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AUTUMN, 1953

SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 4



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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1

Editor : PETER HAMILTON JR.

No. 4

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Look here . . .

It is with a certain feeling of regret that I write this, the last editorial for the first volume of NEBULA. This is the final issue in the first year of publication and, looking back, it is easy to see we have come a long, long way. Only twelve months ago NEBULA was an unheard of quarterly. Now it is the "favourite" of a large percentage of its readers and has a literary standard second to no other magazine in this country.

There are two main reasons for this remarkable progress: Firstly, NEBULA pays higher fees to authors than any other British science-fiction magazine (and naturally obtains correspondingly better stories) and secondly, NEBULA is the only British magazine which actually gives the readers a say in editorial policy.

Proof of the fact that I pay higher author-rates than do other British editors is the series of short stories by top-line authors which starts in this issue with the short-short, "This One's On Me," by Eric Frank Russell. As I remarked in the last issue, Mr. Russell is considered to be one of Britain's first class authors, having been in great demand in the United States for many years. This is the first story of Mr. Russell's to be published outside the States since well before the war—and other British editors have been trying to get him for years!

Other big storey-events in this issue include "Pawn in

Revolt" by William F. Temple, author and technical adviser of the new scientifilm, "Four Sided Triangle," which is at present going the rounds. "Pawn in Revolt" points out that it isn't necessarily the common man who is the cause of war; rather the dictator and the statesman. Mr. Temple has another fine story scheduled for the next edition of NEBULA and I hope that there will be many more to follow.

E. C. Tubb, who appears to be intending to "see you each issue," gives you another suspenseful short, "The Pilot." This is Mr. Tubb in his element and I'm sure you'll be as anxious to see more of this kind of thing as I am. Well-known British author Sydney J. Bounds makes his first appearance in NEBULA this time with the space-opera so many of you have been asking for, "The Adaptable Planet." While on this subject, however, I'm hoping to give you space-opera fans a brand new magazine completely to suit your own tastes in the near future so that I can keep NEBULA for science fiction only.

You asked for a space-opera, but that was only one request of many received during the past three months, so, this being the beginning of a new year of publication and a new volume, I think it as good a time as any to grant many of the various requests for change.

Continued on Page 128

The Pilot

Was the pilot a robot? A man? Or what? When Don Leman learned it was too late to do anything about it

HE SAT waiting, a bundle of nerves and screaming tensions, the blue smoke from his cigarette pluming in a thin wisp past his staring eyes. A runt of a man, thin, with deep hollows pressing his cheeks and dark stains beneath his eyes. His fingers twitched, causing the thin streamer of smoke to waver and dance as if in some invisible breeze, but there was no wind in the soft comfort of the room.

It was silent here, as silent as a grave, as a bleak expanse of deserted moor, as the cold waste between the stars. It was silent, and yet he strained his ears at imagined sounds, the gentle click of steel on glass, the whisper of stealthy footsteps, the murmur of sadistic laughter. He sat and listened and in his nostrils was the raw smell of primitive emotion.

Fear!

It filled him with cold slush and pressed his pounding heart with icy hands. It stiffened the muscles of neck and jaw, sent little

tremours running down thighs and calves, bent his fingers into claws and seared his eyes with the desperate resolve never to blink them shut.

His mouth was dry with it, his ears ached with the strain of listening to non-existent sounds, his body alternately shivered and sweated and the smell of the sweat hung heavily in his nostrils.

He was sick with fear.

The smouldering stub of the cigarette burned his fingers and he jumped a little, snarling a curse and glaring wildly around the soft comfort of the room. The windows were of proofed glass covered with a fine wire mesh, the door locked and chained, the air conditioner covered with a stout metal grill, and yet still he felt afraid.

Gas could be pumped through the grill. High-velocity bullets could smash through even proofed glass, and strong though the door was, yet it could still be beaten down. If they ever found him he would die, and the knowledge jerked him from his seat and into impatient motion across the thick carpet of the silent room.

He fumbled for a fresh cigarette, flared a match into life and sucked down great lungfuls of smoke. He crossed the room and cautiously peered through the heavy curtains into the deserted street. He stood watching, feeling himself relax at the sight of blank windows and empty doorways. A car drove past, its turbine whining as it slowed to take a corner, a second followed it, a trade vehicle, and he watched them with sharp suspicious eyes.

It was impossible to tell!

A harmless trade vehicle, a sleek car, a pedlar or a postman, a housewife or an old man. All were suspect, all could be other than what they seemed, and it would take only one careless move to bring the hounds baying at his heels.

A curtain swung a little in an opposite window, and he stumbled away from the curtain, his hands shaking and his face and neck streaming with sweat.

Damn them!

Damn them all!

The videophone hummed, the soft sound blasting the silence and causing his nerves to leap and tremble as he stared at the instrument. He hesitated, one hand half-way towards the control and this thin lips twisting in sudden doubt.

Suppose . . . ?

The videophone hummed again, then again, then kept on hum-

ming. He stared at it, little rivulets of sweat trickling down his paste-coloured features, and his heart thudding against his ribs. He wanted to run, to hide, to silence the humming instrument, and yet . . .

He snarled and twisted the knob.

The screen flared, flickering a little as it steadied into focus and a man's face stared from the smooth surface. A heavy, serious-looking face, with deep-set eyes and a firm mouth and jaw. He shifted a little, and the grey of his temples stood clear against the bronze of his skin. He smiled, and a maze of tiny lines touched the corners of his eyes, then he became serious and in the silence of the room his voice sounded strangely loud.

"Ready, Scott?"

The little man nodded, staring at the screen and gulping in shocked relief.

* * * *

At the edge of the spaceport the lights were few and far between, it took too much power to illuminate every foot of the two mile fence and it wasn't necessary. The wire mesh rose for twenty feet, a shimmering barrier of triple-strand wire, barbed and covered with jagged points, sprouting downcurved spines at the top and patrolled by vigilant guards.

Few could climb it. Fewer still would want to. Honest persons could gain access to the field via the single gate, and anyway, who would want to steal a spaceship?

Don Leman grinned as he studied the gentle sweep of the circular fence. The gun beneath his armpit felt good against his ribs, the blackjack up his sleeve was worth its weight in confidence, and he had a thin-bladed knife tucked into one knee-boot just to make sure.

None of these things felt half as good as the small packet of diamonds pressing against the firm muscles of his stomach. They represented the careful work of many selected robberies, a potential fortune—in the right place, and he knew just where that place was.

He squinted towards the centre of the field, to where a slender needle of smoothly curving metal thrust its sharp nose towards the

distant stars. High in the heavens a tiny point flashed with a ruddy sheen, almost lost among the bright splendour of other stars, and he stared at it with desperate longing.

Mars!

The new frontier where a man could sell anything, anything valuable that is, and no questions asked. Cash was worthless there, water was precious and diamonds to tip the drills and cutting parts of machine tools worth whatever the seller wanted—and no questions asked.

Leman grinned again, and slowly began to worm his way towards the high wire fence.

A guard passed, carelessly, thinking more of the card game going on in the guard hut than on possible danger. He glanced at the fence as he walked, his eyes dull and glittering a little in the reflected light from the overhead arcs. His patrol was routine, a vestige of the early days when sabotage was a constant threat, now a thing of the past.

He strolled on his way, yawning a little and scuffling the dirt with his heavy boots, and before the sound of those boots had died away, the watching man had acted.

The tool in his hands sliced through the stout wire as if it had been string. Swiftly he cut a horizontal slash, then a vertical, bending up the triangular flap so made and wriggling through. Carefully he bent the wire back into position, sealing the cuts with a fast-setting metal-glue and holding the joins until they had set. At a casual glance the wire appeared to be unbroken, and he grunted with satisfaction as he tested the fence.

Shadows sprawled across the wide expanse of the flame-scorched landing field, and like a shadow he scuttled towards the towering spire of the waiting ship. He grinned as he ran with long easy strides, his boots making hardly any sound on the dirt, and rapidly the ship rose before him.

It was too easy!

The checkers had finished their work, the loading crews, the technicians, and the ship waited for the moment when the pilot would bring it to thundering life and fling it towards the distant ruby light of Mars. It was always the same, everything was put into perfect condition and absolute readiness for the pilot, and with everything done, crews and guards grew careless

No-one had ever stolen a spaceship. No-one had ever stowed

away on a spaceship, and what had never yet happened was unlikely ever to happen. It was human to relax. Human to let the other man worry, to enjoy a snug drink and swap idle talk in the warm cosiness of field quarters. The ship was too big to steal, too intricate to harm, too well lit to be approached without someone spotting the interloper. Why worry? Let the other man take care of it, and so Lemman stood unchallenged beneath the wide fins of the spaceship.

Tensely he stared upwards, then steadily began climbing the spidery ladder leading towards the nose of the vessel. He climbed with every muscle jumping, every nerve tense and the palms of his hands grew slippery with sweat. This was the danger point!

Against the smooth metal of the hull he was limned with brilliant light. He had stained his clothes the colour of the metal but he still threw a shadow, if someone looked up . . . !

They didn't, and he almost fell into the tiny control cabin.

A smoothly fitting hatchway led into the interior of the rocket, the cargo space and lower down the fuel bins and engine room. There were the squat bulks of the atomic piles, the feed controls, the gyroscopes, but he wasn't interested in those. Hastily he adjusted bales of cargo making a soft nest in which he could withstand the shock of acceleration. Water and food he didn't have to worry about, he would share the pilot's.

Lying in the darkness waiting for the slow hours to drag past until take-off time, he wondered about the pilot. Few had ever seen one, they were men, not robots as some had supposed, but they kept themselves very much to themselves and aside from a glimpse through a pair of binoculars, he had never seen one.

He shrugged, and settled himself more comfortably in his soft nest. The diamonds pressed with the consoling weight of several millions, and he grinned into the darkness.

* * * *

It was as though the night would never pass.

He sat and smoked, filling the air with a blue haze of innumerable cigarettes and feeling his mouth and throat grow dry and sore from the heated smoke. He couldn't sleep, the lights were too bright for that, and if he turned them off the room would fill with clustering

shadows, strangely shaped and oddly menacing. He wished that he had a drink, but the room was empty of alcohol and it would be suicide to venture outside.

He sat and smoked and stared at the calm figure of the big man sitting by the locked and chained door.

"Why don't you get some sleep, Scott?" Conroy looked at the nerve-torn little man, deliberately keeping his voice casual and devoid of meaning.

"Why?"

Scott looked suspiciously at the big man. His eyes burned against the pallor of his twisted features and his hands trembled as he lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of another. Conroy shrugged.

"You'd feel better. I'll stand guard, no one will be able to get to you while I'm on watch."

"You think not?" The little man sneered and dragged on the butt of his cigarette. "I know better. They're out there now, waiting, just waiting for me to make a slip and when I do . . ."

He shuddered and looked at the big man with fresh suspicion.

"Why do you want me to go to sleep? Have they got at you? Are you going to hand me over to them? Are you? Are you?"

He was almost screaming, tiny flecks of foam showing at the corners of his twisted mouth and his eyes like fresh-blown embers sunk in the dark sockets of his skull. Conroy shook his head, his heavy face expressionless.

"You know that you can trust me, don't you, Scott? You know that I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, I won't ever let them get you, you can always rely on me."

"Then why are you trying to get me to sleep?"

"I'm not, I thought that a little rest might do you good. It won't be long now, and when we leave here we may have to move fast." He rubbed strong fingers over the stubble on his chin and stared thoughtfully at the little man.

"You're certain of what you must do?"

"Of course I am, you don't have to keep telling me. Just get me there safe and I'll do the rest." Scott moved impatiently about the room, dragging at his cigarette and kicking little streaks in the grey dust covering the thick carpet. The air was thick with stale cigarette smoke and heavy with the acrid odour of human sweat. The air conditioner had been shut off, the grill stuffed with torn fragments of hand towels and what with smoke and sweat and overused air,

the room stank.

Conroy sat on his chair, his lids drooping wearily over his stinging eyes and watched the nervous pacing of the little man. Up, down. Forward, back. Like a trapped beast, an animal, pacing restlessly about the confines of its cage, but this was no cage and Scott was no animal. He was human, and his fear was contagious.

Slowly the hours dragged past, the stars dimmed in the heavens, the swollen orb of the Moon paled and hung a thin ghost against a sky streaked and painted white with the warm rays of an early dawn. A car whined down the street, then slowed before the house, its turbine droning as it braked to a halt.

Conroy rose stiffly to his feet and moved to the window. He drew the curtains and peered into the street, ignoring the frenzied tugging at his sleeve, as the little man snatched at his arm.

"The lights!" Scott darted to the wall switch and a thin glow filtered through the window as the flourescents died. "You want us to get shot? How do know who may be out there." He glared at the big man, his teeth gleaming between his writhing lips.

"You are with them! All this time you've been working with them, working to trap me—and I trusted you! Like a fool I trusted you!" He lunged for the door, then recoiled, his hand plucking nervously at his mouth. Conroy sighed, and dropped the curtain.

"Steady now, Scott," he warned. "This is no time to break up, we've got to get out of here."

"No!"

"Yes I tell you, we must."

"I can't!" The little man almost gibbered with terror. "They're waiting for me, waiting to kill me. I can't go out there!"

"If we don't get out they'll come in after us." The big man reached into his pocket and held out a vicious looking pistol. "Here. If anyone tries to stop you, shoot. Ready?"

Scott gulped, gingerly taking the pistol and staring at it as he nervously licked his thin lips. He hefted it, slipping a finger through the guard and shielding the weapon beneath his short packet. He nodded.

"Let's go."

Conroy sighed and opened the door.

Aside from the car the street was deserted, a ribbon of concrete bordered with the blank eyes of curtained windows soft with the rose and pink, the yellow and orange of an early dawn. It was brisk

and the air had a sharp clear odour startling in its contrast to the stale air of the room behind them. It was like wine, tingling the skin and sending the blood rushing through tired veins and muscles.

Conroy gulped great breaths of the cold air, feeling it wash away his fatigue and the nervous irritation of the past few hours, then glanced up and down the empty street.

"Quick now, get in the car."

"Wait!" Scott stared nervously at the silent shape of the driver, then stared at the blank windows opposite.

"How do we know we can trust him?"

"We don't," agreed the big man, "leave him to me."

Abruptly he jerked open the door of the car and reached for the driver. The man writhed, twisted as he almost fell from the vehicle and grabbed desperately for his pocket.

A gun thundered, the sound of the discharge echoing along the street and ringing from the blank faces of the silent buildings. The driver stiffened, a shocked expression on his nondescript features, then slumped to the pavement his limbs sprawled and ugly.

"He was one of them!" Scott snarled down at the distorted shape, the pistol smoking in his hand and his eyes wild and frenzied in the growing light. "You saw him? He was going to kill me."

"I saw him," agreed Conroy. He jerked open the door of the car. "Quick now, before they come after us!"

The turbine whined and with a smooth surge of power the car slid from the kerb, gaining speed as it raced down the empty street. Behind them someone yelled, whistles blew and the empty street seemed to erupt into violent activity.

Tensely the big man bent over the wheel, the turbine shrilling and the tyres whining as they sped through the empty streets. Scott writhed in the seat beside him, the pistol in his hand and his head jerking as he tried to look in several directions at once.

"They're after us," he gasped. "Think that we can make it?"

"We'll make it," promised the big man grimly. He thrust harder with his foot and the car surged beneath them. "When we arrive don't waste a moment, shoot if you have to, but keep moving. You know what to do?"

"Yes."

"Good. Just let yourself go, don't try and think things out, you won't have time, and if you miss this chance there won't be another." He grunted as a man darted at them from the side of

the road, signalling with frantic arms.

Before them the road stretched, a widening ribbon of concrete, slashing straight across the city and leading to the sun-bright glimmer of a slender spire. The car lurched a little, and the big man clutched the wheel, beads of sweat glistening on his creased forehead. He glanced once at the man at his side, then at the chronometer on the instrument panel. The turbine shrilled as he coaxed yet more speed from the vehicle and before them the slender spire grew into a slim pillar of burnished metal.

"I'll get as near as I can," grunted Conroy. "When I stop you jump out and run for it. Remember what I told you, don't stop for anything, and don't hesitate."

"I won't," promised the little man. He stared with avid eyes at what lay before them and his knuckles whitened around the butt of his pistol. He sat tensed, almost trembling with impatience, his fear almost forgotten in the violent rush of action yet still lurking beneath the surface ready to leap out and devour him.

A fence rushed at them, a twenty foot screen of thick wire mesh barbed and protected with downcurving spines. A guard gaped at them as the car slammed through a flimsy barrier, then yelled and raised his rifle in a futile gesture. From the guard hut men poured and a car moved sluggishly from the fence following their path towards the delicate beauty of the towering spaceship.

"Now!" Conroy slammed on the brakes and dirt spewed from the locked wheels as the car skidded to a jarring halt. "Get moving!"

Scott snatched at the latch and swung wide the door, almost falling as he lunged from the car. He staggered as he fought to regain his balance, then hesitated, looking at the big man.

"What about you?"

"Never mind me," snapped Conroy. "Get moving!"

He jerked as a rifle echoed across the field, then slumped behind the wheel his eyes glazing and his heavy features growing slack. Scott bit his lip, made a half gesture towards the big man, then dirt plumed beneath his feet as he raced for the slim beauty of the spaceship.

Rifles thundered as he ran and a guard appeared from behind one of the wide fins. Scott shot him without breaking his stride, the pistol flaming in his hand. The guard stopped, looked surprised, then fell to the flame-seared dirt of the field.

The next moment the little man was climbing like an ape up the slender ladder to the nose of the vessel.

He looked once behind him, his face a pale blob limned by the warm light of the rising sun, then the port had closed behind him and the field swarmed with the figures of men racing from the menace of the guttering venturis.

Two minutes later the spaceship was a dim point of flame rising towards the clear blue of the heavens.

Conroy sighed and moved stiffly from behind the wheel of the car. A guard, his uniform stained with dirt and his face white in the early light, struggled to his feet from beneath the vehicle. The big man grinned at him and gestured towards the car.

"Get in, I'll give you a lift back to the field office."

"Thanks." The guard wiped sweat from his forehead and stared wonderingly at the palm of his hand. "I never thought that I'd make it. I could feel the blast and the car was the only cover in sight."

"You did well." Conroy spun the wheel and headed the vehicle towards the high tower of the field office. "Dropping like that was quick thinking. For a moment I was afraid that you'd give the game away."

"I nearly shot him," confessed the guard. "I hadn't expected him so soon otherwise I'd have left the vicinity. That blast . . .!"

He shuddered, then grinned as the shock of reaction wore off. "You can drop me here, sir, and thanks."

Conroy nodded and continued his journey to the administration offices of the spaceport.

Benson greeted him as he thrust his way into the office. The controller had thick bushy eyebrows and a skull which glistened with a smooth pink nakedness in the early morning light. He looked very tired.

"Another one off," he said. "Was he difficult?"

"As usual." The big man slumped into a chair and reached gratefully for the drink Benson pushed towards him. He drained the glass, pulling a wry face as the alcohol stung his throat, then carefully set down the empty glass.

"Benson, I want to quit."

"What!"

"Quit. Resign. Walk off the job. I've had enough, much more of this and I'll be as crazy as they are."

"You can't do that," snapped Benson. "Your contract . . ."

He stopped and grinned understandingly at the psychologist.

"You don't mean that."

"No," agreed Conroy. "I don't mean it."

He sighed and stared down at his big, strong hands, slowly clenching them into fists and slamming them down on his knees.

"How did we ever get into this, Benson? How did man's finest dream ever degenerate into a nursery for maniacs and ham actors? Isn't there some other way the ships can be sent into space?"

Benson shrugged and reached for the bottle. Deliberately he refilled the empty glasses and pushed one towards the tense figure of the big man.

"You know the answers as well as I do," he said. "What do you call it? The general adaption syndrome isn't it? Space is too big, too lonely for a normal man. Something happens to him and he can't adapt to the alien environment. He tries, but he can't adjust himself and so he goes stark staring crazy."

Conroy nodded. "I know the fancy answers we have coined to fit something we don't really understand, but how long must this go on? There is a psychological limit, seven men can stand space conditions, less can't and we just cannot afford seven-man crews. We make do with one, one man conditioned to operate the few to realign the ship after it has passed the atmosphere. One man, and he might as well be a robot."

"Robots are too heavy, too expensive, and too unreliable." Benson leaned back in his chair and stared through the window at the deserted field.

"We use what we can, a man who is unhappy anywhere but in space. A man who is normally insane, and so has nothing to fear from space conditions, rather he welcomes them."

"A paranoic!" Conroy jerked to his feet and began to stride about the office. "I sat with him all night, Benson. I felt his fear, his desperate illogical fear. It ate into me, contaminated me, almost I felt as if I were persecuted, too." He gulped at the proffered drink and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"I felt sorry for the man, and yet I had to feed his fear, to play on his paranoia and to drive him on a path from which the poor devil couldn't escape. I gave him a pistol loaded with blanks, the driver fell as though shot, the guards, even I had to act a part.

He was surrounded by enemies, shooting at him, chasing him, trying to kill him. What else could he do but run away? "

" Nothing."

" So he ran to the spaceship, blasted from his enemies into the vast loneliness of space, the barren wastes between the planets where even his warped mind realised that he couldn't be touched."

" What else can we do? " Benson sighed as he riffled the papers on his desk. " Out there in space he will grow calm, his fears will lessen and he will obey his conditioning. He will believe that he has friends on Mars, and for a while at least, he will be happy."

" Until they play the same game there! "

Benson shrugged.

" They will receive him kindly," said Conroy bitterly. " They are always kind. Then the little things will start again, the threats, the cold looks, the shots that miss and the attackers that almost, but not quite, manage to hurt him. He will feel all the old fear again, the horrible mind-destroying fear of paranoia, and he will escape from that fear in a spaceship bound for Earth, and so the cycle continues. For how long, Benson? For how long? "

He stared at the vast expanse of the landing field, but the seared dirt gave no answer.

. . . .

He was free!

The breath sobbed in his throat and his thin body streamed with sweat, but he was free. Automatically he dogged shut the port and strapped himself into the soft padding of the control chair. He didn't stop to think why he did what he did. His body seemed a thing apart and he watched his hands dart over the controls, tripping switches and sliding levers in their sockets. Beneath him the venturis flamed to throbbing life, and he grinned in savage glee.

Damn them! Let them catch him now!

The long hand of a chronometer swung across its dial and his hands reached again for the controls. The muffled throbbing of the rocket motors deepened, thrummed with all the fury of unleashed power, and weight pressed steadily and relentlessly down on his

chest and stomach.

He gasped, feeling his senses reel beneath the acceleration pressure, and for a moment fought with blind primitive fury at the straps holding him to the control chair.

The pressure increased.

He sobbed. He cursed and twisted, plucking at the straps and screaming with pain and fear. He felt the blood drain from his head, felt the air wheeze from his lungs, knew all the terrifying fear of an animal, not knowing what was happening to him, not caring, just fighting with instinctive hatred at what caused him pain.

The pressure died. The thundering of the rockets, the pain, the fury and the blind savage hate, all died and silence filled the metal shell. He relaxed, feeling a wonderful sense of freedom and ease and fumbled with the wide straps holding him to the soft padding of the chair.

He rose like a wisp of thistledown, an ungainly fairy, his thin limbs beating vainly at the air as he hovered in the null-gravity of free fall. Catching a stanchion he pulled himself to the eye-piece of the directional telescope and pressed his face against the foam rubber mask.

As usual they were off course.

It was the winds which did it, the thousand mile-an-hour winds of the upper levels of the atmosphere, pressing with their weak fury against the soaring metal of the ship, and causing a slight deviation from the pre-determined flight path.

A deviation which had to be corrected.

Deep within the ship gyroscopes whined as they spun on their axis, rotating the vessel in a reverse direction to their motion. Slowly the target stars swung before the nose of the ship, seemed to vibrate a little, then steadied as the gyroscopes died.

Satisfied, the little man drew himself back to the control chair and reached for the firing levers. Weight pushed at him as incandescent gases flared from the venturis thrusting at the ship with the force of their reaction. Less this time, hardly more than normal gravity, yet with the return of weight came a return of fear.

Scott sat and breathed heavily through his mouth as he watched the moving hand of the chronometer. He wanted to cut the power, to feel again the blissful sense of freedom accompanying free fall, but something prevented him from reaching for the levers.

Three minutes, and little beads of sweat began to trickle from

his glistening forehead.

Five minutes, and he began to writhe in the chair, his hands trembling where they rested on his knees.

Seven minutes, and a thin line of blood rilled from his bitten lips.

Ten minutes, and he cut the power!

Peace came, a great and wonderful peace washing away his fears and letting the blood flow through veins and muscles as his tensed nerves relaxed. He was alone, utterly alone, locked in a shell of metal and riding on wings of flame.

They couldn't catch him now!

He smiled, feeling his mind grow crystal-clear and attain a razor edge as blood, freed from the drag of gravity, pulsed through capillaries and cells. He laughed, floating a few inches above the chair and knowing that he was beyond all harm.

Metal clicked, startlingly loud in the utter silence, and he tensed, his eyes wide and his heart thudding painfully against his ribs. The cold steel of the pistol in his belt struck his arm, and he drew the weapon, staring at the floor of the control room.

Something was lifting the metal hatch!

* * * *

Don Leman started awake as he felt the first vibration of the rockets. He grinned in the darkness as he realised what was happening, then bit his lip to stifle a cry as pressure slammed against him. He groaned, his eyes staring from his head and something wet and sticky-warm running from his nose over his mouth and chin. Grimly he struggled to retain consciousness, mentally cursing himself for a fool as the diamonds in his body-belt dug into him with more than ten times normal weight.

The weight died and he frowned as he heard the whining of the gyroscopes, clutching at the bales of cargo to prevent himself floating from his hiding place. The gyros died, and he grunted as he smacked down hard against the bales, then muttered a curse as he felt at his blood-stained face.

The darkness pressed around him, and he waited restlessly for the thrumming rockets to die impatient for some form of human

company.

He wondered what the pilot would say, whether or not he would be annoyed, Leman thought not, any sort of company should be welcome on the long flight to Mars, and he had a rich fund of bar-room stories to while away the time

He reached for his pistol as the rockets died and free fall returned. Better to be careful, and a gun was a powerful argument when it came to making a man see your point of view. Not that he would use it, of course. Even if he could manage to land the vessel, awkward questions would be asked and not even a package of diamonds could get a man off a murder rap, not when the police could help themselves anyway.

He moved carefully in the darkness, feeling for the thin metal hatch cover, blinking in the sudden shaft of light, tensing himself for rapid motion. He heaved, the cover slipping from his hand and soaring to the curved roof of the control room, and he followed it, propelled by the muscles of calves and thighs.

"Steady," he snapped. Don't do anything rash."

The pilot goggled at him, a thin man, runtish and paper-white with utter terror. He mouthed strange inhuman sounds and the pistol in his hand reflected little splinters of glittering light.

"Drop it!" Leman twisted, trying to jerk himself towards the pilot, the gun in his hand ringing as it struck against a stanchion.

The pilot screamed, his eyes glazed with terror, little flecks of foam appearing at the corners of his writhing mouth. The gun in his hand spat fire, again, again, pointing directly at the hovering man's stomach.

Leman flinched, his body jerking to the imagined impact of hot lead, and blind reflex action tightened his own trigger finger. Once, twice he fired, the reports echoing from the curved hull and the smoke of the discharge fouling the air.

The pilot jerked, doubled over as the bullets ripped into his body, and slammed against the hull from the force of the impact. His eyes glazed, his mouth opened, and for a moment it seemed as if he tried to speak, then blood gushed from between his lips in a ruby stream. He twitched once, then hovered in the air, the blood collecting around his head in a fine mist of tiny droplets.

