NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

BI-MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 9



HEINLEIN ★ WRIGHT ★ WHITE ★ TUBB

Back Numbers ?

Ensure many extra hours of reading enjoyment by writing for these back issues of Britain's Quality Science-Fiction Magazine to-day.

NEBULA NUMBER ONE **POST FREE 1/-**

Introduced Peter Ridley, big-name author of the future.

NEBULA NUMBER FIVE **POST FREE 1/6**

Contained "Alphabet Scoop," by Ross Rocklynne, which was recently reprinted in the U.S.A.

NEBULA NUMBER SIX **POST FREE 1/6**

Has a treat in store for you with "Sustained Pressure" by Eric Frank Russell.

NEBULA NUMBER SEVEN **POST FREE 1/6**

Better than any previous issue!

NEBULA NUMBER EIGHT **From your Newsagent 2/-**

Read and be thrilled by "Episode" by E. C. Tubb.

Numbers 2, 3 and 4 out of Print

Readers in America should send One Dollar for all available numbers. Cash with Order in all cases, please, to

NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E., Scotland

NEBULA
SCIENCE FICTION

Issue Number Nine

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Novel:

PROJECT ONE — **E. C. Tubb** 67

There was a grim threat of sudden and painful death—but no one knew from where it came.

Novelette:

ORDEAL IN SPACE — **Robert A. Heinlein** 3

He ventured out into space —and brought back hell!

Short Stories:

CURTAIN CALL — **James White** 19
CUL DE SAC — **Lan Wright** 29
ALCOHOLIC AMBASSADOR — **Dan Morgan** 40
ASPECT — **Bob Shaw** 55

Special Features:

Look Here — **The Editor** 2
Something To Read — **Kenneth F. Slater** 116
Scientifilm Previews — **Forrest J. Ackerman** 120
Electric Fan — **Walter A. Willis** 122
Guided Missives — **The Readers** 124

Cover by Bob Clothier.
Black and White Illustrations by Wilson, Clothier, Frew, Greengrass and Hunter

NEBULA SCIENCE-FICTION is printed in Scotland and published bi-monthly by PETER HAMILTON (Publisher) at 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E. This edition was published in August, 1954.

Sole distribution rights for Australia and New Zealand have been granted to Messrs. Gordon & Gotch (Australasia) Ltd.

No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage of unsolicited mss or artwork and while these are invited, adequate return postage shou'd always be enclosed.

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

Look here . . .

As time goes on it becomes increasingly evident that science-fiction readers are not confining themselves solely to the magazines and paper-backed pocket-books in the field, there being presently a large number of hard-cover science-fiction novels and anthologies on the market.

This is very satisfactory and it is gratifying to see our favourite form of literature taking another step towards general recognition, but I feel that it is a pity that almost all these books, in common with almost all of the magazines at our disposal, are merely reprints of American publications.

Exceptions to this regrettable rule are few, considering the number and quality of British authors. A notable exception is however, a new series of books devoted entirely to new novels by British authors, published by Messrs. Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd., and edited by Angus Wilson.

The first in this series is "Hole in Heaven" by F. DUBREZ FAWCETT, which is reviewed on another page. But whatever the merits of this particular book, I would urge you to buy it, if only to encourage a venture which deserves all possible success.

Many readers forget that a large number of the authors who are so popular in America are in fact British and only sell their stories abroad to obtain the higher author rates caused by the present rate - of - exchange. No American editor is going to attempt to foster *new* British talent, as obviously there is plenty right on his own doorstep. So without the presence of virile science-fiction magazine and book publishers in this country we would be left in the very unfortunate position of having to read only what Americans were pleased to permit us—by courtesy of our large magazine reprinting firms here, of course.

So let us all, as potential authors and illustrators of science-fiction (and I believe that this potentiality exists in every keen sf. reader), support those publications which are prepared to give us the opportunities we require.

NEBULA and the firm I have mentioned above are two—the others will receive special mentions and reviews in all future editions of this magazine.

* * * *

Our lead novel this time is by E. C. (Ted) TUBB, who is now very well known to us all. This novel, "Project One," should fill a long felt want with the readers who have been asking for a story set entirely on Earth, but don't think that it lacks any of the punch, originality and "Human Interest" which have made this author so popular in so short a time; many of the people who have seen this story so far think that it is easily his best to date!

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, the author of "Ordeal in Space" is well-known to everyone familiar with the science-fiction world. This story has never appeared in magazine form in this country

Concluded on Page 128

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Ordeal In Space

He ventured out into space—
and brought back hell

Illustrated by Jack Wilson

MAYBE we should never have ventured out into space. One of our basic, innate fears is the fear of falling. Those terrible heights! Why should any man in his right mind let himself be placed where he could fall for days and weeks and die of hunger or exhaustion before striking anything solid? But all spacemen are crazy. Everybody knows that.

The medicos were being very kind, he supposed. "You're lucky. You want to remember that, old fellow. You're still young and your retired pay relieves you of worry about the future. You're in fine shape."

"Fine shape?"

"No, I mean it," the chief psychiatrist persisted gently. "The little quirk you have does you no harm at all—except that you can't go out into space again. I can't honestly call acrophobia a neurosis; fear of falling is normal and sane. You just have it a little more strongly than most, which is not surprising in view of what you have been through."

The reminder set him to shaking again. He closed his eyes and saw the stars wheeling below him again. He was falling, falling endlessly. The psychiatrist's voice pulled him back. "Steady, old man! Look around you."

"Sorry."

"Not at all. Now tell me, what do you plan to do?"

"I don't know. Get a job, I suppose."

"The Company will give you a job."

He shook his head. The last thing he wanted was to hang around a spaceport. He could see himself wearing a little button in his shirt to show that he was once a man, being addressed by the courtesy title of captain, claiming the privileges of the pilots' lounge on the basis of what he used to be, and hearing the shop talk die down whenever he approached a group of pilots.

"I think you're wise," the doctor said. "Best to make a clean break until you are feeling better."

"You think I'll get over it?"

"Possibly. It's functional, you know. No trauma."

"But you don't think so?"

"I didn't say that. I honestly don't know. We still know very little about what makes a man tick."

"I see. Well, I might as well be leaving."

The psychiatrist stood up and held out his hand. "Holler if you want anything. And come back to see us in any case."

"Thanks."

The psychiatrist shook his head as his patient walked out. The man did not walk like a spaceman; the easy, animal self-confidence was gone.

Only a small part of Greater New York was roofed over in those days, so he stayed underground until he was in that section, then sought out a passageway lined with bachelor rooms. He put a coin in the slot of the first one which was vacant, threw his jump bag inside, and left. The monitor at the intersection gave him the address of the nearest placement office. He went there, seated himself at the interview desk, stamped in his fingerprints, and started filling out forms. It gave him a curious back-to-the-beginning feeling; he had not looked for a job since pre-cadet days.

He left filling in his name to the last and hesitated even then. He had already received more than his fill of publicity and did

not want to be recognised. Presently he printed in the name 'William Saunders' and dropped the forms in the slot.

He had finished his third cigarette and was getting ready to light another when the screen in front of him at last lighted up. He found himself staring at the image of a nice-looking brunette. "Mr Saunders," the image said, "will you come inside, please? Door seventeen."

The brunette in person was there to offer him a seat and a cigarette. "Make yourself comfortable, Mr Saunders. I'm Miss Joyce. I'd like to talk with you about your application."

When she saw that he did not intend to speak, she said, "This name you have given us—we know who you are, of course, from your prints."

"I suppose so."

"Of course I know what everybody knows about you, but your action in using this name, Mr—"

"Saunders."

"—Mr Saunders, caused me to query the files." She held up a microfilm spool, turned so that he might read his own name on it. "I know quite a lot about you now—more than the public knows and more than you saw fit to put into your application. It's a good record, Mr Saunders."

"Thank you."

"But I can't use it in placing you in a job. I can't even refer to it, if you insist on using a false name."

"The name is Saunders." His voice was flat, rather than emphatic.

"Don't be hasty, Mr Saunders. There are many positions in which the factor of prestige can be used quite legitimately to obtain a much higher beginning pay."

"I'm not interested."

She looked at him and decided not to insist. "As you wish. If you go to reception room B, you can start your classification and skill tests."

"Thank you."

"If you should change your mind later, Mr Saunders, we will be glad to re-open the case. Through that door, please."

Three days later found him at work for a small firm which specialised in custom-built communication systems. His job was calibrating electronic equipment. It was soothing work, de-

manding enough to occupy his mind yet easy for a man of his experience. At the end of three months he was promoted out of the helper category.

He was building himself a well-insulated rut: working, sleeping, eating, spending an occasional evening at the public library or working out at the YMCA—and never, under any circumstances, going out under the open sky or up to any height, not even a theatre balcony.

He tried to keep his past life out of his mind, but his memory of it was still fresh. At times he would find himself daydreaming about the star-sharp, frozen sky of Mars, or the roaring night life of Venusburg. He would see again the swollen, ruddy bulk of Jupiter hanging over the port on Ganymede, impossibly huge, crowding the sky. Or he might, for a time, feel again the sweet quiet of the long watches on the lonely reaches between the planets. But such reveries were dangerous; they cut close to the edge of his new peace of mind. It was easy to slide over and find himself clinging for life to his last handhold on the steel sides of the Valkyrie, fingers numb and failing, and nothing below him but the bottomless well of space. Then he would come back to Earth, shaking uncontrollably and gripping his chair or the workbench with frantic fingers.

The first time it happened at work he found one of his benchmates, Joe Tully, staring at him curiously. "What's the trouble, Bill?" he asked. "Hangover?"

"Nothing," he managed to say. "Just a chill."

"You better take a pill. Come on—let's go to lunch."

Tully led the way to the elevator and they crowded in. Most of the employees, even the women, preferred to go down via the drop chute, but Tully always used the elevator. Saunders, of course, never used the drop chute; this had eased them into the habit of lunching together. He knew that the chute was safe, that, even if the power should fail, safety nets would snap across at each floor level.

Tully said publicly that a drop chute hurt his arches, but he confided privately to Saunders that he didn't trust automatic machinery. Saunders nodded understandingly but said nothing. It warmed him toward Tully. He began feeling friendly and not on the defensive for the first time since the start of his new life. He began to want to tell Tully the truth about himself, but he was afraid that Joe would insist on treating him like a hero. When he was a kid, hanging around spaceports, trying to wangle chances to

go inside the ships, and cutting classes to watch take-offs, he had dreamed of being a "hero" some day, a hero of the spaceways, returning in triumph from some incredible and dangerous piece of exploration. What troubled him now was the fact that he still had the same picture of what a hero should look like and how he should behave; it did not include shying away from open windows or being fearful of walking across an open square.

One day Tully invited him home for dinner. He wanted to go, but fended off the invitation while he enquired where Tully lived. The Shelton Homes, Tully told him, naming one of those great, boxlike warrens that disfigured the Jersey flats. "It's a long way to come back," Saunders said doubtfully, while turning over in his mind ways to get there without exposing himself to the things he feared.

"You won't have to come back," Tully assured him. "We've got a spare room. Come on. My old lady does her own cooking —that's why I keep her."

"Well, all right," he conceded. "Thanks, Joe." The La Guardia Tube would take him within a quarter-of-a-mile; if he could not find a covered way, he would take a ground cab and close the shades .

When he arrived at the apartment Tully met him in the hall and said in a whisper, "Meant to have a young lady for you, Bill. Instead we've got my brother-in-law. He's a louse. Sorry."

"Forget it, Joe. I'm glad to be here." He was indeed. The discovery that Joe's flat was on the thirty-fifth floor had dismayed him at first, but he was delighted to find that he had no feeling of height. The lights were on, the windows occulted, the floor under him was rock solid; he felt warm and safe. He let himself go to the pleasure of feeling at home and safe and wanted. He managed not even to hear most of the aggressive and opinionated remarks of Joe's brother-in-law.

After dinner he relaxed in an easy chair, glass of beer in hand, and watched the video screen. It was a musical comedy and he laughed more heartily than he had for months. Presently the comedy gave way to a religious programme, the National Cathedral Choir. He let it be, listening with one ear and giving some attention to the conversation with the other.

The choir was more than halfway through the "Prayer for Travellers" before he became fully aware of what they were singing: —

"Hear us when we pray to Thee
For those in peril on the sea.
Almighty Ruler of the All
Whose power extends to great and small,
Who guides the stars with steadfast law,
Whose least creation fills with awe;
Oh, grant Thy mercy and Thy grace
To those who venture into space."

He wanted to switch off, but he had to hear it out. He could not stop listening to it, though it hurt him in his heart with the unbearable homesickness of the hopelessly exiled. Even as a cadet this one hymn could fill his eyes with tears; now he kept his face turned away from the others.

When the choir's "amen" let him do so, he switched quickly to another program and remained bent over the instrument, pretending to fiddle with it, while he composed his features. Then he turned back to the company, outwardly serene, though it seemed to him that anyone could see the hard, aching knot in his middle.

The brother-in-law was still droning on. "We ought to annex 'em," he was saying. "That's what we ought to do. Three-Planets' Treaty— what a lot of ruddy rot! What right have they got to tell us what we can do and can't do on Mars?"

"Well, Ed," Tully said mildly, "it's their planet, isn't it? They were there first."

Ed brushed it aside. "Did we ask the Indians whether or not they wanted us in North America? Nobody has any right to hang on to something he doesn't know how to use. With proper exploitation—"

"You been speculating, Ed?"

"Huh? It wouldn't be speculation, if the government wasn't made up of a bunch of weak-spined old women. 'Rights of natives,' indeed! What rights do a bunch of degenerates have?"

Saunders found himself contrasting Ed Schultz with Knath Sooth, the only Martian he himself had ever known well. Gentle Knath, who had been old before Ed was born, and yet was rated as young among his own kind. Knath. why, Knath could sit for hours with a friend or trusted acquaintance, saying nothing, needing to say nothing. "Growing together," they called it. His entire race had so grown together that they had needed no government until the earthmen came.

Saunders had once asked his friend why he exerted himself so little, was satisfied with so little. More than an hour passed and Saunders was beginning to regret his inquisitiveness when Knath replied, "My fathers have laboured and I am weary."

Saunders sat up and faced the brother-in-law. "They are *not* degenerate."

"I suppose you are an expert!"

"The Martians aren't degenerate, they're just tired," Saunders persisted.

Tully grinned. His brother-in-law saw it and became surly. "What gives you the right to an opinion? Have you ever been to Mars?"

Saunders realised suddenly that he had let his censors down. "Have *you*?" he answered cautiously.

"That's beside the point. The best minds all agree—" Bill let him go on and did not contradict him again. It was a relief when Tully suggested that, since they all had to be up early, maybe it was time to think about going to bed.

He said goodnight to Mrs Tully and thanked her for a wonderful dinner, then followed Tully into the guestroom. "Only way to get rid of that family curse we're saddled with, Bill," he apologised. "Stay up as long as you like." Tully stepped to the window and opened it. "You'll sleep well here. We're up high enough to get honest-to-goodness fresh air." He stuck his head out and took a couple of big breaths. "Nothing like the real article," he continued as he withdrew from the window. "I'm a country boy at heart. What's the matter, Bill?"

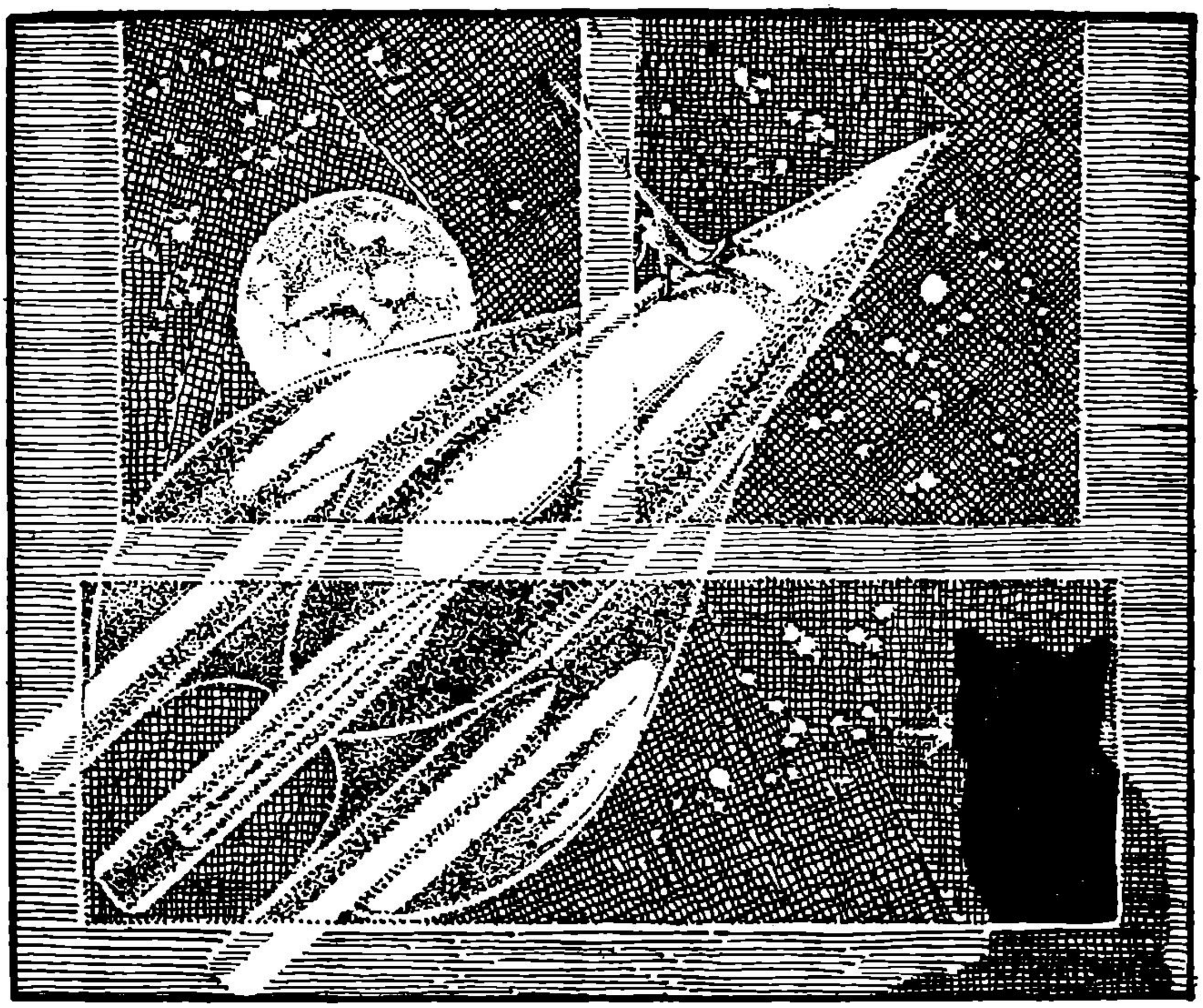
"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"I thought you looked a little pale. Well, sleep tight. I've already set your bed for seven; that'll give us plenty of time."

"Thanks, Joe. Goodnight." As soon as Tully was out of the room he braced himself, then edged over and closed the window. He turned away quickly, switched the ventilation back on, and sank down on the edge of the bed.

He sat there for a long time, smoking one cigarette after another. He knew too well that the peace of mind he thought he had regained was unreal. There was nothing left to him but shame and a long, long hurt. To have reached the point where he had to knuckle under to a tenth-rate knot-head like Joe's brother-in-law! It would have been better, if he had never come out of the Valkyrie business.

Presently he took a five-grain tablet of "Fly-Rite" from his



pouch, swallowed it, and went to bed. He got up almost at once, forced himself to open the window a trifle, then compromised by changing the setting of the bed so that it would not turn out the lights after he was asleep.

He had been sleeping and dreaming for an indefinitely long time. He was back in space again—indeed, he had never been away from it. He was happy with the full happiness of a man who has awakened to find his fright was only a bad dream.

It was the crying that disturbed his serenity. At first it made him only vaguely uneasy, then he began to feel in some way responsible; he must do something about it. The transition to falling had only dream logic behind it, but it was real to him. He was grasping, his hands were slipping, had slipped, and there was nothing under him but the black emptiness of space . .

He was awake and gasping on the bed; the lights burned brightly around him. The dream was over. But the crying persisted. He shook his head, then listened. There was no doubt

of it's reality. It sounded like the cry of a kitten. He sat up quickly. Even if he had not had the spaceman's traditional fondness for cats, he would have investigated. He liked cats for themselves. He got up and looked for the source of the crying.

The kitten was not in the room—the sound came in through the slightly open window. He shied off, stopped, and tried to collect his thoughts. He told himself that it was unnecessary to do anything more. If the sound came from outside, then it must be that the kitten was in a nearby apartment. But he knew that he was lying to himself; the sound was too close. In some impossible way the cat was just outside his window, thirty-five stories above the street.

He sat down and tried to light a cigarette, but it broke in his fingers. Letting the fragments fall to the floor, he rose to his feet and took six nervous steps toward the window, as if he were being jerked by a rope. Sinking to his knees, he grasped the window, threw it wide open, then clung to the sill, his eyes tightly shut.

After a time the sill seemed to steady a bit. He opened his eyes, gasped, and shut them again. Finally he opened them slowly, being careful not to look out at the stars or down at the street. He had half expected to find the cat on a balcony outside his room —it seemed the only reasonable explanation. But there was no balcony, no place at all where a cat could reasonably be.

Now the mewing was louder than ever and seemed to come from directly under him. Slowly he forced his head out, still clinging to the sill, and made himself look down. About four feet below the window, a narrow ledge ran around the building, and seated on it was a kitten, a ball of fluff that stared up at him and mewed again.

It was barely possible that, by clinging to the sill with one hand, he could reach it without actually going out of the window. He considered calling Tully, then thought better of it. Tully was shorter than he was and had less reach. The only thing was to rescue the kitten now, before the fluff-brained idiot jumped or fell.

He tried for it. He shoved his shoulders out, clung with his left hand, and reached down with his right. Then he opened his eyes and saw that he was still a foot or ten inches away from the kitten. It sniffed curiously in the direction of his hand.

He stretched till his bones cracked. The kitten promptly skittered from his fingers and stopped a good six feet away. It settled down and began washing its face.

He inched back inside and collapsed, sobbbing, on the floor. "I can't do it. Not again—"

The rocket ship Valkyrie was two hundred and forty-nine days out from the Earth-Luna Space Terminal and approaching Mars Terminal on Deimos, outer Martian satellite. William Cole, Chief Communications Officer and relief pilot, was sleeping sweetly when his assistant shook him. "Hey, Bill! Wake up! We're in a jam."

"Huh? Wazzat?" But he was already reaching for his socks. "Whats the trouble, Tom?"

Fifteen minutes later he knew that his junior officer had not exaggerated; he was reporting the facts to the old man: the primary radar was out of whack. Tom Dalquhist had discovered it during a routine check that he made as soon as Mars was inside the maximum range of the radar pilot. The captain had shrugged. "Fix it, Mister—and be quick about it. We need it."

Bill Cole shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with it inside, Captain. She acts as if the antenna were gone completely."

"That's impossible. We haven't even had a meteor alarm."

"Might be anything, Captain. Might be metal fatigue and it just fell off. But we've got to replace that antenna. Stop the spin on the ship and I'll go out and fix it. I can jury-rig a replacement while she loses her spin."

The Valkyrie was a luxury ship, even though she had been assembled long before anyone had any idea how to produce an artificial gravity field. Nevertheless she had pseudogravity for the comfort of her passengers. She spun endlessly around her main axis, like a shell from a rifled gun. The resulting angular acceleration—miscalled 'centrifugal force'—kept her passengers firm in their beds, or steady on their feet. The spin was started as soon as her rockets stopped blasting at the beginning of a trip and was stopped only when it was necessary to manoeuvre into a landing.

The captain looked annoyed . "I've started to take the spin off, but I can't wait that long. Jury-rig the astrogational radar for piloting."

"It can't be done, sir. It's a technical impossibility."

"When I was your age I could jury-rig anything! Well, find me an answer, Mister. I can't take this ship down blind—not even for the Harriman Medal."

Bill Cole hesitated for a moment before replying. "I'll have to go out while she's still got spin on her, Captain, and make the replacement. There isn't any other way to do it."

The captain looked away from him, his jaw muscles flexed. "Get the replacement ready. Hurry up about it."

Cole found the captain already at the airlock when he arrived with the gear he needed for the repair. To his surprise the old man had on his spacesuit. "Explain to me what I'm to do," he ordered Bill.

"You're not going out, sir?" The captain simply nodded.

Bill took a look at the captain's waistline. Why, the old man must be thirty-five, if he's a day! "I'm afraid I can't explain too clearly. I had expected to make the repair myself."

"I've never asked a man to do a job I wouldn't do myself. Explain it to me."

Dalquhist and he, both in spacesuits, helped the old man down the hole after the inner door of the lock was closed and the air exhausted. The space below the lock was a vast, star-flexed emptiness. With spin still on the ship, every direction outward was 'down'—down for millions of uncounted miles. They put a safety line on him, of course, but nevertheless it gave Bill a sinking feeling to see the captain's head disappear into the bottomless hole.

The line paid out steadily for several feet, then stopped. When it had stopped for several minutes, Bill leaned over and touched his helmet against Dalquhist's. "Hang on to my feet. I'm going to take a look."

He hung head down out of the lock and looked around. The captain was stopped, hanging by both hands, nowhere near the antenna fixture. He scrambled back up and reversed himself. "I'm going out."

It was not a great trick, he found, to hang by his hands and swing himself along to where the captain was stalled. The Valkyrie was a space-to-space ship, not like the sleek-sided jobs we see around earthports; she was covered with handholds for the convenience of repairmen at the terminals. Once he reached him, it was possible, by grasping the same steel rung that the captain clung to, to aid him in swinging back to the last one he had quitted. Five minutes later Dalquhist was pulling the old man up through the hole and Bill was scrambling after him.

He began at once to unbuckle the repair gear from the cap-

tain's suit and transfer it to his own. He lowered himself back down the hole and was on his way before the older man had recovered enough to object.

Swinging out to where the antenna must be replaced was not too hard, though he had all eternities under his toes. The suit impeded him a little, but he was used to working in spacesuits. He was a little winded from helping the captain, but he could not stop to think about that. The increased spin bothered him somewhat —the airlock was nearer the axis of spin than was the antenna— and he felt heavier as he moved out.

Getting the replacement antenna shipped was another matter. It was neither large nor heavy, but he found it impossible to fasten it into place. He needed one hand to cling by, one to hold the antenna, and one to handle the wrench. That left him shy one hand, no matter how he tried.

Finally he jerked his safety line to signal to Dalquhist for more slack. Then, working with one hand, he unshackled it from his waist, passed the end twice through a handhold and knotted it, leaving about six feet of it hanging free. The shackle on the free end he fastened to another handhold. The result was a loop, an improvised bosun's chair, which would support his weight while he manhandled the antenna into place. The job went fairly quickly then.

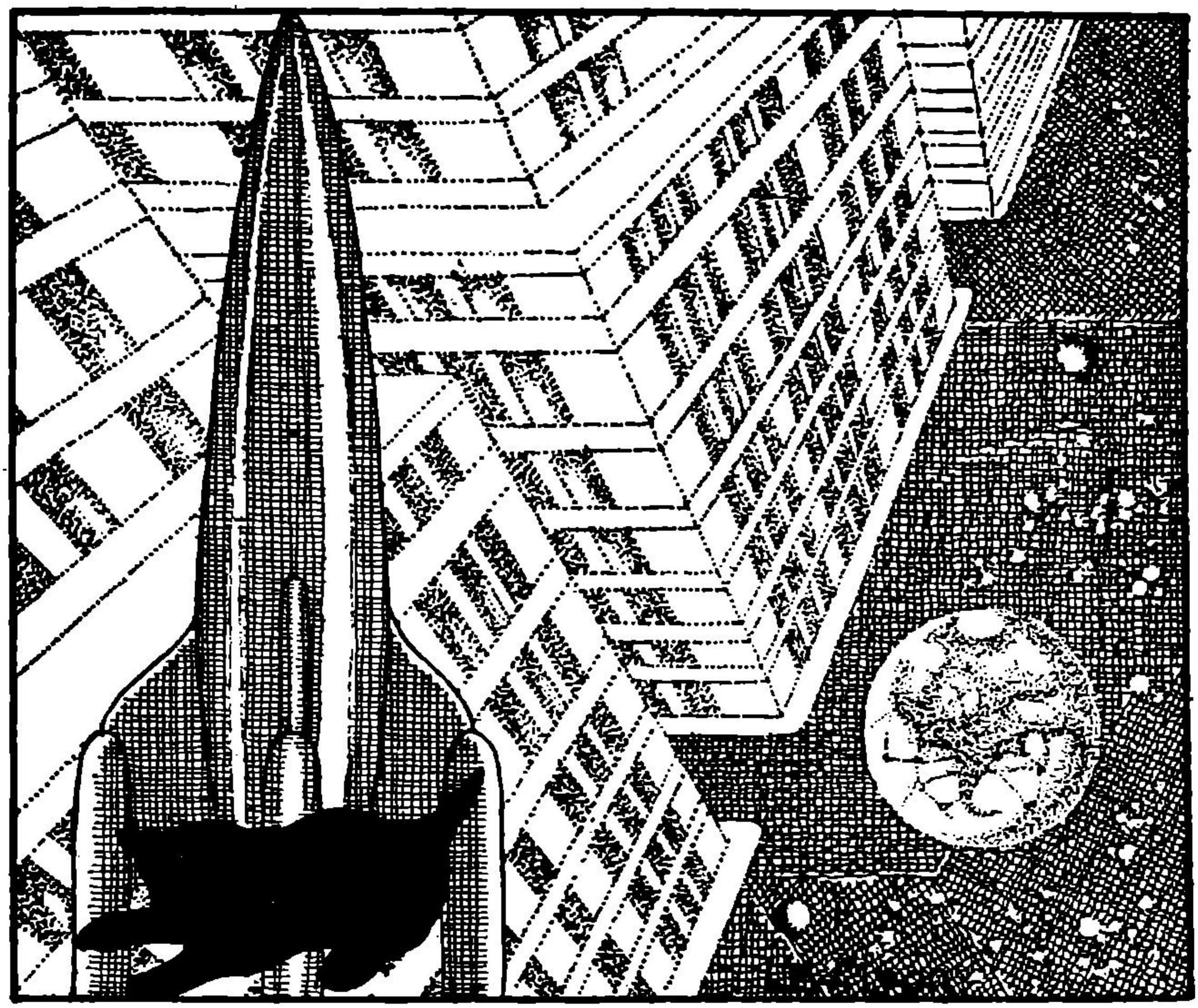
He was almost through. There remained one bolt to fasten on the far side, away from where he swung. The antenna was already secured at two points and its circuit connection made. He decided he could manage it with one hand. He left his perch and swung over, monkey fashion.

The wrench slipped as he finished tightening the bolt; it escaped from his grasp and fell free. He watched it go, out and out and out, down and down and down. It made him dizzy to watch it, bright in the sunlight against the deep black of space. Up to now, he had been too busy to look down. He shivered. "Good thing I was through with it," he said. "It would be a long walk to fetch it." Then he started back.

He found suddenly that he could not make it.

