

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

BI-MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 19



SEVEN TOP-LINE SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Issue Number Nineteen

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Front Cover by James Stark

Back Cover by D. McKeown

Black and White Illustrations by Arthur Thomson and Martin Frew

NEBULA SCIENCE-FICTION, price Two Shillings, is printed in Scotland by The Munro Press Ltd., Perth, and published by Peter Hamilton at 159, Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E. This edition was published in December 1956.

Subscription Rates in Great Britain and the British Commonwealth: Six issues, 12/- Stg.; Twelve issues, 24/- Stg. In the U.S.A. and Canada, Six issues, \$2.00; Twelve issues, \$4.00. All Rates Post Free.

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Look here . . .

In the last issue of NEBULA I promised you a full-length novel by F. G. Rayer which, as you will see from the contents page, has not been included. The reason is that our good friends in the bookselling trade, who form the distributive link between you, who are reading this editorial, and we, who produce this magazine, requested another issue of NEBULA to be in their hands before the end of 1956 and, as the Rayer story in question was still away being illustrated when the current number went to press, it could not be included—a great pity. But next time, I hope.

Replacing Rayer's novel is another full-length yarn by an author who is quickly growing in popularity with NEBULA readers. "The Number of My Days" by John Brunner, while being a strikingly true-to-life science-fiction story concerning the opening up of a new planet, incorporates the "death count," a system by which the members of the expedition in the story can learn before they set out just how many of them will not return. Although this may seem an impossibly fictional ingredient for a story, it is but a logical extension of present-day insurance procedure, where the life-expectancy and accident or illness probability of any ordinary person can be calculated with surprising accuracy.

"The Great Armadas" sees the return of Kenneth Bulmer with a fascinating suggestion as to the most appropriate part which our descendants may play in any Galactic Union. Judging by the current world tension over events in Hungary, the Middle East, etc.—a tension which implies quite simply that although I am writing this column in December for your enjoyment in January, there may be no one around in January to read it—I think Bulmer may have a very valid suggestion.

William F. Temple is back again with a new experience for many regular science-fiction readers—a really gripping ghost story. You may think that this is out of place in a magazine like NEBULA, but I feel that there is a large enough science-fictional content in this story to justify its inclusion in this magazine and, as you would imagine, bearing in mind by whom it is written, it is a really first-rate yarn of its kind.

The shorter stories include a spine-chilling piece by Brian W. Aldiss touching on a theme rather neglected by many science-fiction authors—the science of sonics—and a poignant little tale of rivalry and death on a distant planet by an author new to our pages, Len Shaw.

The photo-feature promised in the last issue of NEBULA has been held over to No. 20 for further improvements—but I assure you that it is well worth waiting another two months to see. The Scientifilm Preview feature returns in this number and all the other regular features are present and correct.

My only hope now is that you enjoy reading this edition as much as I have enjoyed compiling it for you.

Peter Hamilton

KENNETH BULMER

The Great Armadas

*They had unleashed the Ultimate Weapon on their enemies—
could they now prevent it from turning on themselves?*

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson

Supreme Councillor Meyer rubbed his temples with paper thin fingers and said tiredly: "The trouble is, of course, that they simply don't listen when you talk to them."

Meyer was at that age when features no longer matter. Under the yellow translucent skin his blood pumped sluggishly, sure indication that a life spent administering the Galaxy had prematurely worn out his heart.

"The discussions have lasted too long already," Councillor Jungor said with a touch of disbelief in his voice. "If we do not act soon the whole Galaxy will be affected."

Jungor was young for a Councillor and inclined to be touchy and intolerant, and to question obliquely profound remarks made by his superior.

Meyer rubbed his temples luxuriously and allowed his face to assume that mask of inscrutability he had found so useful.

"True, Jungor," he said gently. "But you still have to use that old 'I tell you three times' technique. And even then they don't believe us." Sadness touched his eyes briefly.

There was quite a possibility that one day Jungor would be Supreme Councillor and as part of Meyer's position as the present Supreme was the burden of leading the younger Councillors along the roads of wisdom. It was never easy properly to administer a Galaxy hub, even with the sub-radio brought to instantaneous perfection, and cybernetic machines, whilst remarkably fine servants, could never make the decisions expected of a master.

"I don't think the Rebels mean what they say——" Jungor began, when Councillor Dorpf interrupted brusquely, his black fly-like eyes half-concealed beneath drooping lids. His face was long and his chin pointed almost to deformity. "They mean every word." His voice was high and distinct, like ice breaking. "They want complete autonomy, 'freedom,' they term it. They are determined to break away from the Galactic Council and go their own way to hell—and nothing you can say will stop them."

"The police——" Meyer began in what he knew was a hopeless tone; but about which he could do nothing.

For once both Jungor and Dorpf joined forces to laugh at him. Politely, as gentlemen; but, nonetheless, to laugh. And that, he had to face it, was the crux of the whole problem. The Galactic civilisation was too gentlemanly—if the members of a cluster or group of systems decided that for the good of their souls they were going to break away from the Council's dictums, the Council had no way apart from discussion to dissuade them. More often than not, thankfully, quiet talks and re-orientation of outlook coupled with sensible concessions were enough. In the present crisis the group of star systems that had decided to steer their own ship of fate—the "Rebels"—were simply carrying on doing just that. And Supreme Councillor Meyer and all his police couldn't do a single thing to prevent it.

From this newly created young world near the heart of the Galaxy—oh, yes, the creation of worlds was no longer merely a whim of star whorls, this one had been brought over twenty thousand light years—Councillor Meyer could supervise the regional commanders. Normally, decisions affected life on individual planets a considerable time after their promulgation. The police, a purely nominal force engaged in every activity but the detection and prevention of crime, were worse than useless under these conditions. There was no crime in the Galaxy. The Galactics all lived together quite happily and sociably and only very rarely did any one of them who knew, think of the sun system where twenty large planets circled under the perpetual grey cloak of oblivion.

And if a Galactic did happen to recall this system of Thread he would wonder what had upset his mind-balance that day and immediately thrust the thought from him, forcing it away if necessary by quite strenuous exercise. Not that the Galactics had any twinges of conscience, you understand, merely that they were reluctant to be reminded of the place.

And Supreme Councillor Meyer had a horrible suspicion that the impetuous folly of Jungor would impel that youth to speak of Thread, even, perhaps, to mention its function.

Meyer pushed his huge gilded chair back on castors, stood up without any joints creaking, which pleased him, and crossed to stand gazing pensively into the tridi tank. Quietly Dorpf joined him, his enigmatic eyes probing the darkness of the tank. Meyer could hear Jungor's quick breathing from the Council table quite clearly. Whatever suggestion the youngster put forward would have, by virtue of Dorpf's presence, to be presented when the full Council met, in exactly—he glanced at the illuminated wall clock—six minutes.

"If we mean to prevent the Rebels from leaving the Council authority," Jungor said harshly, "we must make it perfectly plain to them. We should use the Ultimate Weapon, Supreme Councillor, the hour is ripe for it."

The pang shot through Meyer. Ultimate Weapon. Jungor had spoken the words: now the whole question must be put to the assembled Council. And Frenesi with his lop-sided grin and his twitching hands would be there to obstruct, antagonise, seduce and generally play old hob with the rest of the Council.

"All right, young man!" Meyer turned, his thin body erect and one hand pushed behind him for support. "You realise, I hope, what you have suggested"

"Certainly," Jungor said; but there was unease in his eyes. "We have to settle——"

"You have raised an issue the importance of which you obviously do not appreciate. The Ultimate Weapon has been activated and used only six times since its inception thirty thousand years ago. You know that. And it was not designed for use against our own people——"

"Own people?" Jungor spoke savagely. "They're traitors, all of them ——"

"Save it for the meeting," Meyer said sharply. Meyer was still possessed by anger when the meeting convened. Anger was a natural enough function; but no Galactic had the mental hook-up which could channel that anger into any other outlet than that of speech. They were in for a high old time this session. Across from him, Frenesi was making a fuss about sitting down, his veined hands twitching at his robes. The old buzzard would be in fine fettle, when he got wind of the way Meyer was feeling. Trouble was, Frenesi, however powerful a Galactic he might personally be, was not suited for the position of Supreme and would never reach that eminence.

Frenesi didn't know that, of course. Meyer had spared him the humiliation—as Frenesi would interpret it. Meyer was slumped in his chair and as the business of the meeting progressed, found his mind wandering again to that bleak, hostile and miserable system of Thread.

The Ultimate Weapon—his thoughts came back to the present in time with the words as Jungor spoke them, youthful and wrathful.

"And I say we must bring the Rebels to heel by using the Ultimate Weapon——"

The stir which consumed the Council members would have awed—and delighted—those who had planned the Ultimate Weapon thirty thousand years ago.

Fierce words thrust back and forth across the table. Fists thumped the table top—fists that would shrink from striking a face. Names were hurled with reckless abandon. Finally, having enjoyed himself capitably, Meyer rose slowly to his feet and held up one hand. Gradually, the noise subsided.

His shrewd old eyes had been quick to see which way the arguments had been going. Frenesi was all in favour of backing the young cub Jungor. Dorpf was staunchly in support of his old friend, the Supreme. A wise move, as Dorpf was Supreme elect—although he didn't know it. Significantly, though, Frenesi's friends had been cautious. their support of Frenesi could not over-rule the implications inherent in the Ultimate Weapon.

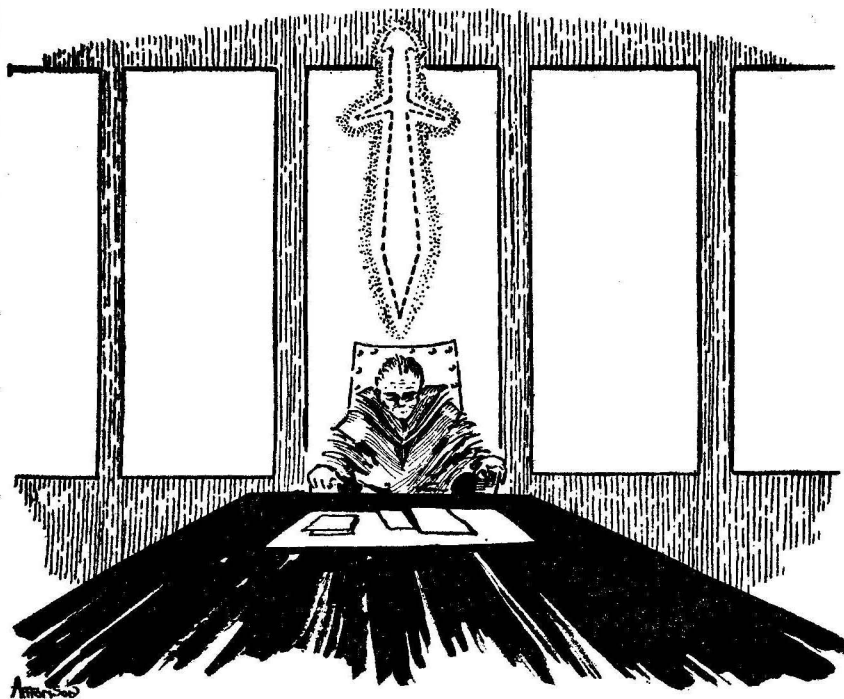
"Very well," Meyer said, head held high. "We will take a vote on the question. Do you, Jungor, state your case." When Jungor had repeated his fiery observations and rescated himself, flushed and belligerent; Dorpf rose to refute the argument. And, when Dorpf sat down, his black eyes still brilliant beneath half-concealed eyelids, Meyer rose again to take the vote.

He felt no triumph as the hands rose slowly, one after the other. He had known that the Council would not tolerate the use of the Ultimate Weapon. Six times employed in thirty thousand years—the last time five thousand years ago! Impossible to conceive of using it over a question of this minor magnitude.

"Very well." Meyer spoke in a voice brittle with age. "We are agreed. We shall not use the weapon, let it sleep on in Thread." The silence was embarrassing.

That silence was shattered as a uniformed messenger ran into the Council chamber and, with a swiftly uttered: "Your pardon for disturbing you, gentlemen," thrust a pink message form into Meyer's hands. Meyer looked down to read the form and when he raised his head and looked along the table every voice hushed suddenly. They all sat staring at him, a frail, old, indomitable man who spoke in a voice chopped up by emotion.

"I have to inform you that this Galaxy has been invaded by beings from some other galaxy." He held up one fragile arm, and from a



finger the Great Ring of Thread gleamed like a sunburst. "There can be no doubt that they have no desire to enter into friendly contact with us. There remains only the assumption that they are implacably hostile. A ship went out to meet them and was—was—" Meyer could not go on. He swallowed and on the expectant silence young Jungor, his face as pale a fish's belly, said: "And was destroyed!"

Meyer nodded mutely. The conception sickened them all. Presently he roused himself and indicated in the tridi tank the position of the Invaders. A little conversation flowed and then it was time for the only thing he could do.

"I propose," Meyer said solemnly, feeling the full weight of five thousand years of waiting on Thread, "that the Ultimate Weapon be reactivated and used to prevent this extra-galactic invading onslaught."

The vote was perfunctory. What else could they do?

Further messages were received, clearly indicating that the hostiles were completely without mercy or reason. Every ship sent out to contact them was destroyed. The rest of that grey day, shot through with the vivid-orange of destruction reports, passed like a nightmare to Meyer. When

they received the message telling of the first destruction of a planet it seemed to the old Supreme as though he personally had experienced the pang of agony.

Whoever the aliens were and wherever they had sprung from, one thing was certain. They were immensely powerful. It would take the weapon at full stretch to deal with them. Meyer recalled the records on previous Weapon reactivations. The cat-people who had been ravaging all across a backward segment of the Galaxy had put up a stiff and bloody fight that had lasted all of a hundred years. But, in the end, inevitably, the Ultimate Weapon had triumphed. And been put back to sleep again on the twenty planets of Thread.

That had been five thousand years ago, over three thousand years before Meyer had been born. He was a thousand and ninety. A remarkable age, even for the Galactics; but he felt serenely sure he'd live to see out this last use of the Weapon—even if Frenesi was talking in whispers to his cronies and planning a *coup d'etat*. Old Supreme Meyer would last out, long enough to see this nasty bit of Weapon business through, install Dorpf firmly as Supreme and then set about training young Jungor.

The Galactics were ordinary people, with the foibles and weaknesses of the flesh; but they had the traditions of thousands of years of happy, peaceful living among themselves in the Galaxy to sustain and buoy them and lend them a profound understanding of life. Of course, there had been troubles, times when they had had to work hard to avoid extinction; but those had been the early days and very few new cultures rose now to torment them. Meyer recalled with distaste, that in the very early periods of the Galactics' rise, they had actually had to fight to remain alive. Thankfully, in line with all Galactics, he pulled over himself, the cloak of such comfort, the knowledge that he was above fighting, and that his superior understanding gave him peace and security of mind.

Which was of great personal use but of utterly negative value now that there were Invaders to be dealt with. The sword was about to be drawn from the scabbard. The responsibility of drawing such a weapon had broken men before now, and Meyer called on all his own resources of strength as he stood under the grey skies of the central planet of Thread and stared sombrely at the unending rows of buildings. He needs must come here personally to active the weapon—he alone, as Supreme, had that awful power. And he would use that power rapidly, quickly, hoping to cauterise the wound to his mind by the very sharpness of his decisions and actions.

He did not intend to allow the realisation that he was reactivating

the Ultimate Weapon to crush his spirit.

Technicians were hurrying from the row of interstellar ships, their equipment propelled before them on anti-grav sleds, and the whole scene sharply reminded Meyer of children's holidays. A tech read off a meter and gave a thumbs up sign and Meyer thankfully removed his spacesuit. He'd sent word ahead and the atmospheric pumps had brought air pressure from its artificial low level—just enough to dispose of wayward meteorites—up to a breathable fifteen pounds.

The rest of the Council were divesting themselves of their suits and then they were looking at him, waiting for the single simple act that would resurrect a thirty-thousand year old spectre.

Supreme Councillor Meyer looked slowly round the horizon, taking in the clump of spaceships looking like silvered reeds, the jagged-edged mountain backdrop, the row after row after row of tall concrete and steel buildings, for all the world like Alphabet blocks stood solemnly in lines across the face of the planet. He sighed—but softly, so that the Council should not think him unworthy of this position.

Then he spoke a single word into a microphone.

The word spread across the planet, carried on eager waves and humming wires it burrowed to the heart of each block, unheard, it activated hidden mechanisms, unused for five thousand dusty years, and brought forth the Dragon's Seed.

"I suggest we move down to a cell block." Meyer said mildly. "We don't often come here——" he laughed an embarrassed laugh at his feeble witticism "——and the experience should prove salutary to our younger members." He carefully did not look at Jungor.

"Good idea," Dropf said enthusiastically. He began to walk across the packed dirt of the planetary surface to the uncompromising wall of the nearest block. The rest trailed after him. Frenesi was deep in conversation with a crony, a conversation which dried away as soon as Meyer approached. He smiled and went to talk to Jungor.

"And I still think they'll run into trouble," Jungor said to Meyer "These Invaders are tough, militant, utterly ruthless—I wish I shared your feeling of conviction that the Ultimate Weapon will hold them."

"It always has."

"But, this time—I can but read the reports. We contained the Weapon, we put it here, on these twenty planets of Thread—we must have overcome it."

"We used to fight in those days, Jungor; but we were being beaten, even the Galactics." His words trailed as they entered a cell block, the archway soaring above their heads and the vastness of the place reaching away as though it curved into another dimension. A solemn stillness

lay on this ancient vault. For a long space the only sound was their blood, thumping regularly in their temples.

The perspective was dazing, even to men accustomed to the fantasies of daring customary with Galactic architects. From the archway-pierced wall behind them that raked upward a sky-brushing thousand feet, the ceiling and floor swept away before them, to end in the further thousand foot tall wall—which looked incredibly tiny.

No-one spoke. They walked quietly across the floor the central gangway engulfed them and they were looking at rack after rack of plastic transparent cases. Each case was six foot long and two across and was filled with a coiling mist that obscured whatever lay within.

"The process takes approximately six hours, sir," a wide-eyed technician told Meyer. The Supreme thanked him, feeling sympathy for the youngster's awe here in this place putting into practice the theory learned over the years.

They went out and crossed to the next block where was the same mystery of procedure and hints of Galactic majesty bottled and preserved against the day of wrath. A surfeit of emotion shook Meyer. He knew that reactivating the Ultimate Weapon had been his only course; but now he was shaken by doubts, by panic-ridden fears of what might be the outcome. He had studied the records too; he knew what the Weapon had done in the past, before it had been shut away on the lonely system of Thread.

Whole solar systems wiped out in the brainless gush of atomic fire. Silver ships clashing and rending in the void and the ugly stain of combat spreading like the virus in a barrel of infected apples. The Weapon had done all that, had stalked implacably and—somehow combining—in majesty and pity across the stars. Meyers shook himself and went with the Council to their ship to eat and rest, awaiting the expiry of the six hour period.

It came, soon enough. And in that period, Meyer fell to thinking about the Weapon, and the hows and whys of it, and a tinge of sympathy for the Invaders crept over him. After all, the extra-Galactic Invaders were rough and tough and mighty ugly—but they were heading straight for the Ultimate Weapon—and kindly, peaceloving and gentle Meyer had a surreptitious twinge of pity for them.

It was all rather bloody, when you thought about it.

Looking from the ramp leading to the entry port, he saw a man come briskly out of the cell block, pause and stretch, looking about, and then, directed by a tech's pointing finger head towards the lead ship. The man had a lithe, free way of walking, a lilt and swing about it, noticeably different from the grave tread of the Galactics. Meyer braced himself.

Now for it.

The man sprang up the ramp. He halted before the Supreme. Meyer saw the neat blue uniform, covered with multi-coloured scraps of cloth above the breast pocket, the bands of gold braid around the sleeves, the sharply visored cap with its bursting comet insignia. The man's hand snapped smartly to that cap brim. His face, brown, lined, with a radiating web of crows' feet from the eyes, held a bold, competent inner conviction of purposive power. It was the face of a fighting man.

He said, simply: "Earth, reporting for duty, sir."

Supreme Councillor Meyer was feeling his full one thousand one hundred and twenty heavy years. This damnable war with the Invaders had been blaspheming away for thirty years now. He sighed as Jungor came in and slumped down in a chair.

"Frenesi is cooking something up, Supreme," Jungor stated positively. "I don't like it. Everything you said about the Invaders and the Weapon has proven true. Frenesi must move fast, otherwise he doesn't stand a chance."

"I know, Jungor," Meyer said softly. "The latest news from the front says that the last Invading fleet was totally wiped out by the Terran Tenth Fleet. I saw some film shots. It was ghastly, obscene, and yet, somehow, there was a fantastic kind of grandeur about the way those lads of Earth took their ships in. Something of a laugh before death. A drink, a kiss, a laugh and a song into the heart of the sleeting leaden death." He filled a goblet and drank gratefully. "Earthmen are mortal terrible fighters," he said.

Jungor shivered. "Terrans are indeed fearsome, I can well understand how they acquired the reputation they have. But it is not normal to be able to fight like that. They must be a race of psychopaths."

"By our standards they are. But we grew to stature on a planet which had only us as the dominant life form. On Earth, apparently, there were many animal forms. It was a struggle, to survive, literally that, I assure you. Admiral Vernon, the new commander, is a cultured man, like you or I. But he has inherent within him the ability to turn on his ancestor's fighting attitude—something that you and I and the rest of the Galactics are unable to do."

"And something we find hard to understand, also."

True. However, the war is going well, we are holding the enemy. Your report on friend Frenesi is disturbing all the same. I admit, reluctantly, that I am feeling tired. I intend to see out the war as Supreme; after that I can turn over the onerous position, after I have safely returned

to Thread and suspended animation on the men of Terra."

"They breed fast—a whole new generation is fighting. They live their lives out quite normally; their women folk at home on various frontier planets whilst their men go off to war. It seems strange to me."

Meyer laughed. "It shouldn't be, Jungor. That is the way the people of Earth always lived. The women waited and the men fought. In many of their later wars the women fought, also; but we do not allow that. They like fighting, it seems; and yet sometimes I doubt that. To think of a whole life spent in battle!"

Jungor winced under the conception and said quickly: "We talk about them glibly like this. We keep them in suspended animation on the planets of Thread, we keep there their warships, their guns and ammunition and terrible weapons, and then we call them up and send them to war. And they always go to fight for the Galaxy. And then, when the war is over, back to Thread they go. What life is that?"

"Not for us to probe too deeply," Meyer said. "You realise, of course, that if they were allowed to live in the Galaxy with us in the normal way they would be continually making trouble? Apart from extermination, what other course is there?"

"Alter their minds——?" began Jungor doubtfully.

"They would not allow us, even if such a thing were possible. Their aptitude for fighting goes a lot deeper than merely hypnotism and associated techniques could remove. It is a part of their very being."

"The guilt feeling all the Galactics have over Terrans," Jungor said slowly, looking at Meyer. "It worries me."

A fresh voice broke in from the doorway.

"Well, you'll be happy to know that you can stop worrying from this minute on." Frenesi stood there, his hands twitching in the sleeves of his robe, his face smiling and triumphant. Flanking him a number of Councillors stood as though backing him up at the same time as drawing initiative from him.

"What do you mean, Frenesi?" Meyer asked coolly.

"Simply this. The Invaders have finally retreated. Definite evidence is to hand that they have returned to their own Galaxy—we have, incidentally, captured enough of their ships to have discovered the principles of the intergalactic drive—and the war is over!"

Meyer was on his feet, hand groping for his chair back.

"Why was I not informed personally of this?"

Frenesi laughed and some of the Councillors echoed him. "Because, my dear Meyer, you are no longer Supreme! I have taken over. I, Frenesi, am now Supreme Councillor!"

Meyer did not say anything. Jungor laughed harshly. "You pick

your time for treachery well! The people will connect peace and your accession in their minds—very clever.”

“The thought had occurred to me,” Frenesi said smugly.

Meyer stood for a long moment with his veined hand gripping the carved chair and the world going round in a frightening vortex of colour and noise. And then he fell.

Jungor had his frail body off the floor and laid on a window couch in seconds. The younger Councillor stood holding his old friend's pulse, looking down with compassion and pity. The purple eyelids hooding that flickering lightning of his eyes, showed ghastly against the yellow skin. Something about them reminded Jungor that Dorpf was not to hand. Strange.

“All right,” Frenesi was saying. “Take the poor old fool to his quarters—no, stay—they are mine now! Fix him up somewhere. And then send in Admiral Vernon of the Terran Space Navy. It's time they were put back in cold storage.”

Jungor stared at the twitching, arrogant little man, and a hot, choking, nauseating feeling rose in him. Could that be a “killing rage”? He shook his head, watching attendants wheel Meyer's limp body away. No, because only Earthmen had the faculty of hating to such a pitch that they could kill. That was why they were kept in cold storage and brought out whenever there was trouble in the Galaxy. He remembered he had wanted to bring them out to quell those Rebels just before the Invaders struck—and shuddered. He hadn't known the powers he was willing to unleash.

Councillor Dorpf walked swiftly through the door, his robes clutched around his ankles. Seeing Jungor he seized the youngster's arm, his black hooded eyes bright with fear. “Where's Meyer?” he demanded roughly.

Jungor pointed after the stretcher being wheeled away. His face was bleak. “There's been a change in management,” he said harshly. “Frenesi is the big boy, now, the one with the say so.”

If Jungor had expected any reaction of anger, surprise, antagonism or a determination to alter things at once, he was disappointed. Dorpf bent his brilliant eyes on the strutting figure of Frenesi.

“He is, is he,” Dorpf grunted. “Well, let's see him handle this.”

Jungor wandered over after Dorpf, unwilling to believe that his friend had gone over to Frenesi. He had had a strong belief that Dorpf was cut out to be the next Supreme, and having worked with him, was happy over the choice. Now, however, it looked as though Dorpf was willing to let Frenesi take over.

Dorpf tapped Frenesi on the chest, and as the little man swung

angrily towards him, said bluntly: "Frenesi, if you are the big boss now, there's some business for you. The Terrans refuse to return to suspended animation on Thread."

The rustle of Councillors' robes was loud in the hush. Jungor stood stock still, his mind a turmoil. His first, bursting elation at the problem which confronted Frenesi had almost instantaneously given way to a shocked realisation of what this meant. Catastrophe! The thought of the Terrans loose in the Galaxy, their predatory instincts turned against the Galactics—barbarism, terror, fire and sword, utter chaos!

