grow our own vegetables. I have been allowed to divert men and machines for that purpose."

"Anything else?"

"No. Not yet anyway, but we'll keep trying." Fenris stared at the old doctor and Curt had the impression of perfect understanding between the two men. He shifted uncomfortably on the hard bunk, irritated because something was going on he didn't know about, and yet impatient because he shouldn't really care.

"So I really did something for the colony after all," he said. "I made the companies give up a little of the wealth they've squeezed out of us."

"You did nothing but serve as a catalyst," said Fenris coldly. "You were the trigger, the example I'd been waiting for, if it hadn't been you it would have been someone else."

"You were waiting for me to strike?" Curt shook his head at the other's nod. "I don't believe you."

"Why do you think I let you persuade the Recorder that forced labour was illegal? Why do think I agreed with what you said, restrained Manson from using force, let you spread trouble among the other prisoners? You were just the man I was waiting for, if you hadn't done it I would have used someone else. I complimented you on your intelligence, remember, and warned you not to spoil my opinion. You did that when you continued the strike too long, preached a lot of stupid nonsense, and let things go too far."

"You're lying!"

"No. Did you really believe that one man could break a system? That by spouting a little confused law you could halt the entire settlement? Man, I could have flung you into solitary confinement, had you shot as an escaping prisoner, done any one of twenty things to break the strike and to shut your mouth. I did none of them, but at the same time I thought you were sincere in your desire to help the colony."

" I was."

" No. What you did was what a small boy would have done, kicked because he couldn't get his own way. Why should you be treated differently than anyone else? "

Curt stared down at his hands, and felt his stomach churn with insane rage. He wanted to kill, to burn and smash and destroy, to drive the settlement back into the sand and force the companies to transport the people back home. He didn't believe Fenris, the man was lying, putting the best face he could on what had happened, trying to justify his position by belittling what Curt had done. He smiled grimly, if they wanted trouble he would give it to them, give it to them by the ton. He could wreck the pipe-line from the pole, spoil the culture in the yeast tanks, spread dissention among the workers and cut production at the mines.

He would beat the companies yet!

" Well, Gregson, what are you going to do? " Fenris rested his hand on the young man's knee. " I still think that you belong here, and we need every good man we can get. Mars is a growing place, there will be room for all of us, plenty of space to live in and rich exports to bring us trade. Economic and natural law will divorce the settlement from company control, it may take a little time, but it must happen. Other nations will build ships and come here. Other peoples will settle and build new colonies. Why don't you stay here and be a part of it all? "

" Thanks for nothing," snarled Curt savagely. The last sales talk I listened to cost me ten years of hell."

" Do you still want to go back to Earth? " The old doctor looked hopefully at the young man. " Do you, Curt? "

" You know damn well I do."

Fenris stared at the old man and nodded.

" It will take time," he said, " but I think I can arrange it. The companies won't want to keep a trouble-maker here if they can help it, and he did pay for a ticket."

" No." The old man shook his head. " Not that way, Fenris, that will automatically prevent him from ever coming back." He smiled at the taut face of the young man. " You can use my ticket, Curt. I'll never need it now. Use it, and then when you've found that Earth doesn't welcome strangers, when you've realised that your home is on Mars, come back to us, come back to your only real friends."

" Do you mean that, Doc, about the ticket I mean? " Curt

swallowed, his stomach churning to an unfamiliar emotion.

"I do, son, all of it."

"I'll never come back," breathed Curt, and his words were both a valediction and a curse. "Just let me get off this damn desert. Just let me get back to decent people, to a decent way of life where a man doesn't have to pay for everything he has. Just let me get back home."

He stared at the name-scribbled wall, already savouring the rich welcome awaiting a returning hero, the comforts of a wealthy Earth.

And so he returned to Earth, to a gravity which wrenched at his atrophied muscles, to air which almost choked him with its thick humidity, to the churning, screaming, bustle and rush of the commercial rat-race of an overcrowded civilisation.

And three days after he landed he was arrested for vagrancy and thrown into jail.