He had swung past the antenna to reach his present position, using a grip on his safety-line swing to give him a few inches more reach. Now the loop of line hung quietly, just beyond his grasp. There was no way to reverse the process.

He hung by both hands and told himself not to get panicky —he must think his way out. Around the other side? No, the



steel skin of the Valkyrie was smooth there with no handhold for more than six feet. Even if he were not tired—and he had to admit that he was tired and becoming fiercely cold—even if he were fresh, it would be an impossible swing for anyone not a chimpanzee.

He looked down and immediately regretted it.

There was nothing below him but stars, down and down, endlessly—stars, swinging in great arcs as the ship spun in the emptiness and blackness and cold of all time.

He tried to hoist himself bodily into the single narrow rung he clung to, trying to reach it with his toes. It was a futile, strength-wasting attempt. He quieted his panic sufficiently to stop it, then hung limp.

It was easier if he kept his eyes closed, but after a while he always had to open them and look. The Big Dipper would swing past, to be followed presently by Orion. He tried to compute the passing minutes in terms of the number of rotations the ship made, but his mind would not work clearly, and, after a while, he always had to shut his eyes.

His hands were becoming stiff from the cold and the tiredness. He tried to rest them by hanging by one hand at a time. He let go with his left hand, felt pins and needles course through it, and beat it against his side. Presently it seemed time to give his right hand a spell.

He could no longer reach up to the rung with his left hand. He did not have the power left in him to make the extra pull; he was fully extended and could not shorten himself enough to get his left hand up.

He could no longer feel his right hand at all, but he could see it begin to slip. It was slipping— Then the sudden release in tension let him know that he was falling. The ship dropped swiftly away from him.

He came to with the captain bending over him. "Just keep quiet, Bill."

"Where—?"

"Take it easy. The patrol from Deimos was already close by when you let go. They tracked you on the 'scope, matched orbits with you, and picked you up. First time in history, I guess. Now keep quiet. You're a sick man; you hung there for more than two hours, Bill."

The mewing started up again, more plaintively than ever. He got up on his knees and looked out over the window sill. The kitten was still away to the left on the ledge. He thrust his head cautiously out a little further, remembering not to look at anything but the kitten and the ledge. "Here, kitty!" he called. "Here, kit-kit-kit-ty! Here, kitty, come kitty!"

The kitten stopped washing and managed to look puzzled.

"Come, kitty," he repeated softly. He let go the window sill with his right hand and gestured toward the kitten invitingly. It approached about three inches, then sat down. "Here, kitty," he pleaded and stretched his arm as far as possible. It promptly backed away again.

He withdrew his arm and thought over the situation. This was getting nowhere, he decided. If he were to slide over the sill and stand on the ledge, he could hang on with one arm and be perfectly safe. He knew that, he knew it would be safe—he need not look down.

He drew himself back inside, reversed himself, and, with great caution, gripped the sill with both arms and let his legs slide down the face of the building. He focussed his eyes carefully on the corner of the bed.

The ledge seemed to have been moved. He could not find it, and was beginning to be sure that he had reached past it with one toe, then he had both feet firmly planted on it. It seemed about six inches wide. He took a deep breath.

Letting go with his right arm, he turned and faced the kitten, which was interested in the procedure but not disposed to investigate more closely. If he were to creep along the ledge, holding on with his left hand, he could just about reach it from the corner of the window.

He moved his feet slowly, until his left arm was fully extended, then, bending his knees a trifle, and leaning down, he stretched out his hand. The kitten sniffed his groping fingers, then leaped backwards. One tiny paw missed the edge; it scrambled and regained its footing. "You little idiot!" he said indignantly, "Do you want to bash your brains out?"

The situation looked hopeless now; the baby cat was too far away to be reached from his anchorage at the window. He called "Kitty, kitty" rather hopelessly, then stopped to consider the matter.

He could give up. He could prepare himself to wait all night in the hope that the kitten would decide to come closer. Or he could go and get it.

The ledge was wide enough to give him footing. He made himself small, flat to the wall, and moved slowly, retaining the grip on the window as long as possible, inching so gradually that he hardly seemed to move. When the window frame was finally out of reach, when his left hand was flat against the smooth wall, he made the mistake of looking down—down past the sheer wall to the glowing pavement below.

He pulled his eyes back and fastened them on a spot on the wall. Slowly he moved his right foot forward, and bent his knees. He stretched his right hand along the wall, until it was over and a little beyond the kitten. He brought it down in a sudden swipe and found himself with a handful of scratching, biting fur.

He held perfectly still then, and made no attempt to check the minor outrages the kitten was inflicting on his hand. Arms still outstretched, body flat to the wall, he started his return. He could not see where he was going and could not turn his head without

losing some little of his margin of balance. It seemed a long way back, longer than he had come, but at last the fingertips of his left hand slipped into the window opening.

He backed up the rest of the way in a matter of seconds, put the kitten on the sill, then got his right knee over. He pulled himself up and took a deep breath. "Man!" he said aloud. "That was a tight squeeze. You're a menace to traffic, little cat."

He glanced down at the pavement and found he could watch the people walking below without feeling any fear. Bracing himself in the window frame, his back against one side, feet pushed against the other, he looked up at the stars. Mighty nice they looked, and mighty bright. The kitten settled down in the cradle of his stomach and began to purr. With his eyes still on the heavens, he stroked it absent-mindedly and reached for a cigarette. He would go out to the port and take his physical and his psycho tomorrow, he decided. He scratched the kitten's ears. "Little fluff-head," he said, "how would you like to take a long, long ride with me "

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Tomorrow's BIG NAMES :

Paul Enever — **Bob Shaw**

Peter J. Ridley — **Tony C. Thorne**

David S. Gardner — **Bob Silverberg**

were all introduced in

NEBULA

The Magazine of Opportunity!

JAMES WHITE

Curtain Call

The End must come sooner or later—will a new Beginning follow?

Illustrated by Bob Clothier

THE crater was small and typical, just another un-named pock-mark on the wrinkled and pitted face of the Moon in the vicinity of Petavius. But it did give a good view of Earth, Mitchell saw, as he stood among his battery of telescopic cameras and tape recorders; and the ringwall was high enough to shade the sensitive equipment from the solar glare. That was important if he was to get clear, sharp pictures with no fogging.

Or, he amended bitterly, that *would* be important—if there were people left to look at his pictures.

On the ground a few yards away a thing that resembled only slightly a lizard moved restlessly. Beside it something that looked like a withered prune floating in a spherical gob of syrup began to hop slowly up and down, making little flat dimples in the soft pumice. A completely opaque cube that held something else remained motionless. The slow, awful thoughts that weren't his own began to well up into his mind again; reproach, utter helplessness, and a great wave of pity.

Shut up! Mitchell thought savagely. *Leave me alone*!

The vast minds withdrew and his thoughts were his own property again. But they would still be listening in, he knew, and watching. And they would listen and watch carefully, so as not to miss a thing. There was going to be quite a show here any minute now, an unparalleled spectacle maybe. Excitement, thrills, sudden death. Like the galactic rubbernecks they were, they wouldn't want to miss any of it.

But he was not being fair, Mitchell knew, calling them that. As he looked again at the beautiful blue crescent Earth hanging up there, he thought that they would be just as pleased if nothing at all happened. He'd got that impression from them somehow.

"Mitch!" said a tinny voice in his ear. "Can you hear me? The wind's changing again, Mitch. This might be it."

A long flex connected the receiver on the ground with the RT socket in his helmet, allowing him to listen while moving about. He felt an unreasoning urge to yank the plug out and stop that voice for good. It had begun to get on his nerves. It had said substantially the same thing three minutes ago. It had been saying it every few minutes for the last two hours.

Mitchell told the voice that he could hear it, and that that was good. His tone was deliberately lacking in warmth, but the voice still wanted to talk.

"Wh-what's it feel like being the only man on the Moon?" the voice asked. Even at a quarter of a million miles it sounded jittery. "Aren't you lonesome up there?"

Mitchell glanced involuntarily at the extra-terrestrial menagerie squatting nearby. He hadn't told Earth about them yet—they had enough on their minds up there already. They wouldn't have believed him anyway.

"It feels," he replied with great fervour, "Extremely crowded."

"All right, all *right*." the voice said angrily. "If you don't want to talk, say so, you sarcastic . ." It broke off. When it went on it sounded more friendly, but hurt, puzzled. "Sorry, Mitch. I didn't mean that. But I don't understand you. All alone up there, and at a time like this ." There was a click, and silence.

But he *liked* being alone, that was the main reason he'd asked for this job. Didn't they know that. And about not understanding him—that was a laugh. He didn't understand himself half the time. He only knew that he didn't like people—close up,

that was. They were, in a way, disease spots; just so many wild variables in an otherwise sane and scientifically well-ordered Universe. If you got too close to them they infected you with the same variability. They infected you with things like hate and friendship and courage and love, and more often as not they made you very unhappy. Mitchell *knew*. It was better to keep them at a distance.

Back on Earth people were always telling Mitchell to pull himself out of it, and live a little. They would act very friendly these people brought into contact with him during his work. They would slap him on the back, tell him to relax that they wouldn't bite him, and ask him out for a drink. The more tactless ones advised him to see a psychiatrist. His reply to them all was usually the same, and they rarely advised him twice. He had a gift for lifting the skin off a person's back with just a few softly-spoken sentences, and he found it hard not to use it. Mitchell knew what he was alright. He was simply a hermit. Unfortunately, hermits were out of date.

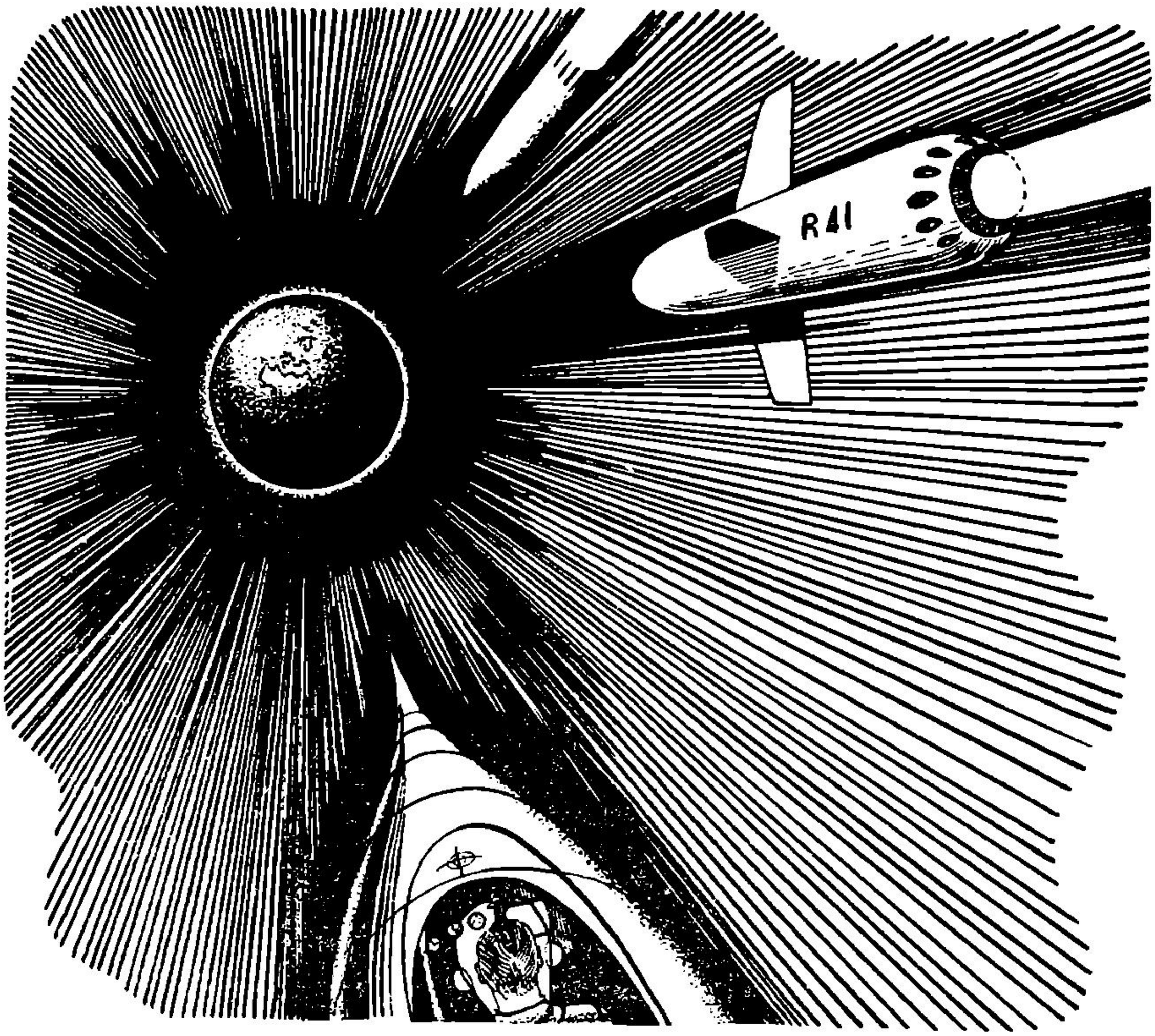
But he was good at his job. People went for his sound and TV news commentaries in a large way. In them he had things to say about everything, and about practically everybody—rude, libellous, corrosively sarcastic things. But they were true things he talked about; bigotry, graft, injustice. The people lapped up his words and his insults and demanded more. Naturally they didn't believe he meant half the things he said—nobody could dislike people *that* much.

Now he was the only human being not on Earth. That proved, he thought cynically, just how wrong they were.

"Mitch," said the voice in his earphones suddenly. "We're about ready to go. Get your cameras rolling, Mitch. Chemical and simple atomic weapons first. Watch northeast Asia for the firework display." The voice paused. Mitchell had the big telescopic cameras already turning when it continued. "You can start saying your piece now, Mitch. But don't be too smart. Don't make too many cracks. This may not turn out well, the way we want it."

No, said Mitchell silently. I won't be smart or make cracks. Not this time. This might be my first funeral oration. The death of a world is a serious business.

The star-begotten trio began edging closer, thinking great, sad, reproachful thoughts. Mitchell ignored them. In the air



less silence little, multi-coloured lights told of recording equipment ready and waiting. He cleared his throat and began to speak.

"This is Gregory Mitchell, on the Moon," he said quietly. "From here the Earth is a big, intensely-blue crescent hanging in blackness above the jagged ringwall of the crater Petavius. It is blue because, as yet, the atmosphere is un-poisoned by the fission products of A-bombs, B-bombs, or H-bombs. But in a few moments . ."

Mitchell went on talking. Quietly, soberly, he set the scene. Earth as seen by a detached observer, from space. No cracks; no snide remarks. Just plain, unemotional reporting. Trouble was he didn't feel detached at all; and a lot of emotions he hadn't known he possessed were beginning to affect his annunciation. Mitchell, for the first time in his life, felt very, very lonely.

That was understandable, of course. He was the only human being off Earth.

The tiny colony on Mars had tidied away their equipment, sealed their domes, and left. The staff of the Lunar Observatory had given their Big Glass a farewell polish, and departed. With them went the men of the refineries at Tycho, Eratosthenes, and Hell, and the scientists at the fuel abstraction plant in the Mare Imbrium. And the two exploratory ships nosing their way among the moons of Jupiter and Saturn had gone back, too. Everybody had gone back. They had just left whatever they had been doing and gone home. Home to Earth. Home for the Fireworks, the Big Show.

They all thought it very important to be in at the finale.

They couldn't make any difference to the final outcome, Mitchell knew. It was stupid, suicidal; but it was also the right thing to do. At the most important moment in human history they had all come home. Propaganda hadn't been responsible—they were too intelligent to be affected by that even if it had been used. They had come back to die, if that should be necessary, on their home planet, for an ideal and a way of living that they at long last knew to be worth dying for—and not worth living without.

Mitchell almost wished that he was up there, too.

On Earth's night side a point of light winked briefly into being and remained as an angry red blotch. The dump at Reinomsk, in the Urals. Talking rapidly, describing everything he saw, Mitchell lined up a telescope with the conflagration that marked the point of the explosion and saw that the monstrous, poisoned mushroom was already spreading and being torn to pieces by stratospheric winds. As he talked there were more winking lights, more angry red fever spots.

Further south, in Tunisia, another point of pale green light appeared suddenly and died in a fading red stain of air-borne radio-actives. Almost simultaneously the Aleutians and Central Australia followed suit. Mitchell wondered what the American continent looked like now. But it was out of sight on the day side of the planet—and anyway, probably most of the spectacular stuff would be happening in the Eastern hemisphere.

It was going to be quite a show.

Mitchell wondered what the three aliens thought of the performance. They were a very critical audience, he knew, and they hadn't liked it very much up to now. But the show could be saved by a terrific climax, a grand finale. And it could be a smash hit if only the actors lived to take a curtain call.

It was hard to think of it turning out a flop; there was so much action, drama, and sheer talent in it. Maybe there had been too much action recently—too much melodrama, and too much blood and atomic thunder. But there were good things in it, too. With people like Shakespeare, Gandhi, and Lister collaborating on the Book, with Decor by Michealangelo, da Vinci, and Wren, and musical arrangements by Beethoven, Gershwin and Sibelius among others, it could not help but be *good*

But the trouble was that there was no Producer, and by the time enough of the cast became intelligent enough to realise just how the show was supposed to go, it was too late to try producing themselves.

Or almost too late.

Mitchell caught himself sharply; without realising it he'd been holding forth onto the tape like some cosmic theatre critic. He shut up and began moving among his equipment, switching on receivers and moving their dials almost at random. As well as his own commentary, he wanted to record some radio reports from different countries on the Earth. He tried not to let the reports affect him, but it was no good.

When one of them said: the last load of Beebees is now at the x point, after their arrival from Dakar, where they were landed from the cruiser *Unicorn* which carried them from the Arctic base in North Canada. Each vial is encased in shock-absorbent layers of cotton and foam rubber, and during the final stages of the journey, in case of accidents, ten men with flame-throwers guarded each tiny container, ready to burn it and themselves out of existence . ." Mitchell felt the cold sweat break out on his forehead and his whole body crawl with a sympathetic itch. Viciously he slapped the toggle on his shoulder, switching the suit's 'phones out of circuit with *that* particular receiver.

Ten guards with flame-throwers, he thought disgustedly. *Flame-throwers*! And that was supposed to be protection against the most hellishly efficient engine of mass destruction ever developed—the Mark 17 Bacteriological Bomb.

They'd had flame-throwers at that base in the Arctic Circle which was producing BB17, but that hadn't stopped them from being wiped out to a man when a faulty retort sprung a leak. BB17 was fast-acting, and fantastically heat-resistant, but, being an artificial strain, it died out eventually if it hadn't anything to feed on and was kept isolated. After a few years had elapsed, Mitchell

remembered, they had been able to clean out that sealed-up base and use it again—to re-start production of BB17.

But BB17 hadn't been the only Weapon Too Terrible To Be Used that had been developed. The number of conventional A-bombs possessed by even the poorest countries came as a great shock to everyone. The United States had the H-bomb in considerable quantity. Russia, too. And Great Britain, who always seemed to prefer their native craftsmanship to mass production, had a few little bombs using a new type of reaction which produced an area of total destruction approximately seventy miles wide. France had come up with some lovely nerve gases, and Egypt had the neo-Influenza bugs. None of these weapons were for use, of course; they were all too horrible, too deadly.

But they'd kept on making them anyway. They'd made them until each and every country had enough Beebees to wipe out all life on Earth.

Mitchell ignored them. At first when he'd realised that equipment which might soon contain the records of the last words and deeds of a world that had died by its own hand. It was insane, crazy. But it was also wonderful, soul-stirring, and utterly human.

Mitchell wanted to talk again. He had to get this off his chest or he would blow himself apart. He took a deep breath.

The things on the crater floor edged nearer. Their awful alien minds touched his. The thing from Sirius that looked like a withered prune radiated a deep wave of pity and helplessness. The lizard-thing from Canopus and the thing in the cube from he didn't know where sent thoughts of sadness and recrimination, reproaching him that his young and promising race had blindly allowed itself to get into such a tragic predicament.

Mitchell ingored them. At first when he'd realised that these things were from the stars, he'd thought that they could have helped—produced a miracle of superscience maybe, and save the world. But no, they had explained that they had come in small scoutships and that they had no miracles on them, or thoughts to that effect. And even if they could have helped, they wouldn't. It was the Law, they had told him, that each race still bound to one solar system had to solve its problem without outside help. The Earth people would have to work this thing out for themselves.

Mitchell ground his teeth helplessly at the memory of it. Then he began to talk.

It wasn't quiet, unemotional reporting this time, but the almost incoherent eruption of a man complaining bitterly against blind Fate, and at the even blinder recent stupidity of his fellow men. Sometimes he spoke angrily and at the top of his voice, sometimes in a whisper that was almost a sob. He started with the small, international fights and worked up to World Wars One and Two and beyond. He accused, he reviled, and he condemned by name the men of the past he thought had contributed to the present mess by word, deed or omission. His tirade included Monarchs, Dictators, Presidents, and the unknown millions of bottle washers and street sweepers who had allowed themselves to be led like sheep, and who hadn't used their brains to *think* with. He cursed the stupidity that started the Cold War, and made every nation an arsenal where eventually the greatest fear had grown to be that of its own weapons getting out of control.

Something irritated Mitchell's ear. He disregarded it. Almost shouting, he went on, ". . nobody ever wanted a war—nobody who had actually to fight in it, that is. The Toms, Dicks, and Harrys who clean windows or drive trucks or dig potatoes never wanted wars. Neither did the Ivans or the Achmeds or the Mitsuis. And now, when we've at last come to our senses, when we've all agreed that war must stop, we're still threatened with destruction—"

Mitchell broke off as the irritation in his ear returned. In the silence it resolved itself into a voice in his 'phones.

"Mitch! *Ten seconds to go*!"

Mitchell looked up at the big blue crescent Earth, then at the little watch fixed inside his helmet, then back again. Funny, he thought, the Earth and the watch looked to be the same size. All at once the awful realisation of what was about to happen, and of what might happen afterwards, descended on him with crushing, implacable force.

"Oh God," he prayed, "Make this turn out . right."

On the darkened eastern hemisphere a point of searing blue light—many times brighter than any that had gone before—flared suddenly. Within a second it grew to a blinding disc a hundred miles across that lit the whole of North Africa like a planet-sized floodlight. Then orange and purple and dirty brown clouds formed, hiding its centre and making it look like a giant, hazy-edged doughnut.

The fiery doughnut continued to expand, *but* it began to fade. *The reaction wasn't self-sustaining after all.*

Mitchell stumbled to a telescope, but he couldn't see a thing —his visor kept fogging up just at eye level. Vaguely he saw the lizard and the withered prune thing scuttling and bouncing away in the direction of their ships; the cube, who had been wearing his, was gone already. The ending of the show had more than pleased them—their parting thoughts to him brought a tightness to his throat and made it even harder for him to see. Mitchell left the useless telescope and went to one of the receivers. Tears didn't affect one's hearing, luckily.

It was a shouting, screaming bedlam.

"Change in wind direction," roared one. "Dust warning for Malta and Italy as far north as Rome. Population will go underground for eighteen hours minimum. Take food and water, especially water . ."

"*Prenez-garde Marseilles et Lyon* . ." babbled another. "*Achtung*! *Achtung*! ." screamed somebody else. But at most of the stations they were just yelling their fool heads off.

Mitchell searched the dial feverishly until he got what he wanted.

". we are flying eight miles above the north-west coast of Africa, and can see the main cloud like a dull red fog drifting towards us from over the Sahara. Wind velocities, etc., have been calculated so that the main cloud will disperse harmlessly over the north Atlantic, but some of the ragged edges have become detached and are being blown towards Central Europe. Cities in the danger area are being warned to get the people into the shelters prepared for this contingency."

Happily, the voice continued; "The shock-wave from the Explosion Point reached harmless proportions beyond a circle of 150 miles radius. There were no casualties, and there is now no danger of the multiple H-explosion starting a self-sustaining chain reaction in the Earth's crust.

"Operation Last Blast has been a complete success. Everything—chemical explosives, orthodox atomic weapons, the works —went up at once. Sick of war at last, the people of the Earth unanimously decided to disarm, so to-day we destroyed all our weapons of war, everywhere, and at almost the same time. There is not a bomb or gun left on the whole planet.

"The chemical explosives and simple A-weapons were disposed of harmlessly in specially evacuated areas of the countries concerned. But the Sahara blast was a different matter. As you know, the only way we could be sure of destroying our fantasti-

cally heat-resistant and utterly deadly bacteriological bombs—the BB17's—was to collect them all in one place and detonate a circle of H-bombs around them; no bacteria could live through the heat produced by *that* explosion. But setting off so many H-weapons all together was a terrible risk. There was a chance that the explosion would start a chain reaction in the Earth's crust that would blow the planet into very small pieces. We were lucky; it didn't.

"Now the people who came home from the Moon and planets to be present at the greatest and most dangerous moment in human history, the people who were unable to take our bombs into space because of the shock of take-off, can go out again. They can go out with a new-found maturity and a sense of complete unity and conquer those planets. Eventualy they will spread to the stars. We are a fighting race, but we no longer are a war-like one. There are plenty of natural forces in the universe to fight; we've now outgrown the urge to fight ourselves, or for that matter, any other intelligent and civilised species we might find out there among the stars.

"This is Bryce Paterson signing off and returning you to the studio ."

At the studio: sounds of shouting, cheering, laughing. A voice calling, "Shaddup dammit, we're on the air," and another asking, "But if we aren't going to make gunpowder anymore, what about the Fifth of November .?"

Mitchell began slowly storing away his record tapes and film spools. He wondered how long it would be before somebody down there remembered that he was up here.

JAMES WHITE



LAN WRIGHT

Cul-De-Sac

His mind was the
one-way road to hell.

Illustrated by Martin Frew

TOMMY was in the back garden when the stranger called. He was aware of his presence even before the man knocked at the front door and his mother answered. He knew that he was a doctor, but not the same sort of doctor as kindly old Doctor Barrus who lived down the road and gave him sweets when he had to take the medicine he prescribed.

For a stranger the man's thoughts were peculiarly clear, and even at that distance Tommy had very little difficulty in following them.

"My name is Ward, Mrs Harris," he told Tommy's mother. "I am a neural phsycologist attached to the Department of Health. I've come to talk to you about your little boy."

The sudden anxiety in his mother's mind registered and was reproduced in Tommy's. He stopped his idle play with the tennis ball and sat down on the grass, butterflies of apprehension fluttering in his stomach. Such a visit was not entirely unexpected.

"Has he done something wrong?" His mother's reaction was immediate and anxious, and the Doctor's laughter was reassuring to her even though it did nothing to ease Tommy's fears.

"No, he hasn't. I just want to talk to you about him."

His mother's relief was clear and concise, and washed through him like a warm wave. Her unspoken, "Thank God for that," made Tommy smile despite his apprehension.

"Won't you come into the drawing room, doctor? Tommy is out playing with some friends I expect. Shall I try and get hold of him?"

"No, no. It would be better if we talked alone."

Strong as they were originally, the doctor's thoughts were beginning to get stronger as Tommy got used to them. The power of the man's personality was reflected in the strength and purposefulness of his thought waves. There was an undercurrent of desire in the doctor's thoughts that had an unpleasant ring about it, and it told Tommy that his mother was still young and very attractive, though the entire significance of it was lost on his seven-year-old mind.

His mother's wondering thoughts came easily to him, they were familiar and, as with most friends and relatives, he did not need to concentrate too hard. It was like listening to the radio but without the hardness of pure sound. There was a curiosity and a slight, unwilling apprehension in his mother's mind despite the reassurances of the doctor.

There was an eagerness in the man's thoughts that he could not quite pin down, a subconscious whisper that had something to do with the voices in Tommy's head; and there was a connection with school teacher Morris somewhere.

Suddenly the whole thing was clear to Tommy as his child's mind made a faltering four out of two abstract twos. Only last week the teacher had threatened to keep them in if someone in the class couldn't answer a very difficult problem, and he used the teacher's mind to find out the answer so that he and Pete and Mike could have the ball game they had planned on their way home. It had been silly he knew, because Morris had looked at him very peculiarly, and not for the first time.

"Mrs Harris." Ward was seated in the better of the two

easy chairs in the front room, and Tommy could sense the abstract animal comfort as he relaxed in its soft depths. "Your boy seems to be a very remarkable little chap for his age."

His mother's gratification was very plain, but his own fear only increased as each word pointed the direction which events must take.

"I'm glad to hear it, doctor."

"I wonder if you realise just how remarkable?" An undercurrent of thought said ironically, "I bet she doesn't."

Bewilderment preceeded a faltering, "I don't quite understand?"

"Let's take first things first. Has Tommy ever spoken to you about any peculiar experiences?"

"No."

"What I mean is, has he ever said anything to you about hearing voices that others couldn't hear, or anything like that?"

The alarm was clear and repellant, and his mother's reply faltering and uncertain as she said, "Why, yes. A long time ago. We put it down to childhood fancies and after a while he stopped talking about it. You know what kids are, always imagining things."

"Yes, of course. But did you ever notice that he claimed to have heard something which you or your husband had been thinking just before?"

"Why—no, at least—yes, once or twice he did with me, but we all have coincidences like that."

"Yes, that's true." Ward was silent for several moments, but his thoughts were as clear in Tommy's mind as if he had been speaking aloud. "She doesn't realise it, that's obvious. Why the devil do I have to deal with the parents? If they refuse to cooperate it will mean a special act of Parliament or something to get control of the kid."

Fear rose like a tide in Tommy's being, sending shudders through his body despite the warmth of the sun. The greatest fear of a child is to be separated from it's parents, and that was what the doctor was thinking.

Ward made up his mind suddenly. "I think it best to tell you the whole story from the beginning, Mrs Harris. About six months ago Mr. Morris, the teacher, was giving a few simple tests to the class in which Tommy is placed. You know, simple spelling, writing short sentences from dictation, adding small figures

and so on. He was walking around the room keeping an eye on the children and calling out words and sums, when he noticed that your son had written down the word 'flamboyant' quite correctly and without prompting. Funnily enough he had been thinking about that particular word quite a bit as he walked round the class, but the significance of the affair didn't strike him at the time. A few weeks later he got angry with the class because, as he put it, they all seemed to be having one of those dull afternoons which children get on occasions. As a result he set them a test with the threat that if they didn't get it right they would all be kept in that afternoon for an extra half hour.

"Rather unjustly as he afterwards admitted, he set them a sum which no normal seven year old could possibly have answered. He did it with the intention of teaching them a lesson. Imagine his amazement when six of the pupils came up with the right answer. The centre of the six, who sat in a small group, was Tommy, and he admitted under pressure that he had passed the answer on to the other five boys. But he would not say how he knew that answer, he merely mumbled shamefacedly that he did know it, and that was all Morris could get out of him."

In the garden Tommy felt tremors of apprehension run through him as he recalled the incident to which Ward referred. It had been careless of him, and he knew that it was the first occasion on which teacher Morris had regarded him with suspicion.

"A little later on," continued Ward, "Morris set another test as a small trap for Tommy. He promised a sweet to anyone in the class who could answer a very advanced problem in mathematics." Ward paused for effect, and tension mounted in the boy even though he knew what was coming.

