

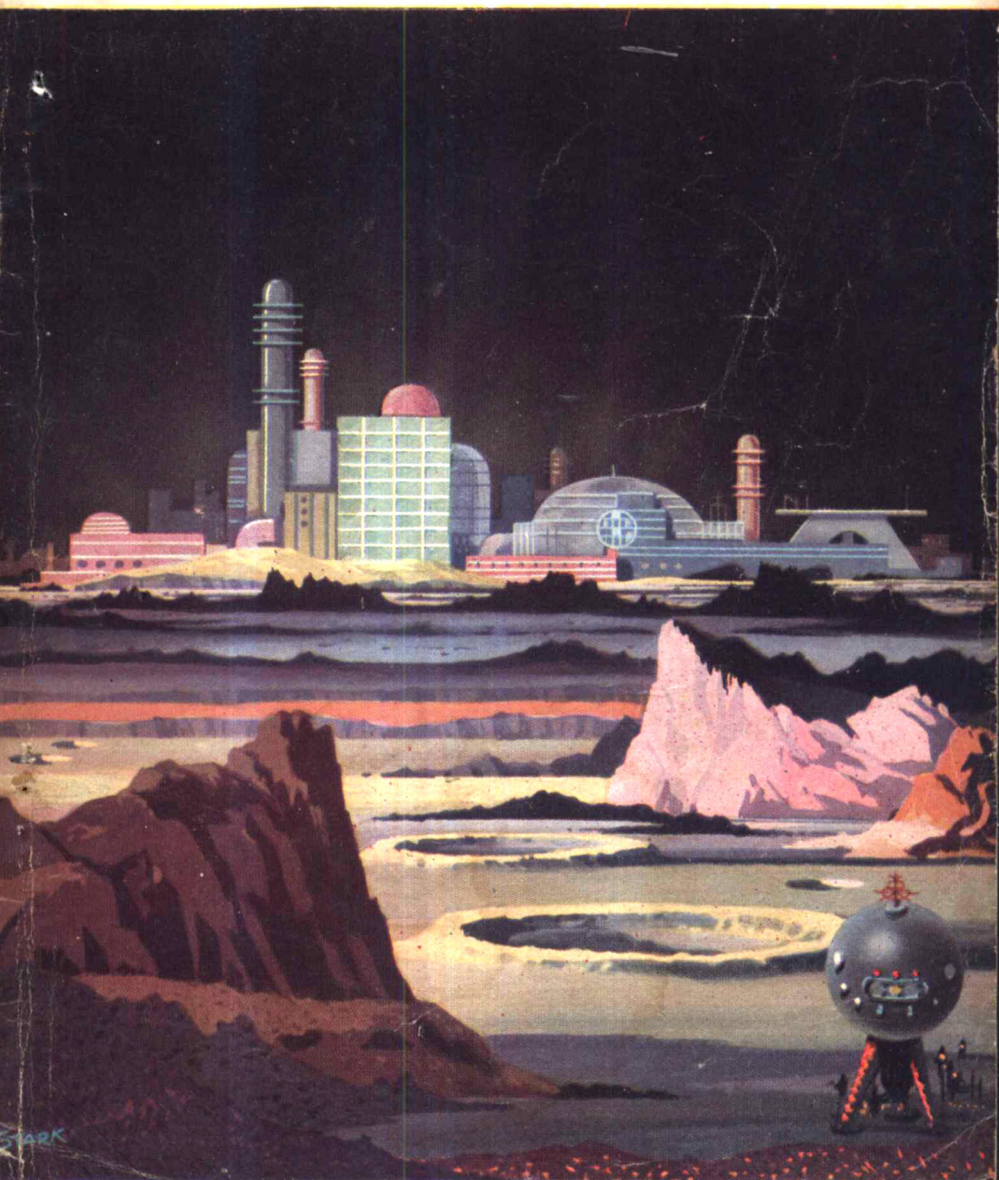
NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 32



NEW FOUR PART SERIAL BY KENNETH BULMER

THE CRATER CONTROVERSY



The Moon, showing Terminator

KENNETH JOHNS

Just outside the window a patch of gluey mud has been left by workmen repairing the chimneys; the rain, which at the time of writing is very welcome, after striking the window-sill, drips irregularly on to the mud. Looked at uncritically, that strip of pock-marked mud looks, with the aid of the latent-image effect, not unlike the photograph above.

Although we know a considerable number of things about the Moon, the mysteries which remain are of the oddly frustrating kind quite different from the broader sweep of stellar and galactic secrets yet to be uncovered. Those raindrops made me think of just one Lunar mystery, and of the experiments carried out by dropping ball bearings on to mud, following Alihans and his fresh mortar and grapeshot, to reproduce typical Lunar craters.

The results were not completely successful and the people who passionately believed in the volcanic theory remained unconvinced. Although the volcanic theory has now been discarded, it did put forward some interesting views which, in its time, seemed to answer problems other theories could not.

According to this theory, ancient volcanoes ejected sufficient lava to create the wide dark areas we call seas which are not apparently cratered to any great extent. The ring walls—a truer name and superior to the commonly

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by **PETER HAMILTON**

Issue Number **Thirty-Two**

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WISDOM OF THE GODS (Part One) **Kenneth Bulmer** 68

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Back Cover by Arthur Thomson

Black and White Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

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Look here .

The commencement of the new four part serial by Kenneth Bulmer in this issue may come as something of a surprise to many of our regular readers as, although our magazine has been appearing now for over six years, we have never before attempted the publication of a "to be continued" story.

In the past, of course, it was not practicable for us to publish serials, as, with a bi-monthly schedule, it would have taken us no less than eight months to serialise a story of worthwhile length and, while it is tantalising enough to be kept waiting for three months, as at present, to find out how a story is going to finish—particularly when the story is as unusual as "Wisdom of the Gods"—it would be just downright intolerable to be kept in suspense for longer.

So, we have our regular monthly frequency to thank for "Wisdom of the Gods," but this is by no means the only innovation made possible by a dependable publishing schedule. Definite commissions can be offered to well known science-fiction authors and it is now possible for me to lay plans for the future of the magazine with greater confidence than at any other time in its history.

Among the special tit-bits which I have secured for your future enjoyment are two further complete novels in the "Against Goliath" series by William F. Temple (the last one appeared in NEBULA No. 31); another off trail novelette in which Brian Aldiss gives us a glimpse of an unusual yet horribly convincing future, in which each individual has come to rely entirely on his doctor; a colourful and imaginative adventure novelette by E. C. Tubb (which he, himself, describes as an "Intellectual Space Opera"); plus other yarns currently in preparation by Robert Silverberg, Harlan Ellison and many others.

Plans are also well advanced for the commencement of a brand new regular series featuring news of scientific and science-fictional doings on the Western side of the Atlantic and written by that well known American science-fiction personality Robert A. Madle.

Turning back to more immediate things, I think you will agree that the current issue is well up to our usual standard of diversity and entertainment. Not only do we have the usual quota of new stories by Internationally popular science-fiction authors, but the work of comparative (and complete) newcomers is also featured.

However, no matter how well established a writer may be, he is interested and, indeed, dependent upon the reactions of the science-fiction reading public to his stories. The likes and dislikes of those of you who express a preference on the stories we publish each month, are keenly studied by all the contributors to the magazine and are my own sole means of judging whether or not any particular story submitted to me is likely to be popular if published in NEBULA.

By filling up the Ballot Form each month you are not only giving a well-earned vote of thanks to your favourite authors, you are also deciding the type of story which will appear in future issues of the magazine. This is a unique opportunity offered to its readers only by NEBULA.

There is a Ballot Form on page 111.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Hamilton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'P'.

Sense of Proportion

He was the first real hero of the Space Age—and scheduled to make one last public appearance before his death

Illustrated by Kenneth Barr

I sensed trouble as soon as I arrived at the studios. It wasn't anything definite or superficial but I've been in the game too long not to recognise the signs. There was a false heartiness in Fred's greeting as he took over my coleopter for parking, a cold politeness from Sam as he took me down from the roof, a subtle difference in Moira's welcome as I entered my office. I had been on vacation for a month and, apparently, it had been four weeks too long.

Starman was waiting for me and he, of them all, still seemed normal. He bounced forward with his toothy smile and wrung my hand in his own.

"Gee, boss!" he said. "It's good to see you. Have a nice vacation?"

"Wonderful." It hadn't been as good as all that but it was the only thing to say. Some people might like visiting dusty

museums and art galleries but I wasn't one of them. "Anything new?"

"Mary's had a baby," he beamed. "Eight pound girl." He waited for my congratulations.

I gave him what he was waiting for but felt a little guilty about it even while I was clapping him on the shoulder. The truth was that I'd forgotten all about his wife and her blessed event—if you could call it blessed, what with the medical bills and all. Harry's salary wasn't all that big and it wouldn't be long before he felt the pinch. Maybe he was feeling it already and was doing something about it? I dismissed the idea as soon as it came. Harry was loyal, which didn't matter in the slightest; I didn't believe in loyalty, but he was lacking that certain something which could put him on the top deck. I'd worked for the Premiger Corporation for ten years and I knew the way the Old Man picked his staff.

"You know, Jake," he said after I'd got through the congratulations, "it's great being a father. You should try it sometime."

"I'll think about it," I said shortly. Harry had known me for over six years and during that time I'd had two wives and two divorces. He should have been more diplomatic.

"Sure," he said, seeming to realise that he'd stepped a little over the line. He snapped his fingers. "Say! While you were away I had a great idea. What say we put Captain Murphy on the hot seat?"

"Murphy?"

"Sure. You know the guy. First to the moon way back at the end of the century."

"I thought he was dead?"

"So do most people but he isn't. What say, Jake, shall I get on the job?" He was eager to please. Too eager? I didn't know but caution cost nothing. I pretended to think of the idea, then shook my head. "No?" He sounded hurt.

"I'll let you know." I glanced at my watch. "I've got a lot of catching up to do, Harry, and I guess you've something to do also. How about us getting on with the job?"

He took the hint and left. Alone, I sat at my desk and wondered again about Harry. He was my leg-man and good enough in his way, even if he did get a bit wearing at times. I could have asked him if he had heard anything on the grape-vine but that would have been the wrong thing to do. If he'd known nothing then I would have scratched his curiosity. If he knew something then he would have told me.

Moira knocked discreetly on the door, opened it at my call, entered the office with a sheaf of papers beneath her arm. She set them down before me, flashed me a wary half-smile, then added a slip of paper to the heap.

"A message from J. P.'s office, Mr. Thompson," she said. "He wants you to attend a personal conference at 11.00."

"Thank you." I didn't make the mistake of asking her if she knew what J. P. wanted. I didn't even glance at the memo until she had gone and then I knew for certain that something unpleasant was in the air. Julius Premiger only sent for anyone in the lower executive levels either to promote or to slate them and my reception to date hadn't been that of a man headed for promotion. I looked at the other papers; they were the Delmar ratings for my show, and then I knew what all the trouble was about.

You can argue all you like about the validity of the Delmar ratings; the system of phoning a thousand people at random during the televising of a show and asking them what they are looking at, but the fact remains that the ratings are accuser, judge



and executioner, all three in one. When your rating is high then you're sitting pretty; when it's low then you and your show are headed for the discard.

And the rating for *Resurrection* was way down in the red.

You've heard of the show, of course, everyone has. The idea may not be new but I've given it a polish that it never had before. You take a man or woman, the more notable they are the better, and you relive their life for them in speeded tempo. Most people haven't very good memories; they tend to forget the unpleasant things which have happened to them, but with the electroscanner it is possible to dig out every particle of their lives and record it on tape. Then we use actors, dressed and made up to resemble the actual characters known at the time of the incident, and have them speak the same words when possible.

The result, to the person in the hot seat, as we call it, is something out of this world. To them it seems as if the actual past has come to life again and that people, long dead, move and speak as they did in real life. They get a kick out of it, naturally, and so do the audience and the fifty million viewers to each show.

But now something had gone wrong and that fifty million was dwindling too fast for comfort.

I'd last seen Julius Premiger four years before, when he'd given me full charge of my own show. It had seemed then that he couldn't possibly get any older; that he had reached the limit as far as physical deterioration was concerned. I hadn't been wrong. He looked now as he had then, dehydrated, wizened, stooped, a frail shell of a man surrounding a pair of pale, deep-set eyes. It was the eyes which gave an insight to his character. Old, wise, shrewd and cunning. The eyes of a man who has fought his way up from office boy to the head of a corporation. I admired him.

"Have a nice vacation, Thompson?" His voice matched the rest of him, thin, dry, acid and emotionless.

"Yes, J. P., I did." My voice was heavy with enthusiasm. "I got some great ideas while I was abroad and I'd like to put some of them before the board for your approval. It wasn't a wasted four weeks, J. P., no sir!"

"Glad to hear it, Thompson." Julius rustled some papers before him. "We could use some new ideas around here." He rustled the papers again. "Are you satisfied with the way your show is progressing?"

"No sir, I'm not!" I made it good and emphatic. "J. P., I

should never have taken that vacation! I haven't had time yet to make a total check, but it seems to me that someone has fallen down on the job. I left eight packaged shows ready for presentation, good shows too, and what do I find?" I leaned earnestly forward. "The Delmar ratings were a shock to me as you can guess. Frankly, I can't understand it, not on the face of it, that is." I hesitated. "J. P., will you be honest with me?"

He raised an eyebrow and I plunged ahead.

"*Resurrection* is a good show. You know it, I know it, everyone knows it. Those ratings hit me where it hurts, you know that." I lowered my voice. "Tell me, J. P. Is this a matter of corporation policy?"

"And if it was?"

"Then I'm not arguing." I slumped back in the chair. "If it's a question of policy then I'm for it." I managed a weak smile. "I hate to see the show go, sure, but if it's for the good of the corporation, then I'm with you every step of the way."

"If the show goes, then you go with it," he reminded. I knew better than to say anything and he grunted with what could have been approval. "You're a good man, Thompson, I wouldn't like to lose you if it can be avoided, but these ratings——"

"I still don't understand it, J. P.," I said quickly. "I'm not excusing myself, don't think that, it's my show and I'm responsible." I drove my right fist into my left palm. "I'd never have taken that vacation had I known that Starman's wife was expecting a baby! I suppose it's asking a little too much of a man to keep his mind wholly on the job at a time like that. But he should have told me."

"Are you blaming Starman?"

"No sir, I'm not!" I met his pale stare without wavering. "It's my show and my responsibility."

"Yes," he said. "It is and I'm glad to hear you say it." His thin fingers toyed again with the papers. "I'll be open with you, Thompson. On the basis of these ratings I should cancel your show. Can you give me a good reason why I shouldn't?"

"Yes sir, I can," I said quickly. "I've got something lined up which will lift *Resurrection* to the top and keep it there. Something really big." I hesitated just long enough to whet his interest. "I don't want to say too much, J. P., you know how it is, but this thing I'm working on is really big. I wouldn't like anyone else to get hold of it before we do."