The babble that broke like the crash of thunder beat in frenzied waves against the tridi tank and the smooth sweep of transpex window. This was an unparalleled crisis. No-one had any clear idea of just what had happened after previous reactivations of the Weapon, except that there the Earthmen were, all neatly laid out in rows under the grey cloak of oblivion on the twenty planets of Thread.

Frenesi was almost wringing his hands, standing confused in the midst of the Councillors.

The problem was, how did you persuade the lion to walk back into the cage? How did you get the terrible Weapon that was the fighting spirit of Earth back into the dreamless state of suspended animation?

Jungor shoved through the melee, caught Dorpf by the arm and jerked his head meaningfully. The two friends drew apart from the uproar and Jungor said: "Any further news Dorpf? I mean, there must be something else besides this bald announcement."

Dorpf's face was haggard. "Nothing. Admiral Vernon is on his way here now. No doubt he will tell Supreme what he intends. Is Meyer all right?"

"He is very weak. The shock of Frenesi's betrayal struck him down cruelly. Your entry prevented me from following him—I think we should keep this latest news from him."

Dorpf nodded. "I agree. I'll come with you—the old boy's a pretty wonderful type."

Jungor looked thoughtfully at Dorpf, and then slowly said: "I think, Dorpf, that Meyer had chosen you to be the next Supreme. I'd like you to know that although we had our differences in the past, I'm glad it's you and I'll give you my loyalty."

Dorpf's lips twisted wryly. "Thanks. But talking like this is of little use whilst Frenesi holds the whip hand——"

Jungor glanced around casually and yet searchingly. Frenesi was temporarily hidden by the arguing forms of the Councillors. He said: "We'll cook something up for friend Frenesi. I'm worried about Meyer. I think he knows more about the situation than he's told anyone—and

this Frenesi must have Terran blood in him to act like this——”

“You believe in insulting people when you start, eh, Jungor?” grinned Dorpf. “I think we should tell Frenesi to go jump into hyper-space. There aren’t many Councillors who’ll put up with him.”

Dorpf, his face growing grimmer with every word, turned on his heel and ran full tilt into Frenesi. The little man’s face was a scarlet blodge of fury. Mixed with that anger, Jungor shrewdly saw, was humiliation, uncertainty and fear—fear of his own henchmen.

Frenesi raised his hand and struck Dorpf.

The blow crashed as loud as two colliding galaxies.

Dorpf, caught off his guard, staggered back, reeled, flung up his arms and fell sprawling. His head smashed sickeningly against a clawed chairleg.

Everyone in the Council chamber knew that Dorpf was dead. There seemed almost a visible withdrawal of an aura. The incident had happened so rapidly, blow and fall and result, that they were caught and held in absurd positions like flies in amber.

No-one knew quite what to do. If unprecedented things had been happening in the Galaxy, surely this was the greatest, the maddest, the most inconceivable idiocy ever to occur? A Galactic, striking another—and killing him? It was impossible.

Yes—Jungor told himself fiercely—it was impossible. Frenesi must be tainted with other blood, other dark-world wombs must have spawned his sires.

Gradually motion came back into the chamber. Noise crept into the world again with the smothered cough, the screech of a chair as a man finished sitting down, the indrawn breath of stark disbelief. And riding those noises, beating them down and crushing out every other pulse in the world, came the steady tramp-tramp-tramp of booted feet marching down the corridor.

The doors opened. A group of men came through, tense, hard-faced, vibrantly alive and as discordant in that room of gentleness as a pair of brass knuckles lying on a lace handkerchief.

Only Jungor corrected the simile wildly, there was blood already staining that handkerchief.

“Supreme Councillor Meyer?” the leading figure asked, looking about. No-one answered him. Jungor, watching, saw the neat blue uniform, the scraps of coloured cloth that he knew represented medals, the sharp-visored cap with its bursting comet insignia. Standing relaxed and yet with that awareness, that vibrant preparedness typical of Earthmen, were the others, clad in dun khaki and olive drab, gaiters holding their trouser legs in at the ankle, giving them a leaping look, steel helmets

bulking their heads—spare, grim, alive, dominating figures. Fighters.

Jungor raised a finger and said emptily: "Councillor Frenesi has taken over from Councillor Meyer. Tell him what you want, Earthman."

Admiral Vernon's direct eyes flickered from Jungor to Frenesi, passing the corpse of Dorpf on the way. Of course, Jungor twitched with chill, the Earthman was used to bodies and death and the stink of corruption.

"Councillor Frenesi," Admiral Vernon said quite respectfully and yet with the iron of decision in his voice. "We have decided that we cannot allow our armies and navies to be returned to that living death on the Thread system. Why should we fight for the Galaxy and then be denied the right to live in it?"

Frenesi swallowed and dragged his eyes away from the body at his feet. His fingers shook uncontrollably.

"I am Supreme," he whispered. Then, raggedly: "You must return! There is no place here for the likes of you!"

"Explain yourself!" Vernon's eyes bored into Frenesi, level and direct and with all the power of a keen intellect determined to have his own way.

"The Galaxy is at peace. We don't want you blood-minded Terrans around now. Go back to Thread, where you belong!"

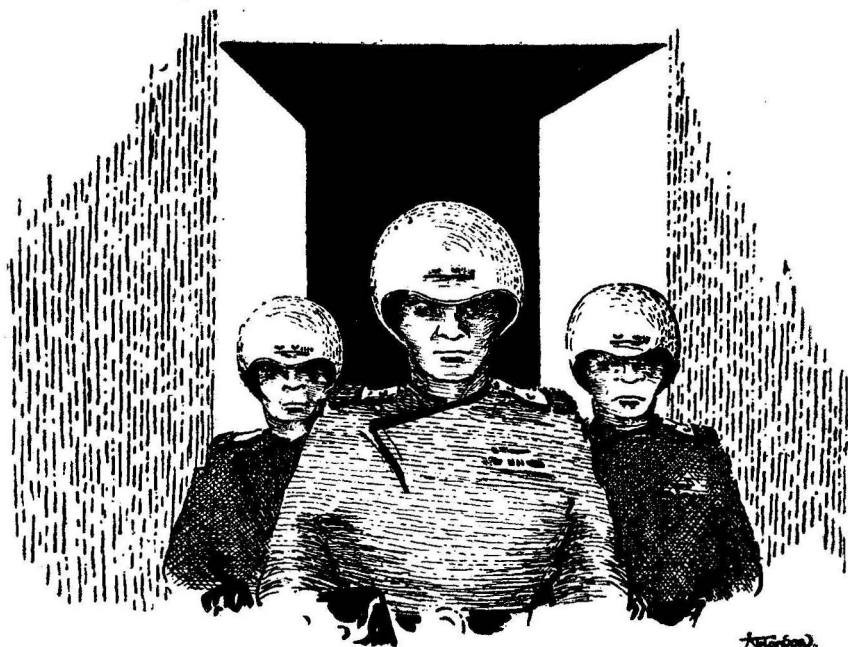
"So that's it!" Vernon smiled and the smile was unpleasant. "I see. There used to be a saying covering this situation, friend. Tommy Atkins in peace and war. Well, Galactic, if we Terrans are good enough to be asked to save this Galaxy, then we're good enough to live in it after our work's done."

"But you can't." Frenesi wrung his hands. "The whole balance of civilisation would be upset if you were allowed to live during peacetime. You are fed with war propadanda, you fight well—hideously well. You're simply unfit, mentally, to live in a world of peace."

Admiral Vernon took a pace nearer and now his face was harsh and angry and his mouth spat the words as though he wanted to spit in the face of this cringing Galactic.

"What peace do you allow us? You call us when there is war—and then return us to oblivion. For thirty thousand years we have seen only five hundred years of light—seventeen generations—seventeen generations of war! D'you understand what that means? War, continuously all your life! Bah—you preach about peace to me and I come here to find you standing over the body of a man you've just killed! Hypocrite! Incubus! Slaver!"

Vernon stopped, panting, and his glare was so ferocious that the



Galactics instinctively backed away a step.

Jungor saw clearly that Frenesi wasn't getting anywhere. He was still mulling over what the Council could do about the death of Dorpf, what action they could take against Frenesi—there were no precedents that he recalled. Jungor decided he'd better go see if Meyer was well enough to talk and give some advice—it shouldn't be too difficult to topple Frenesi now—if Admiral Vernon didn't take over in the interim.

That wasn't—starkly—impossible now.

Councillor Jungor walked towards Admiral Vernon, stood regarding him. Then he said: "I cannot really understand all your thought processes, Admiral, naturally; I want to help. It seems to me that whether you have a life all in one piece, as it were, or cut up like yours, is immaterial. And when you are engaged in war your people live in comfort; there is none of your old time poverty and privation and terror for the non-combatants——"

Vernon laughed harshly. "Ask a girl that when her man is fighting in a metal shell somewhere out on the Rim——"

Jungor shrugged helplessly. "Whether you personally like war or not doesn't matter. The race as a whole is permeated with it, you fight over anything, you snarl and bicker, you kill! Your whole race stinks with death!" He held up a sudden hand as Vernon made to interrupt.

"Wait. I put it to you that you cannot share a Galaxy with normal Galactics—either you must return to Thread to sleep until you are needed—or you must be exterminated!"

Jungor was woefully aware of all the flaws in that, but it was the best he could do.

Admiral Vernon had the look of a man who had just been told he had bad breath. His aides fidgeted, muttering.

"We're not going back," Vernon said doggedly. "I don't know how you got us to sleep in the first instance, thirty thousand years is a very long time; now we're going to live normally. And to talk of exterminating us—that is just a laugh! Who'd do it—your pansy boys around here?"

"I don't think that will be necessary." The shaky words came from the door. All heads swung in that direction. Sitting propped bolt upright in an electrically driven chair, Supreme Councillor Meyer was looking at them with that whimsical, knowledgeable, devilish little smile curving his lips against the yellow skin.

"Meyer!" gasped Jungor. He ran to stand in sudden embarrassment beside the chair. "Meyer—I was coming to ask your advice."

"I have been sitting quietly here, listening, for some time. I have been edified, and amused, and also made very sad." Meyer reached one fragile hand towards Jungor. "Dorpf," he said. Then: "Dorpf," again. And his fingers, for all their slenderness, were gripping and biting on Jungor's arm.

"Admiral Vernon!" Meyer said with a sudden sharp crack in his voice. His body almost trembled in its rigidity. "What is the penalty in your Navy if a man kills a comrade?"

Vernon said offhandedly: "Death. He went on to speak further but Meyer stayed him with an upraised hand.

"Thank you," Meyer said.

The old Supreme looked directly at Frenesi. That poor, small twitching individual braced himself up, drawing his robes about him, making a pathetic attempt to brazen out the incident and to lay a claim on the position of Supreme. But the true situation was painfully clear to all the Councillors. They had been like young boys, skylarking when the teacher left the room. With the return of Meyer the whole picture had altered. He had taken the threads of drama and shaken them and moulded the play into his own pattern.

Supreme Meyer, sitting very yellow and upright in his chair, looked quizzically at Admiral Vernon and said: "Well?"

Admiral Vernon swallowed. His brown warrior's face contracted, grew grim and forbidding.

"I must inform you that the armies and navies of Earth find it unacceptable to return to the system of Thread."

Meyer appeared to consider this.

"For the education of certain people," he said at last, "we will discuss this. Do you know why this system was called Thread? Do you know how the first armies and navies were confined to it? Do you know why the Earthmen always return?" He chuckled, that devilish smile lighting up his yellow face. "It seems that the Galaxy would have had a first class civil war on its hands if friend Frenesi had carried on administering it."

The jibe was not lost on Frenesi. He shuffled away, his hands twitching until Jungor wanted to grab them and keep them steady.

Admiral Vernon said: "We can live in peace with you in the Galaxy. Good grief. Terrans weren't always fighting!

"Of what account is a ten year gap between wars, Admiral?" On the instant of speech, Mayer gasped, buckled in the middle. Before Jungor could help him he had flung out a restraining hand, and fought his way upright, gasping and blue faced. He swallowed and wiped away spittle.

"Jungor!" he said urgently. "I wish to speak with you in private. Later I will send for Admiral Vernon. Come!

Closeted with the old Supreme, Jungor stared at him compassionately.

"I haven't long to live, boy Dorpf is dead. You must take over position as Supreme. Don't argue! All the others went over to Frenesi like sheep. Only you and Dorpf showed any balance—and Dorpf's dead. Obviously there's more to the Supreme's job than donning robes and a name. Now listen!"

Jungor sat silently, watching, wondering, filled with an all pervading sense of joy and humility.

"Admiral Vernon has argued that Terrans are fit to live in the Galaxy alongside normal Galactics. When he saw what that madman Frenesi had done I can't blame him. Frenesi must be sent away, quietly, and forgotten—that is all we can do. Now—you remember the activation of the Weapon was by speaking a word—quite obviously, then something similar must have been evolved. There was a story current on Earth about a sword belonging to a mythical being called Damocles which was suspended by a —"

"By a Thread!" whispered Jungor.

"Precisely. The system of Thread held suspended over the Galaxy the mightiest sword the Universe has seen. The word which activates that Weapon is "Damocles." Don't forget it. You will have to pass it

on to your successor."

"But how was it put there?" Jungor shifted, lost in this revelation of thirty thousand year old secrets.

"The answer is simple, too, once you know. Of course no Galactic could fight the Terrans, and they were carrying fire and sword throughout the Galaxy once they discovered faster-than-light drives. But, not all Terrans were warlike, and those who thought like we do co-operated with us to build a new Galaxy; and they, inevitably, were the only people strong enough to fight—and beat—the warlike Terrans. They set them down on Thread with our scientific help, and then they joined with us in creating this fine new Galaxy."

"So Frenesi is a throwback?"

"Yes. And you, too, have Terran blood in you, Jungor. I know. By the way you handle yourself when you argue—and, Jungor, what causes me great remorse, I too, have Terran blood. You see, all Terrans weren't evil."

"But I don't consider Admiral Vernon evil——"

"All those with the germ of fighting and warfare inherent in them are evil, Jungor. Don't forget it."

Meyer had been growing visibly weaker. Jungor not looking at him, said: "Then the only people who could beat the Terrans were Terrans. But, what of today?"

"Listen boy——" Meyer said, and at his husky words Jungor was on his knees by the chair in a flash, staring into the old man's luminous eyes.

"Jungor——" Meyer gasped, rallied, and struggled to smile. "Words inserted in their hereditary ancestral memory artificially. Gene patterns affected to carry it on. Words no-one now likely to know. Dead language. Tell Admiral Vernon, he'll pass it on. Jungor——" Meyer's head lolled limply, like a half-severed flower.

"Supreme!" Jungor said wildly. If the old man should die without speaking further——

"Supreme!"

"Jungor—nice of you to call. Ask Dorpf to step in and we can have a three-handed game." Meyer was walking again the pleasant days of his past, hand-in-hand with memories. "I accept your nomination as Supreme, and I pledge myself to do everything I can . . . Rebels? We can discuss this amicably, gentlemen . . . I have entrusted to me power . . . Damocles . . . must never forget—and never use, if I can avoid it . . ." The voice trailed away into silence.

Jungor knelt holding the old man's hand in his, staring in an ecstasy of panic into the lined face.

Hard footsteps rang from beyond a curtain. The drapes parted and Admiral Vernon came through. His brown face darted a quick, comprehensive look at Meyer, and then, belligerently, swung to Jungor.

"I have been waiting, Councillor, for your summons. I can wait no longer. Certain fleet evolutions must be performed. We have captured a number of the Invaders' craft and are despatching an expedition to their home galaxy. It seems to me that we shall have to take over control of the Galaxy—from what I have seen today it appears to be run by a bunch of old women."

"By men without the fire of murder in their blood," Jungor said quietly. Meyer raised his head, attracted by the noise, and into his eyes came a spark of rambling intelligence.

"After that Frenesi——" began Vernon.

"He was a throwback," Jungor said harshly. "We Galactics aren't perfect, we are ordinary men, we have our quarrels and bickerings. But we do not—unless we are mad, resort to violence. Frenesi was insane."

Meyer lolled round in his chair and words spilled. "Happy to know your boy is making good, Jungor, he will one day make a good Councillor. And soon . . . Dorpf will be the next Supreme . . . cultivated gardens on that new planet . . . musn't use the Weapon . . . on my conscience . . . cannot use it . . . Terran blood in me . . . Traitor to my own people . . . not true . . . let them sleep forever . . . Latin mumbo-jumbo . . . musn't forget . . . Requiescat in Pace . . . in Pace . . ." Supreme Councillor Meyer's head fell forward. Jungor knew he was dead.

Admiral Vernon, listening, said smartly: "I shall order all armies and navies to return at once to the Thread system." He smiled and held out a hand towards Jungor.

"This has been a short war," he said. "I don't suppose you'll be around when we're called on again. But don't forget, we're there, all sleeping on Thread, waiting to come out fighting if anyone else tries to mess up the Galaxy."

KENNETH BULMER



Dumb Show

Could death be so terrible in this world of screaming silence?

Mrs Snowdon was slowly being worn down. She had reached the stage now where she carried about with her a square of card on which the word DON'T was written in large letters. It was kept tucked inside her cardigan, ready to be produced at a moment's notice and flashed before Pauline's eyes.

The ill-matched pair, the grubby girl of three and the shabby-elegant lady of fifty eight, came up to the side door of their house, Pauline capering over the flagstones, Mrs Snowdon walking slowly with her eyes on the bare border. Spring was reluctantly here, but the tepid earth hardly acknowledged it; even the daffodils had failed to put in an appearance this year.

"Can't understand it at all," Mrs Snowdon told herself. "Nothing ever happens to daffodils." And then she went on to compile a list of things that nevertheless might have happened: frost—it had been a hard winter; soil-starvation—no manure since the outbreak of hostilities, seven years ago; ants; mice; cats; the sounds—that seemed most likely. Sound did anything, these days.

Pauline rapped primly on the little brass knocker and vanished into the hall. Mrs Snowdon paused in the porch, stopping to look back at the houses on the other side of her high brick wall. When this house had been built, it had stood in open fields; now drab little semi-detacheds surrounded it on three sides. She paused and hated them. Catching herself at it, she tried instead to admire the late afternoon light falling on the huddled roofs; the sunshine fell in languid, horizontal strokes—but it had no meaning for her, except as a sign that it was nearly time to blackout again.

She went heavily into the house, closing the door. Inside, night had already commenced.

Her grand-daughter marched round the drawing-room, banging a tin lid against her head. That way, she could hear the noise it made. Mrs Snowden reached for the DON'T card, then let her hand drop; the action was becoming automatic, and she must guard against it. She went to the gram-wire-tv cabinet, of which only the last compartment was now of use, and switched on. Conditions at home were a little better since the recapture of Iceland, and there were now broadcasts for an hour and a half every evening.

Circuits warmed, a picture burned in the half-globe. A man and woman danced solemnly, without music. To Mrs Snowden it looked as meaningless as turning a book of blank pages, but Pauline stopped her march and came to stare. She smiled at the dancing couple; her lips moved; she was talking to them.

DON'T, screamed Mrs Snowden's sudden, dumb card.

Pauline made a face and answered back. She jumped away as her grandmother reached forward, leaping, prancing over the chairs, shouting defiance.

In fury, Mrs Snowden skimmed the card across the room, crying angrily, hating to be reminded of their infirmity, waving her narrow hands. She collapsed onto a music stool—music, that dear, extinct thing!—and wept. Her own anger in her own head had sounded a million cotton wool miles away, emphasising the isolation. At this point she always crumpled.

The little girl came to her delicately, treading and staring with impertinence, knowing she had the victory. She pulled a sweet face and twizzled on her heel. Lack of hearing did not worry her; the silence she had known in the womb had never left her. Her indifference seemed a mockery.

"You little beast!" Mrs Snowden said. "You cruel, ignorant little beast!"

Pauline replied, the little babblings which would never turn into words, the little noises no human ear could hear. Then she walked quietly over to the windows, pointed out at the sickening day, and began to draw the curtains. Controlling herself with an effort, Mrs Snowden stood up. Thank goodness the child had some sense; they must black-out. First she retrieved her DON'T card from behind the ancient XX century settee, and then they went together through the house, tugging the folds of black velvet across the glass.

Now Pauline was skipping again. How she did it on the low

calories was a matter for wonder. Perhaps, thought Mrs Snowden, it was a blessing to be responsible for the child; so, she kept contact with life. She even caught an echo of gaiety herself, so that they hurried from room to room like bearers of good news, pulling blackness over them, then sweeping on the sonic lights. Up the stairs, pausing at the landing window, racing into the bedrooms, till new citadels were created from all the shabby darknesses. Pauline collapsed laughing on her bed. Seizing her, tickling now and again, Mrs Snowden undressed her and tucked her between the fraying sheets.

She kissed the girl good-night, put out the light, closed the door, and then went slowly round, putting out all the other lights, downstairs, putting all the lights out there.

Directly she had gone, Pauline climbed out of bed, stamped into the bathroom, opened the little medicine cupboard, took out the bottle with the label "Sleeping Pills." Unscrewing the top, she swallowed a pill, pulling a pig's eyes face at herself in the looking-glass as she did so. Then she put the bottle back on its shelf and slammed the little door, hugging to herself this noisy secret.

None of these things had names for her. Having no names, they had only mist meanings. The very edges of them were blurred, for all objects were grouped together in only two vast categories: those-that-concerned-her and those-that-did-not-concern-her.

She trailed loudly back to her bed in the silence there was no breaking, making pig's eyes all the way to ward off the darkness. Once in bed, she began to think, it was because of these pictures she stole her grandmother's pills: they fought the pictures and turned them eventually into an all-night nothing.

Predominant was the aching picture. A warmth, a face, a comforting—it was at once the vaguest yet most vivid picture; someone soft who carried and cared for her; someone who now never came; someone who now provoked only the water scalding from her eyes.

Elbowing that picture away came the boring picture. This tall, old-smelling person who had suddenly become everything after the other had gone; her stiff fingers, bad over buttons; her slowness about the stove; her meaningless marks on cards; all the dull mystery of who she was and what she did.

The new picture. The room down the road where Pauline was taken every morning. It was full of small people, some like her, in frocks, some with short hair and fierce movements. And big people, walking between their seats, again with marks on cards, trying with despairing faces to make them comprehend incomprehensible things by

gestures of the hand and fingers.

The push picture. Something needed, strange as sunlight, something lost, lost as laughter . . .

The pill worked like a time-bomb and Pauline was asleep where only the neurosis of puzzlement could insidiously follow.

Mrs Snowden switched the globe off and sank into a chair. They had been showing a silent film: the latest scientific advances had thrown entertainment back to where it had been in her grandfather's young days. For a moment she had watched the silent gestures, followed by a wall of dialogue.

"Jean: Then—you knew he was not my father, Denis?"

Denis: From the first moment we met in Madrid.

Jean: And I swore none should ever know."

Sighing, Mrs Snowden switched the poor stuff off, and sank down with a hand over her forehead. T.V. merely accentuated her isolation, everyone's isolation. She thought mockingly of the newspaper phrase describing this conflict, The Civilized War, and wished momentarily for one of the old, rough kind with doodlebugs and H-bombs; then you could achieve a sort of Henry Moore-ish anonymity, crouching with massed others underground. Now, your individuality was forced onto you, till self-consciousness became a burden that sunk you in an ocean of loneliness.

Right at the beginning of this war, Mrs Snowden's husband had left for the duration. He was on secret work—where, she had no idea. Up till two years ago, she received a card from him each Christmas; then he had missed a year; then, in the paper shortage, the sending of cards had been forbidden. So whether he lived or not she did not know; the question now raised curiously little excitement in her. Heart-sickness had ceased to be relevant.

Mrs Snowden had come to live here in her old home with her parents after she had been declared redundant at the university, when all but the practical chairs closed down. In the lean winters, first her mother then her father died. Then her married daughter was killed in a sound raid; Pauline, a tiny babe, had come to live with her.

It was all impersonal, dry facts, she thought. You stated the facts to explain how the situation arose; but to explain the *situation* . . .

Nobody in the world could hear a sound. *That* was the only important fact.

She jumped up and flicked aside an edge of curtain. rag of dirty

daylight was still propped over the serried chimney tops. The more those houses crowded, the more they isolated her. "This should be a time for madness" she said aloud, misting the pane: something grand and horrid to break the chain of days. And her eyes swept the treble row of old text-books over her bureau: Jackson's "Eighteen Nineties," Montgomery's "Early Twentieth Century Science Fiction," Slade's "Novelists of the Psychological Era," Wilson's "Zola," Nollybend's "Wilson" . . . a row of dodos, as defunct as the courses of Eng. Lit. they had once nourished.

"Dead!" she exclaimed. "A culture in Coventry!" she whispered, and went to get something to eat.

"Tough old hag," she told herself. "You'll survive."

The food was the usual vibro-culture, tasteless, filling, insubstantial. The hospitals of England held as many beri-beri cases as wounded. Sound ruled the whole deaf world. It wrecked the buildings, killed the soldiers, shattered the tympanums and ballooned synthesized proteins from mixtures of animo acids.

The Sound Revolution had come at the dawn of this new century, following thirty years of peace. Progress had taken a new direction. It had all been simple and complete; you just flushed the right electrostatic stress through the right quartz plates and—bingo! You could do anything! The most spectacular result was a global conflict.

The Powers warred under certain humane agreements: gas, fission and fusion weapons were forbidden. It was to be, indeed, a Civilized War. V.M. (vibratory motion) had the field to itself. It learnt to expand living vegetable cells a thousand fold, so that a potato would last for two year's dinners; it learnt to pulverise brick and metal, so that cities could comfortably be turned to a thin dust; it learnt to twist the human ear into an echoing, useless coil of gristle. There seemed no limit to its adaptability.

Mrs Snowden ate her blown-up yeast with dignity, and thought of other things. She thought—for lately she had been straining after wider horizons—of the course of human history, its paradoxical sameness and variety, and then something made her look up to the tube over the mantelpiece.

The tube was a piece of standard equipment in every home. It was a crude ear, designed to announce when the local siren was giving a sound raid alarm.

She glanced indifferently at it. The lycopodium seed was stirring sluggishly in its tube; damp must be getting in, it was not **patterning** properly. She went on eating, gloomily wondering about the future gen-

erations: how much of the vital essence of tradition would be lost through this blanket of deafness?