"Tommy answered the question quite correctly and won the sweet."

Tommy knew it had been careless of him, and he had not thought of possible effects at the time. The sweet was very large and very luscious, and he had not wanted it for himself, but to give to Rosie Smith who lived three doors down the road.

"You see, Mrs. Harris, it is quite impossible for your boy to have answered that question unless he was a child prodigy. In fact, that was what Morris thought he had on his hands, and it was borne out on several other occasions when he set little traps. Then, one day a very odd thing happened. You probably know

that during the summer Morris takes the class on one afternoon a week into the park near the school for a few simple lessons on botany; you know, leaf pressing and that sort of thing. About two months ago he took them as was his usual practice into the park for a couple of hours, and on their way back they had to cross a main road. Normally, Morris forms them into a double line and shepherds them across safely. On that particular afternoon Tommy and a couple of other boys got ahead of the main party and out of the park gates. Morris got to the gate just in time to see the three of them rush across the road in front of a heavy truck. He didn't have time to call them; it was all over in a flash, but into his mind sprang the thought, 'My God, they'll be killed'."

Ward paused, and Tommy could feel him building the effect of his next words, while his mother's apprehensive anxiety wove a background of fear and uncertainty in his mind.

"Your boy turned on the other side of the road, Mrs Harris, and called back, 'No, we shan't, sir, we had plenty of time.'"

Tommy remembered the incident well, all too well now that it was recalled for him in detail. It had been very careless, but at the time Morris's thought had been so strong and vivid that he could have sworn the man had spoken out loud. Morris had, he recalled, regarding him very oddly all the way back to school.

"So, you see, we have several unconnected incidents building to a climax," went on Ward. "Morris thought about it for a long time, several weeks in fact, before he got in touch with a friend in the Health Service. Of course, he was laughed at, but he was so insistent that we agreed to have someone go down and make a few tests. The result was startling; so startling that two other people were sent to substantiate what the first investigator found. They proved Morris's suspicion without any shadow of doubt, Mrs. Harris."

Once again, like the good psychologist he was, Ward paused to build the tension to the appropriate pitch, and Tommy sat taut and still on the lawn with his legs drawn up against his chest. He knew what was coming, but there was a deadly fascination and uncontrollable impatience as the seconds passed. Even Ward's thoughts gave no indication of what he was going to say, there was only a clinical analysis of his mother's reactions, a kind of medical sadism that was being used towards one end; but that end was not to be found at the moment in the lurking passage of Ward's thoughts. He was building to a final climax so that the resistance of the woman would be as low as possible.

"Your son can read other people's minds."

The shocked, stunned incredulity in his mother's mind flooded in on him like a roaring cascade, a jumble of thoughts and emotions in which disbelief and horror were uppermost. Frantically he shut the babble out and twin tears of fear and terror sprang from his wide blue eyes. His secret was his no longer; he had known for some time that Morris thought him peculiar, but he had not known how near this moment had been.

Long ago when he was very small he had learned to keep the secret to himself. His own parents had laughed gently at his 'childish fancies' when he spoke in his halting voice about the clear, bewildering voices in his head. It had been apparent then that his was a unique experience, and that such secrets had to be kept to one's self as a safeguard against ridicule and laughter.

"Can you imagine what this means?" asked Ward. "If we can find how this power that Tommy possesses works, then we shall have unravelled one of the greatest secrets of the human mind and brought to reality one of man's oldest dreams.

"Even if we are unsuccessful in that, your son will be of immense value to his country, and he will probably rise to be one of the greatest of its citizens."

Ward was pulling out all the stops now. He had thrown the woman into a panic of fear and horror, and now he was offering her a way out that was attractive.

"But this—this is—" Tommy could feel the hysterical denial which sprang to his mother's lips, but he could sense too the background of half belief that told her that the doctor was a clever and important man; that he would hardly come to her with such a ridiculous story unless there was some truth in it, and if there were truth in it—.

"Ridiculous?" said Ward. "That's how I looked at it at first, but we have checked as thoroughly as we can under conditions of secrecy, and we are as certain as we can be that it is so. Now, we have come into the open because we can go no further without the co-operation of you and your husband. We want to study Tommy closely, test him, try and find out what makes him like he is. We want to concentrate his powers if possible and develop them, and if we can do it then there is no limit to what he may achieve when he is a grown man."

Again there was the undercurrent of excitement and anticipation at the back of the doctor's mind and it was stronger now as he saw the woman wavering, doubtful, frightened still by the sud-

den revelation. There was ambition in the man's mind; the thought that, "I've got her half convinced, it'll soon be in the bag." There was, too, something about the Institute, and a mental picture of a wide, high, forbidding building with white columns and large rooms, long echoing corridors and the peculiar smell of antiseptic. Another thought brought the picture of a stooped, elderly man with grey hair, and a thin, ascetic face, Professor Trautman, "He'll find out if anybody can," followed by a picture of the same old man in a white coat and skull cap standing by a white-draped table with a body on it, shining steel knives and instruments, and —blood

A sob shook the small body, and fresh tears dribbled down the white, pinched face, from eyes which were wide with fear.

"Well—of course, my husband and I will have to talk it over. After all he is our only son."

"You won't be losing him," Ward laughed deprecatingly at her obvious fears. "He will have holidays like other little boys. It will be like sending him to boarding school, and, of course there will be a cash settlement, a generous one I shouldn't be surprised."

The satisfaction of the man registered on Tommy's mind despite his own fear and terror. He judged that the family were not as well off as they might be, and the thought of some extra money, and the boy getting a free education would weigh heavily.

In his mother's mind he read doubtful half acceptance of the position which mingled with soft, warm thoughts about a new dress and perhaps a television set.

"This must have been quite a shock to you, Mrs. Harris," Ward's thoughts did not match the kindliness of his spoken words, there was only triumph and satisfaction at the way the affair had gone so far. "But it has its bright side when you come to think about it. You and your husband talk it over and in a few days I'll bring some more people to see you, important people who will iron out any troubles or any details which may worry you."

"It's all so sudden—" and at the back of the thought Tommy read a rising, unreasoning pride of achievement, the thought that, "I've done this, Bob and I, we've created a superman. Why we'll be famous, and so will Tommy." A moment's sadness. "Of course, they'll take him away." Brighter now. "But it'll only be for a short while, they couldn't keep him always." Coldly practical. "We could certainly use some extra money."

Tommy got up quickly from his squatting positon on the soft, green lawn. He was sobbing hard now, and the tears flowed freely down a face which quivered with childish terror and fear. He walked hurriedly across the lawn and down the gravel path to the back gate, and turned jnto the road, half walking, half running, as he strove to put as much distance as possible between himself and the soundless terror of his home. He strove to shut out all the thoughts from the doctor and his mother, he had heard too much in the last half hour.

"Hi, Tommy." He ignored the call from a school friend and ran on, while the boy made up his mind to tell the rest of the class about 'crybaby Tommy Harris'.

The grocer at the corner waved as he passed, but he took no notice.

Mrs Wilson, who lived five houses away, made up her mind to tell his mother what a nasty, ill mannered little boy he was, passing her in the street as if she wasn't there. Her thoughts, sharp, angry and nasty, were strong in his mind. His terror increased and he ran on faster now, frantic with need of distance between himself and his home. Home? It was a place of horror in the grip of a doctor who knew about the voices in his head.

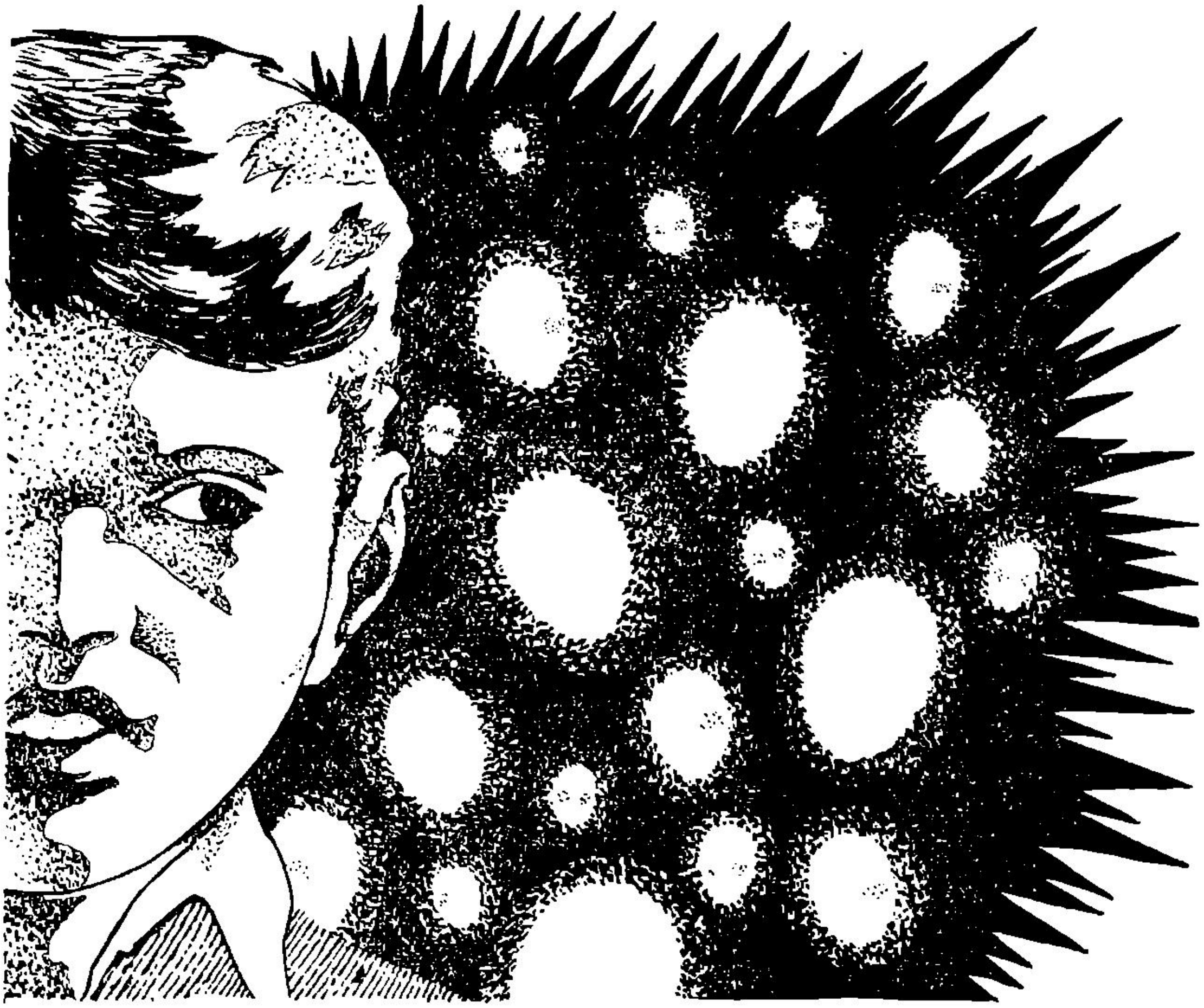
Blindly, he scurried across a main road, aware of the startled, unspoken curses of a car driver, and the half-fainting shock of an old lady.

"Say, the kid looks scared to death." Even the policeman on point duty had noticed him.

The town fell behind him, and the green, open countryside spread itself warmly in the sunlight, before him; and some of the helpless terror left him. He slowed his walk and made for the small, wooded copse where he used to picnic with the other kids on holiday. In the shady, familiar glade he dropped exhausted, his lungs panting the torture that his body had inflicted upon them. He hadn't realised how much he had hurried, and how much involuntary torture he had inflicted on his body.

As he lay there he could sense, dimly, the tiny, almost mindless pulsations of the birds in the trees around, and their twitterings helped to ease the dull ache that throbbed in waves through his head. In the cool and shadow he closed his eyes and lay back to sleep.

It was night, dark and silent. He had awakened with a start that made his heart pound with fright, alerting every sense for a danger which he knew was close.



From the road came the sound of footsteps, more than one man was out there, and he caught a faint, angry thought, "Darned kid. Why the devil does he want to get lost? That doctor fellow seems worried, though. Wonder what's in it?"

Voices, too, not loud. "Yeah, this is the place."

"I hope to heaven he's here."

"The devil only knows where we'll look if he isn't."

"On my night off, too." Another thought, hot with anger and tinged with regret. In the background was the picture of a large, comfortable room filled with men who laughed and talked in the soft lights, and a glass of brown liquid with a frothy top. "Darned kid. If I were his father—"

He shivered in the return of terror. His father was out there, he could feel the strong undercurrent of his thoughts, anger and fear were mixed with anxiety, a reluctant fear that was half drowned beneath the anxious, nagging question, "Who is this fellow, Ward? Why the heck is *he* so worried? Anyone would think Tommy was his kid."

Ward was there too. A dark figure, unrecognised except by his thoughts. Worry and anger mingled with a temporary frustration. "But he wasn't at the house when I was there . . . Can't possibly have disappeared on account of me. There'll be hell to pay if anything happens to him now."

Tommy rose slowly. They were gettting close now; in a minute they would be entering the copse barely twenty yards from where he lay. He turned and ran in the opposite direction, stumbling in the dark over the uneven ground. The branches of small trees and shrubs whipped his legs and face, stinging and cutting as he tore through the thick undergrowth.

"Hear that?" The voice and the thought came together. Then silence.

He stopped, listening, his heart pounding furiously beneath his heaving chest.

"Must have been a rabbit. I didn't hear anything."

And the thoughts again, many of them building up a tense wall of anger around him, and over it all the relentlessness of the hunt.

"Damned kid. Where's he got to?"

The copse ended abruptly and he found himself on the edge of a field with the moon shining brightly upon him. He paused for an instant to look frantically to the right and left, but the field was large, and it stretched away endlessly on either side of him. Ahead, was a hedge with a gate in it, seen dimly in the moonlight as a bright gap in the centre of the long, dark shadow of the briar bushes. He ran towards it.

The grass was long and the ground uneven, but he did not have the trouble in moving that he had had in the copse, and his rising terror gave him strength and speed. He had reached the gate and climbed it frantically, dropping to the muddy ground on the other side with a soft squelch. He stood there trembling and striving to catch the thoughts from his followers. It was not difficult, and through them all he could pick out the strong, clear threat of the doctor.

To the left was another hedge which led right down to the river's edge, cutting this field off from the next one. To the right the field stretched away for almost half a mile, rising in a gentle slope to a ridge which was topped by a row of trees, standing gaunt and dark in the moonlight. There was not a vestige of cover in which he might hide.

The men were out of the copse now, debating which way he had gone, cursing the luck that had caused them to miss him. One of them spotted the gate.

Across the river stood an old barn, broken and shattered. It offered shelter and cover if he could reach it, and he did not think they would cross the river without going down to the bridge which was several hundred yards away beyond the hedge. It would give him time to lose himself more thoroughly in the darkness.

He waded into the cool, dark water, his movements making the moonbeams shimmer and fade. He shivered slightly as the water struck cold to his heated body, but the sensation was not unpleasant as it soothed the irritating sweat caused by his flight. It rose around his thighs as he moved in further, over his loins, swirling in eddies around his waist. As the water soaked into them his clothes became heavy, and he caught his breath suddenly as a small wave sloshed over his chest and splashed his face.

The river bottom was uneven and sloped sharply, more sharply than he had thought, and for an instant panic nearly made him turn back as his feet skidded on a stone and his face was momentarily ducked beneath the surface again.

Behind him the thoughts of the men came clearly. Ward was still there, his thoughts loud and ugly, outstripping even those of Tommy's father.

For an instant only he hesitated, and then plunged on in a blind desperation towards the farther shore. His feet left the bottom and the water splashed over his face again as he struck out madly, whimpering in the terror of two horrible alternatives. The dark waters swirled over him, cool and peaceful, and he sank struggling into a world of quiet and silence.

There was peace suddenly within him and he stopped struggling. There was rest from the torment of the voices. For the first time as long as he could remember he was alone with his own thoughts; all the others were gone for ever, washed away by the waters of the friendly river. He knew that they would never trouble him again.

When they found him, there was a smile of contentment on his pale, wet face.

LAN WRIGHT

DAN MORGAN

Alcoholic Ambassador

Rigel III was inhabited by every kind of horror in the Universe; fortunately most of them were imaginary.

Illustrated by John J. Greengrass

THE pink mouse seated on the beer pump handle raised its small, brown derby in a white gloved paw and winked knowingly. Walter Cooney returned the gesture solemnly and took another pull at his scotch. The bartender slid a half-empty bottle of whisky off the bar and placed it under the counter.

"You've got them again, Walter," he said. "I knew you were heading that way. Why don't you lay off the stuff?"

"Excuse me," said Walter, to the mouse. He screwed his eyes up to bring the bartender into focus, the mouse seemed so much more real. "I presume that by 'them' you are referring to my friend on the pump. He is alone at the moment, but no doubt the rest of the party will be along in a few minutes. In the meantime, why don't we all have another little drink?"

"You've had a big drink—several big drinks," said the bartender with an expression of suffering. "Couldn't you take your custom elsewhere? We're almost on the U-list already, and you haven't even a vacation pass. If a PUDO walked in here right now he'd close the joint, what with you in that condition and all. I'd probably be re-allocated, and I like being a bartender."

"Re-allocation's not so bad," said Walter. "You get used to it after the first five or six times." The pink mouse made a perilous descent down the sheer black plastic of the pump handle, dropping the brown derby in the process. Upon reaching the counter it underwent a metamorphosis and re-appeared as two slightly larger mice, dressed in straw hats, striped blazers and goloshes.

"See what I mean?" said Walter delightedly. "The party is about to commence. They're only small yet. But they'll grow, brother, they'll grow." The bartender placed his elbows on the counter and leaned forward. He regarded Walter with the air of a father who sees his favourite son taking the downward path.

"You poor guy," he said. "You really see them, don't you? But there's nothing there—look!" He drew his beefy arm across the patch of counter that was receiving Walter Cooney's undivided attention.

"Say! These boys are really good. Get a load of that," said Walter without looking up.

"There's nothing there!" yelled the bartender, grabbing Walter by his skinny shoulders and shaking him violently. "It's an hallucination, an illusion."

"Don't get so excited, friend," said Walter, looking hurt. "What you need is a drink. All this talk about illusions. Life is an illusion—the whole darn world is an illusion, haven't you heard?" The bartender shrugged despairingly.

"Why do you do it, Walter?" he asked. "The whole world is full of people doing jobs they have been allocated to, well adjusted, efficient Units, and here are you with nine re-allocations behind you drinking yourself into another. You can't go on like this, you know. Ten is the maximum number allowed under the System, the next step after that is Euthanasia."

"I do it because I've got a pathological craving for alcohol," said Walter. "Furthermore, I like a drink. I'm a man born out of his time. A square peg in a world of round pegs and round holes. Weep for me, brother, the Euthanasia Chamber looms large upon my horizon. But do not deny me the cup that cheers. Pardon me now, more of my friends are arriving. And no more

talk about illusions, please. I've known them a long time, long enough to know that they resent such scepticisms." Walter turned away and began to converse in a confidential tone with a spectral three-headed, yellow ape which had just materialised on the stool to his left.

The bartender made a determined effort to ignore Walter and concentrate on the routine task of glass polishing. From past experience he had discovered that there was only one way to get rid of him. Sooner or later he would get tired of calling for drinks that never came. Other drunks would have become noisy and started making trouble, but Walter was not that type. When he realised that he had overstayed his welcome, he would just pass along to the next bar and start over again.

Walter finished his chat with the spectral ape and cast a bleary optic in the direction of the bartender. He realised that the time had come to move. He lifted himself gently off the stool and with an unsteady bow said goodbye to the crowd of hallucinatory monsters who, apart from the bartender, were the only other occupants of the bar. With a gentle weaving motion he made his way towards the swing door, in search of pastures new. On the sidewalk he paused gravely for a moment as the fresh air hit him like a tidal wave. He fell flat on his face, out cold .

Personnel Unit Disposal Officer Johnson was not a happy man. He had gnawing stomach ulcers, a troublesome wife and a problem. In all bureaucratic organisations since time immemorial there has been a method of dealing with sticky situations, best summed up as 'passing the can'. At this moment the can lay on 'PUDO Johnson's desk, in the form of an Interdepartmental Memo. The sheet bore the stamps of its journey down the echelons of the PUDO governmental system, from the office of the Supreme PUDO to the Department of Fisheries, by way of Galactic Exploration and Hydroponic Inspection. As PUDO in charge of Alcoholic Disposal, Johnson was stuck with it. There was no one left to pass it on to. His only alternatives were to take action in the matter or be classified as incompetent and re-allocated. Alcoholic Disposal had been a nice, comfortable little backwater of the System until now, a mere matter of re-allocating treated Alcoholics and consigning Chronics to the Euthanasia Chamber. With a sigh he re-read the document for the fiftieth time.

15/5/2160. *Office of the Supreme PUDO.*
Interdepartmental Memorandum

Subject: Development of Planet Rigel III.

Your department is hereby instructed to furnish Unit(s) of Personnel capable of establishing friendly relations with the intelligent life form known to inhabit the a/mentioned planet and arranging a system of trade, in accordance with Sec. II. Para. XIV. Galactic League (Colonisation) Regulations. This matter will be treated with extreme URGENCY and there will be no repetition of previous errors.

Signed: G. FALSEN. Supreme PUDO.

That was it, apart from a badly erased pencil note scribbled by some harassed Departmental head, which read: 'Get this thing to hell out of here, it's too hot to handle!" A low moan from Johnson confirmed his agreement with the unknown scribbler. How could he supply Units for a Trade Mission, when all he had were reconditioned drunks who would hit the bottle again at the first opportunity? He picked up the report on the two previous missions and pored through it hopelessly.

Rigel III had been inspected from space by a Galactic Exploration Ship two months before. The preliminary Geophysical survey had indicated that the planet would be a fruitful source of radioactive fuels. This news came to Earth at a time when the Venusian mines were almost played out and the Supreme PUDO immediately filed a claim with the Colonisation Board of the Galactic League. The Board accepted the claim, but politely drew attention to Sec. II. Para. XIV., which stated that any member filing claim to a planet inhabited by an intelligent native species must establish friendly communication with same and arrange trade, or utilisation of the planet's resources, to the value of one million Galactic Credits within six months. Should the applicant fail in this, all title would be lost and the claim of the next applicant, if any, would be recognised.

With confidence in the powers of Earth salesmanship the Department of Interplanetary Trade sent out a well equipped mission. The mission landed on Rigel III. The atmosphere was tested and found a little low in oxygen content, but quite breathable. The first person out of the airlock was a specialist in dealing with alien races, carrying a Semantic translator. He walked confidently across the grassy plain towards a cluster of small buildings. When

he had covered about half the distance, the watchers aboard ship were amazed to hear a scream of terror through the intercom and see the specialist drop the translator in panic as he raced back. The unfortunate man bolted into the airlock and slammed the door behind him as if pursued by the hounds of hell. The rest of the crew, unable to see any reason for the flight of the specialist concluded that his mind had become unhinged and raced to the inner door of the airlock to control him.

When he appeared he seemed quite rational, apart from the fact that he insisted he had been chased back to the ship by a hundred-foot long dinosaur. The commander of the expedition knew this was nonsense, as he had been watching from an observation port. Reluctantly, he ordered the Chief Medic to place the protesting specialist under sedation. As there was no obvious danger in sight he decided to lead the next landing party himself. He issued six blasters to the men he had chosen, and they left the ship. A few minutes later the party returned in haste and piled into the airlock, having discharged their blasters into what appeared to the spectators to be empty air. When the inner door of the lock opened this time the members of the landing party were engaged in a heated argument. Each man had his own version of the affair; all agreed that they had had a lucky escape, but the nature of the monster or monsters from which they had escaped seemed uncertain. The commander decided that this was a job for a fully equipped scientific and military expedition and ordered an immediate blastoff. Thus ended the first Earth mission to Rigel III.

The second expedition was a more organised effort, fully prepared to tackle any eventuality. After considerable investigation the explanation for the monsters was discovered. Each man who left the ship reported seeing some sort of nightmare creature, and it was soon realised that the monsters were in fact just that. The combination of the low oxygen content in the atmosphere and an otherwise harmless excess of radio activity emanating from rich deposits of ore beneath the surface of the planet, produced an hallucinatory condition in the human mind. When the experimenters were on board the ship, with its efficient shielding and conditioned atmosphere, they were perfectly normal; but it was found that no existing suit would prevent them from experiencing these visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations when on the surface of Rigel III. From a scientific point of view this was interesting, but it did not solve the problem of establishing friendly contact with the natives of the planet. These were indistinguishable from the hallu-

cinations, as far as the Earthmen were concerned, and hence still unidentified. At this point some co-operation from these mysterious beings would have proved most helpful, but they had apparently decided to ignore the landing of an alien ship. This, the expedition's Psycho Techs attributed to some conservative streak in their mentality; a mechanism which said—"If we ignore it long enough, it will probably go away."

After a fruitless month, spent interviewing creatures which always turned out to be figments of the imagination, the expedition returned to Earth and replaced the problem in the lap of the Supreme PUDO. The Supreme PUDO was somewhat rattled by now. Centaurus IV had registered with the Colonisation Board as second claimant to Rigel III, as soon as the possibility of radioactive fuels had been rumoured, and if Earth could not fulfil the conditions of the Colonisation Regulations the Centaurans would automatically take over

The door of PUDO Johnson's office opened suddenly, jerking him up from the lethargy of despair. A Collector entered, dragging behind him a well-oiled Alcoholic.

"Excuse me, Sir," said the Collector. "But I thought I'd better see you before putting this Unit through for re-conditioning. He's been through Psycho Cure four times, Tapering off, three and Bio Resurgence once, and I know you always like to interview Chronic's before they get their last going over." Johnson pulled his flabby face muscles into the expression of stern, fatherly authority he used in such cases.

"You wretched creature," he boomed. "You are a disgrace to our society. Every chance has been given you, but you always revert to type. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Walter Cooney brushed a green lizard from his cuff in an absent manner and gazed owlishly at his inquisitor.

"I have seen you before," he said. "Every time I see you, you don't look happy. You need a drink. Why can't you leave me alone? Put me through the re-conditioning course, but spare me your philosophy, friend." Johnson would willingly have done just that. He had his own troubles. But regulations stated that an Alcoholic should be given every chance to rehabilitate himself. He gazed at the poster on the wall opposite, which displayed in two-inch red letters the basic motto and principle of the PUDO System. A PLACE FOR EVERY UNIT—EVERY UNIT IN

PLACE. That was all very well, thought Johnson treasonably, but a drunk like this, what sort of a job was he fitted for?

"This is your last chance, Cooney," he said. "If you don't do any good in your re-allocation, the next step is Euthanasia. Now, you don't want that, do you?"

Walter smiled "I don't know," he said. "It might not be such a bad idea. In the next world—if there is a next world—the system may be better."

PUDO Johnston stiffened. "Do you dare question the efficiency of the System?" he barked. "The PUDO System is a proven, productive success."

"That ain't so," said Walter. He turned and waved an arm in the direction of the poster. "A place for every Unit—Every Unit in place. If that's true and proven, as you say, where's my place? I'm a Unit, am I not? If you can't find me a job that I'm suited for, it's not me that's wrong, it's the System."

PUDO Johnson was still worrying about the memo, and in his lowered state of resistance the drunk's logic was unbearable. It had always seemed so right, so easy before. An Alcoholic was a misfit, who must be made to conform to the System or be eliminated. But now . . With an uncertain gesture he picked up the memo again and looked at it. Then he looked back at Walter, who was cheerfully talking to some invisible being on his left. Yes! That was it! A place for every Unit—Every Unit in place.

"The System is perfect, Cooney," he said with rising confidence. "It even provides work for people with your qualifications."

Walter made a rude sound, to indicate his disbelief. PUDO Johnson was not disturbed, the future suddenly seemed brighter, re-allocation had faded temporarily into the background. Cooney obviously suffered from hallucinations, and appeared to be quite happy with them. Through years of delirium tremens he had become conditioned to accept them as a real, everyday part of his existence. The nightmare creatures of Rigel III would not bother such a person one bit .

Walter Cooney made the journey to Rigel III in a top secret military F.T.L. ship. The crew of the orbital base ship were more than glad to see him, as the success of his mission would relieve them of a monotonously inactive task. He therefore found himself treated as a person of some consequence aboard the Astratradar. With a view to efficiency Walter had not been re-conditioned before making the trip. He was issued at set intervals with sūffi-



cient alcohol to keep him in a normal state of well-being. Walter's only objection to this was the fact that the alcohol ration was administered intravenously by a Medic with a hypo gun. He maintained that this procedure was sacreligious.

For the first time in his life the little drunk had a feeling of belonging, of having some purpose in life other than the attainment of oblivion. He discussed his mission intelligently with the staff of the base ship, some of whom had been members of the second expedition. It had been decided to send Walter to the surface of the planet in a small scout ship, which would then return to the Astratradar and leave him to communicate by radio. Walter objected to this, on the grounds that the scout ship would provide a certain amount of cover should the natives become hostile, and also a quick means of retreat if necessary. It was tactfuly pointed out that, as far as Walter was concerned, there was no question of retreat. Furthermore, it was explained that as scout ships were intended for use within the atmosphere, it was

doubtful if the shielding would provide sufficient protection for the pilot during his wait on the surface of Rigel III. Walter countered this with a suggestion that he should be his own pilot. At first the idea was ridiculed, but a friendly Astrogation Officer produced a Hypno Tape Course which enabled him to qualify within twelve hours.

Walter floated down towards the planet in a gentle landing trajectory, gazing out of the observation port with mingled feelings. About two miles from the surface he began to feel better —almost euphoric. He realised he was no longer alone in the scout ship, and looked round with a grin of pleasure. They were there, the old friends he had known for years. Over on the chart table the two pink mice were going through their vaudeville routine. The friendly bats, Joe and Mona, were flitting round the ceiling of the cabin and Clarence, the three-headed, spectral, yellow ape, was sitting beside him in the co-pilot's seat. Walter decided that he was going to like Rigel III, and that he was not going to miss the Medic's injections, after all.

He landed on an inviting looking beach of silvery sand which flanked a deep blue ocean. The ship settled gently on her tail jets. Walter opened the airlock and climbed quickly to the ground. He felt better than he ever remembered feeling in his life before. The air was heady, like pink champagne and the rays of the sun caressed him like an after-dinner cognac. The welcoming committee was large. Even in his wildest bouts he had never produced such a crop of hallucinations. Apart from a species of green, teddy bear creature, they were all familiar types. But there were so many of them, it was like coming home. With a sigh of contentment, Walter threw off his clothes and lay down on the soft, yielding sand. Like many other drunks he had often dreamed of retiring to some peaceful South Sea Island, far from the madding crowd. He lay drinking in the sunlight, half dreaming and hoping this would last for ever.

He was rudely awakened from his reverie by the sound of a loud bell from within the scout ship. He lay still for a moment, hoping that it would stop, but it kept on jangling. Reluctantly, he climbed to his feet and made his way back to the ship. In the control cabin, the ultra wave communicator was blazing with the fretful life that indicated someone was trying to contact him. He switched in a microphone.

"Hallo. Cooney here," he said.

"Base ship Astratradar speaking," burped the communicator. "Why didn't you report your landing? Are you all right?"