"I understand." He looked thoughtful. "Can you give me some idea?"

"I'm going to put a hero in the hot seat," I said. "A real-life hero who has everything it takes to make the viewers scream for a repeat performance. A man who has had the most adventurous life of this generation, everyone knows him and what he did. I tell you, J. P., it can't miss."

"If it does," he said coldly, "both you and your show will be finished."

"J. P.," I said firmly. "If what I plan isn't the biggest thing in mass entertainment then you can have my head on a charger. And, what's more, I'll deliver it myself."

We had a little more talk, not much because I knew that Julius was a busy man, but it was certain that when I'd made my promise he hadn't thought I was joking. I had to deliver or else. I intended to deliver.

I didn't rush things, not too fast anyway; it doesn't pay to let anyone know that you're too eager. So before I gave Starman the go-ahead I did some studying, reading up the old newspaper clippings on Captain Murphy and what he had done. I was disappointed.

Sure, he was officially recognised as having been the first man to set foot on the moon, but when you'd said that you'd said it all. I dug back into his early life and the results were pretty barren. No great love affair, no dirt, no question that he was anything other than what he was supposed to be. A clean-living, one hundred per cent comic-book hero of the traditional school. A crew-cut, patriotic order-obeyer who had been given a brief moment of glory and had earned himself a minor niche in the Hall of Fame. As red-blooded material for *Resurrection* he was utterly useless.

Normally I wouldn't have given him a second thought but I wasn't a free agent. The famous and the notorious didn't seem too eager to be put on the hot seat anymore. I'd promised J. P. a hero and a hero it had to be. Which meant that it was this Captain Murphy or nothing. So I grabbed hold of Starman and we went to dig up the past.

How Starman had discovered Murphy I didn't know. Maybe it was a tip from some nurse or friend, someone hungry for a small bonus. It wasn't important; a good leg-man is expected to deliver the goods and Starman was a good leg-man, but I had a moment's doubt when I discovered where Murphy lived.

"You're sure this is right?" I stared at the drab, dirty pseudo-

stone of the old folks' home. Resthaven it was called from the sagging plaque on the gate. An ugly collection of buildings which reminded me of a factory, set in an acre of bleached grass and withered trees. A few stooped figures tended some flower beds and several more wandered like lost souls along winding concrete paths.

"This is it." Starman sent the car droning towards the front door. "He's old, you know, and poor." He braked with unnecessary violence. "So we treat our heroes."

Inside, the house had a musty, grease-polish and damp smell. The floors were of polished wood, the walls painted a dark brown and cream, the furniture heavy and unmatched. A man was waiting for us and Starman introduced him to me as Paul Fairclough the superintendent or, as he put it, the Co-ordinating Officer of Resthaven. Either way it meant the same thing; he was the boss.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Thompson," beamed Fairclough, washing his hands with invisible soap. They didn't need washing but they didn't seem to be clean either. The rest of him matched his hands. His face was sallow, his hair a slicked-back tangle of arranged waves shining with oil, his suit was passable; the kind I'd use for work in the garden if I had a garden. His eyes were a muddy brown, dog-like in their fawning expression. I was used to that expression, I had seen it from a hundred people, all of whom hoped that I could do something for them.

I glanced at my wrist watch, it was enough.

"Mr. Starman, of course, has told me of your purpose here," said Fairclough. "Captain Murphy is one of our most honoured guests. I need not tell you how proud and pleased we here at Resthaven are to have him with us." He led the way to a tall door painted in the universal brown. "He is taking his leisure in the recreation room. I have informed him of your intention to visit."

"Thank you," said Starman curtly. "We can find our own way." He opened the door, waited until I had passed through, then shut it firmly in Fairclough's face. "Snake," he whispered, and looked around the room. "What a joint!"

I agreed with him, not that it mattered. The room was an echoing chamber of bare misery. A few tables rested against the dingy walls. A few chairs stood in ranked array in the centre of the bare, polished floor. Tall windows flanked one wall and, facing them, sitting in solitary state in the empty room, staring at the view of bleached grass and hopeless trees outside, sat Captain Murphy, the hero of our age.

He was an old man, I had expected that. He was sitting,

hunched in a faded dressing gown, a blanket over his knees, carpet slippers on his feet. His hands rested on the blanket, thin, sere, mere hooked claws with cracked, dirt-ringed nails. He was almost bald, his bare dome shining with a pallid whiteness, an island of skin surrounded by wisps of off-white hair. His face was creased and lined, his lips pendulous, his eyes red-rimmed and pouched like the eyes of a confirmed drunkard. He looked as much like a hero as a farmyard rooster does an eagle.

"Captain Murphy." I was surprised at the gentleness in Starman's voice. "Captain Murphy, sir. May we have your attention?"

It was like talking to a mummy and just as rewarding. The bleared eyes never shifted from the view outside. The hands didn't move on the blanket, the lips remained slack in the slack face. I stepped forward and stood where he couldn't help but see me.

"We've come here to talk," I snapped. "Are you with us?"

"Steady, Jake!" said Starman. I glared at him, shook off the hand he had placed on my arm, stared at the man in the chair.

"I'm Jake Thompson," I said. "I run the show *Resurrection*, you know of it, naturally. I've come a long way to see you because I think that I can do a lot for you. Are you interested?"

Where Starman had failed I succeeded. The eyes changed focus and stared, not at the view but at me. The lips parted and a thick, coated tongue wiped the spittle from them. Captain Murphy, the first man to set foot on the moon, dragged his thoughts from somewhere a quarter of a million miles away and gave me his attention.

"What did you say?"

I repeated what I had said, adding a little more for emphasis. "You're a famous man, Murphy, and we want to give the youngsters a chance to see you and the people who made you the man you are. You'll agree, naturally?"

"No," he said thickly. "No, I won't agree. You're not going to get me on that show of yours and make me into a clown."

"Now let's not be foolish about this," I said. "Look at it this way. When you were given the opportunity to reach the moon, you accepted a responsibility towards the culture which gave you that opportunity. Hell, man, do you think that you could ever have made it alone? It took billions to get that ship up there and you with it." I took a couple of paces away from him, then spun on my heel, my finger pointing towards his face. "And what about Emshaw? What about the poor guy who was sent up with you and who died up there all that way from home? Don't you think that you owe him something?"

"Leave Emshaw out of this!" Murphy half-rose from his chair, then fell back again, little bubbles frothing his lips. "Just don't bring him into this."

"Why not?" I lowered the finger and stepped towards him. "He was your co-pilot, wasn't he? Two went up and only one came down. You were the lucky one, Murphy. Do you think it fair to leave Emshaw up there alone and forgotten? Agree to sit in on my show, Murphy, and both you and he will be famous again."

"No," he said again. "No."

"There's a bonus in it for you," I urged. "Five thousand in cool cash."

"No."

"Ten thousand!"

"Leave me alone!" Murphy surged up in his chair again. "Damn you! Leave me alone!"

"Yes, Jake," said Starman in a tight voice. "Leave him alone."

Personally, there was nothing more I would rather have done. Murphy was practically senile and it would take the make-up artists days to clean him up and get him ready for the cameras. His response during interview was bound to be poor and, on all counts, he was at the bottom of the heap. But he was a hero and I had to have him one way or another.

"Talk to him, Harry," I said gently. "Try and show him that it's to his advantage to come on the show." I managed a rueful smile. "Better make my apologies too. I guess that I just got carried away for a moment at the thought of losing him." I headed towards the door. "I'll just step outside for a while and leave you two alone together. Maybe my presence irritates him."

Fairclough was where I expected him to be, standing at the door his ears red from pressure. I took him by the arm.

"I want to talk to you. Privately."

"In my office, Mr. Thompson." He almost ran in his eagerness to show me the way. Settled, he offered me a drink of second-rate Scotch and a choice of a third-rate cigar. I refused both.

"Ulcers," I explained, and got down to business. "I'll be frank with you, Paul. I want Murphy on my show and it's worth a thousand to the man who'll help get him there." I paused. "What's the set-up in this home? Do the 'guests' pay?"

"Yes." He sipped at his own drink, his muddy eyes glistening at the thought of what I had offered. "Murphy is on a small government pension, it barely covers his keep."

"Isn't there a clause in his agreement with the home that he

should help support himself?" I put on a blank expression. "I'm not quite sure of what I mean but suppose he were to deliberately turn down a lucrative offer, something like that?"

"He isn't forced to earn money," said Fairclough regretfully. "We accepted him in perpetuity when he deeded his pension over to us."

"Perpetuity is a long time," I reminded.

"Just a gimmick," explained Fairclough. "It means that Murphy signed over to us all his estate on the understanding that we would support him forever or, until he dies." He took another sip of his drink and gave a small chuckle. "Of course, they always die."

"The laugh would be on you if they didn't," I said. "Must be tough on the home what with the rising cost of living and all." I looked at the ceiling. "From the look of it Murphy hasn't much longer to go. With the money I'd pay him it's on the cards that he'd die with quite a sum in the bank. As heirs, you'd inherit that sum. Right?"

"I—"

"Forget it." I rose and gave him a smile. "Just curious, I guess. Anyway, I don't suppose Murphy would want to put his money in a bank at that." I heard footsteps outside and held out my hand. "That must be my assistant. Thanks for your trouble, Paul. Maybe I'll be hearing from you sometime."

I left before he could answer. Starman was waiting for me by the outside door. He shook his head as we headed towards the car.

"Sorry Jake, but we wasted our time. Captain Murphy wants nothing to do with either us or the show." He sighed. "Guess we'd better forget the whole idea."

He looked really guilty about it.

What pressure Fairclough used I couldn't know, but two days later I had Murphy's signed agreement to appear on *Resurrection* on my desk. Sending for Starman I gave quick instructions.

"Get over to the home and take a full team with you. Take a doctor too, a good one, the old man is going to need plenty of shots if he's going to take the scanner. Process him in double-quick time and let me have the break-down as soon as possible." I scribbled a cheque and slipped it into an envelope. "And give this to Fairclough with my compliments."

Starman didn't take the envelope. He just stood by the desk staring down at me. I glared up at him.

"Well?"

"Captain Murphy didn't want to appear on the show, Jake," he said slowly. "He meant what he said."

"So he changed his mind, what of it?"

"Maybe he had it changed for him?"

"Maybe he did," I agreed. "Where's the difference?" I took hold of my patience. "What the devil's wrong with you, Harry? Don't you want your job any longer?"

"You know I do, Jake." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "It's just that—"

"Better call Mary and tell her not to expect you," I interrupted. "And talking of Mary, how's the youngster?"

"Fine, Jake, just fine." He hesitated for a moment longer then seemed to make up his mind about something. He picked up the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. "Guess I'd better get moving."

"Sure, Harry, that's the spirit." I reached for a phone. "I'll call Mary for you, save a little time that way and time is what we haven't enough of. Remember that."

Starman had a good memory. He delivered the break-down sheets in record time and waited, pale and looking harassed while I scanned them.

"Have any trouble?" I flipped the sheaf of papers, looking for usable high spots.

"It was pretty bad," he said. "At one time I didn't think he'd make it, kept fighting the helmet and twisting until we had to strap him down. The Doc wasn't too happy either, said his heart couldn't take too much of a strain."

"Murphy's old." I riffled the sheets again. "We got to him just in time." I concentrated on the pages. "Not much here to work on. A couple of affairs when he was a kid, the usual boy and girl stuff without meat. Had a shine for a married woman at one time but didn't do anything about it. Kept his nose clean all through college aside from using stimulants to pep up his retention." I frowned at the item. "Might use that for a spot. You know the kind of thing; pedlar threatens to apply pressure and hero is faced with disgrace."

"Stimulants are legal," said Starman. "Captain Murphy just felt guilty at taking an unfair advantage over the rest of his class."

"I know that," I snapped. "We can show him as the hero who was seduced into taking the dope and dropped the habit when he realised what he was doing. Maybe we can even drag a woman

into it somewhere." I caught sight of Starman's expression. "You don't like it?"

"No."

"Neither do I." I tossed down the sheets. "It's pure corn and, worse, it's been done too often." I frowned up at the ceiling. "We can use some of this stuff without trouble. His mother trying to make him take a secure job and marry the girl next door. His father, not wanting to see him go but proud that his only son should be chosen. Classmates who envy him. Commander Selcombe who briefed him, the girl he left behind, the usual stuff."

"Captain Murphy is a hero," said Starman quietly. "He did a great thing, the greatest thing which has ever been done in this or any other generation. He was the first man to set foot on alien soil."

"So?"

"So let's remember that, shall we?"

"Sure, I'm not forgetting." I snatched up the break-down again and scanned it while worry mounted within me. Murphy was almost too good to be true. Everyone, or almost everyone has something they are ashamed of buried in their past. Or they have some high spot of emotion which can be used to give drama and emphasis. Most have some minor crime, hidden away in the subconscious, which can be dragged out to the discomfort of the subject and the delight of the audience. But not Murphy.

The guy had only done one thing of note in his whole life. He had been to the moon and had returned in one piece. Fifty years ago that was probably something wonderful but not now. Not when anyone who could scrape up the fare could do the same thing and when ships were regularly travelling between the inner planets. As a hero Murphy was strictly out of date.

And I had promised J. P. that the show would have the kick of a mule and the impact of an H-bomb.

"This Emshaw." I tapped one of the sheets with a fingernail. "What emotional response was there when the scanner hit that period?"

"Plenty." Starman looked bleak at the memory. "You know what happened, of course? Captain Murphy was the first one out of the ship. After he'd returned, Emshaw took his turn outside. He didn't come back. Something happened to him while outside, he slipped or fell into a crevasse, it doesn't really matter now. Captain Murphy had to sit and listen to him die and then he had to bring the ship back alone."

"Couldn't Murphy have rescued him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He explained why on the official deposition he made when they questioned him. Those crevasses are filled with dust and Emshaw simply vanished from sight. Captain Murphy tried, but he couldn't even find the spot where Emshaw had vanished." He looked sharply at me. "Why? What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, just asking." Returning to the sheets, I examined the emotional index of that period. From the index I could tell that plenty of electronic force had been needed to drag the incident from the recesses of memory. It was the highest spot on the entire record, higher even than the pain of his return and the long, agonising hospitalisation which had followed.

And, suddenly, I wasn't worried anymore.

It took some fast talking but I managed to get a week's extension from J. P. before I put my career in the balance. I had a good point to back me up; the anniversary of Murphy's epoch-making flight was obviously the time to put him on the programme and the dates tied in nicely. In the meantime I concentrated on publicity, running some packaged shows and trying to ignore the way my Delmar ratings were hitting the dirt.

Starman came in just as I was finishing a talk with a man I knew was connected with a syndicated column on the dailies. He looked irritable and on edge.

