

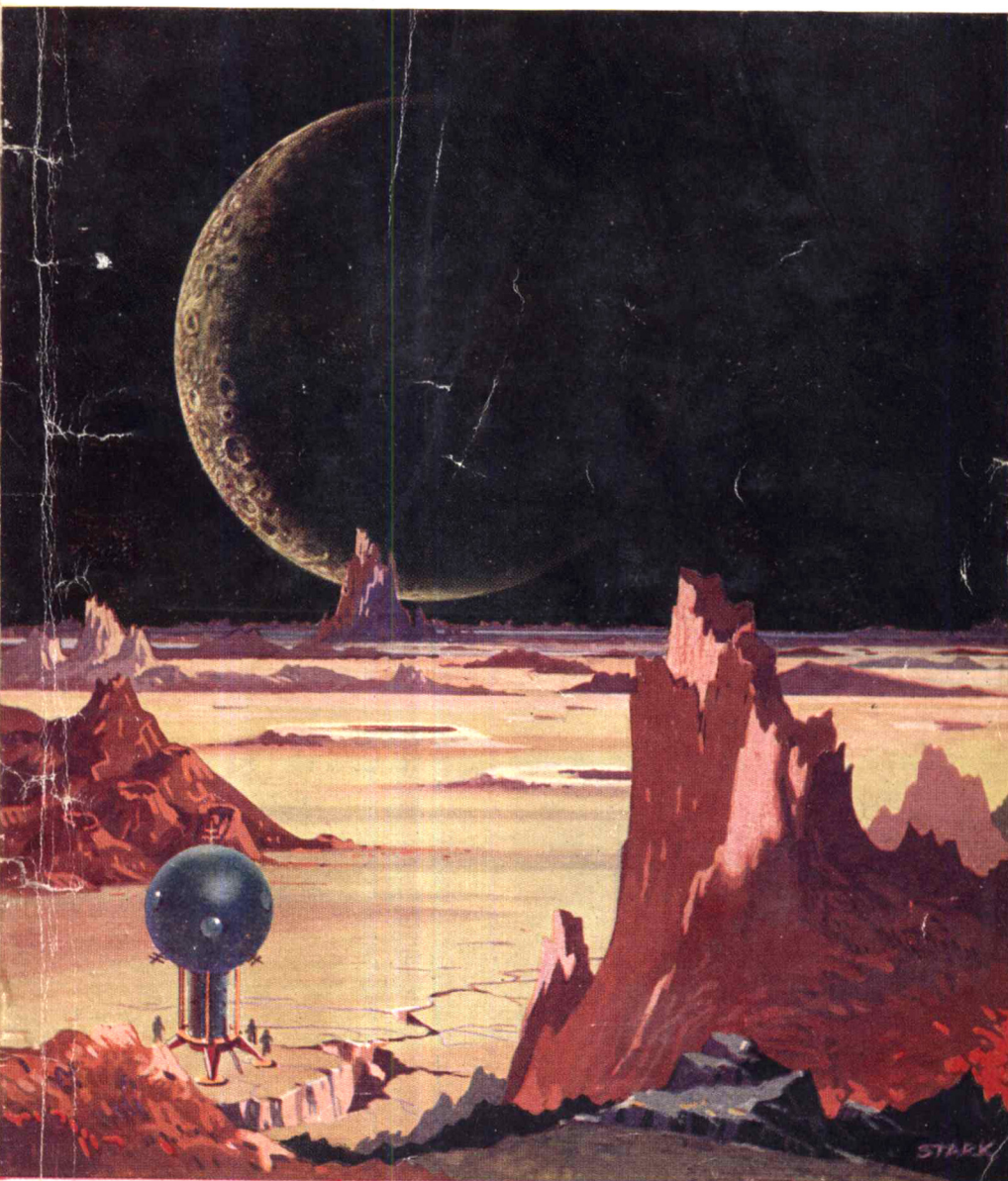
NEBULA

MONTHLY

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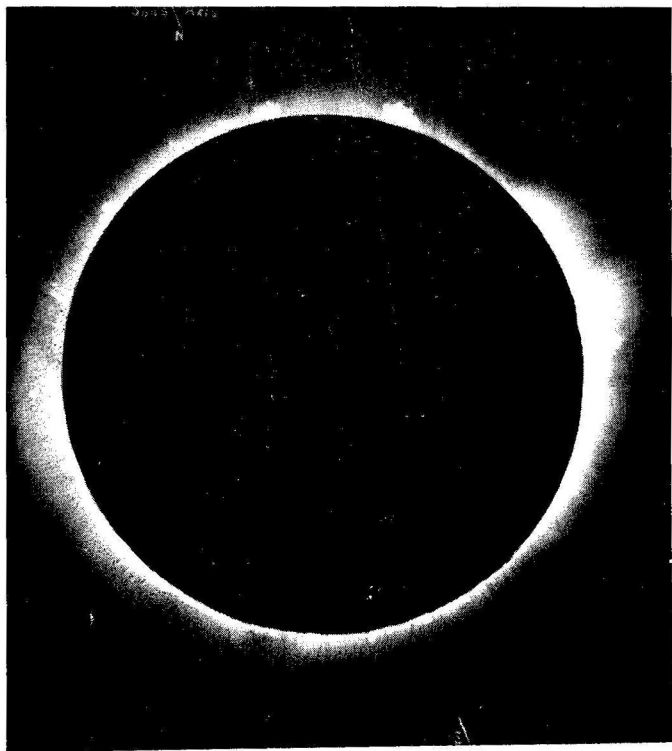
SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 26



FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

STATION SOL



Total Solar Eclipse (Crown Copyright,
Science Museum, London)

KENNETH JOHNS

The Sun is not all it seems. There is a strange, invisible Sun in our sky, a Sun with a disc four times the area of the star we think of as our primary, a Sun that was undreamed of just a few years ago. This unknown Sun is a variable star, altering its energy output a millionfold in a few seconds.

This is the only Sun of its type actually detected by astronomers. They call it the Radio Sun. Together with the heat, light, electrons, hydrogen nuclei and x-rays that are poured forth by our Sun, there is a constant emission of radio waves, and, if you tune into the Sun with a loudspeaker you will hear an intense hissing—this really is the Sun sizzling.

Yet these all-pervading radio waves come not from the great sphere of gas limited by the photosphere that makes up the familiar Sun we know by day. They originate from the rarefied solar atmosphere that sprawls out

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

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Look here .

Last October I promised you another issue of NEBULA out on schedule in November—it has been impossible to produce it until now. I realise that many of our readers who take the magazine regularly must have been disappointed by its non-appearance during the last two months, and I believe that there were even some wild rumours afoot that the magazine had ceased publication altogether. I was, however, faced by the simple alternative of having to disappoint our regular readers for two months while certain modifications were being made in technical arrangements for the magazine, or run the risk of disappointing you all over a much longer period by being forced to let it skip issues, appear late, and be generally difficult to obtain at various local selling points.

It has taken me these two months to straighten out our technical difficulties and we can now look forward to a regular and lively monthly publication for NEBULA from the current issue. Many of your favourite authors are lined up to appear in future issues and I have a variety of surprise items and special treats among the stories awaiting you. Yes, it looks as though 1958 is really going to be a big year for NEBULA and, of course, for all its readers.

As this issue goes to press the latest news is of the second Russian Satellite, and reaction to this amazing scientific achievement here in Great Britain would seem to be chiefly one of profound shock and horror that the nasty Soviet scientists should have the heart to put a dog on board to test the reaction of a living creature to spacial conditions.

Since the end of the 1939-45 war there have been many “little” wars in which countless thousands of men, women, children—and even dogs—have been slaughtered remorselessly, yet I am quite at a loss to recall any comparably publicised outcry from the British public on these occasions. As is quite obvious even to the least intelligent among us, these conflicts were the futile and criminally wasteful destruction of life and property which brought no gain of any kind to anyone, whereas the historic space exploration programme being carried out by the Russians may well open the door to the stars.

A human race so illogical as to deny itself the fulfilment of space travel to prevent the only possible destruction of one dog, while at the same time it feels no apparent remorse at the self-inflicted destruction of countless of its own species seems hardly fitted to receive the prize which the Russian scientists and their canine assistant offer us.

Peter Hamilton

Training Aid

The aliens were closing in on Earth—was there still time to discover the one deadly flaw in Terran defence?

The room was warm and dark, smelling faintly of metal, warm insulation, plastic, human sweat and animal fear. Wrong, of course, metal does not smell, not machined, crackle-finished alloy and the insulation couldn't smell unless it fused. Plastic doesn't smell either so that was imagination too, but there was no imagination about the human sweat and animal fear. Mark Curtway knew that they were very real and very personal.

It was natural to be afraid, he supposed, shut in an outsized coffin, staring at a screen, waiting for the ruby fleck of a Frenshi ship to make its appearance. The darkness was lit by the baleful eyes of the tell-tales, the tiny light overpowered by the cyclops of the GP screen. It was big that screen, it had to be to incorporate a three hundred and sixty degree of vision, but in contrast the chair which supported him was as small as could be devised. It hugged him, embraced him rather, like a second skin. He could move his arms a little, his hands freely, twist his head a trifle and that was all. He was a pair of eyes and a pair of hands coupled by a brain, the whole strapped before a general purpose screen.

A machine, he thought grimly. A human component wedded to

alloy and plastic. Surgery would have made the job more efficient but medical science hadn't yet reached the stage where a man could be turned into a permanent part of a machine. But it would come. It might have to come.

Abruptly the screen flared with a fleck of ruby light and, at the same time, the chair jerked forward. Before he was consciously aware of what he was doing his hands had flickered over the controls. Something whined and the screen blurred for a moment, steadying as cross lines centred on the Frenshi ship. Buttons sank beneath his fingers and tell-tales flared their message. The red fleck vanished from the star-shot screen and the hiss and thud of the reloaders drowned the steady purr of the air conditioners. The screen shone blank, empty of menace, the cold spangle of the stars signalling peace. With peace came danger.

He knew it but could do nothing about it. The human animal is not designed to operate for long periods at optimum conditions of mental and physical alertness. Eyes which stare too long and too hard sometimes refuse to see the very thing they are watching for. Nerves, overtensed to perform certain actions at a certain signal, can refuse to recognise those signals when they appear. To remain alert a man needs to relax a little in the lull between action. He has to ease his muscles, rest his eyes, switch off, as it were, from optimum concentration.

So Curtway forced himself to relax a little, cutting off his conscious mind from his hands and eyes. The eyes would see and the hands would act, and they would operate in closer harmony if he didn't interfere. Conscious direction, like over-prolonged tension, was a luxury he couldn't afford.

The screen flared again and his hands moved as with a life of their own. Buttons sank beneath his fingers and the whine of gyros merged with the hiss and thud of the reloaders. A second fleck joined the first and his lips thinned as his fear mounted.

It was a gamble he was running, a gamble in which there could be only one winner. Either he wiped the red flecks off his screen or the enemy would wipe him off theirs. If they had screens, that is, or eyes with which to see them. No one had ever seen the enemy, the true enemy, the things which guided the ships which were the targets. All anyone living had ever seen was the alien shape of their vessels, but a few things were known about the Frenshi, the effect of their weapons, in particular, which were utterly and horribly final. That and the one inescapable fact which had resulted from the contact of the two races.

It was a brutally simple fact; when Frenshi and Terran met one died. Sometimes both died but never yet had both survived. It was the twenty-first century's version of the law of the jungle. Fight or die. Kill or be killed.

The end? Curtway neither knew nor cared as to that. All his alertness was concentrated on the problem of survival. His hands moved in smooth co-ordination with the images transmitted by his eyes. Beneath him the chair bucked and heaved, tell-tales flashed their messages to die as his hands touched buttons. It was a time of insane confusion, a time in which conscious thought was impossible and only trained reflexes could handle what had to be done.

Curtway had good reflexes, if he hadn't he would have been dead a long time ago. Now he gave them free rein, divorcing them from the tension mounting within him, the sick tension born of fear and anger. He was fighting for his life and he knew it. And Curtway valued his life.

The screen cleared, not simply cleared of the red flecks but cleared of the star-shot background of space. It shone a pearly white, matching the lights which sprang to life in the ceiling and, as the screen cleared the tell-tales winked out, the purr of the air conditioner, the whine of the gyros, all the other little sounds so natural to a ship in space faded and died.

Curtway shook his head, closing his eyes and feeling again the shock of the abrupt transition from the world of make-believe to the world of reality. It had seemed so real. He had been back in space again, fitted into the wasp like a pea into its pod, with all eternity around him and the Frenshi in his sights. He sat, waiting for his heart to slow down, for the adrenaline released into his blood to dissipate its effects. He sighed and reached for the release lever of the chair. Metal slid on plastic and he was free of the form-hugging confines. He rose, still feeling a vague regret that he was here, on Earth, instead of somewhere beyond Saturn. He turned as the door opened and the duty-technician looked into the room. The man seemed anxious.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Perfect, just like the real thing." He followed the technician into the corridor, closing the door behind him. To either side other doors led into exact replicas of the room he had just left. Each room was a perfect simulacrum of the control cabin of a wasp fighter. Each room was occupied by an embryo pilot intent on his training. Mark felt a momentary sense of guilt that, because of his desire to experi-

ence again the thrill and rush of combat, even in make-believe, he had caused someone to forgo some training time. He could justify it easily enough, it was his responsibility to make sure that the simulators were operated and programmed correctly, but he knew that his real reason for making the test had been a personal one. Curiosity prompted his question. "How did I make out?"

"A clear run, sir." The technician had lost his anxiety. "Sorry I had to cut the run short but a message arrived from Colonel Hendersley. You are wanted in the projection room."

"Thank you." Mark hid his disappointment. He'd asked for the programming to be stepped up until he failed; now he would have to take the run-through again or be left in doubt as to his own capabilities. Unless the technician was lying, of course, diplomatic strategy, tact, bootlicking, call it what you will, wasn't unknown even in ComTrain H.Q. Was more prevalent, if anything, than elsewhere.

He dismissed the thought as he strode towards the projection room.

Hendersley spotted him as he entered the long, low room, flanked by a screen, dotted with chairs, half-filled with men smoking and talking in whispers. The colonel was a dour-faced, wizened little man who never seemed to fit his uniform. His mouth creased in a smile as Mark joined him and he waved to a seat at his side.

"Sorry to cut short your test, Mark, but the big chief is on the warpath."

"Lemain?"

"None other. He flew in a short while ago and called a meeting of ComTrain executive. That makes your presence essential."

"Nice to be wanted," said Mary drily. He leaned back, surveying the others present. He knew most of them, heads and chiefs of different departments, and the others bore the familiar stamp of professional military personnel. A couple of youngsters wore the uniform of active waspers and he felt a sharp envy. "Any news on my transfer?"

"Do we have to go all through that again?" Hendersley reached into a pocket and produced cigarettes. He passed one to Mark, stuck another into his mouth and made a ceremony of lighting them. "A man can't always do what he wants to do, Mark. Especially in a war he can't. In times like these a man sometimes has to be forced to do the best thing for the majority."

"Like killing the Frenshi?"

"Like teaching others to kill the Frenshi," corrected Hendersley.

He drew at his cigarette, sent plumes of smoke coiling towards the ceiling, watched them until they shredded into the general haze. "As a wasp fighter pilot you are probably the best we have. You chalked up a big score, bigger than any three others put together, and you didn't show any signs of going psychotic while doing it. That makes you a valuable man, Mark. Too valuable to throw away"

"So you pulled me from combat duty and stuck me in Com-Train." Mark was bitter. "Hero's reward?"

"Selfish necessity." Hendersley was curt. "A war isn't a one-man show, Mark, no matter how good that man might be. Alone you could never stop the Frenshi, no matter how many ships you had, how charmed your life might be. You just couldn't cover enough space to do it, you just couldn't live long enough if you could. But a thousand extensions of you, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, even more, well, they can stop the Frenshi and end the war. And the more extensions of you we have the quicker it will be over."

"Extensions," said Mark. "You make me sound like an octopus."

"You're a mould from which we hope to cast others like you," said Hendersley seriously. "We want to find out just what made you so good as a pilot and teach that something to others. If you go back into combat duty you'll maybe kill a few Frenshi before they finally get you. And they will get you in the end, Mark, make no mistake about that. When they do you'll be dead and your skill with you. I want to save that skill."

"You've saved it."

"Maybe." Hendersley didn't sound too convinced.

"What do you mean?" Mark stared at the older man. "The simulacrum is perfect, I can swear to it. We're turning out men who train under actual battle conditions. I tell you that there isn't a scrap of difference between the control cabin of a wasp and the training cubicles."

"And they pass out a hundred per cent." Hendersley gestured with his cigarette. "You don't have to tell me my job, Mark, I'm as well briefed as you are."

"Sorry." Mark drew at his cigarette, found it had gone out, reached for his lighter then changed his mind as General Lemain walked into the projection room and mounted the dais before the screen.

Lemain was a tall, thin man with hooded eyes and a great beak

of a nose. In peacetime the cartoonists had depicted him as a vulture battenning on the taxpayers for his own aggrandisement. Now they depicted him as an eagle ready to rend and claw the invader. To some of them, that is, the war was still too far away, the Frenshi too unreal to cause overmuch concern among the civilians at home. So Lemain had become the butt and figurehead of politicians who either used him as their hero or their foil depending on the political mood of the time.

Lemain didn't mind or, if he did, he didn't show it. With civilians he could be gentle, pandering to their opinions. With politicians he could be firm or yielding, depending on what he was after and how much he was prepared to yield to gain his own ends. With the staff of ComTrain he didn't have to be either. They weren't civilians; they were military personnel.

"At ease, gentlemen." His voice, not loud, was penetrating, acid, decisive. "Take your seats, please. You may smoke."

A rustle passed over the assembled men. Mark remembered his unsmoked cigarette, reached for his lighter and whispered to Hendersley.

"What's this all about?"

"No idea." Hendersley didn't shrug but his voice sounded as if he had. "Why not wait and find out?" They didn't have to wait long.

"At sixteen hundred hours Universal Space Time the Frenshi destroyed our base on Titan, Saturn's moon." Lemain could have been talking about the weather, so casual did he sound. "All wasp fighters, those remaining in combat, were recalled to the mother ships and a fresh line of defence will be prepared around Jupiter." His deep-set eyes flickered over his stunned audience. "Experience has shown that ground-based offensive and defensive armament has only short-term effectiveness against the enemy. Logistics and the computation of logical probabilities show that, on the basis of all known factors, the Frenshi will inevitably overrun the satellites of Jupiter. Withdrawal of our forces to the Asteroid Belt with their resultant wide dispersion will do little to barricade the route to Mars. The situation is grave."

As an understatement it was a masterpiece and everyone in the room knew it. A man sprang to his feet, military protocol forgotten. Mark recognised Captain Barr and remembered that the man's home was on Mars. His family too, probably, it explained his agitation.

"What the hell are we sitting here for? We've got to stop the"

"Please!" The whiplash of Lemain's acid voice acted like a douche of ice water. "I can assure you that everything possible is being done." He paused. "At least, by all other service departments."

"Meaning?" Mark was surprised to find himself on his feet. He felt suddenly self-conscious, aware of eyes staring at him, then dismissed the feeling. If Lemain had spoken the truth this was no time for worrying about trifles.

"Sit down, Mark!" Hendersley grabbed at his arm. Mark brushed it aside, feeling anger rise within him.

"You said something, sir." Even in his anger he remembered the title. "You said something and you hinted something."

"Your name?" Lemain's eyes glittered as he moved across the dais.

"Captain Mark Curtway, late active wasp pilot." Mark swallowed, horribly aware of the position in which he had placed himself. His anger rose again, washing away all reluctance, awe of the tall, thin man on the dais, all shyness.

"You were saying?" Lemain's voice hadn't altered, but now he spoke to Mark as if they were alone.

"No, sir, it is you who was doing the talking." Mark took a deep breath, forced himself to speak quietly and calmly. "You have just made an announcement and it was a serious one. You have told us that we are on the retreat. We all know of the Frenshi and what they can do and the picture you painted isn't a pretty one. You then hinted, by inference, that someone, some department, wasn't doing its best to help the war against the Frenshi. I resent that."

"Indeed?"

"I have no love for the Frenshi," said Mark thickly. "And I have no liking for being told that I'm not doing my best against them."

"The truth," said Lemain evenly, "sometimes hurts."

"The truth!" Mark fought Hendersley's grip on his arm. "Damn you! You..."

"Be seated!" Even then Lemain didn't lose his self-control. His hooded eyes scanned each man in the room as if he had already forgotten Mark's protest. Hendersley, winning at last, gasped with relief as Mark slumped down beside him.

"Are you begging for trouble! You'll be lucky if Lemain doesn't bust you down to latrine orderly for the duration for this!" He was probably exaggerating, but Mark didn't care. He was listening to Lemain.

"A piece of machinery is, in the final essence, only as good as the man who controls it. It would be nice if we had fully automatic wasp fighters. It would be better if we could wholly dispense with human personnel in this war with the Frenshi but unfortunately we can't do that. We still need the human element. We still have, in the final essence, to rely on flesh and blood, brain and sinew. We can build ships, mother ships, transports, supply vessels, and we can crew them. We can build wasp fighters, all of them we can use, but we are not managing to find the men to pilot them. That is ComTrain's duty and ComTrain is not doing its job."

Lemain was a good showman and he knew the value of drama. Before anyone could protest he made a signal. The lights winked out in the projection room and a beam of light sliced the darkness from the projection booth. A moving picture in full colour filled the screen, a picture marred by his tall silhouette. He stepped to one side before introducing the film.

"You all recognise the scene, it's the control room of a wasp. The pilot is on an actual combat mission. Watch!"

Mark, as did the others, watched, they couldn't help it. To Mark the scene was all too familiar, only the pilot was strange. He was a fresh-faced youngster, his high-G helmet and suit giving him a spurious look of aggressiveness. He seemed relaxed, even smiling, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"The pilot is unaware of the camera," said Lemain, his voice somehow hollow in the darkness. "A wide angle lens was used to give maximum coverage."

Mark ignored the technical details, his eyes glued to the screen. To one side he caught a glimpse of the wasp's G.P. screen, dotted with stars, but distorted and unclear. The control board was in direct vision and prominence had been given to the pilot's features. They were still relaxed, still smiling.

Tell-tales suddenly winked on the control board and the pilot's hands danced over his controls. Mark, leaning forward in his chair, felt uneasy. It was wrong, all wrong. The smile, the pilot's air of relaxation, the casual, almost leisurely way he moved his hands. And that smile! Mark couldn't get over the smile.

And then the pilot lost his easy grin. He lost more than that, much more. One second he was smiling to himself, relaxed, his eyes crinkled like a small boy enjoying a treat, the next. . . .

The Frenshi vibrations were all too well known, but even so no one could see their effect and remain unmoved. Flesh literally lost its cohesion, ran like butter in the sun, twisted as it yielded to the

firmer bone then sagged as that dissolved in turn. For one second the screen depicted a faceless horror, scrabbling desperately at the controls, then the picture froze into ghastly immobility.

"This was a ComTrain produced pilot," said Lemain evenly. "Ten per cent. of all fighters engaged on this particular mission were fitted with cameras. Disintegration of the pilot released the detonation button and the units were blown clear. Of all cameras so used this was the only one recovered." He pointed with his hand, his arm cutting the projection beam, his shadowed fingers appearing to touch the ruined horror of a face.

"Fifty per cent. of all fighters on that mission died as this man died. One-half of the pilots produced by this department were lost on their first engagement with the enemy. It seems reasonable to assume that either all the pilots were only half trained and those who survived did so from sheer chance, or that one-half of the pilots were never trained for combat duty at all."

He made a gesture and, in slow motion, the film began to run its course. As an object lesson on the effects of Frenshi vibrations it was more than effective. Slowly the pilot began to disintegrate, and it was terribly obvious that, despite the flux of his body, he remained conscious and aware to the last.

"ComTrain is responsible for the production of wasp pilots," said Lemain quietly. He seemed unaware of the screen by which he stood. "And wasp fighters are the only effective means we have of stopping the advance of the Frenshi. What you are now seeing happened to the personnel of the satellites of Saturn. It will happen to the personnel of the satellites of Jupiter, to the colonists of Mars and Venus and, finally, to the inhabitants of Earth. And if it does it will be the direct responsibility of you in this room!"

His logic was inescapable.

"Fifty per cent," said Mark. "I can't believe it." It was later, days, hours, Mark didn't know. The assembly had broken up and, since the showing of the film everyone connected with ComTrain had been searching their hearts. Had they been too smugly assured that their own work was as good as it could have been? Had they tended to rest on previous accomplishments? Had they, perhaps, been going the wrong way about things? No one could be sure, but of one thing they were certain. Unless ComTrain could produce better pilots then heads would roll. Lemain, despite his outward coldness, his icy calm, had made that very clear.

Mark couldn't blame him. In wartime mistakes were inevitable

and, in the long run, both men and machines were expendable. They were expendable now, to a degree, but not to the extent of fifty per cent. losses of fighter pilots. And this was no normal war. The enemies weren't human enemies. There could be no armistice, no truce, no settling down and readjustment after the conflict was over. This was a war to the finish; the film had merely underlined the obvious.

"Lemain wasn't lying," said Hendersley. He looked tired, his uniform rumpled and spotted with cigarette ash. He needed a shave and his hair was a mess. He reached for his coffee, stared down at the black mess at the bottom of the cup, sipped it and pushed it aside. "I've checked his figures, we all have. Each time a mission goes out to intercept a fresh wave of the Frenshi a half of them fail to return. Maybe if we had enough men to man the ships it wouldn't matter but we haven't. It takes time to train a wasper and we haven't got that much time."

"But why now?" Mark was irritable, a nervous irritation born of fatigue and worry. "It doesn't make sense, we did better than that in the old days."

"Are you sure about that?" Hendersley didn't wait for an answer. He reached for the phone, dialled a number, waited, his fingers drumming on the desk. "Mary? Hendersley here. Those figures come through yet? They have? Good, bring them up will you? And bring some coffee too, this stuff we have here tastes like mud." He replaced the receiver and met Mark's questioning expression. "I'm getting some figures from Statistics, they should be interesting."

"Anything from Medical?"

"Negative. The men we send out are one hundred per cent. fit and tested to twenty G without blackout."

"Reflexes?"

"As high as we can get, higher than normal." Hendersley sucked at his cheeks, the sudden hollows giving him a look of age. "The material is good, Mark, it's what we do with it that's at fault."

"You agree with Lemain, then?"

"What else can I do?" Hendersley lit a fresh cigarette, blew smoke towards the air vent. "Lemain isn't playing, Mark, and I don't blame him. He's fighting a losing war and he knows it. He's boiled down the factor at fault and we're it."

Mark sighed, reluctant to agree but honest enough to admit the logic of the conclusion. He wondered if it had been his own inward

subconscious knowledge of inadequacy which had made him stand up in the projection room and defend ComTrain against the general's accusation. Or had it been a natural, outraged pride which had made him defend his accomplishments? Not that it mattered, not now. Lemain's shock treatment had overridden personal considerations. If the ships were good, and they were, and the men were fit, and they were, then the fault lay with the department responsible for wedding men and ships together. And the training of the men was partly Mark's responsibility. His and Hendersley's and many others, of course, but Mark didn't think of that. To him it was a personal thing; if the training programme failed, then he had failed. And he hated failure.

The door clicked, opened as Hendersley pressed the disengage button, and Mary entered the room. She was a tall girl, slender, with the slightly knock-kneed walk which most tall girls have. Her hair was dressed in a simple fashion and her eyes had a slightly glassy appearance. She carried a tray bearing cups, sugar, cream and a pot of coffee. A thick file rested under one arm. Mark rose, relieved her of the tray as Hendersley placed a third chair by the desk.