"I'm O.K.," said Walter. "How are you?" The burp took on a suspicious tone.

"Have you been drinking, Cooney?"

"Nah, of course not," said Walter. "It's the air here, it hits you like fifty-year-old scotch."

"Have you contacted the natives yet?"

"I'm working on it," said Walter. "Give me time. Rome wasn't built in a day—and your two expeditions didn't do so good, anyway," he added as an afterthought.

"Well, keep at it," the burp sounded a little chastened. "And report back as soon as you spot anything. We don't want to start from scratch again if anything happens to you."

"I'll do that," said Walter. "Happy New Year." He switched off the set and left the ship. Out on the beach the sun was still warm and the water looked inviting. Walter took a bathe. He rolled, snorted and splashed. Afterwards he sprinted along the beach to dry himself, then he lay down on the sand again and went to sleep.

When he awoke he was hungry. He asked a passing Dodo the best place to eat on Rigel III. Then he smiled at himself, hallucinations have no need of food. He went back to the ship and opened a can of beans. Just as he was swallowing the last forkful the communicator started its racket again. With a murmur of annoyance, Walter threw the switch.

"Well, what's eating you now?" he said.

"Captain Gotz, Commander of Base ship Astratradar, speaking," barked the communicator. Walter swallowed, the bark would be harder to handle than the burp.

"Yes, Captain," he said meekly.

"I'm not going to waste time beating about the bush," said the Commander. "I've just had a call from the Supreme PUDO's Office, back on Earth. The fuel position is becoming more serious, and they want action. If they don't get it, heads will roll—and yours will be the first. Do I make myself clear, Cooney?" Walter managed a weak affirmative. "You've been down there for eight hours, already," continued Captain Gotz. "And so far you've not reported any progress. I'll give you another four hours to do something intelligent. If at the end of that time you are still lying down on the job, I shall report to Earth that you are incompetent. You will then be re-allocated, or rather, as you will have

reached the end of your quota, you will be eliminated. Think it over. That is all."

Walter gazed at the now silent communicator. The holiday was over, now he would have to do something. The natives, whoever they were, did not seem inclined to reveal themselves. He guessed that they were aware of the effect of the planet's atmosphere upon aliens and used this camouflage of confusion as a survival mechanism. No alien could distinguish them from the visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations by which he was surrounded, without their co-operation.

Walter let out a whoop—that was it! All he had to do was to win their confidence and they would reveal themselves to him. He rushed out of the control cabin, through the airlock and started down the ladder. His descent was not as he had intended. The ladder on the exterior of a scout ship is automatically retracted after use, as the craft are often required to make emergency blast off from the very nature of their duties. In his enthusiasm Walter had omitted to press the small, blue release button by the exit of the airlock. In short, the ladder was not there. Walter descended the twenty-five feet to the beach gravity powered, his head connecting briefly on the way down with one of the tail fins . . .

Walter struggled back to consciousness, tensing himself to withstand the usual sickening impact of a hangover. He put his hands up to his head in readiness, and opened his eyes. Then he remembered where he was. There was no hangover, just a headache and a slight stiffness. He glanced at his wrist. He had been unconscious for well over three hours. Only forty minutes to go to the deadline Captain Gotz had given him—and he was no nearer to a solution. He dragged himself miserably to his feet, pressed the blue button at the base of the ship and scaled the ladder. Back in the control cabin he prepared to call the Astratradar and explain that he had met with an accident. Perhaps Gotz would allow him more time. He glanced at his reflection in the gleaming panel of the communicator. A thin faced creature with mournful eyes and a bandaged head looked back at him sadly. *A bandaged head* . The natives must have seen him fall and helped him whilst he was unconscious. This proved that they were not after all entirely anti-social, just retiring.

There must be some way, some process of elimination which would enable him to identify them. He picked up a pen and fev-

erishly scribbled out a list of the creatures he had seen on Rigel III since his arrival. The clue was there somewhere, if he could only see it. He dredged back in his extensive experiences as a sanitarium patient, trying to remember everything he had ever heard about hallucinations. At last, in amongst the trash he recalled something that a Psycho Tech had said to him after his first bout of D.T.'s. This was the link he was looking for, the obvious answer that all the previous investigators, for all their scientific method, had missed .

Walter manoeuvred the tiny scout ship into the open lock of the Astratradar and waited impatiently for the equalisation of pressure. When the inner door opened at last he requested to be taken to the Commander's cabin immediately. Captain Gotz eyed him distastefully.

"What have you got there, your last will and testament?" he sneered. Walter was still clutching the scribbled list.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Captain," he said, with some pride.

"You've succeeded?" said Captain Gotz incredulously. "Well talk, man, talk."

"I have a theory," said Walter solemnly. "I have great faith in it, but it needs experimental proof. If you will allow me the necessary materials to carry it out I am prepared to use myself as a guinea pig."

"Of course," said the Commander. His tone showed a new respect for Walter. "What do you require, a computor, a semantic translator? Any of the Tech Staff? Or do you want something shipped out from Earth? The Supreme PUDO's Office have placed this project on Top Priority and sanctioned any appropriations I may deem necessary."

"It's nothing like that," said Walter, shaking a little in anticipation of the coming storm. "All I want is a crate of whisky —purely for experimental purposes, you understand. Will that be all right?"

Captain Gotz spluttered incoherently for a full minute. With a masterly effort of will he finally regained his self control.

"If this is just another way of getting a drink, as I suspect, you can be assured that it will be your last," he said icily. "This project is just desperate enough for me to allow you such a ridiculous request." He called the steward and ordered him to bring the liquor. Walter walked over to the other side of the cabin and

opened the door of the Commander's bedroom. After a short inspection of the sleeping accommodation he turned his attention to the lock on the door. The mechanism apparently met with his approval.

"Would you mind calling the Ship's Surgeon?" he asked. "I may need his help later." Captain Gotz complied with the request and the Surgeon arrived at the same time as the steward with the whisky.

"What's this, Captain, a party?" said the Surgeon. Captain Gotz quelled his joviality with a glance.

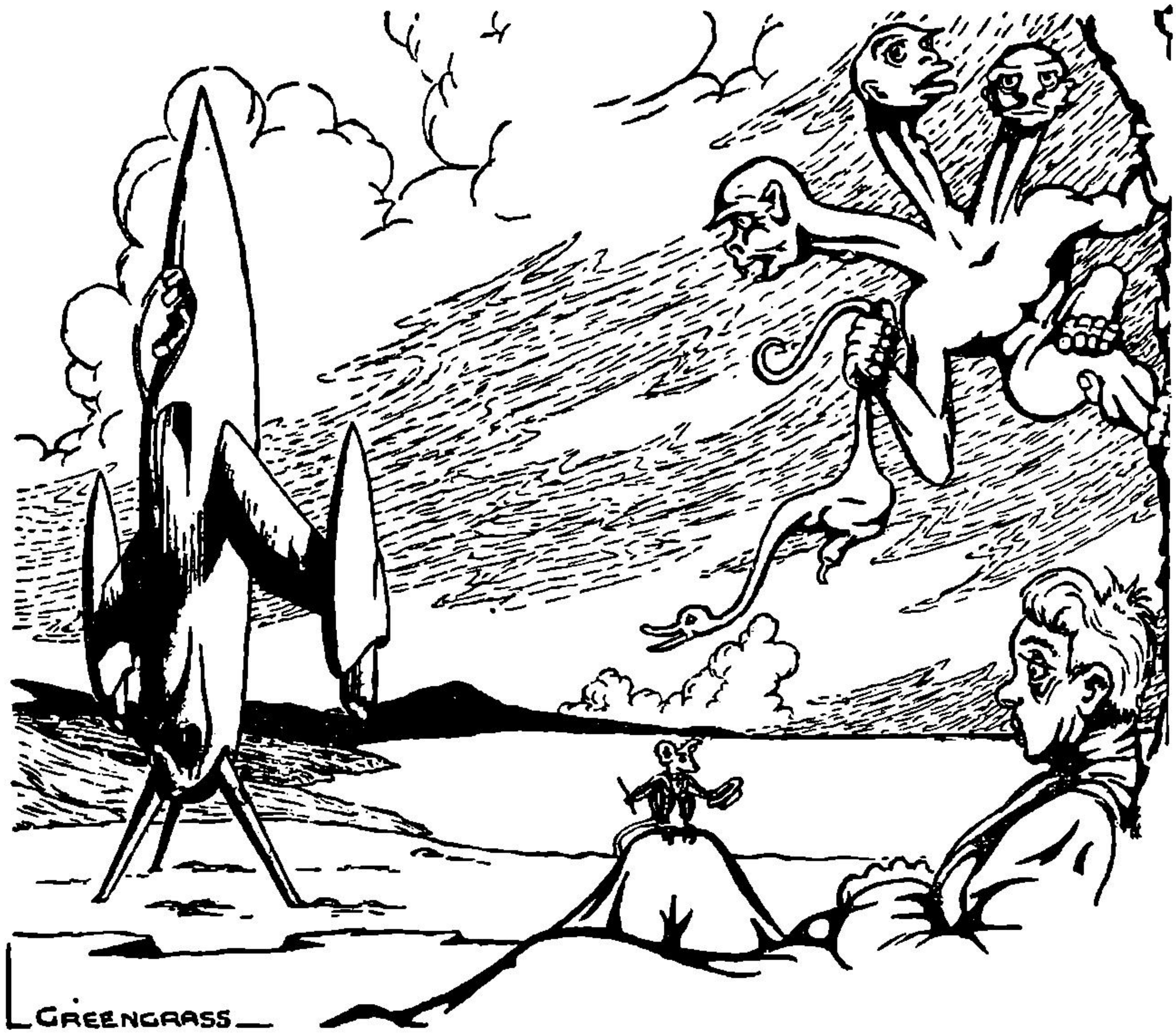
"Sorry, Doc," said Walter. "This is a serious scientific experiment. I want you to prepare a hypo that will sober me up if I get too tight, I'm a little out of practice." He picked up the case of booze and walked into the bedrom, placing it on the floor beside the bed. Digging in his pockets he produced the grimy, scribbled list of hallucinations he had made out on Rigel III. "Lend me a pencil for a few minutes, will you, Captain?" he asked, coming back into the cabin. The Commander handed it to him without a word of comment. Walter retired once more to the bedroom, this time locking the door firmly behind him. The Commander explained the situation as best he could to the Surgeon and the two waited, listening anxiously to the sounds which issued from the locked room.

There were occasional pops and clinks as a fresh bottle was opened and incoherent mutterings which were punctuated at times by snatches of ribald bar room ditties. Half an hour later Walter reappeared triumphant, a half empty bottle in one hand and the grimy sheet of paper in the other. With the careful sobriety of a very drunken man he walked slowly across the cabin and lowered himself into the empty chair between the Commander and the Surgeon. He leaned confidentially towards the Surgeon, who recoiled slightly at the alcoholic aura. He picked up the hypo and prepared to give Walter a sobering shot.

"I won't need that, Doc," said Walter. "But you can help me in another way. When I was in a San once a Psycho Tech told me something about hallucinations—he told me that they were purely Subjective. Is that right?"

"Of course," said the Surgeon. "They are manifestations of the unconscious mind of the patient brought up to the conscious level. I understand that they can assume all the characteristics of reality under certain conditions."

"That's the way I figured it," said Walter. "Everybody



carries his own little set of horrors around with him. When he's been on the bottle as long as I have, he gets to know them pretty well, until they're like old friends. I say old friends, because he gets the same ones over and over again once he's been through the entire repertoire of his unconscious mind."

"I suppose it would be that way," said the Surgeon. "But I don't quite see how it helps to solve the present problem."

Walter took a swig at the bottle.

"You're trouble is that you're sober, you can't think like a drunk," he said. "I'm by way of being an expert in the matter. When I was on Rigel III, I wrote out a list of all the hallucinations I saw. One of these species had to be the real inhabitants of the planet, so I cooked up this experiment. Getting drunk up here, out of the atmosphere of Rigel III, I waited until the horrors started coming and crossed them off one by one. Whether you get drunk on atmosphere or whisky makes no difference, you still get the same hallucinations, because as you say they are subjective."

He turned to the Commander and handed him the crumpled list. "As you will see, Captain, there is only one species that I have not crossed off. That species I have been unable to conjure up with the assistance of your very good whisky. And so, by a simple process of elimination I present you with the identity of the elusive natives of Rigel III. Now that they are identified, the establishment of friendly relations is only a matter of winning their confidence. Do you think you could put my name forward for the job? I rather like it down there."

DAN MORGAN

Here's an Idea . . .

★ If you consider yourself a budding author, yet have never hit on a really unusual plot for your first story, why don't you take a look at our cover this issue and write a story with this scene coming in to it? Let's have plenty of suspense and good character work and, who knows, in a few years you may be one of the biggest names in science-fiction writing!

★ Your MSS can be of any length and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of white foolscap paper.

★ The author of the best story received will be presented with a *cash prize* depending on the length of the story.

★ All other stories accepted will be paid for at our usual high fees-to-authors in the normal manner.

★ Mark your envelope "Cover Comp. 2" and address it to

NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

BOB SHAW

Aspect

The little airless planet was quite commonplace—
but on it Mankind found that he was not alone.

Illustrated by Tony Steele

IT'S been a fine year, hasn't it, Psaxhro? Yes indeed, a fine year.

Well, come on over—code two—that's right. I'm glad you were able to get over to see my new home. After spending nearly three millions I want to get the maximum value out of it—so you'll have to listen for a while as I enthuse.

As you can see, this is the main entrance machine...

They got a good series of photographs as the *Panther* bulletted in for a landing. Jennings punched a button for preliminary prints and sat down, self-consciously igniting a rare cigarette. He took a deep heady pull, drawing smoke down to fill the emptiness in his stomach, and leaned back.

"But why a glasshouse?" Davies was saying, an aggrieved edge marring his voice.

"Dunno," said Keene, after some consideration He shook his large balding head slowly and stared down at the limp leather of his Original Bible.

"Who would want to build a bleddy glasshouse on this airless, Godforsaken planet?" Davies repeated more forcibly.

That's Keene's cue, thought Jennings, becoming briefly interested in the fine column of blue smoke balanced on the end of his cigarette.

"It's not a Godforsaken planet, Gren. God is on every planet," said Keene looking at the other two, his eyes luminescent with vicarious pride.

Jennings grunted, levered up out of his chair and ejected the preliminary prints from the drier.

They showed the glasshouse from a series of view-points that ranged over nearly one-eighty degrees. The first three, taken from what appeared to be the rear, showed the cubical glasshouse to have one wall formed of featureless concrete. The remaining four exposed surfaces of the cube were of a transparent substance, through which could be seen vague objects that might have been machinery.

Jennings flipped the dull prints on to Davies' lap and choked his cigarette. "Resumé," he said.

"As you know, there hasn't been any absolute delegation of authority on this ship. We came out here to map a new system—the welfare of the ship and crew being my responsibility, the astrogation and warp plotting Davies' pigeon, and the actual astrographing to be Keene's job.

"Now. We have found proof that someone has been here before us, and as we know we're the first humans in this system, this someone must have been non-human."

"Two and two make four, also," said Davies. "Don't forget to tell us that."

Jennings ignored the interruption and kept on, trying desperately to induce his own responses in Keene's totally different mind, "As far as I can see, the problem of procedure before us is predominantly Keene's and mine. Okay?"

Davies waved one hand with its crooked off-parallel fingers in careless renunciation, and Keene nodded in slow motion.

Jennings took a deep breath. This was the important bit. The decision he had made as the *Panther* was bumping and skidding her way to the end of a two-mile furrow in the fine dust outside.

"I feel," he began, weighing and forming every word, "that getting a report back to the Board is more important than unearthing details. So, I say to take off now and let a better equipped expedition do the investigating.

"Besides, we don't know what we're up against here." Jennings cursed inwardly as he realised he had let his tongue get out of control. The last sentence had been a mistake. Before that his argument had appealed to Keene's sense of what was right and wrong—relative to the Astrographing Service. His final sentence had made it personal, between Keene and the aliens.

Another man might have been grateful for Jennings' reasoning to help him back out, but Keene's God had been with him as he ventured out into the unknown, and now, if Keene turned and ran, his God would be scuttling back home too.

Jennings watched, fascinated, as Keene squared his shoulders and spoke, keeping his eyes down. "Sorry to ... ah ... disagree with you, but I was instructed to turn in details of all the important aspects of this system. And ah ... this structure is one of them. See?" Keene laughed nervously as he finished, unused to directly contradicting people.

"That's right," chipped in Davies. "I vote that we should take the coracle and go out and have a glare at it now."

"That's it then." said Jennings. "We go and have a look. I suppose pulling its tail is as good a way as any to find out if a snake is dead or alive."

"Never worry," said Davies, rising and giving one of his joggle-toothed grins. He went aft and Jennings heard him opening the storage locker containing the bundle of steel tubing which could be connected up to form the *Panther's* coracle.

Keene was holding the prints close to his face. "It's a marvellous thing," he said, "the way they were able to build such a ah ... neat looking job."

Jennings stared at him for a few seconds before answering.

"You won't like this because it contradicts your very illogical belief that the universe was built around Man, *but*, whoever built that structure out there is scientifically our superior—as far as space travel is concerned anyway."

"Huh?"

"Because, if they found it as difficult as we do to cross space they wouldn't do it just to build one twenty-foot glasshouse."

"Wait a minute," said Keene, raising his hand with the Bible still in it. "These aliens haven't got any space travel."

"This is an airless planet with no other indication of life. It's a safe assumption that the builders came from another planet. Even from another system, because we've surveyed the four other planets in this one," said Jennings patiently.

"I don't care," Keene replied quietly. "They can't have space travel. I *know*."

Jennings shrugged and gave no answer. The age old pattern for religious bigots, he thought. Sure you know. Two hundred years ago you would have *known* that the stars were lights put in the sky to show you your way about at night.

Angrily he channelled his thoughts in a different direction —there was no point in calling names at Keene. It was curious how diverse the personalities of a crew could be in spite of the screening and sifting they all came through.

Davies was there because the pay was good and the pension came early. Keene, because it was the nearest approach to being a well-paid hermit that was going. Himself, because a woman—his wife—had given him an emotional inferiority complex.

Davies was standing with the small man's straightness, admiring the semi-completed coracle when Jennings stepped into the ante-lock. His thoughts were far away.

Denise had cried the day he left for his preparatory course. Jennings could remember how close he had come to signing off —he probably would have, but for something she had said.

'Don't go, Vern," had been her words. "Don't go. All I want is for us to stay together for ever, and to hear you say you love me." That had given him the strength to go on.

Nearly a year now of knowing he had been wrong then knowing he had been right, and not knowing which was the worst. *To hear you say you love me.* What if she had got it the wrong way round? You love me, instead of, I love you. What if it *was* true that in every marriage there is one who loves and one who lets himself be loved? It was still a marriage, wasn't it?

Questions. Lots of questions, but no answers.

"We needn't connect up the fore and aft sections till we get her outside," said Davies, remoulding his disarranged blond hair. His voice snapped Jennings back into the present.

"All right. We'll do that."

"Know something?"

"No. What?"

"Next time Keene's cutting my hair I think I'll get him to crop it off short. D'you think it would look all right?"

"Could be," said Jennings. That was Davies at his best. He couldn't understand why other people didn't share his interest in his own hair styles, moles, double joints and all other trivia that seemed to occupy a large portion of his thoughts.

Jennings and Davies lifted the two built-up parts of the coracle and set them at the lock door. Jennings opened another locker and wrestled the coracle's drive unit out onto the ante-lock floor and slid it over beside the metal framework.

"Maybe if I got it cut short on top and left it long ... " Davies broke off, dilating his nostrils. "Here's Keene coming. How does he smoke that stuff?"

Keene wriggled akwardly into the ante-lock with a glowing stick of cinnamon in his hand. "Bad news," he said.

"What is it?" asked Jennings, thinking for one sick moment that it was to do with the aliens' glasshouse.

"You've set the ship down in a bad place, Vern. I was having a quick look at the local topography through the front screen. There's a range of hills at the far edge of this plain and ah ... there's a mountain in the centre of the viewer. We can't take off, at least, it looks that way to me."

"Don't worry!" said Jennings, relaxing. "We can get over it. In this gravity, one point two Earth norm, we will get a fifteen thousand foot lift in twenty miles."

"This mountain is easily seventeen thousand. Ah it might be more: I didn't check very closely." He grinned apologetically as Jennings squeezed past him and ran to the control room.

The mountain rose gradually, at first, from the low range that bounded the dust-blanketted plain, and then as it got further from the ground, seemed to shed the shackles of gravity with an arrogant reach for the stars. The last four thousand feet was a slim, impossible needle of rock that could not have stood for a minute on a planet with an atmosphere.

Jennings cursed under his breath.

"Could we go to one side of it?" asked Davies from behind.

"If this plain was level we probably could, but in the take-off we'll be bouncing about from side to side. It wouldn't be safe. No guarantee that we wouldn't hit dead on: "

"It would *look* good though. What a sight that would be. Boom!"

Jennings glanced sharply at Davies and blanked out the screen: "This is my department," he said. "We don't go any-

where until there is a clear take-off ready. Before we look over the glasshouse, you and Keene will plant mercury bombs at the base of that needle and cut it down. Two should be enough."

"You mean knock it down? But it must be half a mile across at the bottom."

"It'll go. It's away beyond the ratio of slenderness figure for any sort of rock. One good thrust at the base will set up stresses that will make the ultimate fibre stress for stone look like nothing."

Davies seemed rather subdued and awestruck by the magnitude of the destruction in which he was going to participate. He stood for a moment, ready to speak, then turned and went towards the rear of the ship.

Jennings stared after him, knowing that he should go in place of Keene who was irreverent with explosives, but he had a reason for staying. One that seemed very important.

...through this screen, Psaxhro. Note the perfect cohesion. Oh yes, no starting at the middle and spreading outwards here. 'The boundaries and extensions of the house were aligned and trued at the same time as the central buildings.

If you want a thing done right, Psaxhro, supervise it yourself. That's what I always say.

Now for the in-systems extensions...

Jennings sat at the main screen until the coracle appeared on the right hand edge, spitting flame and churning up clouds of dust which, lacking air to buoy up their particles, vanished back into the ground quicker than the eye could follow. When the coracle's driving exhaust had dwindled to a pinpoint of light he made an adjustment to the screen's pick-up controls.

He worked for a time, not being satisfied until the blackness of airless space had changed to a warm blue, through which the stars shone with a lessened, more friendly lustre. That done, he snapped a personal tape into a play-back and sat down, staring through half-closed eyes into the large screen.

The music was soft and distant.

Old music that had been written on Earth, long ago in the days when the sky had been silent friendly companionship for evening walks. A backdrop to the thoughts of lovers, or the memories of those that were lovers no longer.

Not a black, cold hell, the darkness of which the stars served not to lessen but to emphasise.

Jennings made himself relax. Slowly the effect of the music and the 'Earth' sky cut the strings that bound his consciousness to the present, and he went slanting into the warm, safe past.

. Wet drowsy summer afternoons in the impersonal obscuring darkness of a cinema, with the smell of a girl's hair drying, and the damp tang of raincoats. The same music alive in the background, barely heard over the meaningless, meaningfull babble of too many voices...*beside a garden wall when stars are bright*...watery gold bars of winter sunlight leaning on scraperboard trees, whose branches were beaded with rooks as he walked to meet Denise...

It was recapitulation. A sort of invocation of the Jennings that used to be before space had dried him up and sapped his resilience, making his attitudes fragile, brittle things.

What might be Man's first contact with the Great Outside seemed almost unimportant

Slowly he refocussed his thoughts on the subject of the glasshouse.

Firstly, the fact that this was an airless planet meant that the glasshouse could have been standing in perfect preservation for half a million years. It was almost certain that it was merely a *relic*, something that could be pulled apart with impunity—like the Pyramids.

Secondly, even if the builders of the cube were still extant, the thing was obviously an unmanned observation post—perhaps a meteorological station.

In either case, the responsibility or the penalty for being the first man to contact not-Man wasn't going to crush Jennings.

All at once he could feel the old lift inside. He lay back for a while and let the tape run its familiar course then he locked it away and re-adjusted the screen.

Still appreciative of the luxury of solitude he ignited another cigarette and made his report to the *Panther's* log. That finished he filed it away and waited.

Davies came in first, contriving to be lightfooted in the heavy spacesuit, followed by Keene carrying two bomb dampers.

"All right?" asked Jennings.

"Yeah. Sure," grinned Davies, his brashness recovered, as Jennings initialled the damper tags and filed them.

"What time?" said Jennings.

"Ah nearly ninety minutes from the time we got there," said Keene examining his chronometer. "That means that the bombs should ignite at 17.30."

"Right. Well, will we eat now or look at the glasshouse first?"

"No sense in wriggling out of these, then putting them on again," replied Keene. "Might as well get out there now."

"I'm not hungry anyway," put in Davies.

Up close the glasshouse proved to be seamless and featureless.

Approaching it, breathing heavily after the stiff climb to the top of the hummock, Jennings got a nightmarish impression that he was missing some simple, too-obvious danger signal. He hesitated for an instant then went on with Davies and Keene close behind trailing ragged columns of night in the light of the flare.

His hope that the glasshouse would turn out to be a mechanically operated observation post drained away, leaving a tense illogical apprehension. For the vaguely seen shapes inside the cube had not been machinery—they were chairs.

There were four subtly-moulded plastic chairs facing out across the lifeless plain towards where the *Panther* lay. The angles and proportions were wrong—for humans—but there was no doubt that they were easy chairs. Designed to allow somebody to sit back and watch...

The question inherent in that thought heightened Jennings unease.

"What's the chairs for?" Davies' voice cracked from the suit phones. He beamed his handlight into the cube, creating quick nervous shadows behind the chairs. On an impulse Jennings stroked his own beam across the interior of the concrete wall at the rear.

The surface was alive.

It seemed to shimmer and run like the colours on the surface of a soap bubble, except that in this case there was only one colour—a pale luminous green. The movement in it was detectable only at the edges of Jenning's field of vision—a fur-

tive trembling that ceased whenever he tried to pin it down.

Jennings felt a surge of near-panic. Here was another factor to be worked into the puzzle. Moreover, what was it he had subconsciously noticed as he approached the cube? Something to do with its architecture.

For a race as advanced as the builders of the cube must be, the design was fantastically backward. From the approach to the glasshouse one received a strong impression of its incongruity. It clashed with its surroundings in a way that jarred heavily on the senses.

Of course, that was from the outside. From the interior it would be fine.

Davies' voice cut in again. "There's no doors on the thing. How do they get in and out?"

That was it! The fact that had eluded Jennings. There were no doors in the glasshouse. Just a shimmering luminescent wall...

Jenning's subconscious sped on ahead of him, down dark tunnels of logic, and thrust a picture up into the spotlight of his consciousness.

He saw a house. Not a house as Jennings knew them, but one in which instantaneous matter transmitters had replaced stairs and corridors. A place where one could step from one room to another even if the rooms were at different ends of the house. In different cities. In different countries.

On different planets!

A house that sprawled over a solar system or a star group or a galaxy. Appearing to the outsider as a series of smaller buildings scattered here and there, but to those inside—much the same as an Earth-type dwelling.

Except that one could have and enjoy an endless variety of landscapes or of climates. A room that led into a garden on one world, another that overlooked a waterfall light years away and lit by two suns instead of one.

Sunlight here, moonlight next door, neither or both in the room beyond that. Lots of living space—a universe full...

Jennings realised that Davies and Keene were staring at him. He must have made a sound. Keene looked away again towards the cube, frowning. "That's right. No doors. Funny that."

"Maybe we could cut in below it and come up from underneath," said Davies. "Bet you..."

"We're touching nothing," interrupted Jennings harshly. "We're going back to the ship and warping home."

Davies looked blank. "Why?"

"That's right. Why?" chipped in Keene, an obstinate note creeping into his voice.

Jennings hesitated. He could tell them and probably make them believe him, except for one thing. What was there to see on the planet? Why would somebody use a room of his house just to sit and stare at an empty, airless plain?

"What time did you say the bombs would ignite?" asked Davies.

"Ah ...17.30," replied Keene..

"Then what in hell's *that*?" Davies snarled.

Jennings spun on his heel. Low down in the sky, out beyond the *Panther*, an intensely bright point of light had appeared. As Jennings watched, it grew even brighter and spread downwards.

Fear of the unknown set Jennings' heart pounding as the light source developed a glowing aura that began to change colours with a slow rhythm.

Suddenly Jennings knew what it was.

The sun was coming up.

The same thought had struck Davies and Keene. "That mountain," Davies said quietly. "The pinnacle must be catching the first rays of the sun. This must happen here every day."

"What about the aura?" asked Jennings keeping his eyes fixed on the spectacle.

"Ah I know what it is," said Keene. "There's volcanic activity in that region. I forgot to mention it, but I think that needle was formed by dust rising up in a column of gas that comes out of the ground there."

"Like a ah ...stalacite in reverse?"

One part of Jennings' mind thought, that's a very good analogy. The water dripping down from the roof of a cave deposits tiny particles that, over thousands of years, form a stalacite. Here there was heated gas rising or being forced into the sky century after century slowly erecting a massive monolith.

Minutes fled by in which neither Jennings nor the others wanted to return to reality. The needle was flaming down half its length now, the gas clouds that surrounded it blazing with misty, multi-coloured splendour.

The mercury bombs planted at the base of the needle



created a bright fan of light that stood out for an instant against the magnificence about it. The needle seemed to stand and unaffected for an aeon of time after the soundless explosion had died—then the reaching arms of destruction pulled it slowly downwards.

Somehow it made Jennings think of a beautiful and glorious puppet whose supporting strings had been carelessly released.

In the increased brightness caused by the sunlight reflecting from the dust clouds that formed the dead giant's shroud, Jennings told the other two why the glasshouse had been built.

The simple, obvious and, to them, *deadly* reason for its existence.

Must you go, Psaxhro?

You haven't seen half of the extra-system extensions yet. Some of them are really superb. There's one in particular...

C

Oh well—if you must, you must. Come over next year and we'll go through them properly. We could take the whole year to do it properly

Back in the *Panther* Jennings sat in his acceleration chair. Somehow, he couldn't realise the implications of all that had happened. He could still hear Davies shouting, "They're not going to like it. They're not going to like it."

I'm coming back, Denise—wait for me, he thought. I'm coming home fast. He sat stiffly gripping the arms of his chair waiting for the engines to reach firing point.

He could still hear Keene saying, "It's all right. They'll never find us—space is too big."

Maybe, thought Jennings, feeling the ship beginning to stir, space is too big for who? Space, the hated sky, that had beaten him at last, had always been to much for him.

He sank back into his cushions.

Maybe they won't find us.

BOB SHAW

THE NEXT ISSUE!!

★ A world is rejoicing; a world bright with the joy and gladness of Christmastide. But, in the dark shadows there lurks the pale spectre of fear and mysterious death! This is the theme of E. C. TUBB'S most brilliant short story to date, appearing for the first time in the next issue of NEBULA.

This edition, available at your newsstand in exactly two months, also contains "Final Curtain", the outstanding novelette by ROBERT DONALD LOCKE, which was unavoidably 'crowded out' of this number; plus other yarns by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL, BOB SHAW and others, making it one of our best all-round issues to date.