He stood on a narrow cot, his leg muscles burning with fatigue from carrying his unaccustomed weight, his chest and lungs sore from the odour-laden air, and stared at a narrow patch of sky visible through the bars of his cell. It was night, and the soft velvet of the heavens was sprinkled with the flickering points of many dim stars.

He found one, a red fleck against the bowl of night, and for a long time he stared at the tiny point of Mars.

He was home, home where he had always wanted to be. Home on Earth—where only the sun and sky are free.

If you don't count the scenery.

E. C. TUBB

News and Advance Reviews for Science-Fiction Film Fans

From FORREST J. ACKERMAN

John Payne, the film star, has 'phoned me some exciting good news that I've been waiting to hear and agitating at him for ever since I first made his acquaintance 10 years ago and learned that, tho' you'd scarcely suspect it from the roles he plays on the screen, he's an intense science fiction fan. He keeps up with a good deal of the current literature, is quite proud of his collection (which runs back to 1926), and has even, under an unrevealed pseudonym, written fantasy and had it published! The Big Announcement? "Forry," he told me, " I'm forming my own company to produce a science fiction film. Can you tell me how to get in touch with Heinlein? " After I gave him the home phone of the Greatest, he revealed to me the title he's interested in filming. Hold your breath—it's a book-length novel, and a honey! THE PUPPET MASTERS! Satisfied?

Jack London's noted novel *Star Rover,* of the man-of-many lives, has been optioned. Many years ago an original story called " The Electric Man " was purchased by Universal Studios and turned into a vehicle for Lon Chaney Jr., called *Man-Made Monster,* the old pseudoscientific version now being re-released as *Atomic Monster;* but, just as *Donovan's Brain* has been re-made, so is *The Electric Man* to emerge as a new scientifilm, this time scripted by Harry Essex, credited with the screenplay of *It Came From Outer Space.*

I just called producer Rick Strauss to ask him what was new for *NEBULA* readers on his in-production scientifilms, *Destruction Orbit* and *The House at Alamagordo.* Strauss, a local (Los Angeles) fan for the past 8 years, has scripted both stories himself. " Well, first of all, Forry," he told me, " they've both had their titles changed again. In talking with Dr. Richardson of the Mt. Wilson Observatory, I found that in postulating an asteroid of a certain size and type and speed and highly elliptical orbit I had in effect described Icarus, which was discovered about 4 years ago; so *Destruction Orbit* may instead be known as *Duel On Icarus.* And the other half of our duo will probably be called *The House at Frenchman Flat."* The overall title of the film is tentatively TIME OF TERROR, suggested by Chad Oliver's astounding story, " The Edge of Forever." I got astronomer Richardson (who is also known in the s.f. magazines as Philip Latham) together with producer Strauss, and there is now a pretty good possibility that the good doctor will *introduce* the picture, from the screen,

in much the same manner as Somerset Maugham. Mel Hunter, the brilliant new science fiction book jacket and magazine cover artist, has been employed by Canterbury Productions as technical adviser on both pictures, and from reading the scripts and supervising a number of sequences (as well as painting interplanetary backdrops, etc.) has become quite familiar with the plots of both. The *House* episode, he tells me, might be considered "a comedy of terrors." It deals with a little boy who befriends an invisible alien, and the bad time his parents give him because they disbelieve the existence of the extra-terrestial. Finally the e.-t. turns, makes itself visible, whisks the doubting Thomases thru the 4th Dimension into a moebius room, and from iceworld to fire planet in a convincing Clarke's tour of the solar system. "*Duel on Icarus,*" Hunter tells me, "opens right up in the future, with interplanetary flight an accomplished fact. In fact, colonization of several of the planets has taken place, and there is now a rebellion on Venus of representatives of the Free Planets v. the Solar Federation. There is a tremendous space battle, the first of its kind attempted on the screen, after which a colonial girl from Venus, who out-ranks an officer from Earth, is stranded with her enemy in an inoperative life-boat plunging on a little planetoid towards the sun." I happened to be present with my client, Hunter, while the final scene of *Icarus* was being shot, so can reassure you that Cinderella and her fella don't fall into the sun and become cinders.