Correct procedure would have been for her, at the stirring of the seed, to collect Pauline and stand out in the open. When the siren went, everyone else left their homes and stood patiently under the bare sky; then, if the sounds swept their buildings, they would be temporarily smothered by dust as the building vanished, but suffer no harm. Mrs Snowden could no longer be bothered with this nonsense.

To her mind, it was undignified to stand in the chill air, meekly waiting. If enemy planes circled overhead, she would have had defiance to spur her out; but nowadays there was only the quiet sky, the eternal silence and the abrupt pulverization—or the anti-climax, when everyone filed sheepishly back to bed.

She took her plate into the kitchen. As she came back in the living room, a reproduction of Mellor's "Egyptian Girl" fell silently onto the floor, shattering frame and glass.

Mrs Snowden went and stared at it. Then, on impulse, she hurried over to the window and peered out. The encircling houses had gone.

Letting the curtain fall back into place, she rushed from the room and up the stairs. She was shaking Pauline before she regained control of herself, and then could not tell whether panic or exultation had sent her scurrying.

"The houses have gone! The houses have gone!"

Silence, in which the little girl woke sluggishly.

Mrs Snowden hustled her downstairs and out onto the front lawn, letting a bright swathe of light cut across the empty flower beds. Somewhere, high and silent overhead, a monitor might be hovering, but she was too excited to care.

By a freak chance, their house stood alone. Around them for miles stretched a new desert, undulant, still settling. The novelty, the *difference*, of it was something wonderful: not a catastrophe, a liberation.

Then they saw the giants.

Vague in the distance, they were nevertheless real enough, although incredible. They were tall—how tall?—ten, fifteen feet? More? With horror Mrs Snowden thought they were enemy troops. This was the latest application of the sound: it enlarged vegetable cells. She had the brief idea she had read that human giants could not survive, or were impossible or something, and then the thought was gone, swept away in fear.

The giants were still growing. They were taller than a house now,

thirty feet or more high. They began to mop and mow, like drunken dancers.

Unreality touched her. Pauline was crying.

A coolness swept her limbs. She trembled involuntarily. A personal alarm now, terror because something unknown was at her blood. She raised a hand to her eyes. It loomed away from her. Her arm extended. She was *growing*.

She knew then that the giants were no enemy troops; they were victims. You get everyone out of their houses. One type of V.M. levels the houses. Another inflates the people, blowing them up like grotesque rubber dummies. Simple. Scientific. Civilized.

Mrs Snowden swayed like a pole. She took a clumsy step to keep her balance. Dizzily, she peered at her blank bedroom window, staggering away to avoid falling into the house. No pain. The circuits were disrupted. Only numbness: numbness and maniac growth.

She could still crazily see the dancing giants. Now she understood why they danced. They were trying to adapt. Before they could do so, their metabolisms burnt out. The sprawled into the desert, giant dusty corpses, full of sound and silence.

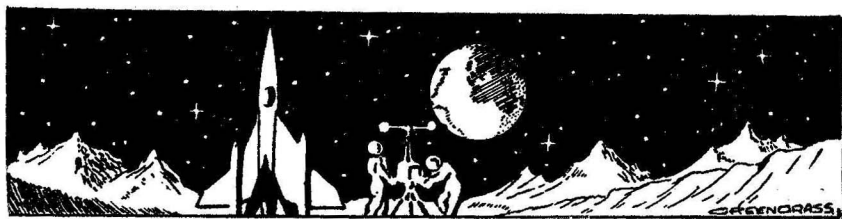
She thought, it's the first excitement for years, amusedly, before her heart failed under its giant load.

She toppled; the DON'T card fluttered gaily from her bosom, spinning and fluttering to the ground.

Pauline had already overtopped her grandmother. The young system was greedy for growth. She uttered a cry of wonder as her head rocked up to the dark sky. She saw her grandmother fall. She saw the tiny fan of sonic light from their tiny front door. She trod into the desert to keep her balance. She started to run. She saw the ground dwindle. She felt the warmth of the stars, the curvature of the earth.

In her brain, the delighted thoughts were wasps in a honey pot, bees in a hive, flies in chapel, gnats in a factory, midges in a Saharah, sparks up an everlasting flue, a comet falling forever in a noiseless void, a voice singing in a new universe.

BRIAN W. ALDISS



The Evidence

*The rivalry between the two girls had been bitter—
fate was about to take a hand, however*

Louella leaped from the fourth rung of the spaceship's ladder and floated down to the planet's rocky surface. Angrily tossing back her main of jet black hair, she flung her magnificent blue cloak over her shoulders and strode forward in the eerie twilight, fleet and supple as an Amazon.

Her one desire was to leave the spaceship behind. Above all things, she had to get away from the people who were swarming down the ladder, overjoyed at the prospect of unrestricted movement after light-years spent in a steel shell.

She ignored the crags towering up on every side. Staring ahead, she marched on tirelessly, never slackening pace until her path was barred by a rumbling, glowing crater with unscalable rock on either side. Then exhausted, she sank to the ground.

She turned, staring with fury at the dim distance-dwarfed spaceship, at the moving dots beside it. The crew and passengers were making the most of their brief liberty before resuming their voyage into deep space.

Her lips tightened vindictively. Probably, at that distance, her imagination was at work; but she fancied she saw the hated yellow cloak moving among the crowd, and her thoughts immediately went tumbling back to the moment of the landing impact.

Louella was the first in the women's quarters to release her webbing harness and rise from her foam-rubber contour couch. After helping release two other women whose over-eager fingers fumbled with their harness, she went forward to the control cabin to congratulate Hal on his skillful handling of the ship. Her feet were hastened, too, by the feeling, which had never left her since they had blasted off from Earth, that she had always to be near Hal or risk losing him for ever.

On the threshold of the cabin she recoiled. A vivid yellow cloak filled her field of vision, paralysed her mind, stretched its blatant menace across the entire universe. Her rival should have been millions of miles away on Earth; but she was here instead, and the fight was to be continued, its intensity stepped-up by close confinement, as they plummeted through space.

She heard Hal's amused drawl, "Pearl! Where did you spring from?" and the laughter it evoked. Then a tiger-leap took her between Hal and the ash-blond who carried her yellow cloak with such an insolent swagger.

"Don't ask stupid questions, Hal," she said scornfully. "She stowed away, of course, in suspended animation. She timed her awakening to coincide with the second landing. She knew she would be trans-shipped back to Earth if she showed up on Mars; but there's no return flight from Corobon!"

Pearl's laughter rang out. Taunting.

"So? . . ."

Louella ignored her.

"Captain," she said, "do your duty."

Hal's eyes went wide.

"Eh? . . ."

"Put her in irons!"

Hal stared incredulously. "Now, wait a minute, Louella!" he objected. "You can't mean that. It may be routine procedure, but this voyage is—well, different from the usual run of things. It will last another twenty-eight years at least. You can't seriously suggest—"

"Then what," flared Louella, "do you propose to do?"

She glared at Hal, who stroked his jaw, looking from one perfect specimen of womanhood to the other. Then a wild hope germinated in her heart and she shot a glance at Pearl, who awaited Hal's decision with an air of reckless amusement.

The immortality drug, a standard injection for all deep-space travellers, was not fool-proof. Occasionally, even when it seemed to have taken, something inexplicable went wrong. The effect wore off and rapid senescence supervened.

The first sign was some small physical deterioration—a decaying tooth, the wrinkling of a youthful cheek, an ugly vein in arm or leg. After that, complete degeneration set in and, in two years at most, death resulted from senile decay.

But the keen eye of jealousy brought no comfort. Pearl's radiant vital body was without blemish, so Louella switched her attention to Hal.

"Well? . . . What d'you mean? Just how is this voyage different?"

"Take it easy Louella!" Hal put an arm round her shoulders, and his other encircled Pearl's yielding waist. "It won't do to have you two girls at daggers drawn! We have to colonise a planet. Remember? We can't have too many women."

Louella broke free.

"Very well," she said icily. "But let's get one thing clear here and now. You must make your choice between us. Which is it to be—Pearl or me?"

"Don't be naive, Louella!" Hal smiled strangely, and his chuckle sent ice through her veins. "We are going to found a new civilisation. We shall need a new morality."

"Meaning? . . ."

"I shall have you both!"

The crater gave little warning. The rumbling intensified. The glow brightened. Louella had scarcely run twenty yards before a roaring flame shot hundreds of feet into the air.

She watched, awe-stricken, her hands protecting her scorching cheeks. After a few seconds the flame subsided and the crater was quiescent. Only the faint glow, the low rumble, gave warning of subterranean fury.

She stared, fascinated, at the crater, her mind working rapidly. On one point at least Pearl and herself were in complete agreement. Both clung to the old morality. The idea of Hal as a polygamous planetary pasha was not acceptable to either—and years of rivalry in the space-ship was unthinkable. So it was a fight to the death.

She stared through narrowed eyes at the distant ship. If it was to be the survival of the fittest, then the sooner the better and what better place could there be to implement the jungle law? Particularly as, being an adept at the ancient art of judo, she rated high her own chance of survival.

As the planet's sun edged over the horizon, pouring light across the inhospitable terrain, Louella spoke into her hand microphone. Contacting Pearl, she spoke briefly. Proffered insult. Issued challenge.

She sat, waiting on a rock. Her blue cloak slipped from her shoulders as she produced lipstick and mirror. Shaking back her jet tresses, she pursed her lips and bent forward, staring keen-eyed into the pellucid glass.

Putting on a final spurt, Hal caught up with Pearl as she stopped and, drawing her yellow cloak around herself protectively, stared down at Louella's blue cloak draped over a rock. She looked round. Her frightened eyes met Hal's. She shivered.

"Where is she, Hal?"

"You ought to know!"

"She said——"

"I heard what she said!"

"Very well, then," Pearl flashed back. "You know as much as I do. You tell *me* where she is!"

Muttering darkly, Hal shaded his eyes, his glance sweeping round in a fruitless arc of search. Ahead—the crater. On either hand sheer rock. No sign of Louella anywhere.

He strode to the crater's edge, staring down, humped his shoulders, and came slowly back to the waiting girl.

"Nothing. Not a sign. Not a vestige."

Suddenly Pearl was clinging to his arm. "Hal!" Her voice shook. "Let's go back. I'm scared."

He hesitated, appalled by the inevitable conclusion that Louella had thrown herself into the crater. But why? Why? . . . Even so, it was pure deduction on his part. There was no evidence, not a shred. And he was reluctant to leave, to abandon the possibility of some other, happier explanation.

At length he sighed. "Come on, then," he said wearily. "There's nothing we can do. Let's get back to the ship."

Nothing loath, Pearl turned her back on the crater, bending to pick up Louella's cloak. Then she stood, rigid as the rocks around her, staring eyes focussed on the blue cloth draped over her arm. She uttered a choked cry; and Hal, striding ahead, turned back irritably.

"What's the matter now?"

"Look! . . ."

Delicately, Pearl removed something from the cloak and held it up for Hal to see. He peered forward, screwing his eyes, unable to see anything.

"What the blazes," he began pettishly.

Then he saw what she was holding, and fell silent. For Pearl, a little smile of pity and understanding trembling on her lips, held between finger and thumb a single long white hair.

Whispering Gallery

Frederick wanted the golden apple from the top of the dome—he couldn't know that it was well protected

“Now, if you will just come this way . . .”

The voice was sibilant and insinuating. It hinted at wonders which would make all you had seen so far become thin and flat and forgotten. Marvels unmatched lay just around the corner and the voice knew the way.

But Frederick was five years old and therefore he knew what voices really said and it wasn't always what the words would have you believe. This voice said, really: “I hate you all, especially the boy, and this is the way out and I shall be glad to see the last of you.”

The voice had no intention, after all, of leading the way up the secret staircase to the golden ball.

This guide was a tall, lean fellow, with yellow sunken cheeks and eye-sockets so deep and shadowed that you could not be sure whether there were eyes in their recesses or not. Not unless you looked hard into them, that was, and so far Frederick had not found the courage to do so and make sure.

He had peeped up at the guides' face only now and again from the corners of his own eyes. And the sight of that strangely small nose (as if the original had been pared to the bone) and the almost lipless mouth, with the big white teeth that seemed set in a sardonic grin that would always be there whatever the outward facial mask expressed, had frightened his timid glance away every time.

If only this man had been like the jolly Beefeater in the fancy dress who had shown him the room in the Tower of London where the little Princes had been murdered. The Beefeater would have taken him up to the golden ball and perhaps given it to him. Especially if he had known that Frederic had wanted it for years. Since yesterday morning.

Yesterday was the magic morning when Jim was driving him around London in the open tourer. Just him and Jim. They were caught for a few minutes in a traffic jam in Fleet Street, and their car was facing east.

"Gosh," said Frederick pointing over the bonnet, "that must be the biggest building in the world!"

The chauffeur looked tolerantly up at the Cathedral.

He said: "It looks big from here because it's standing on top of a hill—Ludgate Hill. But it's not so big really. It's hardly knee-high to the Empire State, and you've been up that."

Frederick craned his neck. The great grey dome swelled up like an enormous bubble above the twin flanking towers, and on top of the dome stood another high tower, with a golden gallery around its base. And right at the top of this tower was a golden ball with a golden cross planted on it like a tree. All the golden things glittered in the sunlight, but the ball gleamed brightest of all: it seemed to give a light of its own own rather than reflect.

"Don't be stupid, Jim," said Frederick, scornfully. "Anybody can see it's higher than the Empire State. It's the biggest thing I've ever seen. What a lovely golden ball that is! I wish I had it to play with. I wonder if it—comes off?"

"Would you like me to climb up there and unscrew it for you?" Jim asked quizzically.

"Would you?" said Frederick, eagerly. "Would you?"

Jim laughed. There was a time when he would have sighed, and muttered under his breath: "The rich folk are all alike—big kids and little kids. But all kids. Get me this, get me that—look, the moon shines pretty: get me that."

But he'd served them for a long time now, and he'd grown philosophical. They weren't happy, these people—they were poor. They were always wanting something: not only to have something, but to go somewhere, see something new, have someone praise them, reassure them, do things for them. When they were little kids the world was too big for them, and they tore around it in deadly fear of missing any of it before they died. And when they were big kids, with dulled eyes and desensitized palates, the world was too small, it was a pile of cinders which they prodded wearily, hoping against hope that one day they might uncover something that gleamed bright and new and fascinated their attention.

Like the dimly-remembered silver ring hanging from the hood of the baby carriage. Like the golden ball atop St. Paul's Cathedral on a sunny day in your fifth year.

"Jim! You're not listening."

"Yes, I am, Freddy. See here, son, when you're small you get all balled up inside over sizes and heights and distances. I remember when I was a kid telling my Ma that telegraph posts were just the tallest things in the world, higher than any old church steeple. But when I grew up I saw I hadn't been talking sense."

"Get me that ball, Jim," said Frederick gravely.

"I'm trying to tell you, son—it's too big. Why, half a dozen grown up men could get inside it."

"Why, its no bigger than an apple! Perhaps it *is* an apple—a golden apple. The golden apple in the story."

"What story?"

"Oh," impatiently, "the one Mr George told me, about Paris giving Aphro—Aphrodotty" (he hadn't got the name right, but it didn't matter: Jim wouldn't know) "a golden apple for a prize. I've always wanted a golden apple. I wonder if it is, Jim? Do you think——?"

Jim Bates opened his mouth, and closed it again. He'd often done that in the service of the Staggs. Mrs Stagg often found the truth unpleasant; her son also obstinately believed what he wanted to believe. There wasn't much use fighting against it. The rich were always right—if you wanted to keep your job.

"I don't know, Freddy. I don't suppose I shall ever know."

"Why not climb——"

"Chauffeurs aren't allowed in churches," said Jim, hastily but firmly, as though it was a thing everybody knew. And Frederick, who knew that there were many holy sanctums in his native Boston where chauffeurs weren't allowed, said "Oh," disappointedly, as the jam broke and the car rolled forward.

"Jim, perhaps I——"

More haste and firmness: "We must go back to the hotel now. Your mother said you must be back at one for lunch."

And the tourer swung sharply left at Ludgate Circus and angled back through side-streets to Holburn and the straight run to the hotel at Marble Arch, and though he kept looking back Frederick could not see St Paul's again for the shops and office buildings. He couldn't understand how such little buildings could block out such a towering magnificence at St. Paul's. Perhaps they're jealous, he thought: they're getting together and trying to stop anyone from seeing St. Paul's because it makes them look so unimportant beside it.

"But I *can't*, Frederick—not this afternoon: we're having tea with Lady Cornford."

"Can we go tomorrow, then, Mom?"

"No. We're going home tomorrow."

The corners of Frederick's mouth turned down. His eyes began to water.

"Oh, my," said Mrs Stagg, and her self-harassed mind darted about seeking to forestall the shrieks which would have drowned the orchestra in the hotel restaurant. She consulted the clockface which was always in that mind's eye by which she lived, by which she moved, always aiming to fit the social events and the sightseeing in so that there would be no awful gaps in which she might be left to reflect upon herself. "Well, look, I could just spare half an hour—no more. We should have to come away right after that."

Frederic smiled. "Thanks, Mom." Half an hour was an enormously long time—easily long enough to reach the golden apple (for by now he was almost sure that it was an apple).

It was a long time, but Skeleton-face (as Frederic silently named the lank guide) wasted it. When he had taken the little party around the various chapels and the choir and shown them the Grinling Gibbons carving and the altar, Frederick hoped that now they would go up to the golden ball.

But the quiet, cold, sibilant voice said: "Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

And it lured them downstairs among the vast piers of the crypt, and it seemed reluctant to leave this place. It kept them staring at the huge and horrible iron funeral carriage that had brought Wellington's body here, while it gave them endless precise details about the manufacture of this ugly thing. It hissed over the tomb of Nelson, and of Wren himself, and over the resting places of the silent multitude of bishops, and artists, and military and naval men. This cold gloom was the natural habitat of the voice. And Frederick felt that it wanted none of them to leave, it wanted them all to stay here. It would talk smoothly and quietly until they were lulled to sleep, and then, somehow, it would get them lying stiff and dead with the others under the hard, heavy stone floor.

So just as the voice was saying "This is the sepulchre of Archdeacon —" Frederick cut in with a wail: "I wanna go upstairs!"

That was where the voice began to hate him.

"Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

They went upstairs, past a notice saying "To the Golden Gallery and ball," and up some more stairs, up, and up, and up.

As they mounted behind the steady-paced guide, all the party began

to lose their breath and make little sighs and smiling grimaces at each other. Except Frederick, who was tense with excitement and anticipation. Maybe this guide wouldn't *give* him the ball (which, of course, was really an apple), but if Mom saw how much he wanted it she would buy it for him. It didn't matter how much it cost: Mom was the richest lady in the world. She could buy him the whole Cathedral if she wanted to. But he only wanted the apple.

The richest lady in the world gasped: "Oh dear. I didn't know it was going to take as long as this."

They got to the top of the winding staircase and with his heart throbbing in his breast Frederick followed the guide through the only doorway there.

"Ooh!" they all said, as they found they were all insects precarious on a narrow rim immediately beneath the arching interior of the great dome, and that only an iron railing was between them and a spreading gulf beneath. Far, far below, other insects crawled over the black and white chequer-board of the floor. They were in a vast but bounded universe.

Frederick peered up to where the browning murals curved together and met around a spider's gallery, and realised that although he was very high up, the golden apple was at least as high again above him still. There must be another staircase somewhere that led up through the dome. Perhaps a hidden, secret staircase.

He hesitated, and tried to go back, but the heavy grown-ups pressed all about him and carried him forward. And then they stopped, because the guide had stopped.

Skeleton-face said, "This is the famous Whispering Gallery. It has peculiar accoustic properties which I shall now demonstrate to you. If you would kindly move around to the opposite side of the Gallery and stand listening against the wall . . ."

"I don't want——" began Frederick, but Mrs Stagg grabbed his hand and said in a low, irritated whisper: "Oh, come *on*!"

The group moved slowly along the curving ledge with the fearful drop on its right-hand side, at which some of them dared not look and others only vouchsafed fleeting, sidelong glances. There was a hush over everything.

Frederick was impatient and wanted to run. But this was a place where you neither ran nor shouted. The great Cathedral stood impassive and suffered these insects to crawl over it, so long as they moved slowly and reverentially. Frederick felt that if he shouted, the Cathedral would start angrily and shake all these invading creatures out of its crevices.

At last they reached the side of the Gallery opposite to the doorway,

beside which the guide remained standing, dwarfed by distance. They arranged themselves in a line, kneeling with one knee on the seat, putting one ear close to the wall. Frederick did not put his ear very close. He had no wish to hear that voice again. Nevertheless, he heard it, distinct and loud, as if the guide were standing beside him—yet he could see him, a thin little shape a long way off, with all the width of the dome between them.

"I am speaking only in a whisper, yet you hear me clearly. The inward diameter of this dome is 108 feet, and the outer diameter 145 feet. The eight murals which you see on the inner surface of the dome were painted by Sir James Thornhill, and represent episodes in the life of St. Paul . . ."

The voice went on about St. Paul, and Frederick sensed that its owner had no great liking for the saint—there was a new, sneering undertone. The voice wanted to have done. So did Frederick. On an impulse, Frederick put his mouth close to the wall and said shrilly: "We don't want to stay here. We want to go up to the golden apple."

"Frederick!" exclaimed his mother, shocked and alarmed. Her voice became amplified to that of an angry giantess, and boomed hollowly all about them.

The guide's voice had stopped. There was a moment's awful silence which Mrs Stagg spent with a guilty flush spreading over her cheeks.

Then: "Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

The voice was sibilant and insinuating. It hinted at wonders which would make all you had seen so far become thin and flat and forgotten.

But Frederic was five years old, and therefore he knew what the voice really said: "I hate you all, especially the boy, and this is the way out and I shall be glad to see the last of you."

The voice had no intention, after all, of leading the way up the secret staircase to the golden ball.

The party shuffled round the great semi-circle back to the door—and Skeleton-face, who stood awaiting them like Charon. Frederick kept his eyes on his own feet and would not look up. For he knew that deep in those dark eye-sockets somewhere above his head animosity burned like a flame, and if the other people hadn't been there . . . He was glad now that he was in the middle of a bunch of grown-ups. They were his unconscious protectors.

Huddling close, he watched his feet and his mother's feet descending the stairs. And presently they were crossing the black and white floor, then the dirty black steps outside the Cathedral, and then—hurriedly—the sidewalk.

Then he saw the running-board of the car, and looked up, and there was Jim grinning at him and the fear in him unfroze.

"Get in, Frederick, don't just stand there," said his mother, pushing him. "Go as fast as you dare, Bates—we're ten minutes late now. What *will* Lady Cornford think?

Frederick had not shone before the Lady. He had been silent, and when pressed, sulky. And when pressed again, rude.

When they got back to the hotel, Mrs Stagg decided on disciplinary measures.

"You will go straight to bed now, Frederic. And you are *not* to look at your picture-books in bed. I've had more than enough of you today."

The boy who had caused his mother to shout in a cathedral and look small, who had been rude to an English Lady and again made his mother look small, was left alone in the bedroom with his guilt.

He felt no remorse, only an intense aching regret that tomorrow they would be leaving London and the golden apple behind. Forever, probably. Someone else would come along and take the golden apple away while he was on the silly ship or back at silly school in Boston.

He got out of bed and went to the window. The buses swung dizzily in and out of Park Lane, and for a while he watched them and the little people down there who dodged them and took sanctuary in green Hyde Park. It was summer and there was still an hour or two of daylight left.

He decided nothing. It was as if someone else had taken over his body suddenly and made it act with purpose. He found himself putting on his street clothes, buttoning them up.

Then he was opening the door quietly, surveying the passage, and then he was at the open window at the rear of the building, scrambling through it, and then he was watching his feet descending the webby, iron steps of the fire-escape just as they had descended the staircase in St. Paul's.

The feet seemed to know the way, though it was easy enough: it was almost a straight road back to St. Paul's. But it was a very long road, and the feet were very tired when they got there and climbed the dirty steps in the pale rose light coming up the hill from the sinking sun.

He entered to the sound of far-off singing. There, down at the end of the great nave, candles burned on the altar and before them two lines of people in white surplices sang sweetly together and the organ made quiet thunder over their heads. There were other people too, watching them, in the dim pink light reflected from the windows below the dome.

In fact, they were so intent on their watching, and the choir was so intent on its song, that no one noticed him stealing down a side aisle, between the chairs, and up the stairs which led to the Whispering Gallery.

The old verger who took the entrance money was no longer there, and this gave Frederic heart. All the guides would have gone home by now, Skeleton-face among them. Now all he had to do was to find a place to hide for just a little while until the choir and the congregation had gone home too, leaving St. Paul's—and the golden apple—to him alone.

Up the stairs there was a corridor leading to the library, and in that corridor he had noticed a certain secluded alcove. He hoped he could reach it soon, for his legs were aching and very tired . . .

When he awakened, his shoulders and legs were painful with cramp, for the alcove was small, even for him. Rubbing them, he went exploring in the dark. Soon he had other places to rub, for there seemed to be a lot of things to bump into and they were all hard. What chance had he of finding the secret staircase to the apple?—for it must be well hidden, and hard to detect even in the daytime. He wished he had thought to bring his torch. But then, he hadn't intended to fall asleep and stay here until after dark.

He was not afraid, for the ball shining in the sunlight shone still in his memory, and he felt that it was even now shining there in actuality somewhere above him and when he reached it and unscrewed it (but it was an apple, really, and he would just pick it) it would continue to glow and light his way back down the stairs and along the streets to the hotel. He bumped and blundered along the wall like a blow-fly on a window-pane and all at once fell through a doorway. As he lay there, his foot extended behind him discovered the top of a stairway.

And then, quite distinctly, he heard slow, steady footsteps coming up that dark stairway.

He caught his breath and picked himself up. He must not be discovered now. He went on through the doorway, and so emerged into a very dim yellow light. He was in the Whispering Gallery, uncertainly lit by the moon striving first to pierce a veil of nimbus cloud and then the dusty window-panes of the Cathedral.

He hesitated. There was only this one door, which was the sole entrance and exit to the Gallery. The footsteps were louder now, and began to echo. He fled from them, keeping close to the seat along the curving wall, in a stumbling, yet stealthy sort of run, trying to make no noise in a place which he knew magnified sound in a terrifying way.