E. C. TUBB

Project One

There was a grim threat of sudden and painful death—but no one knew from where it came.

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

DR JOHN CARMODY sat on a hard wooden chair in the anteroom of the Central Defence Building and idly listened to the murmur of low conversation from the soldier at the desk. A big craggy man with tormented eyes and a bitter mouth, he seemed startlingly young for what he was. Physicists, by popular definition, were old white haired men with stooped shoulders and vacant eyes, a little ludicrous, a little absent-minded, and somehow always gentle.

Carmody was nothing like that.

He straightened as the one-sided conversation ceased and by the time the soldier had replaced the hushaphone back into its cradle he was standing before the desk.

"Well?"

"Security clears you, sir. You may go in now."

"Thank you," said the big man drily. "Wasn't that display of caution a little excessive even for Defence? Surely you could have just checked my fingerprints with those on the card?"

"Security regulations, sir." The soldier handed back the identification card in its envelope of heat-sealed transparent plastic "Through that door, sir."

Carmody nodded, swung through the door, and sighed as he saw a guard. Silently he went through the familiar ritual of proving that he was the man he was supposed to be, and the guard nodded as he opened a door.

"Inside, sir. They are waiting for you."

Carmody shrugged and stepped into a small, thickly padded room.

Twelve men stared at him as the door swung shut with a dull thud. Ten of them were utter strangers, most wearing uniform, a few, like himself, in casual civilian dress. He smiled at Conway and shook hands with old Professor Michele.

"It's been a long time, Professor. How are you keeping?"

As usual, John, still trying to look a little further than any other man, and still failing." The old man chuckled as he led Carmody towards the front row of a bank of upholstered seats. "Sit with me, my boy, tell me of your work. Are you married yet?"

"One moment, Doctor." A tall, thin, uniformed man stepped before them, his eyes hard as he stared at the big physicist. "You are late, Carmody, why is that?"

"Ask your watchdog."

"Please, Doctor. I must insist on knowing the reason for your lateness."

"Must you?" Carmody stared at the man with unconcealed dislike. "Why?"

"I am in charge of Security here, and we dare take no chances. Your reasons?"

"I told you, ask your watchdog. For some reason he insisted on checking with Higher Command. It took time, that is why I am late, but if the fact makes you unhappy then perhaps I had better go." He stepped towards the door, then stopped as a hand gripped his arm. He stared down at it, then at the flushed face of the Security officer, his mouth even more bitter than normal.

"Take your hand off me."

"In a moment."

"Take it off now, or do I have to break your arm?" In the shocked silence Carmody could almost hear the thud of his own heart. "If I am late," he said quietly, "it is because of your own regulations. Sometimes I feel it would be a lot simpler if we

were to be branded on the forehead. Or perhaps a thick metal serf-collar would be just as good?"

"Your are impertinent!"

"No. I prefer to think that I am intelligent." Carmody shrugged off the officer's hand and stared at the watchful faces of the assembled men. "Well? What happens now?"

"You will please take your places facing the rostrum." The Security officer didn't look at the big man. "You may smoke if you wish, but I must warn all of you not to talk to each other about your various projects. This room is soundproof but please remember that you will violate Security if you even talk to your neighbour."

He fell silent, then stood watchful against one wall, his uniform blending with the dun-colour of the padding, the pistol at his belt black against the tan.

Conway grinned and sat next to Carmody, the old professor on his other side.

"Still the rebel, John? Still kicking against the thorns?"

"Is that what you call it?" The big man settled deeper in his chair, his grey eyes bitter as he half-heard the whispered murmur of trivialities from the other men. "You are older than I am, Michele, were meetings of scientists muzzled in the old days?"

"Muzzled?" The old man wheezed with ancient mirth. "Indeed not, just the reverse. Why the discussions there used to be, the arguments, the theories! It was like a madhouse sometimes, each trying to talk the other down, and each certain that he alone had the correct knowledge. Things have changed much since the days of my youth."

"And now we are warned not even to discuss what we are working on." Carmody sighed, his eyes dull as he stared at the rostrum before him.

"There's a good reason for that, John," said Conway soberly. "With the state of the world as it is, knowledge is more important than armies. Scientific knowledge can give us the advantage, make the world a safe place to live in, protect us from our enemies. Would you betray your country?"

"Still the patriot, Conway?" Carmody smiled a little as he stared at the man sitting beside him. "Hasn't ten years of directed research, of constant surveillance, of endless suspicion cured you yet?"

"Nothing can 'cure me' as you call it, John. I'll admit that I don't like the surveillance, no one could, but it is for our own

good, and later, when the world situation has eased, Security will be relaxed and scientists will be free men again as they used to be."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

Conway flushed. "Yes. Unlike you, John, I happen to put my country before my personal ideals. I can see the logic of losing a little freedom now in order to be wholly free later on. The alternative isn't pleasant."

"No." The big man smiled a little, his lips twisting without humour. "In Russia we'd be kept under constant surveillance, have to account for our every movement, only be allowed to work along directed lines. Our conversation would be censored, our private lives checked by Security Police, our reading matter suspect." He stared at the young man at his side. "In fact. Conway, we'd live almost exactly as we do now."

"It isn't the same!"

"Of course not. We speak English."

A stir from the assembled scientists cut off the young man's reply, and he leaned forward a little, staring at the rostrum.

A man strode with military precision directly to the centre of the raised platform. He was a hawk-eyed man with close cropped grey hair and a uniform that fitted him like a second skin. He stood, wide-legged and with his hands clasped behind his back, and stared at the white faces of the men below.

Conway nudged the man at his side, his anger forgotten in the pulse of excitement.

"That's Colonel Burford," he whispered. "This thing must be big."

"Silence," Someone called from the back of the room and Conway flushed and bit his lip. Carmody smiled and stared at the man on the rostrum, waiting for him to speak. Burford wasted no time.

"You men have been assembled here for a specific reason, one which you will learn in a short while, but before I continue with what I have to say I must emphasise again the strictest need for absolute secrecy. Each of you is expert in his field. None of you should have the slightest idea of what the man beside you is working on, it is not necessary for you to know, and until now, was most inadvisable. However, it may be necessary to relax Security regulations and allow free discussion between the persons in this room. If that is the case, I must again warn you that no hint of your present projects must be mentioned. Any contravening of this regulation will be regarded as an act of treason and will be

punished accordingly. Any permitted conversation must be limited to general discussion only."

He swayed a little on the balls of his feet, his hard eyes glittering as they surveyed the pallid faces of the men before him.

"In a few moments I am going to give you data and instructions. The data will take the form of photographs and moving pictures. The instructions will depend on certain conclusions which will be reached after you have had a chance to study the evidence. I want you each to study the pictorial and mathematical data, correlate them, arrive at an independent conclusion, then, after a suitable period of time, to give me your conclusions."

He stared at them again, teetering on the balls of his feet, then nodded and stepped to one side.

Three men, all wearing uniform and each bearing arms, carried a squat machine to the front of the rostrum and set it carefully down. One man hooked a screen on the wall, unrolling a starkly white sheet of plastic. A second plugged in an electrical connection while the third set down a sheaf of papers.

Finished, they moved away and Carmody heard the heavy door slam behind them. A Security officer stepped to the side of the machine and a cone of white light stabbed against the screen, bright and harsh against the soft lights of the room.

It grew suddenly very quiet.

"I intend running this moving picture through at least twice. The first time I suggest you relax, let your eyes absorb what they see, don't try to do anything constructive." Colonel Burford was a dim shape at the side of the brilliant screen. He nodded to the officer, a slight hum came from the squat machine, and abruptly the screen became filled with flickering black and white.

It was the sky as seen from Earth, clear, fleeced a little with cloud, hazed with refracted heat. For a long moment nothing happened, then the sky seemed to tilt and swing around the screen, dipping and plunging in sickening alterations of focus. Land replaced the sky, a mottled patchwork of grey and black, white and shadow. It swept in wide arcs, distorted, slightly convex and strangely blurred. The scene altered again—and something glittered for a moment in the right hand corner of the screen.

Carmody blinked in the sudden glare of white, and rubbed his eyes as he stared at the tall figure of the Colonel.

"That was a strip of film taken from one of our high altitude experimental rockets. There is nothing unusual about it except

for one thing. I will run the film again and let you see it for yourselves."

Again the sky, the swinging land, the sky again. The bright object reflected light in splinters of glittering brilliance, hazing the film a little, making it impossible to decipher outline. The projector stopped, the bright object motionless on the screen.

"The experimenal rocket was at an altitude of more than two hundred miles when these photographs were taken," said Burford quietly. "Note the bright object. If we can rely on our instruments it must be in the neighbourhood of three hundred miles above sea level."

He snapped his fingers and the projector hummed a little as it ran off the last of the film. The screen flared white for a moment, then darkened again as fresh shadows moved across its surface.

Again the sky, but steadier this time, a continuous sheet of grey, hazed a little and mottled with cloud. Something trailed across it, a splinter of glittering brilliance, moving at incredible velocity across the screen.

"Taken from the observatory at Mount Palomar." Burford's voice sounded drily through the silence. "Estimated speed of the object is well over one thousand miles an hour."

Again the screen flared white, then shadows crawled over the brilliant surface, crawled and settled, a mingled pattern of black and white.

"This was taken by high speed camera and with telephoto-telescopic lense fitted with electronic trackers. It is the best picture we have of the strange object."

It rested in the centre of the screen, bright, smooth, flared and turreted. In shape it was oviod, like a flattened elongated egg, covered with protrusions and somehow both shockingly familiar and yet utterly alien.

The projector died and after a second the cone of light vanished from the screen. Burford strode back to the centre of the rostrum, his hands still clasped behind his back, his hawk-face stern as he stared at the scientists.

"Your conclusion?" He pointed to a man at the rear.

"Space station?"

"Next!" The finger swung to another of the men.

"Orbiting space ship."

"And you?"

"Obviously a space station."

From man to man the thin finger swept and each gave as his

conclusion one of the two answers. Burford nodded as if expecting just that response.

"Exactly. The object is either a space station or an orbiting ship, for our purposes we can assume that both are the same."

"Can we?" Carmody smiled thinly at the annoyed expression on the Colonel's harsh features. "Personally I would have thought the two things entirely different."

"Indeed? How so may I ask?"

"A space station pre-supposes that it was built and launched by some nation here on Earth. An orbiting space ship could either be a returning vessel from an expediton, or it could equally be an alien visitor."

"Let us not waste time in fantasy, Doctor," Burford snapped acidly. "All that need concern us at the present time is that an orbiting vessel has threatened the security of our country. I would have thought it obvious who is to blame for establishing the threat."

Carmody shrugged and remained silent. He was too used to the narrow channels of military thought to waste time and words on making himself appear ridiculius. Conway grinned at him, then concentrated on what the Colonel was saying.

"The object, which we will hereafter refer to as Project One, was first discovered one month ago. As you saw it was by sheer chance that an image of it was caught on film. Since then we have plotted its course and have been able to predict exactly where it will be at any given time. The course is orbital, on a fixed plane about the two poles. The ship swings on a fixed plane, and its speed is matched with the rotation of the planet so that it covers the entire globe every twenty-four hours."

The Colonel paused, his eyes glittering as he stared at his audience.

"I need hardly tell you gentlemen what that means to the security of our country. Whoever is responsible for Project One literally has the earth at their mercy. From that position they can dominate the world and nothing can stop their atomic missiles from reducing our cities and fortifications to dust.

"As yet the knowledge of Project One has been a closely guarded secret. We can only be sure of one thing—we are not responsible for it. A far as can be known the British Empire and our other allies are also innocent of this treachery. The conclusion is obvious."

"Russia?"

"Yes, Doctor Carmody."

"But is that extrapolation necessarily correct?"

"I am certain that it is. Construction of Project One calls for a high degree of technical knowledge, skilled industries, specialised scientific knowledge and a high economic standard. We have it. Russia has it. Great Britain and probably France have it. Germany would have had it but for our foresight in obtaining the services of German technicians. I think that we can afford to discount the other nations. We have not built a space station. Our allies state they know nothing of it, and as far as we can determine they are speaking the truth. Russia is the sole remaining country able to construct Project One and with the desire to do so."

"I see." The big man frowned down at the tips of his shoes. "You say that the ship was first sighted a month ago. Has any action been observed? Any supply vessels arriving or leaving?"

"No. But the orbit of Project One takes it where we cannot observe, it is quite possible that supply ships contact it then."

"Very well then. Have any demands been made? Any threats?"

"That comes beneath Security, Doctor, it has nothing to do with the reason for calling you together."

"No?"

"No."

"Well then, how about getting on with the reason why we're here, or do we have to find out from sealed orders?"

"You are facetious, Carmody. Please remember what you are and where you are."

"You make that pretty obvious, Colonel." The big man smiled as he stared at the soldier. "May I suggest that you stop treating men of learning as if they were moronic children? To me it is obvious why we are here, and I'm sure that it must be equally obvious to all."

"And that reason is?"

"You want us to destroy the ship."

"You will please refer to the object as Project One."

"You can label it Green Cheese if you like, but to me it is still a ship. Well? Am I right?"

Burford didn't answer. He snapped his fingers and the uniformed officer who had operated the projector began to distribute a thin sheaf of papers to each man.

Riffling through them, Carmody discovered they consisted of blown-up stills, typed columns of figures giving the orbital

velocity and other relevant information, and several schematic drawings of an artist's impression of the strange object.

The latter made the big man smile. Whoever the artist was one thing was certain, he was no scientist.

Glancing at the others as they looked at their papers Carmody gained a shrewd idea as to just how many of them were scientists and how many were Security men in disguise. The ratio was about even, and his knowing Conway and the old professor made it relatively simple for him to pick out the other three genuine experts.

Burford called for order with a noisy clearing of his throat.

"Your first duty will be to study these reports. Your second will be to discover as soon as possible how best to destroy Project One. You each know your own field so there is no need for me to allocate the various tasks."

He rocked a little on his heels, his hands clasped behind him in his invarable posture as he glared at the men.

"Are there any questons?"

A low hum rose from the men, and one or two shifted a little uncomfortably, then Michele lifted his hand.

"Well?"

"I shall need some papers from my study. Will I be permitted to obtain them?"

"None of you will leave this building until further orders. Anything you need will be collected and given to you. Your families will naturally be notified. Any other questions? No? Then that will be all."

They rose, clutching their papers, looking a little sheepish as they glanced at each other, and Carmody was reminded of a bunch of children leaving the classroom.

The missile rose, a slender pencil of polished perfection, shimmering a little in the blistering heat of the mid-day sun. Carmody looked at it, glancing up at the clear blue overhead, then shrugging as he remembered that the test had been scheduled at a time when the mysterious vessel would be on the other side of the planet.

"Think it will work?" Conway stared at the missile, a long, almost loving look, then joined the big man as he walked towards the bunkers. Carmody shrugged.

"Impossible to tell. Three hundred is hard to begin with. then they insist on spot accuracy, and predictable rate of climb and

acceleration. Personally I think they're asking too much. We just don't know enough to build a self-guided missile capable of blasting a target at three hundred, not when the target's moving at about a thousand miles an hour."

"Proximity fuse," said the young man, and smiled.

"I guessed that, Security must think we're utterly stupid. They've been trying to make me believe that the missile will be loaded with gunpowder—no allowance for blast area at all—when it's obvious to a blind man that they'll have to use atomics."

He squinted at the uniformed men waiting outside the bunker and lengthened his stride. Conway followed his example, panting a little as his feet churned through the sand.

"Still, Carmody, they aren't as bad now as they used to be. These past two months have proved that."

"Yes," admitted the big man drily. "They even let us talk together. Maybe someone convinced them that it would be a good idea if the men building the missile should co-operate, instead of each working as an isolated unit." He chuckled at a recent memory when one man had designed a perfect fuel system only to find that someone else had designed guiding instruments which left no room for anything else.

A siren wailed, a short blast echoing flatly from the surrounding desert, and hastily they ran for the shelter of the bunker. Tensely Carmody stared at the glistening shape of the missile, narrowing his eyes as he mentally counted the seconds.

The siren wailed again. A red smoke flare glowed from the top of the tracking station. Someone shouted a last second command and, with a whistling roar as of a million sheets of crumpling paper, the missile sprang into sudden life.

It rose, the flame of its exhaust searing the desert, then, with an abrupt darting motion, it streaked towards the blue heavens, the flare of its rocket drive a shimmering point of dwindling brilliance.

Carmody sighed and nudging Conway left the shelter of the bunker. He hesitated at the side of the transport jeep, then, with a deep sniff of the hot desert air, decided to walk the five miles to the workshops and living quarters.

Others had different ideas.

The driver started to argue, then appealed to Conway. Conway shrugged and looked the other way. A Security officer passed, listened to the driver, and stared at the big man as if he had done something obscene.

"You'd better ride in the jeep," he decided. "We can't take a chance on your getting lost, and besides, you're too valuable to be allowed to run loose." He smiled as he said it but his eyes were hard and Carmody knew better than to argue. Wearily he climbed into the vehicle and gritted his teeth against the jolting ride.

By the time they reached the workshops the firing data had already arrived and was waiting on Carmody's desk. Eagerly he scanned it then, flinging down the papers, slumped onto a hard chair.

"Any good?" Conway glanced at the discarded papers, fighting his natural urge to pick them up and read the answer for himself. Carmody shook his head.

"Two seventy-five and five degrees error."

"That's not too bad." Conway started to say something more then abruptly fell silent. The big man smiled.

"You were going to say that proximity fuses could take care of the error and that the atomic blast would cut down the distance. Maybe they could, but don't forget that three hundred miles up is almost a vacuum and the blast effect diminishes for lack of a conducting medium. I know the radiation effect is still pretty bad, but Project One is moving fast, too fast, and any error can throw the whole effort into the discard."

"What now? Another trial?"

"Perhaps, that's up to Burford, personally I believe we've reached our maximum. We just don't know enough yet to better it. Maybe it's because of some little thing, a more resistant lining for the venturis, a better fuel pump, a lighter system of directional controls, anything, but at the moment we're stumped."

"Why not a bigger missile?"

"Why not?" agreed Carmody. "A bigger shell, larger fuel tanks, more fuel, but greater thrust needed to lift the extra fuel and heavier shell. No, Conway, we're up against the law of diminishing returns. To be really effective the next size would be capable of reaching the Moon, and that's a little ahead of us just yet." He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. "You know, Conway, I'm certain that someone somewhere knows the answer. If only scientific knowledge wasn't held in small water-tight compartments. An Englishman might have his finger on the solution and not know it because he lacks the data we could give him. A Russian could know it, and still be trying procedures we've dropped as useless. If we could only get rid of this crazy suspicion we'd leap ahead fifty years. Science needs the different outlooks of

varied nationalities, the different viewpoints, the shared knowledge. The late part of the nineteenth century proved that, and the early part of this one. Look at the progress which was made in fifty years."

"On the same old hobby horse, John?" Conway smiled and rose to his feet. "Well, I'll be getting along. I promised to drop in and have a chat with Michele."

"I'll come with you." Carmody flung the firing data into a drawer of his desk. "Not much I can do now until Burford holds another conference, and I haven't seen the old boy for too long now." He fell into step beside the young man, their footsteps making a united thudding sound on the concrete of the floor. "Funny about the old prof," he mused. "What would a statistician be doing on a project like this?"

"Security," reminded Conway, and the big man snorted.

"To hell with it! You can't stop a man from putting two and two together. If a statistician can correlate and predict the movements of related figures such as certain age groups and particular classes, then is there any reason why he should not be able to predict the action of a bunch of similar particles?"

"Electrons you mean? Alpha particles and electrons?"

"Security," grinned Carmody and they both laughed.

Professor Michele sat at his wide desk, his still-bright eyes narrowed as he studied columns of figures, translating them and transferring them to an elaborate graph. He smiled as he saw the two men and threw down his pen.

"Hello, boys. How did the test go?"

"Lousy." Carmody slumped onto a chair, his big figure relaxed, and fumbled for a cigarette. "Prof, how many rockets would we need to send up allowing for a five degree error and a twenty-five mile shortage to blast the target?"

"You want the answer now?"

"No, but Burford probably will. Project One is no clay pigeon to be sniped at with leisure. Unless we get it at the first time we don't get at it at all." He grinned at the old man. "Don't worry about it, Prof, I can guess the answer, we just don't have enough missiles to do it."

He squinted at the elaborate graph the old man was working on. "Project stuff?"

"Not exactly." The old man glanced uneasily towards the door. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this but I'm working on

country-wide death statistics. For some reason the trend of old people to die has risen and Higher Command is a little worried."

"Why should they be? Old people always die, don't they?"

"Yes, but not as you'd expect. Senility takes some of course, disease others, but there is a constant ratio between natural death and accidental death. Now the balance has altered and they want me to plot a predictable curve."

"Sounds crazy to me." Conway shrugged and lounged against the wall. "What the devil has old people dying got to do with Defence? Unless . ." His face whitened and he stared at the old man. "They wouldn't dare!"

"Disease?" Carmody stared at the old man. "Is that what they think?"

"Please. I shouldn't have told you, but yes, it does seem that way."

"Disease," whispered Conway, his young features tense and white with anger. "Why, the dirty lousy stinking swine! To do that to us! We ought to blast their rotten country to ash while we still have the chance."

"Wait!" Carmody turned to the old man. "Tell me, Prof, is it an infectious disease? You said something about the older sections of the people, are the younger ones dying too?"

"I ." He stopped, blanching with horror, and the two men sprang to their feet their eyes wide with shock and startled disbelief.

Outside in the corridor a man screamed with unbearable agony.

It was a sound which held more than pain. Carmody was reminded of a man he'd known who had fallen thirty feet from an installation and had ruptured both kidneys. He had screamed like that, like a gored horse or a stricken rabbit, a scream which held the ultimate of physical agony and mental fear.

For one shocked moment they stared at each other, then, as if jerked by a single string, they lunged towards the door. Outside men ran in startled confusion, guards, scientists, their normally white faces even paler with shock. The sounds echoed from the low roof, jarred at ears and nerves, shrilled and washed around them, its very presence creating fear.

Carmody clutched at a passing guard, his fingers slipping from the man's sleeve, then he raced after him, his long legs thrusting at the concrete of the floor. A little group clustered around something on the floor. An old man, almost bald, his

features twisted into something no longer resembling a human face, his eyes wide and starting from his head, his mouth open and his throat spilling sound, lay in their midst.

From that throat came the ghastly screaming.

A man can feel pain and rave and curse and shout in an effort to find relief. A woman can scream from the shock of fear or anticipitated pain, and children shriek from a variety of emotions or sometimes for no reason at all.

The old man didn't scream in any of these ways.

His was an animal cry. The ultimate in vocal expression when all barriers are down, when all self-respect, all knowledge that others may be listening, has not the slightest effect. He writhed on the hard concrete of the floor, his clenched hands pounding at the hard surface, his every muscle tense and quivering as his body vibrated in an ecstasy of anguish. Listening to him Carmody thought of men with their eyes seared with acid, their bodies charred with napalm, their ligaments twisted on some ancient torture device.

"Stop him," a voice whispered, and with a start he recognised it for his own. "Kill him. Put him out of his misery!"

A guard fumbled at his holster, his hard eyes glittering with unaccustomed pity, his hand trembling a little as he raised the heavy automatic. Someone knocked down the weapon just as he squeezed the trigger, the roar of the explosion coinciding with the ending of the screams.

For a moment Carmody thought that the guard had shot the old man, then, as he saw the unmarked body, he knew that whatever it had been that was tormenting the poor devil had now lost it power to hurt. The man was dead, his body relaxed, but his wrinkled features still reflected the hell he must have experienced.

Automatically the big man checked his wrist watch. The screaming had lasted exactly ten seconds. Ten seconds of unbearable agony, seconds which would have seemed an eternity to the stricken man, seconds in which something horrible had entered the snug little world in which they lived.

Slowly the group broke up. Guards fetched a sheet and covered the old man, ushering the scientific personnel back to their quarters, trying not to let their schooled features reflect what they must have felt.

Back in the old professor's room Carmody fumbled for a cigarette, inhaling gratefully at the blue smoke and hoping that his

features weren't as strained and as pale as those of the others. He pointed with the glowing tip of his cigarette towards the door.

"Is that what's been happening outside?"

The old man shrugged, absently picking up his pen and drawing little squiggles on the corner of a sheet of paper.

"I don't know. They didn't tell me much, just gave me the figures and asked me to plot a curve."

"I see." Carmody frowned at the thin streamer of smoke coiling from the end of his cigarette. "That could tell us a lot," he said significantly. "The only reason they would want a predictable curve is because the deaths aren't limited to one age group, or if they were, then that group is shifting."

"You mean that the disease must be attacking younger people?" Conway wiped his face and stared at the wetness on his palm. "Bacteriological warfare! Damn them all to hell! What chance have we against microbes?"

"None." Carmody picked at a shred of tobacco on his lower lip. "Are we certain that it's bacteriological warfare though? Any such weapon must have a boomerang effect on the nation which uses it. Disease recognises no frontiers, no nationalism, no selection other than that of its own survival. Even if Russia devastated us with disease, in the end she too would be devastated."

"Not necessarily." Michele looked up from his doodling. "We know that radioactive dusts can be made with any predictable half-life. They can be used on an enemy and after a week or a month or even a year, the user can advance and occupy the area without harm. The dust will have lost its radiative dangers by then."

"I see what you mean," said Carmody tightly. "Is it possible?"

Conway stared at them, then, as he understood what the old man had meant, surged to his feet, kicking his chair behind him with the violence of his rising.

"You think that they may have developed a short-term virulent disease? One that lasts only a short while and then becomes harmless?"

"Why not?" The old man set down his pen and rubbed his eyes. "Mutation could do it. Exposure to radiation could produce a virulent microbe capable of lethal qualities to men, and yet one which will revert to relative harmlessness after a certain period. It has happened before. The influenza germ is one which has varied the most in medical history. 'Flu can be a mere

nuisance or it can be as deadly as a bullet. We don't know why that should be, but there can be no doubt that it is the case."

"Then .?" Slowly Conway nodded, his young features strained beneath his pallor. "That accounts for Project One. They'd have to plant the germs, they couldn't do it from aircraft, we'd detect them and shoot them down. Local distribution would not do much good, the regions could be isolated and the area quarantined. Project One is the obvious answer. They can send down a continuous spray each time they are above us. We couldn't detect it and by the time the culture had reached the lower levels it would have spread to cover almost all of the country."

Savagely he slammed his fist into his palm.

"Carmody! We've got to destroy it before it destroys us."

"How?" Carmody crushed out the butt of his cigarette. "Don't you think I've tried? With the equipment and knowledge we have it's impossible. We just can't get that high, not with accuracy anyway, and if we try and miss, then we'll never get another chance."

"Why not?"

"That thing has venturis, or at least some method of propulsion. All it need do is accelerate a little or climb high enough so that we just couldn't get within sighting distance of it."

"But we must do something, man! We just can't sit here and let those damn Reds spread their poison. You heard that poor devil out there, for all we know the same thing is going to happen to us, the disease could have infected us while we watched him die. What does it matter what we do so long as we do something to show them we aren't going to take this sitting down?"

"Obviously," Carmody said sarcastically, "you are no Christian. You certainly don't believe in turning the other cheek."

"What's that got to do with it? Or perhaps you wouldn't like to see your damn friends hurt? You'd rather see your country ruined than smack back at the swine who were the cause of it." Conway tensed, his hands clenching into fists, his eyes flaming with anger and hatred as he stepped slowly towards the big man.

"I've stood all I intend standing from you, Carmody. Friend or not I've no time for traitors. Stand up!"

"Sit down," said the big man calmly, "and try not to be a fool."

"You . ." Conway lunged, his fists reaching for the big man's face, his breathing harsh as he tried to batter the calm features to a mask of blood-stained pulp. Carmody didn't even

get up. He lifted one foot, resting it against the young man's stomach and bending his knee against the weight. Savagely he straightened his leg, and Conway staggered backwards across the room, slamming against the wall and whimpering with temper.

"Now sit down," snapped Carmody. "Sit down before I get up and really knock some sense into you."

"You stinking traitor!"

"Why? Because I use my head instead of my emotions? Because I try to think like a scientist instead of letting propagandists think for me?"

Slowly he shook his head.

"No, Conway. The trouble with you starry-eyed patriots is that you never take the trouble to think for yourselves. Something unpleasant happens and immediately you scream for a scapegoat. The fact that the scapegoat changes during the years doesn't seem to matter, you change enemies as fast as you change friends. Once the enemy was England. Then China, Japan, Germany, and now Russia is the nigger in the woodpile. Who will be next Conway?"

"Unless we smash them there won't be another enemy. We have got to kill them now before they kill us!"

"And what if we've made a mistake?"

"There's no mistake! There can only be one country responsible for what is happening. You know it. Burford knows it! We all know it!"

"No, Conway." Carmody stared seriously at the young man. "We don't *know* it. We've only surmised it. Is a wild guess sufficient reason to destroy an entire nation?"

"It's good enough for me. What are you trying to do, justify the murder of your countrymen?"

"No."

"Yes you are. Talk won't get you out of this, Carmody. Wait until Burford learns about it. He'll know what to do. There's no place here for a damn traitor."

"You're a fool, Conway. Any man who tries to deny to another the right to hold his own opinion is a fool. All I have said is that we cannot be certain, and imemdiately you brand me a traitor because I don't agree with you. What do you want me to do, Conway? Rave and rant against another country because a few men are dying? Or could it be because someone has beaten us to Project One?"

He stared at the young man, fumbling in his pocket for a

cigarette, producing a crumpled package and fishing out a battered white cylinder. He lit it, dragging deeply at the blue smoke, his tormented eyes veiled by the writhing fumes.

The door clicked and Burford entered the room.

"Emergency conference," he snapped, his voice cold and hard with repressed emotion. "You will proceed directly to the conference chamber."

"Colonel!" Conway stepped from where he stood against the wall and nervously licked his lips. "I ."

"Later, Conway."

"But, sir. I ."

"You heard what I said!" Burford glared at the young man. "This is an emergency. Stop wasting my time!"

"Yes, sir." Conway gulped, his sallow cheeks flushed with anger and shame.

Carmody grinned and winked at Michele.

Six men assembled in the padded, guarded, air-conditioned conference chamber, and Carmody smiled as he noticed that the disguised Security men had either dropped their pretence or High Command no longer thought such pretence necessary.

He relaxed in a chair, smiling a little as Conway deliberately chose a place well away from him, and looked up at the old professor.

"You'd better not sit next to me," he warned grimly. "I'm not exactly healthy at the moment."

Michele shrugged, a typically Gallic gesture, and sat down next to the big man.

"I am a little old to worry over such matters," he said quietly. "Also I do not believe in deserting my friends."

"Then you don't think that I'm a traitor?"

"No. I think that you are a little foolish, tact is something you have yet to learn, but a traitor? No."

"Thank you." Carmody smiled at the old man, then wiped the expression from his face as Burford entered the room. The Colonel was worried, and like most men of his type, his worry found release in a savage attitude to his subordinates and impatience with his superiors. The fact that he regarded the scientists as his inferiors was plain from his bleak expression and impatient tone of voice.

He wasted no time.

"Two months ago I set you to work on a problem. It was not what I would consider a difficult problem, and you had all the resources of the country at your disposal to help you solve it. You have failed. Failed miserably and pitifully. Project One still remains a constant menace in our skies."