"What's going on, Jake?" he demanded. "What's all this about?"

"I don't get you." I leaned back and stared at him. "How are the actors making out?"

"Good as far as they go but that isn't what I want to talk about." He threw himself into a chair. "I've been hearing things Jake and I don't like what I hear. Didn't we agree to remember that Captain Murphy is a hero?"

"A hero is only as good as his publicity," I reminded. "You want for me to put on the show for a couple of million viewers?"

"I don't want you to turn the Captain into a clown."

"That isn't my intention." I stared at Starman and for the first time recognised the symptoms. He had a bad case of hero-worship and in this business a thing like that can be fatal. Not that I could understand it for one moment; anyone less likely to arouse respect or any other kindred emotion than the broken-down old has-

been I had seen in the old folks home would be hard to imagine. But things were too critical for Starman to get any stupid ideas into his head at this stage.

"Look, Harry," I said seriously, "why not stop for a minute and get the overall picture? Captain Murphy's a hero, that we all agree, and what we're doing is the finest thing that could happen to him. But to make it effective we've got to have a big audience. We want every man and boy and woman too looking at the show when we put him on the hot seat. And why? Because we want what Murphy stands for to be brought home to them with all the impact of a bomb."

"Do we?" He looked doubtful. I pressed home my point.

"Murphy did one notable thing in his life and, in doing it, he ruined what was left of his existence. That's a big thing, Harry, a great thing. Are you asking me to be ashamed of it?"

"Of course not!"

"Then where's your objection to what I'm doing? Sure I'm making plenty of publicity for the show but only for one reason. Only because I want everyone possible to tune in on *Resurrection* so that they, as well as Murphy himself, can experience the thrill and excitement of being the first man to reach the moon."

I didn't mention the real reason for all the advance publicity. If Starman wanted to believe that it was all for Murphy's own good then that was up to him. I changed the subject before he could probe more deeply.

"We run the show to-morrow. You sure that the actors are well briefed?"

"I know my job," he said, and he did too, I knew that. "Father, mother, sweetheart, schoolteacher, all briefed, word perfect and ready to look just as they did fifty and more years ago." He looked doubtful. "I've got the post-landing doctor and a couple of others lined up but what about after that?"

"Nothing about it." I explained before he could protest. "The return was his high point and even that was an anti-climax. Not one is interested in his ten years in hospitals and his twenty-dozen operations. Neither are they interested in his drifting from dump to dump until he signed on at Resthaven. People want glamour not a social lecture."

"It might shake them to learn the truth," said Starman. "Might do them good too."

"We'll do a brief follow-up," I said in order to end the discussion. "Now you'd better get back to rehearsals, we want things

to run as smooth as silk when we go on the air." I clapped him on the shoulder as I led him towards the door. "Get on the job, Harry, and leave the worrying to me."

"Sure, Jake," he said, then hesitated. "Mary sent her regards and wants to know when you're going to eat with us?"

"Just as soon as I can make it," I promised. "I'm just as eager to taste Mary's cooking as I am to see that youngster of yours."

We parted the best of friends.

The doctor's name was Blake and he shook his head at my question.

"I don't know, Mr. Thompson, it's hard to say. He's an old man and in bad health. Personally, I'd warn against it."

"You treated him when he went under the scanner," I reminded. "From what I hear that was bad too."

"It was almost too much," admitted the medic. He chewed thoughtfully at his lower lip. "There's a limit to what shots can do, you know."

"But you can't say that he won't be able to stand the hot seat," I said. "For all you know the excitement might be good for him." I caught his expression and tried to make myself clear. "I mean that it might give him a new lease of life, something to drag him out of the rut. Am I talking sense?"

"There have been cases where excitement has proved beneficial," Blake admitted. "But that presupposes that the heart was able to stand the sudden influx of stimulating glandular excretions. In this case I—"

"I appreciate your professional caution," I interrupted. "Naturally, I don't want to do anything harmful to the old man. That is why I asked your opinion and I'm pleased to hear that you are willing to co-operate." I stared directly into his eyes. "Perhaps a sedative?"

"I'll do what I can," said Blake. He rose and stared down at me. "After all, I am not the only doctor in the world."

He needn't have said it, but it was nothing but the truth. And doctors, like any other men, have to hold a job in order to eat. After he'd gone I pressed the intercom and sent for the actor who was taking the part of Emshaw. He was human too.

There is always a sense of tension just before a show goes on the air and this time it was more pronounced than ever. After my interview with the actor I went down to the floor and made a last-minute check of things. Starman, as usual, was fussing around like a harassed hen, checking lights, cameras, actors, props and any-

thing and everything which he thought concerned him. I always wondered how he got away with it. The only time I had tried to do as he did, I had the Unions down on my neck faster than I liked to remember.

Starman saw me finally and joined me at the edge of the floor. As yet, the audience hadn't been admitted but I could hear them just beyond the door making that low, rustling, sea-sound which too many people herded into too small a space always seem to make. It was a full audience but that meant nothing; you can always find people to attend a free show.

"How's Murphy bearing up?" I glanced at my watch and ran a finger around my collar. "I sent Blake down to check him over."

"I saw him," admitted Starman. He looked doubtful, then shrugged. "I guess he'll be all right. Fairclough's with him."

"He would be." I glanced at my watch again. "We'd better clear out from here, the doors will be opening in a minute."

From a vantage point I watched the crowd stream into the auditorium. Each clutched a small bag, a gift from the sponsors, and each held a printed handout briefing them on the programme. First would come fifteen minutes of popular music, the commercials and then, when they had settled down, the big show.

I felt a touch of pride as I watched them. Even though the concept of the show wasn't new yet I could anticipate just what those people would sense and feel as time drew on.

"Sadists," said Starman abruptly. "That's why they come here. They want to see someone squirm on the hot seat and the more they squirm the better they'll like it."

"You think so?"

"I know so." Starman sounded disgusted. "Those people out there aren't interested in a hero. All they want to see is someone who has suffered and who they hope is going to suffer again. They aren't interested in Captain Murphy for what he is and for what he did. All they want to see is an old man being put through the mill."

The lights dimmed, order grew from chaos and music throbbed in the air. Silently an orchestra came into view on a raised platform and a colour organ began to blend shafts and washes of light in tune to the music. Against the background of light and sound the voice of the announcer dripped like clear, warm honey on to a plate of whipped cream.

I wasn't interested in the announcements nor in the commercials which followed. I wasn't interested in the colour and sound or the rapt faces of the audience. These things were merely the prelude to

the real moment. The moment when my show, *Resurrection*, came on the air.

I was proud of the opening. Everything went dark, suddenly, without warning and then, with an almost physical violence, a brilliant shaft of silver slashed the air and the clear note of a trumpet soaring high and sweet stunned the ear. Gabriel's Horn, modern version, and now the dead would rise in make-believe life from the memories of the past.

I was proud too of the preliminaries. The mounting crescendo matched to a blur of vivid colour. The rising voice of the M.C. touching the edge of hysteria before stopping, breaking with shocking abruptness and, in the following silence, like a flung thunderbolt of radiance, a shaft of light stabbed across the auditorium and centred on the solitary figure in the hot seat.

He had improved since I had seen him last. They had washed him and done something to his hair so that he looked cleaner and younger than he had. Make-up artists had worked on his face, smoothing out some of the graven creases, firming his pendulous lips, touching out the pouches beneath his eyes. He still didn't look like a hero but at least he looked like a man. More than that I could not expect.

"Poor devil!" whispered Starman beside me. "I bet he doesn't even know what's happening to him."

He learned soon enough. The M.C., a master of suggestive hypnotism, spun his verbal web and, at his direction, ghosts rose from their graves and walked again as they had more than half a century ago. Murphy's father, looking as he had when the Captain had been a boy, speaking in the same tone, using the same words. His mother, now less than dust but, on the stage, appearing as a fragment of the reclaimed past. They spoke to Murphy and he would have been less than human had he not been moved.

And across the packed auditorium ran a soft, sucking sound as of indrawn breath, a suggestive rustle as bodies hunched and eyes strained so as not to miss a single thing.

Strange what the sight of an old man's tears can do.

Other actors came on to the stage at the M.C.'s direction. A young girl, tearful as she told the old man that marriage was impossible. An older woman, wife of his friend, who smiled as she broke his heart. A college acquaintance who was gruffly envious. A professor who was acidly hostile. Commander Selcombe, old then, old



now, interviewing the young hopeful for the flight of the age. Twenty years of life compressed to as many minutes.

But not to Murphy. A man cannot deny his own mind and what he was seeing and hearing was the echo of his own brain. Emotional high spots, some of them buried deep and others he had thought forgotten, all now fresh and living and talking to him with the old, familiar voices in the old, familiar terms. Murphy couldn't see the audience. He couldn't see the M.C. He couldn't see anything but the figures which appeared before him to talk and smile and frown and laugh as they had done in the past. He couldn't hear the background music which was geared to his own heart beat in gradually accelerating tempo. For Murphy the outside world had ceased to exist and he was living his life over again as he remembered it.

Naturally he entered into it. Naturally he talked to those who spoke to him, felt again the regrets he had had, then experienced the fears, the hopes and dreams which had been his alone, but which now belonged to the world.

"Total acceptance," breathed Starman at my side. "Incredible!" Starman was wrong, it wasn't incredible. Murphy had few

strong memories and the few he had he'd nursed for decades. They were all he had and he had gone over them again and again while sitting in his chair at the home, unwanted, unwanting, a flesh and blood vegetable waiting for his life to end its course. Now, for the first time, he was really living again.

And the audience knew it. Strange how a crowd can sense what is to come, guess at drama and physical pain when there is no apparent reason for anticipation. Again came that soft, sucking of indrawn breath, that tiny rustle as bodies moved in restless eagerness.

Emshaw walked onto the stage.

Emshaw, tall, pale, dressed in the uniform he had worn during the last days of his life. Emshaw, the man who had gone with Murphy to the moon but who had not returned.

"Hello, John," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Frank!" There was pain in the cry, pain and something else. Murphy cowered in his seat and the sweat shone on his head and face.

"Did you enjoy your fame, John?" The actor who looked like Emshaw stepped closer to the hot seat. "Was it worth what you did to get it?"

"No!" Murphy tore at his collar. "Don't talk like that, Frank. I did my best, you know I did."

"You left me up there, John," said Emshaw gently. "You left me up there while you came back to collect the fame. Are you proud of what you did?"

Pain numbed my arm and Starman's voice rasped in my ear.

"He's not keeping to the script!" he accused. "That wasn't in the script at all."

"Forget it." I dragged his fingers away from where they had dug into my arm.

"He wouldn't do that on his own," said Starman. He made a choking sound. "He had orders to do this."

"Forget it," I snapped again. "You're making me miss the show."

"You—"

What Starman was going to say I never found out. Something happened just then which dissolved our quarrel as though it had never existed. Emshaw was still talking, saying the carefully prepared words I had taught him, the selected ambiguous words which could mean nothing but which could also be taken to mean a lot. Their effect was greater than I had dared to hope. What deeply buried sense of guilt Murphy carried with him I could only guess, but the

scanners had revealed it and I had decided to use it. And I had hit the jackpot.

had revealed it and I had decided to use it. And I had hit the jackpot.

"I didn't mean to do it," screamed Murphy suddenly. "I couldn't help it, I tell you. I had to leave you up there." He sagged, his face turning a peculiar mottled blue and grey. "And I've paid for it," he whimpered. "God! How I've paid for it!"

And then, in full view of the audience and, I hoped, of fifty million viewers, he collapsed and died.

There was trouble, of course, but nothing that I couldn't handle. Everyone had known the old man was in bad health and I owed it to the show to have a schedule ready for emergencies. I had an uneasy few words with J.P. but even he had to admit that I had lived up to the full letter of my promise. And the Delmar ratings had been high, higher than at any time before. Already we were getting flooded with requests for a repeat show—it isn't every day that viewers had the opportunity to see a man die before their very eyes.

In fact, Starman was the only unpleasant note in the whole affair.

"You murdered him," he accused. "You killed him just as surely as if you'd taken a gun and blown his head off."

What can you say to a thing like that? Slowly I put down the copy I had been studying and stared at Harry. He looked as if he hadn't slept for a week and his eyes had that peculiar strained expression people get when they are half-insane from frustration.

"Take it easy, Harry," I said gently. "He was an old man and he had to go some time. His heart just gave out, that was all, it was a risk we all had to take."

"All right, so he was an old man with a bad heart and the excitement killed him," Starman breathed like a man who has been running. "But did you have to ruin his reputation? Did you have to do that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do," snapped Starman. "You altered the script and made out that Captain Murphy had deliberately left Emshaw on the moon so that he could claim full credit of being the first. Hell, the papers are full of it. And it isn't true, you know it isn't."

"I don't know any such thing. You've seen the emotional index of the scanner and you know how high it is. Something happened up there, what, only Murphy really knew and now no one will ever be sure. Maybe things did happen the way he said, or maybe they didn't. Anyway, what does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" Starman repeated the question as if he couldn't believe his ears. "A man does the greatest thing ever known and you ask that? Captain Murphy ruined his life in pushing back the frontiers of space and that's all it means to you? Are you serious?"

"I'm not joking, if that's what you mean." I shook my head at his expression. "I don't understand you, Harry. What's the point in getting all upset over something that happened before you were born? It doesn't make sense."

"You—" Harry took a step forward, his hands clenched at his sides, and for a moment I thought that he was going to hit me. Then he changed his mind.

"What's the good of talking," he said bitterly. "You could never understand. To you, nothing is more important than that lousy show of yours and you don't care what you do or who you crucify as long as your ratings are high. To hell with you and with the show both. I'm quitting!"

I blinked as he slammed the door. I'd always thought of Harry as being a strong, dependable type but he'd just shown me how wrong a man can be. To quit his job, and him with a wife and baby, over nothing at all just didn't make sense.

Some people have no sense of proportion.

E. C. TUBB

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*Administration, Galactic H.Q.
Sector 21A/32.6/182.
08.00. 19/19/01.*

Priority. Operation Priceless. All systems within 1000 light years radius. Vessels over 1200 tons with Sco-Engle drive rendezvous Altair II no later than 16.00 G.M.T. Carry spare generator. Priority Red.

*Administration, Galactic H.Q.
Sector 21A/32.6/182.
08.04. 19/19/01.*

Admiral Spencer, Epsilon III. Assume command Operation Priceless. Rendezvous Altair II at once. Plan of operation to be given you on arrival. Departure for objective 18.00. 4/20/01.

Wanderer, flagship of the Imperial Galactic Patrol spun out of hyperdrive near the second planet of Altair, hung there a moment poised like a huge silver fish then, engaging planetary drive, moved in to where many of the fleet had already gathered.