Yet he was still not really frightened—only excited. It was a long way round to the place diametrically opposite the door, the place where they had all stood listening in the afternoon, but it did not seem quite so far this time, because he could run. There he sat on the seat, hunched up against the wall, trying to make himself so small as to be invisible, and holding his breath lest the same treacherous wall caught the small sound of his presence and flung it round in revelation.

A threadbare patch in the flat cloud passed under the moon, and the spacious murals on the dome overhead suddenly stood out distinctly, with an odd stereoscopic effect. And the dark little oblong of the doorway on the far side of the Gallery became visible.

Below, in the immense well of the Cathedral, he saw now that here and there an electric candelabra glowed, each casting a little circle of light, frayed and thin at the edges: a few, tiny wide-scattered oases in a black desert.

But now he watched the distant doorway opposite—and waited.

His vision became a little blurred with the intensity of his gaze. Presently it seemed that a small vertical strip of the dark rectangle had detached itself and floated away from the main body. And then this little black stroke became still. He rubbed his watering eyes and looked again. There was no doubt about it. The thin black shadow was quite separate from the frame of the doorway.

Then the cloud thickened under the moon again, the murals became blurs, the doorway and the shadow merged into common blackness, and only the small glints of electric light far below retained their clarity.

He hoped the shadow would go back through the doorway. He sat, still hunched, gripping the edge of the seat. He was trembling a little, but was not really afraid.

Then his heart leapt into his throat as a voice spoke right beside him. A sibilant, chill voice, cloaking malice with a surface politeness: "*Now, if you will just come this way . . .*"

He shrank and cowered. His trembling became a violent shaking as fear passed through him like a series of electric shocks. A pain gripped his stomach, and he pressed both hands against the place, doubled up. He could not control his breathing now: it came in loud, rapid gasps, as if he'd just been plunged into cold water.

For ages, it seemed, he sat tied in a knot of pain, gazing terror-struck through the railing at the points of light below (remote as stars), dreading to look up at Skeleton-face standing over him, unable to face the cavernous eye-sockets and the white, fixed grin, shrinking from the imagined touch of a thin hand.

But no hand touched him.

Then the smothered moon broke free to throw a wealth of silvery light about him, and it was apparant that there was no one standing over him. He peeped under his eye-lids—over there. The shadow remained small and distant, by the door. It was so perfectly still that a hope suddenly struck him that it was not a man at all, but just the shadow of some ordinary thing that he had not noticed before. Yet it had seemed to move . . .

He watched it, relaxing gradually as the thin shadow remained as stiff and stationary as a gate-post.

He told himself, not in so many words but with the rough apprehension of the imperfectly articulate, that he had been frightening himself with an imagined bogey-man.

But he had not imagined that voice. That had been real enough. Still, there was probably an explanation that any grown-up could make clear to him. He supposed that everything you said in a Whispering Gallery went echoing round the Gallery for ever and ever, because there was no way for the sound to get out—it was like a fly caught under an upturned bowl. He expected that the echoes became rarer and rarer as time went on, until you hardly ever heard them at all.

All he had heard was a belated echo of the words Skelton-face had kept using in the afternoon.

Then he jumped again, as the same freezing voice said right alongside him: "*If you will just come this way . . .*"

The palms of his hands became sticky with sweat, and his scalp prickled. But he told himself that it was all right. The shadow hadn't moved. It was only that old echo again.

He noticed it had dropped a word this time. How could the sound of that word, "Now," have escaped? Why, of course, it would have slipped out through the doorway as the echo went past on its travels. That was how echoes died in this Gallery, losing a piece every time they went slowly round. It would have to be something like that, otherwise everything everybody had ever said would have gone on sounding for ever, and it would be like a great crowd shouting all the time.

Well, it wasn't any good just sitting here. He'd have to start looking for the staircase to the golden apple. His mother might already have discovered that he had left the hotel, and she would guess where he had gone and come after him.

He stood up slowly, not taking his eyes off the shadow by the door. It remained still. If he went to the left, he would approach the doorway from the other side to the shadow and wouldn't have to go past it a all. Well, he thought, I must go now. He took a deep breath.

And then the clouds made a sudden rush at the moon and all but extinguished it. The silvery light ceased abruptly, as if it had been switched off. It was darker than ever.

He paused, irresolute, his courage evaporating. He could not go round the Gallery in this darkness. He might not be able to distinguish the doorway when he came to it and he might go past it to where the shadow was. But that was silly—if there was no light, there could be no shadow.

Nevertheless, fear was stronger than reason. He stood there, clutching the iron railing and looking down at the little lights below. Suddenly, he wished he were down there, in the safe, steady light that did not go out and leave you trapped on a high shelf and at the mercy of unseen shadows. But if he were down there, he would be further away from the shining golden apple. If he were to attain that prize, he must be courageous and bear the nervous ordeals which lay on the path to it. To deserve the apple, you must be brave.

His fingers tightened on the railing as the mouthless voice said near at hand in the dark: "*You will just come this way. . .*"

This time it sounded less like a request than a command: "*You will come this way. . .*" It was as if the voice knew that it was losing some of the words which it could use and was trying to counterbalance the loss with greater persuasion.

Frederic thought: it's quite all right, really. If I stay here long enough, the echo will have no more words left, it will die out altogether. Perhaps the shadow will go with it. Perhaps the shadow has nothing to do with it.

However, he was glad when the bright moonlight suddenly flooded the dome again. At least, he was glad until——

He screamed as he saw that the shadow had moved in the darkness, had advanced nearly halfway towards him round the Gallery and was still coming on—steadily.

He turned and fled in the opposite direction. As he blundered along the curving path, sometimes banging a knee against the endless seat, sometimes slipping and grabbing the railing for support, he cast a terrified glance across the moonlit spaces to see where the shadow had got to.

It had ceased to pursue its original course round the Gallery. It had turned back, was moving swiftly the other way to head him off before he could reach the door. And it was moving faster than he could.

He spun around, choking with terror, with little thin screams coming from him as he ran. This time he did not blunder or slip. Self-preservation told him that he could afford no mistakes, and the sheer desperate will to live made his feet fly with speed and precision.

For now he knew—he did not know how he knew, but he knew—that the shadow was the shadow of Death. And Death wanted to take him and put him with the other dead people under the cold floor of the crypt.

He was back to where he had been, diametrically opposite to the doorway. And the shadow, too, was back to where it had been, by that doorway. He collapsed on the seat, whooping for breath, but keeping his staring eyes on the shadow. It seemed to have returned to complete immobility.

Then the voice came again, quietly this time, almost coaxingly: *"Just come this way."*

It seemed to imply that if he were just to go along to it, everything would be all right and there would be nothing to worry about.

But he knew it was a trap. He would not go. He would hang on to life as long as he could, because there was still hope: the voice had lost two of its words this time. Perhaps it had called after him as he ran from it, and haste and terror had deafened him to it.

The great dome overhead was almost radiant now with light from the unshielded moon, and the human figures crowded in the arches of the murals were a tense, silent audience looking down on the narrow circular track where Frederic had to run for his life. He believed they were watching him, and he wondered whether they were on his side. St. Paul seemed to be. He stood up there, one hand pointing upwards towards the spider's gallery at the apex of the dome, towards the golden apple. "That's the way you want to go, Frederic," said his expression.

"I know, I know," whispered the boy. "But how do I get up there?"

And the voice of Death spoke again, calling: *"Come this way."*

"No!" cried Frederic, starting to his feet and going a few paces. The shadow glided in the same direction, too, coming round to meet him. He ran back and the shadow stopped as if it were watching him, weighing his intention, and then moved back to cover the doorway. And so Frederic stopped again. It was plain that he could never reach the doorway safely whichever way he went, for the shadow had the advantages of position and speed of movement and could always get there first. Was there to be no end to this horrible game of dodging back and forth?

Yes, he thought desperately, there *must* be an end when the echo dies. And that must be soon now. He must last out until the echo had no more words.

He pressed his hot brow against the cool iron railing. There were, he noticed now, mosaics just under the Gallery itself, between the arches which fell away from beneath them into bottomless gloom, and they all pictured angels flying confidently. What mattered it to them that they were at a fearful height?—they were borne up by their trusted wings.

He thought: if only *I* had wings! I could escape Death. More than that: I could fly up there and pick the golden apple.

His forehead burned, and droplets of sweat from it trickled slowly down the iron bars. His head ached as though a fever had come upon him, and the angels seemed to advance and recede before his blurring gaze, as if they had come quite away from the wall and were indeed flying over the black well.

He watched them for some time, feeling dull and heavy-headed, and they seemed to be aware of him and smile at him and indicate by their slow weaving motions that it was quite easy to fly. Anyone could do it. *He* could do it, if he only tried.

Then suddenly he remembered the shadow and looked up at the opposite side of the Gallery. And it was gone!

Then he caught a movement away to the right, and there was the shadow, much taller, well past the crucial halfway mark on its way to him. It had taken advantage of his preoccupation with the angels to chance leaving the doorway to come round after him.

It had won the awful game. Even if Frederic ran his hardest for the door, the shadow had gained enough ground to overtake him easily before he reached it.

It was too near. It was Skeleton-face, all right. He could see the dark eye-cavities turned steadfastly upon him, the gleam of teeth, as the tall, thin figure glided towards him.

He scrambled up on to the rim of the railing before him, which was not easy, for the rim was turned back inwards. But he mounted to the top of it and balanced there like a wire-walker. He looked up. Somewhere up there, beyond the dome, was the glittering prize he would never now reach.

But St. Paul still pointed upwards, like an inspiration.

"Have faith!" he seemed to say. "Have faith!"

And the angels seemed to be calling in chorus: "Have faith, Frederic, and you can fly like us. Have faith, and you can fly up to

the apple."

Frederic teetered, arms outstretched, on the edge of the cavernous space below and above. He took a quick peep sideways. Skeleton-face was almost upon him, lipless mouth open to speak.

"*This way.*"

"You can fly. You can fly. Have faith," called the angels together.

"I have faith. I'm coming," said Frederic, with a new strength, and began to extend a foot quite steadily and calmly.

"Frederic!" It was his mother's voice, loud with alarm.

A warm relief flooded right over him. Mom had found him, had got here just in time. She would save him from Skeleton-face—she would pay him to go away: she could pay anything, she was so rich.

He looked eagerly around but he couldn't see her. There was only Skeleton-face reaching for him.

And then he realised with a sudden horrible sinking of all his energies that the cry was only the echo of his mother's exclamation here in the afternoon. It must have been slowly circling the Gallery ever since. He was sick with disappointment.

And then bony hands reached for his ankles, and he leapt outwards into space.

It wasn't a leap of faith. It was merely a leap to avoid Death.

In confusion and wretchedness he fell past the angels, fell into darkness. The lights of the candelabras grew bigger as he fell, and they illumined something that lay below them.

A golden disc.

He was turning as he fell and couldn't obtain more than fleeting glimpses of it, but he could see that he was heading straight for it.

Could it be that somehow, in a way he couldn't understand, he was succeeding after all? That he was to reach——

The golden disc flashed up hugely now and dazzled his eyes.

The verger on the night watch had happened just by chance to glance up and catch what looked like a tiny figure balanced on the rail of the Whispering Gallery. He tried to shield his eyes from the immediate light of the candelabra over his head and see past it more clearly up into the moonlit dome.

It was a figure, and even as he watched it jumped out into space.

"My God!" he said, and rushed forward.

A thin shout came from above: "*Way!*"

He stopped, uncertain.

The figure fell down past the mosaics, past the golden organ pipes, past the red canopy over the high pulpit, arching ever outwards to the centre of the floor as it came.

He saw it hit the large circular brass plate let into the floor, immediately over Nelson's tomb. Immediately under the ball and cross, 365 feet above. And he hid his eyes.

When he looked again, a delta of red rivulets was spreading from the crumpled little shape that lay on the brass plate in the centre of the star with the long black and faded pink points . . . bright red trickles which matched the scarlet of the altar screen.

It was a small child, a boy. Dead—naturally.

He sought his fellow verger on the watch, and brought him to the scene. Only it wasn't quite the same scene. The brass ring shone clean and bright—and clear. There was no body. There was no blood.

The second verger put his arm about the other, who had suddenly started to shake, and led him to the chairs by the lectern.

"Sit down and rest, Alex," he said. "Don't worry. It's all right. It once happened to me."

Alex looked at him in slow surprise, his lower lip quivering, his hands shaking like those of a very old man.

"Nor are we the only ones," said the second verger. "It happens—every so often."

"When did it first—*really*—happen?"

"Over twenty years ago. It was a boy named Stagg. An American boy. He strayed from his hotel, somehow found his way here, and got up there. His mother was distracted when she found he'd gone. But he'd been here in the afternoon, and for some reason wanted very much to return. And he was due to go home the next day. So she guessed he might have come here. But she got here just too late: he was already on the rail, just as you and I saw him. She shouted his name. But he fell."

"Do you think she startled him? He was performing some idiotic balancing trick, and——"

"Did it look like that to you?"

Alex looked unseeingly at the golden lectern, with the big golden eagle bearing the Bible on its back and outstretched wings all staring keenly up at the dome.

"He jumped," he said, in a low voice.

"Nobody knows why," said the other verger.

"But he saw me," Alex said. "He must have seen me and thought he was going to hit me. He shouted 'Way!'"

"*Someone* shouted 'Way!' I heard it, too, when the thing happened to me. But it didn't sound like a boy's voice. . . . He was only five you know."

"If it wasn't he, who was it?"

The second verger shrugged his shoulders and became absorbed in removing a few hairs clinging to his black cassock.

Without looking up, he said: "There have been many temples on this site. Before this was Old St. Paul's, and before that a Saxon church stood on this spot for nearly 500 years, and long before that the Romans had a temple here—a Roman altar of stone was uncovered here in 1830."

"I remember reading about that in the chronicles. There was a carved representation of Diana on it, was there not?"

"Yes. Diana, Goddess of the Hunt."

Alex looked at the other sharply.

"Was it a—a sacrificial temple?"

The second verger pursed his lips, picked up a long brown hair carefully by the ends, held it up to the light of the candelabra and regarded it without answering.

"What did you say the name of the boy was?" pursued Alex.

"Stagg," said the other, letting the hair drift gently down: it floated away under a chair. Then he looked straight at Alex and said firmly: "That may be a coincidence. Or it may not. We'll never know. The thought that really frightens me about this affair, the thought I hate to face, is this: does that poor child have to suffer that terrible experience over and over again, every time it happens? Is he caught in some vicious circle of time and can't escape?"

"Circle of time—what do you mean by that?"

"Time is a terribly mysterious thing," said the other verger. "Even the scientists don't know its nature. I picture it myself as a flowing river. But in some rivers, you know, there are whirlpools. The water just eddies round and round without getting anywhere. If that boy were caught in some whirlpool of time . . . It doesn't bear thinking about."

Alex pondered and then said: "I don't see it quite that way. What's past is past, and done with. I don't know by what twist of time we've seen a sort of visual echo of a past incident. But I don't think it's any more than that—like looking at a snippet of an old film, in which the characters go through the motions but remain only unfeeling shadows."

The other said soberly: "For our souls' ease, we must believe that."

He added, half to himself: "And for *his* soul's ease."

They sat lost in thought, two tiny figures side by side under the great dome, in the little pool of light from the candelabra.

Each was grateful for the other's company. For all around them black shadows filled the enormous arches and the silent chapels and the long empty passages. Beneath their feet, spreading under the thick walls and out into the ancient churchyard besieging them in the night, and into the unknown burial grounds deep below that, were the bones of the innumerable dead. The great and the small. The famous and the forgotten. The human and the . . . possibly not human.

The vast presence of Time brooded over them, felt but unseen.

Before them, the golden eagle of the lectern, rising on its claws with excitement, it seemed, gazed eagerly and unwaveringly up at the Whispering Gallery as if it were absorbed in watching a perpetually re-enacted drama taking place up there.

Perhaps it was.

"Now, if you will just come this way . . ."

The voice was sibilant and insinuating. It hinted at wonders which would make all you had seen so far become thin and flat and forgotten. Marvels unmatched lay just around the corner and the voice knew the way. . . .

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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City at Random

Who, or what, had condemned their city to death?

It was an ordeal getting from my apartment to Jerry's place. I had been a fool to stay so long but there had been one or two things to straighten out, oddments to collect and time just passed. When I left, it was dark and that was bad. Things get worse at night and no one, but no one, not even your own brother would open a door after darkness. You might have turned nut or, more likely, some character had a Garron stuck in your back. If the door was opened—wham! You all got it.

I hugged the wall and sprinted across intersections but even then some madman took a shot at me. Then I had to lie flat under the buckled sidewalk to let a character go past. He was dressed as a cavalier, complete to flowing wig and sword. Nevertheless, in what remained of the street lighting, I caught the glint of twin slice pistols strapped to his waist. That was the worst part of the characters, they lived a fantasy up to a point but on the question of survival they kept well up to date. He passed so close I could have touched him. He was humming to himself and twirling his moustache in a way that one imagined a cavalier would.

I waited until his footsteps died away then I crept out and sprinted again. It was a relief to see a blue light come blinking out of an intersection and a mechanical cop came sliding towards me on its single wheel.

"Good evening, Sir." It said, politely. "Identity card please."

I showed it my pass and I knew its radar probes were checking the emanation stamp and the invisible police identification on the card. It clicked faintly inside and said: "Pass satisfactory, Sir. You are taking a big risk out so late at night. May I provide escort, Sir?"

I said, "God, yes," and mopped my face. "I'm going to 25 East, 12. Its just round the corner."

I thanked God that whatever it was that had hit the city had left robotic control severely alone or, alternatively, did not affect it. I noticed, as we set off, that robotic policeman 229 had been pushed around some. Big patches of paint had been burnt off its sides from close range Garrons and there were sundry dents and scratches suggestive of direct hits from missile weapons. I thought, without humour, that a policeman's lot was not a happy one, even if the policeman was a metaplast brain surrounded by relays, circuits and heavy armour.

Jerry activated the door probes when I gave the pre-arranged signal but he wasn't taking any chances either. I saw the probes turn as he checked the street. The interior screens must have shown the cop as well because after that the door slid open almost instantly. Nevertheless, it slid shut with a bang as soon as I was across the threshold.

Long was leaning against the bar and Jerry was behind it, serving him.

"Trying to commit suicide, Joe?" Long took the pipe out of his mouth and blew smoke.

I sat down on one of the stools, my legs suddenly weak. "I just didn't realise the time."

Jerry had poured out a stiff rye. "Drink that, Mr Watson, you look like you need it." He pushed my credit back at me. "Its on the house. These paranoids fling money about like crazy."

"It will be bits of you they'll be flinging about if you stay open." I said. "They're not so bad in day light, admittedly, but they're going downhill fast."

I accepted one of Long's cigarettes and drew it alight. "It's getting worse out there. What's going to be the end of it all? What caused it? Hell, I'm all mixed up."

"It's them starships" said Jerry. "I've got a feeling we brought this on ourselves. We shouldn't have gone roaming into a place and dicker-ing with them aliens, telling them we'd go any place we liked."

He was referring to an unconfirmed report that one of our star ships had run afoul of aliens out Centauri way. Rumour had it had the aliens had taken a dim view of man in space. Did man, the aliens were said to have enquired, consider himself fit to join the Galactic Peoples? Knowing my own kind, I had a pretty good idea what sort of answer the aliens got back.

Jerry pushed across another rye and refused to take my money. "It don't cost a deci-credit, Joe. Something keeps me up to stock. I never

see it happen but when I go down for fresh liquor, the stuff I'd used up the day before has been replaced—imagine that!”

I didn't have to imagine it. The same thing had happened in every store in the city. The hasty rationing programme had been abandoned before it had begun. Someone, or something, was replacing the goods as soon as they were sold.

It gave me a sick feeling inside when I thought about it. Something was having the hell of a laugh at Cransville and we didn't know what it was. Cransville was the last place on Earth as far as we were concerned. If it was still on Earth which I sometimes doubted because you couldn't get out of it. Oh, yes, you could take the main highway and walk, or fly, or ride towards a vague sort of mist, and when you had passed through the mist—you were entering Cransville again.

There was a house on the outskirts which a lot of people had visited. You walked out of the back door towards the road but before you got to the road everything about-faced and you were walking towards the back door again. There was nothing you could do about it. You could run, or jump, or walk backwards but you just ended up the same way.

“It's something to do with them starships” said Jerry, again.

Maybe it did tie up somewhere but I couldn't see where. It didn't explain people going mad and turning upside down psychologically. It didn't explain Madge running out on me and leaving that contemptuous note. I could see it now in her large untidy writing.

“Wise up, baby boy. There's a new order coming about and you can't stop me getting onto it. Madge.”

What the hell did she mean by the new order? I had always thought we were, more or less, happily married. That's why I was staying at Jerry's. Living in an empty apartment still full of memories was a bit more than I could take.

The last time I had seen Madge she had been riding high and wide in one of Bruno's armoured ground sleds.

Jerry was still talking to Long. “Some of these guys is my customers, see? Nice guys, they seemed, some of them. Now they're nuts, paranoids.”

“Schizoids,” corrected Long, gently. He shook his head sadly. “Maybe I'm wrong there, too. They were schizoids, kept in check by externals, now—God knows what they are.”

“Have you some sort of theory?” I asked.

He grinned. “Dare I have one? As the only surviving psych' out of the forty who served this city, maybe my opinion means nothing.”

“But you dealt with nuts,” insisted Jerry. “You must have an

idea."

"Ideas, yes, nothing I can prove. A man adopts a mask he wants the world to see, behind it he leads a different life."

"Like some of our politicians," suggested Jerry "handing out a 'clean-up-the-city' speech and making money from crooked tie-ups."

Long sighed, tiredly. "A broad parallel, Jerry, but you've got the idea. An honest and kindly front does not, necessarily, infer that the wearer is either. In the case of our friends, the characters, something removed the "front."

"But what made 'em get that way?" said Jerry.

"Someone—something—removed the external checks" said Long. "Something took away their fear of the law, of public opinion, even of loss of money. Such external restraints keep the conscious schizoid in check, without them, the need to maintain a "front" no longer remains, they act as they are inwardly."

"What about us?" I asked. "What about the the norms?"

"Internal restraints, civic consciousness, ethics, principle." Long paused. "You both must see that a man who acts rightly from principle is different to the man who acts rightly because he might lose money or go to prison if he didn't."

"About the characters" said Jerry.

"Encouraged fantasy, men who dressed up their rottenness in pretty clothes mentally."

I was beginning to get Long's idea. "People who lived one life inwardly and acted another outwardly. God, half the city went insane. It isn't pretty, is it?"

"It will get worse" said Long. "I suppose that's why the Chief of Police is going to pull all the norms into the South side."

"He's going to what?"

"Take over the South side. The call came just before you arrived. Apparently despite everything we did, Bruno had got hold of some heavy stuff. I hear he raided the War Museum, a lot of those weapons could be serviced."

"So now its going to be war."

Long sighed. "It would have come, Joe, sooner or later. They hunt us at night now, next it will be in daylight. We're safer in one spot than spread out all over the city. The Chief is sending down an armoured sled to pick us up.

"I hope its well armoured, they get rough at nights."

"Best time, at the moment they're still raising hell and Julius Caesar. In a few days they'll have organised into hunting packs."

I saw the Chief's idea. Get together, turn the South side into a fortress and fight it out. We wouldn't stand a chance individually if the characters had got hold of some heavy weapons and I certainly didn't want to be around when the mob got organised.

The armoured sled arrived thirty minutes late. Two robot cops took up positions on either side of the door as we made a sprint for it. The cops had their immobiliser turrets raised and swivelling in readiness. The sled looked as if it had had a rough ride and I was thankful when the door clanged shut behind us. There were forty men and women inside and I found myself pressed against one of the transparent metal ports. I thought the city looked like hell, maybe it was.

We followed Mainstreet for a while and I was sickened but couldn't stop looking. I just couldn't believe that my own city could get to look like that. Only a few of the diffusion rods were working which gave an unpleasant sort of twilight affect. All the stores, and most of the lower windows in every building, were sprayed over with yellow resistaplast to prevent robbery or looting. The moving sidewalks were still, silent and buckled into strange shapes like fantastic caterpillars. The road, too, was pitted with small shallow craters from the early days of the craziness when guys had looted gun stores and banged around with Garrons and slice guns for the hell of it.

It was the characters, however, who made you feel cold inside and kind of sick. A guy in a white robe was gesticulating and shouting at nothing on a corner. Then there was a phoney cowboy, complete to spurs, with a couple of heavy barrelled sonic guns in the starred holsters where his six guns should have been. He was rolling a cigarette with one hand and keeping the other on the butt of one of his guns.

We braked suddenly for a tottering imbecile who staggered into our path. He was chewing Venusian hemp with the orange liquid running down his unshaven chin. Somehow we missed him, not that it mattered, if he had enough of that brain-rot to chew, he was as good as dead anyway. Further on there was a party in the street, people dancing to music we couldn't hear, and it was pretty wild. They threw a dozen or so empty bottles but forgot about us when two naked women climbed onto an overturned ground sled and began to dance.

Every so often a door would open and some drunk would be pitched head first into the street or would stagger uncertainly across the road.

"It's so goddam cruel." I said to Long. "Whatever did this has taken an advanced course in sadism."

He looked at me for a long minute then he turned away. "Do you really think so, Joe?" His voice was very quiet.

I said curtly: "I don't get it. You think its kind to turn people nuts?"

He clamped the empty pipe between his teeth. "The characters wouldn't act that way unless they liked the act, Joe. No one transformed them into beasts, they were always beasts inside, something took the brakes off that's all. They're killing, fighting, getting drunk, slapping people around because they *like* that sort of thing. They'd have done it years ago but then there were consequences, now there aren't."

It was as if someone had tightened something cold inside me. Following that line of reasoning, Madge had married me for security not because she loved me. Something had taken the brakes off and my ever loving wife had stopped doing things on the side and had come out into the open. The whispers I had been hearing and brushing aside as malicious gossip were true. She was doing what she liked, and what she liked was being a tramp, being Bruno's girl friend and living high and dangerously. It explained a lot of things which I didn't like to think about. I tried to think of counter arguments but Long beat me to the punch.

"Study history" he said quietly. Consider the countless cases of outwardly humane people being placed in charge of defenceless prisoners or despised racial groups. Once given the authority of the state to act as they pleased, humanity vanished, they became beasts, torturers, sadists they were always like that inside."