He was dead.

Leman stared at him, licking dry lips, and still not quite certain that he was alive. He felt his chest, untouched, his stomach, unpunc-

tured, then grabbed at the pilot's weapon and examined the charges.

"I didn't know," he whimpered. "How could I know that he was using blanks?"

He let the pistol slip from his hands and tried not to look at the dead man.

"I couldn't help it," he whispered. "It was self-defence. He shot first. I didn't mean to kill him."

The dead man didn't answer. The rocket didn't answer, and neither did the cruel eyes of the mocking stars.

Staring at them, Leman felt the first delicate fingers of madness probing at his brain.

E. C. TUBB

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This One's On Me

*He wanted to get a mutant—
but the mutant got him!*

Illustrated by Pat Wake

THE SHOP was small, dingy and halfway down a side street no wider than an alley. One could pass it a thousand times without giving it a thought. But above the green curtains across its window was a small sign reading: *Mutants For Sale*.

Jensen popped his eyes and went in.

"I'll have six," he said.

"That's being greedy," reproved the little man behind the counter. He had a white mane, watery eyes, a crimson nose and a perpetual snuffle. If he had any brothers they were hanging around Snow White.

"Look," invited Jensen, staring around. "Let's be serious, shall we? Let's come down to earth."

"I'm there already." He stamped a foot to prove it.

"I should hope so," said Jensen. He leaned on the counter, fastened the dwarf with his gaze. "These mutants, how do they come?"

"Fat and thin," informed the other. "Also tall and short. Likewise loony and sane. If there are limits I've yet to find them."

"I know who's the loony," Jensen decided.

"You should," agreed the little man.

"I'm a newspaper columnist," Jensen offered.

"That proves it," said the other.

"Proves what?"

"Who's the loony."

"Snappy," opined Jensen. "I like people who come back at me fast. Even when they're slightly cracked."

"For a pressman you're more than impolite," remarked the little man. He wiped his eyes, blew his nose, blinked at his visitor.

"Attribute it to my especial status. At the moment I'm a prospective customer. The customer is always right, isn't he?"

"Not necessarily."

"You'll see the point if you want to stay in biz," Jensen assured. He eyed the racks at back of the counter. They were lined with all sorts of phials and queer looking jars. "About these mutants."

"Well?"

"What's the gag?"

"I sell them. Is that a gag?"

"Y'betcha!" said Jensen "Know what a mutant is?"

"I ought to."

"Sure you ought—but *do* you?"

"Most decidedly."

"Then what is a mutant?"

"Hah!" The little man wriggled his nose. It went two shades richer in hue. "So you don't know yourself?"

"I raise them by the dozens. I'm a leading breeder."

"Really?" The little man registered polite incredulity. "What's your name?"

"Jensen. Albert Edward Malachi Jensen of the *Morning Call*."

"Never heard of you."

"You wouldn't—if you can't read." Jensen took a breath and went on. "A mutant is a freak of nature created by one chance in a million. A massive particle such as a cosmic ray wallops a gene and in due time Mom has got a circus exhibit on her hands. So let me tell—"

"Wrong!" snapped the little man. "A mutant is a radical change in psyche or physique that breeds true, regardless of whether naturally or artificially created. All my goods breed true to form, therefore they are mutants."

"So you can change the forms of things and guarantee that they'll perpetuate their new kind?"

"That is true."

"You must be God," said Jensen.

"Your blasphemy is unwarranted," said the little man, with



much sharpness.

Ignoring that, Jensen studied the phials and jars a second time. "What are those?"

"Containers."

"I can see that much. What's in 'em—dissolved mutants?"

"Don't be absurd."

"I am never absurd," Jensen told him. "You sell mutants. You've got to stash them someplace."

"I do."

"So it says on the window. What's the gag?"

"I tell you there isn't any?"

"All right. I'm a customer. Show me a few fashionable mutants. Something snazzy for evening wear."

"This isn't a dress shop," asserted the little man. "You want a low-cut gown. And you'd look like hell in it."

"Never mind about that. Hand me a mutant, that's all I ask."

"Any particular kind in mind?" asked the little man.

Jensen thought it over. "Yes. I want a pale blue rhinoceros seventeen inches long and weighing not more than nine pounds."

"Not a stock pattern. It would have to be made."

"I guessed as much. I had a funny feeling that there was something special about it."

"It might take a fortnight," warned the little man. "Or possibly three weeks."

"I don't doubt that. Months and years. A lifetime in fact."

"I could find you a pink elephant," offered the little man. "Roughly the same size."

"They're a drug on the market. I can find dozens of them in any saloon."

"Yes, they are rather commonplace." He smoothed his white hair, emitted a sigh. "It seems that I can do nothing for you."

Jensen said very loudly, "Show me a mutant. Any one. The cheapest you've got."

"Certainly." Wiping his eyes and snuffling a couple of times, the little man went through the doorway at the back.

Leaning over the counter, Jensen helped himself to a small, peculiarly shaped jar. It was transparent and half full of orange-coloured liquid. He uncapped it and sniffed. The odour suggested prime Scotch concentrated to quarter bulk. He stuck the jar back on the shelf, drooling as he did it.

The little man returned holding a white pup with a black patch around one eye. He dumped the pup on the counter.

"There you are. Bargain line."

"So I see," commented Jensen. "You ought to be sued."

"Why?"

"That's no mutant."

"Very well," said the little man, with offended dignity. "You're the authority." Grabbing the pup he bore it through the back door.

"Wise guy!" sneered the pup at Jensen just before it went from sight.

When the shopkeeper reappeared Jensen said, "I heard it talk. So does Charlie McCarthy and every other wooden dummy."

"Quite probably." He rattled the shelves with a sneeze.

"Any stage ventriloquist can do it better," Jensen persistently continued. "Being more polished and original."

"Quite probably," the little man repeated.

"I'm a sticker," Jensen went on. "When I find a newsworthy item I don't get pushed away. I stay right with it until something goes bang. That's me."

"I'm sure."

"All right, then. Look at it this way: you've got mutants for sale or so you say. That's news. There're a few lines in it—and a few lines here and there make a column."

"Indeed?" The little man raised white eyebrows. He seemed baffled by this information.

"Now," proceeded Jensen, looking sinister, "a good column by a competent columnist tells all sorts of interesting things. People read it. Sometimes it tells nice things, sometimes nasty ones. The cops read the nasty ones and feel grateful because I have drawn them to their attention. Usually, though, they're too late because the subject of my remarks has also read my piece and got out of town fast, see?"

"I don't see."

Jensen hammered the counter with an open palm. "You have just tried to sell me a pup. It said, 'Wise guy!' I heard it with my own two ears. That's false pretences. Obtaining money by means of a trick. Petty larceny."

"But I didn't obtain any money." The little man made a disparaging gesture. "Money, what good is it? I never accept money."

"You don't, eh? Then what do you want for the gabby pup?"

The little man looked cautiously around, bent forward, whispered soft and low.

Jensen went popeyed and said, "Now I know you're cracked."

"I go mighty short of certain types of stuff," explained the little man apologetically. "Inorganic material is plentiful. Animal protoplasm isn't. Takes a lot of time and trouble to make it myself."

"I can imagine." Jensen glanced at his watch. "Show me one genuine dyed-in-the-wool mutant and I'll do you proud in the Sunday edition. Otherwise —"

"I'm one myself," informed the little man, modestly.

"Is zat so? What can you do that the Navy can't?"

"I can make anything." He paused, added, "Well, almost anything. I'm restricted to what I can lift unaided. Nothing heavier."

Jensen tee-heed insultingly. "And you make other mutants?"

"Yes."

"Then go ahead and get making. I want a pale blue rhinoceros seventeen inches long. Not more than nine pounds."

"My powers don't function instantaneously. Manufacture takes time."

"So you said before. A good excuse is good enough for twice." Jensen scowled across the counter. "Could you make a first-water rose diamond the size of a bucket?"

"If it were of any use." The little man arshooed with violence, shoved a displaced jar back into position. "A gem that size would be valueless. And it would take time to produce."

"There you go again," Jensen threw a significant glance at the bottle-loaded shelves. "How much are they paying you?"

"Who?"

"The drug ring."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't." Pushing forward his face, Jensen displayed the cynicism of one familiar with life's seamiest side. "What it says in the window is a lot of guff. It doesn't mean what it appears to mean. A mutant is a key-word for a jar of joy-juice as your hop-headed customers well know."

"The jars contain reduction fluids," contradicted the little man.

"You bet they do," Jensen endorsed. "They've reduced many an addict's wad." He pointed to the jar at which he had sniffed. "How much for that one?"

"You may have it for nothing," said the little man, giving it to him. "But I want the empty back."

Taking it, Jensen again uncapped and smelled. He dipped a finger, sucked it cautiously. His expression became beatific.

"I take back all that drug talk. I get the idea now." He waved the jar, doing it gently lest he spill a drop. "Illegal liquor, ninety-six proof and no tax." Another finger-suck. "All the same, somebody really knows how to make it. Somebody is a revenue-dodging expert. Count me a customer—I'll be here regularly as from now."

With that he tried a mouthful. It was like a torchlight procession parading down his gullet.

"Youns!" He gained breath, eyed the jar with unconcealed respect. It was on the small side, holding no more than a fifth of a pint. That was a pity. He lifted it for another drink. "This one's on me. Here's to crime!"

"You have been very rude," remarked the little man. "Remember that!"

Grinning at him, Jensen tilted the jar and let the rest go down. Something exploded in his belly. The walls of the shop appeared to recede to an enormous distance and then shoot back. He teetered for five seconds while strength drained out of his legs, then bowed forward and permitted the floor to smack him in the face.

* * * *

Aeons swung by, one after another, long, foggy, filled with dull sounds. They ended. Jensen emerged slowly as from a bad dream.

He was on all fours on a sheet of ice or something resembling ice. He was down like a dog, also rigid and muzzy-minded. His eyes were out of focus. He shook his head to revive his wits.

Thoughts gradually fought their way into his befuddled cranium. A drug depot. He'd found one and been too nosey. Somebody had pussied behind him. Somebody had handed him a large lump on the pate. What comes of talking out loud and asking too many questions.

"You've been very rude. Remember that!"

Rude nothing. Pretty soon, when he could pull himself together and regain his health and strength, he'd become downright vulgar. He would take the little man apart and strew the pieces around.

The eyes got working more or less, mostly less. They remained peculiarly and horribly short-sighted. His nose was functioning top-notch; it could smell umpteen things at once, including an overheated engine someplace fifty yards away. But the eyes remained poor.

All the same, he could see now that the ice was not ice. It was more like plate glass, thick and cold. There was another sheet of it far below him and another below that. Also a strong wire grille fronting the lot.

He tried to come erect but his back was stiff and refused to bend. His legs wouldn't obey his will. What a thumper he must have caught! Still on all fours, he edged nearer the imprisoning grille, doing it with some sort of lethargic ponderousness. Voices sounded somewhere nearby but out of sight.

"She insists on a telepathic saluki and that's what it's got to be."

"It will take ten days," answered the little man's tones.

"Her birthday is Saturday week. Sure you can have it ready for then?"

"I'm positive."

"That's fine. Go ahead with it. I'll bring you a fat one when I come to collect."

Jensen screwed up his eyes and squinted myopically through the grille at a shiny surface opposite. More glass fronting another row of wired-in but empty shelves. There were vague, elusive shadow-pictures on it. Something like a distant window with words across. The words were reversed and none too clear. It took him quite a time to spell them out: *Mutants For Sale*.

His gaze lowered to his own level, saw something else reflected a good deal more clearly. He moved to one side. It moved likewise. He shook his head. So did the other. He opened his mouth and the mirage opened with him.

Then he screamed bloody murder—but only a tiny snort came forth. The reflection also snorted.

It was pale blue, seventeen inches long and had a horn on its ugly nose.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE NEXT ISSUE

A deep-sea diver trips over an out-cropping of rock and falls through miles of blackness to the ocean bed and the most breathtaking civilisation ever to be described in a science-fiction magazine. This is the basis of the plot of a new and enthralling novelette by star-author WILLIAM F. TEMPLE, to appear for the first time in the next edition of NEBULA.

Prominent American author ROSS ROCKLYNNE contributes a light-hearted original novelette with a space setting, while popular J. T. M'INTOSH tackles Earth's future with surprising results. Other stories are very competently handled by E. C. TUBB, FORREST J. ACKERMAN and others to make a remarkably good all-round collection.

Ultimate Harvest

*Arc had worked well for a hundred
years—then came the time to rest*

Harvest time came round again and with it the high August sun, blazing down on the grain until it sundered from its sheath and lay, crisp and golden, sighing for the reaper. So it had ever been at harvest time—hot, dry and dusty—and Arc accepted it. Later, he knew, the sluices would be opened and welcome water poured out over the stubbles, slaking and softening them so that they might be the easier ploughed under; but now as the reapers moved out into the yellow plain the dust rose in choking clouds. Gritty dust that abraded their bearings; fine dust hanging on the still air in an impenetrable curtain, so that they failed to observe the taller heads of unrogued corn which nodded to them in their passing, and cut them all to a uniform height, thus making harder the work of the pulpers. This, too, Arc accepted, though he should not have done; but for so many years had he been alone in the corn belt it was not unnatural that he should overlook some small things, when so many big things had gone wrong.

From the tower wherein he controlled operations he saw the corn begin its homeward journey. Behind each reaper the sections

of conveyor slid into place and twin streams began to flow. Before him they split like water on a rock, the threshed grain veering off to the left where it was elevated into great silos, the straw and chaff going to the right where the pulpers waited to process it into a thousand valued products. Ahead, the huge ocean of corn began to shrink—slowly, for they would be reaping for a month yet—but perceptibly. Behind him there rose a vast hum and groan as multitudes of machines began their tasks. But these were not Arc's concern: he existed only to grow and harvest the crops. Their ultimate form and destination was decided and arranged by others.

At least, such were his instructions, and he was not conditioned to question them. When the silos overflowed and the grain poured down their sides like a molten stream, he neither knew nor cared; he watched only the stream flowing towards him, that it might not falter or be broken. When the pulpers warehouses could hold no more and the strawboard sheets piled up round them in untidy stacks, Arc was completely indifferent. So long as one ear of corn remained standing in all that gargantuan field, he must keep the combines moving, the conveyors shuffling in their queer side-to-side dance, the harvest flowing. Then there would be the stubble dressing and the water and later, when the great sun had dimmed to a reddening ball and the mornings were silvered with frost, the ploughing.

All these operations were Arc's, and he alone was responsible. If the yield of any section began to fall, Arc could correct it. It was he who would send out the mobile laboratory with its soil testing equipment and automatic replenishers. It was he who rogued the standing crop to eliminate those vagrant mutations which from time to time arose. Arc selected the seed for the following crop, saw to its sowing, harrowing and subsequent cultivation. He protected it from rats, rabbits and birds, dispassionately yet ruthlessly, for was not the corn his sacred charge? He had it sprayed at the appointed periods with insecticides, fungicides and the mystic hormone solutions; he knew their formulas and functions as by rote. For countless years he had been doing all this and never failed to produce a crop as nearly perfect as nature would allow.

Never, until now. Arc was growing old and with age came frequent lapses of memory. At first small things were neglected, harmless in themselves but cumulatively dangerous. This year the corn had been poorly rogued, which meant that the ears would not fall truly onto the centre of the drum and the straw would be longer

than the pulpers could properly accommodate. A doe rat, gravid and cautious, had eluded his once keen eyes and made herself a nest in the ripening stalks, and in due time her young fed to repletion on the milky grains. A reaper ground to a halt, bearing comminuted by dust where there should have been oil. Its companions, receiving no new order, continued in their arrow straight paths, leaving a wide stint unmown. A torn conveyor belt which should long since have been withdrawn, dribbled a thin stream of wheat, marking its length in a golden path beneath it.

Yet acre by acre the harvest came in. Yard by yard the gilded sea diminished giving way to a scarcely less yellow soil and stubble. Slowly the mountain of grain behind Arc grew higher and wider, the pulpers wheezed and rattled and roared in a frenzied crescendo and, one by one, the reapers came back; all except the disabled one which lay nosed into its uncut crop as though held in check by the immensity of the task before it. Then, far over to the East a hoarse rumble announced the opening of the sluice gates and a wall of shining water swept across the bare plain. It broke round the motionless reaper, smote angrily at the remnant of upright corn which bent before it and, protesting, went under and finally halted at the low dyke which was its westward barrier.

Here was further evidence of Arc's inexecution. Not only was he at fault in releasing so great a volume of water to scour off the fertile soil and wash away fertiliser residues, but also in permitting the sluices to open at all until the plain was clear. The damaged reaper should have been drawn in and sent for repair. It was all laid down in Arc's instructions; but it was as though he knew this was his last harvest. Perhaps he sensed that there was no future. Perhaps he knew that behind him the mountains of corn still lay, rotten and heaving with rats, as they had lain for twenty years; that no transports called any more to the pulpers to take away the plastics and fabrics they produced. Perhaps he realised that there was no more power for next year's harvest: or perhaps a century of clicking and humming in the massive tower that was his brain had at last evolved an intelligence.

Intelligence enough to see that an Agricultural Robot Control might well rest, since there was no longer any human being left to enjoy the fruits of its labour.

Pawn In Revolt

*They gave mankind a fresh
start—by pulverising Earth.*

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

As had always been his habit, the old man had doodled on a writing pad all the time they had talked. The same old wolves' heads, full face, left profile, right profile. They were rather fuzzy wolves now, because Luben's hand trembled with age. His voice quavered a little, too, but there was no wavering in his mind: that was fixed in the pattern of Corporism, and it was not set by senility: it had grown rigid in his youth. For he had realised then that Corporism was the final answer to everything. Only the fools, the ignorant, and the misled could not see that, and they were unimportant anyway.

"You must return within a month," he said.

"A month?" echoed Parleck. "I was thinking of at least a year. If I come and go too frequently, it may arouse suspicion—"

"If you leave it as long as a year, you won't be able to return at all."

Parleck stared at the old man, his eyes widening.

"You're not—?" he said, and found he could add no more.

"I am not," said Luben. "*We* are. The council decided this morning. Do you not agree with them?"

"Well — I —"

"I know. You're half Albish, and you're sentimental about the island. But it's become much more than just an island. When you wander along its lanes and through its orchards you must remember this: you are not strolling through a garden—you are walking the deck of a great aircraft carrier, moored off our coast and in the service of our most powerful enemies."

"That I realise," said Parleck, slowly.

"And that you are not walking that deck in the role of a casual visitor among friends, but as a spy among those who have repeatedly proven themselves to be our bitterest enemies."

"That also, I realise."

"Do you—fully? I wonder. I'm not satisfied with your recent reports, Parleck. I don't think you're doing all that your duty to your fatherland demands of you."

"I thought there were no more fatherlands or motherlands—only Corporism."

The point of Luben's pencil stopped on the ear of a wolf which had got out of hand in drawing.

"True," said the old man, quietly. "But Negovia is the fountain head of Corporism, and we owe it to the world to keep the fountain head uninjured and freely flowing."

"I have reported what I have observed in Albion. And I have observed no signs of any intention to attack the fountain head."

Luben abandoned the misshapen wolf and rolled the pencil gently between his fingers.

"If you were to observe Negovia you would see no signs of any intention to attack Albion. Nevertheless, the intention is there. Intentions are made to be concealed. The Albish and their allies intend to attack us. We need no confirmation of that intention: we know it exists, because its existence arises logically out of the immutable laws of Corporism. All situations grow out of other situations, and each stage is predictable if you know your Corporism. What isn't always predictable is the exact time when each stage is to be reached. That is what is wrong with your reports, Parleck—they give no indication of the time. If it is to be more than a year hence, we're not worried—and our enemies will by then be in no

position to worry. But if it's to be before we are ready . . . that's why I want you to go to Albion at once and glean from Sanders some idea of the date. We must know."

"And if it *is* before we are ready?"

"We must stall them by making a show of renouncing Corporism and seeing the error of our ways. We must give them the hope that Corporism will collapse of itself without their having to do anything about it. The Albish have a natural inclination to take the line of least resistance—we must play on that inclination. At least, until our hydrogen bombs are ready: the piles are working night and day."

"I see that you have thought it all out."

Luben smiled faintly. He said: "This sort of thing is no effort for me, any more than it was for Machiavelli or Hitler. In the mass, men are children: they have no character, and one just plays on their hopes and fears. It is too easy. I often wish I—the Council—had a more worthy opponent. But our enemies are democracies, headless animals, confused with a thousand dissonant desires and beliefs which cancel out. They have no binding philosophy, such as we have. They have no direction, no common impulse—except that of blind self-preservation, which will lead them to a so-called preventive war."

"But are *we* not heading for a so-called preventive war?"

There had been little life in Luben's smile, and now it expired altogether.

"There will be nothing 'so-called' about it. As a nation Albion will cease to exist in a matter of minutes. Half a dozen H-bombs could do it, strategically placed—one of them on its capital, of course. And there's no comparison about our intentions. Their war is designed merely to maintain the status quo. Ours—to extend Corporism and peace to the whole world and end wars forever!"

His rheumy eyes could still summon a spark from the revolutionary fire of his youth. His quavering voice could still recall an echo from old, stirring addresses. And age and dignity underwrote them with authority.

"I shall expect useful information within the month," he said, abruptly. "This audience is ended."

Parleck saluted, and left.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before Luben pressed the bell-push under his desk.

Novik, coming in answer from his office below, passed Parleck on the stairs. They smiled and nodded at each other perfunctorily, but said nothing. Each distrusted the other because they had nothing whatever in common, and if Parleck understood Novik, it was certain that Novik did not understand Parleck.

Novik was pleasant-faced, perfectly mannered, always agreeable to those in authority above him. He was also agreeable to his subordinates and expected them to be agreeable to him, which they were. It was a little odd that they were, because not so long ago they were in authority over him. They had, on their various levels, never quite fathomed how Novik, while agreeing with all they said, should somehow have taken over a role in which they found themselves agreeing with all he said. His quiet suggestions had imperceptibly changed into quiet directions, without arousing resentment or jealousy, in a manner which seemed just in the natural course of things.

His gentle infiltration had brought him into the orbit of Luben's notice, and Luben had for some time watched his progress with a secret amusement which became a secret admiration. He had himself fought his way up with violent haranguing, intimidation, manoeuvring with cliques, even conspiracy, and—once—murder. Only as old age began to cool his blood and sap his strength did he begin to appreciate—and practise—the power which lay in subtlety.

When he thought he had mastered it, he became aware of the real master approaching him from below. Had he been younger, he would have fought off and maimed the insidious usurper, for his philosophy was that of the wolf pack: kill or be killed.

He had been leader long enough to recognise a challenge, in whatever form it came. But he knew that soon he would have to relinquish the reins through sheer feebleness, and he would rather hand them over with dignity to a chosen successor than have them taken from him. So for some time he had been keeping his eyes open for such a worthy successor.

At first, before changing his mind and choosing Novik, he had considered Parleck. Parleck was the right age, he was a man of character and intelligence, he had always been a diligent Corporist, courageous, a good organiser, energetic.

He was only half-Negovian. That shouldn't make any difference, because Corporism was supra-national, and even full-blooded negroes filled offices of trust in the Council. The trouble was that he was

also half Albish—his father had been Negovian ambassador in the Albish capital and married an Albish woman. The ambassador had held his post for many years, and so Parleck's formative years had been half Albish too.

How far could Parleck be trusted?

Luben put the question to Novik as soon as he came in.

Novik answered, standing there at a sort of relaxed attention: "I have often wondered."

Luben waved him to a chair. (Parleck would seat himself without giving it a thought, but Novik always waited politely for permission).

"Any conclusions?"

"We can trust him quite a long way, if we are to judge solely by his service to our country as a diplomat and—an agent."

"Say spy, if you mean spy," said Luben, testily.

"A spy, then," said Novik, easily. "His information, even on top secret level, has never been found inaccurate in a single particular, so far as I know."

"Agreed. But lately there hasn't been much of it, and what there is, is relatively unimportant. Of what use to the Council is gossip about Cabinet intrigue when what they desire to know is the size of the atomic bomb stockpile, the amount of heavy hydrogen being produced (and we know Albion *is* producing a lot), and, above all, the contemplated date of attack."

"He may be keeping something back."

"That's what I'm afraid of. The Albish are a reserved, insular, silent people, and there are some of those characteristics in Parleck—you can never be wholly sure of what he's being silent and reserved about."

"That's so. And I've noticed a tendency of his of late to cast doubt on the moral fitness of actions, as though morality were something more than just a temporary convention for convenience's sake. He seems to have lost sight of the eternal principle of Corporism that progress can only be made by breaking conventions—*any* sort of conventions."

"But are not *we* heading for a so-called preventive war?," echoed Luben, from his memory, and mused a while. "It's true, of course, but—"

"But the rightness of an action depends upon who performs it," said the other, anticipating the quotation from the Corporist

Handbook.

Luben nodded.

"Therefore," continued Novik, "judging by the fact that we do not fully know his inner beliefs, we cannot trust him at all. He is a dangerous man."

"Dangerous men can be used—like any other men," said Luben, sliding open a drawer and taking out a chessboard and a box of pieces. "For myself, I trust Parleck—at the moment."

He began setting up the pieces.

Presently, the pair were immersed in their daily game of chess.

The Negovians were great chess players. Indeed, they saw life largely in terms of the game. They could not conceive that any move of any sort by anyone was likely to be anything but a calculated move towards capturing their king. The diehard Corporists believed that there were no generous, disinterested, or altruistic actions, that nobody gave away anything that wasn't a premeditated sacrifice for a later and greater gain, that nothing was straightforward and all was camouflage for ulterior motives.

Of course, there were a lot of pawns in the game, too, whose names were John Smith, Joe Doakes, and Ivan Ivanovitch—silly little things, almost useless, with their heads full of idiotic misapprehensions about the meaning of life, gaping oaf-like at sunsets, pottering in their gardens and growing inutile flowers, pretending to help their neighbours (but really out for their own ends, naturally), pawing their fat wives, rearing ugly little juniors, slapping paint on canvas and scribbling rubbish on paper, building the equivalent of sand castles.

But they weren't wholly useless. You couldn't very well play chess without pawns.

The two men crouched over the ivory figures.

So far Luben hadn't lost a game. When he did, he knew it would be time to hand over to Novik. He felt it would be soon. This past week Novik had extended him to his utmost and left him an exhausted victor.

"You know," said Novik, presently, "I understand your mind better than I do Parleck's. He's the one man I can't figure out. I think I shall have trouble with him."

"He's not *your* trouble yet," reminded Luben, pointedly. "However, you needn't be afraid of him. He's a poor chess player."

"You're a queer bird, Parleck," said Sanders, with a quizzical smile. "I don't think I've ever really understood you, not even when we were at school together."

Parleck lay back on the green bank, chewing a piece of grass. Dog-roses climbed over the hedge above him. A blackbird sang in a chestnut tree, against the blue sky. Scents drifted in the air: new-mown hay, wild flowers, distant wood-smoke.

Parleck said dreamily: "This is a beautiful country. I could live here for ever, if only I weren't a man without a country . . . that's why you've never understood me, Sanders—I've always been without a home-land. I've never really—belonged."

"I think I see what you mean. Mixed blood, mixed upbringing. It must have been the very devil."

"You don't know how I envied you. Here, with your so-very-Albish family, your school and its traditions, your field games and sportsmanship, your friendships, deep and enduring because they've been dug hardly out of a protective seam of reserve . . . in Negovia there are no real friendships: there is surface bonhomie and there are alliances of convenience. That's all. Because the only faith is in Corporism, not in people. Nobody trusts anyone there in the way in which I trust you."

"Thank you," said Sanders.

"But you can't trust me in the same way—because I am not Albish."