"Coffee," he said, and busied himself pouring out the thick, strong brew. "Mark, white or black?"

"Black."

"Me too. Mary?"

"Naked." She sat down, closed her eyes and massaged the lids gently with the tips of her fingers. "Talk about stirring up an ant hill! Visits from generals are 'something I could live without.'" She opened her eyes as Hendersley passed her a cup of black coffee, her contact lenses now not so apparent. "Thanks. Cigarette?"

"Here." Mark held out his package, waited until she had helped herself, lit it for her. "You must be tired."

"I am tired." She drew on the cigarette. "Most of the time Statistics is a bad word around here, but now——!" She shrugged. "Well, it's a change to be popular, I suppose." She reached for the file. "Do you want to wade through these figures on your own or do you want me to act as interpreter?"

"Please." Hendersley remembered something. "Mark, this is Mary Leggatt. Mary, meet Mark Curtway."

"The wonder boy?" She saw Mark's expression; he wasn't amused. "Sorry, but that's what the girls in Statistics call you. You wrote up the highest score against the Frenshi ever and we've

used you as a standard. Pilots are classified as a percentage of your record; with you as one hundred per cent., naturally."

"You flatter me," said Mark drily. He frowned at a memory. "Leggatt?"

"Commander of the third and last contact party," said Hendersley shortly. "You know what happened to them."

"I know." Mark wished he hadn't dragged out the old bones. The idealists had had their chance and, logically, they'd had a good case. It seemed obvious that the two space travelling races should seek to work together instead of trying to destroy each other. After Commander French had first met up with the aliens the idealists had gone out to meet them. The first two contact parties had hoped for mutual trust and co-operation—they had died still hoping. The third contact party had wanted nothing more than a cease fire agreement—they had died too. There had been no further attempts to come to terms with the Frenshi.

Mary had opened the file and looked up from the sheaf of papers. "How far back do you want me to go?"

"All the way," said Mark. Hendersley drained his cup, refilled it and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Just give a résumé," he said. "We don't want to listen to facts and figures from now until next week. We'll ask for a detailed breakdown if we need it."

"I'll skip the first parts then." Mary riffled papers. "Reports on first contact, destruction of our ships without warning or apparent reason. We'll start at the war proper."

"The wasp fighter war," said Mark. He lit two cigarettes and passed her one, she took it without looking at him.

"Thanks. The fighting war, the one you are interested in, started when the first fighting ships went into action. It was discovered that big, heavily armoured ships were sitting ducks to the small combat units used by the Frenshi. Automatic weapons proved ineffective, either the Frenshi had a dampening field or the free radiations of space threw the complex electronic equipment just that trifle out of gear. So we emulated a Frenshi ship, made a small, one-man fighter, fast, heavily armed and able to match the Frenshi for manoeuvrability. The war boiled down to a hit and run affair of small fighting ships. Right?"

"We've got the picture," said Hendersley. He sat, eyes half-closed, the smoke from his cigarette pluming before his face.

"Now for some facts." Mary drew at her cigarette, set it down on the edge of the desk and returned to her files. "The first wasp

fighter mission resulted in fifty-three per cent. losses. The second, using the residue of the original pilots, showed fifteen point two per cent. losses. A fresh influx of transferred pilots together with the residue of the original team made up the third mission. Losses: forty-two point nine. Breakdown: fresh pilots thirty-seven point five. Original pilots: five point four. The fourth mission, again with both fresh pilots together with second, third and fourth mission pilots resulted in an overall loss of forty-one point three per cent. Breakdown. . . ."

"Skip it." Hendersley straightened in his chair. "The picture seems familiar enough. Raw pilots took the heaviest beating. Those with experience did better the next time and so on." He crushed out his cigarette. "When did the psychotic factor begin to defeat experience?"

"The norm was the eighteenth mission. Losses began to mount among experienced pilots to an alarming degree and pilots were recalled from active combat duty on the fifteenth mission."

"I did more than that," said Mark.

"Fifteen missions is the average," explained Mary. "Everyone was expected to do their full term but you, and a few others like you, showed no trace of psychotic breakdown. With the shortage of pilots as it is such men are kept at duty as long as possible."

"So the percentages of losses have remained pretty constant?" Mark wanted to get down to something he could work with. "Is that it?"

"Not quite." Mary drew a graph from among her papers. "The rate of loss is on the increase despite the larger number of ships and pilots now on active duty."

"But wouldn't that explain it?" Mark was grabbing at straws. "I mean, the more ships engaged the higher the probability of total losses in some sectors or. . . ." He fell silent at her expression.

"I simply adore people who insist on telling me how to do my job," she said sweetly, then immediately apologised. "Sorry, but you're wrong. The more ships on duty the lower the percentage of losses should be. Look at it this way. With ten ships and ten enemy the chances are even. With twenty ships against ten of the enemy the chances are higher than twice as much."

"Of course," said Mark. "I guess I just wasn't thinking straight. Forgive me?"

"If you'll give me another cigarette." She smiled at him as he held out the packet. "What was wrong with the other system?"

He blinked, then caught on. Hendersley grinned as he watched

Mark go through the routine of lighting two cigarettes, one for the girl, then became serious.

"I've had reports from other departments and it's obvious that we're in a race. The Frenshi ships are on the increase too, neither side seems to be getting much of an advantage numerically. But our training system has improved tremendously since the early days so our pilots should be better than ever before. And yet our losses are mounting, not falling. Why?"

"The Frenshi could be training too," suggested Mary.

"Maybe." Hendersley rubbed at his chin, his eyes thoughtful. "The trouble is that we know so little about them, not even how they look or how they reproduce. Sometimes I get the shivers thinking about it."

"Why, scared of a mobile nightmare?" Mark had long ago decided to stop worrying about the possible appearance of the enemy. To him the Frenshi were merely target ships to be blasted to destruction.

"I'm not scared of anything I know about," said Hendersley seriously. "But how can you beat a thing if you don't know what you're fighting? Their pilots, for example. Supposing now, just supposing, they reproduced by fission, like an amoeba. And supposing the offspring, brother, whatever you'd call the twin, retained all the knowledge and know-how of the parent. Look what we'd be up against."

"I see what you mean," said Mary. "They'd take the very best pilot they have, one with the highest score, and breed from him. Each split, or twin would be able to split or twin again. They'd wind up with a fleet piloted by nothing but the best." She shuddered. "Horrible!"

"Logical," corrected Hendersley. "And damn convenient." He looked at Mark. "After all, that's just what we're trying to do ourselves."

"And failing," said Mark bitterly. "Maybe you should choose a better model."

"There isn't a better one." Mary was very definite. "You're the best pilot we've ever had, Mark, and don't let anyone tell you different. I know."

"And what does that get us?" Mark restrained an impulse to slam his fist down on the desk. "Fifty per cent. losses, that's what. Young men, trained by me, going out against the Frenshi to be fried by their vibrations. Fifty per cent!"

"And increasing," reminded Hendersley. He looked at the girl. "How long, Mary?"

"Not long enough. Take a graph curve based on the present figures and the end is predictable within too short a time. We can't eat the Frenshi with the equipment we're using. We can't stand the losses, not if we hope to win. The pilots just aren't good enough and each pilot lost is a ship lost too." She gathered her papers and closed the file. "Statistics can be an interesting science. It can be a frightening one too because you can't argue with figures. And the figures are against us."

She was, thought Mark, being very diplomatic.

No matter how complex the machine its successful operation, in the final essence, is based on human frailty. And space war wasn't complex; military science had discovered that. Logistics were important, the getting of the men and ships to the right place at the right time, but that was about all. Space fleets against Frenshi vessels were like shotguns against mosquitoes. Should their home planet ever be discovered and reached then the war vessels might come into their own, but even then only to transport the occupying forces. Atomic weapons had made all ships near enough equal; you can't do more than destroy an enemy and in space destruction was too easy.

So warfare had reverted back to the primitive; the modern equivalent of hand-to-hand combat. Battles, in space, were as intensely personal as the duel with only pre-combat training giving an edge to the victor. And there was something wrong with the training of the Terran pilots.

"I can't make it out," said Mark. He had slept since Mary had displayed the figures which had totalled eventual destruction for all of Earth's billions, but the sleep had done little good. "By all the rules of logic the men we turn out should be one hundred per cent. successful. Hell, they are one hundred per cent successful or we wouldn't release them for combat duty!"

"What sort of logic?" Hendersley looked more shrunken than ever; if he had slept he didn't show it. "Two and two make four? That sort of logic breaks down all too often."

"It does?"

"Ask any chemist." Hendersley yawned, looked guilty, reached into his pocket and produced a phial. "Reinforcements," he explained. "Dope to keep awake and moving. Want some?"

"What happens when it wears off?"

"You feel like hell," said Hendersley. He helped himself to a tablet, swallowed, replaced the phial. "How are we making out?"

"Negative." Mark pushed aside a sheaf of papers. "I've checked the simulacrum and the fault isn't there. Those mock-ups are perfect in every detail. Tapes to simulate the actual noise of wasps in combat; shock-chairs to give acceleration illusions, the works. Men go into them green and get shot down before they know it. They stick, learn the ropes and beat any programming we can give them. What they can do here in the simulacrum they should be able to do in space. Damn it, Hendersley, there's no difference at all."

"That two and two logic again?" Hendersley scanned one of the papers. "Case histories?"

"I've been checking back on the last few batches of trained pilots. I've been hoping to find some common factor in those who managed to survive." Mark shook his head. "Nothing."

"The sum isn't always the total of the parts," said Hendersley, thoughtfully. "There could be an unknown factor, one peculiar to yourself."

"Psi?" Mark shrugged. "I can't laugh off the concept, I don't know enough about it, but I'd take bets against it."

"I hope that you're right. Searching for some peculiar wild talent wouldn't be easy; teaching others to use it would be impossible."

"So we're back where we started," said Mark with disgust. "I can do it but I can't seem to be able to teach others to do it. Knowing what it is that seems to make me so special would help. Maybe I'm just plain lucky or have a charmed life or something."

"That would be a psi factor," reminded Hendersley. "Have you tried coupling the simulacrum together in pairs so that one pilot fights another?"

"Tried it and dropped it. We can put on better programming than those embryo pilots can dream of. They are too predictable and, anyway, we don't want to train them that way. The Frenshi aren't human; pilots trained against human adversaries would be at a disadvantage."

"I don't see that," protested Hendersley. "The Frenshi aren't human, we know, but that doesn't matter to the pilots. They aren't fighting actual Frenshi at all; they are trying to knock spots off their screens. They . . ." He broke off, staring at Mark. "Something wrong?"

"No." Mark looked thoughtful. "What was that you were saying?"

"About the pilots?" Hendersley shrugged. "I'm just saying how it looks to me. I've tried the simulacrum, didn't do any good at it, but I imagine I could with time and practice. It's just a question of knocking out the red flecks."

"Yes," said Mark slowly. "It's just a question of knocking out some red flecks." He rose to his feet and looked at Hendersley. "Did Lemain leave that film behind?"

"Yes, a copy anyway. Psychology wanted it for study, they have some idea of using it for indoctrination. Why do you ask?"

"I want to see it again. Meet me in the projection room with someone from Psychology, Mary too if she's free."

"You've an idea, Mark?" Hope washed some of the fatigue from Hendersley's eyes. "Something to work on?"

He spoke to a closing door.

The screen darkened, the room lights flicked on, the tiny audience stirred and eased cramped muscles. Mark twisted in his chair and stared at the others. "Well, did you notice it?"

"Notice what?" Hendersley was curt. Three times now the film had been shown and each time Mark had asked the same question.

"You didn't." Mark glanced at the girl, pale from watching a man torn apart by Frenshi vibrations. "Mary?" She shook her head, fumbling for a cigarette. "How about you, Straker, did you spot anything?"

The man from Psychology looked like a mouse with spectacles. He took them off, breathed on them, polished them with a spotless handkerchief and slipped them back on his nose. The action irritated Mark, the man could have worn contact lenses, the old fashioned spectacles were worn for affectation or, more likely, as a camouflage for indecision. He repeated his question.

"It depends," said Straker cautiously. "Things which I regard as important may not so appear to you, a layman if you will pardon the term. I . . ."

"You didn't spot it." Mark slumped in his chair feeling anger and irritation at their apparent stupidity. He lit a cigarette, knowing that the action was the same, in essence, as Straker's play with his spectacles. He inhaled, held the smoke for a long moment, then released it in a sudden gush.

"You're not wasp fighter pilots," he said. "I am. Maybe we do look at things differently because of that and perhaps I'm asking too much, but I'll try once more. Now, before we begin, I want you

to enter the picture. I want you to gain an affinity with the young man on the screen. You are a freshly qualified fighter pilot. You are on a mission against the enemy. You know that it is your life or theirs, no quarter, no possibility of rescue, nothing but death if you fail to fire first and aim straight. Remember that. You are literally fighting for your life."

"But what are we looking for?" protested Hendersley. "Can't you give us a clue?"

"I've already said too much." He turned and signalled to the projection box. "I want you to spot it without help." He settled back as the room darkened and the screen flickered into life.

Mark didn't look at the screen, instead he watched the faces of the others. He could tell them what he had spotted, he supposed, but that would be no check on his own suspicions. Maybe he was reading too much into too little, clutching at straws, but he was past worrying about the chances of making himself appear a fool. He tensed as Mary sucked in her breath.

"Yes?"

"Nothing." He could see her throat move as she swallowed. "At least . . ."

"You spotted something." He gestured, his arm cutting the projection beam, and the film halted into stasis. "What was it, Mary?"

"It's foolish." She looked embarrassed. "You'll laugh at me, but . . . Would a man smile like that?"

"You've hit it!" Mark swung his arm back, waited until the reversed film hit the correct spot, then halted it again. On the screen the pilot glowed in natural colour, his eyes crinkled, his lips curved in an easy, relaxed smile. "That smile! Now do you get it?"

"No." Hendersley sounded annoyed. "So he's smiling, is that bad?"

"Well?" Mark glanced at the psychologist. "Is it?"

"A moment." Straker polished his spectacles again, his eyes heavy with thought. "I see what you're driving at." He gave a little shrug. "It's odd how the obvious can be so difficult to spot but then I've never been in space, still less fought the Frenshi. I wouldn't know what to look for. Yes, I would say that it is very bad indeed."

"How?" Hendersley looked baffled. "Mark, what is this all about?"

"Look for yourself." Mark gestured towards the screen. "Look

at him! That man is on his first mission. He is in space, in command of a wasp fighter, our one effective defence against the Frenshi. At any moment he could spot one of them on his screen and, when he does, it will be his speed and skill against theirs. If he wins we have one enemy less to worry about. If he loses then he loses his life. He knows that. He knows that he is risking his neck every moment he is in that control chair. Or does he?"

"Is there doubt?" Hendersley looked from Mark to Straker then back to Mark. "I seem to be the odd man out, around here. Maybe you'd better explain."

"He's doing all the explaining," said Mark, and again he gestured towards the screen. "Look at him! The way he's sitting, the way he's smiling I felt something was wrong as soon as I saw that smile. That isn't a man tensed up, ready and waiting to kill or to be killed. He's a man watching a screen, a man who knows that he can knock down the red flecks when he has to, a man playing a game. Damn it!" Mark beat his fist against the edge of the chair before him. "Is that all we've trained men to do, play a game? No wonder we're losing half of them every time they go on a mission."

"Is he right?" Hendersley stared at the psychologist. "Can you tell all that from a smile?"

"The smile is the symptom." On his own subject Straker was very assured. "Captain Curtway is correct in what he says. The attitude of that pilot is not what I would expect from a man in his situation."

"But ?"

"We're at fault, Hendersley," said Mark bitterly. "I'm at fault, rather, because I should have known better. I passed the simulacrum and the programming. I was responsible, in the final essence, for training those pilots. I'm the one who sent them out to play games with an enemy who doesn't know the meaning of mercy."

"Stop blaming yourself, Mark!" Hendersley was abrupt. "ComTrain isn't one man, remember that!"

"You took me for a standard," reminded Mark. "That makes me responsible. And I've fought the Frenshi while you haven't."

"But why are you blaming yourself?" Mary was bewildered. "What did you do wrong?"

"I'll tell you." Mark flung down his cigarette and crushed it beneath his heel. "I took young, inexperienced boys, sat them in a clever gimmick and told them to knock red flecks off their screens. I told them that they wouldn't be pilots until they could knock out

every red fleck we threw at them and I kept them at it until they could do it as well as I could. And then I called them trained pilots and sent them out to be killed. I even thought, God forgive me, that I had taught them to be as good a pilot as I was."

"And you were right."

"I was wrong and you know it, your figures tell you that. All I had done was to teach them to play games and I'd forced them to learn how to play by the reward and punishment method. Be clever and you'll get a waspers uniform; be dumb and you get kicked back into general service." Mark shook his head at her expression. "Can't you see the fallacy even now? I didn't train them to be killers, I trained them to be good players at an electronic game. Not one of them ever really visualised those red flecks as the Frenshi. In theory, yes, in practice, no."

"But they scored one hundred per cent before we passed them," protested Hendersley. "What they did here they could do in space."

"No," interrupted Straker. He glanced apologetically at Mark. "Different psychological outlook," he continued. "During training they were driven by the fear of failure but in space they had no such driving fear. They had qualified as wasp pilots; they had passed their tests and gained success. Their drive had gone and, as Captain Curtway has said, they relaxed. Warfare was, to them, still a game, a matter of knocking out the red flecks on a screen. And without the driving sense of urgency they had during their training their reflexes slowed, they became careless." He pointed towards the screen. "It was the prelude to death."

"The missing factor," said Hendersley. "The thing you have, Mark, and others haven't. The one thing which made you so successful. You know it now?"

"I know it. It's a simple thing, Hendersley, but a very potent one. It's fear. The gut-twisting, heart stopping fear of a man who is afraid to die. I'm not knocking red flecks off a screen when I fight the Frenshi; I'm trying to kill something before it has a chance to kill me. There's a difference, Hendersley, a big one, and it's the difference between life and death. Somehow we've got to teach it to every pilot we train."

Abruptly he gestured towards the projection box and stared sombrely at the film as it spun towards its ghastly conclusion.

The room seemed the same, warm, smelling faintly, in imagination, of heated insulation, metal and non-existent oil. Only the human sweat and animal fear were lacking but they would come.

Mark, as he checked the control chair, knew that of that there could be no possibility of doubt. He straightened as Hendersley looked through the door.

"All set?"

"Yes." Mark gave a last look round, let his fingers brush lightly across the controls then stepped into the corridor. "Straker picked the guinea pig?"

"I picked him." Hendersley held a file in his hand. "Just passed with top scoring and minimum training time. Normally we would have been patting ourselves on the back at having processed him so quickly. Now I'm not so sure." He held out the file. "Want to check?"

"I'll take your word for it." Mark waved aside the file. "Name?"

"Frank Locksby. You may have met him."

"How could I miss?" It was Mark's duty to brief all trainee pilots, Hendersley had apparently forgotten that. He frowned, trying to fit a face to the name. Memories sorted themselves out and a picture resolved itself in his mind. The picture of a young man, blond, cocky. A smiling, arrogant, almost too handsome face. He hadn't liked the man.

"Straker's briefing him now," said Hendersley. He glanced down the corridor. "He knows what to do. As far as Locksby is concerned this is just a favour-run; a programme test. It has nothing to do with his training and the results won't matter either way." He broke off as the psychologist appeared at the end of the corridor. "Here they come now."

Locksby was as Mark remembered him. He nodded to the two men, adjusted his impeccable waspers uniform and stepped disdainfully into the simulacrum. Mark felt like helping him with a boot. He restrained himself, waited until Straker, who had entered the room with Locksby to see him positioned, had emerged and shut the door, then stepped to the record box. "Ready?"

"You can start the run." Straker looked thoughtful. "What if he makes a top score?"

"You think he will?"

"No," admitted Straker. "But if he does?"

Mark shrugged, not answering. Within the simulacrum the screen had changed to the star-shot night of space. Locksby should already have entered the illusion, be tense and ready for the enemy soon to appear as red flecks of menace. He became aware of Straker talking to Hendersley.

"The idea isn't new, of course, even in the early wars they knew the importance of duplicating actual conditions of combat as closely as possible during training. At one time, during mock battles, they even used real machine gun fire to teach the troops to remain low and under cover. There were casualties, naturally, but it is better to have casualties at a home base than on the actual field of combat."

"They fired real guns at the men?" Hendersley sounded incredulous.

"That and more. They made warfare as real as they could without actually trying to injure or kill their own men." Straker reached for his spectacles, changed his mind and rubbed his ear instead. "The system worked; men grew to respect the weapons they had to face and, by the time they reached actual combat service, they were battle-trained. Our problem is somewhat more difficult."

"Is it?" Hendersley, like Mark, was paying little attention to the psychologist. They were intent on the score dial on the record box. So far Locksby had made a clear run.

"Obviously." Straker was enjoying himself, it wasn't often that he had the chance to lecture the high brass. "The conditions are different, for one thing, and the environment is totally different for another. Wasp pilots are divorced from all unpleasantness. They never see a wounded man and they are never wounded. They rarely even see one of their own kind die. They are protected, live in the artificial environment of a space ship, they suffer no physical hardship of any kind. To them the external universe becomes unreal, a thing of lights on a screen. The war becomes unreal, a game, as Captain Curtway has said. The enemy is unreal, red flecks on a screen. They can die, yes, but they cannot consciously accept the fact any more than any other man can accept the fact that, one day, he must inevitably die. The problem, so set, was interesting and..."

Mark stopped listening to the smooth voice. He stopped hearing Straker's tedious explanations which he already knew anyway. His eyes were on the score dial of the record box but the rest of him was in the room with Locksby. The pilot was, theoretically, fighting for his life. Mark hoped that he would remember that.

Locksby had other things to think about. He sat in the control chair, his eyes on the screen, and his hands poised over the controls. He wasn't worried, he had no reason to be. He had passed all his tests and come out on top. Now he was a fully qualified wasper pilot with a fancy uniform and high pay. What he was doing now was routine, hell, he could knock down these red flecks as fast as they could throw them at him. No need to worry. No need to sweat. No

one could take his uniform away from him and it was a relief not to have the knot of fear tightening his insides, the fear of failure which now no longer had reality.

This was a bore but he guessed that it had to be done. Finish this run and then ten clear days leave before leaving to join his mother ship and combat duty. Fifteen missions and then leave again. The life of Riley!

He smiled and relaxed still more. Inevitably his conscious thought obtruded between the fine coordination of hand and eye. His reflexes slowed a little, only a little but it was enough. He fumbled a control, recovered, thrust at the button. Too late.

Pain seared through him, such pain as he had never experienced before and with the pain came the knowledge of failure. He wasn't dead but he wished he was, so great was the agony. He wouldn't die but had he been in a real ship and those red flecks the real Frenshi then he would have died, been dying now. And he had seen the effect of the Frenshi vibrations.

He sagged in the control chair, quite helpless to do anything but gasp for breath, to suck air into his straining lungs and to feel hate and fear. Fear of a repetition of the pain which had knotted his muscles and hate, a deep, terrible hate at the red flecks which had caused the pain.

A pain which he would never, as long as he lived, get used to or forget.

E. C. TUBB

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Fiends for Neighbours

They had led a quiet and happy life until these men had come to their neighbourhood to watch . . . to spy . . . and to kill

“And,” said my wife, concluding the day’s domestic news, “we have some new neighbours.”

I was, I must admit, a trifle surprised. The previous tenant of the house next door had disappeared some months previously under circumstances that the police had chosen to term mysterious, since which time a trickle of rather obviously dubious clients had spasmodically appeared in the company of an overly-enthusiastic but in each case unsuccessful estate-agent. We are, it is true, a little isolated and rather far from the main road, but the town is rapidly growing and only four miles away and a pretty regular country bus service is available.

Personally, I prefer to be cut off from the eternal bustle of people—once the daily grind is completed, it’s a good feeling to relax in the company of one’s own family secure in the knowledge that we’re really too far to be bothered with socially. And in any case, when you’re in charge of the local mortuary, as I am, people find plenty of excuses for not wanting to mix with you in your spare time—family memories, and a generally queasy feeling about

spending their time with someone who handles cadavers as part of his job, no doubt. Anyway, my wife, since I was fortunate enough to marry the right sort of partner, shares my views on the social side of things and our son David likes the rural life well enough, so we don't miss what would very probably be a rather irritating series of relationships.

The business of our previous neighbour, a rather odd old chap called Broom, had received a certain amount of publicity in the local press, but not too much fuss had been made about it. There was absolutely no evidence of foul play, and after a couple of weeks it died a natural death. After all, people disappear all the time in very much the same way, and while I think the local police would have liked to carry the matter further than they did, they had very little to work on. Still, you know how it is in a largely rural area. People talk, because they have precious little else to occupy their spare time, and some pretty wild conclusions are reached in the process. There was even a short period when my wife and I were subjected to some rather overly obvious close scrutiny from our fellow travellers on our journeys to town, but, thank God, that didn't last very long.

However, as I say, it was rather a surprise. I think the estate-agent had more or less written the place off as a white elephant, and we had rather got used to having no immediate neighbours.

"A family?" I asked.

My wife shook her head.

"Two men," she said. "One tall, pale and silent, the other short, sandy and also silent. They're both rather grim looking, and the tall one has very piercing eyes."

I laughed. My wife has a slight tendency to dramatise about people. I think she'd even rather enjoyed the fuss that had been made about old Broom.

"How do you know they're silent?"

"They came round to borrow some milk."

"They?" I looked at her, puzzled. "Did it take two of them to carry a bottle of milk? Provided you gave them one, of course."

She shrugged.

"Perhaps they're shy. Anyway, the tall one did the talking, what there was of it. He said they hadn't had time to make arrangements with the local tradesmen, but they'd take care of it in the morning. He said they didn't expect to be there for long. Probably only a week or two, depending on circumstances."

"He still doesn't sound very silent to me," I said.

"Oh, that was all he said, apart from good-morning. The rest of the time he just stood there, giving me the benefit of his piercing glance. I told him how long it was since we'd had anybody next door, and how the estate-agents have had such a hard time finding anyone willing to occupy a house with such a mysterious past. He didn't say anything at all—just nodded every so often and fixed me with those penetrating eyes."

"Well, let's hope they weren't capable of penetrating too far," I said. "And what did Lou Costello do all this time?"

She laughed.

"Oh, he just stood there holding the milk bottle. I didn't tell you about his eyes, did I? Rather pale and fishy, and he never blinks. He stared at me, too, but it wasn't half as effective as the other one." She frowned a little. "They're an odd couple. I wouldn't say they were exactly creepy, but they both had a sort of—well—slightly fanatical look about them."

"There are different types of fanatics," I said. "They might be musicians or painters or something. Anyway, as long as they don't pester us for milk all the time they can be as fanatical as they like."

I yawned and stretched. I hadn't had a particularly hard day—the local mortality rate is pretty low—but there are times when it's an extra good feeling to be away from the people, live and dead, who surround me all day, and back with those I can really relax with.

I pushed my chair back.

"I think I'll wander round the garden for a bit. I want to have a look at those cauliflowers, and there's always the chance I might get a look at these odd neighbours of ours." I smiled. "Shan't be long."

"All right," said my wife. She started clearing dishes off the table. "Don't forget to look at the chickens while you're out there. They've got into the habit of laying an extra egg or two when we're not looking, and then tucking them away in an odd corner where we aren't likely to find them. And I could do with some potatoes for the morning."

"Chickens and potatoes," I said, dutifully.