"You're saying my wife won't come back."

Long didn't sympathise. "Would you want her back now you know?"

"She was like this all along?"

Long shrugged indifferently but it was better that way, better than saying "everyone knew what she was but you."

I looked out at the street and at the characters and didn't see a thing. I had to face it. No, knowing what I did, I didn't want her back, to hell with her.

We came to a mob of characters standing just out of range of the police cordon. They threw things at the ground sled and you could hear the metal creak as they took ineffective shots at us with Garrons and sonic guns. They were waving their arms and shouting themselves silly. Then we were through and the police cordon closed behind us. We were **safe in the fortress.**

"What the hell where those characters yelling?" said Jerry.

"Something about the Virts, I expect" said Long. "Virts, short for

the virtuous. Crime despises honesty, as norms they consider us a threat, they hate our guts."

I saw Jerry begin to sweat a little. "It's going to be a tough fight when it starts."

Long paused as we walked away from the ground sled. "Don't get taken prisoner," he said. "Just don't do that."

There was something in the way he said it that started my hands trembling. Whether I wanted to agree with his theories or not, Long was a top rate psych' and he seemed very sure of himself.

Curiously there was a call for him almost at once and we went over to the temporary police station housed in the city hall.

The Chief of Police, an ordinary cop elected by the norms—the original one had turned nut—looked worried. "I'd like you to look over a refugee, Mr Long, I've locked him up for safety. His papers just don't make sense to me although he doesn't act like a nut. The robots let him through and they usually know but I just can't afford to take chances."

The man who had been hunched in a chair, rose as we entered. He was broad shouldered and determined looking. Despite two days growth of stubble on his chin there was an air of authority in his bearing which was instantly noticeable.

"I'm the city psych'," said Long, directly.

"Thank God," said the man. "I was wondering if there were any sane people in this madhouse, or am I mad?"

"Name?" said Long quietly.

"Er—Dale, Paul Dale, Acting Commander, Star Ship Explorer."

Jerry looked at me meaningly. I could see he was thinking "another nut, after all."

Long continued his questioning unhurriedly. Finally he accepted Dale's papers which he studied carefully before returning. "You are quite sane, Commander." He took out his pipe and began to load it slowly. "If I remember the account of your departure correctly, you were second in command of the starship, Explorer. The vessel was fitted with the new warp drive and was the third of a proposed fleet of deep space exploration vessels. The last report confirmed your position as well beyond the Centauri group. We'd rather like to know how you got here, Commander."

Dale made a helpless gesture. "God knows. I was sitting in my cabin recording the log when something seemed to hit me. When I woke up I was in a cheap hotel with some madman pointing a Garron at me. He wore a purple cloak and told me he was the angel of death—there was a bit of a fight." He sighed reminiscently. "A worse fight to

get here, too. Is it universal, this insanity?"

Long shrugged. "We couldn't say. We can't get out of Cransville."

"Cransville!" The Commander sat down heavily. "This is Cransville?" There were beads of sweat on his face.

Long nodded, his eyes alert.

Dale swallowed twice. "I did it," he said, hoarsely. "I did it. I had to open my blasted mouth like a fool. I've brought this thing on a whole damn city, just as I had condemned a hundred thousand people out of hand with a mere word." He faced us. "It was not intentional, you must believe that. I accept responsibility, yes, but not of deliberation—. Cransville—my God."

"Perhaps a beginning" suggested Long, quietly.

Dale nodded. "You're right, of course. I suppose it began when everything froze, instruments, motors, space warp variator, everything. We were deep then, frighteningly deep, with the Centauri group a good two light years behind us. Presumably we just hung there in nothingness for a week, there was no means of telling. A week was enough, after a day certain members of the crew developed—eccentricities" Dale paused and looked at us uneasily. "It wasn't pretty, it was like Cransville I suppose. I and the rest of the norms managed to seal them off where they couldn't do any damage. This, incidentally, included the Commander who cherished the illusion he was divinely appointed to control the galaxy as MAN the supreme. He went into the brig first." Dale found a crumpled cigarette in an inner pocket and sucked it alight. I could see now that he wore a uniform of sorts but too tattered and scorched to be recognisable.

"And at the end of the week" prompted Long.

Dale exhaled smoke. "At the end of the week they boarded us. We never saw their vessels, maybe they didn't have any. They looked like men but I have a feeling they assumed that appearance for our benefit. As acting Commander, I took their remarks, which were brief and to the point. Turn about and go back home. We weren't wanted out there. We weren't fit or ready to meet the galactic peoples. We were, in pointed language, barbarians."

"You took that?" said Jerry incredulously.

Dale shook his head angrily. "No, but I wish I had. I said others would come but he had an answer to that too. Once man had passed a certain point a psychotic condition would develop in crews. The race could never proceed beyond that point no matter how hard they tried or what method they used."

"What do they think they are, omnipotent? I asked, angrily. "Do they think they own space?"

Dale exploded suddenly. "They were ready to accept us, *the norms*, but not the others. That was their complaint, we were not even integrated as a race, we were forty three per cent conscious schizoids" Dale lowered his voice again. "Naturally I argued. I pointed out that crews were chosen for their scientific ability, their physical endurance and not for their internal psychology. The alien I took to be the leader smiled at me. A sad understanding sort of smile which made me feel uncomfortable. "Unfortunately your personnel are representative, Commander."

Dale rose and began to stride up and down angrily. "I contradicted him, of course. I said he could take any normal cross section of Earth people and test for himself. I almost dared him to take any town or city at random and he said "name such a city." Dale stopped and looked at us, his face shiny with sweat. "I picked the first name that came into my mind——"

We looked at one another. There was no need for Dale to continue. Cransville was the city he had picked at random.

Jerry said dully. "The test proved him right, didn't it?"

Dale's eyes pleaded with us but he said, firmly: "I genuinely believed that a test would prove him wrong. I had no idea he would go to such lengths."

"You have no need to blame yourself, Commander." said Long. "Man let you down——"

A sudden high pitched shriek interrupted us and I leapt to the window. I was just in time to see the roof of the public health office across the way gush upwards in shards and billowing dust. There was no mistaking that high pitched shriek, a long range sonic cannon.

We sprinted for the door and almost collided with the Chief of Police. "That damn Bruno, attacking before we were properly organised, clever devil." He thrust a Hirst into my hand and shouted a warning after us as we sprinted for the door. "They're mixing it out there, the characters came up through the subways and sewers inside the cordon, watch it——" When we got into the street, it was every man for himself, characters and norms were snap shooting at close range.

I felt a Garron discharge scorch my cheek and fired wildly at a character dressed in a black cloak who was crouched in an open doorway. I saw the puff of incandescence as the energy charge hit him full in the face. A Hirst doesn't leave much, something charred and unrecognisable rolled out of the doorway and lay, still smoking, on the sidewalk.

Two Garron discharges crackled past me and I looked round wildly

for cover. I heard Long's voice shout: "Over here Joe." Then something hit me in the chest. I tried to lift the gun but I couldn't. The street tilted crazily and blurred. Something white-hot and corrosive seemed to be eating out my lungs and I couldn't breath. I don't remember falling— When I regained consciousness I was in bed. My chest ached and I couldn't move. My head seemed clear enough, however, and I got to worrying how I had taken a Garron discharge in the chest and still be alive. I knew what a Garron could do at close range—a cindered hole big enough to put your first in.

Someone's face came between me and the ceiling. It was a strong face, yet gentle with a quality one seldom sees in this day and age. It was compassionate.

"Feeling better, Watson?"

I found I could speak. "My friends—?"

"They are being taken care of."

"How did I get here? I shouldn't be alive."

The man—it was a man—shook his head. "It never happened, Watson, none of it happened, factually." He paused as if allowing me to consider his words. "It was entirely subjective. We call it hypno-induction. We induce an appearance of reality into the mind and release the external checks."

I tried to sit upright and couldn't. "Why me? What have I done?"

"Not you alone, Watson, a city, mass hypno-induction."

"You mean half the city never went nuts?"

His face was suddenly sad. "They chose a mode of life in keeping with their internal characters, yes, but within the illusion of reality we fed into their minds—into your mind also. As they acted according to their natures, so the over-all pictures was altered to correspond."

"You mean that when the nuts looted a store, you altered the picture in all minds so that the wreckage was in the illusion?"

"Precisely."

I said angrily: "What right had you to test us?"

"It was a request. You know of it but you are not ready for galactic contact. The normals among you yes, but as a race no. You are brave, virile, ingenious gadgeteers, but regrettably uncivilised. You have, as a life form, missed an essential of development, your own integrity. True civilisation is imposed by the individual from within and not enforced by penalties from without."

"A fine lecture" I sneered. "After you put us through hell."

"If we open the door to your house," he said, sadly "are we to blame if light reveals dirt?"

I said nothing because I couldn't think of an answer.

PHILIP E. HIGH

Flesh and Blood

*Whichever way he went only pain and death
would meet him—so had Humanity decreed*

Illustrated by Martin Frew

On the fourth day, the wind dropped and darkness came early. The priest shifted his gaze from the grey of the road to the grey of the sky. The shredded clouds were beginning to huddle together again. It would rain soon. The priest shivered and quickened his step, although he was going nowhere in particular and there was nowhere to seek shelter.

He was from his parish. The solemn black of his cassock was floured with dust and only the cracked belt with the plain steel buckle kept the robe from falling apart in tatters. The soft leather trimming at the hem had been torn loose in several places and whipped his feet as he walked. From one pocket, the neck of a gin bottle protruded. The other pocket sagged with the weight of a rum bottle that went bump, bump, bump against his thigh.

He was a young man with a head full of theology, but his heart was empty and aching because all his wisdom could not supply the answer to the doubts which assailed his faith.

“Father!”

The priest stopped. For two days now he had heard no voice.

“Father!”

The landscape was bare. Not a building stood. There was not even

a heap of rubble to crudely mark the place where a house for the living had become, in an instant, a tomb for the dead. There was nothing but dust. A thick carpet of dust. Dust in wind-sculptured drifts. Dust swirling and sweeping through the air, borne by the wind, which had lost its first fury and was settling down to quiet playfulness.

"Father! Here!"

A drift moved. The priest was straining his rimmed and reddened eyes. He caught the slight movement, a mere shifting of the dust.

He rolled the man over, freeing him from the drift. He patted the man's clothes and freed them of most of the dust. He left the man's face encrusted as it was; when he tried to rub off the grey dust, the red flesh underneath slid off with the dirt.

"Drink this. Slowly, it's rum."

The man sucked at the neck of the bottle. When he handed it back to the priest, less than a glassful remained.

"Thank you, Father."

For a moment the priest considered explaining that he was not entitled to that particular form of address. He dismissed the thought. The point had no importance.

Instead, he asked, "Was this another city?"

"A big one. If I hadn't come here I might have escaped. I suppose I just got my desserts. I'm a thief, Father." His voice was gaining strength as the rum worked its way into his system. The priest made no comment.

"I'm a thief. My hometown lies about twenty miles over there. Everybody saw the mushroom and knew this place had got one. I thought there could be some easy pickings; so I came here, intending a snatch and run raid. I figured I could pick up some loot and get out again before the gammas got me. I thought the enemy had passed. I never dreamed they would drop another one."

The priest spoke. "They dropped one on your hometown too. I've come from that direction. They seem to have dropped them everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"I haven't seen more than a dozen living souls since the first bomb fell. There doesn't appear to be a single house left standing. I've been doing what I could for the people I found."

At first he had believed he had been specially chosen to survive the blast of the bomb that reduced his parish to dust. Chosen—or lucky to have been in the crypt at the time. He soon learned that the lucky ones

were the ones who had been killed outright.

He had stepped out of the ruins, dazed and bewildered to see death on such a scale. From his experiences at sickbeds and funerals he had come to think of death as an affair of silence and coldness and blackness. How wrong he had been! Death was a thing of blinding light and searing heat, and came with an unholy noise. And for those who survived its first assault, death had other, more subtle, weapons; the insidious unseen radiations, the deadly infected dust, and the wind that bore the dust so that it was carried into every crack and crevice until everyone and everything had received the devilish anointment.

The dead had been many, the dying few. In all his parish, he alone had been fully alive. That was four days ago, before he had turned his back on the desolate debris to seek what remained of civilisation. He had wandered far and had found only more death and desolation. The world was dust and the dust was death. And he had breathed the dust and swallowed it and felt its lethal sting upon his cheek.

"Here comes the rain," said the thief.

The priest watched the great drops pattering on his sleeve. Big tears they were, that bounced off the layers of dust. More fell and lay glistening on his sleeve for a second. Then they emerged and washed narrow channels through the grey dust and streaks of black appeared. The priest watched his cassock slowly assume its former colour, the sombre black of mourning. Who will mourn—he wondered—when all are dead? Was there Anyone who cared?

He tried to shelter the thief under the skirt of his cassock but a weak hand thrust him back.

"I'm sick," said the thief and retched into the slurry of dust and rain until his eyes boggled with the effort to keep the last threads of life in his mouth.

"I shouldn't have allowed you to drink so much of the rum."

The thief lay back and let the quickening rain wash the filth from his lips.

"Don't," he croaked. "Don't try to fool me. I know what the sickness is."

The priest nodded. He had suffered the first bout himself that morning. He knocked the broken cork from the gin bottle and poured a few minutes of stolen time into the thief's body. He threw the bottle into a dune. The dust shelved off and the bottle rolled to the ground where it twirled and twirled in a lively dance.



"How do you feel now? I have a crust of bread if you want it."

With the sustaining fire of the gin, the thief managed a laugh. "Rum . . . gin . . . bread! What's this, Father? The last sacrament?"

The suggestion disturbed the priest. He had given food and drink to ten living, dying men. He had said a prayer for each. Some could speak, some were mute. But all—by word or by look—had rejected his spiritual offering while accepting the material aid.

He answered the thief. "That wasn't my intention."

"I should hope not. What Creator would allow His work to be undone like this? You're a sensible man, Father. When Armageddon comes, to hell with the holy wine and the sanctified bread! Bring out the booze!"

The thief rolled his head to the side and coughed. One cough touched off another and the priest had to administer a mouthful of rum to numb the wretch's throat reflexes. The thief continued to lie that way, with his back in a pool of mud and his head turned sideways. Life

remained only in his glistening eyes and in the teeth-baring snarl of his lips.

"These were all I could find," said the priest. There was no reason why he should bother to explain but he continued. "My parish was gone. I thought that perhaps some places had escaped the full force of the bombs; that somewhere perhaps, injured people would need food and drink. I found precious little to offer them. A loaf of bread, a bottle of gin and a bottle of rum."

"Water?"

The words slid from the thief's mouth, carried solely by his breath, unpowered by vocal chords.

"No, I didn't take water. They were very thorough. Just in case anyone remained unkilld and there was a water supply still in operation they came again and dropped other bombs. I saw them fall—they were the quiet bombs. Oh, they were thorough!"

"They?"

The connections between mind and brain were loosening quickly. The thief was almost gone. He heard the quiet voice at his ear but his senses could not follow what he heard.

"They!" repeated the priest and suddenly it was important not to lose his audience. One man at least must hear the truth he had discovered. He gave the thief what remained of the rum and, in his fervour, failed to see that the liquor ran unsavoured from the far side of the man's mouth.

"Not *they*, but *us*!" said the priest. "The enemy has done this to us but we have done the same to them. No nation is innocent. There is no enemy but Man himself. Since the beginning we have warred. We've had wars to prevent wars. Wars to end wars. Every war was to be the last one. This time it's true. This is the last war. In other wars the hand of Man has always been stayed before he could destroy himself completely. But not this time. He had a potential paradise and made it a hell. The green pastures are withered and the quiet waters polluted. So Man has been dispossessed. He will never again destroy. There will be no more pain and suffering."

The rain was falling faster and the wind was driving it with renewed vigour. The dust had been laid and the air was clear and sweet. The two men had been washed free of the deadly dust but the cleansing rain was itself a flesh-eroding poison.

Wet and cold, sick and hungry, the priest was smiling yet. The thief still lay with his head turned sideways. The snarl persisted on his

lips and his eyes were still open. The pool in which his head lay had deepened and the water lapped over one eye—which did not blink.

The priest looked at the dead thief. Then he looked at the empty rum bottle and the crust of bread. He tipped the bottle and dark red drops sputtered into the mud, like rubies from a broken necklace. He broke the soggy crust and the inner surface of the two halves were plumed with feathers of green mould.

“The blood has all been spilled,” he said to the wind. “And even the last of the flesh is already rotting.” He laid the bottle and the bread beside the thief and stood up.

To north and south lay desolation. Barren wastes stretched to east and west. He hesitated, debating which way to go. Then he laughed at his momentary foolishness. Whichever way he took, he would reach the same goal.

He turned his face into the wind and the rain and set out across the wilderness. He knew where he was going.

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The Number of my Days

*Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days;
that I may be certified how long I have to live.—*

Psalm XXXIX (Prayer book version).

This time I'd had almost a year on Earth, when I'd expected at most six months. Whether it was that the cost of living had fallen, or just that I'd been living at a less extravagant rate than usual, I could have gone on for another three months before my bank balance dropped below half what it had been when I landed. I never let it get any lower than that. I'd seen what happened to retired XTE's who'd run out of money at the same time as they ran out of work.

But, for two reasons, I signed off and went back to Intercon—the Interplanetary Construction Company. One reason was that Elise was getting entirely too fond of me, and I of her, and in my business that has never been good. The other was that I'd seen the ads Intercon were putting out, and they looked *big*.

So I put in my application as usual, and thumb-printed the contract, and in due time I was told when to report. As soon as that came in, I kissed Elise goodbye, told her the straight truth—that I wouldn't write—and said I hoped she'd forget me in a hurry. There were a few tears, but I didn't pay them much mind, since I'd seen it happen before, and I knew I would never be worth remembering for very long.

Nonetheless, as I stood on the edge of the intercontinental landing ground at Quito after getting off the express from Cambodia, and rang for a cab, I wondered what the hell had possessed me to take up extra-terrestrial engineering as a career. As usual, I came to the entirely honest conclusion that it must have been the money. I didn't give a hoot for that garbage about the challenge of new frontiers and the lure of adventure. In my book, any sane man can pass up his chance at adventure in favour of a life of ease and comfort if he can get that any other way. But then, maybe I'd never been entirely sane.

I'd just seen the cab I'd rung for start to roll over to me from the rank across the way, when there was a hail from behind me.

"Jorge! Jorge Higgins!"

I turned, hoping it wouldn't lose me my cab—the intercontinental had been crowded this trip, and I was running short of time—and saw a drak man in blue coming towards me from the disembarkation point. I waved back at him, and as the cabby pulled up beside me, I told him to wait a moment.

"How's tricks, Jules?" I said as he came within earshot. Jules Rafferty had been with me last trip, and I guessed at once he was on the same business as myself.

He came up, panting—he'd sprinted as soon as he saw I had a cab waiting—and shook my hand enthusiastically. "I'm fine, *amigo*," he said—he always would try to make me feel good by throwing Spanish at me, even though with his Irish-French accent it sounded more like aboriginal Eskimo. "You're headed for Intercon?"

"Where else?" I said. "Have this ride on me."

"Surely, and thanks," he agreed. I held the door open, and he slipped past me and settled into the worn suspension seating. As soon as I followed, the cabby, who must have caught our reference to Intercon, pulled out into the traffic flow.

As we gathered speed, Jules handed me a cigarillo—one of the strong black Luna-grown ones that most XTE's smoked as an affectation on Earth—and said, "You're signed up for the trip, are you?"

I nodded. "Wherever we may be going. Say Jules, you're usually on the inside. Do you know what it is, this time? I've been out of reach of the grapevine for the past few months, over in Thailand and Indochina."

The cab slid round a tight corner before he could answer, and he looked back and laughed at the indignant gestures of a cop on the side of the road. Then he sobered. "Jorge, you know I'd tell you if I could, but I can't. Nobody, but nobody, seems to know. Not even Lula Graham."

I choked slightly on a mouthful of raw smoke. "Lula Graham? You mean Boss Graham's daughter? Jules, you must really want to know if you've been that close to the source."

"It was all in the line of pleasure," he said with an engaging grin. "She has a weakness for XTE's."

"Okay," I said, spreading by hands. "So she's an easy touch. I've heard a few stories about her, myself. I know she's wild. But you're

really sticking your neck out, you know. If Boss Graham catches on, Intercon will be adding one to the death call for this trip and they'll make sure it's you who fills it."

His face froze. "That's not a joking matter," he said stiffly.

I could have bitten off my tongue. "I'm sorry," I said weakly. "I didn't know——"

"Forget it," he interrupted. "Most people don't mind. You couldn't have expected it. It's just that I disapprove—that's all."

He took a rosary from his pocket and muttered, "Excuse me," and turned to look out of the far window, his lips moving in silent prayer.

I turned away uncomfortably. It wasn't the rosary that bothered me; of course—among XTE's, who lived most of their time on the edge of death, you learned to respect another man's faith, because sometimes it was all he had to hang on to.

But it just went to show how you could live with a man and think you knew him pretty well, and then find out you knew nothing at all, I reflected. I'd been all through the Dome Three construction project on Mars with Jules, and I'd never discovered that he was soured on the death call. But of course, even the most hard-boiled XTE's had their quirks. Myself, I'd never given a damn for the risks. When it was my turn, I'd go, wherever I was, on Earth, Mars or Luna. But I had my own weak spots, too.

The cab got itself all snarled up in a traffic jam at that point, and I looked at my watch anxiously. We had only ten minutes before we were due to report in for briefing. I started to time the delay, just for something to do. A quiet rustle from Jules gave me the hint that he was back with me.

"You'd have thought Quito, as the largest spaceport on Earth, would have done something about its traffic problem," he said, in as level a tone as if we had not previously spoken. "But not likely. I suppose it's the South American mentality."

"I'm quite used to having one myself, thank you," I answered. "Even if my name is as Irish as yours, I'm eighth generation Bolivian, remember."

He let that one rest. Later he said, rather fretfully, "I wish we could do something about this destination clause in the standard contract, Jorge. It worries me, sometimes, never knowing where I'm going till I leave."

"I've been thinking along those lines myself," I agreed. "In fact, I talked it over with Hans Harnisch when he was Guild Secretary last

year. We agreed that we couldn't put on the pressure yet because the public like to think of us as perpetually on call for emergencies, and any binding contract about destinations would upset them. We're still dependent upon public opinion, remember."

Jules nodded. Abruptly, he said, "I'm sorry I soured on that joke. I didn't mean to. I know the death call serves its purpose—it makes people take the no-attachments proviso seriously, and that sort of thing——"

"And helps to keep our stock up in the public eye," I broke in. "Never forget that—to the world at large each of us is still a twenty-four carat hero, facing death with a smile on his lips and a song in his heart."

He grinned rather wryly at that. "I wonder what song they imagine us singing," he said. "But the death call is still one of my personal hates. It seems—well, against nature. It's a usurpation of the power of life and death——"

"It's only a calculated risk. Sometimes it isn't even very well calculated. Besides, it isn't as if they can say *who* is going to die. They can only estimate *how many*."

He nodded in grudging agreement, and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

Eventually the cab pulled out of the pattern and halted against the kirk outside the familiar big yellow building, with the name standing across its frontage in letters eight feet high—

INTERPLANETARY CONSTRUCTION COMPANY INCORPORATED.

For a moment or two I looked up at the foreshortened words. I had that old, hateful but wonderful hollowness inside me. It always brought back the first time I went down the long slide we had in the playground of my kindergarten. I'd been as scared as hell, but I'd gone ahead and done it to show that I wasn't. And then I did it again—and again—and even after fifty rides I was still scared, I still held back, I still had to gather myself each time even though I knew I had to do it anyway——

This, I thought, is the head of the slide again. Some day I'll turn around and go back down the ladder; some day, I'll know I've had enough. Either that, or the death call will catch up on me.

Put like that, it made me hesitate. I wondered; why not now? Why not go back and find Elise and spin out the rest of that bank account until I died? Or get a nice safe job here on Earth—I was a four-tripper XTE; no one would accuse me of cowardice. I found I couldn't go along with the idea.

I had plenty; I wanted more. That was always the way.

Jules nudged me, and I realised I'd just been sitting there, saying and doing nothing. Hastily, I came back to reality, got out, and went through the usual routine of persuading the driver that even if extra-terrestrial engineers did get paid about ten times what anyone else rated, they were still entitled to cab fare at the legal scale. Then I wasted my advantage on a ten-credit tip, just for luck. XTE's are like that.

I joined Jules on the steps of the Intercon building, took a deep breath, and we went in.

The building hadn't changed, of course. It probably never would. The floor was still imitation marble; there were still gilded doors on the elevators to the right and natural maple doors on the offices to the left. The people who came and went in a ceaseless quiet flow from left to right and right to left might have been the same ones who had been crossing when I'd come here as a green first-timer to join the crew leaving for Suburb Nine of Luna City. But there was a new girl at the information desk in the foyer here, and I was surprised. I shouldn't have been. I reflected that twelve years in one job was a long time—but I couldn't help myself. I had to ask a question.

I muttered to Jules something about meeting him in briefing, and strolled over to the desk, trying to avoid the appearance of hurry. The new girl was pretty, dark, with smooth long hair and a deep tan. She looked up at my approach and said, "Yes, sir? Can I help you?"

"Where's Imelda?" I asked.

It puzzled her for a moment. Then she caught on. "Oh, you mean Miss Jenkins, who used to have this job. She left over a year ago. Went to get married."

"Do you ever see her?"

"I write to her sometimes. She lives in Tasmania now."

"When you next send her a letter, tell her that Jorge Higgins asked after her. Better yet, put this in." I took out one of my official Guild of XTE's cards. As an afterthought, I scribbled a note of congratulation on the back of it. "Will you do that for me?"

"Surely," she said, with a flash of white teeth.

I thanked her, and crossed the hall to the elevators. While I was waiting for one to take me up to briefing, I thought back to a time twelve years ago, when I'd just got back from my first XTE job. I'd been hungry as all hell for the taste of the open air and the sight of a

woman—in that order—and Imelda had been around. I had kindly memories of Imelda. Maybe, if I'd had the sense, it could have been me she married instead of—whatever. But it was no good thinking of that.

All the same, it made me feel a little empty.

Just as the elevator dropped soundlessly to my level, I turned and glanced back at the new girl at the desk. Her sleek black head was bent away from me.