Melvin Korshak of Chicago, director of Shasta Publishers, is out here in Hollywood for a spell, "flogging" (if I recall my British slanguage correctly from my visit in 1951) his various titles. He has one television producer interested in the possibility of making a pilot (sample) picture of THE WORLD BELOW, which classic Shasta revived in America several seasons ago; and, for theatrical release, has stirred up much interest in Raymond F. Jones' "This Island Earth," a property about the Peace Engineers of the future which my literary agency originally placed with Shasta. The book, incidentally, enjoys the distinction of having been picked by *two* book clubs.

Many, many years ago, over 20 to be exact, I formed an ambitious little group called the Boys' Scientifiction Club. Vice-President was a teenage fan-pal of mine, Jim Nicholson. Well, I just sold Abtcon Pictures a screenplay collaborated on this boyhood buddy of mine, based on the IF magazine story "Deadly City" by Ivar Jorgenson, the latter being a pseudonym for Paul W. Fairman, Managing Editor of *Amazing Stories*. Nicholson's adaptation for wide-screen was done together with Wyott Ordung, who *acted* in the futuristic film *Invasion, U.S.A.*, will *direct* a forthcoming scientifilm titled *The Unknown*, and *wrote* the original version (not the mishmash that appeared on the screen) of the 3-dimensional *Robot Monster*. The picture will be called *Target—Earth*! and concerns itself, if you are not familiar with the plot, with a handful of survivors in an American metropolis after invaders (robotoid) have all but conquered the world.

Latest News of Fan Activities

From WALTER A. WILLIS

It seems to be raining fanmags in Manchester these days, which must be a nice change for the inhabitants. While the rest of English fandom seems to have been paralysed by the Convention the Mancunians have been living up to their own modest description of themselves as 'Great Britain's Most Active Fan Group' to the extent of producing both the fanmags I have to review, plus another one which I think is on the way but hasn't arrived in time. I hope it's not using the same mode of travel as another Manchester magazine I remember, which was described by a more hair-raising reviewer as "looking as if it had been kicked all the way from Salford." An unkind remark but justified, though recalling the muddy printing and washed-out appearance of that issue I think maybe 'dribbled' would have been a better word than 'kicked.' On the other hand, these two magazines are the most attractive looking fanmags published in England since oldtime fan Harry Turner retired from amateur publishing some twelve years ago. This isn't surprising, since the new publisher of both of them is that same Harry Turner, walking the earth again like a giant from a former era and shaking the ground for complacency from under the feats of the lesser publishers of today. ASTRONEER, a Nor-West Science Fantasy Club Publication (How I love these long names the fans think up. I get paid for every word.) edited by Paul Sowerby and Harry Turner, 9 Willow Bank, Church Lane, Moston, Manchester 9. Quarterly, 1/- per copy. This one has a nicely executed two-colour cover and the reproduction throughout is of such a high standard that I think the manufacturers of the duplicator used would do well to buy Harry Turner and put him on exhibition throughout the country. He wouldn't be the first fan to make an exhibition of himself, judging from the vignettes of the London Convention published here under discreet anonymity and the title 'Coroncon Comments.' Such goings-on! Another more serious article deals with the science of general semantics, which used to be a very popular

subject in fanmags until Korczybski's book was published in a cheap edition and fans actually tried to read it. Most notable of the other comments is a fanciful little story called 'Love Among The Robots,' all about a romance between a shoe-shine machine and an automatic timekeeper. It ends unhappily, but then stories which deal with robots as people inevitably do. There's always some flaw when machines try to have love affairs with one another . . . a screw missing, as it were.