It was fresh in the garden, cool but very pleasant. It was getting dark, so I checked on the chickens while I could see what I was doing. Apparently this was one of their lazy days. They gave a few hostile clucks at being disturbed, but no eggs were forthcoming. I made sure the padlock on the door was firmly locked—you never

know what might try creeping in there at night—and fetched the spade from the tool-shed.

It was quite dark when I started digging. I'd sneaked a look over the fence on my way to the potato patch, but nothing was visible in the gloom of the next garden and there were no lights on in the house. I presumed our neighbours were either out or liked to retire early. As a result, it gave me more than just a slight jolt when I suddenly found myself bathed in a pool of white light as I was bent down, feeling for potatoes in the freshly turned ground.

I straightened up and turned slowly, shading my eyes and blinking a little in the glare. The light was directed from the top of the fence that divided the two gardens. It seemed to be coming from a torch or bicycle lamp, and a pretty powerful one at that. I stuck my head forward, squinting at the source, still blinking and wondering who the devil was trying to be funny.

"Yes?" I said. It sounded damned silly at the time, but the whole thing was so unexpected that I couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't have involved a certain amount of exasperated blasphemy.

I finally made out a head, silhouetted against the remains of the fading sunset. The torch seemed to be resting on top of the fence, and as far as I could make out he was giving me a thorough once-over.

"Yes?" I said again, and it didn't sound any more intelligent than the first time. I moved forward, still holding the spade, and tried to get a better look at him.

"Digging I see," he said, and there was some consolation to the fact that his opening remark sounded as asinine as my own. It was a deep voice, with pretty sombre overtones, and for some reason I was immediately reminded of an undertaker that I'd once known. It had very much the same sort of foreboding note about it.

"Yes," I said. "That's right. Digging. For potatoes." I said it pretty shortly, because the confounded man had nearly made me jump out of my skin. "I take it you're one of the chaps my wife was telling me about. Our new neigh . . ."

"Potatoes," he said, and it sounded like bodies. I don't know if he thought that grave-digging was included among my duties. "Do you often dig for potatoes at this time of night, Mr.—ah—Brown?"

"When they're needed," I said. Now that the initial shock had abated a little, I was beginning to feel more than a little resentful. Also, I have always considered the name Brown to be a perfectly

presentable one, and his exaggerated pause in the middle of producing it had smacked more than a little of disdain. "While I appreciate this early attempt at a neighbourly introduction, Mr.—ah——"; he let that one slide; "I must confess to a slight allergy to being spotlighted in such an abrupt manner." I smiled, and made it pretty sour. "You'll have to excuse what might seem to you my unreasonableness in this matter, but it's just that I'm not used . . ."

"Not at all," he said. "Your allergy. I quite understand." He seemed to be playing his torch a little closer to my feet than my face, and his head was tipped a little as though studying the ground. I looked down. A potato gleamed whitely where the spade had neatly sliced it in half. I bent down, picked it up, and waved it gently in the beam of the torch.

"Potatoes," I said.

He said nothing, and I could feel his eyes probing at me from behind the beam. Then, as abruptly as it had been switched on, the light went out. There was the faintest rustle of grass behind the fence, and then he was gone.

I stood for several seconds, just staring foolishly at the spot above the fence that he had vacated. It was very quiet, and I heard his feet as he reached the gravel path. Then another pair joined in. Together, they crunched off into silence. A door slammed.

Suddenly, the night seemed a lot colder.

Annoyed, puzzled, and with the faintest flicker of fear worming its way down my spine, I finished digging the potatoes. It was pretty dark, particularly after peering for so long into the beam of light, and I must have split quite a few more before I finally got as many as we'd need for the next day. I took the spade back to the shed, and carried them indoors, frowning. My wife was reading in the one easy chair that we keep in the kitchen, and she looked up as I came in.

"You've been a long time," she said. She saw my frown, raised her eyebrows, and put down her book. "Something wrong?"

I told her what had happened, including the bit about the second pair of footsteps. Before I finished, she was frowning, too.

"Did you get a look at him?"

"With him shining that confounded light at me, I couldn't see a thing. I must admit, though, more than once I got the impression that you must be right about his piercing eyes. I felt the damned things digging into me at unpleasantly regular intervals. Or maybe it was the little one, peeping through a convenient knot-hole." I took my pipe from the mantel, and started packing it with tobacco.

"I'm certainly going to take a look at them the first chance I get. What the devil does he mean by creeping up on me like that? I nearly jumped ten feet in the air when he switched his torch on. I didn't hear a sound, and before I knew it there I was, spotlighted like a ruddy crooner at the Palladium."

I started lighting my pipe, feeling thoroughly annoyed.

She looked at me silently while I exhausted two matches.

"Do you think they're—alright?" she said. She looked a little upset. "I mean . . ."

I shook my head, firmly, and used up a third match, but I wasn't feeling too happy. The small worm of unease that had made itself felt in the garden was still persisting, and I couldn't shake off the impression that his—or somebody's—eyes had made on me.

The pipe refused to behave itself and my wife was obviously a bit upset about the whole affair, so we listened to the radio for a bit and went to bed early. It took me quite a while to get off to sleep, an unusual state of affairs, and she was still stirring restlessly when I dozed off. Also, I had a bit of a nightmare, another unusual event, a frighteningly pointless affair in which I was completely surrounded by gigantic searchlights that poured a glaringly concentrated pool of searing white light that nearly blinded me. And even as I clapped my hands over my eyes, I caught a vague impression of something lancing at me from the surrounding blackness, travelling with frightening velocity and ready to pin me in the circle of light like a butterfly on a collector's pad.

I woke, sweating profusely, just before it hit.

I was more than a little relieved when the alarm clattered and we had an excuse to get up.

Nothing at all happened during the next couple of days, at least as far as I was concerned. My wife reported that she'd seen them in the garden at odd intervals, and once they walked past the house while she was out at the front picking flowers. She'd said good-morning, but the only response she got was a brace of glances, one piercing, the other piscine. I didn't even catch a glimpse of them myself, but young David let it drop at breakfast that he'd seen them watching him from one of the upstairs windows as he left to catch the school 'bus in the mornings.

"And when I came home yesterday afternoon," he said. He started tucking into his cornflakes with childish unconcern. My wife and I exchanged glances, but said nothing. I didn't like it, but there didn't seem to be anything we could do. People have a perfect

right to look at who they please, especially from their own house. What the devil they were doing in one of the bedrooms at five o'clock in the afternoon I couldn't imagine, but there again it was their concern. I swallowed the last of my breakfast, patted the boy on the shoulder, kissed my wife, and went out for the 'bus.

While I was passing the next house, I sneaked a look up at the upstairs windows. A curtain stirred briefly, then stilled. I caught a vague glimpse of a white face that moved suddenly backwards, and was gone.

I felt a momentary twinge of fear. For a split-second I considered going back home, but the absurdity of it all kept me moving in the same direction. After all, the boy would be out and I was perfectly confident that my wife was capable of looking after herself. I caught the 'bus, exchanged the usual polite greetings with my fellow travellers and went on to work, but I spent a pretty uneasy day. For the first time I found myself regretting that we didn't have a 'phone at the house. Before, we'd always considered ourselves fortunate that we were so completely cut off from outside communication, but now I wasn't so sure that it was such an advantage after all.

It was a distinct relief when five-thirty came around. I bade a hurried good-night to the caretaker, and practically raced to the 'bus stop. Not that anything was gained by rushing, but I had the absurd fear that for once in its lethargic travels the 'bus would be early and leave without me.

It was five past six when I turned the last bend in the road that led to the house. I had a good look at the house next door as I passed, but this time no curtains moved and no white face was apparent. Nevertheless, I hurried down the drive, almost at a jog-trot.

I heard the boy crying even before I opened the back door. I was in a cold sweat as I rushed in. The cause of the crying could have been anything, a cut knee, a bumped head, any one of a thousand minor accidents that youngsters are so prone to, but somehow this sound was different. A frightened crying, the sound of a child who had been subjected to something he doesn't understand.

I blundered into the kitchen, and stopped.

The boy was sitting at the table, his head cradled on his arms. My wife was kneeling by him, stroking his hair, patting his shoulder, in a vain attempt to soothe the muffled, racking sobs that came from him. She jumped as I came in, and got to her feet quickly. Her face was paper white, and her eyes wide and frightened.

"Oh, thank God you're home!" she said. She seemed to crumple

a little as she came over to me. She held my arm, and took a deep, shaking breath. She was never a heavy woman, but now she seemed drawn and shrunken to the point of emaciation. "Those men . . ."

"Next door?" I said. I felt sick, and I was more frightened than I had ever been. I took her by the shoulders and peered at her with eyes that must have been as fear-ridden as her own. "Well, *tell* me, for pity's sake! What's happened? What have they . . .?"

"They met David on his way home from school," she said. She seemed suddenly very tired. Her voice was quiet and lifeless. "He met them at the top of the road. The tall one said good-afternoon, and told David they were our new neighbours. David said, yes, he knew, and started to walk off. The tall one stopped him, and told him it wasn't very polite for someone to walk away just after they'd been introduced." She looked as if she was going to cry. "He asked David if he'd mind walking down the road with them, just for the talk. He said they didn't know anybody here, and they'd like to know about the people. What could the boy do? He's been brought up to listen to his elders, and it only seemed polite . . ."

"But I've *told* him about things like that!" I said. I almost shouted. "He's been told to keep away from strangers that want to talk to him! Good God, how many times . . .?"

She shook her head, tiredly.

"He can't help it. He's just naturally friendly. And after all, we're always friendly to strangers, people that don't know their way about. It seems natural that he should be the same way . . ."

"But it's *not* the same!" I shouted. I was cold, but the sweat was running down my back in a steady stream. "We're adults, we know what to do . . .!" I choked off. "What happened?"

"The tall one talked. He asked David questions . . ."

"Questions?" I looked wildly at the boy, and then back to my wife. "What the devil kind of questions get *this* kind of result?" I went over to the boy, knelt by the table, and lifted him upright. He was huddled and tense. His eyes were dreadfully red and swollen and he was still crying. "David son, tell me what happened."

He told me. About the questions, and his answers that had seemed entirely automatic, as though the bright, burning eyes of the tall man had dragged them out of him against his will, about the dark, whispered suggestions that had kept him rooted like a rabbit before a stoat as they stood in the lane where they had somehow wandered, and all the time the cold fish-glance of the silent sandy

man watching him with wet-lipped anticipation, his hands forever clenching and unclenching with a barely controlled venom.

I knelt there, listening and shaking like a tree in a high and terrible wind.

"And then I ran!" the boy cried. Earlier, his sobs had quieted a little, but now his face was crumpled into a puckered red mask of fear. "He shouted at me to stop, but I ran and ran until I got here!" He tore himself out of my hands and threw himself face-downwards again. His muffled voice came from the shelter of his thin arms, and a small hand beat the table once in a gesture of frustrated, childish fear. "He hated me! They *both* did! They *hated* me, and wanted me *dead*!"

Anger is a terrible thing. In the space of seconds it can turn a peaceful being into a thing of blood and wrath, obsessed with nothing but the desire to maim, tear and crush the thing that has caused his anger to swell from the dark depths where it lies, hidden and forever waiting. As I pushed myself upright and stood by the table, sick and shaking, I wanted blood. I wanted the blood of these prowling things next door, these dark and menacing creatures who had erupted into our lives, and in a space of days caused us to live in fear.

For a moment I thought of the police, but I dismissed the idea. This was different, a private thing. I turned, and headed for the back door. My wife caught at my arm as I passed and tugged at me, fearfully.

"What are you going to do .?"

I patted her hand and detached it, gently but firmly. I didn't look at her. I moved towards the door again.

"No!" Her voice was a high, frightened whisper. "No, you mustn't !"

I went out, shutting the door behind me.

I went down the drive, out into the road, and turned into the gateway of the house next door. I caught a glimpse of movement in the front room, a flicker of the curtains, and then nothing.

I jammed my thumb against the bell and kept it there.

The door was answered sooner than I expected. About ten seconds after I commenced my onslaught of ringing, there was the click of the latch, and the door swung inwards.

It was the tall one, and for the first time I got a proper look at him. He was pale and thin, his clothing a nondescript grey suit, almost black. His forehead was high and protruding and his face long and drawn. It was high cheek-boned, and with the long upper-

lip that so often indicates a superior intelligence. It was a striking face in itself, but dominated completely by the glowing, coal-like eyes that shone from beneath the heavy forehead, the eyes of someone consumed by a turbulently frightening inner fire.

In spite of myself and the unabated tumult that beat inside my senses, I hesitated.

"We were expecting you," he said. His eyes were fixed unblinkingly on mine, and there was a faintly malicious edge to his voice as he spoke. He sounded almost triumphant. "Please come inside."

"What I have to say can be said perfectly well where we . . ."

"I must insist that you come inside." It was a lick-lipping, anticipatory voice. "What we have to say is not for the innocent ears of the birds and the flowers. It is better spoken behind closed doors, away from the cleanness of the open air and the normality of nature." He stepped to one side. "If you please."

Despite my anger, despite my bubbling hatred of these men and their doings, the small flicker of fear made itself felt again. If anything, that was what I needed. I nodded, curtly, and walked into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind me.

He led the way down the passage to the rear of the house, opened a door and ushered me inside. His silent gesture was contemptuous. Clenching my teeth to control the anger that came surging to the surface even stronger than before, I stalked inside.

I stopped.

The small man sat in a far corner, his feet placed neatly side by side on the floor, his left hand resting docilely on his knee. In his right hand, the point towards me, he held a foot-long knife with a strange twisted blade.

I whirled. The tall man was closing the door, his back towards me. There was a double click, a slight fumbling motion, and then he turned.

The gun in his hand was as steady as a rock and pointed directly at me.

We stood for several seconds, just staring at one another. One thing was certain, he came out of that battle of the eyes the winner. In the space of a second, fear was the dominating sensation that gripped me. An icy hand traced its way down my spine, and I knew with an absolute, chilling certainty that these men were capable of killing me.

"What's this all about?" I said. My voice was hoarse, and my remark sounded as foolish as my opening one at our first encounter over the garden fence. I could feel the dead-fish stare of the small

man drilling icily into my back. I didn't move. "Before we commence this conversation . . ."

"Before we commence any conversation," said the tall man, "you will sit down. Over there." His eyes were bright, with a terrible sadistic triumph. He gestured towards an easy chair set against the wall. We continued the exchange of glances while I complied, the gun turning in a slow, steady arc, following my progress like a menacing metallic shadow. I sat down on the edge of the chair.

"Back," he said. He waved the gun, gently. "Sit back."

I leaned back cursing silently. The small man was on my right, and while my chances of jumping the tall one successfully were virtually nil, they were now rendered doubly so by the treacherously springy upholstery that now encased me. I sank and waited, trying to control my shaking.

The tall one took his time about speaking, studying me first with those mad, luminescent pools for the best part of a minute. Beside me, the small man made no sound. I couldn't even hear him breathing. For all I knew, he could have been dead.

At last the tall one broke the tortuous, nerve-grinding silence.

"I spoke to your little boy today," he said. "An interesting conversation." He seemed to relax a little, but the gun never wavered in his hand. He was smiling, a dreadful contraction of the facial muscles that never reached his eyes. "A polite, well-mannered boy. Perhaps too well-mannered. If he had not been brought up with such a conventional respect for his elders and their whims, you would not be here now."

"But I am here," I said. My voice sounded like a rasping file. "Why?"

The dreadful smile continued.

"Naturally, you questioned your son about our conversation. If he answered you truthfully, then you know that we expressed considerable interest in your occupation." He licked his lips, carefully. "You are, I understand, the mortician for the nearby town of Morley Park and the surrounding district."

I nodded, slowly.

"That is true

"And as such, you are in sole charge of the local mortuary." He licked his lips again. His eyes were bright and burning on my face. "Is that correct?"

"There is a caretaker .

"Who only deputises in your absence. Correct again?" He

nodded, gently. "Yes, I think so." The smile was triumphant now, the smile of someone who is utterly sure of his ground and the direction it will take him if he follows it unquestioningly. His tongue ran over his lips as he savoured the next question, taking his time about the asking, relishing his certain foreknowledge of the answer.

"And naturally a man in your position would have access to the building at all times. You have keys, for example?"

The sweat was pouring out of my cold skin in a steady stream. For the life of me I couldn't control my shaking.

"Of course ."

"Perhaps you have them with you now?"

For one blindingly terrifying moment I caught a mental glimpse of myself at my place of work, only now my position was dreadfully, irrevocably changed. I was on one of the veined marble slabs, a naked, cold cadaver, motionless in the dim shrouded silence of the vault. And bending over me, the light from his insane eyes etching sharp black shadows across my dead and staring face, was the creature that stood opposite me in this musty, unaired room, staring at me with those same maniacal eyes and holding certain death in his hand.

"Yes ,," I said. My mouth was a dry, arid desert. The muscles around it were numb and frozen. I opened it with difficulty. "Yes, I always carry them . . ."

"You must die now," he said. It was so sudden, so horribly unexpected at that moment that for an instant what he'd said didn't register on my already half-fainting mind. His face was a dead, cold mask, his eyes with their dreadful burning light the only sign of life. "In some ways I regret that it must be so soon and so final—however, we have a little something prepared in the cellar for your wife and boy ."

I almost fainted.

"My wife ."

"They must die, too." His voice was a dim, toneless drumming in my ears. "To kill only one of you would be useless. There must be no witnesses, no bearers of descriptions to those who would seek your killers . . ."

His eyes burned madly at me, and he talked on.

It was then or never, I knew. Then or never was my one pitifully absurd, impossible chance for life. It was what he'd said about the wife and boy that did it. If it hadn't been for that I think I might have sat there, a frozen corpse even before the bullet

hit me, but that statement, so much more than just a threat, filled me with the kind of insane recklessness that results inevitably in either corpses or heroes.

I got a tight grip on the arms of the chair, and heaved.

I thank God now for several things. One is the fact that the chair was backed tight against the wall, his obvious aim being to have as much space as possible between us. The room, however, wasn't really large enough to make that really worthwhile, and the amount of solid leverage that I was able to obtain from it more than compensated from my point of view. Second, and one that at first glance might seem a doubtful advantage, I slipped and fell. The blessing there was that he'd been expecting me to come at him a little higher up, probably to try and grab the gun. Third was the fact that while the little man was up and out of his chair like a streak of greased light, lunging at me as he came, he moved slightly behind me as he did so. He hadn't made a sound during our brief association, and he was incapable of making one after that. The one bullet that the tall man fired whined over my back and took him just below the hairline. I lurched forward across the carpet as the tall man hesitated for one brief, dumb-struck second, wrapped my arms around his legs, and heaved. He wasn't a heavy man, despite his height. He toppled over backwards, and his head hit the wall with a dull crunching noise.

I heaved myself up and sprang astride him, pinning his gun arm under my knee and twisting it hard with both hands. He moaned and let go, but his left arm was still free, his clawing hand seeking my eyes. His eyes were still glazed, but getting brighter by the second. I felt the strength in his body squirming back to life beneath me, and something gave in my mind.

It had to be done. It had been a long time, many long months since I had done this thing to a living breathing human, but it was the only way. I forced his free arm under my knee and bent towards the suddenly insanely frightened face.

And as I sank my teeth into his neck, cutting off the bubbling scream, I knew that this way—our way—was the only one.

The bundle of sharpened stakes that I found down in the cellar made quite a nice bonfire, together with several other items of interest that I found on the bodies. Notably their identification. A card in the wallet of the tall one labelled him as A. Hunter—a singularly appropriate name and not, I suspect, his own—and named him a member of a group that called themselves the Supernatural

Slayers. I'd heard of it vaguely through other members of the family, but this was my first direct contact with any of its members.

The dagger was an interesting item. The twisted blade was teak, extremely effective I should imagine, and of the type found protruding from my Uncle George when his travels ended abruptly in a remote part of Asia. The dagger, the guns, and a spare box of silver bullets I buried with the bodies, alongside that of old Broom, our previous neighbour, well away from the houses and in a spot that was unlikely to receive agricultural attention for some considerable time.

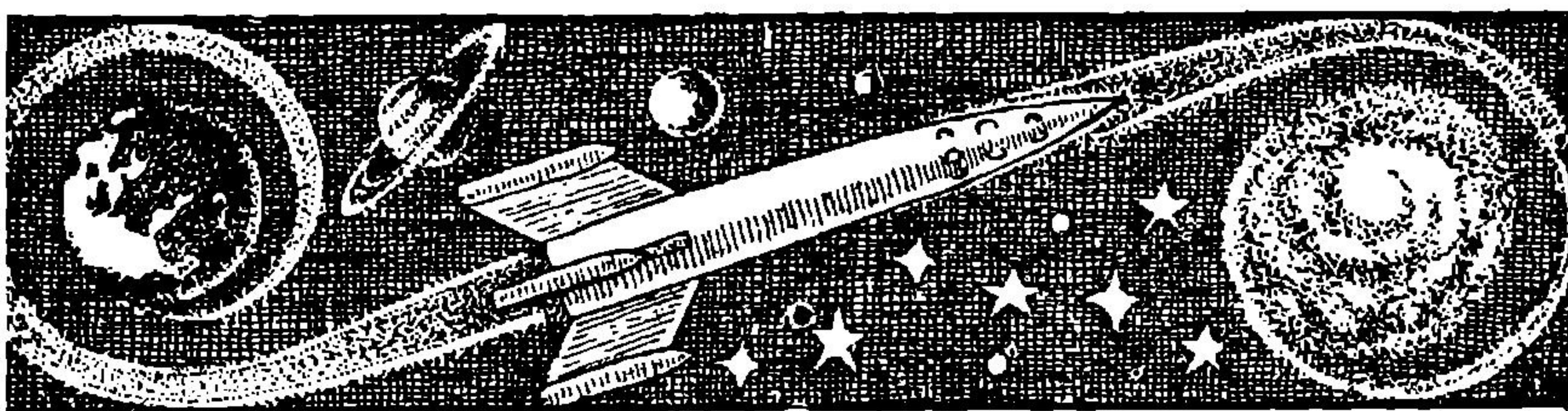
Between us, my wife and I cooked up a yarn to spin to the house-agents and any other nosey-parkers that might consider it their business, including the police, but this time I have my doubts as to its success. It's a little complicated, involving a friend in a motor-car who had rushed down from Leeds in a frightful hurry because the brother of the tall one was dangerously ill, and they hadn't had time to bring back the keys and rent in lieu of notice, and now they'd asked us to do it for them, going off in such a terrific tear that they hadn't even had time to write a note and leave an address for forwarding mail . . .

Hmm. I must confess it does sound a bit thin. The police were very polite about it all, but my wife and boy have reported that they are being subjected to considerable scrutiny every time they go anywhere near the town. People who previously greeted me and seemed willing to indulge in a certain amount of conversation now find sudden and urgent business waiting for them on the other side of the street whenever I approach.

Perhaps it would be best if we were to consider a change of address in the near future. Jobs, of course, are a difficulty, particularly those offering the amenities of my present one—I wonder, under the circumstances, if a family member who might possibly be reading this could help me in the matter.

It would be greatly appreciated.

ROBERT J. TILLEY



The Meek Shall Inherit

*Mankind had left his mark upon a hundred planets—
one planet constituted something of a problem, however*

There are two ways to conquer a galaxy, the first, and obviously the best, is the long-term policy. Careful survey, a bridgehead of picked scientific personnel and consolidation with trained occupation pioneers with every scientific aid to ensure their continued survival. There are, however, a number of drawbacks to the correct method. The cost is prohibitive, the scientific lay-out for supply over interstellar distances and, finally, the training of personnel involve a heavy drain on a planet's resources.

That leaves the second method. The one adopted by astute and ruthless Governments far-seeing enough to kill several birds with one stone—sucker conquest.

The first sucker was the survey man. News services raised him to hero status and he was glamourised like a video star. The resulting pool of allegedly qualified survey men was gratifyingly high for a Government which preached benevolence and secretly assessed the value of human life at slightly less than that of a cigarette butt.

They took the survey sucker out in a hyper-ship, dumped him

on a planet on which instruments showed he could breathe, and left him. Three months later the ship went back. If he was still alive, the planet was marked 'Suitable for Colonisation'. Stage two was twofold, involving high powered propaganda concerning newly opened planetary paradises on the one hand and subtle economic jockeyings on the other. The cost of living rose alarmingly, there were shortages of essentials with subsequent rationing.

The Government appealed to the people to remain calm and draw in their belts for the benefit of the race. Everything was being done to ease the situation which, as the public realised, was due to over-crowding.

On the one hand the attractive coloured folders, the allegedly authentic letters from satisfied pioneers already settled on some new planetary paradise. On the other, struggle, near-starvation and increasing demands for more work on less money.

The Government offered free passage to the new worlds and were generously adding one year's supply of essentials until the pioneers were comfortably settled in the promised haven. It was, perhaps, man's most ruthless exploitation of his own kind in the history of the race.

They went in their millions, dreaming of new frontiers, new freedoms and their names inscribed on the glowing pages of history. Pioneers some of them, most of them bludgeoned by propaganda into thinking they were. They went to planets with strange romantic names, to Andos, Viad, None, Deneb 9, Plateon, Taltha.

If any of them had lingering doubts there was always the comforting thought that there would be regular supply ships. If things didn't work out, they could always come back, couldn't they?

The best type pioneers burned their boats behind them. The new age pioneers didn't do that, the Government did it for them. The promised supply ships failed to materialise.

Seventy-eight planets, each with its quota of five hundred thousand pioneers had been left to fend for themselves in conditions of incredible hostility and danger. If the experiment worked and the pioneers survived, the Government had acquired an Empire at Minimum cost. If it didn't, well, things were easier now that the over-crowding problem had been solved.

Marshall was drunk when they picked him up discreetly. It was just in time. He had reached the stage where he was drunk enough to be talkative and sober enough to remember why he was drunk. They inveigled him into a car (the Government was subtle about

its strong-arm methods and never made them public) and drove him to headquarters.

In a sound proof room a man slapped his face. "When you're given a Government assignment you do it, see? You do it whether it's clean or dirty. You don't develop ethics or become morally indignant about means or methods, you just do what you're told without question, understand?"

They gave him two injections. The first to inhibit the appearance of bruises, the second to keep open certain neural passages rendering merciful loss of consciousness unlikely.

The Head of the department nodded briefly. "Glad you're back, Mr. Marshall, quite a spell in hospital. It must have been a very nasty fall."

Marshall looked at him, seething inwardly, but the other's face was blandly unconcerned. He knew, of course he knew, but the new, subtler methods of retribution would never permit him to betray his satisfaction publicly. Subtle intimidation, hidden behind an outward show of freedom, was far more frightening and effective than a secret police in jackboots.

Marshall muttered a brief formal reply and sat down at his desk, turning over a heap of reports with a show of interest he was far from feeling. A few odd million sent to their deaths might mean nothing to the Government but it made him sick to his soul. Government! He had learned enough by now to realise that the elections were rigged and the so called democracy was a dynasty from crooked father to perverted son.

How to acquire an empire at minimum cost—sucker conquest. Ship out your eager millions and abandon them for ten generations. In ten generations the pioneers would have been wiped out, degenerated to beasts or—begun to conquer their environment.

Marshall tried to keep his face expressionless. The infuriating part to him was that the experiment had been, by large measure, successful. Of seventy-eight worlds, forty-three had been successfully colonised. They were now being "brought into the Empire" regardless of the wishes of the colonists. A couple of cruisers and a transport of trained assault troops had successfully brought about the desired union with the home planet. All save one—Taltha. Taltha had successfully kicked the armed landing party clean off the planet.

Marshall found himself suddenly interested again and began to go through all the reports on Taltha. What he learned didn't make

sense. According to the reports there shouldn't be any colonists on Taltha, they should have been wiped out to a man. The planet was rated by survey as one hundred and fifty per cent. hostile. Sixteen survey men had gone to their deaths on the planet and the seventeenth had only survived because he had spent three months in a cave with the entrance sealed by a portable force screen.