I wondered if she'd be around for some young first-timer one day. I wondered if he would be someone with more sense than I had.

I grew aware that the elevator was on the point of answering another call, and stepped inside just in time. I punched fifth floor on the selector almost without knowing that I'd done it, and I was definitely on my way.

The briefing hall was really no more than a large room, though it was always called a hall by courtesy. It was lined with maps and charts of Earth, Luna and Mars. Three or four years ago, someone had added a blown-up photograph of the clouds of Venus, inscribed with a large question mark, and for some reason they had left it there. At the far end was an office which bore the familiar words TRIP BOSS, where for the previous three or four months whoever had been picked to lead this trip had been working over the rough outline of the plan. Two or three trip bosses were sometimes planning at once, but the Guild was too small to allow of more than two major projects at a time, plus about fifteen per cent. of the membership on emergency call or extended leave on Earth.

I knew everyone here, of course. There were about twenty-five men waiting. A four-tripper gets to call the whole of the senior half of the Guild by their first names, and I'd already guessed from the secrecy and the fact that they had offered me ninety thousand credits a month instead of my usual sixty-five that this was going to be an all-star job. It was, too; none of those here were less than three-trip men.

I walked through the room, exchanging greetings as I went past, and carried on into the trip boss's office. There were two or three other new arrivals just signing the book in front of me. I reached for my pen and waited behind them, glancing around to see who the boss was to be.

I saw Hans Harnisch standing at one side—a small man, German-

Swiss, with a fat pink face and bristly short hair, who had been the Guild Secretary the previous year—and called to him. He turned and nodded acknowledgement, and I saw that he held the personnel file for the trip.

This was going to be a *very* big job. They didn't put top executives of the Guild into trip boss posts for Lunar work.

"Am I late?" I asked him. "I got hung up in a traffic jam with Jules on the way from the port."

Harnisch checked the time. "You would have been," he said. "As it is, we had to put the briefing back half an hour to give Bogol and a couple of others a chance to get in from Sydney—the express was delayed by a hurricane on take-off. Look, I daren't just stop now, Jorge—Boss Graham's coming down to see us off in person, and I'm rolling out the red carpet. I'll see you later."

He hustled off to pore over a stack of Intercon report sheets on his table. I found the way clear to the booking-in ledger, and signed against my name as reporting for the trip. I looked down the list of appointments while I was at it.

TRIP BOSS: Hans Harnisch, P.S.G.

(That was Past Secretary of the Guild).

CREW BOSS: Bogol, Igor; Curtis, Rinaldo N.; Rafferty, Jules; U Phwa; Higgins-Hernandez, Jorge.

That gave me a pleasant surprise. I was the only four-tripper among the crew bosses—Bogol was a six-tripper and the rest had all done five. It looked as if I might make trip boss the time after next with a bit of luck.

I ran down the rest of the names, noting that all but three had signed in. Those outstanding were two crew bosses, Bogol and Curtis, and the first new name I had seen—Green, R. R. I didn't know him.

I glanced around the trip boss's room, wondering what it would be like having to do all the thinking for a complete tour lasting about two to two and a half years, even when I had Intercon's unique set of computers to help me. I knew Jules for one would never make trip boss—one of the tasks involved was figuring the death call, and even if it was an almost exact science, I wouldn't have envied any man that.

I put down the ledger and returned to the hall. The usual stack of chairs was propped against the wall—I took one, finished saying my hellos, and joined Jules at the other end of the room.

"I hear Boss Graham is seeing us off personally," I told him.

"That so?" he said in amazement. "That means only one of two things. Either further out, which I doubt, or further in."

I took a moment to digest that. Then I gestured at the big query mark on the photo of Venus. "That? You could be right. You know, Jules, somehow I'm not looking forward to this trip."

"Me neither," said Jules shortly.

We thought the idea over in silence.

Of course, there had already been three Venus expeditions; one fatal, one a fair success, and one an unqualified success. But I'd read the reports—of course; if I wanted to stay where I was in the Guild, I had to run like hell to keep up with my subject—and they weren't nice. The very slow rotation of the planet produced stratosphere temperatures varying from about plus a hundred and fifty to minus twenty on the day and night sides respectively; at the surface, the carbon dioxide-high air produced the greenhouse effect and bolstered the noon equatorial temperature to some two hundred plus. The combined effects of unstable air masses and solar tides resulted in weather beside which the tropical hurricane of Earth seemed a gentle breeze.

I was still chewing the idea over and hoping we had made a wrong guess, when the door behind us opened again and Rinaldo Curtis came in—a tall man with hair salted grey. He scattered the usual nods of greeting as he went with long strides to sign on. After him came another man I knew—Bogol, a Pole. He and Jules threw up their hands at the sight of each other and began to talk fiercely and simultaneously in French.

The door swung shut. In a moment it opened again. Checking through my memory, I realised that R. R. Green—whoever he might be—was still missing.

I turned to look and remained to stare.

He was medium-sized and lightly-built, with a long shock of fair hair, and he wore a neat grey formal suit under a fashionable dark red slicker. He was dressed like a college boy. He looked like a college boy. He looked, in fact, about eighteen.

At first I made the logical mistake—assumed he'd lost his way. Then I ran my eye over him again. In one hand he carried a small jump bag; in the other a fat envelope full of papers. Out of the top of the latter I could see poking, quite unmistakably, the clean yellow parchment of a newly acquired XTE certificate.

When I was getting over my amazement, someone else had noticed him and nudged his neighbour. The latter, perhaps more kindly than the rest of us, called out, "Hey, kid! You looking for someone?"

Evidently he hadn't recognised the parchment.

"Yes—thanks. Mr. Harnisch, I believe." He rolled the *r* like a good *Schweizerdeutscher* himself. His voice was a light tenor. He probably used to sing with the college dance band when he'd had too many beers to feel self-conscious.

The man who had called out must have noticed the parchment then, because I caught him smothering a grin. "Through there, boy," he said without batting an eyelid.

The kid nodded and took the way he had been shown. As he passed by, heads came up right and left to look at him. There was a general quiet rustle as they summed him up—first-timer. Younger-looking than most, of course. They went no further than that for the most part. They couldn't have drawn the conclusion Jules and I had come to from the presence of so many top-liners in one outfit. Jules, however, breaking free of Bogol as the latter decided he'd best go and sign on at last, caught my eye and winked. I nodded, knowing what he was thinking. If his guess had been right, Harnisch would blow his top when he found out whom he had engaged. I expected the kid to come out in a moment with rather a red face. Intercon was a business concern, not a university extension course.

However, apparently Jule's guess was wrong after all, for first Curtis, then Bogol, and lastly the kid came out of the office and took their places on the floor. Bogol finished his interrupted conversation with Jules and departed for someone else just as the boy re-appeared. Far from making hastily for the door, he picked up a chair and glanced around for somewhere to put it.

I signed to him to come sit with us, and he came over at once. He said, "Hello there."

I couldn't quite decide whether he was kidding himself, whether he was self-confident, or just fresh. Either way, he was a first-timer, and there was an ancient procedure for dealing with those. I didn't like it, myself, but I sure as hell could never have done anything about it.

I introduced myself and Jules.

"I'm Rory Green," said the kid. "Glad to meet you."

"Are you booked on this trip?" I demanded.

He nodded. Jules, who was notoriously rough on first-timers, cut in, tapping the visible end of Rory's parchment and emphasising its shiny newness. "This your first time out, boy?" he said silkily.

"That's right," Rory agreed.

"Looking forward to it?"

"I'm scared from hell to Pluto," said the kid honestly. That took

Jules off-balance, and I had trouble keeping my face straight at his expression. He recovered quickly.

"Don't let that worry you," he said smoothly. "Um—smoke?"

He produced his case of lethal Lunar cigarillos. The kid took one with a word of thanks and offered him a light. Jules, expecting the usual reaction to the virulent tobacco, accepted the flame and sat back to await results. There were none. Rory inhaled as if he were pulling on light Virginia, and then inspected the slim black tube critically.

"I remember I used to sneak these from my dad's humidor when I was a kid," he said. "Made me sick as a dog, but I kept trying."

When he was a kid! Dear God, what did he think he was now? If he was putting on an act, or if he really was as self-possessed as he seemed to be, either way there was going to be trouble from this quarter. When you live two years at a time in constant fear for your life, you get to be sensitive about that sort of thing.

But the reference to the cigarillos was interesting. It placed him as having either XTE or spacecrew somewhere in his family. I mused for a second, trying to remember if I'd met a Green in that line of business. Married spacemen were rare enough in all conscience——

Then there was a slow shuffle as people turned to face the end of the room. The door of the trip boss's office had opened, and I could glimpse Hans Harnisch standing aside to let Boss Graham pass. I hadn't seen the big wheel in six or eight years, but I could never mistake him. He was stolid, red-faced, with lively eyes and one of the surest flairs for business in history. Even though he was our employer, and therefore presumably our enemy, as anyone knowing only the other Guilds would have assumed, there had been talk of putting him up for honorary membership one year.

I had never been able to understand how a man like that had come to father Lulu Graham, who, though she was a honey, was strictly wild.

Graham took a chair from the wall, refusing Han's obsequious assistance, and sat down facing us in the corner. Harnisch gave him a worried glance and then turned to look us over. The tension mounted like the blood-pressure of a first-timer.

I sneaked a passing look at our first-timer. He looked as if he were planning a holiday in Bermuda.

Harnisch I knew for a very good engineer, but he would never make a public speaker. He hemmed and hawed for a moment, and then straightened up and said bluntly, "Well, I suppose the first thing you want to know is where we're going. We're opening up Venus."

People sat forward on their chairs. Jules caught my eye and ringed his forefinger and thumb at me, winking.

"I'll skip all the usual stuff about dependants and attachments. It was in your contracts, anyway, and all of you—most of you, that is," he corrected hastily, "have been through it before. I'll get on to the important points."

He pulled down a rolled sheet hanging on the wall behind him. It bore a sketchy map of some ground, a photomontage of infrared survey pictures, and some constructional data. He began to explain. He kept his back to us, and we had to tell him to speak up a couple of times, but when he got on to the technical side his words flowed more freely.

Compared with the last Mars job, this one was simplicity itself as far as the actual building work went. They were calling for only one dome, and that a small one, a two hundred-footer. The third expedition had located what looked like the ideal site for it—a hollow between three small hills, forming a natural windbreak. We were to anchor the dome with struts and braces, carve out six million cubic feet of galleries in the surrounding rock, install three dozen air converters, and build eight miles of wall from local rock to surround what would later be cleared ground. This was to be a pilot project, of course. It was easy to see what pattern future trips would follow: a couple of hundred thousand air converters all over the planet, to unlock the oxygen from the CO_2 and the water vapour from the formaldehyde, some sort of vegetation to keep it that way, and we'd have a planet for the taking in sixty or eighty years' time.

But this was a first time, and the first time is always the worst.

There were half a dozen questions on technical points, mostly from Bogol, who seemed to know Venusian conditions pretty well. I turned to Jules, but stopped the words I meant to say before they reached my lips. He was sitting rock-like, his fists clenched, and I realised that every man in the room was waiting with tense expectation for one last—and important—item.

At length it came. Harnisch turned back to face us, letting his maps roll up again with a snap. He said, his mouth making a mess of the words, "Now, of course, you want to know the death call. Well, this is a first time, of course, but the exploratory trips did a much better job on Venus than they did on Mars, and the government is underwriting half our expenses, and I think we've covered everything we can reasonably expect. We've budgeted for an estimated loss of thirty per cent. material——"

Budgeted! As if men were items on an expense account!

"—and one fatal casualty."

It dropped like a fission bomb. The shock was so mixed with relief that it took a few seconds for anyone to digest it completely. Then there was silence, while people remembered the first Mars Dome project, when they had a death call of four and lost thirty out of ninety-six men. But that had been a long time ago, and they hadn't undercalled since.

Which meant—and I trusted Harnisch even more than I trusted the computers which figured the odds for Intercon—that for once we stood a very good chance of all coming back alive.

During the pause, Harnisch had stood down for Boss Graham, who spoke for a few minutes on generalities. Nobody listened. In the end, he toured the room and shook hands with us crew bosses, and we were set.

After he had left the room, there was a sudden buzz of excited talk, and people crowded around Harnisch asking technical questions. I reached for a smoke, letting the tenseness seep out of my nerves by degrees.

"Venus, eh?" said Rory on my right. "That's really something."

I'd almost forgotten him. For some reason I'd been thinking of Elise, wondering whether I was going to run the risk of being caught by the death call and tell her I would be seeing her again after all. I shut it firmly out of my mind, and realised that sitting right next to me was the biggest problem I'd met in years.

I said slowly, "Boy, do you know what you've let yourself in for?"

"I think so," he answered with injured dignity.

"Take my advice. I've done four trips—I know what I'm talking about. Walk right out of this room and don't come back till we've gone. Then do your first trip on Luna, the way I did. You stand a lot better chance of living to enjoy your pay that way."

He didn't answer, but his soft chin—he looked as if he hadn't even started to shave—set in an uncompromising line. I knew I wouldn't sell him on that. He was the obstinate type.

I got up and pushed my way through the throng towards Harnisch, catching him just as he was going back into his office. I laid a hand on his arm.

"Can I have a private word with you?" I said.

"Sure—come in." He held the door for me, and when I was past

him, pulled it shut. "Okay, Jorge, what do you want to know?"

"That kid—Rory Green," I said. "You aren't really letting him come on this trip?"

His pale blue eyes, buried in rolls of pink fat, studied me. "Why not?" he said at length.

"Hans, it'll be murder to let a first-timer go along on this Venus project! I know he's got a degree, but what's a degree on this sort of job? Couldn't you have got someone like Chauncey or Krishnasavati—someone who's done a couple of trips already?"

"Forget it, Higgins," he said, suddenly going all trip boss on me. "This job is being done under government subsidy, and we're legally bound to hire the best men we've got. Green has the best certificate I've ever seen—ergo, he qualifies for the trip."

I was about to start threatening to resign if they kept Rory on, when he cut in. "That's the official answer, Jorge. I'll be grateful if you remember it. But, speaking off the record, do you know what the name of the first navigator on the first Venus trip was—the one that didn't get back?"

I shook my head.

"Green. Catch? If we tried to throw that boy out, he'd sue us from here to Pluto for breach of contract. It's that way."

I chewed it over in silence. At length I said, "All right. Does Boss Graham know?"

"Boss Graham told me the boy asked him as a favour if he could make the Venus trip when it came up."

"There's one thing you can do," I added. "Put him in my crew, will you?"

"That's a very good idea," he nodded. "I'll do that."

"It's not as good an idea as sending him somewhere safe—like Luna—to do his first tour."

"That's Earth's back yard now," said Harnisch. "It wasn't when you did your first trip, Jorge. We called six deaths on that one—remember? We got five of them. Young Green will be a damned sight safer on Venus than you were on Luna."

"I'll tell you this right now, though," I interrupted. "If your death call is correct, I can name the man who'll fill the vacancy."

He looked at me steadily. "If you're right," he said in a dead voice, "God help you, Jorge. You'll never be able to live with yourself again."

I felt cold hands on the back of my neck. I started to answer him,

changed my mind, and went out.

For a little while I hated Harnisch and Boss Graham both for letting a quixotic impulse over-rule their common sense, but it didn't last long. When you're confined to the company of the same few dozen men for years on end, you lose the ability to nurse a grudge—or you lose your job. Even if I hadn't been able to forget it as I did, I'd still have acted as if I had. XTE's don't like it if their crew boss quarrels with the trip boss.

We blasted off for the satellite that same evening, and trans-shipped to the Venus fleet a few hours later. It was a five-month run for the first men to do the journey. We could afford to travel at a steady tenth gee the whole way, and with our initial orbital velocity and the push from the boosters which rode off with us from the satellite, it took us a matter of fifteen days. We had five ships—four for landing, one to orbit Venus as a temporary space station for the duration of our tour.

Before we left, I wished we did have five months before landing. I thought I was faced with the problem of turning a cocky, space-blinded boy into an extra-terrestrial engineer. But I spent a lot of time with Rory on the trip, and felt a little better at the end of it. Not much—but a little was all I had expected. He knew his theory all right, he could run an assembly sequence in his head, and he was faster with a slipstick than I was. Provided his judgment stayed the way it was, he'd make an XTE yet.

I did one thing which I thought over very carefully before making up my mind. I took Jules off into a corner and told him to make it known that if anyone ribbed the boy hard enough to damage his assurance, he would have to answer to me. I knew ribbing was usually a good thing for a first-timer—I knew it had been for me. But I estimated Rory's opinion of himself was ninety per cent. justified, and I'd rather work with a man who believes in his own decisions, especially when he thinks them over, than with one who's forever scared of putting a foot wrong.

About the last thing I told myself before I strapped down for landing was that maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

The landing itself was *rough*. I blacked out two or three times, and wasn't really registering the rest of it, and it brought it home to us for the first time how it was going to be for the next thirty months. We were thrown this way and that by the stratospheric currents; we were

bounced and buffeted by the lower air layers; and when we finally woke up after the last spurt of the tubes, there was light outside the ship and we couldn't see a thing.

There was noise, too: the noise of the wind which lifted fine dust from the seared plains of the equator and which would deafen and blind us for the remainder of our stay.

I unstrapped myself stiffly and looked around at my crewmen. They were all in good shape. I had four others besides Rory—Campbell, Pereira, Matsukuo, and a West African whom we called Koona because his real name had three tongue-clicks in it and was difficult to get out unless you'd been born to it. Our landing had been automatic, of course, but we also had a human pilot on board—one Winton, who would be a general factotum for us during our stay; cook, communications man, medical officer and housekeeper. I didn't envy him the job.

I managed a weak grin, looking around at the ship which was to be our headquarters.

"Welcome home, men!" I said.

Three of us had homed within the three miles radius that was considered good shooting. The command ship, with Harnisch and two crews on board, had overshot and come down a mile further out, diametrically opposite ours, because of a bad gust during their approach run, but they were all in one piece, and by the time we had manhandled our personnel dome out of the lock and anchored it to what looked like bedrock, though it was hard to tell in the dusty air, Winton reported that he'd picked them up on the radio and that they had unshipped their sandhog for a reconnaissance of the position.

The first two or three days were taken up with domestic chores—tying down the ships, erecting the four masts of a rhomboid antenna to put us in touch with the orbital ship beyond the scudding wrack which passed for a sky, setting up stills for water and a miniature air converter for our oxygen supply. It was routine work, and not difficult, except for the handicap of having to work in sealed suits—not pressure suits, fortunately; those were tolerable in the light gravity of Mars, but would have been impossible here. But it was essential to keep out the dust and to wear an air-mask, of course, and most of the time the dust forced us to work on radar and infrared. It was tough going, but all of us barring Rory were used to that, and he just set his jaw and kept going.

On the third day, Harnisch called a crew bosses' conference in the

personnel dome of his ship—which had to hold thirteen men instead of six, and was large enough to give us elbow room—and gave us the go-ahead.

It was impossible, we found at once, to clear the ground below the dome, because as soon as we shifted the dust, another gust of the continual hot gale would dump it right back in our laps. So we were forced to wade through it, sinking knee and sometimes thigh-deep, while we carried out the first surveys.

I'd never tried to sink post-holes by radar before, and since our infrared theodolites were often blinded by the heat of the ground, our first couple of holes were well off. Eventually, though, we had the six most important ones sunk in the raw rock, and covered them with plastic lids to keep them clear. Then we brought up the main spars of the dome, six precisely curved and surprisingly light ninety-six-foot girders. They were too light, it turned out. After three sweaty, swearing hours, in which we had all been knocked off our feet until we ached all over, we had to admit that we couldn't hold them in place long enough for the assemblymen at the centre of the dome area to attach them to each other.

It looked as if we'd struck a serious snag before starting.

I absent-mindedly tried to wipe my forehead through a layer of plastic and looked round to the limit of my range. Koona and Campbell, the heaviest of my men, were lying on the upward slant of our girder, trying to keep it steady. Pereira was doing his best to hang on, but he was a lightly-built Puerto Rican, and it wasn't much good. Matsukuo was one of the dimly visible figures in the centre of the hollow, trying vainly to hold the swaying members together for more than a second at a time.

I felt a slap on my back, and turned to find Rory there. "Mr. Higgins!" he shouted. "Have we got any iron wire with us?"

"God knows!" I yelled back—anything under a full-throated roar would have been lost in the gale. "Why?"

"If we wound the ends of the girders with it and ran a current through, we might be able to use the magnetism to hold the spars for long enough to fasten them!"

It took me a minute to work out the approximate amount of wire we'd need, and the current. Then I made my way along the rim of the hollow until I bumped Harnisch. The idea appealed to him. More, it worked—or at least, it cut down the speed with which the girders jerked apart from one another long enough to let the assemblymen get

them hog-tied. I wasn't around when the rest of the men found out who it was who thought up that dodge, but I imagined that if I'd put an infrared red scope on Rory's face, I'd have been dazzled.

As an indication of the pace of the job, it took us ten weeks, near enough, to sink and anchor the struts of the dome. After the main members came the concentric ribs which would hold the cover in place, and angled trusses to spread the not inconsiderable load it would impose.

Harnisch, correctly judging the state of our nerves, declared a party in celebration of the completion of the main structure. It had been found long ago—during the first Lunar project, in fact—that XTE's living far from home and existing on their nerves needed something more than just recreation and a few library books to keep them—not just happy, but actually sane. Our parties were the traditional result. They were less necessary and less frequent on a job like this, with a low death call and a fair approximation to schedule to its credit, but on jobs like the first Mars Dome, when almost every other day you lost a man, it was all that kept the men's nerves intact. A friend of mine who was interested in history once told me that bomber pilots during the last war reacted the same way, and held boisterous parties to keep their minds off the fact that tomorrow they might not be here.

But ten weeks was only the beginning of the job, and next day we began the really hard task—getting the cover on. It was blowing its usual forty mile an hour khamsin when we started. The cover was tough fluorine-based plastic, about as flexible as eighth-inch steel plate and much more resistant to abrasion. It had to be. It was also carbon and oxygen inert—likewise. But the impact of one of the sudden gusts which might reach ninety m.p.h. on the broadside of a sheet of it was more than enough to lift a man off his feet. After a week-long struggle, we had got thirteen of the twenty-four sections in place, by lashing each one closely to the framework and clawing our way out along the latter, dragging the plates with us and moving only when there was a comparative lull.

It had to happen, eventually, that a gust should spring up unexpectedly and whip one of us off the precarious perch plate and all. It happened—to Bogol, of all people.

One moment he was inching his way out along a swaying radial strut, lying on top of the plate and always keeping one hand firmly gripping a support. The next instant a dust-devil leapt up below him, and he had been lifted off the rib and thrown twenty yards, ploughing into a soft bank of drifted sand. Those of us who could see what was

happening held our breath and remembered the death call. We had only been here three months; time was still long.

When a couple of his crew ploughed their way over to him, they found he had got off lightly, though the loose plate, freed of his bulk on top of it, had been carried off somewhere into the distance like a sheet of paper fluttering in the breeze. Bogol, though, turned out to have slight concussion and a broken ankle, and he was well enough to be back to the job next day, perched atop a rock and lashed down like a pile of loose equipment.

Time passed. The cover went on eventually. Then, while half the crewmen sealed the outside with plastic lay, the rest of us took shovels and began the heart and back-breaking business of getting the dust out of the inside. It got low enough to be syphoned out with an air-pump, but it did the pump no good at all, and we had to abandon the idea. We wound up using brooms, improvised out of spun glass matting and odd bits of metal and wire.

At the six-month mark, the dome was ready, and we marked that with another party—one came in retrospect to count the day-by-day progress of a trip by the number of parties. But the completion of the dome was a quarter of the job only. Compared to what came next, it was interesting. Roughly speaking, the removal of six million cubic feet of Venusian rock implied cutting, finishing and facing with plastic, twelve miles of ten foot by ten foot corridors underground. We had to feel the ground ahead of us every inch of the way. It was soul-destroyingly monotonous, and even by the time the first of the passages was finished, we were feeling the strain. It took us all of the next four months before the first of the subterranean air converters was in place and ready to be started.

We marked that with a party, too. That was a good one. It was the first we'd been able to hold inside the big dome, instead of in our personnel domes, and the psychological effect of eating under what amounted to open sky—at least it was two hundred feet from horizon to horizon—made us happy in itself, even if we were eating off work benches.

Our pilot-cooks excelled themselves, opening the ceremonial cans, and we had a fine meal and plenty of beer and spirits. The fact that they were dehydrated and pumped up to size with distilled Venusian water didn't make them taste as bad as might have been expected.

After we'd eaten, Harnisch made a speech of sorts, and Bogol told a bunch of unprintable Polish folk tales; Matsukuo and another junior crewman held an impromptu wrestling match; and we sang songs to the

accompaniment of Konoa's finger-drumming on a tin of silicone grease.

It was getting quite late when I looked around the dome and noticed that Rory wasn't there. When I thought back, I realised I hadn't seen him for more than an hour. I felt a bit guilty at that, especially since all the older men were still here enjoying themselves. I'd been paying Rory less and less attention as the months passed, because once I'd convinced myself he wasn't a major liability to the rest of us, I must have developed a block against starting to worry again. When I came to think of it, even the youngest of the others here were seven or eight years older than he was, and I guessed he might feel a bit out of it.

I slipped out from the company and made my way over to the lock, fastening my suit and putting on my mask as I did so. The personnel dome which I shared with the rest of my crew was near the point at which we had landed, and it was a good walk, so I didn't reach it till half an hour later. Making as little noise as possible, in case Rory was asleep, I slipped through the lock and went inside.

Rory was sitting on the edge of the unshipped acceleration couch which served as his bed, his face buried in his hands. On his knee, picture upwards, was a photograph. I recognised it—or rather, I recognised the face it showed. All of a sudden I felt very ill indeed. I wanted to run a long way.

He didn't seem to have noticed me, so I coughed. He sat up with a jerk, and I saw that his eyes were inflamed and red.

The movement knocked the photo to the floor, and he reached hastily for it. He said, "Hullo, Mr Higgins. Turning in?"

He tried hard to seem carefree, but it was a lousy act.

I was at a loss for words at first. I said, trying to sound casual, "No. I just came over to see if you were all right." My voice seemed uncertain in my ears.

"Me? Hell, yes!" he declared.