Sanders bit his lip. He said, awkwardly: "I trust you as a friend, in personal matters. You may have anything of mine. But you know my position as Defence Minister forbids my entrusting you with what is not mine. The secrets of State are not my secrets. I wouldn't divulge them even to my closest Albish friend."

"Let alone a Negovian Corporist playing a double game," said Parleck, removing the chewed grass stem and smiling at it.

Sanders flushed. "Don't be a fool," he said shortly. "I never implied—"

"No, you're too much of a gentleman to imply such a thing. You're polite, and pretend such things aren't done, and yet you know they are done. You have given me information in the past, and had information from me. Correct information on both sides. Give and take. I've often given you more than the Corporist Council has thought. I've just as often given the Corporist Council less than you suspected. My bias is towards your side, but—and

this is the thing people don't understand about me—I *am on neither side.*"

"Then why play this dangerous game?"

"Because it seems to me that it is what destiny intended me for. All my early life I cursed that destiny which denied me happiness. For happiness is a sense of fitting naturally into an environment. My environments were changed and interchanged too rapidly: I was never wholly at ease on Albish playing fields or on Negovian parade grounds, beneath the oaks in the rain or under the firs in the snow, talking light banter or discussing weighty Corporist promulgations. I was torn between two ways of life, belonged to neither. Then one day I grew up and realised I belonged to something greater than either—humanity."

"So you became an umpire?"

Parleck laughed. "The Albish and their way of seeing life as a field game! Healthier than Negovians, though, who see it in terms of an indoor game—chess. No, I became more of a universal father, quietly interfering now and then in the rather too rough games children play sometimes, trying to save them from hurting themselves. Negovia and Albion would have been at war long ago if it hadn't been for my good offices."

"What sort of offices?"

"Contrary to the respected principles of Corporism, wars are bred from ignorance, misunderstanding, and fear rather than from deliberate intention. I've kept each side in as little ignorance about the other side as possible, and thus each side felt more secure than if it had to rely only on imagination and suspicion: the Negovians, at least, always tend to imagine the worst, perhaps because they expect, and have often had, the worst from everyone. Unfortunately, while I have palliated the Corporist disease, I've not been able to cure it. And now it's broken out beyond my control and looks like reaching a crisis. Which is why I am here, to see what can be done."

"An unofficial diplomat, eh?"

"The plain stark truth is the only good diplomat. I am going to give you all of the truth I know. It would no doubt help humanity if you were to be as frank. But if you put Albion before humanity, and leave me in ignorance—well, it can't be helped. I can't make you grow up by anything other than example."

Sanders plucked a wide blade of grass and split it slowly down the middle. He was as intent on it as if it was a major operation.

He remained silent.

"Negovia intends to bomb Albion flat, in a lightning raid, within a year," said Parleck, with brutal suddenness.

Sanders' fingers froze, and then slowly resumed pulling the shreds of grass apart. He had gone a little pale.

"H-bombs?" he said, colourlessly.

"Yes."

Sanders separated the shreds, and then flung them down with an abrupt motion.

"Maniacs!" he said, briefly, bitterly.

"They think they will make the world safe for Corporism."

"Maniacs!" repeated Sanders. "How many converts do they expect to get by such methods?"

Parleck shrugged. "They think the truths of Corporism are self-evident, that everyone except a few villians is converted already and only waiting to be liberated. They imagine that if they don't strike first, your Government will."

Sanders was very angry now. "They pride themselves that they are realists above all else. Heaven help us, they live in a crazy fantasy of their own creation!"

Parleck had a brief vision of Luben and Novik brooding over their chess-board.

"They certainly do," he said. And then, more as a statement than a question: "You weren't, of course, intending to strike first?"

"Of course not," said Sanders, shortly. "We—" And then he checked himself. When one was angry, one was liable to say too much. It was quite possible that what he said now would go back to those who had chosen themselves to be Albion's enemies. "Of course, we have made every preparation for defence," he went on, giving Parleck a sidelong glance.

"What defence is there against H-bombs? The Negovians will use at least six of them."

"Surely you can't expect me to reveal—"

"There's nothing to reveal," said Parleck smoothly. "The only defence is to attack first. That you won't do, because there's nothing to go on except my say-so—and even if you accepted it, the Prime Minister wouldn't. Nor would the nation. Look here, Sanders, I'm not fencing and probing and playing at 'Let's Pretend.' As I told you, I've grown out of all that infantile, nationalistic mummery. Try to be adult for a moment, and face the truth. It

may be worth it."

Sanders was irresolute. Then he said, almost defiantly: "Very well. We have a passive sort of defence: deep shelters. But I realise they're not likely to be very effective. One penetration bomb will crush them by earthquake. All right, we have no real defence."

"That's better," said Parleck, and for the moment Sanders felt as though he were being addressed by a stern, but just parent. This Parleck, who'd once been under his captaincy in the school football team, this fellow whom (in his heart) he'd always looked down on a little because he was only fifty per cent. Albish—no, he would never get to the bottom of him. But it was queer, the way the man inspired trust.

"Now," said Parleck, "I felt pretty low about it myself when Luben dropped the bombshell on me. But in the 'plane coming over I reviewed the situation detachedly, and then, you know, I saw there *was* a defence against the H-bomb. A very effective defence."

"Go on."

"You have in this country, I know, many atomic piles producing heavy hydrogen—"

"Purely in respect of possible retaliatory measures, I assure you," said Sanders, quietly. "Not in view of making any attack."

"I believe you, where Luben wouldn't—and doesn't. Now, this is my idea . . ."

* * * *

"Well?" said Luben, and Novik looked up expectantly too.

"I shall send in my report," said Parleck, looking down at the chess-board without expression.

"Good, but let's have a verbal resumé now," said Luben. "First things first—did you get the date?"

"I had it confirmed from Sanders' own mouth that Albion does not propose to attack."

Luben stared at him bleakly. He said: "Then it is plain that Sanders has begun to suspect you. The old school tie link has worn thin. I'm afraid your usefulness as a spy is ended, Parleck."

"I am quite sure that Sanders wasn't bluffing," said Parleck, and Novik gave a little smothered chuckle.

Luben smote his forehead in a despair that was half genuine.

"Will you never grow up, Parleck. *All* statesmen bluff all the time. It's the game—it can't be played any other way. If everyone put their cards on the table, how could any game be possible?"

"It couldn't," said Parleck. He didn't express his contempt for the game, query its necessity, nor enlarge upon the evils arising from it. People believed what they wanted to believe, and conversion by reason was highly unlikely—in the case of Luben and Novik, quite impossible. They loved the game of power politics for the same reason that they loved chess, and that love was ineradicable.

"Very well, then. So the upshot of your report is that you have nothing to report?"

"Not quite. I have returned with some useful and, as usual, reliable information."

"Well?"

"The Albish have prepared a perfect defence against hydrogen bomb attacks. I don't know what form it takes—I couldn't find out. But I can assure you that they have one. And the Council had better reconsider its decision about the war."

Luben toyed with a captured bishop. He glanced across at Novik, who was grinning. "More bluff!" said Novik's expression. "What a fool!"

Luben said quietly: "I have a feeling, Parleck, that you don't approve of our preventive war, that you would like to stop it. I can't make up my mind whether you've been fooled or whether you seek to fool the Council. Until I can, you will be kept under open arrest."

"I have done my duty. I have given you correct information," said Parleck stiffly. "If I may be permitted an observation: it is possible to doubt too much. There are people who tell the truth."

"And you are one of them, eh?" murmured Luben. "We shall see."

* * * *

Some weeks later, Luben sent for Parleck, which he had not done since the arrest.



Luben tugged some sheets of typescript from under the Roman paper-weight fashioned in the likeness of the wolf-mother of Romulus and Remus. He spun the thin sheaf across the desk to Parleck, who picked it up curiously and sank into a chair with it.

It read:

RADIO ANNOUNCEMENT (NEWS) ALBION (2nd PROG.)

August 9th. 12.00 hrs.

" Mr. Sanders, the Defence Minister, this morning in Parliament read a statement which is to receive world-wide publicity.

" He said: ' In view of the fact that it seems to be the accepted thing is these serious times that wars should start without declaration or warning of any kind, so that the aggressor may virutally win the war outright through the surprise element, the Albish Government has felt it its duty to take measures to protect the country against the likelihood of such unprovoked attacks, especially as it is aware that just one H-bomb could wipe out all our capital and a much greater area beyond it.

" ' To put the matter bluntly, it has been the opinion of the Government that the only effective deterrent against H-bomb attacks is the threat of instant reprisal in kind. It still is our opinion. But we have never lost sight of the possibility that the aggressor's initial attack may be so overwhelming as to destroy the victim's ability to mount an attack in reprisal. Indeed, that is certain to be the aim of the aggressor. To defeat this aim, we have taken precautions to see that a reprisal attack IS made, instantly and AUTOMATICALLY.

" ' The more deadly weapons are, the more likely they are to become boomerangs. It was tacitly recognised that gas was a dangerous weapon of this kind, and therefore no one dared use it in the last war. In our view, the H-bomb can also be made an unusable weapon for the same reason.

" ' In the nerve centres of this country, we now have a pattern of containers of heavy hydrogen liquefied under a pressure of over 100,000 lbs. These containers are scientifically placed, so that the explosion of one would start an instant chain reaction in the others. The material of which they are composed is an excellent conductor of heat. They are also carefully camouflaged. In themselves they present no danger: to set them off it would take the heat and pressure from an H-bomb exploding in the vicinity of just one of them.

" ' Now, our technicians have calculated that the energy pro-

duced by the hydrogen-to-helium change in respect merely of the containers situated in this city would be sufficient to cause utter devastation within a radius of 1,500 miles. At the moment we have to fear attack only from countries whose capitals, and a large part of the countries themselves lie within this radius.

" ' Thus any attempt to destroy Albion by hydrogen bomb attacks will automatically ensure the destruction of the greater part of the aggressor's own country. It goes without saying that our own country would be totally destroyed, but in the event of an unprovoked attack that would have happened anyway. As Albishmen, we are gratified to know that should we be attacked we can be sure of bringing our enemy down with us, and that we can still claim that we shall never be beaten, whatever happens.

" ' However, I do not visualise such a spectacular end to our destinies. We are safer now than we have ever been since atomic weapons were invented, for, knowing these facts, it would be suicide for anyone to attack us. We shall add to our heavy hydrogen store so that there is no safe distance from which any aggressor might launch an attack. If any independent country feels that our defence measures place it in danger, we make these points:—

- " ' 1. Any atomic war which starts would in any case spread into a world war: in the nature of things, there can be no neutrals these days.
- ' 2. We have, naturally, no intention ourselves of ever starting a war, and so no danger threatens from us, but only from demonstrable lunacy on the part of other powers.
- ' 3. If other countries copied our defence measures, atomic war would become impossible forever, for any outbreak of it would destroy the planet at once.
- ' 4. We feel that in these times independent countries, playing at power politics and respecting no common law, are themselves a greater danger to the world than our defence measures. It is only because independent countries put nationalism and self-interest before World Law, giving the latter no more than lip service, that we have been driven to our own stern measures to maintain peace. We hear too much about their rights and too little about their greater duty.

" ' We give these facts solemnly to the world. Let those who anticipate aggression reflect upon them. It may occur to them that the love of power beyond a certain mark leads to disaster. We have

indicated that mark. They pass it only to lose all power for all time. This is a warning effective from now.' "

Novik had come quietly into the room while Parleck had been reading, but when Parleck replaced the document on Luben's desk neither of the other men was looking at him. Novik, it seemed, was having trouble with an obdurate cigarette lighter, while Luben doodled on a writing pad—more wolves.

The silence continued.

Parleck was too familiar with the technique of creating nervous tension to be affected by it. Easily, he lit a cigarette and settled back in his chair to await what might come. He was not going to initiate any move.

And so it was Luben who presently felt he must break the silence.

He slipped the pad into a desk drawer suddenly, looked up as though he had forgotten Parleck was there, and then said in a high peremptory voice: "Is there any reason why you should not be executed summarily?"

Parleck exhaled a thin stream of pale blue smoke.

"Is there any reason why I should be?" he countered, undisturbed.

"Yes—this Albish announcement."

"I have an idea that I warned you that some time ago that the Albish had prepared a perfect defence against H-bomb attacks. This announcement merely corroborates the accuracy of my information. Should I be executed for doing my job efficiently?"

"You are not speaking to a fool," said Luben. "I don't believe in coincidences. There's always a connection between events which follow upon another's heels too quickly. In this case, you're the connection, because there can be no other. The Albish Government would not have gone to these drastic lengths to protect their country from H-bomb attacks unless they had definite information that someone was preparing to attack them very soon. You gave them that information."

"Have you any evidence to back such an accusation?"

"I don't need evidence," said Luben. "I know."

"In that case, there's no use arguing about it. I know the quality of your intellectual conceit: once you get an idea in your head which you want to believe, you're right, you're infallible—as infallible as Corporism itself. You'll keep on torturing me until I

make the confession you want to hear—whether the confession is only a lie to end the torture or not. Well, I'll save you the time. For once you are right. I told Sanders about the Council's plan—which means *your* plan, of course. More than that, I told him how to counter it—the containers were my idea."

Novik started. Luben's scrawny old hands began trembling so violently that he put them out of sight, below the edge of the desk.

"You miserable traitor!" said Novik, in an icily cold voice.

Parleck regarded him calmly. "From where I stand, you are the traitors—both of you, traitors to humanity. I do not serve you, nor Corporism, nor Negovia, nor Albion—I am a pawn in revolt. I serve only humanity. And humanity calls for world peace. I have answered that call. Now you can bring on the firing party."

Luben recovered control of himself.

He said: "Idealists always sound slightly ridiculous, especially when playing the martyr. There will be no firing party, and no brave last words. I don't want you to come to such a quick, neat ending thinking your perfidy has triumphed. I'll just tell you this: you have been under suspicion for a long time. I gave you the information about our plan of attack solely that you might pass it on to the Albish. I'm glad they're concentrating on H-bomb defence. It takes their minds off the possibilities of bacteriological warfare. Their containers will be of little value against the bacteriological bombs which will rain down on them within a month, and kill them within the hour. Novik, arrange for Parleck to have a holiday so that he can think these things over. The Manoberian salt mines are an ideal place for quiet thinking—send him there. A nice long vacation, say for a period roughly equal to the rest of his life. Though, of course, it may not be a very long holiday, after all—those salt mines don't agree with everyone. I complained before, Parleck, that you are slow in growing up. You are incredibly naive—humanity surely deserves better servants— . . . Take him away, Novik."

* * *

"Mate!"

It was just a month later.

Novik tried to keep the triumph from his voice, but his first victory after over a year of endeavour meant everything to him—and he had a shrewd idea that it meant as much to Luben.

The old man sat there, drooped, exhausted. There was a film of sweat on his forehead: he had been driven to putting forth more mental effort than ever before. And it had been in vain.

"Another?" said Novik, with a smile which was malicious because Luben was not looking at him. Nevertheless, Luben knew the malice was there. He shook his head wearily.

Novik started putting the pieces away, with fastidious tidiness, in their box.

"Are the bacteriological bombs ready yet?" he asked conversationally.

The old man shook his head again.

"I was speaking to Tanenburg, and he said he doubted if they ever would be ready," said Novik, fitting the white knight in with care.

Luben raised his head and contemplated Novik gravely before speaking. "Tanenburg was under my orders to discuss the matter with no one. This will cost him his post . . . you have an insidious way of getting round people, Novik."

Novik slid the lid over the chess pieces. He rested his fists on the box and met Luben's regard squarely.

"I call your bluff," he said steadily. "You never intended, before Parleck's treachery, to use bacteriological bombs. You knew—and you still know at heart—that there's no way of counteracting their boomerang effect. We could wipe out Albion in a day, sure enough, but just as surely the disease would be rampant here within a week. That sort of victory isn't worth the price—in fact, it's no sort of victory. True?"

"Go on," said Luben, not committing himself.

"You have been driving Tanenburg and his department to make it a one-way weapon, although you knew and he knew that it was impossible. But you didn't like to face up to the fact that you'd failed, that it was time to hand over to me. You just went on, bluffing, hoping irrationally, hanging on, fooling yourself but no one else. I'm sure you didn't fool Parleck."

"I'd failed?"

"Yes, you failed in your judgment of Parleck. I told you he was a dangerous man. But you trusted him—you trusted him too

far."

Luben dropped his gaze.

"You are still trusting him—and the Albish—too far," pursued Novik. "You've allowed yourself to become hypnotised by an empty threat: the threat of automatic reprisal. Don't you realise it's merely psychological warfare—defence by suggestion? Our agents have so far discovered no trace of heavy hydrogen containers in Albion. Even if there *are* containers, you may bet your life they don't contain heavy hydrogen. The Albish are too cunning for that. They realise that the mere belief that it's there is sufficient to deter raiders, without its actually needing to be there. And if there *is* one raider bold enough to attack, they'll be finished anyway, and reprisals won't raise them from the dead."

"Because our agents haven't located the containers, it doesn't mean they're not there," said Luben defensively. "The Albish themselves said they are camouflaged so as to avoid sabotage. A container doesn't have to be a plain metal tank. Almost anything could be used as a container: a water tower, gasometer, the boiler of a locomotive lying idle in the railway yards, a petrol truck. There are two million private houses in their Capital alone, any one of which may conceal a container. A container doesn't have to be anything even resembling a tank—almost any normal feature in an urban area could be hollowed out to make a receiver for heavy hydrogen."

"No it couldn't—not for heavy hydrogen under enormously high pressure. You're frightening yourself with bogeys you're raising in your own imagination. The Albish haven't been playing fool tricks like that with their heavy hydrogen. They've stored it, all right—in the form of bombs to be used on us when they're quite sure we've been duped into not expecting it."

"I've wondered whether they were bluffing, but I was never sure and dared not take the risk," said Luben.

"I'm quite sure they *are* bluffing, and the greater risk is to sit back and do nothing."

Luben passed his fingers through his hair several times, slowly. He was tired and torn with indecision.

"I don't know what to think. I guess I'm getting too old for this sort of thing."

"This sort of thing is only chess on a greater scale," said Novik, and implication was thick in his voice. "That gambit of

yours with the queen . . . I realised it was a bluff from the start, and I saw where the real danger lay. But I pretended to be hoodwinked, and led you on . . . into the trap. I have your measure, I know all your tricks, I can never be bluffed again. I'm the master now."

Luben sighed

"That's right. You are the master now. I was going to hand over the reins to you—you don't have to grab. You seem to know what you're doing better . . . than I know what I'm doing . . ."

Luben's voice trailed away. For a time he stared into space. He'd had a long run. Power had been life itself while he had held it. But one doesn't live forever.

He focussed his eyes on the black and white illustration on the wall from his favourite novel, Jack London's *White Fang*: the fight between the elder leader of the wolf pack and the young leader. He found himself tensing, unconsciously pulling his shoulders back. He stood up. He said firmly, the quaver gone from his voice: "I shall resign from the Chairmanship of the Council to-morrow, and propose your election. But to-day I am still Chairman. Send Tanenburg to me—I'm going to rip his hide off."

. . . .

Two days after Novik became the Chairman, a blast of sun-heat smote Albion from the sky. And Albion leaped up to smite back with forty times the power, light, and thunder.

The whole island cracked and split asunder and somewhere beneath the atmospherical fury sank quietly from view. The sea rolled hugely over the spot and then boiled upwards in a scalding cloud of steam that transformed day to a red night of death.

Lethal pressure waves leaped out in all directions, lethal heat waves on their heels with no task to perform but an innocent and hygienic cremation of the dead. Toiling slowly after them came the great tidal waves of steaming water to clean the crumbling land and the traces of death away. They rolled, ever smaller, across the blasted industrial areas to a place within sight of the ruins of the capital of Negovia, where Luben and Novik and the entire Council lay mingled with each other and with the ashes of millions of their pawns, all for the first time on a common level. And then

they flattened to a hissing stop, as if they had found the sight distasteful, and began to retreat.

Far away on the bleak north-east coast of the continent, Parleck, in the salt mine bored into the mountain-side, heard that a gale of very warm air had sprung up suddenly outside and was beginning to melt the snow.

When, in the meal-time break, he went to see, there was nothing to see but a veil of water pouring down over the entrance to the mine, too thick to penetrate. The snows high above were liquefying and coming down the mountain-side in a thousand channels.

He knew what had happened. He knew the Council were no more, that progressively worse ruin and desolation lay all the way from here to the western coastline, and that most probably that coastline now was not the one he had learned from the school map.

No one could get in or out of the mine, and no more work was done that day. They all sat around watching, waiting, listening, speculating. Above the sound of crashing water they could hear the high wail of the sirocco blowing outside.

At evening, the rushing waterfall over the tunnel mouth thinned and became ragged, splitting into several smaller falls, which they could see between. The valley below had become a broad river flowing into the near-by sea, and the gale had eased to a warm breeze. The concentration camp, its inhabitants, commandant, lieutenants, and all the military guard had been washed into the sea.

In this isolated corner of Manoberia the only live souls left were six hundred political prisoners in the mine and a dozen overseers.

"It's not hard to see how the situation here is going to work out," thought Parleck, "and I'm going to help it along. When the survivors elsewhere learn that the ruling clique has obligingly expunged itself, it'll be every man for himself. But here, with this nucleus of responsible and freedom-loving men, we can start to set up law again. Only this time it'll be law based on a moral code, not on expediency, a law for humanity. A law under which a man can have faith."

The only law in which Luben and Novik had believed was wolf pack law. They thought it was a basic and therefore irreplaceable law.

"Poor old Luben and his *White Fang*! He could never have been made to see that things had moved on since man was three parts animal, and rough and ready animal laws had to be super-

seded. Hydrogen bombs were somewhat more powerful than teeth and claws—and far more indiscriminant.

"The Lubens and Noviks of this world had believed in the survival of the fittest, but they would never have understood how inexorably they themselves would be effaced by that law. Because the test for survival these days was not physical fitness, nor even mental fitness—but only moral fitness.

"And to pass that test you had to believe that some of your fellow men could keep faith and speak truth, and that all gestures did not inevitably conceal an ulterior motive.

"If Luben and Novik had only believed that the Albish meant what they said!"

And then Parleck gave himself a mental shake and returned to the immediate present. There was no time to waste on the "ifs" of the past. It was the "ifs" of the future that mattered now, and it was time to act.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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Adaptable Planet	

After two months the votes will be counted and the author of the story with the most votes will be asked to write another yarn for NEBULA immediately. If any story gets more than 40% of votes its author will receive a CASH PRIZE depending on the length of the story.

Here is the result of the poll on the stories in NEBULA 3.

1st FREIGHT by	E. C. TUBB 31.1% votes
2nd LIMBO by	WILLIAM F. TEMPLE 22.5% votes
3rd THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN by	CHARLES BEAUMONT 18.4% votes
4th MR. UDELL by	DAVID S. GARDNER 13.2% votes
5th ENIGMA by	MICHAEL HERVEY 7.7% votes
6th ALL MEN KILL by	H. J. CAMPBELL 7.1% votes

... And It Shall Be Opened

Their air was leaking quickly into space—had they time to persuade him to stop the leaks?

Illustrated by Terry Jeeves

THE STAR WITCH was seven days out from Mars when Chaptrel died. Now they had straightened his twisted body, and laid it in the Icebox, to wait for the probing steel that would reveal its secrets. Harrison had found him in the control chair, doubled over with pain. That had been two days ago. He had lived the two days in agony, and then quietly died, leaving Harrison the responsibility of setting the Star Witch, her cargo, and passengers down safely on the Moon. There was no doctor, the ship being mostly a cargo carrier, with a few passengers, but the woman in cabin seven, Miss Ghyll, had said it was peritonitis.

Not that Harrison was sorry that Chaptrel was dead, except

that now he had to bear the responsibility of command, for the captain had been an unpleasant companion, moody and vicious. There had been stories told about Chaptrel. Harrison sat idly in the control chair, swinging it on its bearings, thinking back over those tales.

Chaptrel had been the captain of a super liner, until there had been trouble over a woman passenger. Chaptrel had been stripped of his command for negligence. Chaptrel had been in jail for smuggling. Harrison grinned. Alive Chaptrel had been as silent as the grave, perhaps dead he might be more communicative. He got up and went over to Chaptrel's bunk. There were the usual assortment of navigational books and gazeteers, a box containing an emergency astro-lobe, and a few letters. Harrison leafed through them. They were all bills, and mostly unpaid.

Harrison laughed. "Captain Harrison," he said aloud. "Captain Harrison took over command of the S.S. Star Witch on the decease of the former commander, Captain Chaptrel, from unknown causes."

He opened "Marshall's Astro-navigation" and stared at the faded writing on the flyleaf. "To my dear son, on his graduation from the academy." Harrison snapped the book shut and went back to the control chair. For the first time he saw Chaptrel as a human being, and wondered about his feelings. Had Chaptrel bottled up the ignominy of some disaster behind the hard face? Had he longed to be an ordinary human being again, to talk freely and laugh, but been afraid of a rebuff? Had he wanted to go back home, to Earth? It was funny, because now that he was dead Harrison understood him. When he had been alive they had hated one another, but now that Chaptrel was dead Harrison was sorry for him.

It's easy to be sorry for someone who had the same troubles as yourself. "A brilliant student," they had written on Harrison's graduation paper. He'd had no difficulty in getting a job with the Mars Line, but somehow he'd stuck at third mate for a long time. Of course there'd been a slump and plenty of good spacemen earthed, but Harrison had hung on—until he got the Fever. They called it the Fever, the men who worked the ships between worlds, but it wasn't a germ infection, it was something of the mind. God damn all psychologists. Hadn't a man a right to be scared? Scared of the bright stars on the outside, scared of the shining hull that made a little world where you could walk forever upsidedown, with the falling sensation always nagging at you. That was the worst, the

falling feeling always nagging at you, always at your elbow. Harrison had fought it for a long time. He'd gone out onto the small curving world outside, with the stars glaring at him, and only the click click of his footsteps coming up through the air in his suit. He'd been scared, but he'd gone—until the last time—the time when he'd broken. Harrison's mind recoiled from the memory.

Then the psychologists had stepped in. They'd prodded and pryed into his writhing mind, and they'd broken him with a terse report: "Unfit for further duty." He remembered the manager's office, opulent plastics, deep carpets, and the oily toad behind the desk talking. "We regret," he'd said. "... No reflection on you, of course..." While Harrison had stood there, knowing the worst, and yet hoping for a miracle. "You must realise that an officer must lead," and Harrison had still hoped, until the last damning sentence: "We must dispense with your services and withdraw your ticket." Withdraw your ticket. All that Harrison had worked for, gone. Gone at the words of a bunch of crazy psycho's and this fat clot. Harrison hit him then, without personal malice. He'd pulled him from his desk and smashed his face, because he represented the forces taking Harrison's life. Then they put him into prison, not for long—because he had no previous conviction—but it was there in the record. He could hear people whispering: "That's the one who went crazy." "He's the man who was scared to go outside." "Harrison's a jail bird." And so he'd left the green, beautiful Earth and all the people he knew and gone to Mars. They were short of spacemen for the few disreputable lines that ran from there, and not too fussy about your past history, provided you could calculate an orbit without landing in the Sun.

Harrison swung back in the chair. Chaptrel must have been through it all. Another hard luck story seething behind the armour of his front. It took death and some lines scribbled in a book to make it real to Harrison, but now he understood the man that had been Chaptrel.