A fair world, he had written in his report, fair and beautiful with sudden death in every square inch.

Yet, knowing all that, Taltha had received its quota of five hundred thousand pioneers, regardless. Now their descendants, who had no right to be alive at all, had successfully routed a whole transport of trained and fanatical combat troops. The Government, when it recovered from the shock, called in an expert, an alien-psychiatrist to look into the matter. First to determine how the colonists had managed to survive in an impossible environment and secondly, and more important, how they'd managed to defeat trained troops.

He, Marshall, was the expert they'd called in. He seemed to feel the hand striking his face again. "When you're given a Government assignment, you do it, see? You do it whether it's clean or dirty——"

Marshall felt a sudden surge of inward satisfaction. There was only one way to do this job and that was on the spot. True, the chance of survival was negligible but, once the job was done, what were his chances here? He knew too much now, far too much and a man could have an accident, couldn't he? He glanced at the bland face behind the desk—another nasty fall, perhaps.

The garrison was encamped within the beginnings of a desert, not from chance but from sheer necessity. Marshall found the combat troops literally cowering behind a double force screen which would have stopped a grand fleet.

The imported ecologist looked drawn and haggard. "We daren't move, Marshall. This planet is so lousy with danger that the existence of a colony is unbelievable." He sighed. "Yet beyond this desert it's beautiful, big calm seas, green hills, trees which remind you of Earth, yet every damn inch is rotten with death."

"What kind of death?" Marshall lit a cigarette and stared across the encampment.

The ecologist laughed without humour. "Almost anything you can imagine and a good deal you can't. Poison grass, it's sharp, you

see; if you cut yourself you start rotting on your feet within ten minutes. Then there's a bug, looks like a bee, it lands on your body and eats its way through. There's a tree which looks like an elm but can beat a man to pulp with its branches if he gets too close, another spits barbs which can penetrate a protective suit." He sighed again. "The only things apparently harmless are the bacteria and viruses but, believe me, that's all." He shifted his feet nervously. "We shall make out in the end, of course, and then we'll teach these upstarts a lesson they'll never forget." He was watching Marshall in a furtive, darting sort of way as if expecting some response.

"Yes?" Marshall kept his face expressionless.

"Yes." The other's words were hurried as if he were trying to convince not only himself but Marshall as well. "It will be a labour encampment for them, rest assured——"

"Shut up." Marshall sounded weary. "You're fooling nobody, least of all me. You're sick to the stomach with the whole business."

"I assure you——"

"I said, shut up. I saw the injection marks on your wrist when we met." He pulled back his sleeve. "Marks like these to stop the bruising."

Relief that was near to tears showed on the other's face. "My name's Crandon, let's go to my hut where we can talk——"

"Now let's hear the real set-up," said Marshall when the door was shut.

Crandon shrugged. "I don't think the attack stands a hope in hell. A freighter arrived last week with armoured vehicles, that's alright for getting to the city, getting out and occupying it is another thing. It's not only the colonists they're up against, it's the whole damn planet."

"It really is that bad?"

"Worse, because it looks so harmless. It's warm, verdant, gentle, inviting." His mouth twisted. "Like bait in a trap. The first attack had a ninety-five per cent. casualty rate and the troops never saw a colonist." He paused, frowning. "Marshall, nothing human can live on this planet, repeat, *nothing*. Yet these colonists not only survived but trebled their numbers. They've built two major cities with fine connecting roads and there are a number of minor communities scattered around in gentle-looking forest land. The kind of forest which has picked clean a man's bones before he has a chance to draw a gun." He shuddered. "There's a little

mobile plant which looks like a cross between a daisy and a spider. It punctures a man's skin and sows its seeds in his body. In four days green tendrils are sprouting between his fingers and toes. In ten he is a walking plant slowly being eaten alive. God, Marshall, how can a people survive in an environment which is one hundred per cent. sudden death?"

Marshall shrugged. "I'm an alio-psychiatrist. In short, my job is to assess the impact of an alien planet upon the psychology of a people. Perhaps, between us, we may be able to arrive at something. It appears that our lives may depend on it."

Crandon nodded quickly. "In more ways than one. Have you met the Commander? He's one of these gaunt, leather-faced fanatics, crazy for recognition and promotion. He sent the colonists an ultimatum for noon tomorrow."

"What sort of answer did he get?"

"A rude one. They said their own ultimatum expired three hours before that anyway. *Get out and stay out.*" For the first time Crandon grinned faintly. "They told him just what to do with his armoured assault, and I've heard that the veins stood out on his temples like cords. The message came over the general network, you see, and half the garrison heard it."

Marshall found himself warming towards the Talthans. David defying a Goliath and making him look silly. He sobered again. But what chance did they stand? Ten generations was too short a time to develop a technology comprehensive enough to defy an empire. All they probably possessed were a few obsolete weapons and an environment which was hostile to the invader.

At the exact time of the expiry of the Talthan ultimatum, the force screens flickered uncertainly and expired in a shower of sparks.

There was a panic rush to the armoured vehicles and frantic, ineffectual attempts to get the motors running. Something had blown the force screen projectors and sucked power from the nuclear motors leaving them deader than a spent match.

The Commander strode among the men, rasping orders and gradually a semblance of order began to appear. He mounted an armoured vehicle and made a brief savage speech. "Power is dead. We can't move the armour and we can't call for help. Therefore, we are going to march on the city and take it by force of arms. We all know it's death to stay here so it's march or perish." He paused and added softly: "Anyone attempting to surrender to the enemy on approaching the city will be shot out of hand—with a reactor pistol."

He stood down and hurried preparations for the march began.

"Reactor pistol. I thought they were banned." Marshall realised the futility of the words as soon as he had uttered them. The Government made a great show of virtue in public and did the opposite in secret. He sighed wearily and said: "How far to the edge of the desert?"

Crandon shrugged. "Five miles, another twenty-five to the city if we last that long. You'll need a protective suit long before we see green, better put it on now."

It was a tough five miles of loose rock, jagged boulder and sudden fissure. Then they mounted a sudden rise and looked down a long descent leading to distant green.

"Forest and plain," said Crandon softly, "river and hill, pretty as an English garden and as deadly as a mine field."

Whistles blew and the column came to a halt. The Commander strode over. "You're the experts. You're going to get us through to that city alive, understand?"

"My God, I've only been here a day." Marshall stared at him unbelievably.

"You've studied the reports, make the most of them." He turned to Crandon. "You've been here three weeks, you've been out in an armoured vehicle on classification surveys, keep us posted."

Crandon shrugged. "Whatever I do you'll have a ninety per cent. casualty rate, I'm not a magician."

The Commander drew a squat weapon from his hip holster. "Too high, make it forty."

"What about the opposition?"

The other laughed unpleasantly and looked at the gun again. "Two hits with this and there won't be any opposition." He patted the butt. "There isn't an army that can stand up to the psychological impact of these things. Seeing a man hit saps the morale of any army, trained or native." He thrust the weapon back into its holster. "The danger is natural, any kind of opposition we can handle providing we have enough men left, see that we do." He turned abruptly and strode away.

The next stage of the march began according to strict Terran ground tactics with dispersed grouping against possible air attack, yet so arranged to give covering fire in case of direct assault.

"There ought to be monsters," said Marshall savagely. Ahead the green space beckoned invitingly. He could see, not jungle, not forest, but quiet woodland and open flower-strewn fields. "If this planet is as dangerous as you say there ought to be writhing jungles,

dinosaurs, things like walking mountains. It doesn't seem right it should look so damn peaceful."

In the air was suddenly a high fluting like distant pipes and he saw the combat men look at each other uneasily.

"Treble birds," said Crandon half to himself. "Like a sparrow with transparent wings."

"Dangerous?"

"Not while we wear protective suits, otherwise——" He shrugged. "Their eating habits are unpleasant if you happen to be the one they decide to eat. They come down in a swarm, you see, and they can strip flesh to the bone before you fall." He pointed. "That tree which looks like an oak exhales a narcotic vapour which can knock you cold. When you are cold it makes sure you stay that way, it clubs you around with its branches."

Marshall shook his head uncomprehendingly. "And the colonists survived. It doesn't begin to make sense." He paused. "There's an answer somewhere. You can't dominate an environment like this obviously; somehow the colonists must have learned to live in harmony with it. Crandon, we've got to use our heads and learn how they do it, there must be a way."

"Maybe there is, but will we have the time? First we have to keep a grip on our nerves because when we start having casualties they won't be pretty. Second, we've got to try and survive ourselves and that won't give us much time to make scientific observations. While we're figuring out what's what, something could be eating us alive."

The first casualty occurred some two minutes later. There was no warning. A combat man fell flat on his face and lay still. When they turned him over his face was bloated and unrecognisable. All they found was a tiny thorn embedded in the back of his gloved hand.

Ten minutes later a sergeant screamed and clawed at his faceplate. For some seconds he rolled and flopped on the grass like a stranded fish, then he stiffened into grotesque immobility, one arm raised above his head.

It became frighteningly regular, man after man falling—falling and not getting up. It was like being sniped at by an invisible marksman with no chance of return fire.

An officer approached the Commander and saluted. "Sergeant Bland reports trouble with the men, sir."

"Yes?" The Commander's voice was disarmingly soft.

"Yes, sir. I understand that some of them are planning to make a break on their own."

"Who is the ring leader?"

"Private Curtis, sir." He pointed to a big dark man with a heavy jaw.

"Call the men over, they need a warning."

The warning was an act of savagery.

"Private Curtis, you are a subversive." The weapon in the Commander's hand hissed liquidly.

Curtis staggered, frowned in a puzzled way, then his eyes dilated. In the centre of his chest was a tiny blue flame. He beat at it with his gloved hands ineffectually, then began to strip wildly.

"Come on." Crandon jerked at Marshall's arm.

"But, my God——"

"We can't help him." Crandon's voice was harsh. "Can't you understand? He's been hit by a reactor pistol, there's nothing you can do, *nothing*."

Curtis was staring unbelievably at the tiny flame curling upwards from his naked chest. He beat at it wildly, then pressed his palms over it, trying to smother the flame. When he removed his hands tiny feathers of light clung to his fingers.

Crandon jerked again, roughly: "For God's sake don't stay and watch the poor devil burn. The weapon artificially accelerates the carbon-oxygen reaction around the area of the impact and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

Marshall looked back once. Something, bathed in bluish flame, ran in stumbling circles, screaming and beating at itself with flaming arms.

A reactor pistol! A diabolic mechanism directed solely at undermining your enemy's morale. What army could possibly hold together, when among them, their friends burned visibly to death before their eyes?

They were clear of the desert now and the casualty rate was doubling. Doubling in an Eden of running streams, stately trees and smiling flower-strewn meadows.

Marshall shuddered. Taltha might hold sudden death in every square inch, but it had nothing to equal the reactor pistol. Back there on the slope was a blackened something which still twisted, gurgled and died by agonising inches.

Crandon stopped, suddenly, pointing. "On the branch of that tree."

It resembled a huge terrestrial moth. The two-foot downy wings were folded over the grey body and the creature stared back at them with glowing amber eyes.

"I don't know what it is but I think we'll make a detour." Crandon looked for another opening between the trees.

Marshall frowned at it, finding himself strangely calm and untroubled. "It's beautiful," he said, half to himself. "I don't think it would hurt a fly."

"It isn't going to get the chance." The Commander had joined them and was raising his pistol meaningly.

On a sudden impulse Marshall knocked his arm up as he fired. "It hasn't harmed us yet." Almost he was shouting. "Aren't we getting enough trouble around here without stirring up some of our own?"

The Commander's face stiffened, then he smiled coldly. "If you're so damn sure that thing is harmless, Mr. Marshall, you walk past it, you walk under that tree."

Marshall stared at him. "I only——"

"You heard me, Marshall." He jerked the gun menacingly. "Move, if you survive we'll follow."

Marshall shrugged. He supposed he'd asked for it. He turned abruptly and began to walk steadily towards the tree.

The creature watched him coming, amber eyes glowing, downy antennae twitching slightly.

It is beautiful, he thought. There were iridescent rainbows in the wings and the long body glowed warmly in the dappled sunlight. Strangely, he was not afraid and he had a sudden absurd inclination to stroke the creature like a cat.

As if in response the creature spread its wings, launched itself from the branch and glided towards him. For perhaps a second it rested lightly on his shoulder. A soft purring sound proceeded from it and the antennae stroked his faceplate. Then it sailed swiftly away over the tree tops with a shimmer of wings.

Crandon came running up. "You alright?" He held a tattered notebook.

"Fine." Marshall was smiling.

Crandon was sweating copiously. "I thought that damn thing was vaguely familiar. I found reference to it in this book. It's rated by survey as one of the most horrible winged deaths this planet holds. How did you get away with letting it come close?"

Marshall shrugged. "I haven't figured that out myself yet." He frowned. "You sure you've got it right? In my opinion that thing was as harmless as a kitten."

"Dead sure." Crandon tapped the book with his finger. "It's all written down here in complete detail."

"I still think it's as harmless as a kitten." He stopped, a frown of concentration between his brows. "My God," he said softly, "my God." He fumbled for the seal-clips of his protective suit.

"Are you crazy?" Crandon's face was putty coloured. "That suit is the only protection you have."

"No, it's the last barrier." Marshall inhaled the oxygen-rich air as he slipped clear of the suit, loose shirted, bare of leg, sandalled. "Let's go, huh?"

"The grass." Crandon's voice was a croak. "It only has to scratch you once."

"We'll see." Marshall stepped forward confidently. In ten minutes his legs were a mass of minor scratches but he strode on.

Crandon watched, a muscle twitching at the corner of his mouth, hands clenched nervously. Waiting for Marshall's movements to become jerky and uncertain, for the flesh to turn black and the skin to start peeling, but nothing happened. "You've discovered something, what is it?"

"I'm not quite sure myself yet. You're the ecologist, what's the general trend? Anything unusual about it?"

Crandon looked uneasy. "I had to confine myself to classification, haven't had time to prepare an overall study."

"I mean within the last few hours."

The ecologist hesitated. "I haven't really looked," he confessed. "Candidly I've been too interested in staying alive." He relapsed into silence. After five minutes he said. "Symbiosis. Leaves not chewed, grass untouched, the trees produce some sort of goo on the branches which supply the needs of insect life. The general picture is one of interdependence, does it help?"

Marshall nodded. "It bears out my theory." He grinned, twistedly. "Crandon," he said, softly, "there's nothing harmful on this planet, nothing at all—*only us*. We're the danger element, the poison and the violence, nature is neutral."

"Just what are you guys trying to do?" The Commander had joined them again, unnoticed. The lean face was taut and angry and the pistol was pointed meaningly in his hand. "You're supposed to be helping us through, but you're leading us into a trap." The barrel of the pistol lifted a little. "If you want to live you'd better start explaining fast."

Marshall said, coldly. "There's nothing I can tell you that you'd understand."

"No?" The finger tightened on the trigger. "You're walking through this damn death-trap in shorts, yet I'm still losing a man for every hundred feet we advance. You walked under a tree back there, four men followed you and four men died. A branch lashed down like a whip and there wasn't much left when it had finished. Either you've learned something and have decided to keep it quiet or, somehow, you've established some sort of contact with the natives." He paused, then his voice became grating. "I'll give you exactly thirty seconds to say which."

Marshall never saw quite what did happen, something flung a shadow across his face and there was a faint whisper of wings. The Commander screamed, beat frantically and futilely at something with the pistol, then fired wildly, cursing. Something like a huge moth went gliding away over the tree tops.

"It stung me." The Commander dabbed frantically through a broken faceplate at an angry red spot on his cheek with a medical tube from his kit, then he calmed. "If you two think I'm going to die, think again." He broke the seal of a small container at his belt. "This stuff is special, issued only to officers." He placed two small transparent pills on his tongue and swallowed. "These pills will counteract any known poison and stop any damn bug that ever lived." He smiled unpleasantly. "Are you going to talk?"

"I'll talk." Marshall sounded resigned. "But it won't do you any good."

"I'll decide that." The Commander staggered slightly and clutched at Marshall's shoulder for support. "Damn pills, hellish strong."

Marshall stared at him in horror. The angry red spot had changed to a white patch which was spreading down the other's cheek.

"I can feel the damn pills working, no pain now, just an itch." He scratched his face and dust drifted downwards. "Move, we've got to get to that city." He seemed to have forgotten his need for information. "I'll take the place if it's the last thing I do; shoot a few of the men as a warning." He staggered again but did not appear to notice. "Hell, this itch." He rubbed again, rubbed and rubbed and fine dust drifted downwards towards the grass. When he stopped, part of the cheek bone was visible. "Damn native upstarts." His voice had become thick and curiously muffled. "I'll show them——" He crumpled suddenly and pitched forward on his face, a cloud of fine dust drifted upwards but he did not move.

Crandon turned him over. "He's quite dead and half his face

is gone." He straightened. "You know what did this? That damn great moth, I saw it clearly." He turned and began to walk on. "And you declared it was as harmless as a kitten," he said, bitterly.

Marshall said, softly. "It is, but he wasn't."

Crandon stopped in mid-stride. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Life on this planet is not only interdependent, it is also reactive."

"You mean it's reacting to us." Crandon's voice was almost challenging. "That infers reasoning and, as an ecologist, I refuse to accept an intelligent blade of grass."

Marshall laughed softly. "Don't jump ahead of me, I said reactive not reasoning. Your body reacts to fear by glandular adjustment, certain additional secretions are introduced into the bloodstream to meet the emergency, but your body doesn't reason about it, it reacts."

"Ah!" Crandon nodded slowly, then he paled. "Hey, that implies more than I care to think about. Why should nature fear us?" He answered the question himself. "Unless it knows what we're like, knows what we're thinking. God, are you trying to tell me the whole set-up is telepathic?"

Marshall shook his head. "Not telepathic, it can't read our thoughts but it is sensitive to our emotions."

Crandon opened his mouth to retort and shut it again, then he said, quietly: "It makes sense. We come here with a gun in each hand, our minds twisted with hate and violence, and nature hits back."

"Not hits back, it reacts just as the body reacts to fear or pain. Perhaps our emotions hurt it, or perhaps, in the far distant past there was some atavistic life form that didn't evolve with the rest of the planet and nature produced her own antibodies to take care of it."

"So harmless life forms draw upon their ancient natural defences to counteract the source of irritation." Crandon's voice was tense with excitement. "Just as our bodies draw upon their natural defences to counter bacteria or virus." His voice became quiet again. "The Commander singled himself out for attention because of the violence and hatred in his mind." He frowned. "How the hell did the colonists find this out?"

Marshall smiled. "You may not believe this but, as a psych', I can assure you the race is growing away from violence."

"Yes? What makes you think so, or have you forgotten how you got here?"

"The Government is a minority group compared with the mass of the people. One might add a dying minority and subconsciously they know it. The struggles of a dying animal are often fiercer than those of a healthy one. The abuses, cynicisms and cruelties of the present régime are its death throes, but the ordinary people are becoming kinder and more considerate."

"I'd still like to know how the colonists found the answer so damn quickly."

Marshall smiled. "I should imagine the children lead the way, stroking cuddly life forms, admiring flying things before their parents had time to warn them of the danger. They gave kindness and got kindness in return, the answer was there for everyone to see."

"I should have seen too, but you beat me to it." Crandon began to strip off his protective suit. "What do we do with our friends?" He jerked his head at the remnants of the invading army who were grouped together nervously some distance away.

Marshall shrugged. "Let them come with us. Obviously they are less indoctrinated with the Government's hate policy or they wouldn't have survived this long."

"Will the Talthans accept them?"

Marshall laughed. "The unacceptable won't get there to find out."

Crandon nodded. "I'd better go over and try and explain anyway." When he came back he was frowning. "There's only one aspect of this thing I don't like. The Government won't tolerate loss of face, still less a rebel planet in the Empire, they'll try again."

"No doubt." Marshall grinned. "And the Talthans will respond. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if some of the life around here got back to Earth somehow."

"I don't see," began Crandon, then the implications hit him. "My God, the perfect weapon, one which destroys only the violent." He began to laugh. "I suppose it will be the first time in history that a régime has clubbed itself to death with its own viciousness." He paused, frowning. "I seem to have read of this somewhere, something about the meek, can't quite recall——"

Marshall nodded and said softly. "It is written that the meek shall inherit the earth——"

Ten-Storey Jigsaw

He was an ordinary sort of bloke doing an honest job when, suddenly, he remembered the past

My name is Badger Gowland. It's an ordinary sort of name for an ordinary sort of bloke. For the past twenty years I've worked as a scrap merchant in this big, war-torn city. The city happens to be Sydney, but I suppose that, with minor variations, what I'm going to tell you might have happened in any war-torn city: Singapore, New York, Hamburg, Moscow, London. In that twenty years, I've come across many strange stories, but the strangest is that of Tosher Ten-Toes. Tosher was my cobber. Here's his story, and you'll have to take it as it is, without frills.

This particular morning, the last morning of Tosher's life, there was something vague about him. He was preoccupied. I spotted it even in the way he came towards me when he came to work, but thought nothing of it at the time. His amnesia made him like that at times, and all the lads were used to it and thought nothing of it.

"Come on, Tosher!" I shouted. "The other scrap gangs have already left. Time we were moving."

I was seated in the heli-cart, waiting to go. He scrambled up beside me apologetically. I let in the clutch, the vanes began to spin above us and up we went. Heli-carts are absolutely silent in action; we might have been birds, the way we took the air.

It was a fine, warm spring day with air as still as syrup, just the sort of day for our job. The enemy raid over the city the night before had been chicken feed—a paltry couple of satellite-to-Earth squadrons of Depressors dropping a few “suitcases”. “Suitcases” are what we call the light type of H-bombs Depressors generally carry: small stuff equivalent to not more than eighty thousand tons T.N.T. The best thing about them from our point of view is that they’re clean—no R.A. fall-out—and so we don’t have the bother of cluttering ourselves with anti-suits while we are salvaging.

Directly the raid was over, I had phoned through to Civil Maintenance and bought a couple of freshly damaged ten-storey buildings cheap. They stood fairly close together on George’s Heights, looking out across Obelisk Bay and the sea. I slid the co-ordinates into the cyberpilot now and we were away. Tosher pulled his wind-cheater off and stowed it in the locker, just to show he was all set for action.

In the sunshine, the city looked good from the air. Neat. Even the beggars starving in the gutters look tidy when you’re a couple of hundred yards up. A bright, early-flowering weed lent a touch of gaiety to the craters among the buildings. The waters of the port shone like brass.

“What have we got today, Badger?” Tosher asked.

“A tenner with courtesy and a jigsaw tenner,” I said. Those are just the cant terms we use in the trade. A building “with courtesy” means some sort of Government office block—if you get courtesy from them, you get precious little else. A “jigsaw” is private flats or homes; we call them that because when they are busted open they look like a pattern of interlocking pieces—like a smashed dolly house.

In no time we were circling over our new property. Good slices of both of them were still standing. Far below, the demolition squads were busy roping off the area. They always move in and blow up the unsafe buildings after we have paid our brief salvage visits. “The vultures” is what they call us; I won’t tell you what we call them. They grudge us an honest living. Yet what we scrap ads pay the civic authorities pays those chaps’ wages.

“My turn for out,” Tosher said, casting round for his gear.

I had levelled out close to the ten-storey jigsaw, holding the helicart steady against the ruined top floor. We always work from the top down. And we always do the jigsaws first because they are more exciting; you never know what you’re going to find. In a courtesy job, it’s all cut and dried: so many desks, so many

wash basins, so many lavatory bowls. After a time, a good scrap man—like me or Tosher—can fillet a courtesy with our eyes shut.

Anyhow, Tosher strapped his tool haversack on his back, slung one end of the pulley system over his shoulder, and stepped out onto the upper storey of the doomed building. I climbed out the back of my cab into the helicart platform and set up the other end of the pulley tackle. By that means, we transfer the booty into our flying pantechnicon.

Then I sat back, lit a mescahale, and waited for Tosher to reconnoitre and do his stuff. I forgot to tell you why we call him Tosher Ten-Toes.

It started as a joke. The war had hardly begun, nine years ago, when Tosher appeared near my house in a dazed condition. Nothing on but pants and vest and half a shirt; barefoot. Speechless. Total amnesia. There were a lot of poor devils about like that when the raids started. I was short of hands in the yard at the time; my missus and I took Tosher in and looked after him. Tosher Ten-Toes was what the kids called him. You know what kids are: they think it's funny to see a man walk barefoot down Portobello Street.

Tosher began to get better. I got busier as the raids increased. In no time, he was off the yard and working second man in the helicarts. Now for the last four years he was my right-hand man. He might not have had a lot to say, but I wouldn't have changed him for all the you-know-what in China. He still did not know who he was, but that began to trouble him less and less. Nothing of the old days had come back to him, except the memory of Judy. Not that Tosher knew who Judy was, it was just that he used to wake up in the night crying her name. He was faithful to her name, wouldn't look at another woman, not even at Kate, who often looked at him.

Fixing up his end of the pulley, he stood and surveyed the ruined jigsaw. It was in a poor way. Half of it had been sliced into dust, and the foundations were undermined. Spreading his legs, Tosher began to rock from side to side, as he gained momentum, the building began to rock from side to side with him. He killed the motion at once. "Thank heaven there's no wind about," he said to himself.

He was standing in what had been till a few hours ago an attic boxroom. Against the inner wall, four empty trunks were piled. Without bothering to use the pulley system, he threw them over into the hold of the helicart. Nobody had the raw materials to waste on making trunks now; they were scarce and would be worth about six hundred apiece.

Without wasting any time, but moving cautiously, he went to the door and opened it. Outside were stairs, winding down to the floor below. A quarter way down, just past the first bend, the outer wall had been blasted away, leaving the stairs sagging over emptiness. Stepping carefully on the inside of the treads, Tosher came down onto the next floor.

All the walls on the landing were intact—curtains undisturbed round the landing window, just a little white dust over the ornament on the sill. No doubt Tosher felt that feeling you always feel, that you've no right to be there, that you're an intruder, or a burglar, or perhaps a vulture, or a ghost.

Ahead of him, a notice on a door said "Flat 26". The door was locked. Tosher brought out a bunch of skeleton keys, undid it, and went in.

He was in a living-room. Everything was perfectly intact. It was the usual sort of middle-class flat; we deal with them by the dozen. Tosher made a rapid inventory of the saleable items: stove, TV, tape player, carpet, newish suite, clock, nice little china figure. The rest of the stuff, the paperbacks, yesterday's newspaper, the pictures on the wall, would tumble with the jigsaw when the demolition men took over. Later, maybe, kids would crawl over the rubble and pull a comic or a little toy out of it.

"Something like twenty-five thousand credits here," Tosher estimated, jotting the figure down and opening the next door.

He was in the bathroom. It was a nice, roomy bathroom with green tiles all round it and a deep ebony bath and pink and yellow towels on towel rails and a great big airing cupboard. You know. A bit Ritzy. The sort of place that makes you hanker after a bath yourself.

One wall had entirely fallen away. Tosher walked to the edge of the precipice and looked down. The bathroom protruded over space, with only the breezes for support. Obviously, he need not waste much time there.

And then, the way I see it, something came over Tosher. Perhaps he suddenly saw in that bathroom the complete futility of war. He thought of everyone who had been killed, from Vic Shepherd, the great comedian, to the lowliest unknown; he thought even of Norton Sykes, the minister they called The Man Who Started It All, whose hideout had ironically been the first to be destroyed in the war he began—perhaps even of my sister Kate, who at one time set out in a practical way to get Judy out of Tosher's mind and later was killed by a Winged Wallaby, so-called.