"I don't think you are," I said courtly. I shucked off my oxygen mask and opened my suit. Then I sat down on the bed opposite him and indicated the photograph.

"Lula Graham?" I said.

"You know her?" he said in surprise, colouring. He put the picture aside, face down, on the coverlet.

"Yes, I know her." I did. Only too well. "You're in trouble, Rory. Want to tell me?"

Really, it was appallingly simple when I thought of it. I'd swallowed the story of wanting to follow in his father's footsteps, because it was a half-truth—his father had been killed on the first Venus trip. But that wasn't the actual reason he'd signed on for this trip. It was merely the first, and by a long way the best-paid, which had come up after he graduated, and when you're twenty-one (I'd found out his real age a while back) and desperately in love, time can mean a lot.

The girl was Lula Graham, of course. I recalled vaguely that she was about his age, though I had never stuck my neck out in her direction. I knew, though, that she had a weakness for XTE's; Jules was not the only one she'd been taken with.

Logic: he was not well off; he was head over heels in love with a girl who was heiress to one of the biggest fortunes in history. If he married her, it might appear he wanted her money. His solution was to do this tour on Venus, stack up a bank balance of his own, and go back in triumph to claim his bride. He was quite certain she'd still be waiting. Apparently they knew each other pretty well. And, of course, Boss Graham didn't know a thing about it. I would always have given him credit for having sense.

Honour is the damndest thing.

It might work, at that, assuming Lula had been slandered to me. But even if it did, it stank to high heaven in my nostrils, because there's a very good reason for the "no attachments" clause in an XTE contract. Emotional fixation and complete and utter loneliness just don't go together.

I was scared stiff.

Finally I clapped him on the shoulder. I didn't need to fake sincerity when I said, "Rory, you're the damn best first-timer I've met in four trips. If you're still worrying about the death-call catching up on you, I'll tell you this: I'd back anyone else on the project—myself included—to make his final mistake first."

(He looked up at me gratefully and nodded.

I left him there after telling him to go get some sleep. It was all I could do. It wasn't enough. Nothing short of shipping him straight back to Earth would solve the problem for good, and that was impossible. We'd need all the three remaining ships we had—one had been cannibalised to make the dome ribs—to get ourselves out of here. I dressed up again and went back outside.

For a few minutes I just looked at Venus and thought what a lousy planet it must be to die on. Then I started back towards the big dome,

hoping everyone hadn't gone to sleep. During the walk, I found myself doing something I had never thought I would fall into—thinking of a woman. Elise, to be exact, whom I'd successfully forgotten since the trip began. I shut the memory tightly out of my mind again.

I was lucky. When I reached the big dome, I found only a few people had gone, and Jules and Harnisch, the two men I wanted to see, were playing cards on a bench which still bore the scars left by the dust-pump. They had just finished dealing a new hand when I came up. Jules picked up his cards and inspected them critically.

I glanced around the dome. The only other people left were playing dice half-heartedly on the ground a good twenty feet away.

"Anything?" said Harnisch as I came up.

"Three cards," said Jules. "Good?"

"Sorry. I've got a hundred aces and three cards," said Harnisch. He marked something on a scratch pad beside him. Then he looked up and caught sight of me.

"Hullo, Jorge. Thought you'd gone to bed."

I pulled up a chair and sat down. "Go on playing as if I was just kibitzing," I said softly. "I've rather a problem on my hands, and it wouldn't do if it got around."

Jules shot me a keen glance, but he had enough sense to keep silent. They played a couple of tricks before Harnisch said, "Well?"

"You know Rory?" I was having trouble finding words.

"Of course we know Rory," said Jules. "He'll make a good XTE yet."

"Stoeck," said Harnisch, laying down another card. He reached for the score sheet again. "What's wrong with him?"

"He won't be making another trip. He's in love with Lula Graham. He intends to marry her on the profit out of this trip. Go on playing, Jules, and for God's sake don't shout it all over the dome."

Jules laid down another card distractedly, and Harnisch gathered the trick. He said, "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I assured him. I told them what I had just heard from the boy himself.

"That's nasty for two reasons," said Harnisch when I had finished. He played another card. "The first one is the obvious one; with an emotional fixation like that, he may break when we near the end of the trip. The second is——"

"The second is that we all know Lula Graham," finished Jules.

I looked at him steadily. "Is she really as wild as you like to tell

people?"

"Yes, Jorge. I'm afraid she honestly is."

They finished their game in silence.

"Last trick is five points," said Jules at length, and began to count his score. Harnisch did the same abstractedly.

"Eighteen," said Jules, sadly. "Look out, that's the Nell you're throwing away, and I think you've counted the Bauer as an ordinary jack."

Harnisch nodded and started again.

"Well, what do you want us to do about it, Jorge?" said Jules.

Harnisch turned his pale blue eyes on me and mutely repeated the question.

I shrugged. "Nothing," I said helplessly. "I just thought you ought to know."

"That's me over the thousand," said Harnisch, totting up the scores. "That's me over the thousand. Yes." He looked at Jules, his face set, expressionless. "You're eight hundred and six. All right?"

I left them to it.

Once I knew, my nervousness became worse and worse. I hadn't even felt so bad on my first trip. All through the slow measure of days that melted one into another, marked only by the fractional progress of the tunnels into the bedrock, I found my mind tied up with the question of Rory.

He was a good actor, I had to admit. He kept his feelings under wraps; never again did he let so much slip as he had that night. Except for a permanent air of strain which you didn't notice unless you looked closely, he gave no sign of the—terror, almost—that must have been building up in him. But it wasn't good. You can't bottle up a desire like that for two and a half years without ending up by having an obsession.

In his mind, it must always have been; suppose it's me, after all? Here's twelve—fifteen—eighteen months gone by, and still we've had only minor casualties; a broken leg, a case or two of silicosis, caught before harm was done. They told us one of us might die! We're all still here—that one may be myself, I may have wasted my life and all my hopes may have gone for nothing . . .

I had it, too. Not that I was worried over dying. But I kept thinking back to the time in the trip boss's office back at Intercon, and heard in retrospect Harnisch saying, "God help you, Jorge—you'll never be

able to live with yourself again!"

I watched Rory like a mother hen with her first brood.

We reached and passed the twenty-month mark. Two-thirds of the job gone; seven of the air-converters in place, work in progress on the retaining wall which would mark out a patch of shelter for the experimental biochemists on the second trip to plant their mutated vegetation. Somehow, without realising it, we seemed to have picked up a few days ahead of schedule, and even the monotonous keening of the wind and the interminable, external driving of the dust could not take the edge off the first faint stirring of hope that maybe we were going to make it sooner than we had been told.

The crews alternated on work under the shelter of the dome and exposed to the elements, once we began the outside walls. After the struggle to place and anchor the roughly shaped boulders in the teeth of the gale, it came as relaxation to bend to the cutters and the plastic spreader in the tunnels. I had the bad luck to be working with my crew when the first really bad blow we had yet met jumped us, almost a mile from the dome and exposed on a ridge of rock towards the seldom-seen masts of our big antenna.

At first, it wasn't so bad, but when I'd seen Matsukuo, the lightest of my crewmen, knocked sprawling three times in a row by chance blasts, I edged my way around to the next team's position and spoke to Rinaldo Curtis, the boss. We turned to battening down the equipment, and dived for shelter. After a few minutes, Jules brought in his crew also, and we huddled in the slight protection of an outcropping boulder and wondered how long this was going on.

We'd lost almost an hour's work before we saw a shadowy figure struggling towards us from the nearest personnel dome. He half fell into the middle of our group, and when we'd picked him up, we found it was the pilot of the command ship—a man called Grigorov.

"What in hell are you doing out in this?" demanded Curtis, astonished.

We pieced it together between roars of the wind. Apparently it was time for the daily report to the orbital ship overhead, and though the powerful beam from the latter had come through on time, they couldn't get any answer out of us.

"Wind must have brought the antenna down," said Curtis judiciously. "That's a nuisance, if you like."

"You're telling me!" Grigorov confirmed. "If we can't get back in touch with them, they're likely to come down to see what's happened,

and that'd use up their emergency fuel supply."

Jules leaned cautiously out of the shelter of the rock. "I think the wind's dropped," he said. "The best thing we can do is leave the work on the wall for the time being. I'll take the sandhog and reconnoitre the damage. It won't take more than half an hour. Then, when I get back, we can run the crews out there and have the masts up in no time."

"It won't be no time unless the wind goes down more than this," I pointed out.

"Doesn't matter. I'll be safe inside the hog."

He got to his feet, and stood swaying against the gale. "Yes, it's definitely letting up. I'll see you later."

He strode off into dimness, head well down, while we got our equipment together again and went out in ones and twos to survey the situation.

We'd hardly made up our minds to go back to work, however, when the storm started over, and drove us running for cover. Within ten minutes, we couldn't see each other, though we sat within arm's reach, for the blinding swirl of the sand.

We squatted and tried to sleep. Talking was impossible.

After an hour had gone by, I felt a slap on my back and turned to see Rory leaning towards me, indistinct in the murk. He put his face-mask close to my ear and shouted, "How about Jules?"

I yelled something reassuring in reply, about the sandhog being sealed and safe, but I wasn't as sure as I hoped I sounded. The sandhog was very heavy and very tough; it wouldn't be upset by the gale, and it had built-in homing devices. But if anything did go wrong, it was the only hog we had, because it was so massive and because fuel was bulky and hard to transport.

I sat and chewed over the idea until the storm really did start to die down, to a point where we could converse again. We moved out and began to retrieve our equipment from under drifted dust, and examined the damage done to our unfinished wall. But Jules did not return.

Two hours after he went out, I called Curtis and suggested we stop work and go look for him, roping ourselves together in case of more bad weather. We strung the combined membership of our three teams out across a quarter-mile front, and headed in the direction of the rhomboid antenna. We had covered almost half the distance when I felt the tug on the rope which meant someone had found him, and passed it along. Slowly, we circled in on the looming bulk of the sandhog. It was half-buried, and the first arrivals had barely finished scraping the lock clear

when I came up. Curtis detached himself from the rope and went in.

He was inside only long enough to look round. Then he pushed his way out again, shaking his head. I went up to him, demanding what was wrong.

"The main shaft of the turbine's fractured," he told me. "He must have got out and tried to make it back on foot. The fool!"

We never saw Jules again. We searched all that day and most of the night, until we were dead on our feet, but the dust covered everything, and he hadn't been carrying enough metal to give us a blip on the sonar. We could picture him, stranded by the breakdown of the hog, which had been run for almost two years without trouble, confidently getting to the ground and starting out during that deceptive lull, back to the big dome, and somehow—somewhere—in the howling of the wind and the battering of the sand, falling never to rise again.

We were used to the shadow of death. To XTE's it is the very stuff of life. But we missed him, and in our own way we mourned him for as long as we could spare from the job.

And yet that was the fulfilment of destiny. It was the offering to Kali, the blood-price, the sacrifice to the wind. Beneath our sorrow we were all—despite ourselves—that much happier. The Reaper had his harvest; he would not come again.

The relief, which none of us would have dared to admit, showed itself in our work. We went ahead faster. People began cutting corners, secure in their trust of the mechanical computers and the safety factor of our plan which had combined to call one death this trip. The one who was most relieved, of course, was Rory. I knew he felt the guilt of that relief more strongly than any of us, but I watched him and saw that the burden of his worry had been lightened, and he was less tense, less nervy, than before. My own concern for him lessened as a result—in a way I hadn't noticed, until one day just past the twenty-four month mark.

By then, the big dome had a lived-in air. We no longer used the personnel domes except for sleeping, and lived with our work. The tunnels were three-quarters dug, and the lining of them with plastic was going ahead smoothly. I was standing watching my crew setting one of the bulky air converters in place on its bed, shouting an occasional correction, when I felt a touch on my arm.

I turned; it was Harnisch.

"I want a word with you, Jorge," he said. "Come with me into the dome."

I followed him up the smooth square passage and out under the smooth plastic surface of the dome.

"Looks almost like home, doesn't it?" he said.

"Blue sky suits my taste better," I answered. "What is it, Hans?"

"I don't like to tear off a crew boss where his men can hear me, Jorge. That's why I had you come here. Have you stopped worrying about Rory Green?"

"Why, yes," I agreed, puzzled. "Not entirely, of course. But since Jules——" I left the rest of it hanging in the air.

Harnisch nodded. "Yes. Since Jules. I budgeted for accidents on this trip, Jorge, but not for plain unadulterated human stupidity." His voice remained perfectly level, but his tone was contemptuous.

"What on earth——?" I began.

"You know what I mean, Jorge. That boy Rory comes pretty close to worshipping you now. I don't think you've been deliberately playing the part of the hero to him—I think it's just the way you've taken an interest in him and watched over him. Either way, the result is the same: he's taken you for an example.

"But if you've stopped worrying about him, I haven't! What do you think he's going to do when he sees you going around sticking your neck out the way you have been these past couple of months? I've had to bawl out half a dozen men since Jules went, for taking risks, but I never thought I'd have to do it to a crew boss. Where's your oxygen mask? I know, you put it down somewhere because it was getting in the way and there's good air in here. What would happen if the wind got in under the lashings?"

I felt my face burning, but I knew he was right. I said, "I'm sorry, Hans. I suppose I'd been worrying so much over Rory I got out of the habit of worrying about myself."

"Possibly. But that's not the only thing I've noticed. There's flourine in this plastic lay we're spreading. Who told you you could handle it with gloves?"

I glanced down and found that there was a big charred patch on the palm of my left gauntlet.

"On top of that, after Jules went, I ordered everyone to carry a compass whenever they left the dome—even if they were only going back to their quarters. You came over here this morning without yours. I know. I just found it on your locker." He held out one of the little

standard gyro-compasses which had been issued for the trip. We should have thought of them before."

I said slowly, "But that isn't mine, Hans! Look!" I took out my own and showed it to him. "I found that one on the floor of the dome last night and took it with me, meaning to ask around this morning and find out who dropped it, but it slipped my mind."

"Well, I'll withdraw that," said Harnisch. "But whoever lost it ought to have raised hell. Here—take it and find the owner, and give him a bawling out. And if it was Rory—well . . ."

I took the compass without a word.

It was Rory's, of course. I should have guessed.

Once the first fear of impending death had flushed away, I should have known it would be replaced by something more subtle. It can get tiring to concentrate for thirty months solid simply on staying alive, but when you're in XTE work, it just has to be done. I kicked myself thoroughly for not knowing that, especially when Rory had something else preying on his mind. I watched him and myself both after that, even when time went by and the work stayed ahead of schedule.

Our material losses remained well within the thirty per cent. estimate, though the death call had been a hundred per cent. filled. We had only occasional mishaps—as when one man put down a bundle of steel strutting during the repair of the radio masts, forgot to mark the place, and couldn't find them under the dust when he returned; and the time we lost a complete air converter and a hundred yards of tunnel because of a pocket of compressed gas in the rock which had somehow slipped our echo-sounder. But by and large we'd been much more successful than we had any right to be.

We were running so far ahead of schedule by the end of the twenty-eighth month that it looked as if we were going to be able to pull out in a good six weeks under the estimated time. We called a final party under the dome to mark the completion of our surface walls. The following day we only had to set a couple more of the air converters in place, and we could start clearing up to go home. One thing marred the prospect—for some reason which we wouldn't be able to guess at until someone had made a decent study of Venusian meteorology, the wind had got up until our meters ran off the dial at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and we were having to rely on the very speed of the blast to keep the dome clear. Fortunately its curve was smooth, and gave dust no chance to settle in big enough quantities to put a strain on the ribs, but there were creakings and howlings all through our meal

and the get-together afterwards, and we kept being interrupted by the thunderous noise of the storm. It wasn't only picking up dust, this time—it was throwing respectable chunks of rock.

Nonetheless, that wasn't our worry. The dome could take anything the planet had to offer; the walls were as strong as we could make them. The beacon was up, and the air converters were functioning. The next crews in would find living accommodation prepared and our surplus stores piled ready and waiting.

We weren't going to leave much of the liquor, though.

It was getting late when I noticed that Rory, though he was making a gallant effort to keep up with us, was feeling the strain. His eyes kept drooping shut, and his head nodded from time to time.

"The best place for you, young man," I told him as severely as I could in my condition, which was well away, "is bed. I'll give you a hand back to the quarters."

He was too tired to argue. But when I had him safely inside the personnel dome again, and had made sure he was sober enough to get to bed without help, he stopped me as I turned to leave.

"Jorge!"

I turned back. "Yes, what is it?" I'd managed to cure him of calling me Mr. Higgins.

"I hear we may be pulling out in a few days. That true?"

"Once the job's finished, which it will be tomorrow, there's no reason for us to stay. You get paid for the full tour, if that's what's worrying you."

"Thanks, Jorge," he said. "G'night!"

When I'd managed to dress up again for the trip back to the big dome, I looked back one final time. He'd taken the photo of Lula Graham out of his locker and put it proudly on one of the supporting ribs. I smiled, a bit wryly. There wasn't any further need to worry about that—not until he got back to Earth, at least. And then—

Time would tell. I said nothing further, but left the dome.

When I got back to the party, they were singing—as usual. All the old stand-bys for such times were trotted out, one by one, in every language represented: Frankie and Johnny in Japanese, from Matsukuo, Muss i' Denn, Muss i' Denn, *Auprès de ma Blonde*—Bogol's version of that started a downward trend which passed through the mildly unrepeatable ones like *Oh, Sir Jasper Do Not Touch Me!* and a blasphemous parody of *La Golondrina* which Pereira sang and I translated

for the benefit of the non-Spanish-speaking men present—and wound up with the really dirty ones like Martian Jill and the one they call the National Anthem of the Guild of XTE's—Sweet Susie from South Carolina. I never knew just how bad the last one could really be until I heard Koon punctuating the double meanings with slaps of his open hand on his makeshift drum.

We were just giving Susie a second going-over when there was an interruption. Something slapped the dome—once, twice—with a sound like a fist driven into a bag of flour, heavy and yielding. We ducked automatically, but the dome held.

At first I for one was too fuddled to realise what had happened, but Harnisch looked across at Bogol. "That was a good-sized rock," he said softly. "This is really a blow."

Bogol nodded, his face tense and expectant. "If our work can stand that, it can take anything."

We waited, listening, in case it happened again, but it didn't, and gradually the singing began again. I didn't join in. I was looking up at the dome, trying to remember what I hadn't noticed—in which direction and in which order the slaps had sounded. The rock must have been bounced along like a ball of crumpled paper. As far as I could recall, it was running from *there* to *there* . . .

I suddenly had a slow cold feeling of disaster. A premonition, if you like, but since it had already happened, if it had happened, there wasn't much warning about it. I left the group without saying anything, crossed to the lock, and after what seemed like an age I was dressed and outside again.

I walked very slowly towards the personnel dome which had stood at the base of my ship. The wind tugged and tore at me, but I managed to keep my feet. I could have gone faster, even. Somehow I knew it wasn't worth trying.

When I got close enough to see through the dust, I found that the running, tumbling, rolling rock had driven straight through the wall of the dome.

I lifted up the fallen fabric slowly, awkwardly, with my thick gauntlets. I tossed aside the broken pieces of lockers and the scattered personal belongings which I found, letting the wind have them. I worked towards the far corner, where the outline of a still-upright bedstead held the plastic off the ground, tautly delineated by the driving gale. I got a corner of the plastic up from the ground, and the wind whipped under it, almost lifting me off my feet, but I seized the broken end of one of the

firmly-anchored supporting ribs and then—only then—turned my head down to look.

He lay half on, half off the bed, his mouth open in a choking gasp which had drawn in only useless carbon dioxide and nitrogen and the poisonous formaldehyde. He was quite dead.

In one of his outflung hands was something white, with ragged edges. I took it and turned it over. It was one corner of his photograph.

He at least received a proper funeral, not like Jules, who simply lay to mummify in the dust. We had to bury him inside the big dome, of course. We could never have dug a grave in the open air. But XTE's like to be near their work, so we laid his body under the last of the air converters to be put in, and wrote his epitaph in the almost everlasting plastic around it.

We fished out his official documents and found that he had been born in England, and failing any further information, we read the Church of England service over him. Harnisch, as trip boss, did the office.

As we stood in silence, bareheaded, oxygen masks at the ready, around the body, which for want of a shroud was covered with a piece of the torn personnel dome, I thought: at least it was not my fault, or his or anyone's.

Harnisch's voice handled the English poorly, but he was impressive. The sounds die away without echo in the wide dome. I had heard this service before, on Luna, and it had a *final* ring about it that I have never heard in anything else.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can take nothing out," said Harnisch. The men about him shuffled quietly in the all-pervading dust.

It was waiting for something which I remembered. At last it came:

"Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live."

I saw the others stir. That one had gone home!

My mind started to ramble, not really hearing the words, only feeling their meaning. We've found the way to grant the psalmist's wish, I thought, and all it has done is teach us that nothing is certain except the fact of death. And yet—

For the first time I saw what Jules had meant when he turned sour at my joke about the death call—so long ago.

"All our days are gone," said Harnisch. "We bring our years to

an end, as it were a tale that is told."

The tale of Rory Green has been told, I thought. Yet this too is a part of the price we have to pay. The blood-price. And it will not be long before all that is needful is paid.

I thought of the people in the telling of that tale: of Lula Graham, who had—in a way—killed Rory, and of myself and Jules. I thought of the honour that had made him come to Venus in search of a fortune so that he could marry. I thought that in the end it might have been as well for Rory that he did not go back. Later, I knew it was so; but love and honour are not often logical.

"We therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The plastic bed of the air converter covered the filled grave. We went about our tasks.

JOHN BRUNNER

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Case of the Missing Planets

BY KENNETH JOHNS

In this article a well-known writer on scientific matters discusses the origin of what must be among the most mysterious objects in the whole Solar System—the Asteroids

Between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter lie tens of thousands of small planetoids, the asteroids. The problem of their origin has baffled astronomers for hundreds of years and it is only recently that the problem has been solved. During the last few years the application of new methods of radio-active analysis and study have been used to find out not only the age but the conditions under which the asteroids were formed.

Over 1600 asteroids have been named and it is probable that at least 44,000 are visible in the 100 inch telescope, whilst the total number must run to well over 100,000, although many of them are very small.

When astronomers discovered these swarms of small planetoids, the largest is 480 miles across, it was not long before they jumped to the conclusion that they were the remains of a single planet that had, for some unknown reason,

exploded. The fact that the asteroids are rugged chunks of rock and metal and that their orbits are highly eccentric, as would be expected to result from a violent explosion, seemed to favour this explanation.

Some of them come very close to Earth. Hermes once missed us by a bare 485,000 miles, only twice the distance of the Moon, and it is possible for Hermes to come within 220,000 miles of our planet. If one of these asteroids should hit the Earth it would obliterate a continent for, whilst their diameters are measured by only a few miles, the masses of the moderate sized ones are of the order of millions of tons.

The total mass of all the asteroids amounts to only a six hundred and fiftieth of that of Earth. So, if they came from the disintegration of a single planet, that planet could not have been very large.

One asteroid passes closer to

the sun than Mercury so that its surface must glow a dull red before it swoops back to 42 million miles on the other side of the orbit of Mars and becomes freezing cold. Another asteroid has an orbit that is more like a comet's, rising well above the plane of the Solar System.

Five of the moons of the planets, Phoebe of Saturn, VIII, IX and XI of Jupiter and Triton of Neptune, revolve in the opposite direction to the general rotation of the rest of the system's satellites. It is thought that these are asteroids that have been captured at some time in the past and continued in the orbits of satellites. Phoebe is the largest of these, with a diameter of about 200 miles, whilst the others range between 5 and 40 miles in diameter.

As far back as 1803, when only two asteroids were known, it was suggested by an amateur astronomer, Dr. Olbers of Bremen, that they were the remnants of a planet that had exploded. The difficulty is to find a reason for a planet to explode, otherwise it is a fascinating theory.

Various reasons suggested by scientists included tidal forces, rapid rotation causing the whole mass to break up or some vague and undefined chemical reaction. But not one of these theories stands up to critical analysis.

Came the end of the war with Japan and the news of atomic bombs. The emphasis in the explanations slid over to radio-activity building up in the core of the planet until it exploded. Radio-activity can cause a planet to become really hot—but it shouldn't cause a violent explosion.

The curious thing about these theories is that not one of them

covers the possibility of two or more planets having originally been in the one particular orbit. Anyway, there appeared to be no way in which the question could be finally settled and it began to be felt that, until man got out into space and visited the asteroid belt, the problem would remain unsolved.

One of the scientific approaches, whilst suggesting no reason for a planet to explode, was to simply chart their orbits. To find whether these madly careering pieces of rock had, in fact, come from a single ancient planet, their orbits were calculated back in time until they merged into one single sector of space—and that should be where the planet was when it exploded.

The task was so great—and astronomers were continually finding fresh asteroids—that it was left to Professor Hirayama to work on the back-breaking task. Even if each asteroid moved in an undisturbed orbit, disentangling them all would be a difficult enough task: but, in fact, they have been perturbed and changed so much through the millenia that their orbits are a mathematician's nightmare. Some of the asteroids are discovered, their course plotted—and then they are lost. Whether they have their orbits changed by the gravitational forces of the sun or Jupiter, or whether they fall into these giant bodies, can only be guessed. Professor Hirayama worked on and announced that the asteroids could not have originated in a single explosion—he calculated that there must have been at least five points of origin.

This didn't help the explosion theory—the smaller the planet the less the chance of it exploding.

As far as finding out what had happened to the missing planet, or even if there had been a planet there, it appeared that nothing we could do at the moment could give us the answer.

There the story might have rested but for the fact that astronomers, like all good criminologists, took their material to laboratories to be analysed and studied. It is this new evidence that has caused scientists to reopen the case.

The logical thing to do was to examine physically what evidence we had—and that meant re-evaluating the remaining fragments of the missing planet that had fallen on Earth.

On the average, about twenty million meteors enter the Earth's atmosphere every day. Less than five that are more than a few inches in diameter can stand up to friction of the air to reach the surface as meteorites. For these few to have survived the collision with the air they must satisfy certain requirements. If their speeds are too high they will be totally destroyed by the heat of their friction, the greater their speeds the greater amount of heat generated, and they will drift down as dust.

Any body falling into the sun from outside the Solar System must have a speed of at least 26 miles a second by the time it reaches the orbit of Earth, quite enough to destroy all but the very largest. The meteorites that we find have been so little damaged that only a fraction of an inch thick shell of their surfaces are fused by the heat. Consequently, the meteorites that we do find must have low speeds and have come from within the Solar System.