He paused as if inviting someone to challenge him as to the truth of his statement, his cold eyes glittering beneath his bushy eyebrows and his hawk-face thrust forward over the long table.

"Some of you," he stared directly at Carmody, "probably thought that I was a little too worried about Project One. You probably thought that I was afraid of he dark, crying at shadows, shooting at nothing. Perhaps this attitude explains why you have failed to destroy the object. It could even be that you imagined you knew better than High Command, that you, in your pitiful conceit, were able to judge whether or not Project One should be destroyed.

"If any of you imagined that, gentlemen, your sleep should be broken for many nights to come. Project One is the direct cause of a wave of death which has swept our country!"

Abruptly he turned to a lined graph resting against the wall behind him and his hooked finger stabbed at the intricate markings.

"I will shorten the explanations, they could be of little interest to most of you, and content myself with giving you the relevant details. Since our first sighting of Project One the death rate of our older age groups has more than trebled. These deaths are not due to accident, seasonal disease, or from natural causes. We have a very good reason for knowing that these deaths all fall into the same category and are caused from the same source. A simple process of elimination proves that the source must be Project One."

"The screams," said Conway abruptly, and flushed as Burford glared at him.

"Yes. You have all probably wondered about the death of one of our staff. He was an old man, employed as a cleaner, undoubtedly loyal and he died here to-day. The manner of his death was identical with that of others and so you can easily understand how we have no doubt as to the proportion of deaths due to Project One."

"A moment," called Professor Michele. "Is the disease contagious?"

"What are the findings of the post mortems?" A man sitting on the opposite side of the table added his question to that of the

old man's. Burford tightened his thin lips, then, almost reluctantly, opened a sheaf of papers lying in a file before him.

"As far as can be ascertained the disease is not contagious. That is, no one who has handled the bodies, conducted the post mortems, or was near when the victim died, has been found to be suffering from any form of disease other than normal illnesses. As far as we can discover the victims seem to die at random, the only common factor seems to be one of age, and even that is within wide variations."

"How exactly do you mean, Colonel?" Michele looked up from where he scrawled rapid words on a scratch pad. "How wide are the variations?"

"From birth to senility," admitted Burford slowly. "The death rate however, is much higher in the older age groups, it mounts in almost an exact ratio."

"I see, and the symptoms are always the same?"

"Yes."

"Have any of the victims recovered?"

"Not that we are aware of. All reported cases have a mortality rate of one hundred per cent."

Burford frowned at the old man and riffled his papers.

"I should prefer any questions to be left until after I have stated the known information," he said stiffly. "Interruptions would be an unnecessary waste of time."

"I do not consider that I ask stupid questions." The old man was obviously annoyed. "But, as you wish."

"Thank you." Burford didn't even try to keep the sarcasm from his acid voice. "As to the post mortem reports. No trace of any virulent disease has yet been discovered, though obviously it must be there. We suspect nerve poison. A mutated virus which destroys the nerve communication from the brain to the vital organs. We ourselves have knowledge of such viruses, but naturally we would never use them on an enemy."

"Naturally," said Carmody drily, and smiled at the look of hate the Colonel flung at him.

"I will speak with you later, Carmody, in the meantime be good enough to allow me to say what I must without interruption."

The big man bowed and Burford stared down the table.

"The evidence then is this. Our peoples are being murdered by an unknown disease which obviously originates from Project One. As we know who is responsible for the menace in our skies it renders suspicion into certainty."

"One moment, Colonel, if you please." Michele lifted one arm and lowered it again at Burford's impatient gesture. "You mention suspected nerve poisons. Do the post mortems reveal any trace of such?"

"No."

"Then may I enquire how it is that you are so certain that it is a disease at all?"

"Surely that is obvious? What else could it be?"

"Please, Colonel, it is only obvious that I do not suscribe to your system of logic. To me, a negative result is just that, but you seem determined to turn it into a positive one."

"I see what you mean." The man who had asked about post mortem results stared at the Colonel. "You are basing your findings on pure assumption. The evidence is nowhere near sufficient and I must record my impression that you are jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

"Unwarranted!" Conway sprang to his feet his eyes blazing against the whiteness of his features. "You heard that man die! You heard him scream as he felt the poisons tearing at his body! How can you sit there and argue about it? I say we should strike back while we are still able. Blast the swine to dust before they spread their foul disease all over our country. Kill them, I say! Kill them before they kill us!"

Burford tightened his thin lips in a smile as he gently pressed the young man back into his seat. He leaned against the edge of the table, his hands clasped behind him in a familiar attitude, and stared at the watching men.

"This young man has said what was necessary to be said," he nodded gently towards Conway. "Perhaps he has even said it a little better than I could, but tha doesn't matter. Fortunately the final decision does not rest with you. Our country would obviously be ravaged while you waited, insisting on evidence, while the enemy poured over our shores. As I said, gentlemen, the final decision does not rest with you."

He paused and something almost feral glowed from his narrowed eyes.

"The High Command instructs me to inform you that a method of destroying Project One must be found within two weeks. At that time a state of war will be declared between ourselves and Russia, and if you have failed to destroy Project One by then, you will be court martialed and charged with treason."

He smiled a little, his hawk-face creasing and his teeth shining white and animal-like between his thin lips.

"I trust that the knowledge will spur you to fresh efforts, gentlemen. I need hardly remind you of the penalty for treason."

Silence filled the room, filled it with a numbing cloud of invisible tension, and Carmody could guess at the thought reflected on half a dozen faces. Conway was jubilant, Michele shocked and a little disgusted, the rest hadn't yet believed that the Colonel meant exactly what he said.

"I protest," snapped Carmody. "It is a physical impossibility to build a missile capable of destroying Project One within the time given."

"Is it, Doctor?"

"Yes. As co-ordinator of this project I cannot allow the others to suffer for doing what cannot be done. If you still labour beneath the delusion that force can produce ideas, that guns can encourage inventive genius, then I'll be your scapegoat."

"Very noble of you, I'm sure." A sneer twisted Burford's thin mouth. "It appears that you are determind to prove your point, even at the expense of your own life."

"Don't trust the dirty traitor!" Conway reared up from his chair and pointed at the big man with a quivering finger. "He's too much in love with the enemy ever to do anything against them. It wouldn't surpise me to learn that he's deliberately built inefficient missiles for the test. He should be shot.

Carmody shrugged, glancing at the shocked faces of the other scientists, then staring directly at the tall figure of the Colonel.

"Do you believe what he says?"

"Should I?"

"Why not? You're two of a kind." He rose and leaned on the table, his hands palms downwards, his fingers outspread.

"I think it best that I resign. If I am not trusted, and as I know that what you demand is impossible, I cannot win. Either way I stand to be branded as a traitor. If the missile doesn't work I'll be blamed for sabotage, and the fact that nothing we know could ever make it work would have nothing to do with it." He nodded towards Burford. "I hereby resign from Project One."

"Not so fast, Carmody." Burford moved quickly round the table. "I'd like nothing better to kick you off the site, but unfortunately you are the only man with sufficient knowledge to carry out this project within the specified time. If I permitted you to resign it would delay matters, and that I will not tolerate. You

will proceed as instructed."

"But ."

"You heard me, Carmody! Remember that you are under military jurisdiction here. You will work at full pressure on that missile. That is an order!"

He turned irritably to a uniformed man plucking at his sleeve. "What is it, man? Don't you realise that I'm in conference?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. But this communication from High Command has treble priority. I must deliver it to you immediately."

"What?"

"Regulations, sir," stammered the man, and handed over a slip of paper. Burford snatched it, gestured dismissal with a curt motion of his head, and then, after the man had gone, read the message.

He read it silently, his eyes growing bleak as they scanned the communication. Then, after a glance at the waiting men, read it aloud, his words flat and dull against the padding of the room.

"High Command instructs me to inform you that a message has been received from Russia. Message as follows: *Unless we remove our space station from its present orbit and pay heavy reparations for deaths caused by its operation, a state of war will exist between our respective countries*! Message ends."

He stared at the wide-eyed men, the flimsy message-sheet falling from his fingers.

"That was just the bare bones of the ultimatum of course, but the meaning is unmistakable." He drew a deep breath, the the sound of his inhalation startlingly loud in the silence of the room. "Well, gentlemen?"

For a long moment silence filled the room, a shocked incredible silence, then

"Bluff!" snapped Conway. "They must take us for a pack of fools!"

"Is it possible?" Michele stared at the Colonel. "Could they be bluffing?"

"I doubt it." Carmody spoke before Burford could answer. "It's certain that High Command would have checked with intelligence. Russia must be having the same wave of inexplicable deaths as we are having. Unlike us, however, they did take the trouble to ask whether or not we are responsible."

"Ask?" Conway snorted and slammed his fist down onto the

polished surface of the table. "They haven't asked. They've just assumed that we know all about it."

"Well?" Carmody looked steadily at the young man. "Didn't we do exactly the same thing?"

"But if they aren't responsible, then who is?" Michele stared appealingly at the others. "Who *did* put that vessel in the skies?"

Isn't it obvious?" Carmody stared at them each in turn. "We didn't do it, and now we know that Russia didn't. The other countries have been ruled out. To me the answer is plain."

"Yes?"

"An alien! A visitor from some other planet!" He looked at Burford. "What else could it be? That ship has come from outer space—and it is killing the people of earth!"

Silently they stared each other.

The line was a thin streak of green-yellow light against the deeper colour of the screen. It wavered, jumped, rippling with a saw-toothed effect then steadying into a sine-wave pulsing with current flow and electron impact.

Carmody stared at it, then at the assembled apparatus clustered in the room, geiger counters, radio and radar installations, a medley of electronic detection and measuring instruments.

"Are you sure that's it?"

"Certain." The technician jerked a thumb in an upwards direction. "The signal increases each time Project One is overhead, diminishing as it leaves zenith and vanishing as it crosses the horizon."

"I see." Carmody stared at the flickering cathode screen and humped his big body. He looked tired, deep lines creasing his craggy features and his tormented eyes red with strain and fatigue. "Can you isolate the energy pattern?"

"Yes and no." The technician straightened from before the instrument and rubbed his eyes. "We can subtract all known energy emissions, cosmic rays, solar radiation, ionic discharge, the usual 'noise' to be found at any time, but what's left is pretty complex. The energy is beamed from Project One all right, there can be no doubt of that. It spreads in a funnel-shape and by the time it reaches the ground it covers an area about five hundred miles in diameter. We can record it, but that's about all we can do. Heterodyning or repeating the energy-pattern is beyond us."

"That's to be expected. If that ship does come from space, and there can be little doubt now that it does, their science would be more advanced than ours. Have you noticed any increase in the strength of the beam lately?"

"No and I don't want to." The technician shuddered a little as he stooped over his recording instruments. "You know what happened last time."

"I know." Carmody rubbed the stubble on his chin and fought the desire to yawn. "From fifty to one hundred thousand in one day. Luckily for us the deaths fell off after that, if ." He paused and stared at the technician.

"The deaths fell off," he repeated slowly. "Yet you say the beam strength has remained constant. If that energy is a direct cause of the death-wave, and we know it must be, why did the deaths fall off after reaching maximum?"

"Why ask me?" snapped the weary technician. "I only work here."

"Never mind that," snarled the big man. "Keep your eyes on that screen and call me if the beam strength increases again."

Outside the room he lit a cigarette, dragging at the acrid smoke, forcing himself to remain calm. Too long without sleep, too long waiting for something to happen, for the mysterious object to do something other than just spin around the planet had worn his nerves thin.

He wasn't the only one.

Ten others had died since the old cleaner had dropped screaming to the floor. Ten men of the garrison, soldiers, old men and true, but the echo of their screams still rang through the workshops and living quarters, a grim reminder of what had happened and could happen again.

Impatiently he strode to his own office, slumping into a chair and snatching up a sheaf of firing data on the new missile. As usual the results were disappointing. So much thrust from so many venturis. So many venturis for so much weight. So much fuel needed to lift that weight. It was a vicious circle. The law of diminishing returns had set a level over which they couldn't rise.

Not unless something new could be added.

The door clicked and Conway slouched into the room. The young man showed the dread that was riding every one of them, the dread of sudden agony, dreadful pain, and, after an eternity of hell, inevitable death.

"Anything new on the fuel position?" Carmody asked without hope, already knowing the answer, and Conway shook his head.

"No. We can develop a more powerful fuel, in fact we have done, but the material doesn't exist to withstand the heat of the blast. It's up to the metallurgists now."

"I know." The big man threw a cigarette across the desk and leaned back in his chair. "The whole science of rocketry is like that. Someone develops a new fuel, then has to wait until someone comes up with a new metal able to withstand the blast, then both of them have to wait until a new feed system has been designed. After that the whole thing goes round again, and each time it goes round we both know more and realise that we don't know enough."

He struck a match and held it for the young man to light his cigarette.

"Remember the optimists before the war? They were certain they could reach the Moon with the oxy-hydrogen mixture; certain of it, they even had it figured out to the last ton. Then the war came and governments took a hand in research. Atomic power was liberated, the jet engines developed, booster rockets for assisted flight, a dozen things the old-timers hadn't even dreamed of.

"Even when the smoke and noise died down we were further away from the Moon than ever. Before the war we had known too little, it had seemed just a matter of adding two and two until we reached the necessary total. Now we know better, know that space flight isn't just loading a tin can with explosive and touching off the fuse, and the more we learn the more we realise just how little we know."

He snubbed out his butt in an ash tray and lit a fresh cigarette.

"This project is like that. We can do it—but not yet. We will be able to reach the Moon later. We could have been there by now but we've cut ourselves off, we all have, and now instead of a thousand scientists with varying viewpoints, we have a couple of hundred trying to work as directed, not knowing whether or not they are merely following a barren line of research."

"The old hobby-horse?" Conway smiled and then immediately became serious again. "I'm worried, John. My folks are pretty old now, Dad's got a bad heart. I haven't heard from them for a long time now. They could be dead, John, dead, and when I think of them dying like that, those screams ." He

shuddered and the smouldering cigarette crumpled in his hand, the glowing tip blackening his palm. He stared down at it, as if surprised that he could feel the burn.

"I know how it is, Conway, you're not the only one with old folks, but what can we do?" Carmody threw the young man another cigarette from a package he took from a drawer.

"Talk," said the young man bitterly. "That's all we seem to do, talk. God! How did we ever get into this mess?"

Carmody shrugged, then stood up, his mouth bitter as he stared at the bleak room and at the barren desert outside the small window.

"Let's go and talk with Michele. He needs cheering up more than any of us. Remember he's an old man, any time now he could double up screaming his life away, and I think he'll appreciate us going to see him."

Conway nodded and together they strode down the corridor to the statistician's office.

The old man was not alone. He had fallen into the habit of never being alone if he could possibly help it, and now he and a man of about his own age, stooped over a wide table studying sheets of lined and coloured graphs.

"John!" The old man smiled as he recognised them. "Conway! It's good to see you together again. You know Doctor Wellman?"

"Yes." Carmody nodded at the elderly man. "Anything new?"

"We think so." Michele gestured towards the cluttered table. "Wellman and I have been working on it, probably because we are the oldest scientists on the team and so have a special interest. We think that we have discovered the cause of death, the physical cause I mean, we know that the emitted energy from Project One is the prime cause."

"Good. Can we insulate against it? Innoculate? Take some prophylactic measures?"

"No, John. I had hoped that we could but ." He sighed and made a helpless gesture. "There is nothing we can do."

"Why not, Professor?"

"Because the seeds of death are already within those who die, but let Doctor Wellman explain, he has worked on it more than I."

"It's this way," said the elderly doctor abruptly. "We all know that every person who has died had some organic disease or fault. This is true for every case, even the very young, even for

the new-born who have also died as a result of the beam. Now. I have examined the reports and even conducted several experiments on those who died here. In each case I have found that death was caused by a peculiar alteration of the nervous system. I cannot describe it, I can hardly beieve it myself, but all the evidence points to some subtle alteration, and it is this alteration which causes death."

He paused and in the silence Conway's sharp inhalation echoed from the walls.

"Now we know that a sick person releases certain toxins into the blood stream. These poisons are a direct result of the illness. There are other symptoms of course, glandular imbalance, a slight variation of the neuron brain-flow. The body is sick and that sickness affects the entire mind and body. I believe that the beam radiating from Project One has the power of affecting those toxins in the blood and bringing death."

"Can it be possible?" Carmody glanced at Conway's sweating features and hastily looked at the doctor.

"Yes. I can only talk in anology you understand, we haven't words to describe what must happen. Somehow the radiation affects the nervous system of a sick person. In that it is selective, or perhaps it has been set at a frequency which will only affect diseased persons. Eddy currents seem to build, a rot or an overloading of the nervous system is brought into being, the person dies, horribly, but actually he dies, not from the beamed energy from the ship, but because he is unfit and already diseased."

"It makes sense," admitted Carmody. "It would account for the high death rate among the old people, the scattered deaths among the young." He stared at the doctor, his craggy features tense and drawn. "What happens when they increase the beam strength then?"

"More people will die," said Wellman calmly. "How many of us are really fit? How many of us are totally free of some minor illness or organic disease? Aside from that, with such knowledge the aliens should be able to set their beam to cause the death of almost every living thing on this planet. All they need do is increase the strength or alter the frequency until only the perfect are able to pass their test."

"Test?" Carmody stared at the elderly man. "A strange choice of word, doctor. Why do you say 'test'?"

"I'm sorry," said Wellman quietly, "But I find it difficult not to imagine what any scientst would do if they were in the

place of the aliens. Obviously they are not here to make contact. We have given them every opportunity to do so if they wished. No, it appears to me that they are here to occupy the planet, conquer it if you prefer, but to them it must be as if they were merely occupying a farm. As if we ourselves were to take over a primitive jungle regardless of the wishes of the natives."

"You haven't yet explained your choice of the word 'test'," reminded Carmody quietly. He didn't want to look at the tense features of the young man. Wellman shrugged.

"Isn't it obvious? Supposing I was clearing a jungle and stocking a farm. Wouldn't it be natural for me to eliminate all the diseased animals? My farm would have room only for pedigree stock, fit, healthy, young specimens, free of any taint of sickness and free of the danger of transmitted disease. You know how they control the spread of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle, they kill the bearers of the disease, and so prevent the sick cattle from giving it to heathy beasts. What more natural than that the aliens should do the same? No more transmissable diseases. No more hereditary diseases. The few that are left will be clean and pure, strong and healthy, the perfect nucleus from which to restock the planet with perfect animals."

Conway made a choked sound and began beating his clenched fist against the wall.

Thud . Thud . Thud . . .

Carmody glanced at him and knew that he was thinking of his parents. Old and ill. Waiting alone for the sterilising beam from the alien ship. Waiting like cattle in their pens, waiting for agonising death.

He felt sick.

Wellman was right. Somehow he knew that, and the knowledge was a clawed hand tearing at his insides. Space travel shouldn't be like this. Space flight was meant to bring fresh knowledge, wider fields of understanding, a release from petty strife, from Nationalism, from blind worship of outdated Gods.

The aliens could teach them so much. Could give men the knowledge to break the chains of gravity and soar outward to the stars. They could have opened tremendous vistas of bright endeavour, brought to fulfillment an age-old dream, heralded the dawn of a new age, instead . .

They had investigated, there could be little doubt of that. They had examined, weighed, classified. Men had been checked by alien standards. Tested—and found wanting.

Their intelligence had been denied, their civilisation found useless, their culture a thing of no value. Mankind had been placed in proper relation to alien standards, and given a new category, one which the lowest ever born had always denied.

Cattle!

And diseased cattle at that!

Carmody sighed as he admitted the justice of the definition. What else were men? What else could they be when they allowed emotion to dictate to reason, to operate on a push-button system of reflexes set off by a shouted slogan or a glaring symbol? He thought of the glittering truth of science dulled to serve national ends. Of the bright world of technology hampered and weighed with prehistoric doubts and systems. He thought of scientists forced to develop newer and better methods of killing the innocent, of men preaching a religion in which it was impossible they could believe, and yet able to justify two divergent faiths.

He thought of men, sweating, struggling, greedy, fearful men. Like a horde of monkeys playing in an inflammable forest —and using fire as toys. Men, the supreme egotists, the one race which could never learn, and yet who thought they knew everything worth knowing. Men who, after a history consisting almost entirely of war, still didn't know how to live with each other, but thought that they had solved the problem by killing the other guy.

Men. Lords of the Universe—*perhaps*!

He tightened his lips as the old familiar bitterness rose within him, the inner torment which made him deride other men's Gods and worship the crystal gem of pure truth. Dimly he heard the monotonous pounding of Conway's fist against the wall, and spoke almost at random, trying to divert the other's attention.

"Assuming that what you say is true, one thing puzzles me."

"Yes."

"Why don't they just kill us all off? Why gradually strengthen the beam? Don't they realise that we must know what is happening?"

"I wouldn't know about that," said Wellman quietly. "Michele here can tell you why we are being disposed of as we are."

The old professor nodded and rested his hand on one of his coloured graphs.



"They must be very good statisticians," he said quietly. "I would have liked the opportunity to talk with them, but I suppose that will never be." He sighed and shook his head as if reaching an unpleasant conclusion.

"The reason is simple. There are more than two thousand million people living in the world. Even at a hundred pounds each that is a lot of meat. One hundred million tons as near as I can roughly estimate. Quite sufficient to pollute the air and water of this planet, certainly enough to kill the few remaining specimens by disease. No, John, it would be illogical to cover the ground with so much rotting flesh. They have set their beam so that the living are fully capable of disposing of the dead. It will take a little longer, but the end result will be far more satisfactory."

"The swine," whispered Conway tensely. "The filthy murdering swine! My people are there somewhere. Dad has a bad heart and Mom is old. They might be dead for all I know. They might be screaming their lives away at this very moment. And I'm stuck here! Helpless to do anything to save them! Just talking while those damn aliens murder our planet!"

He lunged for the door, jerking it open and almost knocking down a man about to enter the room. He staggered, regained his balance, and Carmody saw that it was the electronic technician.

"Carmody," he gasped. "The beam! They've increased the strength again."

"What?"

"Yes, I caught the increased signal as the ship rose above the horizon. The beam will hit us within seconds. I must warn Burford."

He ran from the room and the big man turned, then stared at the tense expressions on the faces of the two older men.

"Remember," said Michele, and Wellman nodded.

"What are you talking about?" Carmody nervously licked his lips, not liking the feeling churning at his stomach. Unconsciously he braced himself, waiting for the beam to strike, for the agony to begin.

"What do you mean? I. "

He stopped, the words chopped short at his lips, his eyes sick as he stared at the expression on Wellman's face.

The doctor stiffened, staggered a little, one hand groping at his jacket pocket. His face twisted, his eyes bulging until they almost left their sockets, his mouth opening into a ghastly parody of a grin.

He screamed!

The report of the gun was almost welcome after the nerve-tugging sounds spilling from Wellman's throat. Michele leaned heavily against the table, his face white as he stared down at the contorted features of the doctor, the big automatic in his hand sagging from lax fingers. Carmody stared at him, then down at the bullet smashed head of Wellman. Gently he took the pistol from the old man's hand.

"We had made a pact," whispered the old man. "Each of us had promised to kill the other should the agony strike, but I thought that it would have been me. I was certain it would have been me." He stared at the big man, his old hands trembling as he groped his way into a chair.

Promise to kill me, John, if necessary. Don't let me suffer. I'm not afraid of death, I'm too old for that, but their faces! The awful agony of their faces!"

He shuddered, hiding his face in his hands, his thin shoulders trembling with emotion. Carmody bit his lip and touched the old man on the shoulder.

" I promise, Michele," he said grimly. " I promise to kill you and any other man if necessary. Nothing, either animal or human, should have to suffer like that."

He turned and faced the wall, half-conscious of screams echoing from other parts of the building, screams mingled with the clean sound of mercy-shots. His muscles ached from his grip on the pistol, and he stared down at it, looking at it as if it were something strange and unfamiliar. Sweat dripped from his forehead, running in little streams over his craggy features, and he breathed in great gasps, as if he had just run a long way.

" We've got to stop this," he whispered. " Somehow we've got to stop it!"

He turned and almost ran from the room, the pistol a glinting finger of menace in his hand. Guards stared at him as he passed, their faces white, their eyes sick and ill with too recent memory. A Security officer tried to bar his path, grabbing desperately at his holster, then swallowing as the big man rammed the pistol into his stomach.

" Where's Burford?"

Inside, but you can't see him. No one can see him."

" Take me in," gritted Carmody. " Quick now!"

" I daren't! The Colonel is communicating with High Command. Treble priority and top secret. I can't admit you. I daren't!"

" To hell with all your mumbo-jumbo! What's the good of secrecy when all the world is dying around us? Let me in there soldier. If you don't you won't be alive to writhe beneath the alien beam."

" You would kill me?" The officer swallowed as he stared at the big man. " I. "

Impatiently Carmody pushed the officer aside and thrust his way into the room.

Burford stared at him from behind a wide desk.

The Colonel looked ill, his hawk-face tired and drawn, his cold eyes red and sore from lack of sleep and worry. He stared calmly at the pistol then looked at the guards pushing through the open door.

" Leave us."

" But, sir! He is armed and .

" Leave us!"

" Yes, sir."

Carmody remained silent while the guards left the room and Carmody smiled, a thin humourless twitching of his lips, and

deliberately sat down. Not once did he lower the heavy pistol.

"You are a wise man, Colonel. How did you guess that I would have killed you if you had called for help?"

"I didn't," said Burford dryly, "but scientists don't walk about with pistols during the normal course of their duties. You know that you could be shot for this?"

"Could I?" Carmody laughed and the sound of his laughter made the Colonel wince. "This is no time to be worrying about procedure or punishment, Burford. I've just left an old man, a poor, broken old man who has just killed his friend. You can guess why."

"I can guess. I have given orders to all guards to shoot instantly any man suffering from the effects of the alien beam. That order is general throughout the world by now. Morale has improved a little because of it."

"Morale!" Carmody almost spat. "Is that your only reaction? Doesn't pity have anything to do with it? Or mercy? Does the killing of pain-crazed civilians come under the heading of 'morale'?"

"You wanted to see me," said Burford evenly. "Was it just to insult me at a pistol point, or did you have some other reason?"

You're damn right there's another reason. This play-acting has gone on for long enough, Burford. We face a common enemy now, and we must face it together. As technical head of this project I warn you that we cannot destroy Project One alone."

"So?"

"So you must inform High Command that as this presents a common danger it must be met with united action. Russia must be invited to contribute, and to share, technical knowledge."

"I see." Burford stared at the big man, not moving, not doing anything but stare. His eyes seemed a little glazed, as if he had suffered a recent shock, and when he spoke his words dribbled like dry sand from between his thin lips.

"As usual, Carmody, you are a little late. High Command has informed me that technicians are being flown here from the Urals. In return we are dispatching a party from White Sands."

Good." Relief made the big man suddenly weak. "Why couldn't they have done this before?"

Burford shrugged, not answering, and held out his hand.

"The pistol if you please. Only the military personnel are allowed to be armed."

"Sorry."

I want that gun, Carmody!"

No." He rose, slipping the weapon in his pocked, and stared

coolly at the anger-flushed face of the Colonel. "I made a promise to a friend," he said quietly. "A promise which I intend to keep."

"The guards will take care of anything like that."

"Maybe, but to a man in agony a second feels like a lifetime, and I'd prefer not to rely on your guards."

He turned and strode from the room, a big man, with tormented eyes and a bitter mouth. Guards stared after him, and others stepped out of his path, almost afraid of the expression on his craggy features.

He came to the room where the old man did his work, then halted, staring at the slumped figure within.

There had been a second gun and Michele had remembered it.

He had not waited for the alien beam.

That week five million people died. They died in screaming agony, falling where they stood, some dying in bed, some at their work, others dropping in crowded streets or in the more horrible isolation of their own homes. Always it was the old, the weak, and the ill.

The hospitals emptied; the institutions for the aged, the asylums, the prisons, the schools for backward children. Business men died; elderly statesmen, the aged leaders of the nations and the elderly leaders of commerce. They died, and youth, healthy youth, gained rapid promotion.

Five million in one week. Then a respite while the healthy buried their dead. A brief respite until the alien beam increased its strength again. It was almost predictable that beam. After each increase came a week of falling death-rate as the doubtful cases struggled with the toxics in their bodies. If they lived for a week they were safe—until the beam strength increased again.

But in the meantime mankind lived in fear.

Death had always been known. It was an accepted part of life and each man knew that one day he must die. It was an impersonal knowledge, something that would happen one day, but not now, not yet.

And so men who's bodies were rotten with disease still planned their tomorrows. People who lived on drugs and hope alone, could still shrug and forget their inevitable end. Men could receive terrible injuries, drag themselves through months and years of pain and surgery, and still look forward to an active life.

But not now.

Not now that the invisible beam of alien destruction streamed down from the skies. Now disease or serious injury meant death. No drugs could stave off the effects of the beam, no hope, nothing that man could think or do could prevent the wave of screaming deaths. The churches filled, and prayer rose like an intangible curtain of incence towards the indifferent Gods. The dance halls filled and discordant sound and flaring lights turned night into day. The drinking dens filled. Vendors of drugs operated openly on the streets of the cities. Crime increased to a fantastic level, and naked murder stalked across the globe.

All men knew that they lived by sufferance—and what man-made laws could weigh against the knowledge of certain death? Perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in a week or a month, the alien beam would reach the critical strength and death would come with shrieking torment.

So to hell with it all! Enjoy today for tomorrow—we die!

And so civilisation began slowly, but inevitably, to crumple, and still the answer to the threat had not been found. And steadily, every two weeks, the beam increased in strength and the smoke from the crematoriums darkened the skies.

Strangely enough Burford did not die.

He was elderly, well past his prime, but his thin body was iron-tough and his constitution free of disease. He lived, but his hawk-features held a haunting dread as he stared at the closely typed columns of figures spread before him.

Five million the first week, that had been the week Michele had died. Then seven million, eight, a jump to ten, then a falling to three. Eight weeks, and more than thirty-three million people had died from the effects of the alien beam. Not too bad considering. Not more than two per cent. of the world's population, but they had died within two months—and the beam would increase again within ten days.

How many this time?

How long before factual figures were unobtainable?

How long before the living could no longer dispose of the dead?

How long before his turn came?

He shuddered a little, feeling some of the universal fear claw at his stomach. Even here in the desert that fear had penetrated. Even in the closely guarded confines of Project One it shone in the eyes of the guards, betrayed itself in the thin lips of the technicians, the nervousness of the workers, the insane haste of the scientists. They were all fighting a grim battle. Running a terror-stricken race against

time. For the men who could beat the invader, the men who's minds held the all-important knowledge of fuels and venturis, atomics and metals, those men were—*old*.

And the beam would return within ten days.

Burford glanced up from the figures as the door swung open, then, as Carmody entered the room, leaned back in his chair, the papers dropping from his hands.

The big man almost lurched across the room, slumping wearily into a chair, automatically fumbling in his pockers for cigarettes and inhaling deeply at the blue smoke. His craggy features were lined with fatigue, his eyes red and sore from lack of sleep, his hands trembling as he rested them on his knees. He sat for a moment, drawing at his cigarette, and silence folded around them with leaden wings.