Tosher must have seen it all in that bathroom: the way in war you're busy doing something ordinary one minute and the next—bingo!—you're in Kingdom Come. Norton Sykes crouching over his battle plans or my sister Kate hanging out her smalls—when the time comes, they all go like that. That's how it had been in the bathroom too. A nice place and a nice life spoilt for ever.

The little glass shelf over the wash basin was cluttered with powder tins, shaving tackle, tooth brushes, and other paraphernalia. On the stool next to the black bath were a child's pyjamas. There was water in the bath; on the water floated a becalmed yacht and two rubber ducks.

It all told its own story. Death comes at bedtime—it sounds like the title of a cheap novel. Everything there looked perfectly in order, except that the big airing cupboard door was partly open and a woolly bath towel had fallen out; and a tooth glass had teetered off the shelf and shattered in the wash basin. But with the outer wall gone, all those indoor objects looked unreal in the outdoor lighting, as if they were something on a tele or a movie set.

Then Tosher saw another detail. On the edge of the lino, by the sheer drop, was a bloody hand print. The fingers pointed into the room. The print was smudged where the hand had slid over the edge and into the gulf. It had been just a small hand.

"My God!" Tosher said.

You could picture it all. Mother about to bath son. Water in the bath and everything. "I think I'd better wash your hair tonight, dear." Then the Depressors pulling out of their two hundred mile dive and screeching off, leaving their suitcases behind. The detonation, and the wall whipped away like a curtain. Blast probably sucked mother out with the wall. Son was bowled to the brink of the ninety foot drop. He was injured. For a minute he clung there, perhaps not even struggling to get back to safety.

He hung and looked at the old order, the soft, warm towels, his little pyjamas, the steam rising from the tub. Then he had to let go.

Tosher turned wildly. He began cursing aloud. He cursed the war that killed the kid and blotted out Judy and his own past; he cursed Norton Sykes, who started the war; he cursed the generals who continued the war; he even cursed me, who made a profit out of the war. Then he cursed himself most of all.

He wrenched a crowbar out of his kit and smashed the mirror on the wall so that he could no longer see his own distorted face. He flicked the plug out of the bath; the water gurgled and splashed

over a piano standing forlornly on a ledge which had once been the floor below. Then he hurled the crowbar away.

He watched the metal glint as it fell lazily over and over, finally to strike the pavement far below; and when he turned back, the towel by the cupboard door was moving.

For a minute Tosher did not understand. Then the towel was dragged aside. A woman was there on the floor, on her hands and knees. Clutching the door, she stood up. She was in her early forties, dishevelled, still with a waterproof apron tied round her middle. It was the boy's mother. The blast, flinging her into the airing cupboard, had knocked her senseless, and there she had lain till the row Tosher made had roused her.

The sight of her petrified Tosher for a minute.

"I thought you were a ghost!" he said hoarsely.

The woman brushed a hand over her forehead.

"Why aren't you in the bath yet, Mickie?" she asked in a puzzled fashion.

"You're a bit dazed, my dear," said Tosher, in a gentle voice. "Here, look, let me——"

"I asked you to get undressed, didn't I?" she said. She sounded rational enough, but her eyes—they were as blank as prunes and stared unseeingly through Tosher. "Hurry up and get your clothes off, Mickie, or the water will be getting cold."

"I'm not your little boy," Tosher said. "Something—something's happened. Try and understand. Let me take care of you."

"Don't argue, Mickie," she said sharply. "Get undressed quickly. It's nearly time for Daddy to come home."

"Mickie isn't here!" Tosher explained desperately. "I've come to get you out of here, old pet."

"You must have your bath first," she shouted. There was a bruise on her temple like mud under the skin where she had clouted herself against the airing cupboard door. "It's getting late," she said.

"Can't you see——" Tosher began, gesturing to the little yacht lying on its side in the bath. But he knew she could not understand; the poor creature was not rational.

If he could get her upstairs, the helicart would take her to hospital for treatment. Advancing, he laid a hand on the woman's wrist. With unexpected force, she flung herself onto him. She pounced like a wild cat and began to rip the clothes off his back.

"Get undressed! Get undressed!" she yelled. "You must have your bath, you dirty little scamp!"

Tosher staggered back, putting his hand up to her throat to push her off him. With a quick movement, she bit his fingers till the blood came.

"Into the bath!" she screamed. "Quick! Quickly! Your ducks and boats are waiting for you!"

Under the prod of pain, Tosher acted instinctively. He chopped her under the nose with the edge of his palm and then, when her head was still jerked backwards, pushed hard against her chest. She came away from him.

"Your bath . ." she began surprisedly.

Just for a moment she was balanced on the brink of the drop. Tosher stepped forward to grab her. Their fingers touched. Then she was falling backwards, outwards, her mouth fixed in an astonished, silent, "Oh!"

Helplessly, Tosher just stood there and watched her fall. Her round mouth and her puzzled expression—as if this were some problem she could solve, given another five minutes—were vividly clear to him. And in that instant he recognised her.

"Judy!" he called. Just that one call.

And the round mouth of her, fixed, dwindling in the centre of his vision, changed suddenly into an expanding hole, growing rounder, bigger, bigger yet. It was swallowing, vaporising away the barrier that stood between Tosher and his past. The sight of Judy had finally vanquished his nine-year amnesia.

Standing there on the edge of nothing, Tosher could at last see back into his lost life. A figure was standing there. It was Norton Sykes, The Man Who Started It All, the man who had vanished when the first load of enemy suitcases fell on his hideout. Tosher recognised Norton's figure: it was himself.

"Me Norton . ." he muttered and then, aloud in an oddly conversational tone, "but I don't want to be Norton."

And he took a pace forward into thin air.

Most of this I saw with my own two eyes. Directly I heard Tosher breaking the mirror, I guessed something was wrong. In rocky jigsaws, we scrap chaps are always as silent as mice.

All I had to do was drop the heli-cart down one storey and angle it round one corner. I did it in a hurry, and the pulley system snagged me. In my haste, I had forgotten it still connected me up with the attic.

Rather than flip the crate up again to disconnect, I snatched up my welder and jumped back onto the platform to burn the

steel pulley cable through and thus release the helicar. It took a hell of a time. The welder wouldn't function properly and my hands were shaking as if I had palsy.

I was stuck half round the corner, helpless. I could see Tosher and the woman from where I was, but couldn't get to them. I shouted, but they didn't hear. I waved but they didn't look. When the cable finally gave, I was just too late to catch Tosher as he fell.

The terrible thing was, that woman wasn't Judy any more than I am. I checked afterwards. It was just a delusion of poor old Tosher's. But of course he was—or had been—Norton Sykes. I'd found that out years ago. All the boys in the yard knew, but they never let on. Nor did they ever hold it against him, although as Norton Sykes, Tosher had been a virtual dictator.

It's an odd world. A dictator can make a damn good scrap man. And *vice versa*, unfortunately.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

NEBULA No. 27 . . .

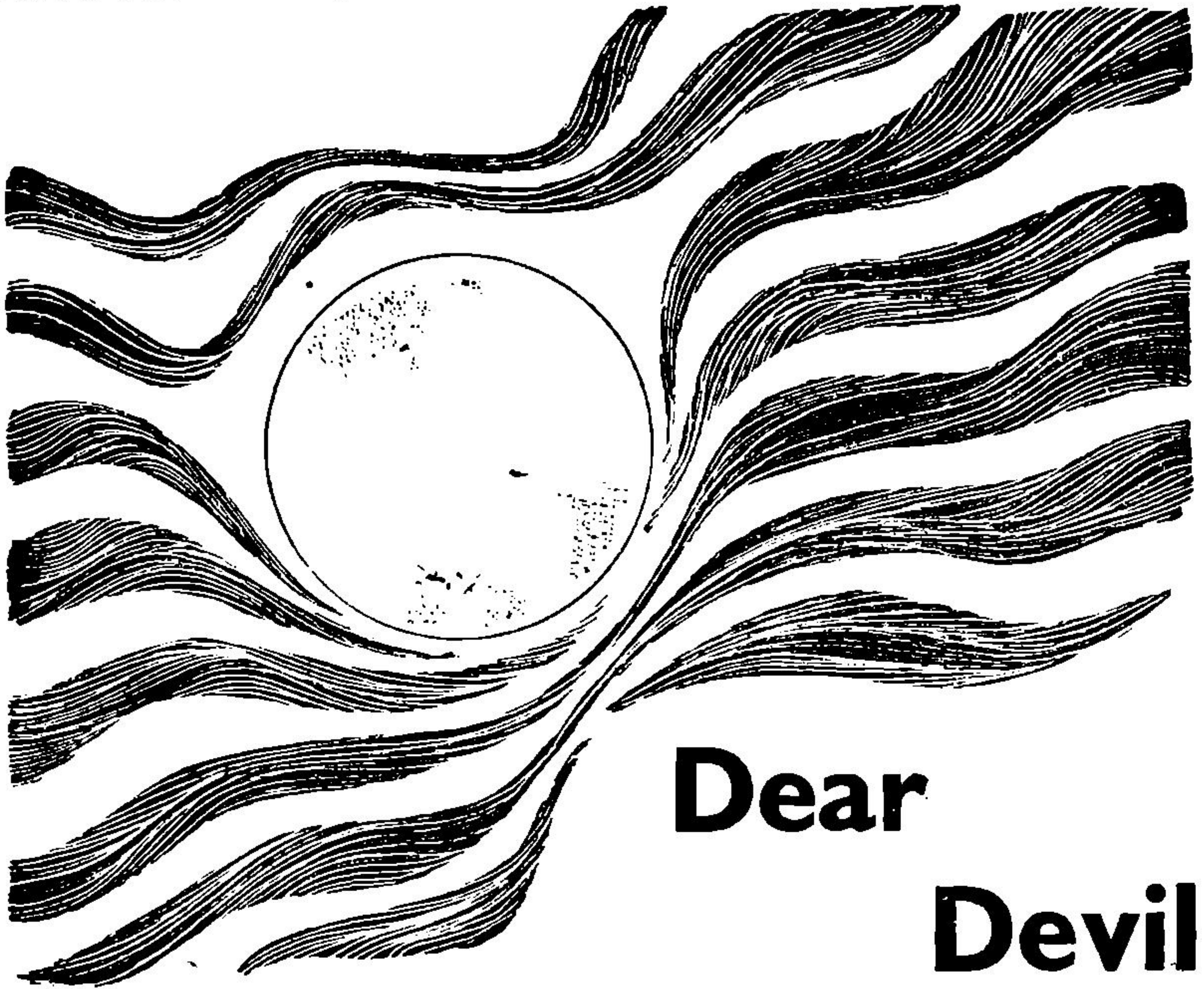
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J. M. W. Turner



Destroyed by his own hand, mankind's last hope of salvation lay in the alien being from another world

Illustrated by Harry Turner

The first Martian vessel descended upon Earth with the slow, stately fall of a landing balloon. It did resemble a large balloon in that it was spherical and had a strange buoyancy out of keeping with its metallic construction. Beyond this superficial appearance all similarity to anything Terrestrial ceased.

There were no rockets, no flaming venturis, no external projections other than several solaradiant distorting grids that served to boost the ship in any desired direction through the cosmic field. There were no observation-ports. All viewing was done through a transparent plastic band running right around the fat belly of the sphere. The bluish, nightmarish crew were assembled behind that band and surveying the new world with great, multi-faceted eyes.

Together they gazed in complete silence as they examined this world called Terra. Even if they had been capable of speech they'd have said nothing just then. But none among them had a talkative faculty in any sonic sense and at this quiet moment none needed it.

The scene outside was one of untrammelled desolation. Scraggy blue-green grass clung to tired ground all the way to a horizon scarred by ragged mountains. Dismal bushes struggled for life here and there, some with the pathetic air of striving to become trees as once their ancestors had been. To the right a long, straight scar through the grass betrayed the sterile lumpiness of rocks at odd places. Too rugged and too narrow ever to have been a road, it suggested no more than the desiccated remnants of a long-gone wall. And over all this depressing wasteland there loomed a ghastly sky.

Captain Skhiva eyed his crew, spoke to them with his sign-talking tentacle. The alternative was contact-telepathy which required physical touch.

"It is obvious that we are out of luck. We could have done no worse had we landed on the empty satellite. However, our instruments show that it is safe to go forth. Anyone who wishes to explore a little while may do so."

One of them gesticulated back at him. "Captain, don't you wish to be the first to step upon this world?"

"It is of no consequence. If anyone deems it an honour he is welcome to it." He pulled the lever opening both air-lock doors. Pressure went up a little as thicker, heavier air crowded in. "Beware of over-exertion," he warned as they went out.

Poet Fander touched him, tentacles tip to tip as he sent his thoughts racing through their nerve-ends. "Captain, this confirms all that we'd suspected during our approach. A stricken planet far gone in its death throes. What do you suppose caused it?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. Naturally I would much like to know. If it has been smitten by some kind of cosmic catastrophe, what are the chances of the same thing happening to Mars?" His troubled mind sent its throb of worry up Fander's contacting tentacle. "A pity that this planet had not been farther away from the Sun instead of closer in; we might then have observed the preceding phenomena and learned exactly what occurred. It is so difficult properly to study this planet against the Sun's persistent glare."

"That applies still more to the next world, the misty one," observed Poet Fander.

"I know it. And I am beginning to fear what we may find there. If it proves to be equally dead it will be a great misfortune for us,

possibly a disaster. We shall be completely stalled until we can make the big jump outward."

"Which won't be in our lifetimes."

"I doubt it," agreed Captain Skhiva. "We might move fast and effectively with the help of friends. Alone, we shall be slow, perhaps too slow." He turned to watch his crew writhing in various directions across the grim landscape. "They find it good to be on firm ground. But what is a world without life and beauty? In a short time they will grow tired of it."

Fander said thoughtfully, "Nevertheless I would like to see more of this place. May I take out the lifeboat?"

"You are a songbird, not a pilot," reproved Skhiva. "Your function is to maintain morale by entertaining us, not to roam around in a lifeboat."

"But I know how to use it. Every one of us was trained to handle it. Let me take it that I may see more."

"Haven't we seen enough even before we landed? What else is there to see? Cracked and distorted roads about to dissolve into nothingness. Ages-old cities torn and broken, crumbling into dust. Shattered mountains and charred forests and craters little smaller than those upon the Moon. No sign of any superior lifeform still surviving. Only the miserable grass, the dreary shrubs and various animals, two or four-legged, that flee at our approach. Why do you wish to see more?"

"There is music even in death," said Fander.

"Even so, it remains repulsive." Skhiva gave a little shiver. "All right. Take the lifeboat. Who am I to question the weird workings of a non-technical mind?"

"Thank you, Captain."

"It is nothing. See that you are back by dusk." With that he broke contact, went into the nearest lock, curled himself snakishly upon its outer rim and brooded, still without bothering to touch the new world. So much attempted, so much done—for so poor a reward.

He was coddling his gloom when the lifeboat floated from its hangar and soared skyward. Expressionlessly his multi-faceted eyes watched the energized grids change angle as the boat swung into a curve and drifted away like a little bubble. Skhiva was sensitive to futility.

The crew returned well before the fall of darkness. A few hours were enough. Just grass and shrubs and child-trees straining to grow up. Two of the crew had discovered a mile away a sterile oblong that once might have been the site of a dwelling. They

brought back a small piece of the foundation, a lump of perished concrete that Skhiva put aside for later analysis.

Another had found a small, brown, six-legged insect, but his super-sensitive nerve-ends had heard its cry of fear as he picked it up, so hastily he had put it down and let it go free. Little animals had been hopping clumsily in the distance but all had dived down holes in the ground before any curious Martian could get near. All the crew were agreed upon one thing: the majestic silence and solemnity of an unknown people's passing was unendurable.

Fander beat the sinking of the Sun by half a time-unit. His bubble soared under a big, black cloud, sank to ship-level and came in. A moment later the rain started. It roared down in a frenzied torrent while they stood watching behind the transparent band and marvelled at so much water.

After a while Captain Skhiva told them, "We must accept what we find. Here we have drawn a blank. The cause of this world's condition is a mystery to be solved by others with more time and better equipment. It is for us to abandon this graveyard and try the misty planet. We'll take off early in the morning."

None offered comment, but Fander followed him to his cabin, made contact with a tentacle-touch.

"One could live here, Captain."

"I am not so sure of that." Skhiva coiled on his couch, let his tentacles hang in the various limb-rests. The blue sheen of his rubbery hide was reflected by the metal wall. "In some places are rocks emitting alpha-sparks. They are dangerous."

"Of course, Captain. But I can sense them and avoid them."

"You?" Skhiva stared up at him.

"Yes, Captain. I wish to be left here."

"What?—in this place of appalling gloom?"

"It has an all-pervading air of ugliness and despair," admitted Poet Fander. "All destruction is ugly. But by accident I have found a touch of beauty. It heartens me. The very contrast makes it shine like a gem in the dark. I would like to seek its source."

"To what beauty do you refer?" Skhiva demanded.

Fander tried to explain the alien in non-alien terms. It was impossible.

"Draw it for me," ordered Skhiva.

Obediently Fander drew it, gave him the pictures. "There—that is it."

Gazing at it for a long time, Skhiva handed it back, spoke along the other's nerves. "We are individuals with all the rights

of individuals. As an individual I don't think that picture worth the tail-tip of a domestic *arlan*. I will admit that it is not ugly, even that it is pleasing in an outlandish sort of way."

"But, Captain——"

"As an individual," Skhiva went on, "you have an equal right to your opinions strange though they may be. So if you really wish to stay I cannot refuse you. It would be wrong of me to thwart you. I am entitled only to think you a little crazy." He regarded Fander speculatively. "When do you hope to be picked up?"

"This year, next year, sometime, never."

"It might well be never," Skhiva warned. "Are you prepared to face that grim prospect?"

"One must always be prepared to face the consequences of his own actions," Fander pointed out.

"True." Skhiva was reluctant to surrender. "But have you given this matter serious thought?"

"I am a non-technical component. I am not guided by thought."

"Then by what?"

"By my desires, emotions, instincts. By my inward feelings."

Skhiva said fervently, "The twin moons preserve us!"

"Captain, sing me a song of home and play me the tinkling harp."

"Don't be silly. I have not the ability."

"Captain, if it required no more than careful thought you would be able to do it?"

"Without a doubt," agreed Skhiva, seeing the trap but unable to avoid it.

"There you are!" said Fander pointedly.

"I give up. I cannot argue with someone who casts aside the accepted rules of logic and invents rules of his own. You are governed by notions that defeat me."

"It is not a matter of logic or illogic," Fander told him. "It is merely a matter of viewpoint. You see angles typical of yourself. I see angles typical of myself."

"For example?"

"You won't pin me down that way. I can find plenty of examples. For instance, do you remember the formula for determining the phase of a series-tuned circuit?"

"Most certainly."

"I felt sure you would. You are a technician. You have registered it in your mind for all time as a matter of technical

utility." He paused, eyeing his listener thoughtfully. "I know that formula, too. It was mentioned to me, casually, many years ago. It is not of the slightest use to me—yet I have never forgotten it."

"Why?"

"Because it holds the beauty of rhythm. It is a poem."

Skhiva sighed and said, "I don't see it."

"*One upon R into omega L minus one upon omega C,*" recited Fander. "A perfect hexameter." He registered amusement at the other's surprise.

After a while, Skhiva remarked, "It could be sung. One could dance to it."

"This also is a song, an alien one and perhaps a sad one, but still a song." Fander exhibited his rough sketch. "It holds beauty. Where there is beauty there once was talent—may still be the remnants of talent for all we know. Where talent abides there is also greatness. In the realms of greatness we may find powerful friends. *We need such friends.*"

"You win." Skhiva made a gesture of defeat. "We shall leave you to your self-chosen fate in the morning."

"Thank you, Captain."

That same streak of stubbornness which made Skhiva a worthy commander induced him to take one final crack at Fander shortly before departure. Summoning him to his cabin, he studied the poet calculatingly.

"You are still of the same mind?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then does it not occur to you as strange that I should be so content to abandon this planet if indeed it does still hold some dregs of greatness?"

"No."

Skhiva stiffened slightly. "Why not?"

"Captain, I think you are a little afraid because you suspect what I suspect, namely, that there was no natural disaster, that they did it themselves—to themselves."

"We have no proof of it," said Skhiva uneasily.

"No, Captain, we haven't."

"If this is their own handiwork what are our chances of finding allies among people so much to be feared?"

"Poor," admitted Fander. "But that, being the product of cold thought, means little to me. I am animated by warm hopes."

"There you go again, blatantly disregarding reason in favour of an idle dream. Hoping, hoping, hoping—to achieve the impossible."

Fander gave back, "The difficult can be done at once; the impossible takes a little longer."

"Your thoughts make my orderly mind feel lopsided. Every remark is a flat denial of something that makes sense." Skhiva transmitted the sensation of a lugubrious chuckle. "Oh, well, we live and learn." He came forward, moving closer to the other. "All your supplies are assembled outside. Nothing remains but to bid you goodbye."

They embraced in the Martian manner. Leaving the lock, Poet Fander watched the big sphere shudder and glide upward. It soared without sound, shrinking steadily until it was a mere dot entering a cloud. A moment later it had gone.

He remained there looking at the cloud for a long, long time. Then he turned his attention to the load-sled holding his supplies. Climbing into its small, exposed front seat he shifted the control that energized the flotation-grids, let the sled rise a few feet. The higher the climb the greater the expenditure of power. He wished to conserve power; there was no knowing how long he might need it. So at low altitude and gentle pace he let the sled glide in the general direction of the thing of beauty.

Later he found a dry cave in the hill on which his objective stood. It took him two days of careful, cautious raving to square its walls, ceiling and floor, plus half a day with a powered fan to drive out silicate dust. After that he stowed his supplies at the back, parked the sled near the front, set up a curtaining force-screen across the entrance. The hole in the hill was now home.

Slumber did not come easily that first night. He lay within the cave, a ropy, knotted thing of glowing blue with enormous, bee-like eyes and found himself listening for harps that played sixty million miles away. His tentacle-tips twitched in involuntary search of the telepathic-contact songs that would go with the harps, and twitched in vain.

Darkness grew deep and all the world a monstrous stillness held. His hearing-organs craved from the eventide to high-moon for the homely flip-flop of sand-frogs, but there were no frogs. He wanted the familiar drone of night-beetles, but there were no beetles. Except for once when something faraway howled its heart at the Moon there was nothing, nothing.

In the morning he washed, ate, took out the sled and explored

the site of what once had been a small town. There was little to satisfy his curiosity, only mounds of shapeless rubble on ragged, faintly oblong foundations. It was a graveyard of long-dead domiciles, rotting, weedy, near to complete oblivion. A view from five hundred feet up gave him only one extra piece of information; the orderliness of the town's outlines showed that its unknown inhabitants had been tidy and methodical.

But tidiness is not another form of loveliness. He returned to the top of his hill and sought solace with the thing that did hold beauty.

His explorations continued day by day, not in systematic manner as Skhiva would have performed them, but in accordance with his own mercurial whims. At times he saw many animals, singly or in groups, none resembling anything Martian. Most of them scattered at full gallop when his sled swooped over them. Some dived into ground-holes, showing a brief flash of white, absurd tails. Others, four-footed, sharp-faced, long-toothed hunted in packs and bayed at him in concert with harsh, defiant voices.

On the seventieth day, in a deep, shadowed glade to the north, he spotted a small group of new shapes slinking along in single file. He recognised them at a glance, knew them so well that his searching eyes telegraphed an immediate thrill of triumph to his mind. They were ragged, dirty and no more than half-grown, but the thing of beauty on the hill had told him what they were.

Hugging the ground low, he swept around in a wide curve that brought him to the farther end of the little valley. His sled sloped slightly into the drop as it entered the glade. He could see them better now, even the soiled pinkness of their thin legs. They were moving away from him, backs toward him, unaware of his presence. Their advance was being made with great caution, as if they were wary of a hidden foe. The utter silence of his swoop from behind gave them no warning.

The rearmost one of the stealthy file fooled him at the last moment. He was hanging over the side of the sled, tentacles outstretched in readiness to snatch the last one with the wild mop of yellow hair when, responding to some sixth sense, the intending victim threw itself flat. Fander's grasp shot past a couple of feet short and he got a glimpse of frightened grey eyes before a dexterous side-tilt of the sled enabled him to make good his loss by grabbing the less wary next in line.

This one was dark-haired, a bit bigger and sturdier. It fought madly at his holding limbs while the sled gained altitude. Then

suddenly realising the queer nature of its bonds, it writhed around and looked him straight in the face. The result was unexpected. Its features paled, it closed its eyes and went completely limp.

It was still limp when he bore it into the cave but its heart continued to beat, its lungs to draw. Laying it carefully on the softness of his bed, he moved to the cave's entrance and waited for it to recover. Eventually it stirred, sat up, gazed confusedly at the facing wall. Its black eyes moved slowly around, taking in the surroundings. Then they saw Fander. They widened tremendously and their owner began to make high-pitched, unpleasant noises as it tried to back away through the solid wall. It screamed so much, in one rising throb after another, that Fander slithered out of the cave, right out of sight, and sat in the cold winds until the noises had died down.

A couple of hours later he made cautious reappearance to offer it food but its reaction was so swift, hysterical and heartrending that he dropped his gift and hid himself as if the fear were his own. The food remained untouched for two full days. On the third a little of it was eaten. Fander showed himself again.

Although the Martian did not go near, the boy cowered away saying, "Devil! Devil!" His eyes were red with rings of dark discoloration beneath them.

"Devil!" thought Fander, totally unable to repeat the alien word but wondering what it meant. He used his sign-talking tentacle in valiant effort to convey something reassuring. The attempt was wasted. The other watched its sinuous writhings half in fear, half in disgust and showed complete lack of comprehension. Fander now let a major tentacle gently slither forward across the floor, hoping to make thought-contact. The boy recoiled from it as from a striking snake.

"Patience," Fander reminded himself. "The impossible takes a little longer."

Periodically he showed himself with food and drink. Night-times he slept fitfully outside the cave, on coarse, damp grass beneath lowering skies—while the prisoner who was his guest enjoyed the softness of the bed, the warmth of the cave, the security of the force-screen.

Time came when Fander betrayed an unpoetic shrewdness by using the other's belly to estimate the ripeness of the moment. When on the eleventh day he noted that his food-offerings were now being taken regularly, he had a meal of his own at the edge of the

cave, within plain sight, and observed that the other's appetite was not spoiled. That night he slept just within the cave, close to the force-screen and as far away from the boy as possible. The prisoner stayed awake late, watching him, always watching him, but gave way to slumber in the small hours.

Another attempt at sign-talking brought results no better than before and the boy still refused to touch his offered tentacle-tip. All the same, he was gaining ground slowly. His overtures still were rejected but with less obvious revulsion. Gradually, ever so gradually, the Martian shape was becoming familiar and almost acceptable.