ZENITH, Harry Turner, address as above. Irregular, 1/- per copy. This mag is Turner's own personal brainchild, and something of a prodigal son too since it's the same mag that made his name twelve years ago. He has certainly killed the fatted calf for this issue. The contents can't really live up to their presentation but they go down fighting. They include a drily humorous 'Lament for Science Fiction' by D. R. Smith, dessicated to the proposition that there has been no true science fiction since 1930. Mr. Smith's criterion for true science fiction is apparently that it has *footnotes*, presumably like the ones the old stagers will remember . . .

> NOTE.—The reason Jon Bronson's blood ran cold at the sight of the hideous monster from the Asteroid Belt was presumably that the waving of the creature's tentacles agitated the molecules of air in the room which in accordance with the Second Law of Thermodynamics (p. 257) thereby in turn reduced the temperature of the corpuscles in Jon's bloodstream, increasing their viscosity and slowing down their rate of flow in accordance with Bode's law (p. 345). Actually, of course, the intrepid space explorers of the future will guard against this contingency by the use of miniature immersion heaters in the main arteries, as predicted in the last issue of THE ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTER in my article "I Make People's Blood Boil."—Hugo Gernsback.

This was known at the time as 'the educative value of science fiction,' but is now referred to in literary circles as *turgid crud*. Smith goes on to admit that we are well rid of this sort of thing, which makes one wonder was there any point to the article other than to illustrate how well Smith can write with his tongue in his cheek—admittedly neither the best implement nor the best surface for fine writing. The most promising feature is one called BLAST, which is to be devoted to denunciation, satire and sheer vulgar abuse of various personalities in the s.f. world. Even the most respected and venarable figures are not to be spared, it seems, for the first victim is none other than myself. Not, I am surprised to see, for any of the things I am ashamed of, but for relaying an article to an American fanmag that spoke too well of Ted Carnell (By which true but thoroughly misleading description I think I've got my own back). But probably the best things in this excellent magazine are the cartoons by Denness Morton who is, I am told, 78 years of age, female, and a Scottish Nationalist. In spite of all this she seems to have a keen sense of humour. I was told she's a dianeticist, too, but I have an idea someone has been pulling my leg and I don't want to be sued for libel.

SOMETHING TO READ . . . .

From KENNETH F. SLATER

BEYOND HUMAN KEN
An anthology edited by
JUDITH MERRIL
(*Grayson & Grayson*, 240 *pp*, 9/6)

In this work, Miss Merril has combined fifteen tales which are definitely " beyond human ken " and should appeal to the science-fiction reader, although they are not all strict ' s.f.' For instance, she has included Robert A. Heinleins delightful fantansy " Our Fair City," the story of the tame whirlwind which assists a local paper and its crusading editor and staff to clean up (in more ways than one) a city. Then there is Idris Seabrights' rather horrific " The Man Who Sold Rope To The Gnoles," and Stephen Benét's " The Angel Was A Yankee."

On the science-fiction side you'll find " The Glass Eye " by Eric Frank Russell, concerning the two aliens who underestimated the ability of mankind, with tragic results—to the aliens. Aliens occur, also in Mark Clifton's " What Have I Done? " These came with a different intention to be sure—but get the same treatment.

" Helen O'Loy," by Lester del Rey, is a robot story. A rather tragic one; the heart-touching tale of a robot who is more human than most of humankind. A robot is the hero of Malcolm Jameson's " Pride "; a very likeable fellow called " Old Tom," with whom the reader will be in sympathy. Old Tom has pride of race, and wants descendants, children, a son. But how can a robot have a son? Old Tom solves his problem in this tale, and quite neatly, too.

Off-trail, the "we are property" theme is the basis of Roger Dee's " Unwelcome Tenant," while a mutant dog who is still a dog is the " Socrates " of John Christopher's yarn of that title. " The House Dutiful " represents the work of William Tenn, a fine story of a house which serves its owner with all his needs—according to the houses's appreciation of the needs. And its powers are unlimited . . .