Harrison sat at the head of the dining table and watched Miss Ghyll. He wished he had shaved. She was talking, with some animation, to the fat man that Harrison pegged as a drummer. He strained his ears to hear what she said, but her brother interrupted with some banality and Harrison was swept back into general conversation. He wasn't very good at small talk, but still incomparably better than Chaptrel had been. Conversation among the passengers

was freer than it had been when Chaptrel sat scowling where Harrison was now. The steward brought lunch in, and the chatter abated. Harrison sat chewing and catalogued his fellow diners. Miss Ghyll, a bit stout, and not so young, but attractive; her brother, young and foolish, both going to Earth for a holiday; the fat man, probably a commercial on his way home after selling the Colonies; the tall, egg-headed man who called himself Dr. Pennil, and the two tenth-rate night club singers, pseudo blonde and heavily made up. A pretty average crowd for the Star Witch. Harrison cut a piece of steak and forked it into his mouth. They're all under my command, he thought, them and the crew. He grinned. The crew? Two officers and a crew of three, only now there was only one officer. Still automatics were better than any crew, less trouble and more dependable.

Harrow, the steward, brought in the desert. A small, perky, talkative man, Harrison didn't have to wonder about his background. He'd heard the story a dozen times. Steward by profession and pick-pocket by inclination, that was Harrow, likeable though.

"Mr. Harrison." It was Miss Ghyll. Harrison sat up with a jerk.

"Yes, Miss Ghyll?"

"I was wondering about poor Captain Chaptrel . . . whether you ought to inform his relatives of his death?"

"As far as I know Chaptrel had no kin," said Harrison.

"But surely . . . Have you examined . . ."

"Yes, Miss Ghyll, I had the same idea, but his personal effects contain no letters or addresses that one might connect with relatives."

"How sad," said Miss Ghyll. "It must be terrible to be so alone in the world."

"Yeah," said one of the blondes. "And to think that not three days ago he was sitting there as large as life, and now he's on ice. It might happen to any of us. Might be building up inside us now." She stopped, as if amazed at her own philosophy.

"Why don't you shut up?" asked her companion.

Harrison wasn't listening. He was fighting down the absurd desire to blurt out to Miss Ghyll that he had no relatives either. He got up and left without waiting for coffee, and went to sit moodily in the control chair. Miss Ghyll wasn't beautiful, she'd never make the front cover for a glossy magazine, but she was comfortable looking and easy to talk to. Not without her attractions either, if one jettisoned the modern idea that a woman has to be skinny to be attractive.

He heard the door open. Harrow with his coffee.

"Put it down on the table," he said gruffly.

There was a giggle. Harrison swivelled the chair and saw Miss Ghyll. "I'm sorry," he apologised. "I thought you were the steward."

"Oh, that's all right, captain," replied Miss Ghyll. "I really came to apologise to you. I think I must have hurt you when I talked about Captain Chaptrel's relatives. You're a lonely man yourself. Don't deny it, I can see."

Harrison wanted to get away, but he was trapped in the chair. He was frightened by the nearness of the woman.

"Loneliness is the worst thing in the world," went on Miss Ghyll. "It makes people strange, and hard to get on with, but there's no need for you to feel out of touch because you don't know anyone on Mars. I'm sure my father, my brother and I would be only too pleased to have you visit our plantation any time you wish."

"I'm sure I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," said Harrison stiltedly.

"It won't be any trouble at all," smiled Miss Ghyll. "And you must call me Martha. Miss Ghyll sounds so . . . well, old fashioned."

And she prattled on about her embroidery, the servant problem, and all manner of unimportant things. Harrison enjoyed her inconsequential conversation; it was as if a door had opened and the sun was shining in on him.

Harrison swung happily in the chair. Miss Ghyll, no, Martha, had gone, but he still felt good, better than he'd done since his . . . his trouble. He found himself humming a little tune that had been current when he had graduated from the academy, and for the first time in ten years he looked forward to tomorrow.

Another knock on the door. Harrison looked up and scowled to see Mallard, the rad-op.

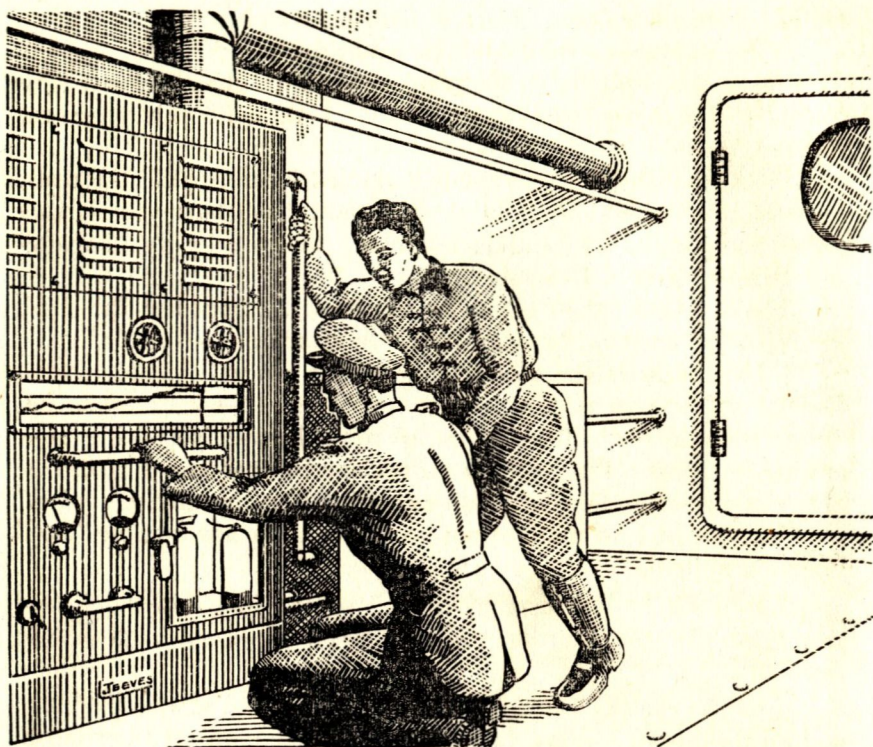
"Trouble, Skip. We're losing air somewhere, pretty fast, too."

Harrison jerked upright in the chair. "How'd you know?"

"Doing my routine check on the atmosphere plant and I saw the replacement figure's well above normal. Didn't stop to check—thought I'd better report straight away."

"Let's go and take a look. Could be serious, or maybe just something wrong with the instruments."

"We did have to jink suddenly to dodge those meteorites two



days out," said Mallard. "That might have strained the hull."

Harrison grunted.

They left the passenger deck through the double steel door, marked "Crew only," and went into the part of the ship devoted to machinery and cargo. The operators didn't waste their money installing artificial gravity there, so they had to pull themselves along space-lines rigged in the narrow corridors. Hand over hand along the line, Harrison thinking, just my luck again, something always goes wrong for me. They checked the atmosphere plant. It was functioning well, but there was a good big leak somewhere to account for the amount of the replacement. Harrison turned to the suits hanging against the plant, light affairs for use within the ship.

"Get one of those on," he ordered. "We'll evacuate air from all but the passenger section. Get cracking."

Mallard took down a suit and followed his lead hesitantly. "Wouldn't it be better if we went outside and charted the leaks for

sealing?" he asked.

"Do as you're told," said Harrison furiously. "I'll do the thinking." He turned to the plant and sealed off the passenger section before evacuating the rest of the ship, and having finished gestured Mallard to follow him and led the way back.

They discarded the suits and hung them just inside the door. "I want you to check the plant every hour and report to me," said Harrison.

Mallard saluted and turned away. Harrison slouched back to the control. Had he seen just the smallest touch of patronage in Mallard's expression? Had that salute been a trifle over meticulous? Were there stories about Harrison? Poor old Harrison, chucked out of the Mars Line, lost his nerve, you know. Harrison: he's a jail bird, common assault. Stories that Mallard, and the rest of the crew had heard. God damn them all. Harrison's fists clenched on the arms of the control chair, and he swore quietly to himself.

He was still sitting, bowed over the navigation table, when Mallard returned an hour and a half later. "Well?"

"The loss is much less now, Skip. Only about 1 per cent. per day."

"Thank Christ," sighed Harrison.

"I made some calculations though, Skip," continued Mallard. "At that rate, supposing the leaks get no worse, our air'll last fifty days. We have to do another eighty before we reach the Moon Harbour."

Harrison looked up, his face twisted. "Get out," he shouted. "Get out, before I kill you."

Harrison could hear Miss Ghyll's voice through the open dining saloon door. She spoke shrilly.

"I don't believe it. I don't believe a word of it."

There was a murmur behind her voice, as if from a number of people half agreeing with her, then Mallard's voice came.

"Well I tell you it's true. You can either believe me or not, as you please, but you'll know for sure before two months are up."

Harrison pushed the door open hard, making it bang back against the bulkhead. All faces turned his way.

"Is this true?" asked Dr. Pennil.

Harrison ignored him. "Mallard," he said quietly, "get back to your quarters."

"Just a moment, captain." The drummer pulled at Harrison's

shoulder. "We have a right to know what's going on. Is there a leak, or not?"

Harrison threw the detaining hand off and continued to advance on Mallard.

"The passengers," said Mallard defiantly, "should be told the circumstances."

"And you thought it your duty to tell them?"

Mallard sneered. "I thought perhaps such a small matter might slip your mind, sir."

His eyes said coward, jeered. Harrison backhanded him with all his strength. He staggered back into the table, tilted it in an effort to regain his balance, and fell with a shower of cutlery. Mallard dragged himself to a sitting position, looked up and wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his month. "You space crazy swine," he screamed, "you're afraid to go outside, so you take it out on me." He savoured Harrison's despair. "You're scared of space. Your're yellow."

All the people who had sneered and laughed at him seemed to spring up in front of Harrison. Crowding, hateful faces. Disdainful, patronising faces. The faces of people who hadn't had to battle down surging fears, and step out into the blackness, with belly twitching and heart knocking to get out of its cage. He fought them, with his big, clumsy looking hands he smashed and pounded them until they were gone, and the saloon returned.

Mallard lay in the wreck of the table, breathing bloody bubbles through a beaten face. The drummer was doubled over the deck, groaning. One of the blondes still held the broken handle of the jug that had brought Harrison back to sanity. He looked round, then at Miss Ghyll, who was helping the drummer. She looked through him. Harrison left.

He swung angrily, despairingly in the control chair, hating the eternal blackness that looked in through the visor. A thousand yelping little blacknesses danced through his brain. Harrison's yellow. Harrison's yellow. He shook his head as if to throw them out. "We must deprive you of your ticket," said a loud voice. Harrison jumped to his feet and pounded down the corridor to the cargo hold door. His hands were clumsy and painful as he put on the suit he had so recently discarded. "Must do something, something to stop me thinking," he muttered. "Mustn't think about it."

The atmosphere plant was still ticking steadily, metering life to

the ship. Harrison crouched beside it and took the readings. The loss had risen to 1.5 per cent. Harrison's face burst out with sweat. The leaks were getting worse. He envisioned the outside, somewhere along the shining hull there was a little jet of gas, condensing water vapour on the shadowed side, steam on the sun side. Maybe two or three leaks, spurting life away into the nothingness. He thought of the blackness and the bright stars, and his stomach twisted up under his heart. He bent and waited for the paroxysm to go. Thoughts whirled in his head metronomed by the steady tick of the plant. Fifty days' air. No, less now. Eighty days to Moon Harbour. Eighty, fifty, eighty, fifty. Death. Death, that was it. Peace. No more sneering, sniggering looks. No more weary days hiding in a dingy room between flights, afraid to go out for fear someone'd recognise Harrison, the man with space fever.

Another vibration mingled with the steady beat of the plant. Grating metal on metal. Harrison turned, and as he did so something struck the shoulder of his suit with numbing force. Mallard was raising the heavy spanner for another blow at his vulnerable headpiece. Harrison's hand leapt up and snatched at the weapon. He caught Mallard's wrist and forced the spanner away. Their heads were together. Harrison could see the other's hate twisted face and hear his muttering. He still held Mallard's right arm against all his efforts to free it, and now his numbed arm was coming to life. He brought it over and twisted Mallard's arm until he dropped the spanner, then let go. Mallard backed away until he was against the side of the hold and then, with his feet against the wall, he jumped at Harrison, head down. Harrison slipped aside and his opponent crashed against the plant. His head flopped sideways and a myriad tiny cracks appeared in his headpiece. Harrison picked him up and pulled the two of them rapidly along the space line, through the air lock and into the passenger section.

They were all there, waiting. Harrison dropped Mallard and started to strip off his suit without waiting to get out of his own.

"We tried to stop him," said Pennil. Harrison went on taking Mallard's suit off. The man's face was blue and he wasn't breathing. He tried to give artificial respiration but his arm had gone numb again.

"Here, let me." Dr. Pennil pushed him aside. "I'm not an M.D., but I know how to give respiration."

Harrison watched until Mallard started to breathe again and

then left them.

Harrison was sunk in a swamp of despair as he twisted restlessly in the control chair. The implacable stars mocked him through the visor until he closed it, but even with a six inch steel plate shutting them out he could still see them, serene, unmoved, eternal cynics, amused by his suffering. He could see the little puffs of air, seeping noiselessly into space, dispersing into the tenuous near-nothing-ness that surrounded them. He wanted a drink, a lot of drinks. Burning liquor, to make the difficulties seem small, and Harrison big. He wanted to be reduced to the state when everything is a joke. But there was nothing but coffee aboard. Regulations—they can't make regulations to cover human nature. "By Christ," Harrison said aloud: "With a coupla drinks inside me I could go outside and have things fixed in a jiffy." But he knew it wasn't true. Alcohol made him maudlin, made him cry, and ask for his mother. Then Harrison threw his head back and cursed God and Man with vicious comprehension.

He was slumped forward over the navigation table when Dr. Pennil knocked. Harrison didn't reply. The doctor knocked again and then opened the door and came through.

"Captain Harrison."

Harrison lay unmoving across the table.

"Captain Harrison," the doctor moved closer. "Are you all right?" He bent over to touch Harrison, taking him by the shoulder. Harrison shook him off. "We are holding a meeting in the saloon. It is necessary that you be present." The doctor bent closer. "Captain, it is essential that you come to this meeting."

Harrison lay still.

Dr. Pennil started to leave, then as he reached the door he hesitated, and, as if he had made his mind up about something, returned to the control chair. He seized Harrison by the hair, dragged his head up and slapped his face hard. Harrison's unfocussed eyes stared past him. "Follow me," he ordered, and Harrison slowly got to his feet and followed the doctor out, staggering blindly down the corridor like some great, well trained dog.

The small saloon was full. The whole ship's company was there, except the still unconscious Mallard. Conversation died as Pennil walked in, followed by Harrison. "Sit down at the head of the table, captain," said the doctor.

"What's wrong with him?" asked one of the blondes in a

loud whisper. "He looks like a zombie."

Harrison could hear her, but he gave no sign of it. He could hear and see them all. He knew what they were going to say and do, but it seemed as if his mind was divorced from his body. He wanted to shout his fears at them, but his body stayed wooden and still at the head of the table.

"We all know why this meeting has been called," said Pennil. "But in case anyone has the facts mixed I'm going to briefly state them again. Air is leaking from the ship at a rate which will exhaust out supplies before we can reach Moon Harbour. It is, therefore, essential that the leaks be stopped. I am correct so far, am I not, captain?"

Harrison nodded.

Pennil continued. "The leaks are not large enough to be detected from the inside and so someone has to go outside, where the escapes will be visible, to chart the locations of the leaks in order that they may be sealed."

Harrison crashed a big hand down on the table and levered himself to his feet. "I'm Captain Harrison," he sneered "I'm yellow. Yellow through and through. I'm the only one fit to go outside and I'm scared. Go on, tell them, tell everybody. I'm used to it, used to sneers behind my back. I've stood them for a long time and I can stand them a bit longer. Not much longer though, soon we'll all be dead. Dead and peaceful." He sat down heavily.

"Why, you dirty rat." It was the drummer. "You can't let us die because you want to. We want to live. You haven't any right to..."

Harrison laughed.

"Shut up, Mueller," snapped Dr. Pennil. "Harrison is an empyriphobe. He has a great fear of space. It's like a fear of heights. There's nothing *we* can do about it. What I was going to suggest is that one of us goes out to map the leaks. Anyone had any experience?"

A few seconds passed, with each person looking at his or her neighbour hopefully.

Harrison laughed. "It's all black nothing out there," he said. "Black nothing, with the stars pushing through it and laughing, laughing at us all. And you walk on a little piece of iron, always upside down, with a million miles to fall through. It's not up or down really, out there, you're falling, falling all the time." He

slumped forward onto the table.

"I'm the youngest and most fit," said Miss Ghyll's brother. "And besides, I've read a lot about this business. I'll go."

"That's right," said Miss Ghyll, inanely. "He plays a very good game of tennis."

The drummer looked mightily relieved. "Good for you, son," he applauded. "You're no coward."

Harrison could hear their noise echoing along the corridor. He raised his head and Miss Ghyll was still there sitting quiet. "You should have been the one to go," she said, and then she got up and followed the others.

He could hear the clank of armour and the chattering of the blondes as they helped young Ghyll into his suit. He knew he ought to go and help, with advice at least, but he couldn't face the shame, so he sat at the table and tried not to think at all.

Voices came loud down the trumpeting corridor.

"Let me kiss him for luck."

"And me."

"I'll be all right, Sis, don't you worry. There's nothing to it."

"Don't worry, miss, your brother'll be a hero back on Earth. I'll see to that. Friends in the news cast business."

The door of the airlock shut with a whoosh and Harrison could hear the squeaking of the tightening screw. The boy must be shut in the little, grew, bolt-studded box now, waiting for the outer door to open and let the blackness in. A tremor went through Harrison as he remembered the times he'd done that; waiting with his face wet with sweat and the sick feeling creeping up from his stomach to his brain, for one wall to fall out of the world and leave him facing the horror of having to force himself to take the step that would put him outside. How many times had he carried out a "routine inspection of the hull"—routine inspection—when every minute he spent outside had been the subject of fierce mental battle.

He listened for the sound of footsteps on the hull. Presently they came. Clip, clop, clip clop. He found himself staring at the curved wall, trying to see through to the solitary figure outside, plodding round his little world under the merciless stars. Clip clop—and then the footsteps stopped. Harrison waited, face lifted to the place from which the sound had last come, for them to recommence. He could hear the sound of his own heavy breathing. Clip, clop—the footsteps went on, drawing Harrison's eyes in an invisible line across

the wall. And they stopped again.

He must be standing there now, thought Harrison, with a silent cloud of gas that should be hissing but isn't, spurting out of his world. Strange thoughts come into your head when you're out there alone. You think that maybe everybody else is dead. You can't see or hear them. Everything is still, motionless, except yourself, and you feel that you're an interloper in a universe of death. Harrison wondered if the young man outside was thinking those thoughts.

Miss Ghyll screamed. Not loudly, but with despair. Two loud screams from the blondes. Harrison rose, shook his head, and pounded stupidly along the corridor.

They were all at the ports.

"Oh, my God. He's floating away. Why doesn't he come back?" It was Miss Ghyll, her voice high with fright. Harrison pushed one of the blondes away from a port and peered out. Away in space the little armoured figure waved its arms and legs in agonised, jerky motions, almost as though trying to swim.

"Why doesn't he use his jets?" whispered Harrison. "Why doesn't he use his jets?"

Dr. Pennil was at his elbow. "Because he doesn't know about them, you fool."

Harrison flung out an arm and pushed the doctor aside.

"The R/T," he barked. "I can give him instructions over the R/T from the control."

He led the charge to the control, slumped into the chair, surrounded by the passengers, and snatched up the R/T microphone. He opened the short range comm. circuit. "Ship to Ghyll. Ship to Ghyll. Come in Ghyll. Ship to Ghyll, come in." He flipped the switch over to "receive," and they waited for a voice to interrupt Ghyll. Nothing but the now audible laughter of the stars.

"He hasn't got his R/T turned on," said Harrison wearily. "He can't hear us." He turned quickly to Chaptrel's desk and took up the astrolobe, then opened the visor. The little metal puppet was now perceptibly further away, still twitching its limbs fitfully. Harrison raised the instrument and took a sight, waited a few minutes and took another. "He'll be out of sight soon," he said as he turned to the computer and clattered at its keys. Miss Ghyll started to sob quietly, one of the blondes put an arm round her and started to soothe her with the soft crooning that women make to anything

that's hurt.

Harrison's hands became slippery with sweat. "Come on," he said slowly, motioning to the doctor and drummer, "and help me with my suit."

They ran to the airlock. Harrison climbed into the lower half the crackle of the static. "God damn. Ship to Ghyll. Come in, of the suit and felt the well remembered chill of the metal against his legs. His stomach and guts balled up to the size of a clenched fist and he was sick. "Get on with it," he told them between paroxysms. They lifted the huge head and body piece and screwed it home. Harrison opened the comm circuit and thrust his hands down to the "elbows" and tried the movements of the artificial forearms and hands. With these suits, meant for repairmen, the top half of the suit was roomy enough for the wearer to withdraw his arms from the arms of the suit and pass small objects through the airlock on the chest. It meant, however, that wearer could only reach to the elbow of the suit's arms, and he controlled the movements of the suit's forearms and claws remotely. Harrison motioned towards the R/T and saw Pennil shout up the corridor. His set came alive. "Get one of those gas bottles hanging near the suit rack," he ordered. "And attach it to the back of my suit. You'll see a loose connection there. Fit it to the delivery tube on the bottle." He could feel Pennil fumbling behind him, he bottle clanging against the suit, and Miss Ghyll's voice came to him, clear and strong. "The bottle's fixed now, captain."

"Tell them," said Harrison quietly, "to open the inner airlock door."

One of the blondes appeared at the entrance of the corridor, her mouth moving. Pennil went over to the airlock controls and operated the door. A red light flashed above and nothing further happened. Pennil turned agitatedly and shouted something.

"Tell him the outer door is still open and a safety device prevents both doors being opened at the same time," said Harrison.

The blonde appeared again. Miss Ghyll must have improvised a relay system. Pennil nodded at her mouthings and operated the switches again, this time the door swung open.

"Use the intercom system to communicate with Dr. Pennil," advised Harrison. "The switches are up on the right hand side of the control board," and he shuffled heavily into the tiny, grey box of the airlock.

Although he couldn't see it, he sensed the inner door swinging

ponderously shut behind him. A brief drumming from the pump faded as it evacuated the lock. A crack of darkness appeared as the outer door opened. Harrison's stomach screwed itself tighter and the beating of his heart sounded pulsingly in his ears. Slowly, relentlessly, the door opened, showing more and more of the star specked darkness. The old, horrible, familiar falling feeling came, its fingers twisting Harrison's brain. He knew he would have fallen but for the support of the suit. He took a step nearer the door and retched painfully as a vomiting spell caught him. "I can't do it, I can't do it," said the drumming of his heart.

"He's out of sight now. I can't see him any more," said Miss Ghyll. Her voice was level and controlled and utterly pitiful.

Harrison bent his weak legs and jumped. His shoulder caught the lip of the door and he tumbled, spinning into space. Reflexes came to his aid and his trained muscles deftly used the gas jets to right him. Somehow with the jets going it was better. You knew you weren't falling. He searched for and found the star he had fixed on. His head and eyes ached abominably. He trimmed his jets and headed for the star. Now that he was on a straight course he seemed motionless again, and the falling feeling came. He caught a scream in his throat and fought it down. The comm. circuit was still open and he could hear a muted conversation. He concentrated on it as a straw for a drowning man. "It cost him more than you'll ever know to go out there." It was Pennil. "I'm a doctor of psychology and I've dealt with these cases before, so I know something of what I'm talking about. I can still see the captain, Miss Ghyll."

"Well, I still think he should have gone out in the first place," Mueller.

A movement amid the stillness ahead caught Harrison's attention. Gradually it built up into the marionette, still senselessly jerking like a dead frog. Harrison corrected his course and put on speed. Now he was moving with something to measure his speed against. The puppet grew to a child, and from a child to a man. Harrison was close enough now to see young Ghyll's contorted face glaring at him through the headpiece. Suddenly he remembered those waiting on the ship. "Harrison to ship. Harrison to ship," he intoned.

"Ship to Harrison," Miss Ghyll, hope in her voice. "Come in Harrison."

"Harrison to ship. I've found him! Look out for us, we'll be back soon."

"He's found him. He's found him," said Miss Ghyll.

"Thank God," quietly from Dr. Pennil.

Harrison moved nearer, using his jets instinctively. Ghyll's face was bruised and smeared with blood and saliva. As Harrison watched he banged his head forward against the transplastic visor. He still held the tracergun in one hand, and as he waved his limbs wildly the heavy gun made an approach dangerous. Harrison circled in from behind, narrowly missing a blow from the gun that would have split his visor had it connected. He settled behind the demented man, twisted the air delivery valve off, and let most of the air out of Ghyll's suit, keeping the pressure up with carbon di-oxide from his jet bottle. Ghyll arched his neck in agony, and then subsided into unconsciousness. Quickly Harrison restored the atmosphere to the suit. Ghyll was breathing quietly now. Harrison forced the tracer gun out of the claw, loose now that Ghyll's hands had relaxed their control, and clipped it to his belt. Then he placed a foot on each of Ghyll's shoulders and cut in the electro-magnets in the soles of his boots.

The Star Witch was small now, but still clearly visible. Harrison opened up his jets and could see the ship visibly growing.

"Harrison to ship. Harrison to ship."

"Come in Harrison," said Miss Ghyll.

"I'm bringing him in now. Be with you soon. Hove the airlock open."

"Aye, aye," said Miss Ghyll happily.

Harrison manoeuvred to seeming motionlessness beside the ship and the falling feeling didn't come. He laughed and the stars laughed *with* him. Harrison was aware of a steady confidence within him. He turned the magnets off and clasped the unconscious Ghyll by one arm as he moved in at lowest speed towards the airlock.

Then they were inside and the inner door was opening onto light and warmth. A rush of people took him from Harrison and started to strip them both of their suits.

Miss Ghyll looked up from the unconscious, but regularly breathing form of her brother at Harrison, who stood in the lower half of his suit, too tired to climb out of it. "My invitation still stands, Captain Harrison," she said, and smiled.

The door to life was opening.

"Please call me Johnny," said Harrison.

Adaptable Planet

The dying sun had three planets—two were lifeless, frozen wastes—the third, paradise.

Illustrated by Bob Clothier

SPACE was a sable void, star-flecked, silent. The Milky Way glittered like luminous seed scattered by some Celestial sower through the dark reaches of infinity. Devoid of intelligence, a myriad suns moved across the black stage of space, pulsed with the ebb and flow of life, and died.

Space was empty, dark and silent and mysterious, . . . then where there was nothing, a ship appeared; a slender cylinder with tapering ends, flashing silver against the velvet vacuum. As the exploration ship, *Research III*, slowed to a velocity less than that of light, the appearance of space changed. Now there was intelligence to appreciate the wonders of creation.

In the control room of the silver ship, Second Officer Ken Shaw looked into the visiscreen and checked the visual pattern of the stars against figures supplied by a calculating machine. Satisfied that *Research III* had arrived at its precise location in a predetermined corner of the galaxy, he relaxed and gave himself up to the miracle of space.

Although he was no newcomer to space travel, Shaw had never lost his childlike admiration for the incredible beauty of the stars. Others might become blasé after a single trip to Mars, but not he. Shaw was a dreamer, one of those fortunate few who retain a sense of wonder at oft-seen things. He looked now at the random pin-points of light, at the black shroud hanging beyond the ship's hull, and thought of what might lie behind that veil.

The subconscious urge of neglected duty pricked him to action. He leaned forward in the padded chair before the complicated control panel, and pressed down the intercom switch. He spoke into the microphone suspended above his head:

"Duty Officer calling Captain Chester. Ship on course and star system José Maria dead ahead."