"Well?" Burford stared at the scientist. Anything to report?"

"No."

Another failure?"

Carmody shrugged and carefully removed the cigarette from between his lips.

"We've reached two seventy five, that new ceramic venturi lining the Russians had developed did the trick, but it's not enough, Burford, it's not enough."

"Why not? The atomic blast should reach the other twenty five."

"Maybe, but what of accuracy?" Carmody shook his head. "Don't forget that the alien ship is probably well armoured. Certainly it must be protected against radiation. An atomic bomb exploding twenty five miles away, in what is almost a pure vacuum, wouldn't hurt it a bit."

"I see." The Colonel bit his lower lip. He seemed to have lost much of his earlier dislike of the big man, and now, that his own skills were useless against the invader, he had grown to lean on the judgment of the big man with an almost childish trust.

Almost—but not quite. Old habits die hard, and the training of a lifetime cannot be thrown off in a few weeks.

"Do you think that they are keeping something back?" He stared at the big man. "I know that they gave us the secret of their ceramic lining for the venturis, but they did it only under pressure, our fuel for their lining." He hesitated. "Maybe it was an inferior product they gave us. Perhaps they have a better lining than the one they gave us?"

As we have a better fuel?" Carmody stared at the Colonel, then, with an almost savage gesture, crushed his smouldering cigarette in his hand. "We *do* have a better fuel, don't we, Burford. I know that. We've tried it in the missile but the venturi lining cannot stand the heat. If it could, we'd have built a missile capable of reaching well over the three hundred mark."

"Can't you make do with the lining you have?"

"No."

"I see." Burford stared down at his hands. "This Russian scientist, Akim, do you trust him?"

"Trust him?" Carmody shrugged. "It isn't my job to trust or distrust, I'm a scientist, not a Security officer. Why do you ask?"

"I've had reports from our own team in the Urals. They aren't happy as to the way things are going. The Russians seem to want all our information but are reluctant to give us any in return. High Command are worried that we will come out short on the whole deal."

"Come out short?" Carmody stared at the hawk-face of the Colonel. Are you serious?"

"Certainly I'm serious."

"Then ?" Carmody shook his head in stubborn disbeleif. "No. They couldn't be so stupid. Not now. Not when we are all hovering on the edge of utter defeat."

"You don't seem to understand, Carmody. High Command is taking a long-term view. What would happen if we yielded all our top-secret information to the Russians and received nothing in return?"

"We might be able to smash Project One."

And after that?" Burford shook his head. Can't you guess what would happen? What would stop them, armed as they would be with all our technological secrets, from declaring war? You know that we've been fighting a cold war for years now. Only the fact that we've held our lead on scientific progress has staved off actual combat. Once we lose that lead, Carmody, we wouldn't stand a chance."

"I see." Carmody forced himself to remain calm. "So all earth has to die because High Command is afraid of a non-existent bogy man?"

"Don't be facetious, Carmody, this is serious."

Is it, by God!" The big man surged to his feet, his weariness forgotten. "And what of the people? What of all those poor devils screaming their lives away every time the beam strikes? Don't they

count any more? Must they be sacrificed so that your precious 'High Command' can still rule the roost? Get wise to yourself, Burford. This isn't ordinary war we're fighting now. This isn't man against man, but man against alien. There won't be any treaties this time, Burford. No decorations, no conscripted armies, forced labour, short rations or hysterical patriotism. This isn't a game we're playing now. This is real. This is total war. Either we win—and live, or we lose—and die, all of us, Burford, all of us!"

"Then why don't they give us the secret of their new lining? Why must it be us? Why not them? Why should we have to take the first step?"

"God!" Carmody gripped the edge of the desk, his knuckles gleaming white beneath his skin, his muscles trembling as he fought an insane desire to smash the thin, hawk-face to a blood-stained pulp. All his dislike of the man, the soldier, the professional militarist, came back and he hated Burford and everything he stood for, and when he spoke his voice was a savage rasp.

"How many men have lost their lives because of procedure and pride? How many wars have dragged on because someone was afraid of being thought weak? To hell with who should do what first! Let's get it done! Let's do it before it's too late. Before we fight our last battle over who is to dig the last grave. We haven't time for argument. Earth is dying and you sit there and worry about national pride!"

Stop it, Carmody!"

Does the truth hurt? It is the truth, you know, like it or not, and this time there can be no avoiding it. Well?"

"I. " Burford swallowed, his eyes sick, and with a shock of surprise Carmody realised that the man was afraid.

"You know what you're doing, Burford, don't you?" He forced himself to speak gently. "You're gambling with your own life this time. Your rank can't save you, you know that. You are an old man, Burford. Are you certain that the next increase in beam strength won't kill you? You've seen them die. You've seen them double up, screaming, mad with pain as they roll on the floor. It's a mercy to shoot them, to kill them as quickly as possible. Who will fire the shot to end your agony, Burford?"

"Stop it!" Burford stared at the big man, a thin film of sweat glistening on his hawk-features.

"Why, Burford? Are you afraid?"

"Damn you, Carmody! What do you want me to do?"

" Permit me to reveal our new fuel to the Russians. I think that I can get the secret of a better lining from Akim, but even if I can't, what can we lose?"

" I can't do that, Carmody." The Colonel clenched his hands in frustration. " I have my orders."

" Then let me offer a straight exchange, a supply of our fuel for a supply of their new ceramic." He thinned his lips with impatience. " They'll probably analyse it, we'll do the same, so the end result will only be delayed. Well?"

" What about High Command? They'll break me if I permit this."

Aren't you forgetting something, Burford?" Carmody stared at the hawk-faced man. " How long is High Command going to exist? You know your own profession better than I, but how many young men are there in responsible positions? Let that alien beam increase strength once or twice more and the present High Command will be a thing of the past. The officers will all be dead—and so will you!"

" Yes," said Burford sickly. " We'll all be dead." He stared at the big man. " I agree. You may reveal the new fuel to Akim and do what you can. I'll inform our team at the Urals of my decision, but, Carmody——"

" Yes?"

" Hurry, man. Remember the beam should strike again within ten days. Ten days, Carmody! Can you build your missile by then?"

" I don't know," said the big man slowly. " The shell and warhead are all ready, the feeding pumps and castings, the directional controls and automatic fuses. All we really have to do is to design new venturis and test them." He frowned down at the floor. " With luck it could just about be ready within ten days."

" It had better," said Burford grimly. " I've been checking up on the medical reports of the staff and scientific personnel. Not many are really healthy, Carmody, not even you. The next time the beam strikes may be the last for a lot of us, and once we are dead, who is to build the next missile?"

Carmody shrugged and left the room. He had ten days, perhaps his last ten days, in which to save the world.

It had taken nine days, nine days of incredible effort and twenty four hour shifts, but now it was done. Carmody stared at the slender perfection of the missile standing in the brilliant sun, shimmering a

little as if impatient to be gone. He stared at it, then at the monstrosity standing beside it, winged, stubby, studded with rocket tubes and streamlined to the ultimate degree.

It was a Russian rocket plane.

A special job, stripped of guns and bomb racks. Stripped of navigational instruments, radio, everything unessential. In the nose rested an atom bomb, one of the latest produced. The tanks were full of the new fuel, the venturi linings of the new ceramic. It was a combined effort as much as the unmanned missile was, but there the similarity ended.

Akim touched the big man on the arm, his Mongolian features hidden behind a cloud of smoke from the inevitable black paper cigarette.

" How long now?"

" Not too long, the alien ship should rise above the horizon within the hour." He stared at the stubby plane and looked with something like horror at the enigmatic Russian.

" Is it necessary? Can't we just rely on the missile?"

" No, my friend, we dare not." Akim drew heavily on his cigarette and shrugged in a typically Oriental manner. " What would you? There is a missile here, and one at the Urals. There is a plane here and one there also. If we fail they will do what they can. Your missile depends a little too much on luck I think. We are not so trusting. The plane will rise long before the alien rises over the horizon. It will wait above their orbit. As we fire the missile the pilot will dive towards the target. We can only hope that one or the other will do what we wish."

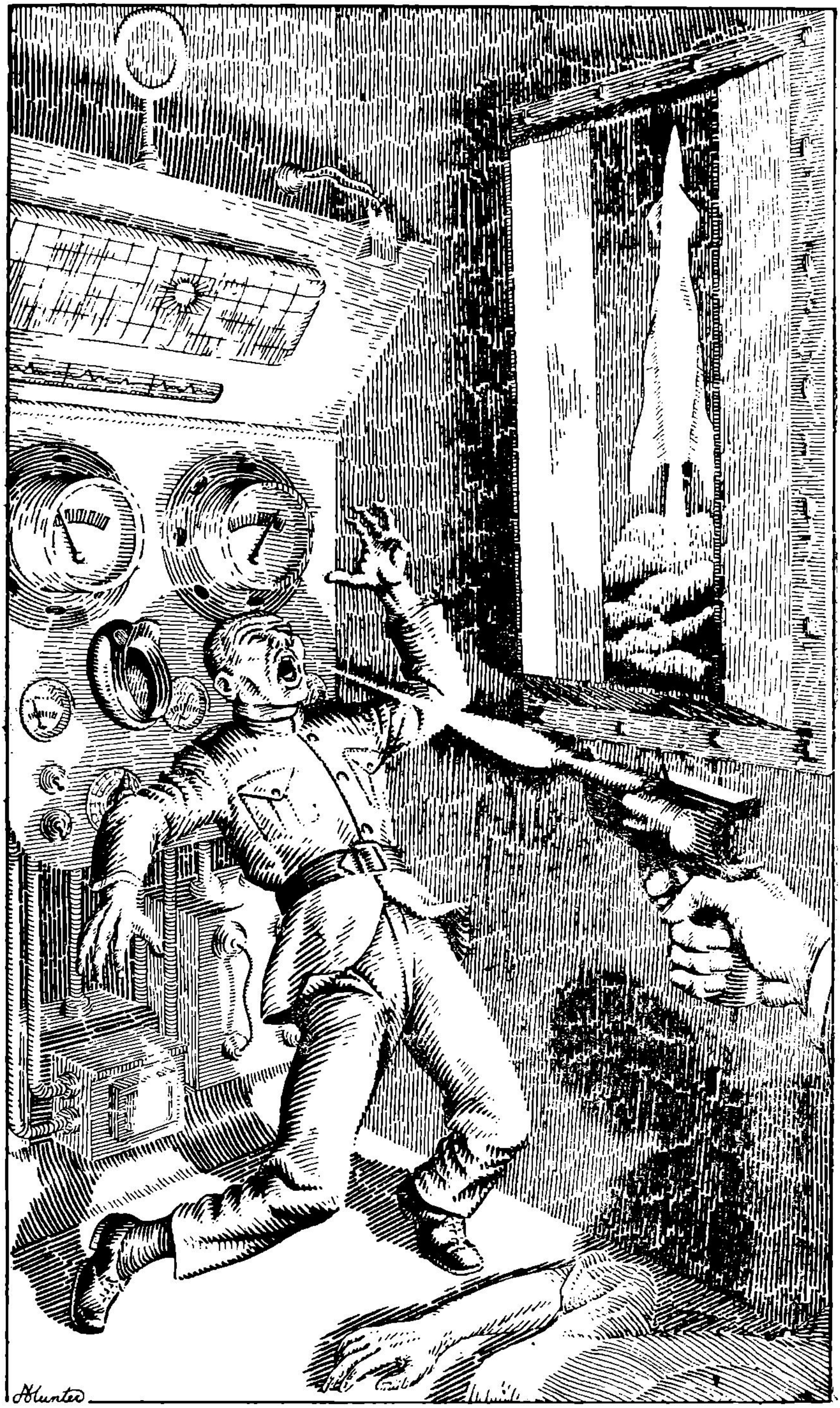
" But there will be a man in that plane! A living man! Don't you realise what you're doing?"

Certainly. We are not as you are my friend. We have the correct perspective. One man, what is that? One life against all the peoples of the Earth. It is not even a gamble."

" I can see your point," said the big man slowly. A living man is the best form of instrument you could have, but what sort of man would be willing to lose his life so cold bloodedly?"

" There are always such men. Japan had them, you undoubtedly remember the Kami-Katz Squadron. Those pilots were readily willing to dive their motorless planes to destruction on their targets. We have them, and if necessary, you could find them in your own country."

He stared towards the blue of the heavens and glanced at his wrist watch.



"We had better take shelter."

Carmody nodded and together the two men walked across the sand towards the concrete bunkers.

Halfway there they passed the pilot of the Russian rocket plane.

He was small, not more than five feet tall, slender, more like a boy than a man, but there was something in his eyes which made Carmody, big as he was, shiver a little, and feel the warm glow of fear-hate emotion.

"A fanatic," remarked Akim quietly, "but then such men always are. His mind is filled with idealism, cultivated propaganda, a conditioned mechanism to obey pre-set emotional controls. He will die, and die gladly, but the tragedy is that he would die just as gladly if he were to crash his plane on one of your cities."

Carmody caught the note of bitterness in the scientist's voice and paused, one foot on the steps leading to the bunker, staring at the Russian.

"You know," he said slowly, "we have much in common, you and I, and I am speaking of groups rather than individuals. We are scientists, we seek the truth wherever it may be found. Why should we fight? Why should we be taught to hate each other? Man against man, divided by the twin barriers of pride and language, and yet we snarl at each other like dogs rather than tear them down."

"You feel that?" Akim smiled, and took his cigarette from his mouth. "Listen. I have an idea. Why not delay the firing of the missiles?"

"What?"

"Is it not simple? Already many people have died, the old, the crippled, the diseased. Let a few more die. Let us take this chance to purge our world of all the unfit and useless. Old men have died. Old men have power. Now I doubt if there are any people alive over the age of sixty. How many rulers, how many politicians, are above that age?"

Lonely?

SEE ADVERT ON NEXT PAGE

In Australia and New Zealand

NEBULA

is available from the

BLUE CENTAUR BOOK CO.

Box 4940, G.P.O., SYDNEY, N.S.W., AUSTRALIA

Current issues of all sf magazines and books published in Great Britain are also supplied. Back issues obtainable. Send Want List.

He paused, staring at the big man, and Carmody felt the stab of quick temptation.

The Russian was right!

Old men had held the reins of power for too long. They sat and dreamed their idle dreams, using the youth of the world to play their games of war and pride. Statesmen, politicians, rulers, all were old, all had lost the enthusiasm of youth, the dreams, the bright hopes, the eager friendliness of the young.

Many had died, and their uniforms, their guards, their snug seats of power had not saved them. Change would come, had come, was inevitable as the old men died. In that respect the aliens had done good. They had cleansed society of the hopelessly ill, the diseased, the senile, the insane. Why not let them finish the job? Why not wait until the beam-strength increased again? Why not wait and let the aliens cleanse society of its cancer?

It was a tempting thought. It was logical. It solved the problem of living space and international tensions caused by too-great populations squeezed into too-little land. It was the scientific solution to an emotional conflict which was dragging the entire planet to the edge of annihilating war, and yet.

He thought of an old man, a kind and gentle old man, sitting weeping over the body of a friend he had to kill. He thought of that same old man slumped against a desk, his skull shattered by a self-administered bullet, a skull which had held so much irreplacable knowledge. He thought of a young man, driven to a desparate insanity by the knowledge of his sick parents waiting for agonizing death. A young man who had run out into the desert, there to die, alone, tormented by thirst, seared by the savage sun.

He shook his head and stared down the steps of the bunker.

Burford stared at him from where he sat next to a complex instrument panel. The man looked ill, sweat gleamed on his thin features and his hands twitched as he rested them on his knees. Next to him sat a technician, his hand on a switch, ready to signal to the rocket pilot and to fire the missile. They waited, and Carmody knew what he must do.

"Fire on schedule!"

He didn't look at the Russian.

Time seemed to stop then; to drag and to hover on leaden wings. Outside the heat increased as the sun seared the desert with its flaming rays. Smoke gathered within the concrete bunker, the coiling smoke of many cigarettes, nervously smoked, snubbed out half-used, then replaced by fresh cylinders.

A hum echoed within the shelter, and a man's voice, relayed via intercom, sounded with sudden strain.

"Observation post here, sir. Project One sighted!"

"Send off the plane." Carmody was surprised to find that he was trembling and he thrust his hands deep into his pockets to hide his nervousness from the others.

Outside the stubby plane sent flat echoes rolling over the desert as it slid across the levelled sand. It rose, the flame from its venturis almost invisible in the sunlight, but where it passed the sand glowed like fused and molten glass. It rose, splitting the air with the speed of its passage, and vanished skywards with a whistling drone.

"Plane away, sir."

"Right. You know what you have to do."

The technician nodded, throwing the switch which cut in the automatic firing controls for the much faster missile.

"Sir!" The intercom almost crackled from the emotion in the speaker's voice. "The beam! They've increased the power of the beam!"

Exciting

NEW FRIENDS

Interesting

CORRESPONDENCE

THROUGH OUR GREAT NEW PEN-FRIEND FINDING SERVICE.

Just send 2½d. in Stamps to

NEBULA Box D.

159 CROWNPOINT ROAD, GLASGOW, S.E.

A brilliant new 'S-F' writer leaps to the front with

SPACEFLIGHT —VENUS

Philip Wilding's

story is set in the year 2002 and tells of a pioneer flight to Venus. The scientific background is well contrived but is always counter-balanced by the human element. The result is space fiction at its imaginative best. **9/6**

HENNEL LOCKE

Distributed by Harrap

"What?" Carmody thrust himself towards the instrument. Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir. Reports tell of a death-wave reaching back to the pole, and the instruments here tell the same. They're going to kill us all this time! They're going to kill us all!"

"You're not dead yet!" snapped Carmody. "Track that vessel!"

Irritably he turned as Burford tugged at his sleeve.

"Carmody! What can we do?"

"Nothing."

Can't we bring it down? Stop the beam?"

"No." The big man stared at the Colonel with pitying understanding. "There's nothing we can do now, Burford. Not until it's time to fire the missile. The interception path is overhead, and we can't alter it now."

"Overhead! But.

"Yes, Burford. This time may be our last. Even if the missile does strike true we may all be dead. The beam spreads, we know that, but we also know that death takes ten seconds."

He stared at the white-faced men, and pointed to a couple of the youngest.

"Here, you and you, stand by that switch and watch that chronometer. When the hands coincide throw that switch. Remember that. Take no notice of anything else that may happen. Just throw that switch at the proper time."

"Can't you put it on automatic?" Burford licked his lips as he stared at the technicians.

Carmody shook his head.

"No time. The firing controls are automatic but the impetus signal isn't. One of those two should live through what's coming even if the rest of us don't."

He wiped sweat from his streaming face, and turned, to see Akim, still smoking, with a heavy pistol in his hand.

"What the. "

"Just in case, my friend. The death is painful, is it not?"

"Yes." The big man nodded and reached for the weapon Burford carried at his waist. He hefted the heavy automatic, making certain that the chamber was loaded, then, despite his jumping nerves, forced himself to sit and wait, a cigarette smouldering between his dry lips.

Tensely they waited.

Carmody sat and smoked and stared at the others with unseeing

eyes. In imagination he was three hundred miles above the surface of the earth, in an orbiting vessel from an unknown place, watching the planet spin beneath him as the ship kept on its fixed path.

What were they like, those aliens? Insect men? Fur-covered? Scaled? Humanoid? He would never know. Earth would never know from where that ship had come. From what far place intelligence had risen and conquered the stars. Earth would win—and the alien vessel would be blasted to atomic dust. Or they would lose—and die beneath the sterilising beam in screaming agony.

It was as simple as that.

Sound shrilled through the bunker. A frenzied torrent of sound. Distorted, almost unrecognisable, a thing of nerve-twisting horror.

The sound of a man in utter agony.

A technician twisted, spun, fell as though kicked in the groin. His mouth gaped and his eyes stared with a mad insanity. He screamed—and his screaming was echoed by others.

Against the control panel one of the two young men was violently sick.

"Watch the missile!" Carmody sprang to his feet, the gun flaming in his hand. "Watch the missile!"

- Science fiction is not just another form of literature: the implications go much further
- The writer of science fiction is postulating a future—your future and mine, of our children and their children
- That is why there is, at the root of all s-f reading, a hard core know as fandom. Intelligent, informed, hyper-critical, they are unique, these fen, for in no other literary form is the author made so much aware of reader-reaction.
- Fen do not confine themselves to criticism—they are constructive, nurturing this new literature of the day-after-to-morrow, and one of their most effective tools is the fan magazine.
- We believe that our fanzine is good. We try to cover many aspects of science fiction; we review, give publishing news, help to train new writers, encourage, praise, and occasionally damn. We produce the magazine because we love s-f at least as much as we do our wives—sometimes they claim we adore s-f and merely love them
- We would like to have you share our pleasure in the magazine called SPACE TIMES. It is Britain's only monthly fanzine.

Single Copies are 1/- or 20 cents, a year's subscription of 6/- or 1 dollar will bring you 12 issues, post free.

Write to: **BRIAN H. VARLEY, 33 Princes Square, London, W.2.**

Again he fired, and next to him the Russian's weapon made a spiteful sound as it spat its bullets of mercy. Four times they fired. Four times bullets smacked into tormented flesh—and the screaming died.

"Carmody!" Burford staggered on his feet, his hawk-face convulsed with terror. "Carmody!"

He screamed, and together with his scream came the sound of the missile as it blasted flame against sand, rising to its rendezvous three hundred miles above the surface of the desert.

Mingled with the whistling roar the sound of Akim's shot seemed but a weak echo.

Carmody staggered, slumped against the concrete wall of the bunker, staring at the shambles with sick eyes. Burford lay where he had fallen, his hawk-face marred now by a puckered hole between his staring eyes, his blood rilling from the back of his head, tracing a pattern on the smooth floor, mingling with the spilled blood of the other victims.

A man's voice whispered from the intercom.

"Tracking station reporting, sir. Missile on course."

"The plane!" Akim stepped towards the instrument. "Where is the plane?"

"Three objects on screen now." The remote voice seemed as if it was reporting something of no interest. "Missile converging on Project One. Plane converging on Project One."

"Which will it be?" The Russian's mongoloid features glistened with sweat. "*Which will it be?*"

"Does it matter?" Carmody licked dry lips as he stared down at the dead. "The beam hasn't reached optimum yet. We may all be dead before either of them strikes."

"Plane and missile converging." The observer still sounded remote and cold. "Converging. . . Converging. . Con. . " Abruptly the remote voice changed, became human, shouted with an incredible release of human emotional stress.

"They've hit! By God they've hit!"

"Which?" Akim thrust himself forward. "Was it the plane?"

"Hell, no!" A technician glared at the Russian. "We did it with our missile."

"Tell me," Akim snapped into the radio. "Did the plane destroy the alien?"

"I don't know, they both hit at the same time." The voice sounded hoarse with excitement. "What the hell does it matter anyway? We go it, didn't we? We got it!"

Carmody stared at the milling, excited men, then slowly walked from the bunker. The explosion would have been too high to see with the naked eye, especially against the bright sunlight, but he stared upwards just the same. Was it imagination? Did he see a fleck of light against the blue? He shrugged. It wasn't important now, nothing was important, except.

Was it the plane? Had it been the missile? They could never be quite certain and soon would start the arguments, both sides forgetting that neither could have done it alone.

Friendly at first? Perhaps, but the nation which could claim to have saved the earth would not readily forget it. Pride would appear. Justifiable irritation at the stupidity of such a claim by others would turn into anger, and so the old cycle would start all over again.

He sighed, thinking of the dead, of the pitiful dead. He thought of Burford, dying from the bullet of his enemy, and yet glad of it. In a way it was ironical, and yet. .

Project One had been destroyed, but Project One still remained.

Men had to learn to live with each other.

For one day the aliens would return.

E. C. TUBB

the best of science fiction

CHILDHOOD'S END

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

A great new novel about a master race which invades earth and takes over human affairs. "It is quite out of range of the common space-and-time writers . . . there has been nothing like it for years"—C. S. Lewis **10/6**

THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH

ROBERT HEINLEIN

One of America's leading s f authors writes the History of the Future—years we ourselves will live through. **9/6**

HOLE IN HEAVEN

F. DUBREZ FAWCETT

First in a new series of s f novels by British authors, edited by Angus Wilson, who writes: "It is not unfitting that the chief virtue of Mr. Fawcett's *Hole in Heaven* should be the very real characters he has created in this macabre and exciting story." **9/6**

from Sidgwick & Jackson

* *Write for details of the Science Fiction Book Club, to 44 Museum St., London, W.C.1.*



An opinion of some new science-fiction books

From KENNETH F. SLATER

HOLE IN HEAVEN ** *F. Dubrez Fawcett* (*Sidgwick & Jackson*), 9/6.

Messrs. Sidgwick & Jackson have commenced their new series of titles in a BRITISH s-f library with HOLE IN HEAVEN, by F. Dubrez Fawcett. Honestly, while I'll admit that definitions of science-fiction are wide and varied, I do not think that any fan would include this work within his definitions. Except, perhaps, some few fans who consider the Psychic News as a technical journal . The story deals with the body of a man, severely burned in fire, which is occupied by a spirit entering through the "hole in heaven" used by the late-lamented for their departure from this life. By exerting its psychic powers this emotionless spirit turns the body into a sort of superman and goes in search of knowledge for its own sake. To keep from being returned to hospital it kills a man and the police get on its track; it kills a few police and escapes. The police follow the girl who believes the body still contains the spirit of her lover, and finally manage to destroy the "Nemo." Rather exciting in spots but despite the glowing claims of the editor of the series in his "Note," I hardly feel that Mr. Fawcett has achieved "convincing and interesting characters." Worth reading if you can borrow it, but not for the died-in-the-wool s-f reader's bookshelf.

CHILDHOOD'S END*** *Arthur C. Clarke* (*Sidgwick & Jackson*), 10/6.

Mr. Clarke has ventured into more imaginative realms than in his previous three works from this publisher, giving excerpts from a future of the human race under the guidance of the Overlords. Fascinating in parts, the book suffers from the disadvantage of being a composition of short stories too widely spaced in time to form a connected whole. However, the skill with which Mr. Clarke holds the reader's attention throughout goes far towards overcoming this defect. The Overlords arrive, and proceed to channel man's activity into the paths they desire. Perhaps one of the most exciting parts of the book is the early section wherein Stormgren attempts to discover the shape and form of the Overlords. I'll not tell you just what that is, because it would spoil the effect. In the next section the Overlords are mingling freely with mankind,

BOARDMAN'S SCIENCE FICTION

STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

Edited by FREDERIK POHL

Here are fifteen excellent stories written by well-known authors such as Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, Ray Bradbury and Judith Merril, all of whom bring closer fascinating new worlds and make them vivid and alive. **9s . 6d**

PROJECT JUPITER

FREDRIC BROWN

Set in the United States in the year 1997. Space explorers have conquered the Moon, Mars and Venus. Jupiter is their next goal.

Fantasy and Science Fiction : "The best small-scale, intimate science fiction of the year. **9s . 6d**

CHILDREN OF THE ATOM

WILMAR H. SHIRAS

This story takes place after an explosion occurs in an atomic plant in the year 1958. One of the most enthralling science fiction novels yet published. **9s . 6d**

THE CAVES OF STEEL

ISAAC ASIMOV

When the mere sight of a robot can cause a riot, it is dangerous to have a robot as a partner!

New York Times : "The first wholly successful balanced blend of science fiction and the strict detective story." **9s. . 6d**

2/- POCKET BOOK SERIES

NO PLACE LIKE EARTH

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

The Star, London : "One of the best so far. The writing is good and the imagination not too fantastic."

Kensington Post : "Mr. Carnell's selection is an excellent one, and shows that the best of British science fiction writers have nothing to learn from America."

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE

by FREDRIC BROWN

New Worlds : "This is undoubtedly the most humorous science fiction satire for many years . . the end of the story provides another surprise. This is one book too good to miss."

THE BIG EYE

by MAX EHRLICH

Authentic Science Fiction: "A fine tale, with mounting tension good science and a delightful end-twist."



If you wish to be on our mailing list write to The Science Fiction Editor.

BOARDMAN, 14 Cockspur Street, London, S.W.1

still guiding him. And, again, a man attempts to visit the home planet of the Overlords—which he does, but not with the results he expects. Here we learn of the true relationship between Man and Overlord—again, a somewhat unexpected one. Finally, comes CHILDHOOD'S END, when the work of the Overlords is finished —at least, for humanity. Well worth reading, even if you have met parts of the story in magazine form before.

THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH *** *Robert A. Heinlein* (*Sidgwick & Jackson*), 9/6.

The second work in the "Future History" series to be published in Britain, THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH comprisies ten stories overlapping slightly with those printed in "The Man Who Sold The Moon," but with the exception of the last, "Logic of Empire," are more stories of people than of social influences. "Space Jockey," in which the marital troubles of the spacemen are demonstrated (and solved); "It's Great To Be Back," showing environment can change people socially, is the simple story of the family who return to the "old town" to find out that it is not quite up to their memories of it—the "old town" in this future tale is the Earth, of course. Lt. Johnny Dalquhist (one of the four major heroes of the Space Patrol, as readers of SPACE CADET will recall) is just an ordinary fellow doing his job as he sees it — and in the doing makes his name immortal. But I can't detail the yarns, just let me say two more things—if the only story Robert A. Heinlein had written had been the title yarn, the story of Rhysling, Blind Singer of the Spaceways, he would still be a well-known s-f author. But as he has written more yarns—on a panorama of extrapolated history —and managed to interconnect them in a believable fashion (check on the reason for Jake Pemberton's moon hop with oxygen, and the plot of "Gentlemen, Be Seated") he has become perhaps the best-known.

BEACHHEADS IN SPACE *** edited *August Derleth* (*Weidenfeld & Nicolson*), 9/6.

Another fine anthology is edited by August Derleth, BEACHHEADS IN SPACE, and published in Gt. Britain by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Seven stories, including one which has long been a favourite of mine, Eric Frank Russell's METAMORPHOSITE, in which we have man on two levels—one that of his present sociological type although technically far advanced, in control of a Galatic Empire; the other, that of a mankind which has suffered and been refined in the horrors of atomic war into something a little different. Mr. Russell holds the attention of the reader by his slow but steady disclosure of the powers of his hero, until the final line. One of the best "last lines" I know. The two preceding stories in the book, by Clifford D. Simak and Lester del Rey, depict the defeat of man; in the first by the unknown natural forces of a strange planet, in the second by the blind lifeless inimical universe. Isaac Asimov, with BREEDS THERE A MAN also

faces mankind with an overpowering enemy, but leaves us with some hope. John Wyndam shows how the silicon alien, underestimating the powers—natural—of the humble carbon-based human, is defeated. Contributions from Donald Wandrei and Clark Ashton Smith deal, in historical narrative style, with the invasion of Earth on a greater scale. Wandrei has the local and complete defeat of man, Smith lets his human race make a come-back. A pretty good collection, and I'm happy to get Russell's story in a lasting format at a reasonable price.

THE FIRST ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGY *** edited *John W. Campbell, Jr.* (*Grayson & Grayson*), 9/6.