Jockeying carefully, *Wanderer* eased herself to somewhere near the centre of the horde of shining ships that were increasing in number every second. Even as the Admiral, square chin in a broad hand, gazed from a port reflectively, he could see the many sudden sparks of light as, far out, other ships cut their drive and blossomed into normal space.

His gaze was temporarily interrupted as a small interplanetary vessel, presumably from Altair II and with the insignia of Galactic H.Q. prominent on the side, eased in close and finally locked on the *Wanderer*.

The hollow ring had barely died out of the hull when the message was brought smartly to him by a young captain. After exchanging salutes it was hardly necessary for the youthful officer to say: "Your plan of operation from H.Q. sir," for that was obvious by the seal on the missive and the insignia again blazoned on the right breast of the captain's trim uniform. Saluting again, the messenger turned sharply and left, his quick footsteps drawing sharp, almost musical sounds from the hollow floor.

The Admiral permitted a ghost of a smile to play briefly across his normally stern features.

Captain Sparrow of the *Wanderer* watched intently from a discreet distance as Admiral Spencer ripped upon and scanned the smaller of the two sheets he took out of the package. The Captain, from his not too advantageous position could just make out that the largest part of the communication appeared to be covered with mathematical symbols and was presumably the finer details of the project.

The Admiral, barely stifling a quickly indrawn breath and numbly immobile, couldn't believe it. It was incredible. For the first time in his long career he felt clouds of utter bewilderment swirl around his stunned mind. This—this was fantastic, he thought. Surely, even with all the ships he would have, and they were estimated to total around a quarter of a million, it would be impossible. He slowly read the message again. Yes, he'd read aright and the scientists said it could be done. They were the finest technicians and theorists in the history of man and they should know.

Admiral Spencer now, as never before, began to feel the undeniable weight of his new responsibility. He'd accepted and won through on many tasks in the name of the Patrol, some pleasant, some unpleasant, others more than dangerous, but always with confidence. This time he wasn't so sure. The risks were great, the responsibility

already a constant drag on his every thought, but the prize was high. The highest man had ever attempted.

The Admiral's thoughts spiralled on and he inwardly braced himself. After all, perhaps it *was* possible. The human race had come a long way since that momentous day a thousand years ago, and was ever gaining in stature. All Patrol training schools in the galaxy had at least one full length tape on the origination of the Sco-Engle drive. That such a tiny start should lead to all this!

The Admiral recalled the tape clearly enough, although it was sixty years since he had last seen it and felt its magic.

A two man experimental spaceship, in the distantly past year of 2105, and only fifty years after the first interplanetary vessel of all, had taken off from the Lunar base and headed a few thousand miles out into space. Scott and Englefield, the designers of a new and very experimental generator and ship encompassing grid, had insisted on testing their design themselves in case of disaster.

No such disaster had occurred, however, when one of them, it was not recorded who, had briefly stabbed the activating button for a fraction of a second.

Neither passage of time nor movement had been felt. Everything in the small ship had gone dark and there was an undignified panic until the two adventurers realised the reason.

The sun was no longer there. They had left it millions of miles behind and were now far out into interstellar space. They were wildly jubilant till the thought occurred that perhaps they were too far away and lost.

Another panic almost ensued, but a quick check on the spectro-scope soon revealed that the brightest star visible was indeed Sol. They had no immediate means of computing distance nor could they calculate how long to press the control even if distance was known! They re-oriented the ship, using rocket power, aligned it in the direction of the sun and after crossing their fingers, tried jabbing the button briefly once again.

It was one chance in a million, but they were lucky.

Their ship emerged from the first journey into hyperspace near enough to the inner planets for them to locate themselves, and two wildly happy but nevertheless sober scientists realised they had gone something over a hundred thousand million miles out past Pluto's orbit in two instants! In two instants, not counting the time taken to re-orient the ship after the first jump, they'd covered more than all the ships of the inner planets had travelled in fifty years.

The Scott-Englefield drive gave man the stars.

Refinements had gone on down through the centuries and now some of the fruits were about to be garnered. The greatest venture that had ever been contemplated was about to begin.

An eye searing flash interrupted the Admiral's reminiscence—a flash with a brilliance that precluded an ordinary emergence from hyperspace. The control room was thrown into sharp relief for a minute fraction of time.

Eyes temporarily blinded and still closed tightly, the Admiral rapped, "Captain Sparrow, find out what that was."

His sight had barely returned again when the Captain reported.

"Sir, two ships attempted to emerge from hyperdrive and occupy the same space simultaneously. They were vaporised!"

"I'm sorry Captain, it was a chance in millions but I suppose it was too much to expect that everything would go without a hitch. Find out their ports of origin and convey my regrets."

"Yes Sir, I'll see that's done," Captain Sparrow turned and strode to the sub-radio operator. He came slowly back and stood near the quietly humming control panel.

"Captain!" The Admiral had turned towards the control desk. "Have all ships synchronise their chronometers with the *Wanderer* and phase in their Sco-Engle generators. It won't be long now till zero hour!"

"I'll see to that right away Sir; is there any special reason for it?"

"Yes Captain, there is. The whole fleet goes into hyperspace together!"

Captain Sparrow's eyes widened. "Together Sir, but that's fantastic, what for?"

The Admiral smiled briefly. "Well Captain, the urgency of the situation dictates it and, you know, it's perfectly feasible."

"I know, but the energy released, it'll be phenomenal! One ship even an instant slow in going will become just so much metallic dust!"

"Yes Captain, that is so, that's why I want every chronometer synchronised with ours to the micro-second. We then operate the master switch for the whole fleet!"

A gleam came into the Admiral's eyes as he felt himself getting to grips with the problem. He'd got his second wind. "Right Captain, come over here and I'll explain as much of the project as I can

at this stage and we can start organising. We've not long now and plenty to do!

Outside the *Wanderer* the vast fleet hung poised within twenty light minutes of Altair, the numberless ships limned by reflection against the black of space like a shoal of silver minnows in a dark pool.

On a quarter of a million ships men prepared, some calmly, some with awe, others with a feeling of impending adventure, adventure on a scale they could scarcely comprehend. Busy as they were, each member of those crews made a point of spending at least a few seconds at a port gazing at the unforgettable sight. They could tell their children of this moment and perhaps embroider a little on the history tapes.

Aboard the *Wanderer*, Captain Sparrow turned towards the Admiral, his voice unemotional. "Fifteen seconds Sir, are you ready?"

"Yes Captain, God speed the men and may our mission be successful."

Breathless tri-di viewers on Altair II who had been watching the gathering fleet, saw it suddenly wink out and felt a sense of wonder. It had gone across the mighty emptiness.

To the men aboard the vessels brief nausea left them and they checked on their positions. They remained relatively the same; the first part of the mission was accomplished. All the ships had arrived simultaneously. Admiration for the highly accurate work done by *Wanderer* was acclaimed by all for they were no more than eight light hours out from their destination, a planet of a particularly bright G type sun which they could now see as a very bright star.

At full planetary drive the fleet sped in the direction of the not yet visible planet. As they came to life, intercommunication systems hissed and crackled with more than usual intensity with the radio emissions from the nearby star. "This is Admiral Spencer; we've arrived men, and right on schedule!" His voice held a note of pride. "Now, follow the plan which you have studied on your main screens and englobe the planet we're concerned with; urgency is the keyword and every hour, perhaps even every second will count." The Admiral paused, "Good luck."

He spoke to Captain Sparrow. "Captain, you know the rest, move in now and take our orbit. Two hundred miles, no more, no less. The Sco-Engle drives must mesh correctly. One vessel out of place and space knows what would happen."

The operation proceeded, the planet appeared, grew larger, filled

the screens. It looked a beautiful world. A jewel. The shining ships swung into orbit.

"Computer reports all ships have integrated Sir." Sparrow looked tired as he saluted the Admiral.

"Very good Captain, please carry on, zero when you think fit." Many anxious millions listened to the countdown.

Supreme Commander, Galactic H.Q.

Sector 21A/32.6/182.

08.00. 7/20/01.

Admiral Spencer. Galactic Patrol.

Altair II.

Subject:— Operation Priceless.

Congratulations! The Galaxy is in your debt. Your name will live in human memory forever. Transfer of Planet Earth to Capella system successful and orbit stable. Population unaffected. The home of the race has been preserved by you and your fleet's magnificent efforts. Latest observation of Nova shows Sol has expanded and consumed inner planets to near Martian orbit.

Tri-di tape of complete operation being forwarded to you for your personal library.

WILLIAM AITKEN

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Bighead

To some people the acquisition of knowledge is an end in itself, Bighead had a private angle, however

Albert Croad and I went to school together.

Even in these days we called him Bighead. But his head was not really big. It bulged above his eyebrows so that when people saw him for the first time they thought he'd got himself bruised there. And he had a way of swaying his head from side to side when he walked, which gave the impression that it was abnormally heavy.

But he knew his onions all right.

Although he didn't shine at school and couldn't be bothered with bookwork, in the fields he was uncannily clever. He could point to a hedgerow half a mile away and tell you where a blackbird had its nest. He could tell you where a hare was hiding in a meadow, or where a trout was lurking in a shadowy stream. And when you asked him how he knew, he'd say: "I can snoag it, it's delliggy."

He never went short of a dinner.

Furthermore he knew immediately if a thing were harmful or not. As kids we would bring him various berries and funguses. And he would inform us which were poisonous and which wholesome. He had his own words for this too. A good thing would be described as "benty", and a harmful thing would be described as "glid".

In the village we accepted these things as normal and put it

down to gipsy blood. Fat Nelly Drake had gipsy blood too, and she could charm warts away and tell fortunes. And her brother Andy could detect underground water with a hazel twig. We just didn't think anything of it.

So when I got a visit from a man who introduced himself as Dr. John Leith I was surprised to learn that he'd come down from London specially to have a look at Bighead. Apparently he'd read the report made by the doctor who failed Bighead for his army medical and he'd come down for some further checking.

He approached me because at that time I was sharing a disused army hut with Albert Croad and Albert was away in the fields catching something for dinner. He spent most of his time outside and I had the place to myself all day for writing and swotting.

Soon after the doctor had left, Albert came in with a brace of partridges, and when I told him about our visitor, he agreed to go and see him in his rooms at the "Red Lion" provided I went along too.

So, the following afternoon, we tidied ourselves up a bit and went round there. Dr. Leith welcomed us heartily.

Albert didn't open his mouth much in front of strangers, so I did most of the talking.

"Have you been sent here by the army?" I asked when we were up in the doctor's room. The doctor seemed shocked by my question. He was a short, stocky man with white hair and a dark complexion, and this, together with his thick spectacles, made him look like an Eastern savant.

"No, no, no! I am making a private enquiry."

"Into what, Doctor?"

"Into human abnormality," he said after a quick, worried glance towards Albert, who was swaying his head from side to side and gazing through the window down into the village square.

"Are you trying to make out that my friend is crazy?" I asked impulsively.

"Crazy? Goodness me, no! From his report I recognised certain characteristics which lead me to believe that he is of a particularly rare type. And I would like to make a few tests with him. You see, human beings are of such a diversity of type that sometimes one wonders if the human race is a single species of animal at all, or several related species."

"I'm not a scientist," I said, "but I've done a little biology, among other things, and I've always been under the impression that

a species is any group of organisms capable of breeding together and of reproducing fertile offspring."

"But *can* any fertile human male and female breed together?" the doctor demanded. "The number of involuntary childless couples, and the widespread practice of A.I.D. would suggest otherwise." And receiving no answer to this he went on. "Nature is constantly experimenting; constantly throwing up new varieties. And I've got reason to believe that our friend here is radically divergent from what we assume to be the normal type of individual."

Smiling encouragingly, the doctor turned to face Albert. "Mr. Croad, I understand you are able to detect the whereabouts of an animal before it can be seen or heard."

Bighead nodded uncertainly. And the doctor, after gazing into his face for a few seconds went over to a table which touched the far wall of the room. "Will you go over and stand by the door, please, Mr. Croad?"

Albert, his head swaying slowly, did as the doctor asked.

"Turn round, please!"

When Albert was facing the table again the doctor reached below it and carefully lifted up five cardboard boxes which he placed in a row at the back of the table. The boxes were numbered from one to five.

The doctor came round to the front of the table and pointed to the boxes with the air of a scholarly conjuror about to perform a rather complicated trick.

"Now one of these boxes contains a living animal. Can you tell me which one it is?"

"Number two," Albert said without hesitation.

Dr. Leith beamed heartily. "How did you know, Mr. Croad?"

Albert coloured. His gipsy eyes glanced quickly round the room as if looking for the easiest way of escape.

"I can snoag it," he said.

"What do you mean by that?"

Albert looked hot and uncomfortable in his best navy blue suit. "Well," he said after shyly scratching his right ear. "It's sort of delliggy. The box is delliggy. You can tell."

"How can you tell?" Dr. Leith asked, approaching Albert with his head held enquiringly on one side.

Speechlessly Albert shuffled his feet about. He took his gaze from the doctor and looked down at his own heavy boots. The doctor turned to me. "Do you know what Mr. Croad means?"

I knew what Albert meant but I didn't know how to put it

into words that the doctor would understand. Living close to Albert had given me the notion that it wasn't really remarkable to snog a thing, and perhaps with a little effort I would be able to do it myself. "It's a gift," I said rather lamely. "Like water-divining or charming warts away. Albert's got gipsy blood in him."

I was talking like an ignorant yokel and I knew it. But how else could you explain these things? The doctor was a scientist looking for new varieties of the human species. Well, surely the gipsy-race was a distinct variety passing on its own hereditary strains and living in an environment far different from that of townsmen.

For the moment the doctor seemed to be satisfied. He went to the table again and came back with an assortment of articles on a tray. "Thank you very much, Mr. Croad," he said. "Now I'd like you to co-operate with me in a further experiment. You see, it is possible that your remarkable gift is the result of an unusually developed sense-organ. So what I'm going to ask you to do now is to allow me to blindfold you and put plugs into your ears and to cover your nose and mouth with a gauze face-mask impregnated with chlorophyll."

Albert frowned and examined the articles on the doctor's tray. "All right by me, Doctor. Those things are all benty."

"You won't be able to poison him, doc," I said. "He knows instinctively if a thing's harmful or not, or if it's doped. It's part of his gift."

"Remarkable!"

The doctor beamed as he pushed the plugs into Albert's ears, tied the mask over his nose and mouth and eventually blindfolded him with cotton-wool and a thick bandage. He settled Albert with his back to the wall, and then, rubbing his hands, the doctor returned to the table and shifted the boxes into various niches at the other end of the room. Then he returned to Albert and shouted in his ear: "Now, Mr. Croad, I would like you to point to the box with the animal in it."

Box number two was placed on a stool in a corner to Albert's left, and he pointed to it immediately.