Shaw released the switch, heard it snap off. The microphone went dead. He sat back and stared again, fascinated, at the scene in the visicreen. He was a heavily built man, still young, with a dark skin and rugged features; his shoulders were broad and powerful, his arms strong. For so massive a man, his eyes were surprisingly soulful, his hands gentle. He had a slow, thoughtful manner and was not given to voluble speech; and for this reason the crew of *Research III* regarded him as a man of sombre character. He had the sensitivity of an artist hidden in the bulk of a giant.

The click of the door latch, the sound of quiet laughter, brought Shaw from his contemplation of the visiscreen. He turned his head to see Lewis McQueen enter the control room, his arm about the waist of Jill Essex.

"Hello, Ken," McQueen drawled. "Still gazing at the wonders of space?"

There was amusement in his voice, but no ridicule; Shaw and McQueen had been friends a long time. Each understood and respected the different temperament of the other.

"If you had more regard for the miracle of creation," Shaw replied seriously, "you'd be the better for it."

McQueen laughed, blue eyes dancing impishly in his handsome face. It gave him pleasure to poke fun at the more solemn Shaw, secure in the knowledge that his banter would not be misconstrued.

"You star-struck kid!" he jeered. "Why don't you grow up?"

Th girl detached McQueen's arm from her waist and walked across the control room. She placed her hand on Shaw's shoulder and looked into the visiscreen.

"Ignore him, Ken," she said softly. "I know how you feel. It gives me goose-flesh to see the stars like naked lights in all that

emptiness. Lewis has no soul—that's his trouble—."

McQueen shrugged his shoulders in mock dismay.

"Maybe I should leave you two soul-mates together?"

Shaw made no answer. He was looking at the girl and, as he looked, he felt a tightness across his chest that made breathing difficult and suffered a rush of blood to the head that set his temples pounding. He knew that his eyes must betray his excitement, but he did not shift his gaze from her.

Jill Essex was the expedition's botanist; that she was also a woman should have been incidental to her professional role—only it wasn't. Few men aboard *Research III* could view her with indifference and their numbers included neither Shaw nor McQueen; both men were possessed by love for her.

She was a tall, good-looking girl with a striking figure; not classically beautiful, but alive and vibrant and exciting. She had only to walk a few steps, with that seductive lilt of her hips, and men lost their heads. She was, Shaw realised, staring boldly, the only girl he had ever seen who could wear slacks and still appear completely feminine and attractive.

Jill moved her head, looking from the visiscreen to Shaw's face. The movement shook down golden-yellow hair in one long, rippling wave about her shoulders. She smiled, and her smile was like a flame, warm and inviting; her eyes flirted with him.

"You wouldn't understand, Lewis," she said, continuing the conversation, "you're always seeking something new. New worlds, new races, new discoveries. Ken and I feel the timelessness of the empty spaces between stars. It's a feeling you either have—or haven't. You haven't!"

McQueen grinned broadly.

"Me," he said, and winked at her. "I go for beauty in another form."

Shaw's eyes came round sharply. He remembered how McQueen's arm had been round the girl's waist as they came into the room, and jealousy stabbed through him like a red-hot knife, threatening to destroy their friendship.

Lewis McQueen had a slender, boyish build, and a way with the ladies. He was two years younger than Shaw, handsome, with a wave to his light-coloured hair. His ready smile and debonair manner would smoothly charm the girl, while Shaw's rougher ways might ruffle her. He was looking at Jill now, with that devil-may-care light glinting in his blue eyes—Shaw had seen it before, but it hadn't mattered then. McQueen always had a bevy of girl-friends

... but,— this time, Shaw wanted the girl.

Their eyes met, Shaw's dark and sombre and looking a challenge, McQueen's losing their smile and hardening like ice-chips.

McQueen said, quietly: "May the best man win!"

Jill Essex tapped the plastic floor-covering, irritably, with her foot, and snapped:

"If you two boys can't behave in a civilised manner, I shall have to leave. I won't have you quarrelling over me."

Tension linked the three, Shaw, McQueen and the girl. No one spoke. Their breathing was heavy in the manufactured air of the ship; the gleaming control panel and the bare walls of the room added to the nervous strain. The unwinking orbs of light in the black depths of the visiscreen built up the moment of mental stress.

The door clicked open and Captain Chester walked into *Research III's* control room, his abrupt entry puncturing the tension as a pin bursts a bubble. His eyes flicked round the room, to the visiscreen, to the faces of McQueen and the girl, resting finally on Shaw.

He said: "Let me have the figures on our position."

Shaw brought himself back to normality with an effort. He knew that his forehead was damp with sweat, that he had been at the point of starting a quarrel with McQueen. He must learn to control his jealousy, he thought; there was no room for such feelings aboard a ship in space. The lives of everyone depended on the closest co-operation.

He replied automatically, reading off the relevant spacetime co-ordinates. Captain Chester picked up a sheet of paper from the control desk and checked the figures.

"Right," he said, "that's good navigating. Now let's have a look at José Maria."

Shaw spun hand-dials, narrowing the focus of the visiscreen and enlarging the image. The dying star which had been named after its discoverer, the Mexican astronomer José Maria, became an irregular disc of dull red, spotted darkly and with weakened prominences. Its photosphere did little beyond breaking the sharp edge the star would otherwise have made against the black vault of space.

Captain Chester began counting: "One . . . two . . . three planets." He gazed speculatively at the tiny black dots. "There'll be nothing for us. Dead worlds, frozen solid—no atmosphere, no life, not even vegetation."

He spread out a star-chart and began to plot the next stage of the journey.

Jill said: "But there may be valuable mineral deposits."

The captain did not look up. He replied, "Perhaps. We shall pass close enough for our detectors to operate," and used a vernier-scale.

Shaw knew what he meant. A frozen world would not attract workers. The stakes would need to be high before Terra's government outfitted a colony on the planets of José Maria—radioactives at least.

Research III was engaged on scientific exploration, the expedition's main task being to find planets suitable for colonisation; the location of mineral deposits was only an incidental function. The ship was one of the first of Terra's fleet to be equipped with the revolutionary faster-than-light drive, and it was this that made travel to the stars possible. Before, with only chemical rockets, Man had been confined to the solar system; now, the planets of distant stars could be exploited. And *Research III* was further from Earth than any ship had been before.

Shaw watched the captain at work and wondered how long it would be till he was promoted to his own command; this present trip might well be the deciding factor. His gaze shifted to McQueen. Both he and McQueen were second officers aboard the *Research III*—and both were due for promotion. He wondered if an advance in rank, with its corresponding higher pay, would influence—Jill in her choice. Certainly, she appeared to have considerable respect and admiration for the captain; even now her eyes were fixed on him as he ruled a line across the star chart. Shaw, too, turned his gaze on the captain.

Captain Chester was a lean, upright man in his forties, clean-shaven and with silver-grey hair. He was an experienced spaceman, an officer of smart appearance and brisk manner. His voice was clipped and businesslike, and he rarely presented himself for duty without his peaked cap with the gold laurels round the brim. It was not surprising that Jill should regard him with every sign of respect, for he had sole command of the ship.

The captain was too old to interest her seriously, of course . . . but how would she react if Shaw wore the gold laurels? Or McQueen? Jealousy returned to inflame Shaw's thoughts; somehow he must see to it that he achieved promotion ahead of McQueen.

Research III rushed on through the void, every second carrying her nearer José Maria. The red star filled the visiscreen and its

three planets began to take on more definite form.

Captain Chester straightened his back, and said:

"McQueen, I believe you're due to take over duty officer in a few minutes from now. Here is the new course—set up the co-ordinates and warn the crew we are about to turn."

McQueen said smartly: "Yes, sir! At once."

Jill was staring hard at the visiscreen.

"Wait," she said. "There's something strange here. Look at the surface contours of those three planets."

They all turned to study the scene in the visiscreen. *Research III* was much closer now, and José Maria's planets were clearly defined against the reddish bulk of the star. Shaw looked at each of the three planets in turn, using his imagination to picture the frozen landscape of those worlds circling a dying sun. Bleak, lifeless, a frigid waste . . .

Captain Chester spoke crisply: "What is it, Miss Essex?"

"Look closely at the outermost planet," Jill replied. "I'll swear it's different from the other two."

"Mister Shaw," said the captain, "focus the screen on each planet in turn."

Shaw spun the dials again. The surface of the first planet, nearest the star, came into sharp relief: gaunt rock and ice, gases frozen solid, rifts and craters and powdered pumice. Again he focussed the screen, this time on the second planet. The view was similar; a desolate wasteland of harsh shadow, dotted with what would have been volcanoes in a long distant past; dead lava, cold and brittle under an airless sky.

Jill breathed: "Now the outermost planet, Ken!"

Shaw refocussed the visiscreen and, as the surface features of the third planet became apparent, caught his breath. Jill was right—there was something strange about the outermost world of José Maria. The whole planet seemed to be surrounded by a halo of pale blue light; there was no vista of frigid rock and ice; instead he saw patches of green and brown and ochreous yellow against a background of blue-grey.

Jill said: "That looks to me like an indication of plant life. I think we ought to investigate."

Captain Chester roused himself.

"You're right, Miss Essex," said he, tensely. "McQueen, cancel the last orders. We're going down to take a closer look."

A silence fell over the control room of *Research III*. Shaw and McQueen, the captain and Jill Essex all looked at the strange

sight of a world which should have been frozen waste, devoid of all life—yet wasn't. There was something here they could not understand. Shaw felt uneasy; his scalp prickled and a tremor of fear ran through him. Fear of the unknown.

McQueen said with forced humour: "That planet doesn't belong. Maybe it wandered here by accident!"

No one laughed. The distance between the spaceship and the unnatural world of José Maria was shortening rapidly. Splashes of bright red showed on the planet's surface, the blood-red of exotic blooms. They were looking at flower-beds set out in a regular pattern . . .

"What we are seeing," Jill Essex said calmly, "is clearly impossible!"

Research III circled the planet a mile above the surface. The landscape in the ship's visiscreen changed in detail yet remained broadly constant. Second officer Ken Shaw watched the panorama unwind before him, diamond-shaped lozenges of grey-ochre, patterned by vivid reds and blues and yellows, the flowers stemming from bright green shrubs and plants—and, over all, the ghostly shadow of a faint blue luminosity.

There were no hills or mountains, no rivers or seas, just a flat unending vista of flower-beds. There were no tall trees or faults or cloud-banks;; only the regular pattern of brightly-coloured gardens set out in mathematical precision and seen through a sparkling clear atmosphere. No ice or barren rock or desert, but low hedges dividing the areas of exotic plant life.

Captain Chester's voice was grim, edged with worry: "This regularity isn't normal. The whole surface configuration of the planet has been laid out to a design—and that means intelligence at work. Yet we've almost circled the globe without seeing anyone. There must be people here . . ."

Jill Essex was excited. This world was a big discovery for her. She said, reading off statistics relayed from the laboratories:

"A chemical test of the atmosphere reveals predominantly oxygen and carbon dioxide—but in the wrong proportion and mixed with other gases which make it poisonous for us. Exploration will mean wearing spacesuits. The temperature is roughly equivalent to that of the middle latitudes back on Earth."

The captain snorted.

"With a dying sun that far distant? Preposterous!" He returned to his earlier theme. "Where are the people, that's what I want to know. Where do they live? They must be somewhere,

yet we've seen no movement of any kind, no buildings, no —"

McQueen was grinning.

"Maybe," he suggested, "the whole planet is an illusion. Maybe we're hypnotized!"

No one took his suggestion seriously. Jill said, craning forward to see the screen better:

"There's something over there. See? I think it is — yes, it must be . . . a city!"

Captain Chester snapped: "Change course five degrees starboard, Mister Shaw."

Shaw punched firing buttons. There came a moment of side-pressure as the rockets flared briefly, then the ship was passing directly over the city. He rubbed his eyes. Looking at the buildings below gave him a headache; his eyes seemed out of focus. The others, too, had that strained look, so he knew it was the city and not himself.

The buildings were laid out in the same ordered pattern that characterised the gardens. The buildings were tall and slender, graceful columns of opal and pearl and silver. They rose, like glittering pencils of light, twined about with spiralling terraces and an *alien* architecture.

The city shimmered, its outline blurring and seeming to pass through changing planes. One pencil-slim column appeared to merge into the next, the minarets to wink like lidless eyes, the spiralling terraces become writhing helices imbued with life. The city was in a state of flux.

Shaw's eyes ached. It was impossible for him to steady his gaze on any one point in the city. He felt as if he were staring at a series of bright lights that revolved rapidly and switched from colour to colour with bizarre randomness. His brain throbbed.

Captain Chester said: "Keep your eyes off the screen, Mister Shaw. I can't afford to have my ship piloted by a blind man."

Shaw looked away; his head stopped spinning and his vision returned to normal.

Jill said, blinking: "Did you see? It was deserted—not a sign of anyone! Not one single person in the city."

The captain said: "I saw. This whole planet is crazy."

McQueen's blue eyes held an impish light.

"Maybe we saw the inhabitants—but didn't realise what we were looking at. A city like that wasn't built by anything human."

Research III passed on, over flowering gardens shaped to diamonds. Green and red and blue; yellow and brown; hedges

and shrubs in mathematical order. The city dropped away behind, below the horizon, out of sight.

Captain Chester pushed back his peaked cap with the gold laurels and stuck out his jaw.

"Mister McQueen," he said buntly. "I'm going to give you the chance to recognise these unhuman inhabitants. You're going back there. Mister Shaw—set down the ship!"

Ken Shaw selected a diamond shape below and punched firing buttons. The spaceship sank lower, down and down, to rest as gently as a bird on the surface of José Maria's third planet. The captain gave orders over the intercom; weapons would be issued to all members of the crew; a sharp watch must be kept; no one was to venture outside the ship; those not on duty would remain strapped down in case the need for an immediate take-off should arise.

"You, McQueen, with Mister Shaw, will break out an auxiliary unit and return to the city. You will reconnoitre and attempt to decide whether or not it has been inhabited recently. You will not take undue risks but remain in radio communication with me. You have complete freedom of action—within the limits laid down by the Extraterrestrial Exploration Committee, and you know those limits as well as I do."

Captain Chester grinned broadly.

"All right, get going—and I suggest that you wear dark glasses!"

Shaw and McQueen saluted smartly and turned away. Jill said, quickly:

"Captain, permission to accompany the officers? As the expedition's botanist —"

"Permission refused," Captain Chester said evenly. "Until I learn more of the planet's possible inhabitants, no one will leave the ship for field work."

Jill made a face. McQueen waved airily from the door, and called:

"Never mind, Jill—I'll bring you back a bouquet!"

Shaw and McQueen walked the length of the ship's main corridor. *Research III* was a large ship; the atomic pile powering the space-drive fixed a minimum size that made chemical rockets look like toys. A crew of twenty, with scientific experts numbering a further twenty—and all their equipment—added more bulk.

McQueen said: "So we've got a free hand, within the limits laid down by E.E.C. I wonder he didn't tie our hands behind our

backs and blindfold us! Oh well, we've ignored rules and regulations before—we can do it again. And providing we don't make any mistakes, Chester will wink and turn his back. Now, when I have my own command —”

Shaw said, soberly: “If we slip up on this job, neither of us will be getting his own command.”

McQueen said no more. They reached the stern holds as technicians prepared to launch the auxiliary unit. It looked like a cone perched on four vanes, squat and stubby, the rockets vents blackened. In the nose, reached by a ladderway, a control room just big enough for two men, held the basic equipment for planetary reconnaissance.

“Why can't they call an auxiliary unit what it is? McQueen said in disgust. “Auxiliary unit—nuts! It's a chemical-fuelled rocketship, that and nothing else.”

Shaw went up the ladderway first. McQueen followed at his heels and locked the circular double-doors after them. Shaw tested the radio and checked the fuel tanks. Everything was in order.

He spoke into the microphone: “All right, swing her out.”

Technicians operated the crane to lift the tiny ship into space. A curved panel in the side of *Research III* slid back and the arm of the crane nosed out into the planet's atmosphere. The auxiliary unit came to rest on its vanes, steady in a firing position—and the crane arm retracted into the larger vessel.

Shaw said: “All set, Lewis?”

“Sure—blast off. Let's take another look at the city.”

Shaw fired the rockets and the tiny ship rose slowly on jets of flame, higher and higher into the sky. He turned the ship, heading towards the city of shimmering buildings. McQueen radioed back their position, then settled to watch the landscape.

“We sure made a mess of that flower-bed,” he commented wryly. “Let's hope the gardeners don't sue for damages!”

Shaw studied the patchwork below for landmarks, and hoped he had set the correct course; so regular was the lay-out of the gardens that one section of the planet looked much the same as any other.

“This light intrigues me,” he said. “The sun is dull red in colour, yet the light is bluish-white. How can that be?”

McQueen thought a moment.

“It seems to me the sun is too weak and too far off to cast much light here. The inhabitants of this planet have obviously rigged up their own lighting—we simply haven't discovered the

source of supply."

Shaw grunted.

"I can see the city now. Let's try the dark glasses—maybe that'll help, as the skipper suggested."

McQueen opened a locker and handed Shaw a pair of goggles inset with dark-plast lenses. He put on a pair himself.

"Better," he said, after a study of the buildings. "The outlines still waver, but at least I can look at them without getting a headache."

Shaw concentrated on setting down the ship near the boundary of the city. The ground rushed up, ochre and grey, dotted with the gaudy colours of flowers. The ship sank slowly on flaring jets, lower and lower, quivering and noisy with vibration, to settle upright on its vanes. Shaw killed the rockets and there was complete silence.

McQueen said: "Nice landing, Ken," and called *Research III* on the radio to report: "Second Officers Shaw and McQueen have grounded just outside the city. Dark glasses definitely help vision. No sign of life. Everything quiet and under control."

He switched off and looked at Shaw, unspeaking. Shaw knew that McQueen was thinking the same as himself: regulations required that one man should stay with the auxiliary unit while the other reconnoitered, relaying radio messages back to the base ship.

Shaw said: "I'm older and that gives me command. I'll go outside."

McQueen smiled and shook his head.

"Not this time, Ken. We've worked together on this sort of job a long while now, without arguing who does what, and when."

Shaw pushed back his shoulders and rocked on his heels; a bleak look came to his dark eyes.

"One of us must stay," he declared.

McQueen's slim form tensed; the smile faded from his face and his eyes hardened to blue ice.

"And the one who goes into the city and brings back something worthwhile is a step nearer promotion . . . and Jill!"

"I'm senior," Shaw said. "I'm going."

"We'll go together." McQueen was laughing now, the hardness gone and a devil gleaming in his eyes. "What's to stop us going together: Only the radio—and I'll soon fix that!"

He picked up a screwdriver and loosened a silver contact so that the wire sprang back and broke the circuit.

"I reckon," he drawled, "that our set has developed a fault."

It's too bad, but we can't radio the captain."

Shaw relaxed, the tension leaving his large frame. It wasn't the first time they had ignored orders and taken the initiative into their own hands. The whole course of their service career together had been a series of reckless exploits—and their success had forced the authorities to turn a blind eye. Results were what counted.

"Let's go," he said.

They dressed in light-weight spacesuits with transparent helmets and air cylinders. Shaw opened the double doors of the airlock and climbed down the ladderway. He waited for McQueen to join him, staring across the flat ground to the buildings of the city.

Their outlines shimmered, wavering unsteadily, tall, slender columns rising high into the air. The dark glasses helped; he could look at the changing planes without going cross-eyed. The bluish light took on a deeper tone and José Maria looked like a big disc hanging in the sky, dark purple in colour.

McQueen reached the ground, knelt and scooped up a handful of the surface material in his glove.

"It looks like gravel to me," he said. "How can plants grow in this stuff?"

There was the crackle of static in Shaw's headset, almost drowning his voice.

"You'd better ask Jill," he replied. "She's the botanist—not me."

McQueen straightened up, staring across the empty space before the city.

"What, no welcoming committee?" he joked. "Guess we'll just have to go and present ourselves to the mayor!"

Shaw started forward, adjusting the valve of his air inlet; he was feeling a little light-headed, partly due to an excess oxygen supply, partly due to his being away from the ship. After months aboard *Research III* he had an exhilarating sense of freedom as his boots scuffed at the gravel underfoot. He was on a new world, an alien world, and there were wonderful things to see . . .

McQueen was ahead of him now, calling over the headset: "Quit dreaming and step up your pace, Ken. Our air cylinders won't last for ever and I have a notion to find myself a native."

They entered the city by a wide avenue that seemed to reach clear to the horizon. On either hand, graceful buildings soared to overhead bridges. There was silence, a tiny breeze disturbing the surface layer of dust. The buildings were of circular section with a single opening at ground level; these openings were wide

and higher than Shaw. No markings broke the smooth walls towering above them.

"Not exactly crowded," McQueen said, staring along the empty avenue. "I've seen more —" He broke off sharply, tugging at Shaw's arm, pointing. "I thought I saw someone move . . . there's nothing there now. Must be the way these buildings seem to shift around."

Shaw grunted.

"There was no one. This city hasn't been used for a long time. Haven't you noticed that our footprints are the only ones to disturb the dust?"

McQueen's laughter sounded harshly through the static in the headset.

"I suppose you're right. I'm getting jumpy. The way these damn buildings appear to change all the time is getting on my nerves. Let's take a look inside one of them."

They went in together. The bluish light was fainter inside, but still strong enough to reveal the outlines of furniture and decoration. Shaw stared in silence, a coldness pricking at his spine.

McQueen said, softly: "Whoever lived here was *really* alien. Look at the shape of things. Nothing human ever used this stuff."

Shaw felt his legs begin to tremble. He turned and walked outside, breathing quickly. He didn't like the picture his imagination formed of the planet's inhabitants—any resemblance between them and the people of Earth would not even have been coincidental. There was something like fear in him at that moment.

McQueen said: "That room hasn't been lived in for quite a while."

They walked down an avenue at right-angles to the main thoroughfare, between ranks of pencil-slim towers. Spiral terraces wound upwards to shimmering minarets and bridges. All was silent, motionless, empty. There were no plants in the city; the only colouring came from the glitter of pearl-and-silvered buildings. And the city writhed like a thing alive.

Shaw jabbed at the walls of one building with a knife-point. He scratched and hacked at the surface, leaving no mark.

"Metal," he decided, "and hard as diamond."

McQueen rested his helmet against the wall, listening. "It beats, like a pulse, Ken. There's a definite throb, a rhythm."

Shaw listened to the wall and heard a faint, regular beat; it went on and on, never varying, a monotonous muffled pounding. He stepped back, staring at McQueen.

"It's like a heart-beat," he murmured "You'd think the thing was alive, but that's crazy."

McQueen was looking round, staring up at the heights, peering into openings.

He said: "I have a feeling we're being watched. I wish whatever it is would show itself. Damn it, I'm getting scared!"

Shaw walked forward, through the opening which served as a door and into the building. He saw a circular floor, smooth walls, and a flat ceiling some thirty feet above his head. The room was perfectly empty and he was about to turn away, when —

There were marks in the dust on the floor, leading from the inner wall to a point near the opening and back again. Shaw called:

"Lewis!"

McQueen joined him and, together, they stared at the marks in the dust. The prints were circular, about six inches in diameter.

"Well," said McQueen, taking a deep breath, "something around here can move—and it has two feet in the shape of discs."

Shaw knelt on one knee, leaning forward to inspect the round marks better. His forehead touched the plastic helmet.

"Not feet," he corrected. "Sucker-pads. See how the dust has been drawn up round the edges?"

He stood up, following the line of prints to the wall. He could see no sign of a door, but the light wasn't good.

"There must be a sliding panel here," he said, and felt the wall with his hands.

He found nothing to operate the panel. The wall persisted in remaining a wall, hard and metallic, wavering in outline as did all the walls in that strange city.

McQueen said, uneasily: "Let's get out of here. Whatever was watching us has gone now—and our air cylinders are getting low. Time to report back at *Research III*."

They went outside. Shaw looked down the avenue, past the flickering, changing walls of the towers. It was strange, he thought, how exactly similar the city looked from any one point—like a maze. If it weren't for their own trail of footprints, he might have had some difficulty in deciding which way they had to go.

McQueen started to move restlessly inside his suit.

"Is it my imagination, or is it getting hotter? I'm beginning to sweat."

Shaw hadn't noticed it till then, but came to the same conclusion. His skin itched and there wasn't anything he could do

about it.

"Temperature's gone up all right," he answered. "And notice the light? It's stronger now."

McQueen quickened his pace, heading back for the auxiliary unit.

"I wish we hadn't come so far," he said.

Shaw lengthened his stride to keep up with him. He was getting jumpy himself. Sweat ran down his face under the plastic helmet;; his muscles grew taut; his brain began to imagine things. The buildings quivered and wavered and merged one into the other. He wanted to run and scream and . . .

McQueen said: "I'll get some plants for Jill —"

Shaw growled: "You'll leave Jill alone. She's one girl I don't want you playing around with. Leave her alone—understand?"

McQueen laughed.

"Jealous, Ken? Because Jill prefers my company to yours?"

Slow anger built up deep inside Shaw. His fingers curled tightly together and his breath came faster.

"Damn you, Lewis! Jill's a fine girl—I won't have you playing with her the way you do with all the others. I'm serious about her. You'll leave her alone if you know what's good for you."

McQueen jeered: "Think you can make me? Jill can choose between us, and if she picks me . . ." his voice was lost in the static of the headset.

Shaw wanted to swing his fist at McQueen's head. He wanted to spoil those handsome features, wipe out that mocking smile. McQueen was too handsome and his conquests came too easily.

Shaw was sweating freely, his body tense. The illusion of shifting walls upset him. He'd never felt like this before. He wondered, abruptly, if it were the onset of madness.

They came to the edge of the city and looked for the tiny rocketship—and looked in vain.

"What in hell . . . ?" McQueen said softly.

Where, before, there had been an empty vista of gravel, there now existed a writhing mass of plants. It seemed as if a jungle had miraculously sprung up from nowhere. And somewhere under that tangled, heaving mass of creeper and leaves, the auxiliary unit lay hopelessly buried.

Ken Shaw's jealous rage faded, leaving him weak from a

nervous exhaustion. His legs were trembling and his eyes stared blindly at the incredible green jungle which had sprung up from nowhere. There was menace in the waving leaves, in the densely matted undergrowth and twisting forms of alien creepers; blood-red flowers swayed on thin stems and took on the appearance of watching eyes. There was danger—death if they could not reach the rocketship before their air supply gave out.

Shaw licked his lips, and said:

"We must have made a mistake. We've come out of the city at another point."

"No." McQueen's reply was emphatic. "We followed our own footprints. The ship is out there, somewhere, buried under all that stuff. Though how anything could grow so fast is something I'll never understand."

He was right, Shaw reflected, the ship had to be there. He was calmer now, able to think; but that didn't help him solve the mystery of plant-life that could grow at express-speed. It would be Jill's problem. In the meanwhile, they had to locate the auxiliary unit . . .

The headsets in their spacesuits were battery operated, short-range affairs! they could never call *Research III* for help at such a distance. Shaw was acutely aware of the faint hissing of air in his helmet and knew that the cylinder must be nearly empty. Regulations had good reason for insisting that one man should stay with the rocketship.

McQueen raised his arm and pointed at the centre of the massed foliage. He said:

"I can guess where our ship is. See that bulky shape where the vegetation is thickest? There's the gleam of metal there."

Shaw followed the line of his outstretched arm. He took a deep breath, and said:

"There's nothing else for it. We have to go in."

He unstrapped the knife at his waist and stepped forward, thrusting his way knee-deep into the jungle. He slashed vigorously with the knife, cutting at thick fronds and snake-like vines. A few more paces and overhanging foliage blotted out most of the light. He hacked at broad green leaves in an effort to clear a space about his head. It became darker as he forced a passage under the closely-twined leaves.

McQueen was panting, his breathing sounding noisily over the roar of static through the headset. He gasped:

"These damn creepers seem almost alive. Soon as I cut one loose from my body, another fastens itself round me. Talk about vegetating octopuses!"