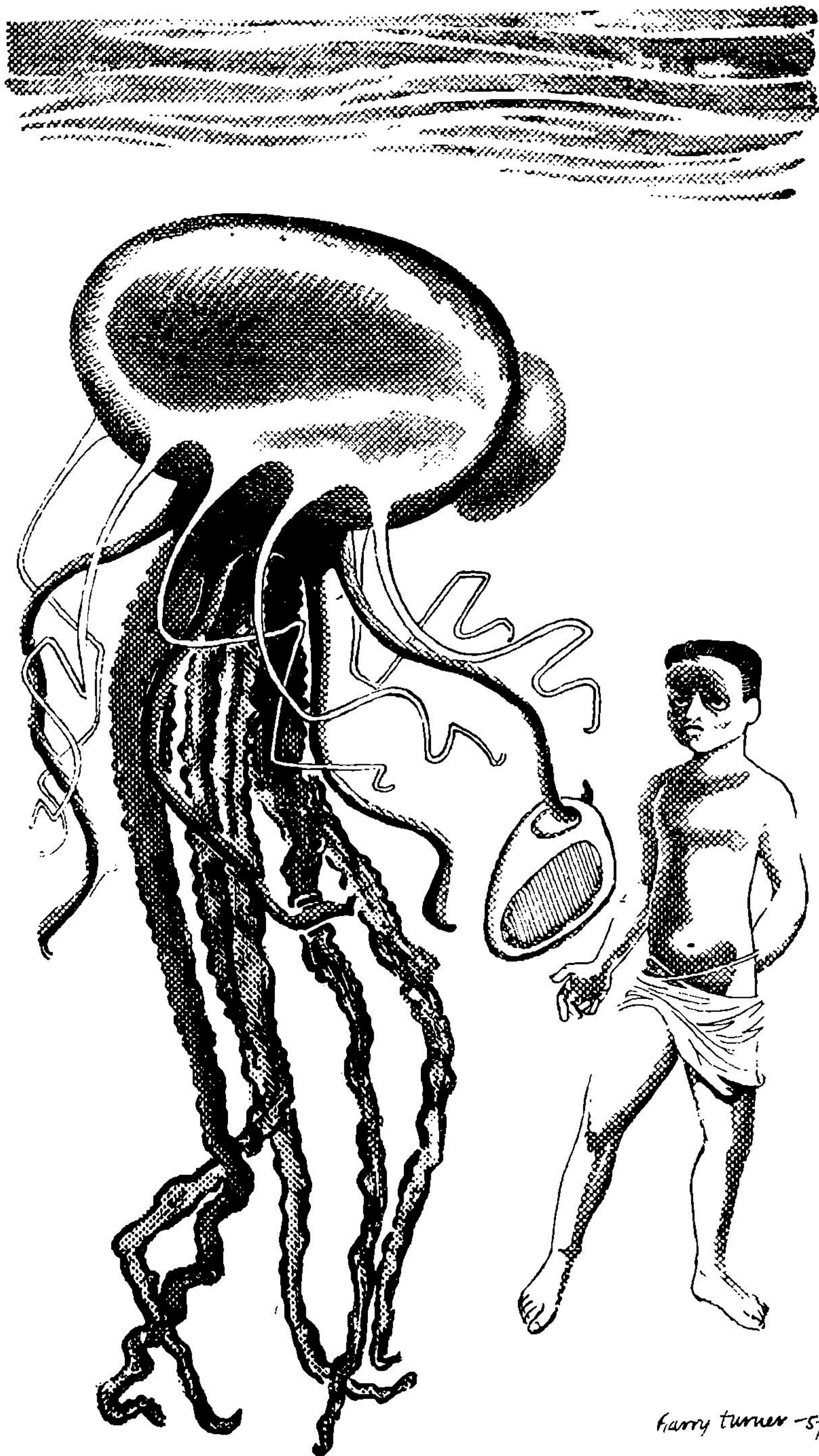
The sweet savour of success was Fander's in the middle of the sixteenth day. The boy had displayed several spells of emotional sickness during which he lay on his front with quivering body and emitted low noises while his eyes watered profusely. At such times the Martian felt strangely helpless and inadequate. On this occasion, during another attack, he took advantage of the sufferer's lack of attention and slid near enough to snatch away the box by the bed.

From the box he drew his tiny electro-harp, plugged its connectors, switched it on, touched its strings with delicate affection. Slowly he began to play, singing an accompaniment deep inside himself. For he had no voice with which to sing out loud and the harp had to sing it for him.

The boy ceased his quiverings and sat up, all his attention upon the dexterous play of the tentacles and the music they conjured forth. And when he judged that at last his listener's mind was captured, Fander ceased with easy, soothing strokes upon the strings, gently offered him the harp. The boy registered interest and reluctance. Careful not to move nearer, not an inch nearer, Fander tendered it at full tentacle length. The boy had to take four steps to reach it. He took them.

That was the start. They played together, day after day and sometimes a little into the night, while almost imperceptibly the distance between them was reduced. Finally they sat together side by side and the boy had not yet learned to laugh but no longer did he show unease. He could now extract a simple tune from the instrument and was pleased with his own aptitude in a solemn sort of way.

One evening as darkness grew and the things that sometimes howled at the Moon were howling again, Fander offered his tentacle-tip for the hundredth time. Always the gestures had been unmistakable even if its motive was not clear, yet always it had been



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rebuffed. But now, now, five fingers curled around it in shy desire to please.

With a fervent prayer that human nerves would function just like Martian ones, Fander poured his thoughts through swiftly, lest the warm grip be loosened too soon.

"Do not fear me. I cannot help my shape any more than you can help yours. I am your friend, your father, your mother. I need you as much as you need me."

The boy let go of him, began quiet, half-stifled whimpering noises. Fander put a tentacle on his shoulder, made little patting motions that he fondly imagined were wholly Martian. For some inexplicable reason this made matters worse. At his wits' end what to do for the best, what action to take that might be understandable in Terrestrial terms, he gave the problem up, surrendered to his instinct, put a long, ropy limb around the boy and held him close until the noises ceased and slumber came. It was then he realized that the child he had taken was much younger than he had estimated. He nursed him through the night.

Much practice was necessary to make conversation. The boy had to learn to put mental drive behind his thoughts, for it was beyond Fander's power to suck them out of him.

"What is your name?"

Fander got a picture of thin legs running rapidly.

He returned it in question form. "Speedy?"

An affirmative.

"What name do you call me?"

An unflattering montage of monsters.

"Devil?"

The picture whirled around, became confused. There was a distinct trace of embarrassment.

"Devil will do," assured Fander. He went on, "Where are your parents?"

More confusion.

"You must have had parents. Everyone has a father and mother, haven't they? Don't you remember yours?"

Muddled ghost-pictures. Grown-ups abandoning children. Grown-ups avoiding children almost as if they feared them.

"What is the first thing you remember?"

"Big man walking with me. Carried me a bit. Walked again."

"What happened to him?"

"Went away. Said he was sick. Said he might make me sick - too."

"Long ago?"

Confusion. Everything back at the beginning of memory was long ago. It couldn't be anything else.

Fander changed his aim. "What of those other children—have they no parents either?"

"All got nobody."

"But *you* have somebody now, haven't you, Speedy?"

Doubtfully, "Yes."

Fander pushed it farther. "Would you rather have me—or those other children?" He let it rest a moment before he added, "Or both?"

"Both," said Speedy with no hesitation. His fingers toyed with the little electro-harp.

"Would you like to help me look for them tomorrow and bring them here? And if they are scared of me will you help them not to be afraid?"

"Sure!" said Speedy, licking his lips and sticking his chest out.

"Then," suggested Fander, "perhaps you'd like to take a walk today. You've been stuck in this cave too long. Will you come for a walk with me?"

"Yes, all right."

Side by side they went a short walk, one trotting rapidly along, the other slithering. The child's spirits perked up considerably with this trip in the open; it was as if the sight of the sky and the feel of the grass made him realize at last that he was not exactly a prisoner.

His formerly solemn features became animated, he made frequent exclamations that Fander could not understand and once he laughed at nothing for the sheer joy of it. On two occasions he grabbed a tentacle-tip in order to tell Fander something, performing the action as if it were in every way as natural as his own speech.

They got out the load-sled in the morning. Fander took the front seat and the controls; Speedy squatted behind him with hands gripping his harness-belt. With a shallow upward glide they headed for the glade. Many small, white-tailed animals bolted down holes as they passed over.

"Good to eat," advised Speedy, touching him and speaking through the touch.

A horrible sickness raced through Fander's insides. Meat-eaters! It was not until a queer feeling of shame and apology came back at him that he knew the other had detected his revulsion. He wished he'd been swift to blanket that reaction before the boy could

sense it but he could not be blamed for the effect of so bald a statement taking him so completely unaware. However, it had created another step in their mutual relationship—Speedy desired his good opinion.

Within fifteen minutes they struck lucky. At a point half a mile south of the glade Speedy let out a shrill yell and pointed downward. A small, golden-haired figure was standing there on a slight rise and staring fascinatedly upward at the phenomenon in the sky. A second tiny shape with red but equally long hair was at the bottom of the slope and gazing in similar wonderment. As the sled tilted toward them, both came to their senses and turned to flee.

Ignoring the pulls on his belt and the yelps of excitement right behind him, Fander swooped, got first one and then the other. This left him dangerously short of limbs to control the sled and gain height. If the victims had fought he'd have had all his work cut out to make it. They did not fight. They shrieked as he snatched them and then relaxed with closed eyes.

The sled climbed, glided a mile at five hundred feet. Fander's attention was divided between his limp prizes, the controls and the horizon when suddenly a thunderous rattling sounded on the base of the sled, the entire framework shuddered, a thin strip of metal flew from its leading edge and things made whining noises toward the clouds.

"Old Graypate," bawled Speedy, forgetting to make contact. He jigged around but kept away from the sled's rim. "He's shooting at us!"

The spoken words meant nothing to the Martian and he could not spare a limb to seek contact. Grimly righting the sled, he gave it full power. Whatever damage it had suffered had not affected its efficiency; it shot forward at a pace that set the red and golden hair of the captives streaming in the wind. Perforce his landing by the cave was clumsy. The sled bumped down and lurched across forty yards of grass.

First things first. Taking the limp, unconscious pair into the cave, he made them comfortable on the bed, came out and examined the sled. There were half a dozen deep dents in its flat underside, two bright furrows angling across one rim. He made contact with Speedy.

"What were you trying to tell me?"

"Old Graypate shot at us."

The mind-pictures burst upon him vividly, with electrifying

effect, a vision of a tall, white-haired, stern-faced old man with a tubular weapon propped upon his shoulder while it spat fire upward. A white-haired old man. An adult!

His grip tightened on the other's arm. "What is this oldster to you?"

"Nothing much. He lives near us in the shelters."

Picture of a long, dusty concrete burrow, badly damaged, its ceiling marked with the scars of a lighting system that had rotted away to nothing. The old man living hermitlike at one end, the children at the other. The old man was sour, taciturn, kept the children at a distance, spoke to them seldom but was swift to respond when they were menaced. He possessed weapons. Once he had killed many wild dogs that had eaten two children.

"People left us near the shelters because old Graypate was there and had guns," informed Speedy.

"But why does he keep away from you? Doesn't he like children?"

"Don't know." Speedy mused a moment, went on, "Once he told us that old people could become very sick and make young ones sick as well and then we'd all die. Maybe he's afraid of making us die."

So there was some much-feared disease around, something highly contagious to which adults were peculiarly susceptible. Without hesitation they abandoned their young at the first onslaught, hoping at least that the children would survive. Sacrifice after sacrifice that the remnants of the race might live. Heartbreak after heartbreak as elders chose death in loneliness rather than share it with their offspring.

Yet Graypate himself was depicted as very old. Was this an exaggeration of the child-mind?

"I must meet Graypate."

"He will shoot," declared Speedy positively. "He knows by now that you took me away. He saw you take the others. He will wait for you and shoot you on sight."

"We must find some way to avoid that."

"How?"

"When these two have become my friends, just as you have become my friend, I will take all three of you back to the shelters. You can then find Graypate for me and tell him that I am not as ugly as I look."

"But you don't look ugly," Speedy objected.

The picture Fander got along with that remark gave him the

weirdest sensation of pleasure. It was of a vague, shadowy and distorted body with a clear human face.

The new prisoners were female. Fander knew it without being told because they were daintier than Speedy and had the warm, sweet smell of females. That meant complications. Maybe they were mere children and maybe they had lived together in the shelters, but he was permitting none of that while they were in his charge. Fander might be outlandish by local standards but he had a certain primness, a touch of the schoolmarm in his makeup. Forthwith he cut another and smaller cave for himself and Speedy.

Neither of the girls saw him for four days. Keeping well out of their sight he let Speedy take them food, talk to them, mentally prepare them for the shape of the thing to come. On the fifth day he presented himself for inspection at a distance. Despite forewarnings they went sheet-white, clung together but uttered no distressing sounds. Moving no nearer to them, he played his harp a little while, withdrew, came back in the evening and played for them again.

Encouraged by Speedy's constant and self-assured flow of propaganda, one of them grasped a tentacle-tip the day after. What came along the Martian's nerves was not a clear picture so much as an ache, a desire, a childish yearning. Backing out of the cave, Fander found some wood, spent the whole night using the sleepy Speedy as a model and fashioned the wood into a tiny, jointed semblance of a human being. He was no sculptor but he possessed a natural delicacy of touch and the poet in him ran through his limbs and expressed itself in the model. Making a thorough job of it, he clothed it in Terrestrial fashion, coloured its face, fixed upon its features the pleasure-grimace that humans call a smile.

He gave her the doll the moment she awakened in the morning. She took it eagerly, hungrily, with wide, glad eyes. Hugging it to her unformed bosom, she crooned over it—and he knew that the strange emptiness within her was now filled.

Though Speedy was openly contemptuous of this obvious waste of effort, Fander set to and made a second manikin. It did not take quite as long as the first, practice having made him swifter, more dexterous. He was able to present it to the other child by mid afternoon. Her acceptance was made with shy grace, she held the doll close as if it meant more than the whole of her sorry world. In her thrilled concentration upon the gift she failed to notice his

nearness, his closeness, and when he offered her a tentacle-tip, she took it.

He said simply, "I love you."

Her mind was too untrained to drive a response but her great eyes warmed.

Fander sat on the grounded sled at a point one mile east of the glade and watched the three children walk hand in hand toward the hidden shelters. Speedy was the obvious leader, hurrying them onward, bossing them with the noisy assurance of one who has been around and considers himself sophisticated. In spite of this the girls paused at intervals to turn and wave at the ropy, bee-eyed thing they'd left behind. And Fander dutifully waved back, always using his signal-tentacle because it had not occurred to him that any tentacle would serve for such a purpose.

They sank from sight behind a rise of ground. He remained on the sled, his multi-faceted gaze going over the near surroundings or studying the angry sky now threatening rain. The ground was a dull, dead grey-green all the way to the horizon. There was no relief from that drab colour, not one shining patch of white, gold or crimson such as dotted the meadows of Mars. There was only the eternal grey-green and his own brilliant blueness.

Before long a sharp-faced, four-footed thing revealed itself in the grass, eyed him hungrily. It pointed its muzzle at the sky and howled. The sound was an eerily urgent wail that ran across the prairie and moaned into the distance. This call brought others of its kind, two, ten, twenty. Their courage increased with their numbers until there was a large band of them edging toward him with lips drawn back and teeth exposed.

Then came a sudden, undetectable flock-command that caused them to cease their belly-slinking and spring forward like one, slavering as they came. They did it with the starving, red-eyed frenzy of animals motivated by something akin to madness.

Repulsive though it was, the sight of creatures craving for meat—even strange blue meat—did not alarm Fander. He slid the altitude-control one notch, the flotation-grids radiated and the sled soared twenty feet.

So calm and easy an escape so casually performed infuriated the wild dog pack beyond all measure. Milling beneath the suspended sled, they made futile springs upward, fell back upon one another, bit and slashed each other, leaped again and again. The pandemonium they set up was a compound of snarls, yelps, barks and

growls. They exuded a pungent odour of dry hair and animal sweat.

Reclining upon the sled in a maddening pose of disdain, Fander let the insane ones rave below. They raced around in tight circles shrieking insults at him and snapping at each other. This went on for some time and ended with a spurt of ultra-rapid cracks from the direction of the glade. Eight dogs fell dead. Two flopped and struggled to crawl away. Ten yelped in agony and made off on three legs. The unharmed ones raced off to some place where they could ambush and make a meal of the escaping limpers. Fander lowered the sled.

Speedy stood atop the rise with Graypate. Restoring his weapon to the crook of his arm, the latter thoughtfully rubbed his chin and ambled forward.

Stopping five yards from the waiting Martian, the old Earthman again massaged his chin whiskers and said, "This is the darnedest thing, just the darnedest thing!"

"No use talking *at* him," advised Speedy. "You've got to touch him like I told you."

"I know, I know." Graypate betrayed the impatience of the aged. "All in good time. I'll touch him when I'm ready." He stood there awhile, staring at Fander with eyes that were very pale and very sharp. "Oh, well, here goes." He offered a hand.

Fander placed a tentacle-end in it.

"Jeepers, he's cold," commented Graypate, closing his grip. "Colder than a snake."

"He isn't a snake," Speedy contradicted fiercely.

"Ease up, ease up—I didn't say he is." Graypate seemed fond of repetitive phrases.

"He doesn't feel like one either," insisted Speedy, who had never felt a snake in his life and did not wish to.

Fander boosted a thought through. "I come from the fourth planet. Do you know what that means?"

"I ain't ignorant," retorted Graypate.

"There is no need to reply vocally. I receive your thoughts exactly as you receive mine. Your responses are much stronger than the boy's and I can understand you easily."

"Humph!" was Graypate's only response to that.

"I have been most anxious to find an adult because the children cannot tell me enough. I would like to ask some questions. Are you willing to answer them?"

"It depends," said Graypate leerily.

"Never mind. Answer them only if you wish. My sole desire is to help you."

"Is that so?" gave back Graypate, with open scepticism. "Why?"

"Because my kind need intelligent friends."

"Why?"

"Because our numbers are small, our resources poor. In visiting this world and the misty one we've come near to the limit of our technical abilities. But with assistance we could go farther, much farther. I think that if we could help you a time might come when you would help us."

Graypate pondered it cautiously, forgetting that the inward workings of his mind were wide open to the other. Chronic suspicion was the keynote of his thoughts, suspicion based on life experiences and recent history. But inward thoughts ran both ways and his own mind could not help but detect the clear sincerity in Fander's.

So he said, "Fair enough. What d'you want to know?"

"What caused all this?" asked Fander, waving a limb to indicate the world as a whole.

"War," said Graypate with dreadful matter-of-factness. "The last war we'll ever have. The entire planet went mad."

"How did it come about?"

"You've got me there." Graypate gave the problem grave consideration. "It wasn't just one thing. It was a multitude of things sort of piling themselves up."

"Such as?"

"Differences in people. Some were coloured differently in their bodies, others in their ideas, and they couldn't get along together. Some bred faster than others, wanted more room to expand, a bigger share of the world's food. There wasn't any more room or any more food. The world was full and nobody could shove in anywhere except by pushing someone else out. My old man told me plenty before he died and he always maintained that if people had had the plain horse-sense to keep their numbers down there might not——"

"Your old man?" interjected Fander. "Your father? Didn't all this occur in your own lifetime?"

"It did not. I saw none of it. I am the son of the son of a survivor."

"Let's go back to the cave," put in Speedy, bored with all this silent-contact talk. "I want to show him our harp."

They took no notice and Fander went on, "Do you think there might be a lot of others still living?"

"Who knows?" Graypate was moody about it. "There isn't any way of telling how many are wandering around on the other side of the globe, maybe still killing each other, or starving to death, or dying of the sickness."

"What sickness is this?"

"I couldn't tell you what it's called." Graypate scratched his head confusedly. "My old man told me several times but I've long forgotten. Knowing the name wouldn't do me any good, see? He said his father told him that *his* father said it was part of the war, it got invented and was spread deliberately. It's still with us today so far as I know."

"What are its symptoms?"

"You go hot and dizzy. You get black swellings in the armpits. In twenty hours you're dead. Old folk seem to catch it first. The kids then get it unless you make away from them mighty fast."

"It is nothing familiar to me," said Fander, unable to recognise a cultivated variety of bubonic plague. "In any case, I'm not a medical expert." He eyed Graypate wonderingly. "But you seem to have avoided it."

"Sheer luck," opined Graypate. "Or perhaps I can't get it. There was a story going around during the war that some folk might be immune to it. Don't ask me why because I don't know. It could be that I'm one of the immune ones—but I'm not counting on it."

"So you try keep your distance from these children?"

"Sure." He glanced at Speedy. "I shouldn't really have come along with this kid. He's got a lousy chance as it is without me increasing the odds."

"That is very considerate of you," Fander remarked, softly. "Especially seeing that you must be lonely."

Graypate bristled and his thought-flow became aggressive. "I ain't grieving for company. I can look after myself the same as I have done since my old man went away to die. I'm standing on my own feet and so is everyone else."

"I believe that," said Fander. "You must pardon me if I say the wrong things. I'm a stranger here, you understand? I judge you by my own feelings. Now and again I get pretty lonely."

"How's that?" demanded Graypate. "You ain't telling me they dumped you and left you all on your own?"

"Yes, they did."

"*Man!*" It was a picture much resembling Speedy's concept, a vision elusive in form but firmly human in face. The oldster was

reacting to what he considered a predicament rather than a free choice and the reaction came on a wave of sympathy.

Fander struck promptly and hard. "You see how I'm fixed. The companionship of wild animals means nothing to me. I need someone intelligent enough to like my music and forget my looks, someone intelligent enough to——"

"I ain't so sure we're that smart," Graypate chipped in. He let his sharp gaze swing morbidly around the landscape. "Not when I see this graveyard and think how it must have looked in my grandfather's days."

"Every flower blooms from the dust of a hundred dead ones," answered Fander.

"Yes? What are flowers?"

It shocked the Martian. He had projected a mind-picture of a trumpet-lily, crimson and shining. Graypate's brain had juggled it around, uncertain whether it were flesh, fish or fowl.

"Vegetable growths like these." Fander plucked half a dozen blades of grass. "But shapelier, more colourful and sweet-scented." He transmitted the brilliant vision of a mile-square field of trumpet-lilies, red and glowing.

"Glory be!" said Graypate. "We've nothing like those."

"Not here," agreed Fander. "Not here." He gestured toward the horizon. "Elsewhere maybe plenty. If we got together we could be company for each other, we could learn things from each other. We could pool our ideas, our efforts and search for flowers far away. Perhaps we'd also find more people."

"Fat lot of good that would do. Folk just won't stick together in large bunches. They hang around in nothing bigger than family groups until the plague breaks them up—then they abandon the kids. The bigger the crowd the greater the risk of someone contaminating the lot." Graypate leaned on his gun, let his thought-forms shape themselves in dull solemnity. "When a fellow is stricken he goes away and meets his end on his own. Nobody's there to console him or make it easier for him. Death is a personal contract between him and his God, with no witnesses. It's a pretty private affair these days."

"What, after all these years? Don't you think that by this time the disease may have run its course and exhausted itself?"

"Nobody knows—and nobody's gambling on it."

"I would gamble," said Fander.

"You ain't like us. You mightn't be able to catch it."

"Or I might get it worse and die more painfully."

"Maybe," admitted Graypate doubtfully. "Anyway, you're looking at it from a different angle. You've been left here on your ownsome. What have you got to lose?"

"My life," said Fander.

Graypate frowned, thought it over. "Yes, that's true. A fellow can't bet any heavier than that." He rubbed his chin whiskers as before. "All right, all right, I'll take you up on that bet. You can come into the shelters and live with us." His knuckles whitened as the grip tightened on his gun. "On this understanding; the moment you feel sick you get out fast and for keeps. If you don't, I'll shoot you and drag you away even if that makes me catch it too. The kids come first, see?"

The shelters were far roomier than the cave. There were eighteen children living in them, all skinny with their prolonged diet of roots, edible herbs and an occasional rabbit. The youngest and most sensitive of them ceased to be terrified of Fander within ten days. In surprisingly short time his slithering shape of blue ropiness had become a normal adjunct of their small, limited world.

Six of the youngsters were males older than Speedy, one of them much older but not quite adult. Fander beguiled them with his harp, teaching them to play, now and again giving them ten-minute rides on the load-sled as a special treat. He made dolls for the girls, and queer, cone-shaped little houses for the dolls, and fan-backed chairs of woven grass for the houses. None of these toys were truly Martian in design, none were Terrestrial. They represented a pathetic compromise within his imagination: the Martian notion of what Terrestrial models might have looked like had there been any in existence.

But surreptitiously, without seeming to give any less attention to the younger ones, he directed his main efforts upon Speedy and the six older boys. To his mind these were the hope of the world—and of Mars. At no time did he bother to ponder that the non-technical brain is not without its peculiar virtues or that there are times and circumstances when it is worth dropping the short view of what is practicable for the sake of the long view of what is remotely possible.

So as best he could he concentrated upon the elder seven, educating them through the dragging weeks and months, stimulating their minds, encouraging their curiosity and continually impressing upon them the idea that fear of disease can become a folk-separating dogma unless they learned to conquer it within their souls.

He taught them that death is death, a natural process to be accepted philosophically and met with dignity. There were times when he suspected that he was teaching them nothing new, that he was merely reminding them of things forgotten, for deep within their growing, expanding minds was the ancestral strain of Terrestrialism that had mulled its way to the same conclusions ten or twenty thousands of years before. Still, he was helping to remove this disease-block from their mentalities and was driving child-logic more rapidly toward complete adult outlook. In this respect he was satisfied because he could do little more.

In time they organised group concerts, humming or making singing noises to the accompaniment of the harp, now and again improvising lines to suit Fander's tunes, arguing the respective merits of chosen words until by process of elimination they had a song. As songs grew to a repertoire and singing grew more adept, more polished, Old Graypate displayed interest, came to one performance and then another until by custom he had established his own place as a sort of one-man audience and critic.

One day the eldest boy, who was named Redhead, came to Fander and clasped a tentacle-tip. "Devil, may I operate your food-machine?"

"You mean you would like me to show you how to work it?"

"No, Devil, I know how to work it." The boy gazed confidently into the other's huge bee-eyes.

"Then tell me how it is operated."

"You fill its container with the tenderest blades of grass, being careful to exclude all roots and dirt. You are equally careful not to turn a switch before the container is full and its door properly closed. You then turn the red switch and leave it on for a count of two hundred and eighty, reverse the container, turn on the green switch for a count of forty seven. Finally you close both switches, empty the container's warm pulp into the end moulds and apply the press until the biscuits are firm and dry."

"How have you discovered all this?"

"I have watched you making biscuits for us many times. This morning, while you were busy, I tried it myself." He extended a hand. It held a biscuit. Taking it from him, Fander examined it. Firm, crisp and well-shaped. He tasted it. Perfect.

Redhead became the world's first mechanic to operate and service a Martian lifeboat's emergency premasticator. Seven years later, long after the machine had ceased to function, he managed to

repower it, weakly but effectively, with dust that gave forth alpha-sparks. In another two years he had improved it, speeded it up. In twelve years he had duplicated it and had all the know-how needed to turn out premasticators on a large scale.

Fander could never have equalled this performance for, as a non-technician, he had no better notion than the average Terrestrial of the principles upon which the machine worked. Neither did he know what was meant by radiant digestion or protein enrichment. He could do little more than urge Redhead along and leave the rest to whatever inherent genius the boy possessed—which was plenty.

In similar manner Speedy and two youths named Blacky and Bigears took the load-sled out of his charge. On rare occasions, as a great privilege, he had permitted them to take up the sled for one-hour trips alone. This time they were gone from dawn to dusk. Graypate mooched worriedly around, a gun under his arm and another stuck in his belt, going frequently to the top of the rise and scanning the sky in all directions. The delinquents swooped in at sunset, bringing with them a strange boy.

Fander summoned them to him. They held hands so that his touch would give him simultaneous contact with all three.

"I am troubled. The sled has only so much power. When it has all been used there will be no more."

They eyed each other aghast.

"Unfortunately I have neither the knowledge nor the ability to energize the sled once its power-reserves become exhausted. I lack the wisdom of the friends who left me here—and that is my shame." He paused, watching them dolefully, then went on, "All I do know is that its power does not leak away. If not used too much and too frequently the reserves should last for many years." Another pause before he added, "In due time you will be grown men and may need the sled far more than you do today."