Dr. Leith was a methodical worker and most of the afternoon was spent in further experiments. He learned that Albert could tell when one thing was more delliggy than another: a box with a cat in it was more delliggy than one with a mouse in it. And a box with a healthy rabbit in it was more delliggy than one containing a rabbit suffering from myxomatosis.

After these experiments, he subjected Bighead to a medical

examination, shining a torch into his ears and nostrils and carefully examining his head, especially the bulge above his eyebrows.

We stayed to tea with the doctor, and during the meal he told us something of his plans.

"I'm preparing a paper on extra-sensory perception," he said glancing in turn to Albert and me. I watched Albert's big hands as he tried to put sugar-lumps into his tea with a pair of tongs. "And later on I would like to repeat the experiments we did this afternoon, in front of some friends of mine," the doctor went on. "So perhaps I can persuade the pair of you to come up to London for a week as my guests."

And so a few weeks later we arrived in London. Dr. Leith met us with his Bentley at Waterloo and drove us to his home in Kensington. We arrived there on a Saturday and Albert promised to go through his tests again on the following Friday. In the meantime we could come and go as we pleased.

I'd been to London several times before. But it was the first time that Albert had been more than twenty miles from our village. And after the first few days a remarkable change came over him. He seemed to become civilised almost overnight. Discarding his heavy boots he bought himself a pair of swede shoes, and he borrowed the money from me to provide himself with a light grey suit similar to the type lots of Londoners were wearing. And, stranger still, he dropped the habit of swaying his head when he walked.

During our week in London we were determined to see the sights. We visited the National Gallery, the British Museum, Regent's Park Zoo, The Windmill Theatre and the Greyhound Stadium at White City. And here Albert had enough luck with the dogs to repay me the money he had borrowed to buy his suit.

We visited Hampstead Heath, the Tower of London, and the Botanical Gardens at Kew. The Friday came round all too quickly. And in the morning when we were getting ready to begin the experiments, I could see Albert was nervous.

The newness and the constant variety of London had served to interest him for a while, but now he looked what he was, a scared country lad surrounded by strangers.

For some reason best known to himself he put on his old navy blue suit to go for the tests, and as we went along the corridor to Dr. Leith's surgery I saw he had fallen back into his old habit of swaying his head as he walked.

Of course there was nothing to be scared of in Dr. Leith's sur-

gery. The five friends he had invited were all mild mannered old boys of the professional class, and the atmosphere was friendly, even jovial. One or two of Dr. Leith's friends were obviously sceptical of Albert's extra-sensory powers and they regarded the whole thing as a possible leg-pull.

But the doctor took it very seriously. Before beginning his demonstration he spoke to his audience about Albert's remarkable gift. He called it extra-sensory cognition of the Life Force. It was, he said, a marvellous potentiality for survival of the individual and the race, and he went on to enumerate the uses to which it could be put in the cure of illnesses, the breeding of livestock, the selection of seeds, the preparation of food.

He went on to talk about the senses, saying that Nature was always trying out new ideas and that there was no reason why there should be just five senses. He spoke of exceptions: Fish in underground cave pools and certain moles had no sight. Dogs had long been thought to possess a sixth, telepathic, sense. Homing-pigeons and certain migratory birds had senses that enabled them to find their way over remarkable distances. Iraqui tribesmen of the Tigris marshes could distinguish between seemingly identical canoes on the skyline.

Albert, during the long speech, squirmed and sweated in his blue suit and I began to feel sorry for him. He was accustomed to freedom and solitude and I visualised many more ordeals like the present one. Experiments, interviews, examinations. It would be enough to send him crazy.

"Now for the demonstration!" Dr. Leith said breezily.

The far end of his surgery had been screened-off from the rest of the room. And now, with the assistance of his pretty blonde secretary, he removed the screen to disclose a large bookcase. The books had been removed from the case, and on each shelf now stood a wooden box. The boxes, six in all, had been placed in a diagonal line reaching from the top right hand corner to the bottom left hand corner. And each box had a number on it.

"I propose to do three tests," Dr. Leith said to the company. "The first test will simply be to ask Mr. Croad which of the boxes contains a living animal. After this test I will replace the screen, move the animal to another box and ask Mr. Croad to repeat the test blindfolded and with his ears plugged and his nose covered with a mask impregnated with chlorophyll. And then the final experiment will be to test Mr. Croad's ability to grade various degrees of the Life Force. For this test I shall use three boxes. One box will

contain a drugged guineapig. The second will contain a normal guineapig. And the third a healthy male cat. And I will ask our friend, while blindfolded, to point to each box in turn and tell me its contents."

A murmur of approval greeted Dr. Leith's words. Everyone seemed quite happy except Albert, who had gone as red as a tomato and was shuffling his feet and swaying his head in anguished embarrassment.

Here in a London surgery he was like a jungle animal in a hygienic cage.

He ignominiously failed to use his gift in that atmosphere, in front of the urbane watchers, and I was not surprised.

He gaped at the boxes, shaking his head. Dr. Leith nodded encouragement. "Come on, Albert! Try to snoag! Which box is delliggy?"

"All of 'em are," Albert said. And there was a subdued titter from the little group of watchers.

Dr. Leith was patient.

"No, Albert. Only one box has an animal in it. And I'd like you to tell me which one it is. Go up and point to it if you like."

"Is it number four?" Albert asked doubtfully. Dr. Leith shook his head.

Albert and I left the surgery gloomily. Dr. Leith was obviously disappointed. But when he came round to see us just before we left for the railway station he showed us no ill will.

"Well, Albert," he said. "Apparently your gift is a country flower which fades in our stuffy London atmosphere."

Albert tried to say something but didn't succeed. The doctor drove us to Waterloo and shook hands with us out in the street.

"Well I hope you've enjoyed your holiday in London," he said. "You've given several of us some new ideas to work on, so our time has not been entirely wasted. If there is a recurrence of your powers, please contact me immediately." He gave us a fiver each and we waved to him as he drove away. When he had gone I turned to walk into the station but Albert did not move.

"Come on! What are you waiting for?"

He was fingering the money Dr. Leith had given him.

"I'm going back to the Greyhound Stadium to put this on a dog."

"Don't be wet," I said. "That's throwing away good money."

"I won last time."

"That was a fluke: beginner's luck."

But Albert shook his strangely-shaped head. "I can't lose at dog racing," he said confidently. "All I have to do is to pick out the greyhound who's the most delliggy."

I looked at him in amazement and saw on his face a cunning look I had never seen there before. "But I thought you couldn't snoag anything in London?"

His look became derisive.

"If I let those old geysers see what I can do it'd be in the papers in no time, and I'd be barred from the dog-tracks altogether."

When I got back to the village I told them that Albert had found a job in London.

"Bighead knows his onions," they said. "Always knew he'd better himself some day."

W. T. WEBB



What was

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No Time At All

He had searched the Galaxy for a new home for the people of Earth and returned to find them already departed

Three ships, fifteen men; blasting off into the blue with a song and a prayer and a whole lot of hope. Venus, Mars and the rest of the Solar family Then the stars.

Alpha Centauri

Two ships, ten men, leaving behind an unknown grave on an unknown world at the bottom of a foggy, poisonous atmosphere. Well, at least there was a little bit of Earth on Alpha Centauri IV. A few battered scraps of humanity and some twisted particles of steel. Five decomposing bodies releasing bacteria that were Earth bacteria. Man had made his first mark on an alien world in a very unspectacular manner.

Back on to the interstellar drive that even then was an unknown quantity and out into the void once more

The second ship left the fleet at Procyon. No warning, no message over the radio-link . the last they saw of it, the ship was hurtling in towards the first magnitude star that got its name from the fact that it rose before the Dog Star.

One ship, five men .

Then Betelgeuse, the red sun resting on Orion's shoulder. A sun with a planet that might have been suitable. Planetfall to a race that was not quite Man, not quite Beast. More decom-

posing bodies, this time beneath a clear blue sky that brought back nostalgic memories, and the ignominious retreat of the man who had commanded the proudest fleet in the history of mankind

"I am fifty-five years of age," Commodore Hadran reminded himself sadly, "and have been away from home for more than thirty years ."

Thirty years! How much change, he asked himself, can occur in all that time? Thirty years at speeds that took all the meaning out of time; when sun followed sun out of hyperspace with such monotonous regularity that his head spun. No time at all when looked at from the proper point of view, he had been told. But from his viewpoint an appreciable slice out of a man's life.

Now his wanderings were over and he was almost back home. That little yellow dot in the crosshairs of his co-ordination screen was Sol his Sun! In a matter of days he would be making planetfall for the last time. A few days! No time at all. And it had all been in vain. Fourteen good men were dead and another had lost thirty irredeemable years from his life. Had it been worth it? The commodore thought not.

Now the greatest task of all lay just ahead of him. He had to tell the people who were waiting that he had failed.

With Hadran's practised fingers on the controls, the ship flashed past Pluto in a wide arc and hurtled inward. Jupiter loomed up ahead and then swung behind him as he depressed the lever that started the deceleration process. The other children of Sol were about somewhere but he had eyes only for one—the fairest of them all.

Earth first appeared as a shining halo a little to the right of the Sun, the Moon a small, paler edition of her. Deceleration was complete by the time he could define the craters of Luna and—the physical fatigue brought upon him by deceleration rapidly falling off—he could approach his home planet at the comparatively trivial speed of twenty-five thousand miles an hour. Then he was manoeuvring for orbit.

The first rocket came into view as Hadran was packing away the microfilms and tapes that were his logbooks and permanent files. He saw it by accident as he glanced out of the foreport and, in his excitement, rushed over to wave, even though his training and common sense told him that they would certainly not be able to see him.

For some hours he had been troubled in mind. After his first look at Earth he had decided to orbit for at least a day. It had changed . . . and the change frightened him. Had the catastrophe predicted by the scientists already befallen the planet? In thirty years? Impossible. The scientists were not often wrong. And they had said a hundred and eighty years.

" . . . the hope of the whole human race goes out with you, Hadran," they had said. *"It may be a long search. Perhaps it will last for twenty years or more. Some of you may die . . . none of you may return. But we, here on Earth, will be waiting."*

"Surely," they had said, *"surely, out there, other planets revolve around other suns. Surely there must be one—at least one—on which Man can live. And surely you, Hadran, can find that one."*

Why should Earth look so different? Even the continents were not the same. The seas . . . where was . . . ?

Hadran had resisted the impulse to fire his braking rockets and spiral earthwards. No. He had to think. There had been no reply to his calls on the radio-link. Maybe there were only dead humans down there. Decomposing bodies like those he had left on Alpha Centauri IV and that other horrid planet!

He had stopped there, appalled. Perhaps this was not his Earth at all! Perhaps he had got his co-ordinates wrong and was orbiting a planet every bit as hostile as the Betelguese one. However, a glance back at Luna had settled his doubts. No other combination of satellite and planet like this could exist. The Moon, at least, had not changed one little bit.

The rocket came closer. So, they were not dead. That rocket had not travelled up there on its own: someone had to send it. They had sent up a welcoming committee. Well, about time.

It was a small craft, something like the old-fashioned research vehicles he remembered, though of an unusual design. Not a crew ship. Too small for that. But why . . . ?

He held his breath as he saw the missile explode in the silence of space. Then there were others, three, four of them. All obviously set off by time fuses. A spatial broadside, though a little off target, fortunately for Hadran.

Target?

Good God!

Hadran did not stop to ask himself any more unanswerable questions. He had to get himself and his ship out of it—and as

quickly as possible. He left what he was doing and ran over to the controls. The overdrive. That was his only chance.

He did not see the rocket which hit his ship and sent it hurtling downward towards his home.

The others were definitely humanoid in appearance but there was a strangeness about them that, to Hadran's mind, was not of Earth. He groaned and put a hand to his head.

"Where am I?" he croaked.

They came running to him at the sound of his voice but, when they spoke, he could not understand them. He grunted, realising that he had not heard human speech for more than twenty years, not since the last of his men died at Betelguese. The thought left him a little lightheaded and breathless.

"What happened?" he asked.

They all spoke at once, gesticulating in a strange manner when they realised that they were not understood. Hadran groaned. They appeared to be men like himself; larger in stature perhaps, but men nonetheless. But strangers . . . aliens.

He closed his eyes and gave himself up to the blackness that was engulfing him once more. He dreamed of a large, brown and green continent viewed from the foreport of his ship: a healthy looking continent with a solid, respectable air about it. There were lots of mountains he could see: mountains and lakes and rivers—more rivers than he could count. One in particular, a big one—the biggest of the lot—appeared to cut the land mass in half. And he was falling, falling, falling into a sea of fear.

Then came the darkness again . . . and peace.

When he awoke again he found himself gasping for breath in another sea—a sea of pain. They were still there, waiting. There were five of them. Big men, all of them, dressed in outlandish clothes; one of them in a cloak of many colours that was dazzling to the eyes. They were gentle with Hadran, surprisingly gentle, especially the old-looking one in the long, white coat who fed the commodore by hand and now and then pricked his arm with a needle that brought blessed relief from the pain.

He was lying in bed in a little white room. From time to time he could hear sounds he had almost forgotten. The chirping of the birds: the whisper of a night wind: the soft patter of rain. He was home again.

But what had happened to his home? It was a different world; a strange world that had altered as much as he had himself. He was

a different man, he knew that. A complete stranger to the hopeful young fellow who had blasted off from Earth in search of a new home for a Mankind which was doomed to die.

"How," he asked himself, with a sigh, "how am I going to tell them that we have failed? Will they be able to reconcile themselves to the fact that after another five or six generations the human race will come to an end?"

However, he could tell them nothing. They did not understand him, nor he them. It was a wondrous thing. Thirty years! It did not seem possible that people could have changed so much in that time. It was not long before Hadran began to realise that he was, in effect, a prisoner. He realised also that they were all afraid of him and wondered why.

As soon as he was able to sit up and take notice they made him understand by signs that by some miracle his ship had spiralled down to Earth after being hit and had made an almost perfect landing in some desert region. He smiled, remembering the automatics. They drew diagrams representing his ship and made him understand that they were after technical information. How did the ship fly? What fuel was used? Where had he come from? It was all very bewildering.

"Surely you know?" Hadran told them by the use of signs. "You are of Earth, are you not? Well, so am I! What has happened to my friends? In what part of the world am I? Some hitherto unexplored region . . . ?"

My friends, he thought bitterly, as he listened to the jabbering of his captors. My good pals, who watched me go with hope in their hearts and a loud hurrah on their lips. What happened to them? How much can a world change in thirty years? How does a man adjust himself to it? Why are these people so afraid? Who are they? And what do they think I can do to them? Do they imagine that I have brought back some alien culture that may threaten their well-being? What does it matter anyway?

One hundred and eighty years, the scientists had said. Thirty from one hundred and eighty leaves one hundred and fifty . . . a century and a half before life on Earth is snuffed out forever. No time at all when looked at from the proper point of view. Is that what frightens them so much? Perhaps they sense my failure and, rather than face the truth, would make a prisoner of me and ultimately destroy me. Bury their heads in the sand, ostrich fashion. Human beings were capable of so much foolishness.