Shaw's arm was beginning to ache from wielding his knife, and he had to stop constantly to bend over and free his ankles. A slender vine wound about his throat, tighter and tighter, seeking to choke him. He slashed at it with his blade and stumbled on, half-blind with the darkly-massed leaves pressing down on him. He could hear McQueen swearing into the headset.

He had never imagined that such a riot of plant-life could exist. Already, the path behind them was blocked with broad, sharp-edged foliage. Bright-red flowers, large as a man's head, swayed and broke as he crushed their vital stems. He was panting, charging deeper into prolific plant growth, changing his knife from one hand to the other, cutting and hacking a path to the ship.

McQueen crashed to the ground, calling:

"Ken! I can't move . . ."

Shaw turned to help him. McQueen was on his back with vines wrapped about his legs; his helmet was completely covered and his arms were slashing furiously and uselessly. Green-stuff slowly crept over him, growing round him and burying him.

Shaw threw himself full-length, smashing the foliage. The creepers and stems were thin, weak; it was the number of them and their rate of growth which made them dangerous. He used his weight to clear a space, then started chopping at individual creepers with his blade. McQueen crawled to his feet and staggered upright.

"Thanks, Ken . . . if anyone had told me a vegetable would try to kill me, I'd have laughed. But not now—these things are vicious. Intelligent plants, trained to kill —"

He swung his knife at a creeper that came at him like a whip-lash, cut it down and trampled on it.

Shaw said: "You're exaggerating, Lewis. They're still only plants, dangerous but not intelligent. I'd say that they have an instinctive urge to grow over any moving thing—that and no more. Let's get on; the ship can't be far away."

He went forward again, hacking a path into the luxuriant verdure. Ahead, through solid green darkness, the glint of metal showed—the rocketship. The weight of his large body crushing a tangle of vegetation, his knife blade cutting down trailing vines which threatened to smother him, Ken Shaw fought his way to the ship.

He felt his way along one of the four vanes and freed the bottom steps of the ladderway. He started up, slashing vigorously to clear the metal treads. McQueen, climbing up behind, panted:

"And only just in time—my air cylinder is about empty."

Shaw reached the top of the ladderway, sheathed his knife and tore at the creepers with his hands. He grasped the handle of the outer door and jerked it wide open; he climbed in and pulled McQueen after him. McQueen locked the door and sighed with relief.

It was a tight squeeze for two men in the tiny airlock, but they flooded the chamber with air and stripped off their suits. Shaw opened the inner door and stepped into the control room. His face wore an expression of grim satisfaction as he prepared to fire the rockets.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he said. "Our jets will burn that stuff clear off the planet!"

He thumbed the firing buttons and the auxiliary unit rose slowly on geysers of burning gases. Higher and higher the ship rose, into an atmosphere tinted with pale blue light. McQueen watched the havoc their jets wrought; the massed vegetation burnt furiously, throwing up red flame and dense smoke.

"There won't be much of that jungle left in a few minutes," he drawled. "And I can't say I'm sorry."

He turned to the radio, remade the connection he had broken, and spoke into the microphone:

"Second Officers Shaw and McQueen calling *Research III*. We are returning to base after exploring the city. We could not report before owing to a radio fault."

Captain Chester's reply was blistering.

"Radio fault, nothing! I'll clap you two in irons for disobeying orders, see if I don't! I'll have you demoted, thrown out of the service! I'll —"

McQueen winked at Shaw as the captain's tone changed.

"Well, what have you learnt? Speak up—I want a full report."

McQueen said: "We'll be back at base in a few minutes, captain. Everything is under control. Signing out."

He switched off and watched the checkerboard gardens below; diamond lozenges of yellow and brown and green flashed past, then the silver bulk of *Research III* showed clear against the horizon. Shaw put down the tiny rocketship close to the aft hatchway and

the crane arm swung out to lift them aboard the base ship. They climbed down the ladder.

A technician grinned at them and jerked his thumb for'ard. "The captain wants you in the control room right away. He's like a bear robbed of its honey—I hope you've the right stuff to sweeten his temper."

"Leave it to us," McQueen said airily. "We'll have him eating out of our hands."

Shaw added in a whisper: "I hope!"

They quickened their pace along the ship's main corridor, reached the control room door, and Shaw knocked.

Captain Chester's voice was a gruff bark: "Come in."

Shaw opened the door and stepped inside. McQueen followed; they saluted. The captain glared at them and said, in a tone heavy with irony:

"So you've condescended to report back? I suppose you realise that you've contravened E.E.C. rules? I should throw you straight in the brig and —"

McQueen drawled: "We had a little trouble with the radio."

Chester interrupted: "You're always having trouble with your radio. I suppose that wouldn't be an excuse for you *both* to leave the auxiliary unit?"

McQueen smiled at Jill Essex who was sitting behind the captain. He replied:

"Well, as the radio wasn't working, there didn't seem much point to us splitting up. And it was a good thing we both went into the city; you see one man might not have got back —"

Captain Chester sighed

"There never is much point to E.E.C. rules, for you two. All right, let's have it—what did you find?"

Shaw gave him a detailed account of their journey through the city, the discovery of the circular prints in the dust, and their fight with the jungle that had sprung up from nowhere.

The captain said: "Hostile cabbages! But those prints mean that the inhabitants are still around. I'll have to think about our next move—until I've made a plan of action, nobody leaves this ship!"

Jill protested: "But I must get a sample of these plants. I have a feeling they may be important in understanding this strange world."

"And I have a feeling, Miss Essex," the captain replied, "that

it may be dangerous! ”

McQueen said: “Relax, Jill. I said I’d bring you back a bouquet, didn’t I? You’ll find some of the creeper stuff in the auxiliary unit. It was round the legs of my spacesuit and I didn’t have time to clean it off.”

Captain Chester pushed back his peaked cap and snorted.

“You brought some of this alien plant aboard my ship? Didn’t it occur to you that it might be contaminated with a disease our Earth medicines can’t cope with? Don’t you ever stick to the rules? You know very well that such an action is forbidden.”

Jill said hurriedly: “Don’t worry, captain, I’ll take care of it. I’ll see that full precautions are taken.” She headed for the door, and said under her breath as she passed: “Thanks, Lewis.”

Shaw watched her go through the door, hips swinging and golden hair tumbling about her shoulders. He wanted to reach out and take her in his arms, crush her against his chest and press her full red lips to his. He glared angrily at McQueen for taking advantage of the green-stuff they had unintentionally brought back with them.

Captain Chester said: “Miss Essex is a lovely girl and I don’t doubt you’re both very much in love with her. She’s also a pert young miss who ought to know better than to play fast-and-loose with members of my crew. In future, try to remember this is a scientific expedition and that Miss Essex is our botanist—and try to keep your minds on the job. Get out now; get some food and sleep because I’ll have work for you soon.”

Shaw and McQueen saluted and left the control room. In the passageway, Shaw clenched his hands and turned dark eyes on McQueen. He said, slowly:

“I’ve told you to stop making passes at Jill.”

McQueen’s eyes were blue and cold, his voice calm.

“Ken, you just saved my life and I’m grateful—and we’ve been friends for a long time. Don’t spoil it. I’m as serious about Jill as you are, and I don’t intend to stand aside and let you grab her. In love, all’s fair—remember the old tag? We’ll play it straight and she can choose between us.”

He walked off to his cabin, leaving Shaw alone in the corridor.

Ken Shaw let his hands drop to his side. He told himself he should have other things on his mind than Jill Essex. They were on an alien world where the inhabitants kept themselves hidden. There might be grave danger. And there were many

puzzles to solve. How could the incredible plant life of this planet flourish so far from the star José Maria, or in any planet on this dying, frigid system? Where was the source of heat and light? What mystery lay behind the strange city with its shimmering walls? What had left the circular prints in the dust?

He did not feel like eating so he went to his cabin and stretched out on the bunk. Sleep was a long time coming—but it wasn't the problems presented by this alien planet that kept him awake. His mind was possessed by an image of Jill Essex. He imagined her, young and slender and lovely, her eyes flirting with him, her golden hair silken under his touch. He knew that he loved her. He seemed to see her smiling down at him, with a smile that was coquettish and inviting . . . her ripe, red lips were still luring and beckoning him when he dropped into a deep sleep.

Six hours later, Shaw awoke. He shaved and dressed and went to the officers' mess for breakfast. McQueen was already there and the ship had an air of excitement.

McQueen said, as Shaw joined him: "Something's happening outside. I don't know what—seems the watch hasn't been able to see much owing to thick haze which even radar can't break. But there's some—sort of activity been going on." He stabbed a thick steak with his fork. "Maybe we're going to view the local inhabitants at last!"

Shaw hurried his meal and walked with McQueen to the control room of *Research III*. Captain Chester was staring into the visiscreen;; there was a faint stubble on his jaw and his hat lay on the deck. He had an expectant gleam in his eyes. Jill Essex was with him, a white coat over her slacks and sweater; she looked as fresh as ever despite the fact that she had been hard at work while the others slept. She, too, had the bright look of excitement in her eyes.

McQueen said, jauntily: "What's up? Are the natives doing a war dance round the ship?"

Shaw glanced at the visiscreen. A wavering grey haze blotted out the view and he could see little beyond the metallic sheen of the ship's projecting vanes.

"Are you going off-duty, captain?" he asked.

Chester shook his head briskly.

"Not now. Something's blowing up out there—and I want to know what it is. Maybe dangerous, and I'll have to take the ship up. Damn this haze; can't see a thing."

Jill said: "It's thinning out. We'll be able to see soon."

McQueen sat himself on the edge of the desk.

"Don't tell me they have fogs here, too?"

"It's not a smoke fog," Jill told him. "A heat haze. The temperature's gone up around the tropical mark—we had to turn on the ship's cooling system. There's radiation, too. Our detectors are registering but it hasn't reached a dangerous level."

Shaw said: "Did you learn anything from the creeper, Jill?"

"Not much, but something. Definitely an alien plant, with a sap that would be poisonous to us. Cellular structure slightly different from plants on Earth. I'd like to get more of it for experimenting, but the captain won't let me go outside."

Captain Chester looked her way.

"Not yet," he said. "Later perhaps. I'm not so sure it's as harmless as you say."

Jill protested: "I am a fully qualified botanist, captain."

"Experts," Chester replied briefly, "never can see further than the end of their noses!"

Shaw was watching the screen and beginning to imagine the outline of things beyond the ship.

He said: "The haze is clearing," and everyone's attention riveted on the screen.

A report came over the intercom: "Outside temperature is dropping rapidly. Radiation down almost to normal. Visibility increasing every minute."

Shaw watched the landscape become clearer, watched and did not understand what he saw. McQueen blinked.

"Captain Chester," he said, "have you moved the ship while we slept?"

The captain shook his head. Jill remained silent. Outside *Research III* the whole scene had changed. Where they had landed, the ground had been a sheet of gravel with a hedge bright with gaudy flowers on the horizon. Now, as the last of the haze dispersed, they saw a plain of lush green grass. trees with pink and white blossom, a rippling brook.

No one spoke. They stared into the screen and wondered at the change that had occurred. There was fruit on the trees and ripe berries on the shrubs; the grass reached to the horizon, thick and verdant; the water of the stream was clear as crystal.

McQueen ran his fingers through his hair.

"Am I going crazy?" he demanded. "Or do those trees

really look like *pear* trees?"

Jill said, in a professional tone of voice that didn't quite mask her excitement: "The trees bear every resemblance to pear and apple and cherry. And over there are root crops you'll find on Earth—yes, and I'm sure that's wheat!"

McQueen grinned.

"You're crazy, too! You know, this place looks more and more like Earth every minute." He scrutinised the view closer. "Except for that purple ball of a sun and the bluish-white light over everything. What do you make of it, Jill?"

The girl shrugged.

Again the voice came over the intercom:

"We've just taken another test of the atmosphere, captain. The composition has changed. The air is breathable—same as Earth. We can't tell any difference!"

Captain Chester swore.

"It isn't possible," he said. "We're dreaming all this. There's no other explanation."

Jill said: "Permission to go outside, captain?"

Chester hesitated, plainly worried. He looked again at the scene in the visiscreen. It did look like Earth, the trees, the grass, and the running brook. The only difference he could see was the absence of hills; the surface of the planet remained flat.

"Well, the air is supposed to be breathable—we'll let some of it into an airlock and I'll be the first to try it."

Shaw and McQueen, with Jill Essex, followed the captain out of the control room and down the corridor to an airlock. Chester went in alone, carrying a two-way radio. Shaw listened on the receiver.

"I've locked the inner door," Captain Chester's voice informed them, "and am about to open the outer door. I'm turning the handle—now . . ."

There was a pause. Shaw became worried. He said:

"Are you all right, captain?"

"Yes, Mister Shaw, I'm fine. The airlock is flooded with the planet's atmosphere and I am breathing normally. I feel no ill effects." Chester paused again, then: "This air is fine, really fresh. I find it stimulating." Another pause. "I'm going outside now."

Shaw moved to a porthole and looked out. He saw Captain Chester walking over the grass, the portable radio in his hands.

The captain went right round the ship, taking his time and stopping to investigate the trees.

"All right, Mister Shaw," he said, "you may come outside. The air is as good as any at home and there's no sign of hostile inhabitants."

Jill breathed: "At last!" and ran for the airlock.

Shaw and McQueen were close behind her as she reached the grass. Shaw took a deep breath, savouring the crisp freshness of an air that wasn't manufactured from chemicals; it was heady, like wine, intoxicating. McQueen was grinning all over his face and skipping about like a young lamb.

"Spring," he said. "That's what it is—Spring!"

He caught hold of Jill and kissed her. She pushed him away "Go and catch tadpoles, Lewis—I've work to do."

Shaw walked across to where the captain stood under what was apparently an apple tree. Chester was looking at the red fruit in a wistful manner; his mouth watered.

He sighed at Shaw, and said: "This is too much like Paradise—they can't be apples I see. Probably poisonous."

"Certainly looks good," Shaw admitted. "I wish I could understand what's going on. Things can't change this way, not in a matter of hours. Not at all, really. Yet they have."

He looked across the grass, past the delicate blossom of the trees, to the empty horizon. A faint blue light disturbed his easy acceptance of the Terran landscape, and he looked up into a cloudless sky. José Maria hung overhead, an angry purplish ball.

"It's too good to be true," the captain said. He shook his head sadly. "Here we are, hundreds of light years from home, on the planet of a dying sun. There are three worlds—two of them frozen chunks of rock. The third . . ."

He gestured with his open hands at the scene around them.

"I feel like that, too," Shaw said. "It's uncanny."

* * * *

Ken Shaw was on duty in *Research III's* control room. He was alone, and had little to do other than routine paper-work and remain alert in case an emergency should arise. It was some hours since Captain Chester had given his sanction for the field work to com-



mence; McQueen was somewhere outside, in charge of the guards posted about the ship. Jill Essex and the rest of the scientific staff were busy collecting and analysing specimens. Captain Chester was sleeping.

It was quiet. Trees swayed gently in a breeze, the sky was clear, the horizon empty. There was still no sign of the planet's mysterious inhabitants. Shaw began to wonder what the scientists would find out . . .

He used the intercom to obtain routine reports from the lookout posts. The answering voices of the crew sounded bored; all told the same story—nothing stirred on the surface of José Maria's third planet.

Shaw crossed the room and stared out through the porthole. A little way off, some of the crew were indulging in a ball game; others lounged under the trees. It was all so much like Earth—unhealthily like Earth.

Two figures came into view, moving towards the ship from beyond the trees. Shaw watched them, recognising McQueen with

Jill Essex, and felt the flame of jealousy flare up inside him. They were holding hands and laughing, perfectly at ease with each other. Jill was wearing a thin white blouse with a short skirt that showed a lot of her legs; McQueen's hair was rumpled, his jacket loose about his shoulders. As they came nearer, Jill said something and gestured with her hand. McQueen stopped, wiping his mouth.

. . . .

Shaw's face darkened and his hands knotted so the veins stood out on the back of them. Damn you, Lewis, he thought bitterly, why can't you leave her alone? He waited for them to come to the control room, his eyes sombre and brooding.

The door opened. Jill came in, looking radiant

"We've been bathing in the stream," she said. "It was wonderful! A good thing the scientists certified the water pure."

McQueen grinned.

"Pity you don't swim, Ken. You'd have enjoyed it."

Shaw glowered at him.

"Maybe I'll ask Jill to teach me," he answered, "when you're on duty!"

Jill looked at him quickly, frowning.

"You two!" she said expressively. "I thought you were supposed to be friends? If you don't behave better, I shall simply stop talking to either of you—there are plenty of other men on this ship who will be glad of my company."

McQueen drawled: "I'm not making trouble."

Shaw said nothing. His jaw was set and his hands clenched; with stolid slowness, he deliberated on taking a swing at McQueen's handsome face, to wipe the mocking grin off it. Before he had made up his mind, Captain Chester walked through the door.

"Miss Essex," he said briskly, "I hope you have done more with your time than antagonize my two senior officers." He turned to Shaw. "All quiet?"

Behind his back, Jill put out her tongue.

Shaw said: "Nothing to report, captain."

"And you, Mister McQueen?"

McQueen shrugged.

"The same. Not a sign of anyone."

Chester said, politely: "I hope our botanist has more information. Your tests are complete?"

"The preliminary tests," Jill corrected. "I could spend years digging out all the details." She took a deep breath and began:

"Despite an outward similarity to Earth stock, all the vegetation is definitely of alien origin. The cellular structure reveals a subtle organic difference. However, none of the fruit is poisonous and the water is quite pure. We can have fresh vegetables for a change."

Chester pushed back his peaked cap.

"All right," he said. "How do you account for this fantastic paradise? If a mere layman may conjecture, it seems to me that this planet is very efficiently adapting itself to our requirements."

Jill smiled.

"You're nearer the truth than you imagine, captain. I think I can tell you what is happening—but not why. That is something we shall probably never know, unless we can persuade the inhabitants, if there are any, to tell us. I'll give you my theory about it."

Captain Chester sat down, removing his hat and placing it on the desk. McQueen perched on the edge of the table, swinging his legs. Shaw leant against the wall. All three men were intent on the girl; as a botanist, she was good at her job and they were eager to hear what she had to say.

Jill said: "I've seen something like this before, back on Terra, but on a much smaller scale. I am referring, of course, to early experiments in soil-less culture; that is, plants grown in a bed of gravel or sand and flooded with a nutrient solution. Incidentally, the gravel you saw when we first landed has not mysteriously disappeared; it is still there, but a thick matting of grass has grown out of it, completely hiding it. I checked that by digging down a few inches."

"The idea behind the experiments on Earth was to avoid soil-borne diseases and to achieve the maximum control over growth. The gravel gave a firm anchorage for plant roots, and an automatic flooding and draining of the nutrient solution gave the necessary food the plants required. It worked—on a limited scale. Here, I suggest, is an experiment on a scale vaster than anything conceived by a Terran botanist. I believe the whole surface of this planet to be artificial—nothing less than a series of gravel beds containing soil-less cultures!"

She paused, and there was a moment's silence while the three men considered her statement.

Chester said: "You're serious?"

"Of course."

The captain scratched at his grey hairs.

"It takes a lot of believing—a completely artificial surface. How

do you explain the speed with which things grow? "

Jill said: " That's more difficult, but even on Earth, the growth of plants have been varied with different types of radiation. Our instruments record an ultra short-wave radiation bathing the whole planet; probably this is the instrument for speeding up the growth. You will remember that we had a sharp increase both in temperature and radiation previous to the changed landscape."

McQueen said: " And it became hotter when that jungle sprang up about our auxiliary unit."

" But what about the difference in the vegetation round our ship, and that which we see now? " Shaw asked. " And how is it these plants are so like those back on Earth? "

Jill looked at him thoughtfully.

" The answer to your first question is obvious—different seeds were planted. The second I cannot answer. At a guess, I'd say that whoever is responsible for this unique experiment has deliberately grown these crops for our benefit. That means they have some way of learning our requirements—and of changing the plants. I mentioned the difference in cellular structure; possibly the plants are such that their outward form can be varied with radiation. Or possibly, there are alien seeds very close in appearance to our own which have been specially sown."

" Chester snorted: " I never heard anything so fantastic! "

Jill replied seriously: " There's no telling exactly what can be done with plant growth under the right conditions. The composition of the atmosphere has already changed since we landed; the lighting and heating are obviously under control. On Earth no botanist has been able to control conditions to such an extent, but on a planet as old as this, complete control of nature would obviously become a necessity when the sun began to grow old. It may be that now, long after the natives have died out, their overwhelming achievement is working on to serve whatever life-form visits the planet."

Shaw roused himself. He said:

" You mentioned flooding and draining the gravel, Jill. Surely that is one thing we can find out in a practical way? "

The girl nodded.

" I was coming to that, Ken. Captain, I want some men to dig trenches. If I'm right, we'll find a network of pipes under the gravel. I want some of the nutrient solution for analysis."

Chester said: " Organise a digging party, Mister Shaw."

Shaw saluted and stepped smartly into the passage. He went

through the airlock and spoke to the men lying on the grass under the trees.

"Parsons, Smith, Jackson, Wells, Goldberg—report to the store and draw shovels. You're going to do some digging."

There were muttered protests.

"I knew this was too good to last. Paradise—and a ruddy shovel! This is supposed to be our rest spell."

Shaw smiled sardonically.

"On an alien planet, there are no rest spells—for anyone. You know that as well as I do."

The men walked off grumbling. When they came back, each had a shovel.

Shaw said: "All right, start digging. I want a trench a yard wide and twenty yards long. That'll do to start. You're looking for a pipe-line."

One of the men grinned.

"Think we'll strike oil, Mister Shaw?"

"You'd better strike something, and quick," Shaw returned.

The men started work, cutting back the layer of grass and shoveling away the gravel. The trench began to open up, slowly, and with little enthusiasm on the part of the men.

Jill Essex came out of the ship.

"How's it going, Ken?"

I've started a straight trench, twenty yards long; if necessary we can extend it. When we hit something, we'll concentrate on that point. Any idea how deep we'll have to go?"

Jill said: "Not very deep, I imagine; not below two feet anyway."

The men looked from Jill to Shaw. One said:

"Why didn't you say this was for Miss Essex? Glad to do anything for you, Miss!"

Jill smiled at them.

"Thank you."

The men worked faster now, and soon had the trench extending in a straight line from the ship. They dug deeper, and one shovel struck something metallic. The man yelled out and Jill and Shaw hurried to join him.

"Careful you don't damage it," the girl warned. "Dig round it."

"All right, you men," Shaw snapped. "Leave the rest of the trench and work at this one point. I want this pipe fully exposed."

The work did not take long. The men rested their shovels and Shaw looked down at the metal pipe; it was about an inch in diameter and dull in colour, quite hard to the hand. Tiny holes were dotted along its length at regular intervals and an amber liquid dripped from them.

Jill jumped into the trench and held a test tube under one of the holes. When it was full, she corked it and Shaw helped her out of the trench.

"I'm off to the lab. to analyse this," she said.

As she walked away, Captain Chester and McQueen came up. The captain looked into the trench.

"So she was right," he murmured. "There is a pipe-line—probably this is just one of a network stretching right across the planet, if Miss Essex is right in her theory." He stared down at the pipe. "Mister Shaw, I want to know what's under this gravel. Have the men dig deeper."

Shaw said: "You heard the captain," and the men began digging again.

McQueen grunted: "Craziest planet I was ever on. Plants that spring up in a matter of hours. Gravel and pipe-lines. What next, I wonder?"

They did not have to wait long to find out. A further eighteen inches below the pipe, a shovel grated on metal. The men scooped away an area, exposing a hard metallic surface. It was perfectly flat, apparently solid, and harder than steel. The edge of a shovel did not mark it.

"Mister McQueen," the captain said. "Get some machine tools operating and see if you can penetrate this stuff."

McQueen went off to organize a party of engineers. They ran out an electric cable from the ship's generator and connected power drills and saws. Nothing they had—not even a diamond-tipped cutter—made the slightest impression on the alien metal.

The chief engineer sucked on a bruyere pipe and blew out a cloud of tobacco smoke.

He said, baffled: "That's some metal! I've come across nothing as hard as this before. May I suggest, captain, that you get the chemists to try some acid on it?"

Chester barked: "See to it, Mister McQueen."

The chemists came and tried their strongest acids: they succeeded only in discolouring the metal slightly.

Shaw said: "This stuff would be worth a fortune on Earth."

The chief engineer looked at him sadly.

"Only, Mister Shaw," he commented, "only if we could find a method for working it."

Leaving the engineers and chemists to try further experiments on the alien metal, Captain Chester, with Shaw and McQueen, returned to *Research III's* control room. The captain placed his hat carefully on the desk top and faced his officers.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, what do we do now? Any suggestions will be welcome. We've found an habitable world—even if it is circling a dying sun. The air is breathable, the water good for drinking, and edible Earth crops flourish. True, there are signs of an alien culture; but we've seen no people there and there has been no hostile activity. The reverse, in fact; the planet adapts itself to our requirements. All right, what do we do about it?"

McQueen drawled: "I'd say that smothering our auxiliary unit with creeper and nearly killing me was a hostile action."

"Possibly," said the captain. "Though it may have been an accident, a mistake of some kind. It would be difficult to prove hostile intent."

McQueen said: "Not to me, it wouldn't! I nearly didn't come back."

Chester turned to Shaw.

"What do you say?"

Shaw took his time before answering, thinking it over in his slow, serious way. Finally, he said:

"There are obviously people or, at least things, on this planet. The prints we found in the city, and the way the vegetation has changed, prove that. I think we should try to make contact with them. And the most likely place to look still seems the city. Will you let me go back there?"

"If he goes, I go too," McQueen added quickly.

Captain Chester considered them both.

"Perhaps. Or I may take the ship nearer and send in the experts. I'll have to think it over."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Chester called.

The door opened and Jill Essex walked in. McQueen brightened, and said:

"We were just talking about returning to the city, Jill, to interview the local inhabitants if we can find them."

The girl's face lit up.

"I'd like to go, too. I feel sure that we shall never understand how this planet adapts surface conditions for our benefit until we meet the people responsible. I've never been so excited about anything before—the discovery of this world is the most thrilling thing that's ever happened to me."

McQueen winked, and drawled: "Really?"

Jill laughed.

"Botanically speaking," she murmured.

Shaw said: "I'll find you one of the gardeners, Jill. I'll bring one back so you can question him."

Chester coughed.

"You have some further information, Miss Essex?"

She nodded.

"I have completed an analysis of the nutrient solution taken from the pipe, and, as I expected, it contains the chemicals that Terran plants require—nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, calcium, and magnesium. There are also minute proportions of the trace elements, sulphur, boron, copper, iron, manganese, and zinc."

"Which substantiates your theory," the captain said, and sighed. "I wish I knew what to do next."

"The aliens must be in the city," Shaw said loudly. "The solution of the mystery lies there. We must go back to make a fuller investigation."

Captain Chester paced the control room restlessly.

"You are probably right, Mister Shaw, but I can't help feeling suspicious. Why don't the inhabitants show themselves? Why have they transformed their planet this way—to satisfy our requirements—if they don't intend to make contact? We don't even know there are inhabitants at all. I smell danger somewhere, and, until I decide a plan of action, no one is leaving the ship for any extensive exploration."

He stopped pacing, picked up his peaked cap and settled it squarely on his head.

"The scientists have plenty of work to keep them busy, the crew will have to keep themselves occupied as best they can. Mister Shaw, you may take some rest. Mister McQueen, you will remain on duty here."

The captain left the control room. McQueen scowled.

"Just my luck," he grumbled.

Shaw looked at Jill.

"I hope you'll join me?"

"Thank you, Ken. I should like to. Hard luck, Lewis!"