Blacky said, "But, Devil, when we are men we'll be bigger and heavier. The sled will expend more power in carrying us."

"How do you know that?" asked Fander sharply.

"More weight, more power to sustain it," opined Blacky with the air of one whose logic is incontrovertible. "It doesn't need thinking out. *It's obvious.*"

Very slowly and softly, Fander said, "You'll do. May the twin moons shine upon you someday, for I know you'll do."

"Do what, Devil?"

"Build a thousand sleds like mine or better—and explore the whole world."

From then onward they confined their trips strictly to one hour, making them less often than of yore and spending a lot of time poking and prying around the power-unit's insides.

Graypate changed character with the slow, stubborn reluctance of the aged. As two years and then three rolled past he came gradually out of his shell, was less surly, more willing to hobnob with those swiftly growing up to his own height. Without fully realizing what he was doing he joined forces with Fander, gave the children what he owned of Earthly wisdom passed down from his father's father.

He taught the boys how to care for and use the guns of which he possessed as many as eleven, some maintained mostly as a source of spare parts for the others. Once in a while he took them shell-hunting, digging deep beneath rotting foundations into stale, half-filled cellars in search of ammunition not too corroded to use.

"Guns ain't no use without shells and shells don't last forever."

Neither do buried shells. They found not one.

Of his own wisdom Graypate determinedly held back but one item until the day when Speedy and Blacky and Redhead chivvied it out of him. Then, like a father facing the hangman, he told them the truth about babies. He made no comparative mention of bees because there were no bees, nor of flowers because there were no flowers. One cannot analogize the non-existent. Nevertheless he managed to explain the matter more or less to their satisfaction after which he mopped his forehead and went to see Fander.

"These youngsters are getting far too nosey for my comfort. They've been asking me how kids come along."

"Did you tell them?"

"Sure did." He sat down, mopped his forehead again. "I don't mind giving in to the boys when I can't beat 'em off any longer—but I'm damned if I'm going to tell the girls."

Fander said, "I've been asked about this myself. I could not tell much because I was far from certain whether you breed precisely as we do. But I told them how we breed."

"The girls too?"

"Of course."

"Jeepers! How did they take it?"

"Just as if I'd told them why water is wet or why the sky is blue."

"Must've been something in the way you put it to them," opined Graypate.

"I told them it was poetry between persons."

Throughout the course of history, Martian, Venusian or Terrestrial, some years are more noteworthy than others. The sixteenth one after Fander's marooning was outstanding for its series of events each of which was pitifully insignificant by cosmic standards but loomed enormously in this small community life.

To start with, the older seven—now bearded men—developed Redhead's improvements to the premasticator and by a similar technique managed to repower the exhausted sled. They took triumphantly to the air for the first time in forty months. Experiments showed that the Martian load-carrier was now slower, could bear less weight but had immense range. They used it to visit the ruins of distant cities in search of metallic junk suitable for the building of more sleds. By early summer they had constructed another one, larger than the original, clumsy to the verge of dangerousness, but still a sled.

On several occasions they failed to find metal but did discover people, odd families surviving in subsurface shelters, clinging grimly to life and passed-down scraps of knowledge. Since all these new contacts were strictly human-to-human, with no weirdly tentacled shape to scare off the parties of the second part, and since many were finding fear of plague more to be endured than terrible loneliness, a lot of families willingly returned with the explorers, settled in the shelters, accepted Fander and added their surviving skills to the community's riches.

Thus local population grew to seventy adults and four hundred children. They compounded with their plague-fear by spreading through the system of shelters, digging out half-wrecked and formerly unused expanses and moving apart to form twenty or thirty lesser groups each one of which could be isolated should contagious death appear.

Growing morale born of added strength and confidence in numbers soon resulted in four more sleds, still clumsy but less risky to use. Above ground there appeared the first rock house standing four-square and solidly under grey skies, a defiant witness that mankind still considered itself several cuts above the rats and rabbits.

The community presented the house to Blacky and Sweetvoice who had announced their desire to associate. An adult who claimed to know the conventional routine spoke solemn words over the happy couple before many witnesses while Fander attended the groom as best Martian.

Toward summer's end Speedy returned from a solo sledtrip of many days, brought with him one old man, one boy and four girls, all

of strange, outlandish countenance. They were yellowish in complexion, had black hair, black tip-tilted eyes and spoke a language that none could understand.

Until these newcomers picked up the local speech Fander had to act as interpreter, for his mind-pictures and theirs were independent of vocal sounds. The four girls were quiet, modest and very beautiful. Within three months Speedy had married one of them whose name was a gentle clucking sound that meant Precious Jewel Ling.

After this wedding Fander sought Graypate, placed a tentacle-tip in his right hand. "There were differences between the man and the girl, distinctive features wider apart than any we know on Mars. Are these some of the differences that caused your war?"

"Don't know. I've never seen one of these yellow folk before. They must live mighty far off." He scratched his head to help his thoughts along. "I only know what my father told me and his father told him. There were too many people of too many different kinds."

"They can't be all that different if they can fall in love."

"Maybe not," agreed Graypate.

"What if most of the people still in this world assembled here, bred together and had less different children, and the children in turn bred others still less different. Wouldn't they eventually become all much the same—just Earth-people?"

"Maybe."

"All speaking the same language, sharing the same culture? If they spread out slowly from a central source, always in contact by sled, continually sharing the same knowledge, the same progress, would there be room for new differences to arise?"

"I don't know," said Graypate evasively. "I'm not so young as I used to be and I can't dream as far ahead as I used to do."

"Well, it doesn't matter so long as the young ones can dream it." Fander mused a moment, continued, "If you're beginning to think of yourself as a back number you've got company. Things are getting somewhat out of hand so far as I'm concerned. The on-looker sees the most of the game and perhaps that's why I'm more sensitive than you to a certain peculiar feeling."

"To what feeling?" asked Graypate, eyeing him.

"That Terra is on the move once more. There are now many people where there were few. A house has been built and more are to follow. They talk of six more. After the six, they will talk of sixty, then six hundred, then six thousand. Some are planning to

dig up sunken conduits and use them to pipe water from the northward lake. Sleds are being built, premasticators will soon be built and protective force-screens likewise. Children are being taught. Less and less is being heard of the plague and so far no more have died of it. I feel a dynamic surge of energy and ambition and genius that may grow with appalling rapidity until it becomes a mighty flood. I feel that I, too, am a back number."

"Bunkum!" said Graypate. He spat on the ground. "If you dream often enough you're bound to have a bad one once in a while."

"Perhaps it is because so many tasks have been taken over and are being done far better than I did them. I have failed to seek new jobs. Were I a technician I'd have discovered a dozen by now. Unfortunately I am not a technician, I am an ignoramus." He let go a mental sigh. "I suppose this is as good a time as any to turn to one piece of work I'd like to get done. I need your help."

"What's on your mind?"

"A long, long time ago I made a poem. It was for the beautiful thing that first impelled me to stay here. I do not know exactly what its maker intended to convey, nor whether my eyes see it as he wished it to be seen, but I have made a poem to express what I feel when I look upon his creation."

"Humph!" said Graypate, not very interested.

"There is an outcrop of solid rock beneath its base which I can shave smooth and use as a plinth on which to inscribe my words. I would like to put them down twice; in the script of Mars and the script of Earth." Fander hesitated, added apologetically, "I hope none will think it presumptuous of me. But it is many years since I wrote for all to read—and my chance may never come again."

Graypate said, "I get the idea. You want me to put down your notions in our writing so that you can copy it?"

"Yes."

"Give me your stylus and pad." Taking them, Graypate squatted on a rock, lowering himself stiffly because he was feeling the weight of his years. Resting the pad on his knees he held the writing instrument in his right hand while his left continued to clasp a tentacle-tip. "Go ahead."

He started drawing thick, laborious marks as Fander's mind-pictures came through, enlarging the letters and keeping them well separated. When he had finished he handed over the pad.

"Asymmetrical," decided Fander, gazing at the queer letters and wishing for the first time that he had taken up the study of Earth-

writing. "Cannot you make this part balance with that, and this with this?"

"It's what you said."

"It is your own translation of what I said. I would like it better balanced. Do you mind if we try again?"

They tried again. They made fourteen attempts before Fander was satisfied with the perfunctory appearance of letters and words he could not understand.

Taking the paper, he found his ray-gun, went to the base-rock of the beautiful thing and sheared the whole front to a flat, smooth surface. Adjusting his beam to cut a V-shaped channel one inch deep, he inscribed his poem on the rock in long, unpunctuated lines of neat Martian curlicues.

With less confidence and much greater care he repeated the verse in Earth's awkward, angular hieroglyphics. The task was slow and tedious. Fifty people were watching him by the time he finished. They said nothing. In complete silence they looked at the poem and at the beautiful thing and were still standing there brooding solemnly when he went away.

One by one the rest of the community visited the scene next day, coming and going with the air of pilgrims attending an ancient shrine. All stood there a long time, returned without comment. Nobody praised Fander's work, nobody damned it, nobody reproached him for alienizing something wholly Earth's. The only effect—too subtle to be noteworthy—was a greater and still growing grimness and determination that boosted the already swelling Earth-dynamic.

In that respect Fander wrought better than he knew.

A plague-scare came the next year. Two sleds had brought back families from afar and within a week of their arrival the children sickened, became spotted.

Metal gongs sounded the alarm, all work ceased, the affected section was cut off and guarded while the majority made ready to flee. It was a threatening reversal of all the things for which so many ~~had~~ toiled so long; a destructive scattering of the tender roots of new civilization.

Fander found Graypate, Speedy and Blacky armed to the teeth, facing a drawn-faced and restless crowd.

"About a hundred folk are isolated in that cut-off section," Graypate was telling the audience. "They ain't all got it. Maybe they

won't get it. If they don't, it ain't so likely you'll go down with it either. We ought to wait and see. Let's stick around awhile."

"Listen who's talking," invited a sceptical voice in the crowd. "If you weren't immune you'd have been buried forty years ago."

"Same goes for everyone else," snapped Graypate. "I ain't much use at speechifying so I'm just saying flatly that nobody runs away before we know whether this really is the plague or whether it's something else." He took the gun from under his arm, pointed it forward, clicked its safety-catch. "Anyone fancy himself at beating a bullet?"

The heckler in the audience muscled his way to the front. He was a swarthy man of muscular build and his dark eyes looked belligerently into Graypate's. "While there's life there's hope. If we get out now we'll live to come back, when it's safe to come back—if ever. And you know it. So I'm calling your bluff, see?" Squaring his shoulders he began to walk away.

Graypate's finger was already tightening on the trigger when he felt the touch of Fander's tentacle on his arm. He stood as if listening to something being whispered, then lowered his weapon and called after the escapee.

"I'm going into the cut-off section and the Devil is going with me. We're running into things—not away from them. I never did like running away." Several of the audience fidgeted, murmured approval. "We'll find out for ourselves exactly what's wrong. We mightn't be able to put it right but we'll have a darned good try."

The walker paused, turned round, eyed him and Fander, said, "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You'll catch it yourselves. A lot of use you'll be when you're dead and stinking."

"What, and me immune?" said Graypate, grinning.

"The Devil will get it," the other hedged.

Graypate was about to retort, "What do *you* care?" but altered it slightly in response to Fander's contacting thoughts. He said more softly, "Do you *care*?"

It caught the objector off-balance. He fumbled embarrassedly within his own mind, avoided looking at the Martian, said lamely, "I don't see reason for anyone to take risks."

"He'll take them because he does care," Graypate gave back. "And I'll take them because I'm too old and useless to matter."

With that he stepped down and marched stubbornly toward the isolated section, Fander slithering at his side. The one who

wished to flee stayed put and stared after them. The crowd shuffled uneasily, seemed in two minds whether to accept the situation and stick around, or whether to rush Graypate and Fander and drag them away. Speedy and Blacky made to follow the pair but were ordered off.

No adult sickened, nobody died. Children in the affected section went one after another through the same routine of liverishness, high temperature and spots until the epidemic of measles had passed away. Not until a month after the last case had been cured by something within its own constitution did Graypate and Fander emerge.

The innocuous course and eventual disappearance of this suspected plague gave the pendulum of confidence a push, swinging it farther. Morale boosted itself almost to the verge of arrogance. More sleds appeared, more mechanics serviced them, more pilots rode them. More people flowed in from far places, more oddments of past knowledge came with them.

Humanity was off to a flying start with the salvaged seeds of bygone wisdom and the urge to do. The tormented ones of Earth were not primitive savages but surviving organisms of a greatness nine-tenths destroyed yet still remembered, each contributing his mite of know-how to restore at least some of those things that had been boiled away in atomic fires.

When in due time Redhead duplicated the premasticator, there were eight thousand stone houses standing around the hill. A community hall seventy times the size of a house, with a great green dome of hand-worked copper, reared itself upon the eastern fringe. A dam held the lake to the north. A hospital was going up in the west. The nuances and energies and talents of fifty races had built this town and were still building it. Among its population were ten Polynesians and four Icelanders and one lean, dusky child who was the last of the Seminoles.

Farms spread wide. One thousand heads of Indian corn rescued from a sheltered valley in the Andes had grown to ten thousand acres of golden grain. Water buffaloes and goats had been brought from afar to serve in lieu of the horses and sheep that would never be seen again—and no man knew why one species had survived while another had not. The horses had died out while the water buffaloes lived. The canines hunted in ferocious packs; the felines had departed from existence. There had been resistance to radiation and there had been susceptibility, causing survival on the one

part and extermination on the other. There were no biologists to seek and find the explanation.

All the small herbs, about half the tubers and many grain-bearing growths had clung to life in odd areas free from blast or radio-active fall-outs. These were rescued and cultivated for hungry bellies—but there were no flowers for the hungry mind. Humanity carried on, making do with what was available. No more than that could be done.

Fander was out-of-date, a back-number. He had nothing left for which to live except his songs and the affection of the others. In everything but his harp and his tunes the Terrestrials were away ahead of him. He could do no more than give of his own love in return for theirs and wait for the end with the dignified patience of one whose work is done.

At the termination of the year they buried Graypate. He died in his sleep, passing with the undramatic casualness of one who ain't much use at speechifying. They put him to rest on a knoll behind the community hall and Fander played his mourning song and Precious Jewel, who was Speedy's wife, planted the grave with sweet-smelling herbs.

In the spring of the following year Fander summoned Speedy and Blacky and Redhead. He was coiled upon a couch, blue and shivering. They held hands so that his touch would speak to them simultaneously.

"I am about to undergo my *amafa*."

He had great difficulty in putting it over in understandable thought-forms, for this was something completely beyond their Earthly experience.

"It is an unavoidable change of age during which my kind must sleep undisturbed." They reacted as if this casual reference to his kind was a strange and startling revelation, a new aspect of his character never previously imagined. He continued, "I must be left alone until this hibernation has run its natural course."

"And how long will that be, Devil?" asked Speedy, showing anxiety.

"It may stretch anywhere from four of your months to a full year, or——"

"Or what?" Speedy did not wait for a reassuring reply. His agile mind was swift to sense the spice of danger lying far back in the Martian's thoughts. "Or it may never end?"

"It may never end," admitted Fander reluctantly. He shivered

again, drew his tentacles close around himself. The brilliance of his blueness now was fading visibly. "The possibility is small but it is there."

Speedy's worry transmitted itself to the others. Their minds were striving to adjust themselves and accept the appalling idea that Fander might not be a fixture, permanent, established for all time.

"We Martians do not last for ever," Fander pointed out with gentle reasonableness. "All are mortal, here on Earth and there on Mars. He who survives his *amafa* has many, many happy years to follow. But some do not survive. It is a trial that must be faced as everything from beginning to end must be faced."

"But——"

"On Mars our numbers are not large," Fander went on. "We breed slowly and many of us die when halfway through the normal span. By cosmic standards we are a weak and foolish people much in need of the support of the clever and the strong. *You* are clever and strong. If ever my people should visit you again, or if any still stranger people come, always remember that you are clever and strong."

"We are strong," echoed Speedy dreamily. His gaze swung around to take in the thousands of roofs, the copper dome, the thing of beauty on the hill. "We are strong."

A prolonged shudder went through the tentacled, huge-eyed creature on the couch.

"I do not wish to be left here, an idle sleeper in the midst of life, posing like a bad example to the young. I would rather rest within the little cave where first we made friends and grew to know and understand each other. Wall it up and fix a door for me. Forbid everyone to touch me or let the light of day fall upon me until such time as I emerge of my own accord." Fander stirred sluggishly, his limbs uncoiling with noticeable lack of sinuousness. "I regret I must ask you to carry me there. Please forgive me. I have left it a little late and cannot . . . cannot . . . make it by myself."

Their faces were pictures of alarm, their minds bells of sorrow. Running for poles, they made a stretcher, edged him onto it, bore him to the cave. A long procession was following by the time they reached it. As they settled him comfortably and began to wall up the entrance, the crowd watched in the same solemn silence with which they had looked upon his verse.

He was already a tightly rolled ball of dull blueness, lying with filmed eyes, when they fitted the door and locked it, leaving him to slumber and to darkness.

Next day a tiny, brown-skinned man with eight children, all hugging dolls, came to this sanctuary. While the youngsters watched wide-eyed, he fixed upon the door a two-word name in metal letters, taking great pains over his self-imposed task and making a neat job of it.

The Martian vessel came from the stratosphere with the slow, stately fall of a landing balloon. Behind the transparent band its bluish, nightmarish crew were assembled and looking with great, multi-faceted eyes at the upper surface of the clouds. The scene resembled a pink-tinged snowfield beneath which the planet remained concealed.

Captain Rdina could feel this as a tense, exciting moment even though his vessel had not the honour to be the first to make such an approach. One Captain Skhiva, now long retired, had done it many years before. Nevertheless, this second venture retained its own exploratory thrill.

Someone stationed a third of the way around the vessel's belly came writhing at top pace toward him as their drop brought them nearer the pinkish clouds. The oncomer's signalling tentacle was jiggling at a seldom used rate.

"Captain, we have just seen an artificial object swoop across the horizon."

"What was it like?"

"It resembled a gigantic load-sled."

"It couldn't have been."

"No, Captain, of course not—but that is exactly what it appeared to be."

"Where is it now?" demanded Rdina, gazing toward the side from which the other had come.

"It dived into the mists below."

"You must have been mistaken. Long-standing anticipation can encourage the strangest delusions." He stopped a moment as the observation-band became shrouded in the vapour of a cloud. Musingly he watched the grey wall of fog slide upward as his vessel continued its descent. "That old report says definitely that there is nothing but desolation and wild animals. There is no intelligent life except some fool of a minor poet whom Skhiva left behind. Twelve to one he's dead by now. The animals may have eaten him."

"Eaten him? Eaten *meat*?" exclaimed the other, thoroughly revolted.

"Anything is possible," assured Rdina, pleased with the extreme

to which his imagination could be stretched. "Except a load-sled. That is a plain silly!"

At which point he had no choice but to let the subject drop for the simple and compelling reason that the ship came out of the base of the cloud and the sled in question was floating alongside. It could be seen in complete detail and even their own instruments were responding to the powerful output of its numerous flotation-grids.

The twenty Martians aboard the sphere sat staring bee-eyed at this enormous thing which was fully half the size of their own vessel. The forty humans on the sled stared back with equal intentness. Ship and sled continued to descend side by side while both crews studied each other with dumb fascination that persisted until simultaneously they touched ground.

It was not until he felt the slight jolt of landing that Captain Rdina recovered sufficiently to look elsewhere. He saw the great expanse of houses, the green-domed building, the thing of beauty poised upon its hill, the many hundreds of Earth-people streaming out of their town and toward his vessel.

None of these queer, bipedal life-forms, he noted, betrayed the slightest sign of revulsion or fear. They galloped to the tryst with a bumptious self-confidence that would still be evident any place the other end of the cosmos.

It shook him a little. He kept saying to himself again and again, "They're not scared—why should you be? They're not scared—why should you be?"

Suppressing his inward apprehension and ignoring the fact that many of them bore weapons, he went out personally to meet the first of them. The leading Earthman, a big, brawny, spade-bearded two-legger, grasped his tentacle-tip as to the manner born.

There came a mind-picture of swiftly limbs. "My name is Speedy."

The ship emptied itself within minutes. No Martian would stay inside who was free to smell new air. Their first visit, in a slithering bunch, was to the thing of beauty. Rdina stood quietly looking at it, his crew clustered in a half-circle around him, the Earth-folk a silent audience behind.

It was a great rock statue of a female of Earth. She was broad-shouldered, full-bosomed, wide-hipped, and wore voluminous skirts that came right down to her heavy-soled shoes. The figure's pose was a story of unutterable sadness. Her back was a little bent, her

head a little bowed, and her face was hidden in her hands, deep in her toil-worn hands.

Rdina tried in vain to gain some glimpse of the tired features behind those concealing fingers. He looked at her a long while before his eyes lowered to read the script beneath, ignoring the Earth-lettering and running easily over the flowing Martian curlicues. Around him the crew also were reading this familiar script.

*Weep my country for your sons asleep,
The ashes of your homes, your tottering towers;
Weep my country, O my country, weep
For birds that cannot sing, for vanished flowers,
The end of everything,
The silenced hours.
Weep! my country.*

There was no signature. Rdina mulled it many minutes while the others remained passive. Then he turned to Speedy, pointed to the Martian writing.

"Who did this?"

"One of your people. He is dead."

"Ah!" said Rdina. "That songbird of Skhiva's. I have forgotten his name. I doubt whether anyone remembers it. He was only a small and unimportant poet. How did he die?"

"He ordered us to enclose him for some long and urgent sleep he must have, and——"

"The *amafa*," put in Rdina comprehendingly. "And then?"

"We did as he asked. He warned us that he might never come out." Speedy gazed at the sky, unconscious that Rdina was picking up his sorrowful thoughts. "He has been there nearly two years and has not emerged." The gaze came down, fastened squarely on Rdina. "I don't know whether you can understand exactly what I mean, but he was one of us."

"I think I understand." Rdina pondered a short time, asked, "How long is this period you call two years?"

They managed to work it out between them, translating it from Terrestrial to Martian time-terms.

"It is long," pronounced Rdina. "Much longer than the average *amafa*. But it is not unique. Occasionally, for no known reason, someone takes even longer. Besides, Earth is Earth and Mars is Mars." He called to one of his crew. "Physician Traith, we have a prolonged *amafa* case. We may not be too late to give it

attention. Get your oils and essences and come with me." When the other had returned, he ordered Speedy, "Take us to where he lies."

Reaching the door to the walled-up cave, Rdina paused to look at the names fixed upon it in neat, incomprehensible Earth-letters. They read: DEAR DEVIL.

"What do those mean?" asked Physician Traith, pointing.

"Do not disturb," guessed Rdina carelessly. Pushing open the door, he let the other enter first, closed it to keep all the rest outside.

They reappeared two hours later. By now the total population of the city had crowded outside the cave, presumably to see the Martians. Rdina wondered why the crew had not satisfied this natural curiosity—it was unlikely that this great host would be more interested in other things, such as the fate of one minor poet.

Thirty thousand eyes were upon them as they came into the sunlight and fastened the cave's door. Rdina made contact with Speedy, gave him the news.

Stretching himself in the light as if reaching toward the sun, Speedy shouted in a voice of tremendous gladness that all could hear.

"He will be out again within twenty days."

At once a mild form of madness seemed to overcome the two-leggers. They made pleasure-grimaces, piercing mouth-noises and many went so far as to beat each other upon the back.

That same night twenty Martians felt like joining Fander through sheer exhaustion. The Martian constitution is peculiarly susceptible to emotion.

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New Hard-Cover Science-Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

My first book for review this month is Jane Gaskell's *STRANGE EVIL* (Hutchinson, 256pp, 12/6). This is perhaps a weird fantasy rather than an s.f. yarn, but as we still lack that firm definition it qualifies as s.f. for me. The publishers make much of the fact that this book was written when Miss Gaskell was only fourteen years of age (I gather that she is now sixteen), but I fail to see what that has to do with the matter. The book is presented for adult reading, and so must be judged accordingly. The news of Miss Gaskell's age would better have come later—after the book had been welcomed with unbiased views. Welcomed, definitely. Despite the fact that there is something wrong with the logic-framework which should be obvious, but isn't, and that I can't follow the connection between the opening and the end. This work is very definitely required reading for fantasy fans, and it should be a very enjoyable task to perform.

Miss Gaskell pictures a fairyland, just separated from our

own sphere, but sharing certain attributes and properties. The atmosphere for example. And the possible pollution of the atmosphere by the A- and H-bombs has certain of the dwellers in the dimension of fairyland worried. Thus a party make a trip to our sphere to investigate—and are detected by Judith, heroine of the story. She returns to fairyland with two of the visitors (one is a halfling, cousin to Judith by descent from a stolen Earth-maid), and in fairyland we find that things in general are in much the same mess as our own affairs—this is developed slowly but obviously. Judith plays a large part in the straightening of some of these matters, and it is with the resolving of the internecine struggle of the particular tribe (race?) of the fey with whom Judith has lodged that the story ends. Unfortunately for that logic that the fan demands equally of "fantasy" and "s.f.", the original premise/question has been forgotten during the story and remains unresolved. In fairness to Miss Gaskell, I must admit that

although I read the book some days before the Convention, it was not until after the Convention that this point "jelled" and I was then able to spot the main thing about the tale that had worried me. I do recommend this, and anxiously await something more from Miss Gaskell.

Another book which has been puzzling me is **FALLEN STAR**, by James Blish (Faber & Faber, 224pp, 15/-). This will be familiar to some of you as **THE FROZEN YEAR**, under which title it was published by Ballentine in America. The story is concerned, primarily, with one of the most inefficient of Arctic expeditions that one can imagine. I am of the opinion that at times Mr. Blish is being satirical and holding up for ridicule a certain type of adventurous human, and certain also of our cherished and established public bodies, business concerns, etc., etc. At the same time he is also telling a straight story with a science-fiction flavour. However, let me try and précis this book—Julian is invited to act as historian for the Second Western Polar Basin Expedition, which although privately sponsored, is recognised by the authorities as part of the IGY. The leading light of the expedition is Commodore Geoffrey Bramwell-Farnsworth, a professional explorer; in a more or less perpetual state of being hard-up. After due trouble with commercial sponsors and governmental departments (who offer aircraft already sold to other nations by other departments, etc.) the expedition gets on the first leg of its journey in a couple of B29's. The second leg will be covered in snow-buggies,

tracked vehicles designed for use on this terrain. Very promptly the expedition loses one of the snow buggies and some of its important members down a hole in the ice. . . a tragedy which was not obvious, but which hindsight assures the reader it should have been. The balance of the journey is done by dog team. At last, reaching the site for their base, the remnant of the expedition set down to make observations and carry out their various tasks (including a record of the passing of orbital satellites and sundry other items for the IGY). We now get for the first time a clear idea of the science fiction content of the yarn—Farnsworth is convinced that the asteroid belt was at one time the fifth planet, and it was destroyed. A short essay on this theory occurs earlier in the book, and it happens that Farnsworth is lucky and dredges up a meteorite offering factual evidence—geological evidence—of the theory in the course of the polar exploration. At this point another character comes to the fore—Elvers, who has been caring for the dog-teams. He is a Martian, and the Martians destroyed the fifth planet—along with the race that dwelled upon it. This crime the Martians would keep secret from all other races, and thus the presence of Elvers with the expedition; to destroy it and its discovery. This is the high point of the story, and thereafter it tails off into a trial (of sorts) and discussion on whether Elvers was a Martian and sane (or insane along with the rest of Mars, with the fear of discovery of a millennium-old crime) or an Earthman and insane.

I'm puzzled. Why such a weak s.f. content? And if it was supposed to satire things—including s.f.—why so weakly?