He asked himself one unanswerable question after another but

could find no explanation for the change. There was a chasm between Hadran and his captors that grew wider and deeper with every passing day and neither he nor they could bridge it. Time after time they sent men obviously speaking many tongues, in an attempt to find some common ground on which they could meet. Always there was the fear. Hadran's fear—and that of the others.

Hadran's was a puzzled fear. He had expected changes. But not this. His world was dead. Or so it seemed. Here was another culture, another way of life. And all in thirty years. The colours, the language, the food, even the smell of these fellow-humans bewildered and at times nauseated him.

The season changed. It became colder. He could feel it, even in the comfort of his hospital bed. He had grown used to the armed guards prowling about him: had learned that the food, although tasteless, was at least sustaining: some of it he had even grown to like. He was heartily sick of the pictures and diagrams they were continually pushing in front of his face. Pictures of cities he had never known existed; moving pictures of aircraft of strange and unfamiliar design which they projected on to the walls of his little white room. He had grown accustomed to the tramp of soldiers' feet in the corridors outside his room. His body mended slowly but his mental illness, one which his captors and their doctors seemed not to recognise, worsened.

He became homesick for the loneliness of his cabin on the ship that had been his home for more than half of his life. He knew that the ship was now almost a total wreck and the knowledge saddened him.

They tried everything. They closeted him with beautiful women who, for hours at a time, spoke to him in angels' voices and even caressed him in an attempt to get him to open up and give them the information they wanted. They were clever. But they were not Hadran's people. They were of a different species. Humans, yes . but ?

Then, one day, Hadran thought he had the answer.

In a flash there came back to him the memory of the struggle that the scientists of thirty years ago had had with the politicians of the day.

"We must tell the people of our discovery," the scientists had insisted.

"It would cause worldwide panic," the politicians had said. "In any case, there is no positive proof that such a calamity will actually befall the Earth ."

Then the scientists had won. The warning had gone out . . . but what had happened in the intervening years? They must all be dead now, those old, old men who had spent years plotting the course of the free planet that would one day collide with the Earth. A lot can happen in that time. A new generation had grown up. Had the politicians by some devilish means managed to change the outlook of the entire human race? Was he, Hadran, being kept incommunicado for that reason . . . so that he could not tell? Was he being subtly driven out of his mind with a fake situation? Had the politicians won after all?

Could he escape and warn the people of their peril?

It was on that day that a smiling, old-young man walked into Hadran's room, sat on his bed, put a filthy smoking tube into his mouth and said, in Hadran's own language:

"Good morning. How do you feel today?"

The accent was strange but Hadran understood what was said. And the tears came to his eyes. Here, at last, was someone he could talk to .

"There, now," said the stranger, "would you like to tell me all about it?"

"You know," said the stranger, after Hadran had told his story, "this is the most wonderful thing that has happened to the world of science."

"I don't understand." Hadran was puzzled.

He felt more comfortable with this man than he had done for a long time but, at the same time, there was still an underlying current which, although not evil any more, was nevertheless still alien. The stranger's name was Holliday, a word which Hadran found difficulty in pronouncing, and was, he said, a student of ancient history.

Hadran listened in wonder as Holliday talked.

"There are always problems," Holliday began, "and it is the duty of scientists to find the answers to them. Thus, we can make a better world for people to live in and show the way to future generations."

"You have solved a problem?" Hadran wanted to know.

"Yes." Holliday nodded his head. "With your help I think I have. One that has puzzled man for centuries."

He smoked one tube after another as he spoke and prevailed upon Hadran once to try it. Hadran collapsed on to the bed, coughing and spluttering.

"It's a habit," Holliday explained. "A filthy one it is true. You can thank your stars tobacco wasn't known in your time."

"A lot can happen in thirty years." Hadran nodded his head. "Even your accent . . ."

The other gazed at him quizzically.

"Your language," he said slowly, "is more or less what we call a dead one, used only by some Indian tribes in a country known as Mexico, south of here."

"A—dead language? In thirty years?" The fear returned in a rush.

"We call it Nahuatl," said Holliday, "and it was spoken by a people called the Aztecs, who first appeared in history about eight hundred years ago. Up to now their origins have been steeped in mystery and legend, although it was thought that they came from a legendary lost continent." Holliday paused for a few seconds. His voice was filled with emotion when he spoke again. "From what you have told me, Hadran, from your use of the language, from your appearance and your descriptions of the world you remember, I am convinced that you are from that lost continent."

"Then," said Hadran hesitantly, "the scientists were right. A lost continent . . . a lost world. But—they said a—a hundred and eighty years . . ." His voice faded out into a fearful silence.

Holliday gave him a half smile.

"There is a theory that once, in the distant past, a free planet passed very close to Earth. This could explain the upheaval that put an end to your world. To the lost world of Atlantis——"

"Atlantis?"

"Your world. We call it Atlantis." Holliday sighed. "I really don't know how to explain it to you. I'm not sure that I'm qualified to do so. After all, I'm only an obscure history student. But I can say this. When you were out in space something happened to you. Something that your scientists did not take into consideration when they designed your ship."

"I grew older," Hadran said, "thirty years older. That's what happened to me."

"Yes, you grew older." The half smile was back. There was a touch of sorrow in it. "But while you were away, the world grew older too."

"You wish to tell me something," said Hadran. "Something bad. What it is I do not know, but I feel that you are trying to make things easier for me. Will you be frank, my friend?"

"All right." Holliday rose from the bed where he had been seated for what seemed centuries and commenced to pace the room. He waved his smoking tube in the air as he moved.

"In some ways," he began, "the technology of Atlantis appears to have been superior to ours. However, there is some evidence from what you say that there were gaps in the knowledge of your scientists. They did not know, for instance, that there is such a thing as a distortion in time when a spaceship such as yours travels through the universe at speeds far exceeding that of light. I can't pretend to explain it, I wouldn't know how to. All I know is that while you were away for thirty years of your life the Earth has grown many thousands of years older."

"I cannot believe it," remarked Hadran. "You must explain it."

"I wish I could," replied Holliday. "It's just one of those things you've got to believe. The man who advanced this theory is now dead. His name was Einstein. I doubt very much whether more than six men on this Earth can understand even the half of what he discovered."

"Is there any proof of this theory?"

Holliday poked Hadran in the chest. "Here's the proof," he said. "You are the living proof."

There was silence for a long time after Holliday had made this blunt statement. Hadran tried to get his thoughts into focus, but it was impossible. He had just learned that he was many thousands of years old. It was the only possible explanation, he knew, but his mind just could not grasp the truth. That it was the truth he now had no doubt.

"For hundreds of years," Holliday told him, "the Aztecs were looking forward to the return of a strange white God, who would lead them to happiness and plenty. His name was Quetzacoatl, the Plumed Serpent . . ."

"Quetzacoatl," Hadran repeated, "the name of my ship! To lead them to happiness and plenty. The Plumed Serpent. And," he added, "the ship was painted white . . ."

"With," supplied Holliday, "a design fixed onto the hull which looks, even now, a lot like a feathered serpent."

"The coat-of-arms of the Hadran family," breathed the almost numb commodore. He looked up at the other with tears in his eyes. "What am I to do?"

Holliday waved a hand vaguely.

"There are lots of things you can do, Hadran. I'm not going

to try to advise you. But I will say this. The old world has grown tired since you last saw it. Very tired. And it's on the brink of another calamity that would make yours sound like a pin drop. You hold information which can bring that calamity nearer. Man no longer trusts Man: the nations are at each other's throats nowadays. Their eyes are turned inwards."

"But with what I know," Hadran protested, "I could make them look up into the sky. I could still bring them happiness and plenty."

"Maybe," Holliday shook his head. "But I don't think so." He sighed and passed a hand across his forehead. "When I go out there I'm going to tell them I couldn't make contact with you. You will never see me again."

"You will leave me? The only friend I have in this strange world?"

"Between us," said Holliday, "we may be able to do some good for this strange world. Do you know what will happen if you let out the secret of your Quetzacoatl? They'll turn it into a missile that can turn a civilised nation into a heap of ashes in less time than it takes to tell. And there won't be an answer to it. They know that already. Your world and mine just won't mix, Hadran. Yours has been dead for centuries. Do you want to kill mine as well?"

"I don't understand all you say," said Hadran from his bed. "But it seems to make sense." He smiled for the first time in a long while.

"No mixing," reminded Holliday as he went out. He did not look back, did not say goodbye. Hadran knew there was no necessity for it. Everything had already been said.

For a long time after the student of ancient languages had gone, Hadran stared at the ceiling. Rain had started to fall on the windows of his little white room. The same kind of rain that used to fall on Atlantis. His eyes blurred. That proud but doomed world was so far away now. With this realisation there came another: he was tired and very, very old. Slowly he turned and faced the wall of his little room.

And then the blackness of oblivion which he had cheated through an unbelievable portion of space and time quietly rolled over him.

They Shall Inherit

Mankind had fought its way to the stars, basically unchanged, but now pressure from the Outside dictated adaptation or decadence

The man from the Health Department sat impatiently in the glossy waiting room, balancing his brief case on his knees. He was a straggling, untidy man with an ill-fitting collar and floppy socks; his fingers drummed unceasingly along the top of the case.

The discreet blonde at the Enquiries desk ignored his occasional starts of movement, which suggested he might suddenly jump up and go. Sometimes he looked at her, but most often he looked away. He had been waiting here for twenty minutes. Through green glass panels he could see the life of the hospital moving, leaving him here isolated.

Finally he rose, skirted the cacti on the low, Scandinavian table, and said to the girl in a moderate voice, "This really is too bad, you know. Dr. Tedder was supposed to see me at three-thirty sharp. I made this appointment three weeks ago."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Duckett. I'll ring his office again, if you like. I can't think what's keeping him; he is usually so punctual."

She had scarcely laid one irreproachable hand on the visiphone before a broad man in a black suit swept into the waiting room, to pause by the desk with a certain theatrical flourish. He was bald. He smiled. He came forward with his hand extended. He was Dr.

Christopher Tedder, Chief Geneticist and Managing Director of the Clixton Progressive Maternity Home.

A flurry of boisterous apologies and irritable "quite-all-rights" enveloped the two men as Tedder led Duckett up to his office on the next floor. Clutching his brief case tightly, Duckett found himself in a sumptuous room with blown-up, high-speed microphotographs for decoration.

"You know I wouldn't keep the Health Department waiting for anything," Tedder protested, offering a box of cigars. Duckett refused; Tedder shut the box with a snap. He had a powerful but curiously blank face, with little red veins patterning the sides of his nose. Beneath his assumed heartiness was a distinct unease, which Duckett noted with pleasure.

"I hope you aren't inferring you kept us waiting for *nothing*," he said, smiling under his moustache.

Looking away from the acid witticism, Tedder said, "A personal matter kept me."

"Well, I expect you know what I have come about, Dr. Tedder," Duckett said, his voice assuming a more official tone. "Public opinion has forced the Health Department to take some steps to allay certain——"

"Yes, I have all the documents you people sent me," Tedder interrupted. "Mr. Duckett, let me put it to you like this. We—I don't mean you and I personally—represent two opposed camps. The Health Department, by its nature, is cautious, reactionary; we at Clixton are bold, progressive. You are afraid of the effects of the gene-shifts with which we have been so successfully experimenting. Public opinion, if I may say so, has nothing to do with the matter; ultimately, it always goes wherever it is led—and in this case it is the Health Department's duty to lead it in *our* direction. I have made this quite clear in letters written to your people over the last couple of years."

"But in this matter——" Duckett began.

"In this matter—forgive my taking the words from your mouth—in this matter, the whole material future of Earth is concerned. We are at the cross-roads; you must be aware that our economic position in the galaxy is unstable."

"Of that I am as aware as you are, Dr. Tedder. But I do not want to talk about galactic economics; I wish to discuss the mothers and new-born children placed under your care."

Tedder put his big hands on the desk, palm down, and made a heavy face.

"The two subjects are inseparably intertwined, Mr. Duckett, let me tell you that. Come, perhaps it would be best if you had a look into one of the wards."

He rose. Duckett reluctantly did the same. Tedder ushered him towards the door, Duckett dodged under his shepherding arm, went back to his chair for his brief case, and followed clutching it like a life belt. He wore the look of a man prepared to face the worst.

They moved down a soundless corridor, through two doors, and into an observation booth overlooking a small ward containing six cots. The cots were all occupied.

"Polaglass; we see them, they do not see us," Tedder explained, glancing at his watch.

Duckett stared through the windows, prepared for something horrible.

The temperature inside the small ward was evidently high, for the six cots held infants who lay there without coverings. A nurse moved efficiently from cot to cot, changing napkins. Only three of the babies were awake; two of them stood shakily, supporting themselves by the bars; the other, having just woken, was anxious to see what was happening. With slow, tentative movements, it pulled itself up, feet wide apart, pink knees slightly bent, until it stood erect. Uttering an inarticulate cry, it staggered two steps forward, grabbed the cot side as if its life depended on it, and hung there gazing vaguely in the general direction of its nurse.

"Splendid exhibition; might have done it especially for our benefit," Tedder said, with gratification. He added quietly, "and all these six babies are *under forty-eight hours old*."

"You can surely see why we think this experiment is monstrous," Duckett said, his lanky body shaking inside its rather loose suit, as he and Tedder walked back down the corridor. In his mind, the picture still burned of that tiny, wizened, red thing standing unaided in its cot; it made him feel as sick as if he had seen a dog thrashed, or a criminal executed.

"You are raising monsters," he added, indignantly, when Tedder did not at once reply. It was one of Duckett's characteristics that, caught on the wrong foot, he could be ruffled easily and then became unable (or so he feared) to express his irritation. He waved a hand and added, "As for the luckless and deluded mothers you have in your power, they should never——"

Tedder showed real anger. Normally he was rather stolid and slow to anger; today his nerves were already on edge. He stopped

so suddenly that Duckett jumped and said, "Just try to remember the facts, will you? People come to the Clixton voluntarily, men and women with an eye to the future, eager to take advantage of the discoveries we have made. D'you think *they* prattle about monsters?"

A redness crept up his face and over the shining expanse of his skull. Still talking, he plunged suddenly into motion again, leading the way back to his room, closing the door after Duckett as the other followed in. He deliberately ignored Duckett's sick expression.

"You see, it comes back to what I was saying about the future of Earth," Tedder said, "in which the future of the individual is naturally involved. How long has man been a traveller among the stars? Something like three thousand years, isn't it? And the intelligent races we've come across run into hundreds, don't they? Some of them have been infinitely further advanced than we, yet we've always held our own. Earth's prospered, hasn't it?"