Cybernetic-space-ships are the theme of " Solar Plexus," by Jas. Blish, and the story presents a neat problem of what to do when one of them decides that spaceships are better than humans. That leaves " The Fly," by Arthur Porges; " The Wabbler," Murray Leinster's story of a machine with a destiny; " Good-Bye, Ilha! " by Laurence Manning, telling of the effect of mankind on just one Martian who tries to save his world, but who likes the humans so much he is willing to die with them, and finally, " The Perfect Host "—the last, and the most unusual story in this collection. Theodore Sturgeon starts with a series of happenings, a death, a visit to a telephone exchange, a murder, all disconnected in logic, but involving the same people by some wacky happenstance. Each incident told by a different person. And then Ted Sturgeon says his piece. Finally, the link between all the bits is drawn . . . As a science-fiction fan, you might qualify for " The Perfect Host! "

DEAR ED: number 3 of "Nebula" is certainly an improvement over the previous two. The mag is now rated best in Britain by the members of our local Science-Fiction Club. We have 16 members, a club library and book-circle with over 250 books and magazines, and hold a meeting and get-together every week on Friday nights at a local public house (Clapham Hotel, Lowestoft), If it is possible for you to write a couple of lines about us somewhere in your magazine we would be glad of the publicity, we know for certain that a number of copies of the current issues rapidly disappear from the local bookstalls and do not go to any of the present club members, we would like to get in touch with these people.

Looking forward to the next issue of N and hoping you keep up the high standard that you have set.

J. J. GREENGRASS,
LOWESTOFT.

* *Thanks for the kind words, John. I hope this 'publicity' does the Club a lot of good.*

DEAR ED: To be quite frank, I didn't expect to see a third issue of "Nebula," let alone four. The first two issues had sincerity and enthusiasm, but didn't offer any formidable competition to those already in the field. The weakest feature was the covers which made the appearence of Clothier on No. 3 all the more welcome. He and Quinn are at present the only s.f. *cover* artists in this country.

The quality of the contents has risen steadily but "The Adaptable Planet" in No. 4 is cluttered up with sex and the ending, in spite of three H-bombs, fizzles out. Tubb and Russell are as competent as ever, but I can only regard the other two shorts as space-fillers.

Don't lower the price until your circulation allows it. "Wonder Stories" folded up after a reduction in price in the 30's and "New Worlds" will in the 50's if the publishers dont' take care. Good stories will sell "Nebula" at half-a-crown, bad stories won't sell at sixpence.

I'm not wondering whether there will be a fifth issue. I'm looking forward to it.

JACK DOGGETT,
LONDON, N.7.

**I can safely assure you that there is no chance of a price-reduction for Nebula. I consider the payment of progressively higher author-rates and the consequent heightening of story quality far more important than the possible acquisition of a few readers who I'd probably be better without anyway.*

Incidentally, you're out of date with your list of cover-artists. Just take a look at our front cover,

and meet Ken McIntyre, Britain's new cover artist, to appear for the first time in Nebula.

Thanks for your other comments, Jack, write again, please.

DEAR ED: Many thanks for the last issue of "Nebula," I thought all the stories were very good, the poorest well above the average of the material currently appearing in the other British mags.

My favourite of the departments is your "Guided Missives" and best letter this time was certainly from Michael Sherry who speaks, I'm sure for a large percentage of your readers.

J. LAIDMAN,
AYR.

* *That letter of Michael Sherry's in Nebula 4 has certainly caused some controversy. One reader suggested that he should be 'tried' as a Scottish Nationalist and remarked that he was a ripe case for a psycho-analyst, while others have agreed in general with his remarks.*

Now, in case I'm accused of being as un-stf-ish as the Editor who gave Queen Elizabeth the blurb in question, I think we'd better drop the subject, huh?

DEAR ED: I have read science fiction now for over fifteen years, since the age of twelve, and have never before troubled to write to the editor of a science fiction print.

I write now in response to your ballot form and to show my appreciation of (in my estimation) the first and only first-class British S.F. mag that has appeared on the market. I have read all four editions and find them all equally good.