The only logical explanation of

meteorites is that they are small asteroids whose orbits intersected that of Earth on a collision orbit. So, we can actually touch and examine pieces of the missing planet.

It cannot be a coincidence that two types of meteorites are found, corresponding to the structure of Earth. These two types are rocky ones corresponding to the surface and iron-nickel meteorites similar to the core of our planet. The rocky ones are peculiar in that they contain metallic iron, rarely found on Earth, and a number of minerals that cannot exist in the presence of water. This suggests that they were formed under conditions lacking in both oxygen and water.

Examination of the structure of the iron-nickel meteorites gives us an even greater amount of information. The size of the crystals in them shows that they must have crystallised slowly over a period of millions of years, which could have only taken place if they were once part of a planet where the internal heat escaped slowly into space. This is confirmed by the fact that the patterns of the crystals show that they were formed under a pressure corresponding to several thousand atmospheres, such as would be found deep in the heart of a planet.

That the planet was once molten explains the stony material being segregated: it floated to the surface of the metallic core and formed a crust. Further examination of the crystal patterns shows that they are distorted in a way that can only be explained by the sudden release of the pressure under which they were formed.

These facts indicate quite clearly that the asteroids were part of at least one planet, a planet which suddenly disintegrated.

From here, the case was taken up by physicists in an attempt to gauge accurately the age of meteorites. By measuring the radio-activity of the uranium present in them and analysing the disintegration products, they were able to correct for the effect of cosmic rays and tell not only how long ago they crystallised but also for how long they had been wandering in space.

What does a summing up of the evidence show? About 5,000 million years ago a group of planets with diameters between 30 and 500 miles condensed out of the interstellar dust in orbits beyond Mars. They were too small to retain an atmosphere or water. As their masses compacted themselves under the influence of gravity their radio-active heat could not escape and they melted. Then

the radio-activity gradually dropped, the planets cooled and they crystallised in the manner shown by the crystal patterns.

Then, a little over 300 million years ago, two of these planets collided and the sheer force of the collision disintegrated them and wrecked the orbits of the others so that they eventually collided or were caught as moons. The debris formed the asteroid belt.

With the more accurate methods of the future it should be possible to discover from which of the original planets each meteorite has come and the individual history of each planet. The task will be almost superhuman. But we can be absolutely sure that it will be attempted and eventually accomplished so that, when it has been checked by spacemen, the case can be finally closed.

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**FLYING SAUCER REVIEW**  
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**ENGLAND**





*New Hard-Cover Science-Fiction Reviewed by*

**KENNETH F. SLATER**

Our mutual friend and editor, Peter Hamilton, in his letter giving me the dead-line for this "review" instructs me to cover "the British 'between-boards' items during the month or so prior to this date . . ."

Difficult. Normally, I'd be faced with the problem of which to omit so that I'd not run over the space devoted to this column. But despite my remark about "a lot more to come" in the last issue, most of those I had in mind are still coming! So I'm faced with the problem of stretching what I've got to fill the space . . . for right now there are only three hard-covers on my shelf.

The first is W. Grey Walter's first novel, *FURTHER OUTLOOK*, from Duckworth at 12/6. Mr. Walter, in his book on *EGG* research titled *THE LIVING BRAIN*, demonstrated that he was an accomplished writer, able to put "dry" material in entertaining form, and pass on instruction which could be understood by any reasonably intelligent layman. Unfortunately, whilst his ability to write well and entertainingly is still evident in this

work of fiction, the story itself—what little "story" there is—I found almost boring. It is loaded with ideas; overloaded in fact (I recommend the book to any s-f author who is a bit short of ideas), but none of these has been developed. Most of them are set out in a long narrative report occupying seventy of the 224 pages of the book. The ideas range from the economic and sociological results of nuclear power; of mutation arising from the increased radiation level of the earth's surface, atmosphere, etc.; space stations, exploration of Mars, Lunar colonies, an efficient contraceptive developed as a result of the mutations; the de-frosting of the Antarctic by fission/fusion bombs and the consequent geological upheaval (any s-f fan could have warned Mr. Walter's characters of these consequences, I'm rather surprised they overlooked them!); the introduction of new forms of government to meet these conditions. . . .

The list is not quite endless, but appears so. Material here for a great number of novels which I am certain Mr. Walter could produce in delightful fashion.

Surrounding this short history of a possible future is the "plot", based on the motivations of two men and a woman; all three over-endowed with creative spirit, the two men in love with the woman (as also is the narrator of this part of the book), all three somewhat self-sacrificing, all three driving me to tears and hoping for some action. That is what the book lacks, I fear.

Probably some literary critic will hail this book as a top-line s-f work. I make no pretensions, I am no critic. My judgement is based on the entertainment value of a work of fiction, and although I find some parts of this entertaining, the whole leaves me cold. The wrapper blurb says "The Snowflake is perhaps the most in-

genious, convincing and magical vehicle yet dreamt of for space-time travel" . . . as for me, the Snowflake (a time machine) is a very weakly developed, poorly described, bit of gadgetry enabling Mr. Walter to insert those afore-mentioned seventy pages into the right (presumably) place in the book. Otherwise it serves no useful function, which—along with the lack of use Mr. Walter has made of all his other ideas—is a great pity.

The other novel I have is *BEYOND MARS*, by John Stafford Gowland (Gryphon Books, 9/6, 191 pp) and opens out where Wing Commander Philip Keverne, D.S.O., D.F.C., is considering whether to accept a perman-

*By the author of 'Spacelight-Venus'*

## SHADOW OVER THE EARTH

*Philip Wilding*

In 1986 space observers are awaiting Halley's comet. It does not appear, but instead radio telescopes track an unknown object rapidly approaching the earth. It appears to be 360 miles in diameter, and orbits between earth and sun with most alarming consequences.

A gripping story, which will be eagerly read by all readers of Wilding's earlier book. **9/6**

===== **HENNEL LOCKE** =====

*Distributed by Harrap*

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ent commission in the RAF or get a flying job commercially. A letter from his rich and secretive uncle, Sir Michael Keverne, results in a possible third choice. Uncle, a visit reveals, has discovered an element which, when separated from the rock in which it is found, floats up to the ceiling. It is also as hard as any known substance. It is also pliable, and can withstand the most extreme temperatures. "Nor does it conduct impulses. Even X-rays could not penetrate more than a thin film of it".

Philip comments: "Why, its possibilities almost take my breath away". Me, too, likewise. . . .

So much for the pseudo science standard of the book . . . although I cannot resist quoting one phrase from a description of the ship: "it seems that either the weight gets out or gravity gets in . . ."

The rather hackneyed opening to the book, one which has been used in something over half the adventure stories ever written, and the rest of the plot follows on. A trip to the moon, where our brave explorers encounter other beings, who prove to be from Zork (or Mars) and who have learned something of mankind from the BBC, and by visiting Earth in flying saucers. The Zorks are at war with Zertok, and anyone who cares to read the book can establish which planet Zertok may be for himself. Despite the quite fluent writing of Mr. Gowland, I'm afraid his idea of science-fiction and the one I hold are too far apart to allow me to waste further time on this. If you are short a present for your young brother it might be worth while; otherwise, it is no interest to the real s-f reader.

The third and last title is BEST SF TWO, edited by Edmund Crispin, from Faber & Faber at 15/-. 296 pages with fourteen stories. The best term for the book is "representative", although "good collection" would also serve. We have Fredric Brown's PLACET IS A FUNNY PLACE, a rather whacky story about a planet where anything can happen, and most things do—like birds which fly through the foundations of buildings! At the other end of the scale we have items such as that delightful story by Edgar Pangborn, ANGEL'S EGG, and the rather too oft reprinted \* Arthur C. Clarke "semi-horror" THE NINE BILLION NAMES OF GOD—you remember that last line? "Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out". Kornbluth, Bester, Brian Aldiss, Gerald Kersh, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Wyndham, Heinlein . . . yes, indeed, "representative" . . . and of the better s-f at that.

Just a quick note—if you've not read EARTH ABIDES, by George R. Stewart, it is now out in a Corgi Giant at 3/6.

Next time, I hope to be able to pass on information about some more promising books than the first two mentioned here. There are some—there must be! I can't be wrong all the time!

*Reviews of the latest  
hard-cover science-  
fiction appear in  
every issue of Nebula.*

# SCIENTI FILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's  
FORREST J. ACKERMAN

**THE MOLE PEOPLE** is about an underground movement. It takes place in a subterranean city of lost Sumerians, unfortunately found by a hero-scientist, and abounds with mutants, despots, high priests, sacrificial maidens and all the ingredients that made great serials—circa 1925. As Len Moffatt succinctly summed it up, "Recommended to moles". And, I might add, pre-teens; I doubt many adults will dig it. 77 monotonous minutes among the albinos and the buggy-eyed, warty-domed Mole Men with their Halloweeny makeups that might frighten teeny children. The only thing frightening to me about the picture is the amount of money it will probably make, which, despite the fact that the Sumerians were buried "forever" at the end of the picture by the inevitable earthquake, may lead to a sequel: *Mole Men Attack the Earth*, or *They Came from Inner Space*.

Faring not much better is **CURUCU, BEAST OF THE AMAZON**, by that old pro of the "B" scientifics, Curt Siodmak. This, in the end, is a pseudo-scientifilm, as the bird-headed monster turns out not to be for real. A bit of mumbo-jumbo is

thrown in about searching for a basic cancer cure via the jungle formula for shrinking heads. In color and actually shot in Brazil, but you may safely shrink from it unless boa constrictors, stampeding water buffalos, giant spiders and carnivorous piranhas are your meat.

**THE MESA OF LOST WOMEN** is pretty much of a mess. Child star Jackie (The Kid) Coogan is mixed up in this mish-mash about a high plateau in Mexico where a mad scientist has created giant arantulas. For insectophiles, lovers of savage women, and movie-going masochists.

By comparison to the foregoing three, **IT CONQUERED THE WORLD** looks good. But only, repeat, by comparison. Same author-producer-director combination responsible for **THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED** last season, with the same calibre end-product resulting. Maybe a shade better. This does have a certain amount of pace to it, but I gagged at the gimmick of the two-way superadio by which the semi-mad scientist was in casual contact with Venus. Why, I remember even back in 1929, when I was a kid, being skeptical of the easi-

bility of translating inter-planetary messages received by radio, and discussing this topic with a popular author of the era, Aladra Septama. (En passant: my god but they had exotic names, some of those old-timers! Homer Eon Flint, G. Peyton Wertenbaker, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Harl Vincent, Clare Winger Harris, Hendrik Dahl Juve—! What else *could* they have been but science-fiction writers, with otherworldly names like those? Say . . . do you suppose?)

IT CONQUERED THE WORLD pits Peter Graves, young Satellites Project scientist of the U.S. armed forces, against Lee Van Cleet, a sort of self-made scientist who sometimes talks dangerously like a sci-fi fan of the old slan clan. He means well, in collaborating with the survivor from Venus, anticipating a millenium on earth when the super-brain from our neighbour planet arrives. Trouble is, as Graves intuited all along, the Venusian is not neighborly after Van Cleet has aided him to land on earth. Monster (built and activated from the interior by American fan and professional artist Paul Blaisdell) starts taking over key humans à la the heinleinian Puppet Masters by birthing bat-like telepathically controlled messengers that attack people on the back of their necks and turn them into zombies. The invading Venusian is finally done away with, rather anticlimatically I fear, with a mere blowtorch.

Well, you've had a big dose of depression, now let's see if there's anything coming up on the bright side.

If a decent job is done on John Wyndham's "Out of the Deep", that could be something worth looking forward to.

RKO will presumably make an

"A" production out of Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth", and has taken over Paramount's option on H. G. Wells' "Food of the Gods". Unless the heads of the Studio are too tranquilized by Miltowns to get excited over the fact, they may some day wake up to the realization that they own and have owned for 25 years the screen rights to Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World".

Producer Brynie Foy will essay production of "The Mysterious Island", and is negotiating with the estate of Wells for film rights to "The Star".

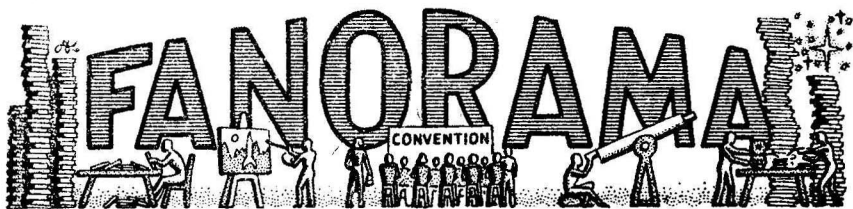
Wilson Tucker's "Man from Tomorrow" (née "Wild Talents") has been purchased.

"Snow Fury", a Doubleday Science Fiction Club selection, has been sold.

Richard Matheson told me the other night he thought Bel-Air would be buying his "I Am Legend". And where did he tell me this? Appropriately enough, we were seeing a rare 16mm. print of VAMUY—German dialog with Danish subtitles! On the twin horror bill, the silent HANDS OF ORLAC, starring Conrad Veidt.

Relating to things vampiric, I am reminded that on what would have been the 74th birthday of the recently deceased Bela Lugosi, I accompanied his widow to a memorial stage presentation of the role he created and made world-famous DRACULA.

"The Jet-Propelled Couch" can jet off in either direction: great or god-awful. I had a tremendous amount of respect for the author, the late Dr. Robert Lindner, and now that he is no longer here to protect himself, hope they don't do something to his work that will cause him to turn over in his grave.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you

Have you ever noticed how oddly the people in stories behave? I mean the extreme reactions they have, and the way they get into all sorts of unnecessary bother through silly misunderstandings, and how at the beginning of stories they keep telling each other things that they know quite well, and then don't explain anything else until the last page, and so on. There's something wrong with the lot of them, and I think I've found out what it is.

They smoke too much.

I've been noticing this for years, but I never bothered drawing it to your attention, because I figured that after all it was no business of mine. We all have our faults and it ill behoves anyone to point the finger of scorn. But the other day I was reading a story in an American SF magazine and a new aspect of the matter struck me.

This story was called "Break-away", and it's all about how this fellow wanted to go to space and his wife was mad at him because she wanted him to stay home and he got so worked up about her attitude that the psychologists wouldn't let him go after all and then he got mad at his wife, so everybody was unhappy in the

end. You can see rightaway that there's something wrong with these people, and you don't have to look far to see exactly what it is.

At the bottom of the first page the hero comes into the living room and finds his wife with a cigarette in her fingers, "burned down too far". (The cigarette, I assume, not her fingers.) The observant author goes on to describe how she crushes it in the ashtray on the maple coffee table. (note that, *maple* coffee table. This is *literature*, man. Realism. An ordinary superficial author would have missed out on subtle nuances like that), and takes another from the pack. During the next two-thirds of a page she says 103 words, turns her head away, brushes away tears, holds the hero's arms tightly, drops her eyes and picks up *yet another* cigarette from the pack on the coffee table. (See, it's still there. This is known as the dramatic unities.) In the intervals her voice has been breaking, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs and the colour has drained from her cheeks.

Now this may seem like quite an eventful evening, especially when she was apparently puffing away hard at that cigarette all the

time, but you know, when you work it out, that programme of activities doesn't really take so very long. Such is my selfless devotion to the cause of truth and literature that I have actually personally carried out the experiment; and I assure you that even reading her and the hero's dialogue at dictation speed and performing all the actions in slow motion, the whole performance can be gone through in 1 minute 75 seconds dead.

You see what I'm driving at. This girl has smoked a whole cigarette in less than two minutes. A good deal less, actually, if you deduct the time taken up by talking, armgripping and tearbrushing. An American cigarette too, none of your Woodbines. Why, the girl must have been drawing like a furnace. No wonder the colour drained from her face. No wonder she's in such a nervous state. No wonder she doesn't want her husband to go to space. Who's going to keep her in cigarettes?

You may say she must have put the cigarette down and let it go out, and I agree that's plausible what with all that armgripping and tearbrushing, hazardous things to do with a lighted cigarette smouldering away, probably burning a hole in the maple coffee table. Sheer waste any way you look at it. You may say, hell it's her cigarette and her coffee table, but look at it this way. That first cigarette took 25 words just to put out, and the second one took 38 more words just to light. That means that at 3c a word each cigarette is costing the editor nearly two dollars, and that's not counting the cost of the ashtray and the maple coffee table. That's what I call an expensive vice—

and don't forget, friends, it's *our* money.

### Reviews

*TRIODE*, No. 8. *Eric Bentcliffe and Terry Jeeves, 47 Alldis St., Great Moor, Stockport, Cheshire. 1/-*. This large well-filled issue contains columns by the editors and Mal Ashworth, a fascinating report of a Swedish fan convention by Lars Helander, a hilariously esoteric instalment of a Future History of Fandom by the inventive John Berry, and lots of interesting letters, but to me the high point of the issue is a blow-by-blow account by Dave Newman of the events behind the scenes before and after the appearance of the Liverpool Group on a commercial television programme. After reading this graphic report you wonder how any such program ever gets on the air and manages to stay there. It's amazing how little of this psychic disturbance that pervades the studio is transmitted to the viewers.

*PLOY*, No. 7. *Ron Bennett, 7 Southway, Arthurs Avenue, Harrogate, Yorks. 1/-*. The most notable item here is a long, polished and extremely interesting column by someone who hides his light under a bushel called 'Phoenix', but the magazine has lots of other varied material including an amusing personal account by Stuart Mackenzie of his troubles as a kilt-wearer in getting aboard a U.S. Army plane during the Berlin airlift. The Regulations said, presumably to protect the modesty or health of female passengers, that "all personnel will wear pants", and rather than throw their planes out of kilter, they were prepared to throw this kilter out of their planes.





# GUIDED MISSIVES

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Ed.: I have just received my copy of *NEBULA* No. 18 and was most impressed by the really magnificent line-up to stories in that issue.

"Outside Position" gets my vote as the best story in this issue, a truly delightful combination of science fiction and humour, it is really pleasant to see Wm. F. Temple with a story in *NEBULA* again.

Another author whom we are all pleased to see in *NEBULA* once more is Brian W. Aldiss whose story "T" struck me as being a minor classic in the S.F. field.

All the other stories came up to the usual *NEBULA* standard. E. C. Tubb particularly seemed at the top of his form in "Reluctant Farmer".

Features were interesting but personally I would prefer more story material instead of these. I like the idea of spot-lighting one of your newer artists by printing nothing but his illustrations in this issue. Is this to be the permanent feature in the magazine from now on?

Finally could we expect *NEBULA* out regularly—perhaps even monthly—in the future?

JOHN BRAIDWOOD,  
Cardiff.

\* *Thanks for your round-up of NEBULA No. 18, Mr. Braidwood, I just wish more readers would take the trouble to be as exhaustive in their comments as you have been.*

*I am glad to say that NEBULA is back on a regular bi-monthly schedule once again, and as I mentioned before, we have high hopes of going monthly before the end of 1957.*

Dear Ed.: It is going to be fairly hard picking the lead stories in issue No. 17 as they are all excellent reading. However I think that Ted Tubb's short story "Into the Empty Dark" sneaked in first with "Cry Wolf" a close and amusing 2nd. John Brunner's "By the Name of Man"—a well written and interesting story—merited 3rd place followed by "Project Pseudoman" which I thought was not quite as interesting as the latter.

Sorry I can't agree with Forrest Ackerman's comments on "Forbidden Planet", to my knowledge this was the best they have made yet, apart from War of the Worlds and Conquest of Space.

P. BUCKLE,  
Leeds, 13,  
Yorks.



\* *Thanks for your interesting letter on NEBULA No. 17 Mr. Buckle. Yes, it seems that Forry Ackerman has been well outvoted by NEBULA readers who seem to be unanimous that Forbidden Planet is the best Science-Fiction movie yet made.*

Dear Ed.: I suppose it is impossible for an English magazine to use American artists to illustrate the stories, which is unfortunate because the story illustrations are in my opinion rather weak although the covers—particularly the front covers—are usually very good.

IVOR MAYNE.  
London, N.4.

\* *I am sorry, Ivor, but I cannot give an opinion on the illustrating problems of English magazines, but speaking for NEBULA (which is published in Scotland), I prefer to use British illustrating as well as writing talent. This policy so far has been acclaimed by readers on both sides of the Atlantic who seem to disagree with your opinion of our interior illustrations.*

Dear Ed.: I would like to take up a point by Ron Bennett in your issue where he pointed out that women could successfully invade the male field while men could not invade the female field. To support this argument Mr. Bennett somewhat naively pointed out that a man could not have a baby, but surely this is reducing things to the merely physical plane? To my knowledge women do not excel in boxing and wrestling and other fields which require merely brute strength.

The fact remains that, other

things being equal, men excel by having more imagination and courage and by being less content with things as they are. If one provides a woman with a fur coat, a box of chocolates and an admiring boy-friend she wishes for nothing more—hardly the mental attitude which has raised us from the caves.

ALFRED WELSH,  
Kettering.

\* *No comment.*

Dear Ed.: I noticed on reading your eighteenth issue that there are none of the usual advertisements which usually lower the tone of "paperbacks"—invitations to join crank societies, patent methods of giving up smoking and so on.

I have often been annoyed by the magazine which purports to be for intelligent readers and yet contains advertisements for magic charms and suchlike. Still, I realize that the cash is necessary.

Although I am pleased by their absence, I would be pleased even more if you could tell us how you produce such a magnificent magazine for two bob without the ads. I mentioned.

A. H. OGDEN,  
Bristol, 8.

\* *Thanks for the letter, Mr. Ogden. I am pleased that you approve of my policy of maintaining advertising material at a uniformly high standard with the rest of the magazine and in response to your query I have found that most people who are readers of science-fiction prefer this approach to advertisements, and that while a certain amount of money is lost through advertising revenue circulation is improved.*

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To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1956 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below and post it to NEBULA, 159, Crownpoint Rd., Glasgow, S.E., immediately.

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| The Great Armadas     |  |
| Dumb Show             |  |
| The Evidence          |  |
| Whispering Gallery    |  |
| City At Random        |  |
| Flesh and Blood       |  |
| The Number of My Days |  |

*Name and Address*

Miss Freda McNeil of Birmingham, 5, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in NEBULA No. 17. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:—

1. INTO THE EMPTY DARK  
By E. C. Tubb 24.0%
2. BY THE NAME OF MAN  
By John Brunner 19.3%
2. WRATH OF THE GODS  
By Philip E. High 19.3%
4. PROJECT PSEUDOMAN  
By Kenneth Bulmer 18.9%
5. CRY WOLF  
By Arthur Sellings 9.5%
6. STORM WARNING  
By Eric Frank Russell 9.0%

The result of the Poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 21.

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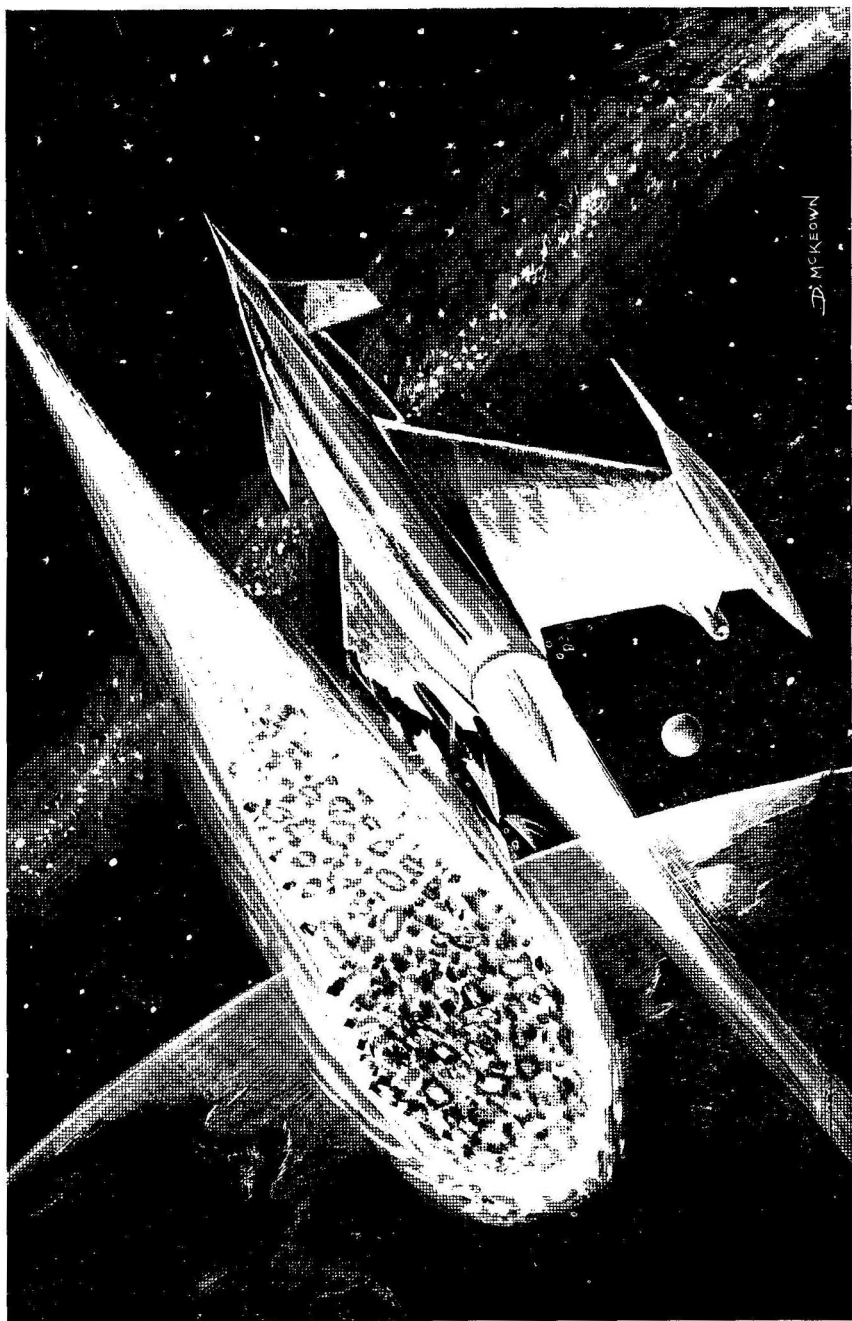
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