"Then we came into contact with this biped race, the Cutalignians, who have an empire of their own. They began at once to swamp planets, which formerly traded with us, with their goods, their executives, their ideas. Cutalignian space liners and freighters, over the century since our cultures met, have taken up trade and shipping lines that were indisputably ours for a millennium. Their influence is everywhere overshadowing ours. We're going down, we're going out of the galactic market. Why?"

"You seem to be giving the history lesson, not I," Duckett said morosely, balancing his brief case on his knees. "The reason generally given is that the Cutalignians are long-lived, so that training and education go further, and an experienced man can serve longer ."

"Good enough. It's a good reason. To put it in cash terms, a thousand-credit education lasts an Earthman from the age of say twenty to sixty-five; that's forty-five years. But a thousand-credit education lasts a Cutalignian sixty-five years. Imagine if everyone on Earth could spend forty years at the age of twenty-five. Advantageous, eh? Here, do have a cigar, Duckett; I'm sorry I lost my temper then. My nerves are all on edge today. Nothing personal intended."

He extended the cigar case almost with a look of pleading. Duckett dithered, set his case down by his chair, and took a cigar. They both lit up.

Tedder rubbed his hand across his big face.

"Lot of worries," he said. "Forgive me if I make a visicall for a minute."

He dialled the screen on his desk and the head and shoulders of a uniformed woman appeared immediately.

"Eunice?" Tedder asked.

"I was just going to call you, Dr. Tedder," the face said. "Everything seems to be perfectly under control. She is quite comfortable, and we aren't expecting any further developments for a while."

She smiled, an official and rather strained curling of the lips.

"Thanks, Sister," Tedder said, cutting her off.

He turned back to Duckett a little blankly.

"Yes You see, Mr. Duckett, the gap between us and the Cutalignians must be closed. And it can be closed. That's what we're doing here, or trying to do, despite outside interference. Everyone lives under pressure nowadays; you know what civilisation has become. It's a rat race. Cut throat competition. But supposing you matured at the age of ten instead of the age of twenty . . ."

Duckett nodded through his cigar smoke.

"I know what you mean," he said. "For anyone who elects to compete in modern life, the competition is indeed stiff and merciless. But no provocation can ever be great enough to allow the meddling with human life that you are doing here. On ethical grounds, and even on biological grounds, the idea is not permissible. Our bodies have achieved a balance . . . we—we blaspheme by trying to alter them. After all, there were experiments in the past; you will remember the sleepless men of Krokazoa."

"That particular experiment failed. Others have succeeded. We constantly 'meddle with human life', as you call it. Every operation, every anaesthetic, every dose of cough stuff you take represents such an experiment."

"What has that got to do with the babies you just showed me, Dr. Tedder? Gene-shift is altogether a more serious matter than a dose of cough mixture."

Tedder got up and thrust his hands into his pockets. He began to walk about. Duckett's eyes never left him.

"All that's happened to those babies is this," the geneticist said slowly. "We operated on their 'genetic dies', the primal cell moulds from which all subsequent cells are modelled in the building of an individual. As I suppose you know, the whole inheritance quota of any individual is contained in these dies. One gene was knocked out of their chromosomes before birth—before conception. As a result, the babies are able to stand almost as soon as they are born."

"It isn't natural," Duckett said.

"It is for a baby animal."

"Dr. Tedder, these are human beings!"

Ignoring the remark, Tedder went over to a cabinet under the wide windows, and shuffled in a drawer. He pulled a photostill out, studied it for a moment, and passed it over to Duckett.

Round the glossy print trailed something resembling raffia, knotted at intervals with differently shaped knots; it formed an eccentric spiral, the middle of which was distinctly darker than the edges. Duckett gazed at it in silence, twisting the print first one way, then the other.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a photostill taken by a Subiton, the infra-electronic micro-camera, of a human chromosome. Those knotty points on it are the large molecules we call genes, which are the bearers of heredity, and carry certain characteristics over from one generation to another. There are one thousand two hundred and five of them. The outer ones are what we call negative or 'damper' genes.

"What we have been doing here is to shift off some of the damper genes from the chromosomes of unborn children, before they leave the gametangium of the parent. It's a fairly simple freezing process, not even painful to the father."

"I don't know, I don't know!" Duckett said, standing up and scratching his head. "You must see that from my point of view, the more you say, the worse you make matters. What reasonable man would co-operate with you to have his children—well, made abnormal?"

Slowly Tedder pulled at his nose, as if he could control another outburst of anger that way.

"Any reasonable man," he answered, heavily emphasising each word.

He took the photograph back to the cabinet.

"Any reasonable man," he repeated, "would give his child the chance to get a head start over its contemporaries. Blessed are the first come, for they shall be first served! Children don't normally stand up till they're about a year old, Mr. Duckett; ours stand when they are a day old. That is progress, Mr. Duckett, say what you will.

"Knock off other of the damper genes and you get other advances." He smiled briefly. "Of course I admit we had a few failures at first: babies born covered in hair, others with fully developed—well, no matter; the point is that through a few mishaps Clixton has gained a bad name. Unfortunately, you see, we cannot

try this sort of thing on animals first. Animals haven't got damper genes. Funny I suspect humans developed them as a safeguard against precocity—you know that compared with animals they take a long while to grow up. Now the world is past its adolescence, precocity is just what we need. Once it was wiser that we did not learn too fast; now the rat race demands that we learn as quickly as possible."

He came and sat down at the desk again. Again he passed his hand over his face. His eyes remained blank, as if focussed on something beyond the discussion.

"You claim to have the world's interests at heart," Duckett said, "yet you think exceedingly little of it."

For the first time, Tedder looked into Duckett's eyes. He saw there, not the scarecrow he had imagined he was dealing with, but a shrewd man whose awkwardness of manner did not entirely cover his firmness of purpose. Tedder looked away.

"What is there but the world?" he exclaimed almost in a groan.

"I am a religious man, Dr. Tedder; I have a positive answer to that."

"God, you mean? Sorry, Duckett, count me out. I've never seen him in the Subiton," Tedder said bleakly.

They looked at each other again, neither enjoying what they saw. Their cigars had gone out.

"You would naturally be disinclined to believe in God, because you are playing God yourself," Duckett said, in an apologetic tone. "I take it your future intentions are to knock more damper genes off, as more volunteer parents appear?"

"Yes."

"But can you predict results? I mean, do you know certainly what change you will effect before the baby is born?"

Tedder was sweating. Seeing Duckett glance at his forehead, he brought out a handkerchief and mopped it abstractedly.

"No," he said. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly! You are no better than a murderer, Dr. Tedder, for all your talk of the common——"

Duckett had risen to his feet now, his collar in disarray, his hands clenching. His speech was cut off by the jangle of the visiphone. Tedder flipped it on with terrible eagerness. The face of the sister who had appeared before flared into view; she had one hand up to her mouth, in a sort of nervous excitement.

"Oh, Dr. Tedder," she exclaimed. "It's Eunice—your wife,

I mean. She's—the pains have started again. I think you'd better come up. Quickly, please."

"At once, Sister, coming at once."

Tedder switched off. He was already out of his chair, apologising, moving towards the door, saying goodbye to Duckett.

"You'll have to excuse me now, Mr. Duckett. My wife's up in the labour ward—I must go to her. There have been unfortunate complications. I'm afraid it's an awkward case, premature. Excuse me."

Instinctively, Duckett was following, out of the room, into the corridor, going through the formal and perfectly sincere phrases of regret, keeping pace with Tedder.

"Terribly sorry to hear Wouldn't have kept you if I had known . You should have told me, intruding at such a time

 You've been so patient It really embarrasses me to think that I ."

Tedder could not shake him off. Duckett pressed into the lift with him. Tedder closed the gates, thumbed the button, and they slid upwards.

"What has brought the birth on prematurely, Doctor, may I ask?"

"My wife had a fall last night," Tedder said abstractedly, glancing upwards.

"I am so sorry I know how these things happen. It must be a great comfort to her to know her husband's a——"

Duckett stopped in mid-sentence.

"There's no danger, is there?" he asked, in a small voice.

"Danger? What do you mean, danger?"

"Dr. Tedder. You've been—you've carried out one of these experiments on your own wife!"

They glared at each other as the lift purred up through the heart of the building, two men who would never understand each other's viewpoints. Tedder's face told Duckett all he needed to know; his guilt was written plainly over it.

"You use the word 'experiment' as if it were synonymous with torture," Dr. Tedder snapped. "You're just a superstitious layman, Duckett. My wife entered wholeheartedly and co-operatively into this great venture with me. It's only natural we should want our child to share the fruits of our researches."

"*Natural!*" Duckett echoed, as the lift stopped. "It's anything but natural. What's this child going to be like?"

The gates opened, they stepped into another soundproof corridor.

"What's it going to be like?" Duckett repeated, plucking at the other's sleeve, hurrying after him. "You don't *know*, do you?"

A nurse stood at the far end of the corridor by an open door. She beckoned anxiously. Tedder was running now, his mouth open, his powerful face blank. Duckett ran beside him, caught in the general feeling of tension. Tedder's face terrified him; the nurse's face terrified him; what had she seen?

"I'm in the rat race," he thought. "I shouldn't be running."

"We didn't like to tell you on the visi," the nurse said, in a high, nervous voice. "The—the baby has just this moment arrived. Your wife will be all right. The baby ."

Just for a second, Tedder paused on the threshold of the room, as if unwilling to go in. Then he entered.

Dithering behind him, the frightened Duckett caught a glimpse of half a dozen uniformed figures round a bed. Their backs were to him. The smell of disinfectant hung over everything.

Then the new-born child's cry came to him, a thin, mewling cry full of fear and rage; it was saying, "Let me get back! Oh, let me get back!"

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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Words and Music

*Once the true meaning of their alien words was revealed,
his life on this lovely planet would be changed for ever*

Illustrated by Kenneth Barr

Captain Halley, master of the tramp starship *Epsilon Gruis*, settled down even more comfortably in the depths of his chair. He took a sip from the tall, frosted glass at his side, then drew on the long, locally manufactured cigar. He looked at Randall, the Trader, with envy.

He said, "You're lucky, Randall. Whenever I find one of you people in a set-up like this I feel like resigning from my command and applying to the Commission for a Trader's berth . . ."

Randall took a swallow from his own glass, smiled beatifically as the sweet, but not too sweet, aromatic, but not too aromatic, stimulant caressed his gullet on the way down to join the excellent dinner which the two men had already eaten.

"I've had to work for this," he said. "You know very well what some of the other worlds are like, Captain. I've had to do my time on balls of mud and balls of barren rock and sand. I've had to live in pressurised huts and wear a spacesuit every time that I wanted to take a stroll outside. I've had to do my trading with sly lizards and uppity octopi and communistic bumble bees. A world like this is the reward for long and faithful service . . ."

The Captain finished his drink.

"I can see why this stuff fetches such big prices back on Earth," he said. "You've not forgotten the cask for the ship's stores, I hope .

"Of course not. Another glass, Captain?"

"Well, we're blasting off in a couple of hours . . . But it's a straight up and out job. The Mate can handle it."

"Good." Randall clapped his pudgy hands.

The woman who glided out on to the verandah was human rather than humanoid. She was tall, and slim, and walked silently and gracefully on narrow, elegant bare feet. Her single garment left her firm breasts and graceful legs exposed. Her blue hair matched her blue eyes, and both contrasted agreeably with her golden skin. Her generous mouth was scarlet and her teeth were very white.

"Lord?" she murmured in a low contralto.

"Two more glasses of the wine," said Randall, "and see that it is well chilled."

"As you say, Lord," she replied.

"Yes," said Captain Halley, when she had gone, "you're sitting pretty. I know that it's none of my business, Randall, but are you and she . . . ?"

"She's my housekeeper," said the Trader, smiling slightly, "with all that it implies. Mind you—I've known friendlier women. There's something *withdrawn* about the women here. They're ornamental enough, but they aren't very affectionate. You know what I mean?"

"Yes. But I suppose you can't have everything

"I'm not complaining," said Randall. "After all, I rather prefer it that way . . ."

The two men were silent as the girl brought in the fresh drinks. They looked out over the wide expanse of green sward to the space-port where, gleaming in the dusk against the background of dark forest, stood the ship. The first of the flamebirds were out, slow moving, iridescent luminosities sweeping gracefully across the dusky sky. To one side of the space-port was the village, its dim-glowing lamps a pleasing contrast to the harsh glare of working lights around the interstellar tramp. From the village drifted the throbbing of drums, the sound of singing voices.

"It reminds me," said the Captain abruptly, "of the West Indies back on Earth . . . There's something of the calypso about that music."

"Yes," agreed Randall. He turned to the girl. "Nita, are they singing for us tonight?"

"Yes, Lord. The ship from the stars has brought materials for our songs, as well as goods for your warehouses."

"All in the calypso tradition," said Halley. "You are lucky, Randall. Wine, women *and* song."

"I've earned it," said Randall, with all of a small, fat man's smugness.

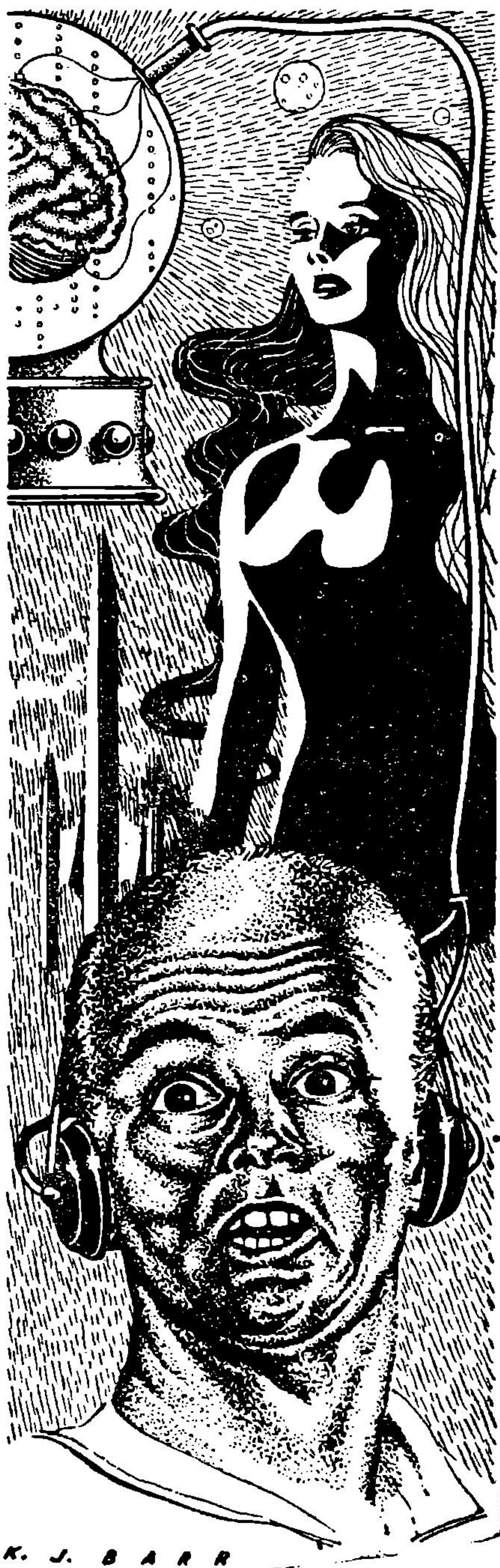
The beat of the drums was louder, the sound of singing. The procession could be seen making its way from the village to the Trader's house, the bobbing, soft-coloured lanterns, the gleam of mellow light on pale flesh.