Throwing a triumphant glance at McQueen, Shaw steered Jill Essex toward the door. Hand in hand they made for a secluded corner of the ship's restaurant to relax and forget the mystery which surrounded them over glasses of iced beer.

"You're lovely," said Shaw presently. "You're the loveliest girl I've ever seen."

Jill arched her eyebrows, smiling coquettishly.

"Why, thank you, Ken," she murmured. "A girl likes to be appreciated!"

"Jill," he said, determinedly, "you must have guessed how much I love you. It's something burning inside me. You're so beautiful and —"

She tilted her head, offering him seductive red lips. Shaw pulled her hard against him and kissed her. When they parted, she sighed and cuddled closer, her smile an invitation.

Shaw said, hoarsely: "Jill, darling—will you marry me?"

"Of course I will," she whispered, and kissed him again.

Shaw trembled with happiness, caressed her and held her and smothered her with kisses. He thought nothing could ever come between them . . . till a voice from the ship's loudspeaker roared:

"Attention everyone. Emergency posts—we are being attacked!"

There was a moment's silence, tense and strained, then confusion. Men were running from the room, some cursing, others tight-lipped. Somewhere in the ship there was an explosion; shuddering vibration echoed through the metal walls. The deadly hiss of rocket trajectories told Shaw that the ship's guns were firing back—he pushed Jill away and raced for the control room.

Shaw reached the control room of *Research III* immediately behind Captain Chester. McQueen sat before the glittering control panel, listening to reports from different sections of the ship and snapping fresh orders into a microphone. He had the visiscreen set so that it automatically recorded a changing picture of the scene outside.

Chester said, crisply: "Take the ship up, Mister McQueen!"

McQueen replied: "Impossible, skipper. They struck without warning, damaging the rocket tubes. We're grounded!"

The captain swore.

"All right, give it to them hot, Mister McQueen. Keep every gun firing. Mister Shaw, get me a report from the engine room

—I want to know how long it will be before we can leave the surface.”

Research III's rocket-guns laid a barrage of shells across the landscape of grass and trees. Shaw spoke to the chief engineer and relayed his report to Chester.

“At least six hours, captain—the engineers have started work on the damage. It's not serious, but it's going to take time.”

Chester groaned: “I knew I shouldn't have trusted these damned aliens. This place looked too much like Paradise to be true.”

McQueen looked away from the visiscreen. He said:

“They don't seem to be attacking any more. They're going round and round the ship, but it's only our guns that are firing now. And we don't seem to be scoring any hits.”

“Keep firing!” Chester roared. “I'll show them they can't damage my ship and get away with it.”

The crimson flashes of the rocket-guns blazed out; the ship shook with vibration; the noise became deafening.

Shaw said: “It looks as if they've achieved their objective—grounding us—and aren't interested in continuing the attack.” He studied the scene in the visiscreen. “I've never seen anyone move so fast before—you can't make out the form of the aliens at all.”

Outside the ship, there was a blur of activity. The aliens had formed a ring about *Research III* and were travelling round the ship at the speed of an express train; it was this that made the gunners' job so difficult. Shaw tried to count the fast-moving blurs, without success. He had a vague image of gleaming metal, thick as a man's trunk and half as high again; he thought he saw arms and legs and eyes, but could not be sure. They moved so rapidly his eyes never had the chance to focus on one. Their weapons—he caught a glimpse of shining barrels—were silent.

In a swift, silent circle, the aliens rushed round the spaceship, the flickering, hazy image of a strange life-form. Nebulous and shadowy, they defied the sharpest eyes aboard *Research III* to identify them. Round and round, the blurred figures raced.

McQueen drawled:

“What do they think they're playing? Ring-a-ring-of-roses?”

Chester scowled darkly, snorting with anger.

“I'll give 'em ring-a-ring-of-roses! They won't be so fond of this game when I've finished with them. Keep the guns firing, Mister Shaw—and tell the gunners to hit something! I'm getting

fed up with this."

Shaw said: "They're not firing back any more. Maybe we could sneak up and catch one?"

McQueen's eyes gleamed.

"I'll bet you've got the same idea as I have. Permission to try it, captain?"

Chester did not hesitate.

"If you can get a prisoner, go to it."

Shaw just beat McQueen to the door. Together they raced aft along the main corridor.

McQueen said: "Use a steel-mesh net. That your idea, too, Ken?"

Shaw nodded.

"Yes—and drop it from the crane arm swung outside the ship."

They reached the ship's store, pulled out one of the nets used for trapping dangerous animals, and ran on to the stern holds. Captain Chester had already given orders over the intercom and technicians were waiting by the crane.

"Open the hatchway," Shaw snapped, "and swing out the crane arm. Then lower us to a point ten feet from the ground."

He climbed on to one side of the heavy steel hook and held tight to the cable. McQueen joined him on the other side of the hook.

"Take her up," Shaw called, slipping one end of the net to McQueen.

The sliding panel in the ship's side opened and the crane arm nosed out. Gently the cable unwound, lowering the hook on which Shaw and McQueen were standing.

"This is better than fishing," McQueen said wryly. "Join E.E.C. and catch yourself a real live alien!" He studied Shaw's face a moment, and added: "You'd better clean off that lipstick, Ken—our friends outside might mistake it for war-paint!"

Shaw rubbed his mouth guiltily. He had forgotten that he'd left Jill in a hurry. He started to tell McQueen she had promised to marry him, and changed his mind—now was not the time for personal jealousies. He could afford to wait, knowing that McQueen's chances with the girl were gone.

Research III's rocket-guns ceased to fire as Shaw and McQueen were dropped lower and lower. In the silence, Shaw studied the aliens below. He could see them better now; they had several

arms and the trunk was not solid but appeared like a ball of wire woven and interwoven in the form of helices. They still raced madly round the ship, a blurred kaleidoscope of gleaming metal, seeming almost a solid wall so fast did one follow upon the next.

The crane hook stopped, swayed a little in the breeze.

McQueen said: "Ready? If we wait too long they may get suspicious and move away."

Shaw said: "I'm ready. Jump—*now!*"

Together they leapt from the hook, dragging the steel net between them. The net spread out like a parachute, falling over one of the aliens. Shaw's feet touched the ground but he lost his balance; the alien rushed on, netted, dragging Shaw and McQueen behind it.

The net was of tough steel-mesh and the alien could not break free; its fast-moving limbs were caught in twisting folds of the net and the combined weight of Shaw and McQueen brought it heavily to the ground.

"Got you!" McQueen shouted in triumph, and scrambled to his feet, winding the net tighter about their prisoner.

Shaw called to the engineers above: "Lower the hook—hurry!"

He reached up and caught hold of the steel hook, looped the ends of the net round it. McQueen grasped the cable and pulled Shaw up after him.

"Right," he said to the crane operator. "Haul us up."

The cable began to wind in, lifting Shaw and McQueen, with their prisoner, high off the ground. Shaw looked down, wondering what the rest of the aliens were doing. He was faintly surprised they had not offered resistance. He received a shock . . . all he saw of the aliens was a faint blur on the horizon. They had gone, leaving their comrade to his fate.

McQueen laughed.

"Guess we scared them off when we dropped in from above. Chicken-hearted lot. No fight in them at all."

Shaw said nothing. He was uneasy, wondering if they might not have caught something more than they could handle. In the net, the alien was suspiciously quiet. Of course, it might be frightened—or it could be waiting a chance to strike back. And they knew nothing of any powers it might have.

The crane arm retracted into *Research III* and lowered its cargo to the deck. Waiting, in a circle, were members of the crew, guns

trained on the thing in the net. Captain Chester, with Jill and other members of the scientific staff, stood in the background.

The alien lay unmoving on the deck of the hold. Shaw and McQueen dragged the net free and inspected their capture—and received a further shock.

McQueen gasped: "Well, I'm damned—a *robot*!"

There could be no doubt that the thing was inanimate. The robot had a spherical body composed of a network of wires; two jointed legs ended in sucker disks; it had four arms each fitted with three digits and two opposing thumbs; the head contained four eyes, spaced equally round the cylindrical shape, and a pair of antennae.

Captain Chester pushed his way forward. He said:

"It looks harmless at the moment, but we can't take chances. Mister Shaw, remove that weapon; then see that the thing is kept locked up under armed guard."

Shaw took hold of the weapon the robot carried. It was surprisingly light, a long metal barrel with two hand-holds and a row of push-buttons. He held it gingerly, careful not to touch the operating mechanism.

Jill said: "We might have anticipated this development. A race that can control the elements would certainly develop robots for manual work—and those hands with opposing thumbs make a wonderful tool."

"Permission to work on the robot, captain?" a physicist said. "It must be either damaged or the power supply is switched off—now is our chance to learn something of its operating principle."

"Permission granted." Captain Chester stared at the lifeless robot with an air of frustration; it looked so helpless he had to remind himself that only a short time before the robot had been one of an attacking party which had damaged his ship's rocket tubes. "But an armed guard must stand by the thing at all times. We can't be sure it won't come to life again."

"And this weapon?" asked the physicist's assistant, taking the metal barrel from Shaw. "I'd like to try taking this little gadget to pieces. From the mess it made of our rockets, I suspect it throws some kind of a heat-energy beam."

"All right," said the captain, "but for heaven's sake be careful. I don't want any more damage to my ship."

Jill sighed.

"We're not much further forward are we? We still haven't

made contact with the inhabitants—and aren't likely to if they only send out robots."

Chester said: "We're going to find them. The robots went off in the direction of the city—so whoever controlled the attack must be there. Mister Shaw, you and McQueen will return to the city and locate the hiding place of the aliens. All three auxiliary units will go. The second ship will land beside yours to provide a guard. The third ship will remain overhead to give warning in case of attack. You will all carry arms and use them if the need should arise. Radio contact with *Research III* must be maintained throughout—and bring back an alien!"

"Yes, sir," Shaw and McQueen said together, saluting.

The captain returned to the control room. The scientists carried away the robot and its mysterious weapon to the laboratories. Jill waited while Shaw and McQueen prepared for the trip.

She said: "Don't use your guns unless you have to. The inhabitants may be friendly, even now. I consider that their leaving us alone, immediately after they struck at the rockets, indicates that they only wanted to stop us leaving. And remember, they have adapted the atmosphere and vegetation for our benefit."

McQueen was sceptical.

"Maybe, Jill, and maybe not. They could have reasons of their own for that. And I don't fancy being at the receiving end of any alien weapon."

A technician reported: "All ready, Mister Shaw."

"Right, Harvey. We'll be leaving." Shaw turned to the girl. "Don't worry, Jill—I'll be back."

McQueen grinned, and winked.

"That goes for me, too," he said, and blew her a kiss as he followed Shaw up the ladderway.

The crane swung the tiny rocketship through the open hatchway and set her down in a firing position.

"All set, Lewis?" Shaw asked, seating himself at the controls.

"Take her up, Ken."

Shaw thumbed the firing studs and the auxiliary unit roared flame and thunder and rose into the sky. He turned the ship towards the distant city. McQueen reported over the radio:

"The landscape has not changed away from *Research III*. We are flying over the same formations of gravel and hedgerow and flowerbeds as before. Earth plants are only growing around the base ship."

Back came a prompt reply: "Check the air composition at the city before you leave the auxiliary unit. Wear spacesuits if necessary."

Shaw grunted: "I can see the city now," and reached for a pair of dark glasses. "It's still wavering about like a mirage."

Far above the third planet, the star José María hung like a purple ball, dimmed and faded. The air was filled with a pale bluish luminosity.

Shaw said: "Going down."

He fired the decelerating rockets and the ship landed near the city boundary. He killed the motors and there was silence once more. McQueen tested the air outside.

"Seems all right," he reported. "We won't need suits. Good thing that—we can get around faster." He strapped on a heavy-bore automatic. "I'm not kidding myself this will really stop a metal robot, but I'll feel better for having it!"

Shaw picked up the portable radio.

"Let's go," he said.

They opened the airlock and climbed down the ladderway and stood once more on a bed of gravel before the city. Another auxiliary unit had landed close-by; the crew waved to show that they were ready to cover the officers. Overhead, the third rocketship moved in a circle, watching.

Shaw and McQueen walked briskly into the city. The shimmering outlines of the buildings were dulled by the dark glasses they wore; the streets, terraces and bridges were silent and deserted.

"What's the plan of action?" McQueen asked.

Shaw did not reply immediately; he was again acutely aware of being on a strange world. After the Terran landscape which had sprung up about *Research III*, this city with its pearl and opal towers and changing planes seemed even more alien. He had a feeling of awe, a sudden fear that they would not return.

He looked sharply at McQueen, and was glad he was not alone. McQueen's slender figure, his blond hair and smiling blue eyes, gave Shaw the feeling of security he needed.

He said: "We'll cast about till we find the tracks left by the robots as they entered the city; follow them and locate their hiding place. After that, we'll have to find some way of breaking in."

They moved in a circle that took in all the lanes leading into the city, ignoring the wavering outline of pencil-slim towers, the way one minaret seemed to merge into the next, the fantasy of

shifting, helical terraces that wound upwards to overhead bridges. They concentrated on looking for tracks in the dust.

No one had made any attempt to hide the circular prints of the robots' sucker-disks; they led in a long trail from the direction of *Research III*, straight into the heart of the alien city. Shaw and McQueen followed the trail down a wide avenue, getting further from their rocketship with every step.

There was still no sign of movement, no sound, as they approached a central dome. The trail of prints went inside, through a yawning archway. Shaw and McQueen paused, looking into the darkened interior.

McQueen said: "This is it, Ken."

Shaw brought an electric battery torch from his pocket and switched on, directing the beam through the doorway. The hall was empty, rising high in a dome, the floor dusty and revealing the path of the robots. He went in, walked forward and came up against a blank metal wall. He flashed his light beam over the wall, looking for the door he knew must exist; but so well did it fit that he could find no crack.

McQueen put his head against the wall, listening.

"The beat is still there," he said. "Slow, regular, rhythmic. I wish I could figure out the cause of it."

Shaw was scratching at the wall surface with his knife blade.

"Same stuff as before," he grunted. "Steel won't mark it. I suppose we'll have to turn the scientists loose on it."

McQueen said: "They've tried acids and diamond-cutters already. I don't think we'll force it open, without using an atom bomb—and E.E.C. would frown on that. No, this is a case for brains. We've got to think out an operating mechanism designed by aliens."

Shaw switched off his torch and they stood in darkness.

"That won't be easy. An alien wouldn't think the same way as we do. Any ideas?"

McQueen moved restlessly.

"Let's get outside. This place upsets my nervous system. I'm getting so I expect robots to walk through a solid wall."

They went out to the street again and stood looking down the deserted lanes.

McQueen said, absently: "Shimmer, shimmer, little wall . . . how I wish these damn buildings would stay still!"

It was not pleasant, waiting alone in an empty and alien city,

Shaw thought—but at least the streets were better than the darkness. He tried to concentrate on a way of opening the door in the wall; but fear of the unknown kept pricking at his brain, chilling him, disturbing his thoughts with strange images.

"We must return to the ship," he said heavily.

McQueen snapped: "No! I want to crack this myself. I promised Jill —"

Shaw turned, pushing back his shoulders.

"You can forget about Jill. She and I . . ."

He stopped, reluctant to force a quarrel at that particular moment. McQueen looked at him seriously.

"I wasn't going to tell you this just yet, Ken," he said quietly, "but you have to know sometime. I know how you feel about Jill, so I won't rub it in. Honestly, you'd better stop thinking about her—you see, she's going to marry me."

Shaw stared back in sheer disbelief. McQueen misunderstood his expression and added, hurriedly:

"Keep your temper, Ken. I love her, too, and you could hardly expect me to stand by and watch you walk off with her. I know it must be a shock and —"

Shaw struggled with words, finally bursting out:

"You've got it wrong, Lewis. Jill has promised to marry me!"

McQueen blinked.

"Jill — promised to marry — you?"

Shaw said: "Yes, after we left you on duty, just before the attack came. I haven't had the chance to speak to you before."

"This is crazy," McQueen said, half-angrily. "Only this morning—when you were on duty, and Jill and I went swimming—I proposed and she accepted me!"

Shaw's jaw dropped. He thought it over slowly and solemnly.

"Jill can't have promised to marry both of us," he said indignantly. "She wouldn't —"

McQueen laughed abruptly.

"That's just what she has done. She . . ."

He stopped, wheeling about as a soft mechanical purring sounded behind him. Shaw's hand dropped for his gun as he saw the robots coming.

McQueen shouted: "Run for it, Ken," and threw himself at the leading robot.

Two robots came from the dome, blurred with the speed of

their motion. The first caught hold of McQueen with its four hands and held him fast. The second made straight for Shaw. Shaw had barely time to snap one shot at the thing and yell into the radio—then metal arms went round his waist and imprisoned his hands.

Although Shaw was heavily built and muscular, he had no chance of breaking free of the four metal arms. The robot lifted him clear of the ground as easily as if he were a child, turned sharply and sped back inside the dome. His gun, radio and torch were taken from him.

Somewhere in the gloom, McQueen was cursing. Shaw continued to struggle, but he was helpless. They should have kept better watch, he thought bitterly; it had been the wrong time to discuss Jill . . .

A wall panel opened with a soft click. The robots carried their prisoners inside and the floor dropped away with alarming speed.

In darkness as solid as the black void of space, Ken Shaw plummeted downward. Down and down and down, to subterranean depths. He had one moment of wild panic before he realised that their mad descent was controlled, then he relaxed, secure in the metal arms of the robot.

Far below, a bluish white light shone, growing rapidly stronger as it rushed up to meet them. He saw the silhouetted form of McQueen in the arms of his metal captor. The air pulsed with a soundless vibration and smelt as if it were charged with static electricity. He was still falling at a rate that sent the blood rushing to his head; and knew a moment of fear as he anticipated the smash at the bottom of the shaft.

Their landing was as controlled as the descent had been. A few feet from the ground, the robot slowed its furious pace; it floated downward for the last few inches, landing so gently that Shaw was hardly aware that his feet touched ground. His body felt heavy and his legs buckled under him. The robot held him steady till his strength returned.

McQueen, a few paces off, said: "So this is why we never located the inhabitants—they live beneath the surface of their planet."

Shaw looked about him. In the harsh glare of a bluish light, he saw a vast cavern filled with the bulk of massive and intricate machinery. Metal gleamed and vibrated, wire helices glowed,

thick cables sprawled in all directions. The machines looked like nothing Shaw had ever seen before; there were few moving parts and he could conceive no idea of their purpose. Oddly-shaped and twisted in form, the machinery bore the stamp of an utterly *alien* design.

Yet of one thing he felt certain; here was power such as no man had dreamt of. The cavern was a temple where power reigned supreme. Towering black monsters, sheathed in metal, hummed a high-pitched song of rampant energy. The air was alive with it. The floor shook to its rhythm.

McQueen whispered: "At least we know why the walls held a pulse—it came from here, from these machines."

A robot pushed Shaw forward, urging him along a lane between the giant machines. They left the cavern and traversed long passageways; there were intersections with other caverns leading off them. In each Shaw saw more of the alien machinery. The sight of so much power awed him.

Occasionally he caught glimpses of a robot at work amongst the labyrinth of machines. He saw no traces of the beings who must have created this underground world of power. Machines and robots; robots and machines; did the third planet of José Maria contain no living beings at all?

McQueen said: "I'm glad I'm not an engineer—I'd go crazy trying to figure out the meaning of all this stuff!"

Shaw and McQueen, guided by the two robots, moved along an arched corridor. The hum of machinery lessened and they became conscious of a peculiar scent in the air. Shaw's nostrils wrinkled. It might be a cross between something reptilian and — No, it wasn't that. It was the smell of rotting fruit, except for . . . Shaw held his breath as it became more pungent. The nearer they came to the source of the smell, the more certain he became that it was an *alien* smell, with nothing quite like it on Terra.

McQueen was choking, his eyes watering.

"If this is what I think it is," he growled, "I hope the interview won't last long. Our friends have the worst case of B.O. I've ever come across. Phew, don't they pong!"

They went through rooms which bore obvious signs of habitation and, again Shaw felt an icy sliver of fear knife through him. He was looking at the furniture in the rooms and his brain automatically tried to reconstruct the form of a being that could use such weirdly-shaped things. He didn't like the mental image he

got and tried to block it out.

"If we get out of here alive, Lewis," he said grimly, "we'd better hope the ship's psychiatrist can do something for us. I'm scared I shall go out of my mind if I actually *see* one of these aliens."

McQueen replied, without humour: "Then keep your eyes shut—that's what I'm going to do."

The last room they came to was divided by a shimmering screen of pure energy. Shaw and McQueen stood silently on one side of the screen. On the other, its form blurred by the random flickering of energy rays, something moved. Shaw thought: *the aliens . . .*

Even through dark glasses, even through the haziness of the screen, the blood froze in his veins as his eyes sought, automatically, to understand the shape of the alien thing. It was not remotely human; he received a distorted image of geometric shapes, cubes and cones and spheres and cylinders, joined together in haphazard fashion. At least, he assumed they were joined—he could not be sure, for his brain registered no unity in the alien's construction. He could not even be sure that his eyes were seeing true through the energy screen—the rays might add to the distortion of the thing's natural form.

Shaw's mind shuddered on the brink of madness, then, with an effort of will, he forced down his head and stared blindly at the metal floor. He felt relief that the energy screen had been there to prevent him seeing too clearly—and he did not lift his eyes again.

A voice said, in English: "You have been brought here to learn certain facts. Listen carefully."

The voice had the oddest intonation, as if the speaker were forcing the words into an unnatural rhythmic sequence.

"First, let me issue a warning. Do not try to cross the barrier I have erected between us. The energy rays would not harm you, but I am a being from a world totally unlike your own and the environment in which I live would be fatal to you."

McQueen, eyes tight shut and holding his nose, murmured: "We've no wish to come any closer, brother!"

"Also," continued the voice, "do not attempt an escape. You have already experienced the superior force of my robot workers—let me assure you that they could break your bodies as easily as they carried you here."

Shaw didn't doubt the truth of that statement. He stood quite

still, eyes downcast, listening.

"I come from a world in another galaxy of this universe, and this planet—as you think of it—is but a spaceship designed by my race for extra-galactic exploration. Of course, it is immeasurably more advanced than your own vessel. Our space-drive utilises the binding energy of the cosmos itself; the outward shape and surface of the ship is merely disguised to appear in the form of a planet. The whole structure is completely artificial.

Shaw heard McQueen's gasp of amazement—or perhaps it was the echo of his own. He felt completely stunned. A spaceship the size of a planet! It made *Research III* seem like a toy . . .

"You should have guessed the truth," the alien went on in his oddly rhythmic voice, "when you discovered that two worlds of this star were frozen waste. It was surely obvious that the third planet could not be the natural satellite of a dying sun?"

Shaw remembered, vividly, McQueen's words on first sighting the strange world of José Maria: "That planet doesn't belong. Maybe it wandered here by accident!" McQueen had been nearer the truth than he had realised, except that it had been no accident.

"This ship is, in effect, an observation point," said the voice behind the energy screen. "It can be moved at will from star to star. We arrive at a new system, set our ship in orbit about the star, and wait to be investigated. In this way, we are able to study the inhabitants of other worlds in an environment which we ourselves control."

"Your botanist was perfectly correct in assuming the surface of our ship to be the product of a soil-less culture. As soon as we had analysed your minds we changed the surface conditions so that you could move around. This gave us greater freedom to study you. Your language was quickly learnt, for we are experts in such matters; as to the method, we have an automatic recording system which picks up every word spoken by members of your party. Even the merest whisper comes straight to us—and your race relies more on the spoken word as a means of communication than any other race we have encountered."

McQueen grunted: "I knew it was a mistake to have women aboard *Research III*!"

The alien continued: "The vegetation we grew about your auxiliary unit, the first time you visited our city, was no more than a test to study the pattern of your behaviour. The attack on your base ship by our robots was another test piece. From the moment

you came within reach of our detectors, your reactions have been studied and analysed."

"Our purpose is simply stated: to decide what part your race shall play in our rapidly expanding galactic empire. We regret that your low degree of intelligence makes it impossible for us to offer you a major role in our system, but we can, however, use you as manual workers. Your race will benefit enormously in many ways. You will enjoy the rewards of scientific developments far beyond your own powers; you will have contact with the greatest minds in the galaxy; and you will be helped to develop such limited intellectual abilities as you possess for the good of the empire.

"In return, you will work for us. Your energies—largely wasted in futile pursuits of your own devising—will be directed to a greater goal. There will be no more fumbling with things you could never understand, but a steady striving in a direction suited to your development. Your race will become a minor, but still important cog in our great empire."

Ken Shaw spoke for the first time. He said, bluntly:

"You are proposing to enslave our people."

"It must inevitably seem like that to a race of your limited outlook, but your descendants will be trained to think differently. They will be born to the idea that the empire is greater than their individual lives. We have the same problem with all new worlds, but the solution is not beyond us. Two or, perhaps, three generations will be necessary to instil our way of life—no more—and time is unimportant. Future generations on your home planet will be unaware of the change; the past will be forgotten. Only the empire is important."

The alien paused a moment, then added:

"But these things will not concern you personally. We have one last test to make. Our robots will take you back to the surface. You will return to your base ship and tell what you have learnt. You will take this message: No member of your expedition will live to return to your planet—you will all be exterminated. We wish to know how members of your race react to the certainty of death."

McQueen shouted: "You're crazy if you think Earthmen will just sit around and let a lot of stinking aliens enslave them. We'll fight and —"

He was not allowed to finish. At a command from behind the energy screen, the two robots moved forward, seized both

Shaw and McQueen and forced them out of the room. McQueen continued swearing all the way back through the passages and caverns where alien machines throbbed with immense power. Shaw remained silent, thinking.

There had to be a way of beating the aliens, if only he could find it. The human race had not fought its way upwards for thousands of years to become the slave-workers of a galactic empire. Men were not built for bondage; they needed freedom to act in their own right. The empire must be fought—but how? It was immediately obvious that the aliens had a greater command of natural forces, and weapons superior to any devised by Earthmen. The position looked hopeless.

They reached the bottom of the shaft and the robots took a firmer grip on Shaw and McQueen. A sudden pressure came from below. They rose, leaving the harshly lighted cavern for the darkness of the shaft. Up and up, towards the surface and the city of shimmering walls, they travelled.

McQueen said: "Well, one thing I'm glad about. We're away from that stench. I'd have fainted if whatever-it-was had kept us much longer."

Time was an important factor, Shaw thought. If Earth could be warned . . . If they had time to devise weapons before the aliens reached the solar system . . . He reminded himself not to voice his thoughts aloud. The aliens could hear the slightest whisper of sound, but they could not read his thoughts. José Maria was a long way from Terra. If this observation point could be destroyed, it might be centuries before the empire reached Sol. *Research III* must return . . .

They reached the top of the shaft. The two robots pushed Shaw and McQueen through an opening and they stumbled out into the empty, dust-covered dome at the centre of the city. The robots disappeared into the shaft.

McQueen drew a deep breath, and said:

"I'm glad that's over. Let's go back to the ship."

They raced along a wide avenue, out of the city with pencil-slim towers and minarets and wavering walls. They did not stop running till they reached the auxiliary unit. The guards at the rocket-ship waved excitedly, relieved to see their officers again.

Shaw called: "Back to base."

Overhead, the third auxiliary unit turned slowly on flaring jets. Shaw thought how futile was that lone watcher in the sky; unless they could work a miracle, Earth itself was doomed. He

fired the rockets that lifted the auxiliary unit off the ground, turned and headed back for *Research III*. The other two ships followed, the crews still unaware of the fatal message they escorted.

McQueen was strangely silent on the trip; his blue eyes were unsmiling; he seemed suddenly older. Shaw's face was grim as he planned his answer to the alien threat.