I am well aware that other British mags publish first-rate stories, but in each case it is necessary to wade through a collection of stupid, childish, and badly-written trash in order to read, perhaps one good short-short. It makes a refreshing change to pick up a top-class S.F. mag and know that it is a British publication and not American.

During the last nine or ten months I have been rather annoyed at having the old red bogey hurled at me from between the pages of the "Astounding." I am no Communist, but I sincerely hope that "Pawn in Revolt" is not the beginning of a similar unwarranted British counterpart.

The "Adaptable Planet" really is a fine space opera in traditional style, although I found the ending rather disappointing. "The Pilot" is what one would expect of the masterly E C Tubb. "Ultimate Harvest," although a well-worn theme, is a brilliant short-short . . . "And It Shall Be Opened" reveals up-to-the-minute detailed knowledge of present-day thought in matters of space flight. A human and moving story.

Please find enclosed cheque for a year's subscription.

T. MURRAY,
LONDON, W.9.

* *Let me assure you that I have no intention of running anti-red scare-stories in Nebula. Any stories with a political slant will be broadminded and SANE and will stress the horror and futility of war, rather than it's "glories."*

Many thanks for writing, Mr. Murray, I'll be looking forward to your next letter.

DEAR ED: I have just finished my first reading of the third issue of "Nebula," and should like to

make the following comments on some of the magazine's features.

The cover was excellent. The clean lines and vivid colouring of Clothier's work compare more than favourably with Hunter's murky red and yellow splotches. Hunter's style is most unsuitable for covers, although it suits the Venusian atmosphere used by Tubb in his "Freight." Please retain Clothier as your regular cover artist.

"Limbo" was quite good—in fact, the second-best story in the magazine.

"Mr. Udell" was only fair. This is an example of straight, unadulterated "transposition" rather than "extrapolation", used for a "shock" finish. Is transposition legitimate in science-fiction?

"Beautiful Women" and "All Men Kill" only fair.

"Freight," however, was excellent. As an economist, I thoroughly appreciated this story. This, and the cover, are quite the best things that have been done in "Nebula."

In general, this issue is far in advance of the first two, with which I was rather disappointed. I like the new policy of reducing the length of the main feature, and increasing the number of shorts, even thought the shorts in this issue were not entirely to my liking.

Further improvement of "Nebula" will be difficult in view of the high standard now attained.

G. R. BENNETT,
TURNER, A.C.T.

* *Thank you for your exhaustive letter of comment on Nebula 3. Mr. Bennett, I'm always delighted to receive letters of this type. I was very glad that you liked the cover of this issue and can assure you that you will be seeing much more of Bob Clothier as time goes on. Ted Tubb is also going to be around for quite a while and I hope you think that his story in this issue matches up favourably with "Freight." I'll look forward to hearing from you anyway.*

DEAR ED: Although rather disappointed in the first issue of "Nebula" I am happy to see it now in the forefront of British science-fiction magazines and my own personal favourites (witness enclosed subscription). Due to your efforts and those of the more critical readers each issue has continually been better than the last. Your greatest story to date is undoubtedly E. C. Tubb's "Dark Solution," in which his writing is the most poignant since Williamson's "With Folded Hands." I sincerely hope to see it again in a "Nebula S.F. Anthology" in the future .

The articles by Ackerman and Willis are tops, let's have more of them. I hope you won't neglect humour in your forthcoming issues and perhaps we might even have an occasional cartoon on the Ed's page.

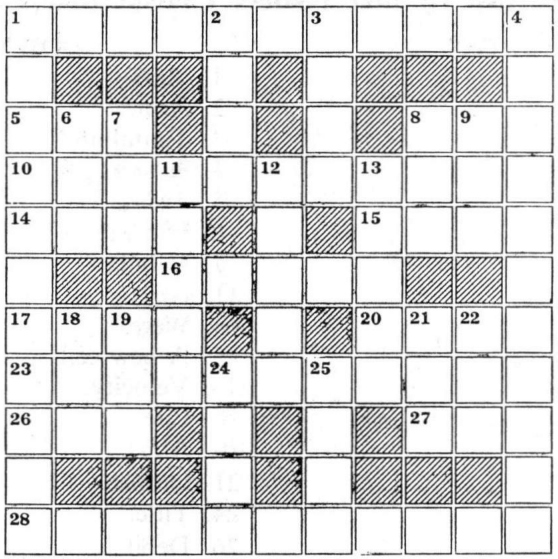
I note your collection of authors for 53/54 reads like a Who's Who of S.F. Other British science-fiction magazines seem to be getting smaller and smaller, I hope "Nebula" will continue to be the biggest in quantity and the best in quality.