But apart from that, the story is written in Blish's excellent style, and holds the attention well. Recommended.

At one time I recall a reader wrote a letter to an s.f. mag in which he designated Edmond Hamilton as "Ed 'World Wrecker' Hamilton", because Hamilton had destroyed the earth—and mankind—in such a variety of cosmic calamities. John Wyndham doesn't destroy the earth, but he is becoming an accomplished disrupter of the fair path of man's progress. For the third time he envisages the invasion of our humdrum little planet by alien creatures, in the process turning that humdrum little planet into a most exciting world. His two previous invasions were more or less straightforward jobs, the first adversary (the Triffids) being a mobile plant misbred here; the second an undersea empire of alien creatures. **THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS** (M. Joseph, 13/6, 239pp) envisages a far different form of invasion, a misdirection, a subtle infiltration. I cannot fairly mention any of the plot without spoiling the effect—although the title is very apt—so will you pardon me if I just enthuse and highly recommend? Incidentally, the action is somewhat more confined than, but none-the-less as far-reaching, as either of the two previous invasions. The method of invasion is a new twist, so far as I can recall. Mr. Wyndham is to be complimented on yet another fine novel *and* a new ideal

Tragic and terrible is the next novel, **MARY'S COUNTRY** by Harold Mead (M. Joseph, 13/6, 288pp). Although it ends on a note of brightness, the body of the story tells of the battle of a group of children against that age-old and implacable foe man they call "the Watcher"; man's primitive personification of the blind cruelty of nature.

The children have been trained as the rulers of the People in the country (unspecified) of the Totes. They learn nothing of right or wrong but only of what is "divergent" and "non-divergent"; they are not taught the hatred in which the People hold their rulers, the Guardians; they are not taught a great deal about the foes of their country, the Dems (Democrats, and obviously equated with America). When the Totes are attacked by a plague, when their numbers are decimated again and again, attempts are made—in vain—to keep this knowledge from the children. Finally, none survive but the children (and not all of them) and a few similar groups of the People.

The children decided to go in search of Mary's Country, a dreamland which exists in the imagination of Mary, and which is shared in part by the others of the group. It is during their journeyings in the smitten countryside that the peaks of horror in this story are attained, and there is no immediate alleviation of this when the "rescue" parties of the Dems finally contact the children.

The outcome of the story is not obvious, but, as I have said, it does end on a note of encouragement and hope. Apart from

the major theme there are smaller points of interest to the reader—particularly the s.f. reader; the atomic war which preceded the time of the story, the mutants, the social structures (unclearly glimpsed) of both the Totes and the Dems. All in all, whilst this may not be the happiest book of the moment, it is by far the most interesting and the most powerful. Highly recommended for a one-sitting reading. Don't start it until you have the time to finish it . . . it is dangerous!

Fifth and final item is from the pen of astronomer Fred Hoyle, and is a book that I've been awaiting for some time. I regret that I completed the book with a sense of disappointment, mainly due to the very limited scope of characterisation portrayed on a cosmic background. The theme of the book is apparent from the title, **THE BLACK CLOUD** (Heinemann, 15/- 251pp). This gaseous body is detected on a photo plate by an astronomer at Mt. Palomar, and independently by calculation of observed disturbances in the orbits of the known bodies of the solar system by a theoretician at Cambridge. Consultation reveals the probability of its close approach to the sun, and the consequent disastrous effects to Earth. Both British and American astronomical bodies inform their respective governments; the American gets a reprimand because he allowed the British scientists to return to the U.K.; then both governments get speedily onto the job of "security" . . . and find that they lack, in Britain, the co-operation of one of the two scientists "in the know" in full. Kingsley makes a deal with the

British government—information in return for complete freedom of action within the normal law. A research group is set up, and the effects of the disaster forecast. These effects will be bad enough, but when the cloud reaches the sun it is found that it does not act as predicted; instead of passing through the solar system it slows down and stops, centred on Sol. Conclusion: that the cloud, far from being just a body of gas, is a sentient being. Communication is established with this being. Old timers in the s.f. fraternity will recognise one of several variations on a standard plot here, but let me say that Mr. Hoyle has added considerable detail work.

Recommended, of course, with reservations outlined above.

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FORREST J. ACKERMAN

I think you will enjoy **THE AMAZING COLOSSAL MAN**. Edmond Hamilton did. Leigh Brackett did. I did. We saw the preview together. And afterwards, in the lobby of the Paradise Theatre, when I introduced old "world wrecker" Hamilton to James H. Nicholson, president of the film company that produced the picture and by now quite a world-wrecker in his own right (*The Day the World Ended, It Conquered the World*, etc.), it was a historic occasion. Over a quarter-century before, when teenagers Nicholson and Ackerman were editing and publishing *The Meteor*, organ of the Boys' Scientifiction Club, in either the first or second issue of our little hectographer fanzine (there only *were* two issues!) we reproduced the autograph of Edmond Hamilton, already then an amazing man, a colossus (with Cummings, Merritt, Burroughs and others of the early Big Boys) among scientifiction authors of the late 20's and early 30's. And now "Nick" had produced a sci-fi pic, at which I was a guest reviewer and Ed. Hamilton was my guest, and after the lights went up we got together in the lobby.

As I said, I liked the picture. Ed. Hamilton said he liked it

better than **THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN**, a film the mind tends to compare it with. I still prefer Dick Matheson's story to the plot concocted by Bert Gordon and Mark Hanna, but considering **COLOSSAL MAN** cost but a fraction of **SHRINKING MAN**, I congratulate American-International on its remarkable showing v.s. Universal-International.

Much of the picture's power is derived from the performance of Glen Langan as the Giant. He does an excellent job. Langan plays Col. Glen Manning, victim of a freak accident during the detonation of the first plutonium bomb. In a heroic effort to save another man's life, it at first appears that Col. Manning has lost his own when the blast sears every inch of skin from his body. The scene where he is charred before the camera's eye by the atomic radiation is a hair raiser, and is effectually reprised twice during the unfoldment of the film.

Burned bald, and from head to toe, dehydrated and at death's door, Manning is given no chance to survive the night. But the next morning his skin has miraculously grown back and his metabolism is nearly normal! Instead of a scarred corpse he

appears to be a convalescent on the way to complete recovery! The baffled doctors can only conclude that plutonium rays must have some marvellous powers to effect recuperation.

The trouble sets in, of course, when Manning not only recuperates but starts to grow. At the rate of 8 to 10 feet a day. Dr. Listrom explains the phenomenon to Manning's fiancée, Carol: "As you probably already know, the body is like a factory. Continually producing new cells to replace the older cells, damaged cells, or destroyed cells. This happens in all the different parts of the body. Bone cells grow new bone cells, skin cells grow new skin cells and so on——" Co-doctor Coulter continues with the explanation: "It is this delicately balanced process of new cells replacing dying cells that is causing the growth problem. The process is out of balance. For some unknown reason, new cells are growing at an accelerated or speeded-up rate——" and right here I want to stop the dialogue to direct your attention to something I consider significant. Note that usage, "accelerated or speeded-up"; the basic English form describing the more "difficult" word in case there's anyone in the audience who doesn't understand it. I noticed this happening so many times in the picture that it formed a pattern. "A stimulus," someone would say, adding "or force" in case a simpler word was required to communicate to a watcher of the film what a stimulus was.

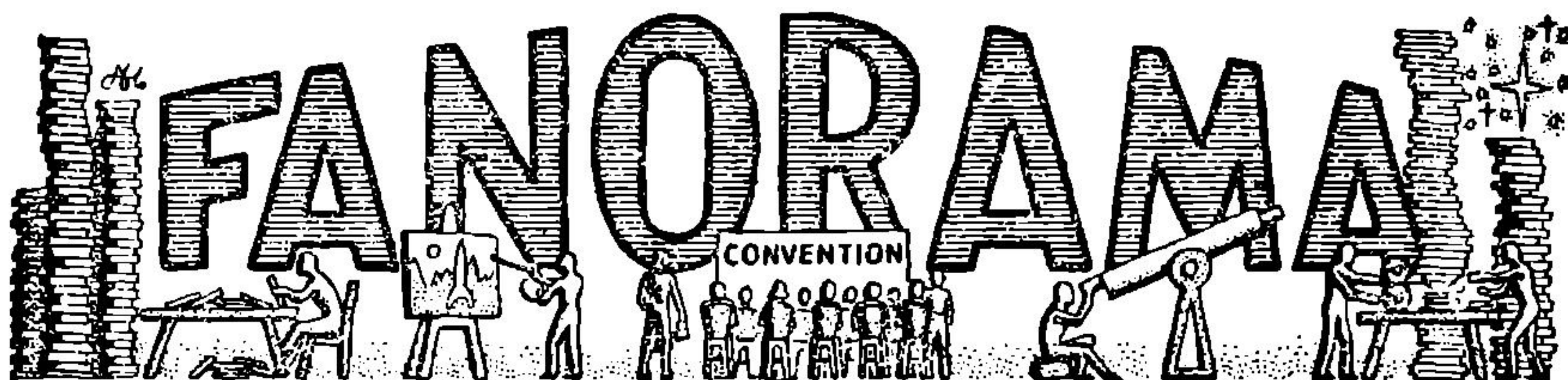
Now of course at this point one good modern Technical Adviser could have stepped in and, if listened to, stopped the giant

dead in his tracks. He would say, "They were more naïve in the days of H. G. Wells' *Food of the Gods* or Homer Eon Flint's *Nth Man*," and then go on to destroy the giant concept altogether: he couldn't support his own weight on account of Avoir du Pois' Law, he'd have to spend all his time eating, he couldn't hear anything because of the thickening of his membranes in the eary canal, etc.

At the same time the Technical Adviser would spoil all the fun, so call it a pseudo-scientifilm and the hell with him.

The impossible AMAZING COLOSSAL MAN is about 80 feet tall before he's through, and has taken giant steps through downtown Las Vegas, doing more damage than the one-armed bandits.

The AMAZING COLOSSAL MAN meets his (apparent) doom at Boulder Dam, but the clink of coins at a healthy box-office can often work wonders in reviving the deadest of monsters, and let's put it this way: I wouldn't be amazed to learn of a sequel. In fact, there's winds already of some thought been put to Frank Quattrocchi scripting an AMAZING COLOSSAL WOMAN. And whether or not she ends up by joining her boy friend at Boulder, I'd by a dam-sight rather watch her than THE GIANT OF DEVIL'S CRAG, a perfectly miserable preview that I sat through *just for you*: wrestler Buddy Baer is brought to by a nearby bolt of lightning after lying around preserved for 500 years. The whole picture was shot in a state of suspended animation.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you

It is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan. That used to be a wryly half-humorous saying in science fiction fandom, and it was true—even if nobody else thought we had any reason to be proud. Now we have, but we're no longer lonely. All of a sudden we have some 1,578 million new fans to keep us company: or at least, even if the whole world hasn't started reading science fiction, they have come to believe what we have been telling them for years and have accepted the basic sciencefictional premise about the destiny of Man. In thousands of offices, shops and schools fans who yesterday were mocked at as crackpots are today approached deferentially as experts. We will no doubt behave with becoming modesty, forbearing to say "I told you so" too often, but between ourselves, let's be proud. Not just because we were right all along on a question of fact, but because we fought a hard fight and won. I don't mean space flight itself . . . that isn't the job of s.f. fans, but of scientists . . . but the preparation of public opinion. Didn't you notice that the reaction of the Press and radio to the "Dawn of the Space Age", as they called it, was instantaneously *right*? Why, the leader columns of the national

newspapers read exactly like fan magazine editorials: occasionally better written, perhaps, but imbued with exactly the same idealistic enthusiasm for the concept of Man putting his tribal squabbles behind him and setting his face towards the stars. I don't mean to imply that the editors of the national newspapers have been secret fan magazine subscribers for years, but I do suggest that there can hardly be any literate person who has not at some time or another been exposed to a science fiction enthusiast and his ideas. We may not be numerous, but we're certainly articulate, and we've been arguing our case for more than thirty years. That's a lot of words in a lot of ears, and it looks as if some of them have stuck. If we are responsible, even in part, for the fact that Man is approaching the stars in his right mind, we have very good reason to be proud.

But what now? In a way fans were less thrilled than anyone about recent events, because we knew what was coming—if not just where it was going to come from! Some fans are still looking further ahead than the newspapers, which takes a bit of doing these days. The most interesting reaction I've come across so far has been that of Pierre Versins,

of Switzerland. He published a special issue of his fan magazine when he heard the news, and here are some quotations from what he had to say. You might be surprised . . .

Friends, I am scared. . . .

Cold. It's cold. I feel like a man in a room, warm and quiet, dreaming. It is winter, and outside there is snow on the soil and on the trees, frozen snow. Nobody in the streets, no noise. . . . And then, suddenly, the window is wide open and there is no one standing outside. But THE COLD is creeping in. Anyone may enter now, with the cold.

In outer space there is either someone waiting for us, or no one. And each part of this alternative scares me.

Because I fear the emptiness of the universe.

Because I fear its fullness.

Another thing to be turned over in the light of these New Moons is science fiction itself, but that will have to wait till next time. Meanwhile, a few words about the subject this column would have been full of in less stirring times.

Among the more predictable results of the satellite sensation was that the B.B.C. showed again on television the film it took at the World Convention in London in September, with a comment to the effect that these people hadn't been as crazy as they looked. They looked crazy, incidentally, because they were in fancy dress for the Masquerade Ball, but the B.B.C. omitted to mention this

fact and no doubt eight million people are quietly convinced that s.f. writers and fans go about normally dressed as tendrilled spacemen and tentacled monstrosities. Fortunately, however, John W. Campbell was not in fancy dress, was interviewed seriously and talked convincingly

. . . and, as it turned out, prophetically about the immediate prospects for space flight. John W. Campbell was, of course, the Convention's Guest of Honour, but the most interesting speech from a science fiction point of view was probably that of Sam Moskowitz, fan, collector and critic, and one of the leading authorities in the field. He gave a startling analysis of a market survey of s.f. readership. Sam is an expert in this type of thing, since he does similar work for a company marketing frozen foods, and it said a great deal for the force of his personality that he was able to talk seriously about s.f. mags and frozen pies in the same breath without anyone raising so much as a titter. Probably the most interesting fact to emerge from the survey analysis was that 9.8 per cent. of s.f. readers buy between 10 and 16 magazines regularly, accounting for 32 per cent. of all copies sold, and if they reduced their purchases to the average, the average sales of all magazines would drop 25 per cent., and less than a quarter of them could continue to exist. From all of which the interesting conclusion emerges that fans are not just a vociferous and unimportant minority as some editors have claimed, but the mainstay of the field and representatives of its development.



Dear Mr. Hamilton: With regard to your editorial remarks about audience reaction to "The Incredible Shrinking Man", my own experience was only fifty per cent. similar. During the first half of the picture when quite a bit of back-projection was used, the local Saturday night audience—a tough crowd—indulged in plenty of guffaws, but once he was down in the cellar you could have heard a pin drop. I can't make up my mind whether this means that Bridgwater has a potentially large s.f. public or whether they'd merely settled down to their customary necking sessions.

ROBERT J. TILLEY,
Bridgwater, Somerset.

★ *Thanks for the report, Robert. My further comments on this subject follow the next letter.*

Dear Ed.: Regarding your editorial (which I did, most highly) I have a slight demurrer to contribute. You mention the bursts of laughter attendant upon the local screening of "The Incredible Shrinking Man". As an old and hardened viewer of science fiction and so-called "Horror" movies, I can assure you that this phenomenon is more or less of a commonplace and has been since the days of the silent cinema. There are few such films which haven't evoked laughter from the audience, and only a few; in each

case there was such a contrived and sudden shock that the audience was caught off-balance and forced to react instinctively and instantaneously (as in the silent *Phantom of the Opera*, when Lon Chaney's mask is removed).

But unless the reaction is instinctive and instantaneous, you can *expect* laughter. Not, however, because the spectator is amused. In my opinion, he is merely reassuring himself, *and* the rest of the audience, that he is a superior sort of fellow, and not easily frightened. If you stop to analyse, you will realise that your average citizen, confronted with something he does not understand, is immediately disconcerted. In "real life", the unknown is regarded as a threat to personal security. Even an odd fact is enough to throw him off balance, or the presence of an unusual stranger in the local pub.

But there is a great socially-imposed taboo against any show of fear or alarm. Consequently, the natural reaction is usually suppressed—and two other reactions substituted. In "real life", your average man will either hit out at the unnatural phenomenon (physically or verbally) or he'll laugh at it. Set an Eskimo with an Oxford accent, wearing a top hat and furs, in a pub—and either somebody will pick a quarrel and try to hit him, or he'll be ridiculed.

Now, in the cinema, your average man is better able to control his instinctive fear-reactions because he knows what he sees is illusion. So although he may be impressed or even disconcerted, he will endeavour to laugh heartily, nevertheless, to show his "superiority". Teen-agers are particularly prone to this ploy. But (and this is the clincher) teen-agers and others continue to attend such showings of s.f. and "horror" films. If they were really convinced these offerings were "silly" they'd go elsewhere. It is a sad truism that all too many of the films are silly; but even the good ones, barring moments of contrived shock which catch the audience unprepared, will continue to evoke laughter. And if science-fiction as literature fails to gain a wide public, it's because it deals with the unfamiliar—and the average man, as Willis points out in his article, feels safer with a known quantity.

ROBERT BLOCH,

Weyauwega, Wis., U.S.A.

* *Thank you for an interesting letter, Robert, and now for a few demurrers from me.*

You classify "horror" and science-fiction films together which is, to my way of thinking, out of order to begin with. Anyone who has experienced the fear of loneliness, silence, the dark, or of the supernatural—and it is an unusual man who has not had an unhappy or fearful moment, through any of these illogical fears—can identify himself easily with the characters in a horror film. This just does not apply to science fiction, most of which is, as I

pointed out in my editorial, without a point of contact with the everyday life of the "man in the street".

Logically, then, the laughter which is heard during the showing of a horror picture is the type of contrived self-assurance which you mention in your letter, while that heard during the screening of a science fiction movie is the laughter of people who find themselves out of their depth and consequently unable to "get the feel" of the events and characters they are watching. This laughter is a case of ridicule and not reassurance, and we must search for a more familiar and understandable approach for the everyday audience before this reaction turns from ridicule to positive dislike.

Dear Ed.: I have just finished reading NEBULA No. 24, and although I have never written to a magazine before, I wanted to let you know what I thought of this issue.

"Proving Ground" was easily the best and this was a new theme to me. Of the other stories "Further Outlook" and "The

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"Ties of Iron" were good, followed by "In the Beginning", "The Eyes of Silence" and "Artifact". I think that this story was below A. B. Chandler's usual high standard.

I am only 15 and I wonder if you have information of any Club for young people in the Manchester area. If there is none could you route further enquiries to me?

A. RISPIN,
Manchester, Lancs.

** In Great Britain there are a number of Science Fiction Fan Clubs but, to my knowledge, none of these is specially for younger readers; few of them are very active and some have even grown away from the appreciation of genuine science fiction altogether.*

Consequently, any young reader interested in forming or joining a new science fiction club will be given every possible assistance by the editor of this magazine, as there are countless different ways in which a lively and active fan club can help to increase the prestige and circulation of science fiction publications in this country.

Anyone interested should write to the Editor, NEBULA Science Fiction, 159, Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E., with all relevant details, whereupon he will be passed the addresses of other interested persons in his area, as well as advice on how the formation of a club can be arranged.

Dear Mr. Hamilton: As to NEBULA No. 23 I liked Stark's cover.

"Sentimental Journey"—well, a ghost story and not a very exceptional one if I may say so. I liked "Time Bomb" but more because of the psychological background than because of the Time Bomb trick, also the feelings of the Martian were well expressed.

"Out of Thin Air" was funny, but minor. Personally I didn't like "The River". The description of to-morrow's earthmen in "Lethe Lend" was very well done. This whole story was well written throughout. "Against Goliath" could have been better in style and plot. I didn't like the end, but perhaps on the whole it was not bad. Perhaps style is not quite what I mean. Somehow I think the idea could have been given a better story. By the way, this is just what German fans have to deplore when considering the books of some German Science Fiction Authors.

RAINER EISFELD,
Bonn, Germany.

** Interesting letter, Rainer—write again, won't you?*

Dear Ed.: Good show for going monthly.

I always look forward to receiving NEBULA's slim, neat volume in the post, with its attractive interior lay-out. Twice as often is more than double anticipation and enjoyment.

My story ratings for No. 21:—First, "Somewhere a Voice." This is one of the finest novels you have had. I guess I'm a Russell fan anyway, but his ability to bring out some of the best points of the resilience of human nature when allied to a

deep faith, however unrecognised, to come out on top even when defeated, is one of his gifts as a writer. I remember "Sustained Pressure" in NEBULA No. 6 as another fine example of the same thing. Second, "All the World's Tears," another fine story so sensitive along with its directness in dealing with human nature. Arthur Thomson's illustration for this story is one of the best he has done. Brian Aldiss is fast becoming one of the best craftsmen in British Science Fiction.

R. L. GEORGE,
Wellington, W.2.
New Zealand.

** Glad to see you enjoy the magazine so much, Mr. George. Naturally, I am always pleased to get letters and ratings from "down under."*

Dear Ed.: Having read John Allison's complaint in the September "Guided Missives" concerning your nationalism and myself supporting quite a few world unity programmes, I nevertheless find myself wholeheartedly backing your "Nationalistically British" policy. International peace and co-operation lie not in the homogenization of the world's cultures into one overall culture, but in peaceful interaction amongst the separate cultures of the world.

Britain has very definitely contributed very much to the world (and science fiction) and undoubtedly has a great deal more to contribute.

WM. J. MATTHEWS,
New Jersey, U.S.A.

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

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 1958 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred, and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

Training Aid	
Fiends for Neighbours	
The Meek Shall Inherit	
Ten-Storey Jigsaw	
Dear Devil	
Name and Address	

Mr. Wm. McMillan, of Glasgow, E.1., wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 23. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:

1. IN THE BEGINNING
By Edward Ludwig 21.7%
2. PROVING GROUND
By Lan Wright 18.8%
3. THE TIES OF IRON
By Kenneth Bulmer 18.8%
4. THE EYES OF SILENCE
By E. C. Tubb 15.7%
5. ARTIFACT
By A. Bertram Chandler 12.8%
6. FURTHER OUTLOOK
By Philip E. High 12.2%

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 29.

* *These are my sentiments entirely, Mr. Matthews, and I am particularly pleased that a large number of American readers should agree with me in this controversial issue. It would, as you imply, be a dull world indeed where everyone conformed to the same standards and had the same tastes, however superior the said standards happened to be in themselves.*

Dear Mr. Hamilton: I have recently bought a copy of NEBULA No. 23, the first copy of your magazine I have seen, as a matter of fact, for quite a while.

After a prolonged separation from a person, one always notices changes, even quite minor ones, which would escape the scrutiny of others with whom that person may have been in contact all the time. So it is with this copy of NEBULA. I am happy to find quite an improvement in the general standard of the stories, and I am also pleased to see that the usual features are still there. May I add here, however, that I always considered your publication to be rather superior to much of the soft-cover rubbish which unfortunately pollutes the s.f. market, furnishing such excellent propaganda for the anti-s.f. critics.

As an old science-fictionist, I enjoyed all of the short stories, particularly, "Out of Thin Air" and "The River." I do think, however, that saturation point must have been reached in the use of the plots in "Against Goliath" and "Lethe Lend." How convenient, in the former story that Prospero turned out to be: (a) superior to the Mak-

kees in scientific knowledge; (b) in possession of the mental circuit breaker; (c) able to converse with the Englishmen; (d) hostile to the Makkees; (e) friendly toward the Terrestrials. The Aliens came into the story as a tremendous anti-climax in the latter story, I thought. Having been more or less reared on aliens of every sort, size, shape and temperament, I was hoping for a more imaginative type of alien on Kweiyang. After all, these are supposed to be imaginative stories? But, Mr. Stratford, they turned out to be the usual "Gods" served by a very servile race, utterly uncivilised, "a link between animal and intelligence" who spent quite a slice of their time maintaining a great metropolis!

The H. G. Wells Club is still in existence, I am pleased to say and has a nice collection of Books and, more important still, a keen membership. Thanks to Fans the world over, and to services rendered by people like yourself, we have survived for more than five years.

A. GREGORY,
Crook, Co. Durham.

* *In case some of our readers are wondering, the H. G. Wells Club exists to interest school-boys in the better type of science fiction and maintains an extensive free library to this end.*

Donations of books and magazines to help in this important task are always gratefully accepted, and should be sent to—A. Gregory, 25, Tennyson Terrace, Crook, Co. Durham.

STATION SOL—*Continued from inside front cover*

from the Sun over a large part of the Solar System; and probably even the Earth is immersed in its tenuous fringes. The Earth, we may have to accept with placidity, actually orbits within the atmosphere of the Sun.

Only during total eclipses of the Sun by the Moon can the majesty of the solar atmosphere, particularly the outlying corona, be seen and appreciated. Then, as the central globe is covered, a magnificent pearly light bursts forth to provide one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles known to man. But astronomers have little time to stand and stare—they have scant minutes in which to make their measurements.

Using high-flying planes, it was found possible to see the corona extending out to over fifty solar radii.

The photograph, taken from Earth's surface, shows the brighter parts of the solar atmosphere during a total eclipse. The finest details are too faint to register on any photographic plate as yet in use. One reason is that the corona, although at a million degrees centigrade, two hundred times as hot as the solar surface, emits very little light because of its tenuousness.

It is only fifteen years since the Radio Sun was first detected, but astronomers are now using its radio messages to build up a new picture of the Sun's atmosphere. Superimposed on the background hiss are sporadic outbursts of noise, often like the sound of the wind whistling through bare branches of winter trees. Analysis of this radio spectrum shows that these bursts begin with short waves and then increase in wavelength, as though something was rising from the solar surface, changing its note as it bursts out into space.

Its speed must be nearly the same as the speed of the particles which reach Earth to create the aurorae. Sunspots are the centre of many such disturbances—and the odd point is that these radio waves are beamed into space so that they sweep over Earth in regular succession.

Present theory holds that charged particles surge upwards from the solar surface where it is lacerated by gigantic storms and are meshed into magnetic fields known to exist over sunspots. Accelerating and reacting with the magnetic flux in space, the particles become radio transmitters, probably continuing to transmit during their day-long trip from the Sun to Earth.

Occasionally a solar flare—a number of flares of Earth-engulfing size are clearly visible on the photograph—swamps all other radio noise with a tremendous barrage of radio energy.

One of the first tasks of the new three thousand inch radio telescope at Jodrell Bank will be the detection and investigation of the radio waves from these noisy streams in interplanetary space. The radio sun makes no secret that it is there in space as a stupendous beacon.

Radio astronomy is now so far advanced that the effect of the corona on an exterior radio source has been used to help analyse the extent of the Solar atmosphere. Luckily, one of the strongest galactic radio sources, the Crab nebula, appears at times fairly close—in terms of straight-line Earthly observation—to the Sun. As the corona cuts across the Crab it diffracts the radio waves. The nebula no longer appears as a point radio source, but is surrounded by a halo, just as a street lamp has a halo on a misty evening.

Man is continually discovering that things are not what they seem. No longer is the Sun just a ball of fire in the sky—that conception is as outdated as Phaeton's chariot.

When at last astronomers are able to take their instruments—and themselves—in a spaceship and position their observation point at will they will certainly take up their post behind the moon, orbiting with it, enjoying a continual eclipse.

And when they do—who knows but that delicate instruments of the future will not reveal the Earth to be cradled in the softly glowing arms of the Sun's atmosphere?