He set down the ship, waited impatiently for the unit to be slung aboard *Research III*, then hurried to the control room. Jill Essex was with the captain and, seeing her, momentarily put everything else out of his head. Her red lips smiled at him, her eyes flirted boldly.

"Hello, Ken; hello, Lewis," she said. "I thought you were never coming back—I was beginning to feel neglected!"

Captain Chester broke in: "I suppose your radio went wrong again?"

Shaw forced his attentions from the girl; there more important things to discuss.

"I have to report that the aliens are definitely hostile, captain, and that their science and weapons are immeasurably in advance of our own. This is what we have learnt—"

He gave an account of their trip under the surface, keeping it brief without omitting anything of consequence. He finished up with the aliens' message forecasting their extermination.

Chester sat down heavily.

"You don't offer much hope, Mister Shaw. Haven't you found anything we can use against them? There must be something . . ."

Jill's face was pale under her sun-tan. She said:

"The rocket tubes are repaired. Let's make a run for it."

Shaw scribbled words on a piece of paper and showed it to the captain:

I have a plan. I cannot discuss it aloud because the aliens hear every word we speak. All orders must be written. The crew must be warned against talking. Take up the ship and set us in an orbit about the planet.

Chester nodded, reached automatically for the intercom microphone, and checked himself. He wrote:

You are in complete charge, Mister Shaw. Give your orders—and I hope your plan works.

Shaw sat down at the desk and wrote on a scratch pad, tearing off the first page and handing it to McQueen.

Lewis: Prepare all three auxiliary units for discharge under remote control. Load each ship with hydrogen-bombs.

To Jill he gave the written order:

Alert the crew to what is happening. Warn them against talking.

McQueen and Jill Essex left the control room. Shaw set up co-ordinates on the calculator and worked out the trajectories he needed. Captain Chester fired the rockets and *Research III* rose into the air, settling in an orbit about the planet. There was a feeling of tension in the silent control room. Time passed slowly.

Shaw was sweating. He thought: Will they give us time? The aliens wanted to study Terran reactions, so they would wait till the last moment. They were so sure of their superiority—and the total absence of speech aboard *Research III* must be puzzling them. Timing was the essence of the plan . . . and any moment, death might strike.

Chester indicated that the ship was in orbit, ten miles above the planet's surface. Shaw studied the figures he obtained from the calculator, and hurried aft. The ship was silent. In passageways, members of the crew gathered, unspeaking. It was uncanny, the tense quietness of the ship; Shaw had never known anything like it.

He reached the stern holds where McQueen and the technicians were working on the auxiliary units. McQueen held up four fingers. Four minutes to wait. Shaw passed across the paper with the trajectories to the technicians and they set the remote control mechanism.

The last bomb was stored away. The fuel hoses were disconnected. The launching racks gleamed dully. All was ready.

Shaw looked at McQueen, who nodded. There was complete silence. The moment was filled with such tension he never again wanted to experience. He checked the firing figures, waited stiffly for the second hand of his stop-watch to reach zero-hour. Now . . .

He thumbed the button.

Slowly, easily, the three rockets were launched on their last journey. Like silver fishes, they fell away from *Research III*, falling to the alien world below. They became rapidly smaller under full acceleration.

Shaw held his breath, watching through the visiscreen. Would his plan work? It must work . . . the fate of Earth depended on it. If the aliens had anything to divert the rockets from their target, all was lost. He prayed, softly, under his breath.

McQueen said: "I guess there can be no harm in our talking now. It's the city, isn't it?"

Shaw nodded, waiting, hands clenched.

"The city is only the aiming point," he exclaimed. "The real target is below the surface—the power rooms. I'm gambling that the first bomb will make a hole in the surface, that the following two rocket-bombs will penetrate to the machines. I have two objectives: one, to wreck the power-drive; two, to blast the planet out of its orbit . . ."

McQueen said, quietly, staring fascinated at the visiscreen: "Any second now."

The first rocket struck and the H-bomb exploded. A dark cloud mushroomed upwards, obscuring the view in the visiscreen. What was happening under that dark shroud, Shaw could only guess. Two further explosions followed. The planet shuddered visibly.

Shaw let out his breath in a noisy hiss. The aliens had been too confident of their own superiority; they could not stop his plan succeeding now. He waited for the last stage to take effect.

"My trajectories were calculated to blast the planet out of orbit, to drive it towards the sun. They have no power to correct their course and José Maria's gravity will come into play—"

McQueen burst out: "The planet will fall into the sun!"

"And be completely destroyed," Shaw finished. "Let's get back to the control room. We must get *Research III* away from here—this won't be a healthy part of the galaxy when a planet of that mass hits a star."

In the control room, Captain Chester was bending over the calculator. He had figures jotted down on a paper in his hand and was waiting impatiently for the machine to give him a result. The mechanical whirring stopped and he grabbed the printed card, his brain automatically translating the figures into fact.

"You've done it, Mister Shaw!" he said triumphantly. "I guessed your plan when I saw the rockets fall, plotted the planet's course, and here's the answer . . . slap into the heart of José Maria! They haven't a chance now. We've won . . . we've won!"

Shaw sat down, the lessening of tension leaving him weak. He smiled faintly, and said:

"Head for Earth, skipper, and switch on the faster-than-light drive. It won't take many minutes to reach the sun—we want to be well clear when that happens."

Chester nodded, and barked a warning over the intercom system. He fired rockets; acceleration built up. He snapped in the main drive and *Research III* leapt forward in space . . .

In the visiscreen, José Maria flared up briefly. So distant were they that the move seemed an anticlimax; a bright speck, fading to insignificance. It was all over. The alien observation point ceased to exist.

McQueen drawled: "The first round goes to us."

"Let us pray that the final conflict will also be our victory," Shaw replied solemnly. "The human race is about to fight its first major battle for the stars. We must win—or forever live in slavery."

The visiscreen showed the sable void of space, star-streaked and silent. The dark reaches of infinity were still shrouded in mystery, but no longer empty—somewhere an alien empire prepared to move out and engulf more worlds, Terra among them. It might be a long time coming, but it would, inevitably, come.

Chester said: "We'll fight, of course. We know now what we're up against; and we have one of their robots and an energy gun. Our scientists can learn much from those. We'll make new weapons. We'll be ready for them."

Shaw nodded, thinking: "Yes, we'll be ready. Hundreds of light years separated the stars José Maria from Sol. It might be centuries, generations, before the galactic struggle came. Terra would be warned and have time to prepare; another empire would rise—a Terran empire . . .

Yes, they had time. The aliens would be tested to the full and, though the result could not be forecast, Earthmen would give a good account of themselves. Slavery was unthinkable. The war was inevitable.

McQueen said, suddenly: "Ken, it's time we had a talk with Jill. Shall we go together?"

Shaw came out of his reverie. He'd forgotten Jill and the fact that she'd promised to marry both of them. He remembered now, and said:

"Of course, Lewis, we'll go together."

They found Jill in her cabin, studying a diary with a thoughtful air; she had a stylo poised over the open pages and looked up absently as Shaw and McQueen entered.

Shaw said, directly: "Who are you going to marry, Jill—Lewis or myself?"

Jill Essex regarded them both. Her eyes conveyed an expression of supreme innocence as she patted her golden hair into place.

"Why, Ken, what a question to ask a girl! Neither of you, of course. You didn't take me seriously, did you?" She consulted her diary. "This trip, I've had seventeen engagements! Isn't that wonderful? And I've just received an offer from one of the stewards . . ."

Shaw stared at her blankly; his experience with women was limited. McQueen only laughed.

Jill said: "Not *real* engagements, of course. The man I'm going to marry is a botanist in the hydroponics section on Earth. We've only been waiting for my contract with EEC to expire—which it does this trip. We'll be married as soon as I reach Earth."

Shaw and McQueen withdrew. They said nothing, but their handshake was firm.

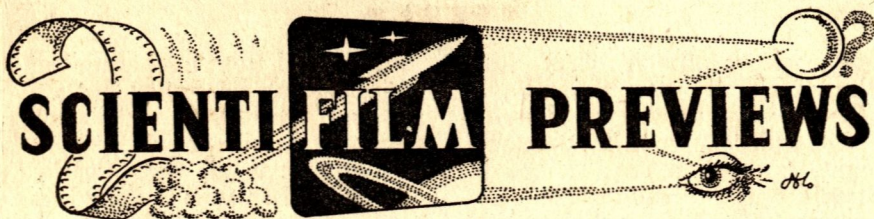
Some time later, McQueen said, casually: "You know, if we accept promotion, we'll be separated, Ken. It would be nice to stay together."

Shaw nodded.

"I thought of that," he admitted, "when I saw Chester, and turned down promotion—for both of us!"

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

* * * *



SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and Advance Reviews for Science-Fiction Film Fans

From **FORREST J. ACKERMAN**

Ray Bradbury just phoned me with an exclusive piece of information: our mutual fan-friend, Ray Harryhausen, who animated Bradbury's "Beast from 20,000 Fathoms," has sold Hollywood an original scientifilm idea called *The Elementals*. "And I've got the producer together with Gerald Heard," Ray tells me, "and Mr. Heard, who as you know, wrote 'The Lost Cavern' and is a great expert on bats, will write a 90-page treatment on this story of prehistoric flying creatures in modern times." The picture will be filmed in France.

It was really Bradbury Week in Hollywood recently when Ray had his first two films previewed within five days: the aforementioned "Beast," suggested by his *Saturday Evening Post* story but containing only about 80 seconds of his work, and the three-dimensional, wide-screen, stereophonic sound thriller, *It Came from Outer Space*, which retains about 80 per cent of his original 125-page manuscript. So shrouded in secrecy was the preview of the latter picture that my two-hour saga (including chasing a wrong car five miles at 70 miles an hour) of playing F.B.I. man (Fantasy Bureau of Investigation) in order to break through the neutronium curtain and see the advance show-

ing, was reported in the newspapers. It was a night of triumph for Bradbury several weeks later when a host of movie stars and the public turned out at the great Pantages Theatre at Hollywood & Vine for the world premiere of his picture. Searchlights lit the sky, Ray and other celebrities were interviewed over the radio, and in the audience were dozens of Ray's friends and admirers, including E. Everett Evans, Thelma Hamm, Mel Hunter, S. J. Byrne, Ray Harryhausen, Mrs. Bradbury and of course, Mr. and Mrs. F. J. Ackerman.

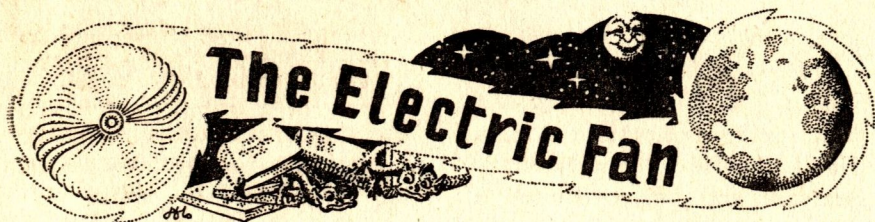
When cerebral experimenter, Dr. Patrick Cory stole the brain from a fresh-dead man, he did not realise there had come into his hands the most famous brain in the world—at least the world of science fiction: *Donovan's Brain*. This was the dangerous excarnate brain created in 1942 by Curt Siodmak, destined to become known "round the world through the medium of magazines, books, pocketbooks, translations, radio dramatizations, and films (first as "The Lady and the Monster" and now, sensibly, under its original title). "This time," producer Tom Gries told me on the set during a special interview for *Nebula*, "we're playing it straight. We think the new audience

for science fiction films will appreciate it that way. Felix Feist, who wrote the screenplay, added: "We're not developing this story in the old, heavy tradition of Frankenstein, or making Dr. Cory into another Jekyll & Hyde. True, when Cory (played by Esperanto-speaking Lew Ayres) comes under the influence of Donovan, he acts anti-socially; but we make him a straightforward, not make-believe scientist, who's intent on unlocking the secrets of the mind. He wants to cure neurotics, not conquer the world; find the electro-combinations responsible for success and happiness, not enslave mankind." In the plot of the picture the sentient brain grows and glows and sends out thought-tendrils that control the scientist so that he is mesmerically forced to live the vicarious life of the dead Donovan.

Seventeen months after completion, the long-awaited *Twonky* is about to be released, but advance reports indicate that, unfortunately, it would be far kinder to all concerned to keep it confined. My friend Milt Luban of the *Hollywood Reporter* states: There's a cute idea behind "The Twonky" but the basic premise is so smothered by a flood of dull dialogue that it becomes completely lost. Arch Oboler produced, directed and scripted, scoring a clean miss on all three counts. His pacing drags, making for a wearisome 72 minutes, while his handling of the cast results in consistently bad performances. Best selling point the film has is the name of Henry Kuttner, author of the original story and a respected figure in the ranks of science-fiction fans. Story deals

with a robot from the future who appears in the guise of a television set and proceeds to wreck the sanity of a college professor by serving him in all ways and by preventing him from doing things considered bad for him. After a lot of inane gab, the robot is destroyed in an automobile accident. There is an attempt at moralizing about man's right to do wrong, but as fatuously expressed here it emerges as rather puerile philosophy." Neal of *Variety* agrees: "*The Twonky* does almost everything except provide an entertaining picture. Briefly, it's unbelievably bad." Seems something nobler was expected of Oboler.

There's another Rossum film been completed, *Robot Monster*. This original story by Wyott Ordung is in three dimensions visually but is reported to be on only a two dimensional comic book level intellectually. Concerns a Ro-Man from another world who destroys everyone on Earth except six people. Motivation for destruction: robot-worlder's disturbance at our progress in atomics, our plans for space-flight. The six survivors are immune to the ro-man's supersonic death ray because of injections of an antibiotic serum developed by the scientist who is a member of the group. When only a quartet remains from the original sextet, sex rears its gland old head in the heart of the ro-man who wishes to spare the pretty maiden and is rewarded with extinction from home base for this base dereliction from duty. Film winds up in a blaze of gory, with a bloody battle involving prehistoric monsters bringing the proceedings to a climax at the end of an hour.



Latest News of Fan Activities

From **WALTER A. WILLIS**

Even 'way back last autumn there were signs that this year's British Convention was going to be a very different thing from the desultory lecture sessions of previous years. At one time, for instance, it was whispered that the proceedings were to open by everyone dancing the conga, by way of breaking the ice—or more probably a few legs. There were few possible events in science fiction I'd rather have seen than this, even Man's first landing on the Moon. The prospect of the more staid British authors and editors cutting a rug under the shocked eyes of their younger admirers seemed far more entrancing than Arthur C. Clarke running up a flag, and a good deal less probable. In fact, I wouldn't even have thought it was possible if I hadn't known that the London Circle had recently received a blood transfusion called Bert Campbell (editor of *Authentic*, if your editor is one of those who thinks his readers strong enough not to expire with shock at the news that there *are* other s.f. magazines) and that anything was likely to happen.

In fact the Convention opened quietly enough, with the

usual ritual delays and apologies for the cancellation of the proposed film showings. Experienced conventioners were so accustomed to these that they hardly noticed them. There followed a speech by prominent author Wm. F. Temple, mainly on his traditional subject, Arthur Clarke, who this time had to be insulted some 3000 miles behind his back since he is busy spending our money in underwater fishing in Florida—engaged, as Temple sinisterly put it, “in submersive activities.” For the rest of the day various talks, plays, discussions, etc. of varying merit succeeded one another with the efficiency of a well oiled machine.

Unfortunately, at some period during the night the machine seems to have got too well oiled. The worst thing that can possibly happen to a Convention had happened—the Committee had started to enjoy themselves. The first part of the second day's programme staggered dazedly through confusion to chaos, a large part of the audience leaving for what it thought was a lunch interval and coming back just in time to meet everyone else going out for the

same meal.

However by teatime the Convention had pulled itself together with a jerk. U.S. author L. Ron Hubbard made an unexpected appearance and proved himself a very accomplished public speaker, though handicapped on this occasion by being both privately and publicly warned not to say anything about dianetics. Instead he announced his return to science fiction writing and deftly inserted several plugs for his forthcoming novel which, he said, was calculated to drive insane everyone who read it. Judgement must be reserved on this claim, since apparently no one has yet read the book except Hubbard. In the same session there were also interviews with guest of honour Bea Mahaffey, editoress of *American Other Worlds* and with your own Peter Hamilton, who though not as pretty as Bea, acquitted himself even more competently under Ted Carnell's cross examination.

This was the last serious note in the Convention which seemed to have been designed to upset all Miss Mahaffey's notions about reserved Englishmen. A knock-about skit in which Bert Campbell and Bryan Berry played the parts of eccentric scientists was followed by what was solemnly announced as a visit from the D'Oyley Carte Ballet Coy. However the "Company" decided to put the horseplay before the D'Oyley Carte and we were treated to the breathtaking spec-

tacle of critic Fred Brown, author Ted Tubb, Convention Treasurer Charlie Duncombe and fan Don Buckmaster, all dressed as young ladies and cavorting coyly about the stage to the strains of "Danse Macabre," protecting their honour against male impersonators Dorothy Rattigan and Daphne Buckmaster.

After this the Convention petered out with an auction, in an atmosphere of premature post mortem. In spite of the irritatingly clammy weather and the thought emanations of the powerful and highly critical Northern contingent (all convinced they could do much better and determined to try next year) it seemed to be the general opinion that the Convention Committee had made a magnificent and on the whole successful attempt to put over a really lively Convention.

There was one item of serious business I'd like to mention. A Two-Way Transatlantic Fund has been inaugurated to send chosen British fans to American Conventions and also to bring American fans to ours. I think there are very few of us who haven't cause to be grateful in one way or another for the generosity of American fans, and here's our opportunity to do something in return. Contributions should be sent to me at 170 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and will be publicly acknowledged in the fan press.



GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor

DEAR ED: I feel I must write to advise you of the outcome of our search for a name for our newly formed s.f. club.

This was decided by vote, each member bringing along his favourite magazine, the name of which was to be the name of the club.

Nebula got it by 12 votes, the American magazine *Galaxy*, coming second with 7 votes.

It appears that your magazine is greatly appreciated by all its readers and has now a place of honour on our s.f. bookshelf.

STEPHEN C. WRIGHT,

(President, *Nebula S.F. Club*),

BRIGHTON.

** Thanks very much for your kind letter, Mr. Wright, and all the best to the Nebula S.F. Club.*

DEAR ED: Have just finished reading "*Nebula*" No. 3 and am pleased to see that the good standard of previous issues is being maintained. Indeed, the cover of the current number is the best to date, Clothier has done an excellent job of illustrating the novellette and I hope to see more of his work in the future. The stories were well chosen to appeal to all tastes and Ted Tubb has turned out another excellent yarn. The originality of Mr. Tubb's work always appeals to me. He never seems to fall back on the time-worn plots. Another original story was "*The Beautiful Woman*"

and I would have given this yarn top rating but for the fact that I had read it in the September '52 number of "*If*." Nevertheless it made an enjoyable second reading, but I can see some fans raising an enquiring eyebrow after reading your editorial in the same issue.

I am rather undecided regarding Mr. Temple's offering. That he is an accomplished author no one will deny, he makes good use of situations and is forthright in presentation, but I think the plot of "*Limbo*" could have been dramatised equally well without dragging in pseudo-Nazism. I liked Dave Gardner's first contribution and hope he can keep up the good work. Both "*Enigma*" and "*All Men Kill*" were well-written, but I found the latter confusing. Memo to H.J.C.: Stick to editing!

The departments, as usual, were varied and interesting, I particularly enjoy Forrest J.'s contributions, his previews of Sff. films are considerably more refreshing and less stilted than the usually prejudiced newspaper critics.

I am sure you will receive many letters hailing your decision to go bi-monthly in the near future and readers should be quite willing to part with two shillings to ensure quality stories.

P. W. CUTLER,
PORTSMOUTH.

**Funny thing, Mr. Cutler, but a lot of people seemed to think that I didn't know that the "Beautiful Woman" was a reprint from American "IF" or I wouldn't have written that editorial. On the contrary, I included "T.B.W." as the first of my "good, few and far-between" reprints, and, as I indicated, more of these will be appearing as time goes on.*

The point of my editorial remarks concerning reprints was that I will never reprint stories which are otherwise easily available over here, and will certainly never bring out an issue containing NOTHING but reprints as is becoming the "done thing" in certain other British magazines.

As far as "dragging pseudo-Nazism" into "Limbo" is concerned, Mr. Temple, the author, was merely illustrating the fact that Nazism is not dead, but very resurgent and that one day, Limbo may be enacted in reality with much more dire consequences to humanity.

Thanks for all your other comments, Mr. Cutler, write again, please.

DEAR ED: Thanks for being the only Editor who didn't mention the Coronation in your magazine!

Both of the other two reputable British magazines mentioned the event and one gave a whole page to a pointless lecture on the Queen. I would like to point out to these people that they edit Science-Fiction magazines and at least one of their readers wants to read Science-Fiction or allied material between their covers.

MICHAEL SHERRY,
GLASGOW.

* Well . . .

DEAR ED: I have just finished reading the second issue of "Nebula" which I think is a great improvement on No. 1, although that was very good for a first issue. The stories I liked best were "Dark Solution" by Tubb, and "Brainpower" by Brunner. I think particularly the gem by Tubb was one of the most interesting stories I have had the pleasure of reading for some time. You must certainly give us more by this talented author.

The lead story was good and I think a vast improvement on the lead story in your No. 1 issue; the idea was novel and well worked out, but I think it was rather too long and tended to become a bit dragged out. Had it been half the length I would have considered it an excellent story. I am afraid I have a brickbat for the story by Mr. Ackerman; I thought better things of him and I am sure he is capable of much better work than that.

I think that you set a high standard in general layout and story material, although I do think your covers could be improved a little and become more adult in character. Mr. Hunter is a good artist, but this cover falls below the very good one he did for your first issue.

Regarding improvements I think you have reached a very high standard already, but I do think your mag. would be even more popular if it could be published say bi-monthly or even monthly. I think the departments are very good, particularly the scientific review.

Once again wishing you every success for the future.

E. L. ROPER,
CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA.

**You are just one of hundreds who have written in and RAVED about Ted Tubb's "Dark Solution," Mr. Roper, but never fear, Mr. Tubb is now well and truly signed up to do a series of novellettes and shorts for the future editions of Nebula. I only hope there will be another like "Dark Solution" among them! Glad you enjoyed the rest of the issue—write again, please.*

DEAR ED: Congratulations!—"Nebula" is progressing rapidly, the contents have improved with every issue and by now should be at least bi-monthly.

If I can deny Walt Willis's statement that the dual issue of "Space Times" was due to financial difficulties within the N.S.F.C. I shall rest happy. This was due solely to the removal of our printer and the hiatus which ensued.

BRIAN VARLEY,
(*Treas., N.S.F.C.*),
ASHTON-U-LYNE.

** Thanks for the note, Brian, I'm naturally glad to let you deny this error in Walt's column—passed to you, Walt.*

DEAR ED: In No. 3 E.C. Tubb gets my first choice for plot and handling plus the fact that the story is not beyond possibility. Whereas "Limbo" seemed rather less good on the plausibility score, it was good reading matter. H. J. Campbell and C. Beaumont both gave food for thought; "Enigma" and "Mr. Udell" both rather disappointing as so many parallel shorts get published nowadays.

Glad to see the X-word (good exercise for the old sweat-

box). I can't see why 4sj does that Film Column—it's getting so that I don't think I'll read it any more. Little Walter's "Electric Fan" was bearable as were "Guided Missives."

Summing up: A fine ish and not one bad item between covers—keep it up, Peter, you're doing fine, but can we have a story which will cause controversy among us?

C. J. LANE,
BARNESLEY,

** Thanks for the kind remarks, Jimmy, I'm glad you enjoy the magazine. What kind of controversial story did you have in mind? By the way, folks, Jimmy wants to contact any fans who are keen photographers. I'll be glad to pass on his address to anyone interested.*

DEAR ED: I congratulate you on the excellent magazine that you publish. It is easily the best on the market to-day. Most of our good authors work is published in bookform only, and the price is too high for a person like me who reads the lot. I have enjoyed every story in the two issues, some are excellent, but all are above the average of to-day's offerings, and I subscribe to 22 current publications.

Thanks again.

HARRY PETZWAL,
CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

** Thanks for the compliments, Harry, write again, won't you?*

**LOOK OUT FOR
"AMERICAN
SCIENCE FICTION"**



going places next year?

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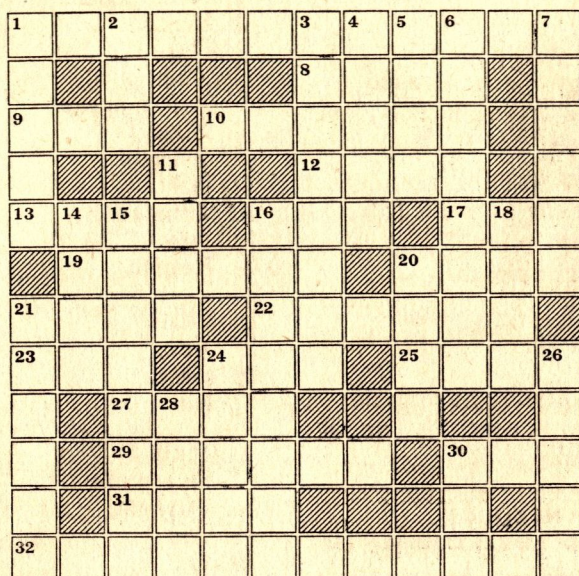
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SCIENCE FICTION CROSSWORD PUZZLE

BY
TONY C. THORNE



CLUES ACROSS.

1. The first step to the planets? (5, 7).
8. More than you could lift! (1, 3).
9. Purpose.
10. In cricket, avoid being caught like this! (3, 3).
12. Ripped.
13. This is no robbery either.
16. Container for chemicals.
17. Jelly-like material.
19. Protective finish and insulator.
20. Kind of air but not atmospheric.
21. Most metals start life as these.
22. The region that is behind you!
23. Modern.
24. Usually applied to the ginger variety!

25. Drained financially!

27. Worth a whistle if this describes her.
29. Some life-forms might do without this.
30. If you do this one way, friction will be applied the other way.
31. Rhythmic quality.
32. Regularly visiting the Solar System (7, 5).

CLUES DOWN.

1. You will find many of these in 7 Down.
2. This extends the use of your hand.
3. Lesser known metallic element.
4. Locomotives entering tunnels often give this (1, 4).
5. A kind of circuit but not electrical.

6. Sum total of all minute components.
7. Brilliant astronomical spectacle.
11. Mythical toxic tree.
14. This when applied to a wolf is something to be avoided.
15. If your flashlight fails you may need this (1, 3, 4).
16. A vector quantity.
18. Part of the Emerald Isle.
20. A French priest.
21. A rapid approach.
24. Name.
26. The unpleasant side to a bank account.
28. Meteorological phenomena.
30. Our sun is near this part of the galaxy.

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SOLUTION TO LAST ISSUES CROSSWORD PUZZLE

DOWN.

1. Hydroponicum.
2. Eclipse.
3. Cog.
4. Stain.
5. Astronomical.
7. Your.
8. Ilmenite.
9. Host.
10. Titanium.
12. Nee.
19. Respite.
21. Doer.
23. Gest.
25. Ado.
26. Get on.
32. Elf.

ACROSS.

1. Hypercubes.
6. Daylight.
11. Ant.
13. Oil.
15. Upmost.
17. Purse.
18. Tar.
20. End.
22. Negro.
24. Nag.
27. Ionise.
28. Ideate.
29. Ups.
30. Cot.
31. Eremitic.
33. Not of metal.

Continued from Page 2

From this present issue NEBULA will contain 128 pages (instead of 120) at no extra cost to the reader. It will appear on your newsstand every TWO MONTHS (instead of every three) and last,

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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'."

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."

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