A. DODD,
HODDESDON, HERTS.

**Thanks for the letter, Mr. Dodd. Actually, I've been considering the idea of humorous cartoons for Nebula for some time. What do other readers think of the idea?*

NEBULA CROSSWORD PUZZLE

From TONY THORNE



CLUES ACROSS

1. A favourite subject in stories about 'robot brains.' (11).
5. This might be played by spacecrews to while away the time (3).
8. The Space Age may well be an incredible . . . (3).
10. Wings on a rocket are only useful . . . (2, 6, 3).
14. Touch (4).
15. Aliens might well have many of these (4).
16. A botanist would tell you that this is part of the pistil (5).
17. Agricultural machines can do this (4).
20. Hardly necessary on a space-ship (4).
23. You need a magnet to look for a needle in a haystack, otherwise you'll . . . (5, 4, 2).
26. A French island! (3).
27. Female rhodent (3).
28. The study of what is behind all knowledge and existence (11).

CLUES DOWN

1. A new element with an American flavour (11).
2. Meteorological phenomena (4).
3. A kind of eagle (4).
4. A Nebula is one of these (4, 7).
6. Mach number of the speed of sound (3).
7. A cypher less one hundred (3).
8. The aural orifice (3).
9. On a wheel it moves the fastest but in a galaxy, the slowest! (3).
11. Under certain circumstances even two scientists might do this (5).
12. Scrap metal (5).
13. Synthetic fabric (5).
18. This one's slippery (3).
19. A Roman welcome (3).
21. This is child's play to a computer (3).
22. Spanish for river (3).
24. Rockets taking off often use this (4).
25. This adjective has been used to describe the blackness of space (4).

Solution to last issue's Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS

1. Spacestation.
8. A ton.
9. Aim.
10. Run out.
12. Tore.
13. Swap.
16. Vat.
17. Gel.
19. Enamel.
20. Aria.
21. Ores.
22. Lumbar.
23. New.
24. Tom.
25. Bled.
27. Chic.
29. Eating.
30. Rub.
31. Lilt.
32. Halley's Comet.

DOWN

1. Stars.
2. Arm.
3. Tantalum.
4. A toot.
5. Tour.
6. Integral.
7. Nebula.
11. Upas.
14. Were.
15. A new cell.
16. Velocity.
18. Eire.
20. Abbe.
21. Onrush.
24. Title.
26. Debit.
28. Hail.
30. Rim.

Concluded from Page 2

whom I've spoken on the subject; and neither does anyone else to but I do feel that British fandom *as a whole* should have some say as to who is to be their spokesman at what is, after all the biggest fan gathering of the year.

This is a very ticklish problem and my argument only hold together if the British fan in question styles himself as our *representative* instead of a *visitor*. However, if the former is the case it is my opinion that some form of ballot should be inaugurated next year when a similar set of circumstances will arise.

Peter Hamilton

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that. . . who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless Queen Joan."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951: Since receiving Joan the Wad . . . my husband's health has improved 100%.

Mr. Jones, of Cheltenham, says, 1951: . . . Send me J. O'Lantern. Since receiving Joan the Wad have won two 1st prizes in Crosswords . . *John Bull* and *Sunday Chronicle*.

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is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

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If you will send me your name and address, a 1/ stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvelous miracles they accomplish.

AS SPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

All you have to do is to send a 1/- stamp (savings stamps accepted) and a stamped, addressed envelope for the history to

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