This collection of stories, selected by the editor of the magazine from which it takes its name contains Robert Heinlein's BLOWUPS HAPPEN— a pity, as this story was included in the first of the Future History collections, recently published by Grayson & Grayson. HOBBYIST, by Eric Frank Russell, the story of a Galatic explorer who meets a Galatic collector (operating on an even larger scale!) is another good yarn. FIRST CONTACT describes what may well happen when an exploratory vessel from Earth meets its counterpart from another race—how can either return home safely, without giving away their home-planet to possible invaders? The writing of Murray Leinster is sound, as usual. James H. Schmitz is represented by THE WITCHES OF KARRES, a story which deserved a sequel but I can't recall having seen one yet. This one has a lighter treatment than most, and is a good swashbuckling space opera, with a little psychokinetics thrown in for good measure.

Theodore Sturgeon's powerful THUNDER AND ROSES follows. A deeply moving story of a defeated America, and a man who puts race above nation. INVARIANT, by John Pierce, is an unusual tale. If a brain were so treated that when a train of thought were broken, it would be immediately completely lost, the brain reverting to the condition it was immediately before the treatment . . ? Short, but good. And finally, William Tenn's CHILD'S PLAY. A slightly whacky but utterly horrible story of the man who found a "Bild-A-Man" set!

Usually in an anthology one or two poor stories must be accepted along with the good ones. For my money, this does not apply here—they are all good! They should be, they've been double-distilled, the original American edition contained 22 stories, and even they were all satisfying yarns!

KENNETH F. SLATER

Fandom's noted literary critic

Writes for you in every edition of

NEBULA SCIENCE-FICTION

SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

The cover of the July 1926 *Amazing Stories* is practically duplicated in action in the sci-*ants* fiction film, "THEM!" The Paul-painted picture of over a quarter century ago illustrated a climatic scene from the young Curt Siodmak's translated thriller of "The Eggs from Lake Tanganyika" and the "house-flies" that hatched that *were* almost as big as houses; well, a small bungalow, anyway, or flying horses. In "THEM!," Warner Bros' gi-ant spectacle, the scientifilm clock has been turned back to Brobdingnagian Twenties when the insects came big, *big*, BIG! Rodents and human beings, as well. Later in a more sophist·cated era, I learned that all such stories of gigantism were pure fairy tales because (for reasons that I could never quite comprehend) of multiple weight problems and the insectival breathing apparatus, etc. But I have also been told (the never by a bumble-bee, who apparently doesn't know any better) that due to some law of aerodynamics Mr. Bee can never fly; and I never did get the straight of why they once were positive that the-heavier-than-air 'plane was a physical impossibility. Anyway, what all this preface is leading up to, is the simple statement that I was perfectly willing to suspend disbelief, the way all the people concerned with the realization of "THEM!" put on their show.

It has been six weeks since I saw the preview of it, but my memory of it is still pretty strong, and runs along like this:

Picture opens with a helicopter view of a New Mexico desert as the pilot sights a little girl on the sand below, clutching a doll and wandering aimlessly. Pilot reports to a ground patrol, and two state police drive to the vicinity. Patrolman James Whitmore jumps out and runs calling, "'ittle girl! Little girl!" The youngster pays no attention, but trudges on like a zombie. Whitmore finally places himself directly in front of her and physically restrains her. He carries her to the car where, on the radio, the helicopter reports a trailer sighted about two miles ahead. Presuming this is where the little girl has wandered away from, the patrolmen head for the trailer. There they are horrified to find a whole side of it apparently blown out. Inside everything is a shambles, but there is no evidence of an explosion, nor has anything valuable (money lies strewn about) been stolen. Outside something which might be a queer, large footprint is noted.

The patrolmen continue to a nearby one-man store to determine if the shopkeeper can shed

any light on the mystery. Here they find the terrible damage repeated, the canned goods and drygoods looking as tho they had been caught up in a tornado. A sugar barrel is overturned. And a shotgun is found, its barrel broken as tho a matchstick. Investigation reveals that the gun's cartridges had been fired —and the missing owner was known to have been a crack shot. His mangled body is finally found in the basement—very thoroly dead. In fact he is dead for half a dozen reasons broken back, punctured lung, loss of blood . but, most inexplicable of all, he is pumped full of enough formic acid to kill a bull elephant !

A plaster cast of the unidentifiable footprint is sent to Washington. All concerned are surprised in return to have two *entomologists* added to their investigating group. Edmund Gwenn gives an amusing portrayal, and personable Joan Weldon is his daughter-assistant who, haply, does not let romance get tritely in the way of the terrific menace that develops.

When, in a layman psychiatrist's attempt to shock the little girl out of her frozen attitude, entomoligist Gwenn unstoppers a bottle of formic acid beneath the child's nose, Sandy Descher (age six) reacts violently, regaining her voice only to crouch in the corner in wide-eyed terror, screaming "*Them* ! *Them* !"

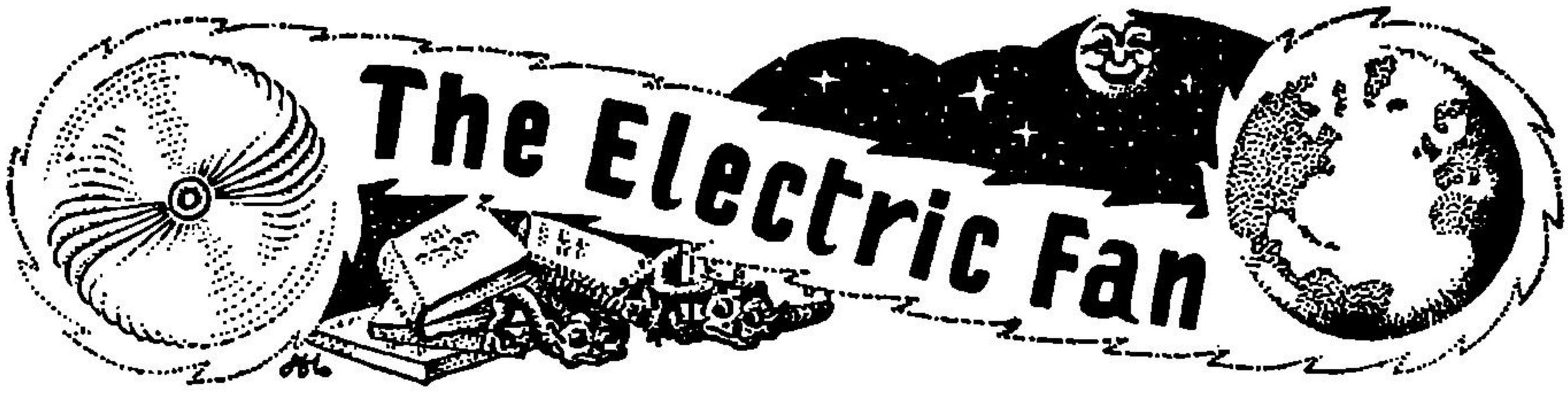
The picture, whose hundred minutes seem fleeting, now gets into high gear. Back at the scene of the first tragedy, the first of the giant ants appear. There is a horrendous shrilling set up by the confronted creature as it is fired upon and its antennae shot off.

By air, the lair of the ant monsters is located. Armed with flame-throwers, bazookas, hand grenades and poison gas, a party of four, including the girl, wipe out the nest—all except two great eggs which are split open and empty. It is determined that two winged ants have escaped and are even now on their "wedding" flight. Their range is such that they could fly to any part of the continent to lay their eggs. Their spawn will be numerous, and the original pair's egg-laying capacities good for 17 years ! There is no grim humor in the fact that mankind may soon be facing an ant-vasion !

A rash of flying saucer reports breaks out as the mut*ants* are observed in flight. One finally holes up in a ship in harbor which soon puts out to sea, emerging far from land and causing pandemonium among the crew. The other chooses the storm drains of Los Angeles, a labyrinthian maze looping beneath the surface of the city, to secrete itself and bear its young.

The climax dazzles the eye, splits the eardrum and pounds the heart to shreds as a dozen of the elephantine ants—indeed the *eleph*ants—are engaged in mortal combat by soldiers with jeeps, machineguns, cyanide bombs and bayonets who battle the chitin-armored nightmares to the death.

You may not believe it, the way I tell it, or be convinced it happened in retrospect, but while the show's going on I guarantee you'll be glued to your seat. May I have ants in my plants if you aren't.



WALTER A. WILLIS

Looks at British fandom

Sometimes I ask myself what I am writing this column *for*. I don't mean that the money I get for it is too much to be counted —actually it's hardly enough to keep me in yachts and dancing girls—but what is the Purpose Of It All ? I suppose part of it is to interest you in the field of literate self-expression known as science fiction fandom, which is why I've mostly been reviewing fanmags so far. But looking at the four I might review this time I begin to have doubts. One of them, I hear indirectly from rival fan editors—what you might call the sour grape vine—is about to cease publication. I wouldn't like to recommend you to subscribe and give the editor the job of sending back hundreds of pounds from the thousands of people who hang on my every word. Another is a new magazine, which so far is frankly not worth your money. I could probably write a review tearing it to pieces which everybody but the editor would enjoy — as La Rochefoucauld said, there is always something not altogether displeasing about the misfortunes of even our best friends—but there's not much point in my persuading you not to subscribe to a magazine you might otherwise never have heard of. That leaves two which I personally enjoyed but which I hesitate to recommend to anyone who hasn't seen a fan magazine before. Rog Phillips, who used to do a column like this in AMAZING, once offered to make refunds out of his own pocket to any reader who'd bought a fanmag on his recommendation and wasn't satisfied with it, but then AMAZING didn't circulate widely in Scotland.

But when you come to think of it, it's often difficult to recommend any fanmag without reservations. The serious ones dealing wholly with s-f are often so poorly written as to annoy the sort of non-fans who might otherwise be interested in literary criticism it annoys some people to see writers unable to distinguish between "its" and "it's" or separating sentences by commas and the better written ones are sometimes incomprehensible to the novice. Sometimes I wonder how anybody ever finds their way into fandom at all. As Robert Bloch said recently in the U.S. fanmag "Psychotic," "fandom's publications offer the widest possible cross-section of contemporary expression ranging from the childishly puerile to the most erudite and polished work." The trouble is that often it's only the inferior fanmags who go hunting

for new subscribers, and accordingly it's those which the newcomer tends to see first.

However, there can be exceptions. For what this is worth, I personally liked the first issue of a new fanmag called BEM, edited by Tom White and Mal Ashworth. 1/6 for two issues from 3 Vine St., Cutler Heights, Bradford, 4, Yorks. This is no ordinary first issue; but one published by fans who are already familiar with the field. Even so, I think the newcomer might enjoy it. Partly for the brightly written editorial matter, and partly for the first of a series of articles by Vince Clarke about the flat where he and Ken Bulmer used to live, known in fandom as The Epicentre. I enjoyed Vince's reminiscences of this fabulous place, a fascinating conglomeration of thousands of promags, countless fanmags, undetermined numbers of typewriters, duplicators and two wayward geniuses — all, especially the last two, in a state of perpetual and happy confusion.

I remember saying once that when good fans died they went to The Epicentre, and that two of them were already there. That last remark was an unkind allusion to the delay in publication of Clarke and Bulmer's S. F. NEWS, and I was reminded of that famous fanmag by an article I saw in a new one the other day. The author, G. E. Mason, makes a clarion call for British fandom to unite in one representative organisation and publish a representative fanmag designed to attract newcomers into the field. I admire Mr. Mason's good intentions, but I can't help feeling this is where I came in. Many years ago British fandom was very keen on organisation. The British Science Fiction Association of pre-war days was at one time so strong that American fans were considering abandoning their own organisations and joining the British one. But of course the war broke up the S.F.A., and afterwards British fans never seemed so keen on being organised. Personally I think they grew out of it. There was a gallant attempt a few years after the war by that organising genius Captain Ken Slater to form a new organisation, and he did actually set up an elaborate structure with regional commissars and everything, but when he was posted to Germany the whole thing just fell to pieces. The trouble was, as usual, with the official organ, in this case the S.F. NEWS. An organisation can't exist without an official organ, but either it is a dull affair in which the editor can't take any personal interest, or sooner or later there is a row between the editor and the club. S.F. NEWS kept falling between these stools for years, and gradually disappeared altogether. The result is that nowadays there is no representative British fan organisation, but I don't think it's anything to worry about. Everything worth while in fandom, even big projects like the Fancyclopoedia, The Immortal Storm, the Fantasy Annual, The Enchanted Duplicator, the Checklist, Operation Fantast, The Transatlantic Fan Funds and so on, have all been accomplished by individuals or *ad hoc* associations of them. It seems that the true s-f fan is essentially individualistic.



DEAR SIR : Can you help me ? My "Nebula" never seems to arrive at my newsagent's at any set time—his wholesalers tell him that there is no set date of publication—and we have to take it when we get it—pretty negative answer, I should say. Is that correct ? Seems most unsatisfactory to me. A thriving mag. like yours must run to a better system than that.

That's my query, Ed. Can you give me any help ?—I'd be very much obliged if you could.

Sincerely,

J. F. PERKINS, LONDON, E.12.

** Well, Mr. Perkins, this problem of regular publication has been the subject of quite a lot of discussion lately, both among readers and at this office. So, in response to a large number of requests, I have decided to publish this number (No. 9) almost two months late (it should have appeared in Gt. Britain towards the end of June) and consequently, am able to guarantee regular publication for NEBULA in future, towards the beginning of every other month from October onwards.*

DEAR ED : Regarded as the work of Britain's supposedly best writer in the field, "Fly Away Peter" is horrible. If it had been by some generally - considered lesser writer it would have merely been below par, but here it's clearly another case of the Mighty Fallen. There's nothing in it of particular interest, nothing original. Incidentally, I notice it has an American setting. In your position you should get EFR to do your stories with a British setting.

ARCHIE MERCER, LINCOLN.

** Well, Archie, I'm surprised at you ! "Fly Away Peter" was well written, well told, and in my opinion was very nicely rounded off. It was, as I pointed out in my last Editorial, written with the newer type of reader in mind, but* no one *could fairly say it was not written in Eric Frank Russells masterly style.*

Incidentally, both Mr. Russell's action in writing this story and my own in printing it have been wholeheartedly endorsed by a large number of readers. It presently stands at "First" in the "Fanalysis" Reader Opinion Poll.

DEAR ED : I have just finished reading No. 8 of N. and I must say that it is an even greater improvement over the previous issues. I have read other people's comments in your mag. and have heard other members of our local club saying that N. is the best S-F mag. in the country, but until this issue that has not been my strict opinion. I have always regarded it as AMONG the best. Now there is no doubt about it, N. is definitely the British No. 1,

and as good as any American S-F publication on the market.

Yours sincerely,
J.J. GREENGRASS, LOWESTOFT

* *Thanks for the kind words, John. You can rest assured that there are thousands who hold the same opinion.*

DEAR ED : It was with real pleasure that I read the eighth edition of NEBULA. It is the first issue of this magazine that I have seen on sale in Australia and I really must congratulate you on the really fine quality of stories it contains. Special honours go to Eric Frank Russell and E. R. James for two of the best stories I have ever read.

Keep up the good work !

EVE McCONNELL,
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA.

* *Many thanks for the letter, Eve, and I'm glad you enjoyed the last issue of NEBULA so much and can safely assure you that the contents of future numbers will be* even better !

Write again, won't you ?

DEAR SIR : I feel that the reason for there being so little science-fiction on the Radio is the inability of this medium to convey the *atmosphere* of outer space and alien planets. It is much simpler to write a descriptive story than to dramatise it.

JOHN SCOTT, PAISLEY.

DEAR ED I couldn't agree more with your comments in the last issue about the lack of s-f on the Air.

It is high time the B.B.C. wakened up to the fact that

FANALYSIS

If you fill up the Ballot Form below, you have a chance of winning a year's subscription to NEBULA, Britain's Quality S F Magazine, absolutely *free!*

All you have to do is fill up the Bailot Form below, numbering the stories in the order of your preference, your favourite first, and so on. Write your name and address in the space provided and mail the Form to NEBULA as soon as possible.

The first form received which corresponds exactly to the final result as published in NEBULA No. 11 will win a prize of one six-issue subscription to NEBULA for the person who sends it in.

Ordeal in Space	
Curtain Call	
Cul-De-Sac	
Alcoholic Ambassador	
Aspect	
Project One	

Name and Address :

The result of the Poll on the stories in NEBULA No. 7 was as follows:—

PILOT'S HANDS	
By Wm. F. Temple	**30·7%**
COLD STORAGE	
By David S. Gardner	**19·4%**
DIVINE RIGHT	
By J. T. McIntosh	**18·2%**
EMANCIPATION	
By E. C. Tubb	**10·2%**
GORGON PLANET	
By Bob Silverberg	**7·9%**
PROJECTIONIST	
By H. J. Campbell	**7·6%**
TROUBLESHOOTER	
By Charles Eric Maine	**6·0%**

Naturally, any story polling more than 40% of all votes cast wins a CASH PRIZE for its author as in previous numbers.

"NEBULA" CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS.

Science-Fiction's Most Lucrative Advertising Medium, 4d. Per Word.

FOR SALE

AMERICAN science-fiction magazines, 1/6. List 2½d.—Moulton, 15 Fordway, Blackpool, Lancashire.

WANTED

WILL buy rare British fantasy books.—S. B. Myers, 904 Forest Ave., Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

PUBLICATIONS

LOOK through this NEBULA for an announcement from the new Editor of Britain's leading fanzine, SPACE-TIMES!

MISCELLANEOUS

COMING SF pinnacle, "The Abyss" by ojB.

SCIENCE-FICTION pocket books and magazines for exchange. Write for list.—A. Clark, Theddlethorpe, Mabelthorpe.

SEE the films which Forry reviews—in your own home! Glasgow and district only.—Nebula Box A.

THAT old Science or Fantasy book which you have read should now be on its way to the H. G. Wells Club to encourage the younger generation to read and enjoy s.f.—Contact A. Gregory, 3 School Street, Witton-le-Waer, Nr. Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham.

Excitement

Romance

Thrills

IN

"AMERSF"

people are reading and enjoying s-f books and magazines. They could easily follow the example which is being set by Hollywood and American radio and TV networks, by giving the public some really first-class s-f plays and films, without losing any of their much vaunted "dignity."

REG ALLAN, SOUTHPORT.

* *John may or may not have a point. I personally doubt if he has in view of some of the fine plays we* have *heard occasionally. So come on, B.B.C., and Radio Luxembourg too, and give the public what it really wants!*

DEAR SIR: Quite some time ago I completed and sent in the "Space-Times Survey of Fandom" with a Postal Order for 1/- for the results, but so far these results have not been forthcoming. As I know of a large number of people who have also had no replies, I am wondering if you can throw any light on the subject.

MISS K. LEE, BRIGHTON.

* *Well, I'm glad to set the minds of both Miss Lee and all the other readers who have written to me on this subject at rest: full results of the* "Space Times Survey" *will reach those of you who sent* 1 *with your completed Ballot Form within the next month. For those of you who did not, I am pleased to announce that I have arranged with the qualified statistician who conducted the Survey, to publish many of the results in the next issue of NEBULA.*

If you feel at all annoyed at the slight delay in the declaration of these results, just think of how

you *would like to prepare an exact and detailed analysis of the answers to over fifty questions on almost* 2,000 *ballot forms* !

DEAR ED : Recently I bought and read the latest copy (No. 8). I think Ted Tubb's story "Episode" takes the honours in this ish. It takes the so-called glamour out of a probable voyage which will mean hard work to achieve. Technically speaking, " Blaze of Glory " was well put over ; then to the fanciful " Fly Away Peter," then " Wind Along The Waste " and finally, " Weather Station."

Noticed Alan Hunter's sketch in " Blaze of Glory." You'd be surprised how we pulled his leg over what it represented, although most of the group knew. Actually in Bournemouth there is a group that meets every 3 weeks. We have the noted Shirley Marriot in our crowd ; she will be absent at our meeting on the 4th of June. She's attending the Supermancon. Are you running a report on this ?

Still I vote Neb. as being the best British magazine to-day. I always have done since around ish 3.

Yours fantastically,
DEREK G. CADELL,
BOURNEMOUTH.

* *Unfortunately, this issue went to press just too early for a report on the Supermancon (Second Manchester Science-Fiction Convention to the rest of us) but I hope Walter Willis will manage to squeeze it into his " Electric Fan " next time.*

DEAR MR. HAMILTON : You are always asking for readers' opinions on your magazine ; so here's my round-up of Nebula 8.

The Cover was fair. You have had better from Bob Clothier (notably that on No. 7) but this is easily the best from anyone else. I congratulate you on developing this new artist.

Stories on the whole were good, especially " Episode " and " Fly Away Peter," which both contained good character work and were very interesting to the last. You have two fine mainstays in Tubb and Russell. I'm looking forward to more of their stories which have been as big a factor as any in putting NEBULA in the forefront.

" Blaze of Glory " although by an author I don't care for, was fairly good, although the perpetual repetition of " up " and " down " got a bit monotonous. " Weather Station " was better than Bound's usual for interest, but at best it was only a very old theme in a not-so-new guise. For the work of a new author " Wind Along The Waste " was well enough, but he'll have to do a lot better than this if he ever wants to hit the heights. I suppose he should be grateful to you for letting him get a first appearance with a story like this.

Interior art was fair, but I think that the greatest room for improvement lies here. Turner, Wilson and in an earlier issue, Frew, all show good promise.

Will that do ?

JOHN DUFF, LONDON, S.E.18.

* *Thanks a lot for your* very *interesting letter, John. I hope many other readers follow your example.*

before and should be of interest to the many readers who saw "Destination Moon," a film on which Mr. Heinlein did some valuable technical directing.

The short stories represent a remarkably wide range of ideas and styles and are all by authors new to our pages while one of them, BOB SHAW, makes his very first appearance in print in this edition. I think you will agree with me that I have another really promising "discovery" in Bob and both he and I will look forward to your comments on his "Aspect."

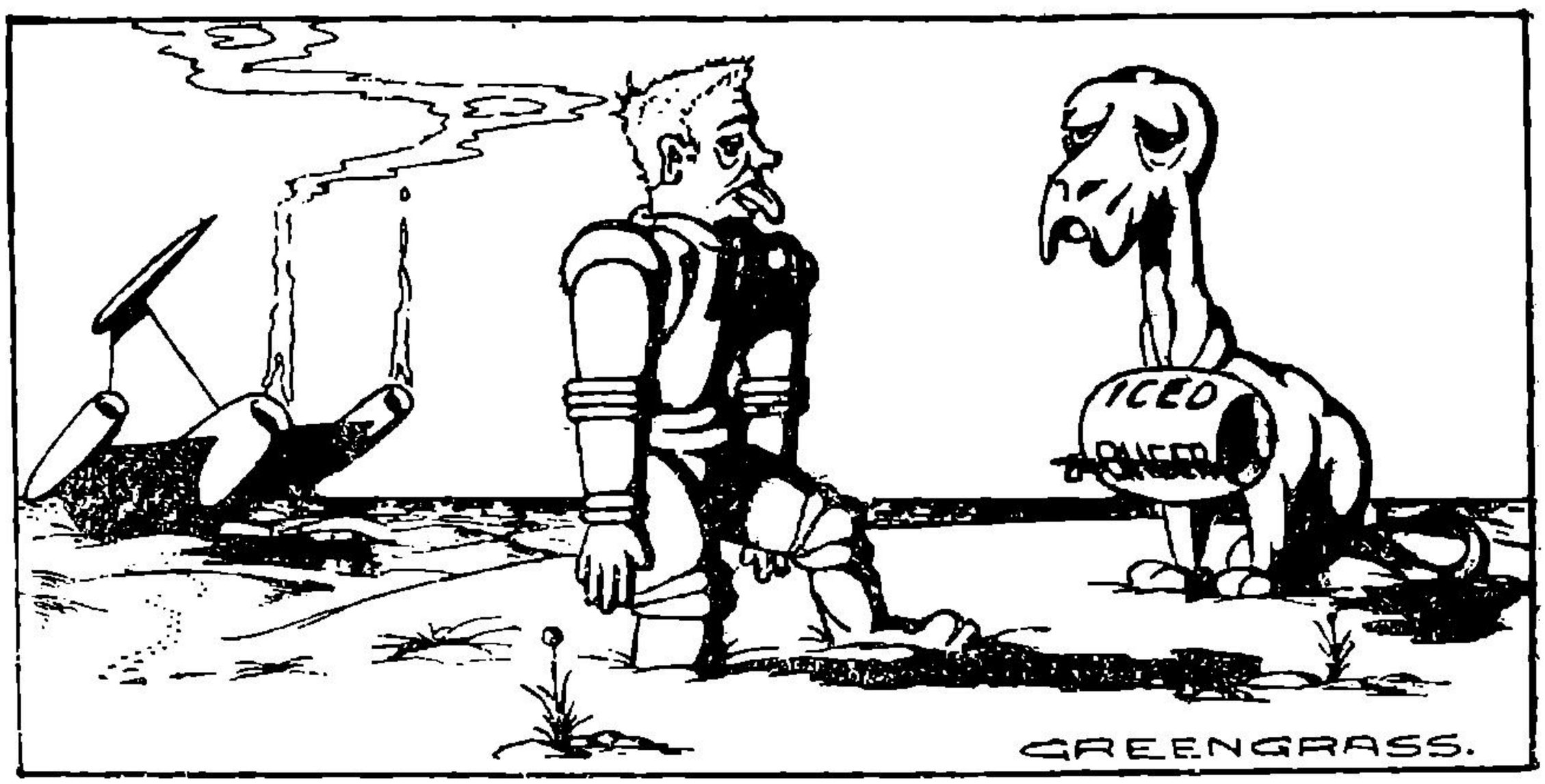
* * * *

Finally here is a message for all authors, from the well established to the completely amateur. In response to remarks I have heard recently, I have made arrangements to let all authors submitting material to me, have my decision on their mss. within three weeks of its arrival here.

Now, this is an important decision for any Editor to make. It means that I will have much more work to do, owing to the flood of material which is likely to result from this announcement, as well as to the fact that every story which is submitted will require immediate attention and an immediate decision. The effect of this change in policy is that the quality of the material in this magazine will become even higher than it has been in the past and it thus represents another step in my campaign to make NEBULA the best magazine *there has ever been.*

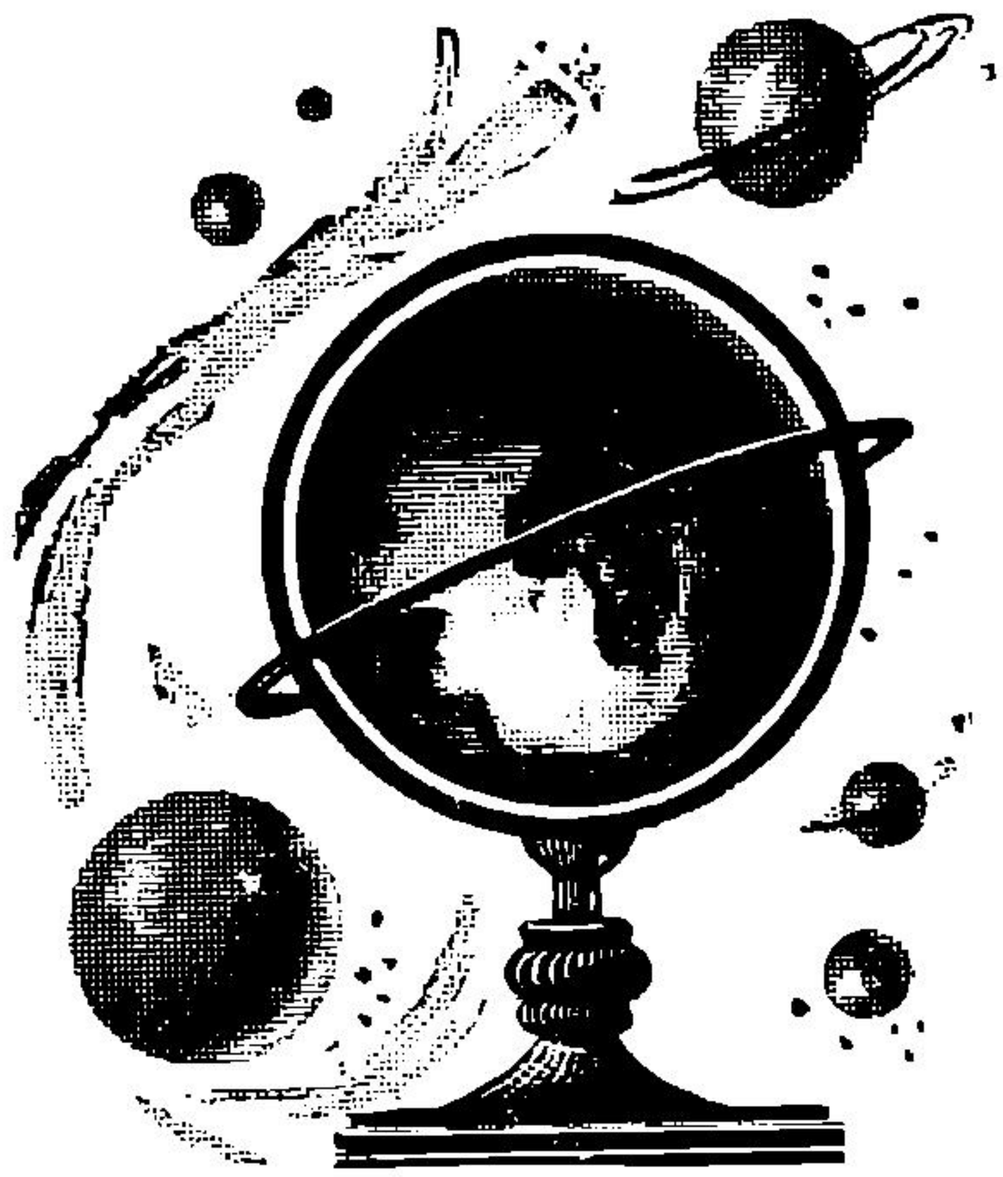
Authors wanting a quick sale (and almost all full-time writers place this before even the slightly higher fees offered by some foreign magazines) can be assured of getting it by sending their stories to NEBULA. Consequently, a larger choice of even better stories than before will be available to me — and to every reader.

Peter Hamilton



New Worlds to Conquer

IN THE



VARGO STATTEN

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

New Size • Increased Contents • Fully Illustrated

Designed for the countless thousands of readers who discovered the pleasures of Science Fiction through the novels of VARGO STATTEN, whose book sales in Britain last year were nearly 250,000 copies.

It is the aim of the Editor to offer all that is best in science fiction and to appeal to the vast public who want their stories in this category to be couched in easily understandable language and told in a truly entertaining manner. Contributors to date include E. C. Tubb, Vargo Statten, Volsted Gridban, F. Dubrez Fawcett, J. Barrington Bayley, Morley Carpenter, Frank Bussey and many new Science Fiction authors who will ultimately become household words, or so we believe!

Full Colour Cover
NOW DEMY 8vo.

Is. 6d.

•

HENRY SQUIRE & CO.
139 BOROUGH HIGH STREET, LONDON, S.E.1

NEBULA
SCIENCE FICTION

- The magazine with the best stories, written for you by well-known authors from both sides of the Atlantic.
- The magazine which takes a lively interest in its readers by printing the kind of material which they enjoy.
- The magazine which encourages new talent among new British authors and artists.
- The magazine which contains absorbing and unusual articles on a variety of interesting subjects.
- In short,

Britain's Magazine of Quality