"What are the words that they are singing, Nita?" asked Randall.

"Just silly words, Lord," she replied evasively.

Halley scowled. "Don't you know what they are, Randall?"

"I," replied the Trader, almost boastfully, "am the Galaxy's worst linguist. I look at it this way—if the natives of any world want to trade with us they'll very soon learn our language. Oh, I know that some Traders can rattle away in Valerian



K. J. BARR

and Trug and, even, High and Low Merkish—but what good does it do 'em? My predecessor here—Cavendish, did you ever run across him?”

“No,” said Halley. “This is my first time on Kiara. That's the worst of the Epsilon ships—you can never settle down to a steady run.”

“Cavendish was a linguist,” went on Randall. “But it didn't do him any good. He's on Traudor now. He'll be able to pass the time trying to make sense of the clicks and grunts the natives there use for a language. At least it'll take his mind off the heat and the dust and the stinks . . .”

The Kiarans were close now, ranged before the verandah in a wide arc. The drummers squatted on the grass, fingers stroking the taut parchment of their instruments. Tall and straight and beautiful the singers stood behind them. Above them, from the long staffs thrust into the turf, hung the glowing lanterns.

Softly, insistently, throbbed the drums. Softly, yet with a growing power, the voices filled the dusk. Halley knew nothing of music, and said so, but said also that he had never heard singing like it. Randall agreed with him.

He said, “The best part of it all, I think, is that one doesn't know what they are singing about. For all I know they may be rhyming ‘Moon’ and ‘June’ and committing all the other crimes of our Terran lyric writers. It's like . . . like . . . How shall I put it? It's like advertising in any of our big cities. You see the shifting shapes of coloured fire against the night, and if you couldn't read the words they would be lovely. But you can read the words—and to know that the letters spell out *Slumbo Sleeping Tablets* or *O'Dowd's Mountain Dew* puts a curse on them . . . See what I mean?”

The Captain said that he did. To the girl he said, “Nita, what are they singing about?”

“It is nothing, Captain,” she said. “It is nothing. It is just a song.”

“But they must be singing about *something*.”

Her slight frown made her pointed face even more attractive.

“They are singing,” she said, “about your ship. Of how you have come across all the long, empty miles to bring us cutlery and cloth, tinned meat and mirrors, in exchange for our worthless fruit juice . . .”

“As I said,” Halley told Randall, “it's like the calypso back on Earth.”

"It seems that way," agreed the Trader.

"It would be amusing," said the Captain, "if one could get hold of a literal translation. Perhaps Nita . . ."

"I've tried, now and again. But she's always been as vague with me as she was, just now, with you."

"Have you ever considered," pursued Halley, "that good recordings might have considerable marketable value back on Earth? I've recording equipment on board, my own property, that's hardly been used. For, say, three more casks of this wine . . ."

"You interest me," said Randall.

"Then," said the Captain, "if you had a literal translation of each song it would enhance the value of the recordings considerably."

"I've already told you," said Randall, "that I'm no linguist. I'll ask Nita . . ." He looked around. "She's gone, damn her." He raised his hands to clap.

"You can never be sure," said Halley, "that her translations are correct. Now, I have a machine on board . . . My Psionic Radio Officer made it . . . You are, of course, familiar with the principles of Psionic Radio?"

"Of course. Telepathy, as opposed to ordinary, light speed radio, is instantaneous. Psionic Radio operators are trained telepaths. Over long ranges, however, they need an amplifier—and the amplifier is, mainly, a tissue culture taken and grown from the brain of a dog."

"Near enough," said Halley. "Well, my P.R.O. is a bright sort of bloke—Fellow of the Rhine Institute and all the rest of it. What he was working on was a Psionic Transmitter and Receiver that would not require a telepath to operate it. It would be ideal equipment for the trading stations, for people like yourself . . ."

"It would be," said Randall.

"Anyhow," said the Captain, "that's what he was working on. (I wish I knew what the words of this song are—it has a lovely lilt to it!) Well, as I was saying, that was what he was working on. What he got was something different."

"What did he get?"

"A machine that is, so far as we can make out, an automatic translator. We have a few linguists in the crew. We've tried talking Russian to it, and Spanish, and Valerian and Trug. The translation comes out almost instantaneously—like a very fast echo, but in English. Rather fascinating."

"But why should it translate into English?"

"I don't know. Anyhow, what I'm driving at is this—I'm sure that my P.R.O. can go on turning out these translating machines of

his as long as the supply of brain tissue lasts, and that'll last as long as we can keep Fido growing ."

"Fido?"

"What other name would you call an overgrown dog's brain in a glass jar?"

"What you're driving at, I suppose," said Randall, "is that your P.R.O. might be willing to sell me his translator to go with your recorder."

"That's it," said Halley.

For a while the two men smoked and drank in silence, listening to the golden voices of the singers.

And they could, thought Randall, be golden voices, literally golden voices. The civilised planets had become blasé about *objets d'art* from the outworlds, and to command a sale such commodities had to be *good*. This singing was good. It might not, he knew, be good to those who measured all music against the yardsticks of Bach and Beethoven, Schubert and Skaatzen, but it would be, to that vast majority that says that it knows what it likes (without knowing much else) *good*. Literal translations of each song would help sales. The Terran wordsmiths would be able to hammer them into singable shape, so that the songs would spread to all worlds where men and women like to sing around a fire, or on the march, or for sheer love of making a joyful noise. Randall saw golden visions of royalties and royalties and still more royalties

"You think he'd sell?" he asked abruptly.

"Probably." A sharp buzzing came from the tiny transceiver on the Captain's wrist. "Excuse me a second, Randall. That'll be my Mate." Halley raised the little instrument to his lips. "Captain here."

The Chief Officer's voice was faint but clear. "All cargo loaded and stowed, sir. All hands aboard. We are securing for Space."

"Good. Thank you, Bill. You know that wire recorder of mine? Will you get it packed and have it ready to put ashore? Detail a couple of cadets to bring it to the Trader's house. And find stowage for a few more casks—private ventures."

"Can do, sir."

"Oh, and you might wake up Bryce from his usual trance and get him to talk to me."

"Will do, sir."

A fresh voice was audible. "P.R.O. here, sir."

"Mr. Bryce—you'll have tasted this local wine, no doubt."

"I have, sir."

"Would you like to make a couple of casks of it for yourself?"

"If the Captain will allow a private venture ."

"The Captain will. It's that translator of yours. The Trader would like it ."

"For two casks. Yes, sir."

"Put the Mate back on, will you?" There was a brief pause. "Listen, Bill—have the brats bring that fancy translator of the P.R.O.'s as well, will you? And be ready to load seven casks of wine into number eight storeroom."

"Three and two," said Randall, "make five."

"I know. But who said that you were paying only two casks for the translator?"

"I distinctly heard you tell your P.R.O. ."

"Maybe. But you didn't hear me tell him what my commission on the deal was to be."

"You're a hard man."

"I have to be."

"I shall want a test."

The Captain glanced at his watch. He said, "It'll have to be a fast one. I pride myself on always adhering to the advertised time of blasting off. Oh, and you'd better arrange for this choir of yours to do a spot of stevedoring—I don't mind my own personnel handling delicate instruments but I'm not going to have them trundling casks up the ramp."

Randall heaved himself out of his chair, walked to the verandah rail. He held up his short arms in a demand for silence.

"Gorloab!" he called.

The man who was beating the biggest of the drums got to his feet and walked forward, his golden, muscular body gleaming in the lamplight.

"Lord?"

"Break out seven casks from the warehouse. Be ready to take them to the ship."

"Yes, Lord."

"Looks like your cadets on the way out now," said the Trader to Halley.

The Captain got to his feet, joined Randall. The two men watched the bright headlights of the utility truck rapidly covering the distance between ship and house. Within a few minutes the little vehicle had drawn up alongside the wide steps. The cadets clambered down from the cab, went to the rear of the truck. Very carefully they lifted down the case containing the wire recorder,

carried it up to the verandah. They returned for the other, larger case, handled it with even greater care.

Randall opened the first case, looked at the wire recorder.

"It seems to be in good condition," he grunted.

"It is," said Halley. Then, to his cadets: "Put the translator on the table. Careful, now."

"How does it work?" asked Randall, looking curiously at the complexity of wiring, at the two tiny pumps—one of which was whirring busily—at the jars of nutrient fluid, at the globe that held the slowly pulsating blob of yellow-grey matter.

"The main thing to remember is that it's alive," said the Captain. "You've enough spare nutrient fluid to last until the next ship drops in. If the pump should stop, you switch over to the other one. It will be as well to switch over every twenty-four hours, as a matter of routine, anyhow."

"But how does it work?"

"The sound," said Halley, poking a trumpet with his finger, "goes in there." He lifted a pair of earphones. "And it comes out here."

"I want a test."

"Then get that girl of yours in."

"All right." Randall clapped his hands. Nita swayed silently on to the verandah. The two cadets stared at her in open mouthed admiration.

"Put on the earphones, Randall," ordered Halley. "All right. Now you, my dear, say into this trumpet, in your own language. Well, say, 'I wish *bon voyage* to *Epsilon Gruis* and all her crew'."

"As you wish, Captain," said the girl. Then a succession of liquid syllables dropped from her tongue.

Randall chuckled.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I got a literal translation of what she said. One has to make allowances for the *mores* of different races, of course."

"What did she say?"

"'I hope,' repeated Randall, 'that the old scow returns with a load of good things for us'."

"What *did* you say?" asked Halley, addressing the girl.

She returned his gaze steadily, her head held high. She said, "You have heard, Captain."

"Your manners," said Halley coldly, "could stand improvement."

"Her manners," said Randall, "are *my* concern, not yours."

"If that's the way you want it," snapped the spaceman. "Well, are you taking the goods?"

"Yes." Then, to the girl, "Tell Gorloab to load the additional cargo into the ship."

"I must be going," said Halley. "Thanks for the evening's entertainment, Randall. I may run into you again—if not here, then on some other planet."

"It'll be either here, or back on Earth," said the Trader. "I like it here—but if I am able to do anything interesting and profitable with the gear you sold me . . . Well, who knows?"

The two men shook hands. Captain Halley followed his cadets into the waiting truck. Randall, sitting at ease on his verandah, watched the vehicle make its way to the ship. He saw, after a while, the bright red light winking from the star tramp's sharp bow, heard the wailing of her siren. He knew that Gorloab would have seen to it that none of his people remained in the danger area. He put on his dark spectacles just as the column of fire started to mount under *Epsilon Gruis's* stern, saw her rise, slowly at first and then faster, until all that remained of her was a tall pillar of fading incandescence against the night, pointing to the stars, dissipated slowly by the high winds.

He thought, I should be sorry to leave this planet. But when I have made my fortune I shall probably be able to live here some of the time.

He was a rather impatient man, was Randall. He was, at the same time, conscientious. There were tallies to be made, entries to be made in his ledgers, goods to be bartered with the natives who always came in to the port after the visit of a starship, the flare of rockets in the night sky being all the notification they needed.

So, throughout the day, Randall worked hard, anxious to get back to the equipment waiting for him on his verandah. He was furious when a fresh contingent of Kiarans from one of the outlying villages arrived within a few minutes of sunset, the official time for finishing the day's business. But he dealt with them, although with a bad grace, taking from them the bags of dried *carranberries* that were almost as valuable as the wine, giving them in exchange knives and mirrors and bolts of cloth and electric torches.

It was dark when he was back in his house.

"Bring me a drink," he snapped to Nita, "then tell Gorloab to arrange a singing party."

"But, Lord, your dinner . . . And there was a singing party last night, in honour of the Star Captain."

"Dinner can wait. And tell Gorloab that I want the singing party *now*."

"As you say, Lord," she replied submissively.

When she was gone he fussed around with the apparatus. He switched on the recorder, said, "Testing One Two Three ." He played it back. He went to the translator, looked with something approaching awe at the pulsating tissue of the brain of the thing. It was strange, he thought, how great a part dogs had played in the conquest of Space—the first living beings in satellite rockets, the first living beings to circumnavigate Earth's Moon and now, thanks to the psychic powers long suspected, the means whereby the ships in space and the major civilised planets and colonies could talk to each other over the light years with no time-lag.

He looked up from the weird machine to see the procession of glowing lanterns making its slow way from the village to his house. He stood erect and walked to the edge of the veranda. He saw, at last, Gorloab heading the ragged column, holding his drum before him.

Slowly, with a certain sullenness, the party spread out into the usual wide arc—drummers squatting on the grass, singers standing behind them. Sullenly, the drums began their rhythmic throbbing. Softly, but with mounting volume, the singing started. Randall sat there with the earphones on his head, listening to the words, the dreadful, humiliating words, that issued in a sing-song voice from the translator.

They think they are gods, he heard, the men from the stars. They think they are gods, but they are despicable, and less than our pigs. We humour them—for how else should we get the things that it is too much trouble for us to make ourselves? The Trader is the most despicable and loathsome of them all. Our women humour him so that they may learn his secrets. They are not defiled, because he cannot touch their inner selves. To them he is only a small nuisance, less than a buzzing mosquito in the night . . . There followed then a description of Terran habits that brought a dull flush to Randall's plump cheeks—a flush that rapidly faded to ashen grey.

He jumped to his feet, tearing the earphones from his head as he did so.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "Stop!"

"Lord," said Gorloab, gravely courteous, "you said that you wanted a singing party."

"I did," said Randall. "I *did*. Nita, come here!"

She climbed the steps to the verandah, stood before him.

"You will answer my questions truthfully," he said in a thick voice.

"Have I ever done otherwise?" she said.

"I don't know," he replied. "I wish that I did . . . Tell me this. Do you hate me?"

"No."

"Do your people hate me?"

"No."

"Do they despise me?"

"Yes."

"I see. Now, tonight's singing party. It was one of the songs they sang last night. It was one of the songs they are always singing. Tell me—were tonight's words special words?"

"No. They are the words we always sing."

Painfully he pressed on.

"These animals that you say we are What are they?"

"*Grungas*," she replied.

Randall winced. The *grunga* was not unlike the Terran pig, but greedier, dirtier.

"And the insect that I am like?"

"*A pzissitt*."

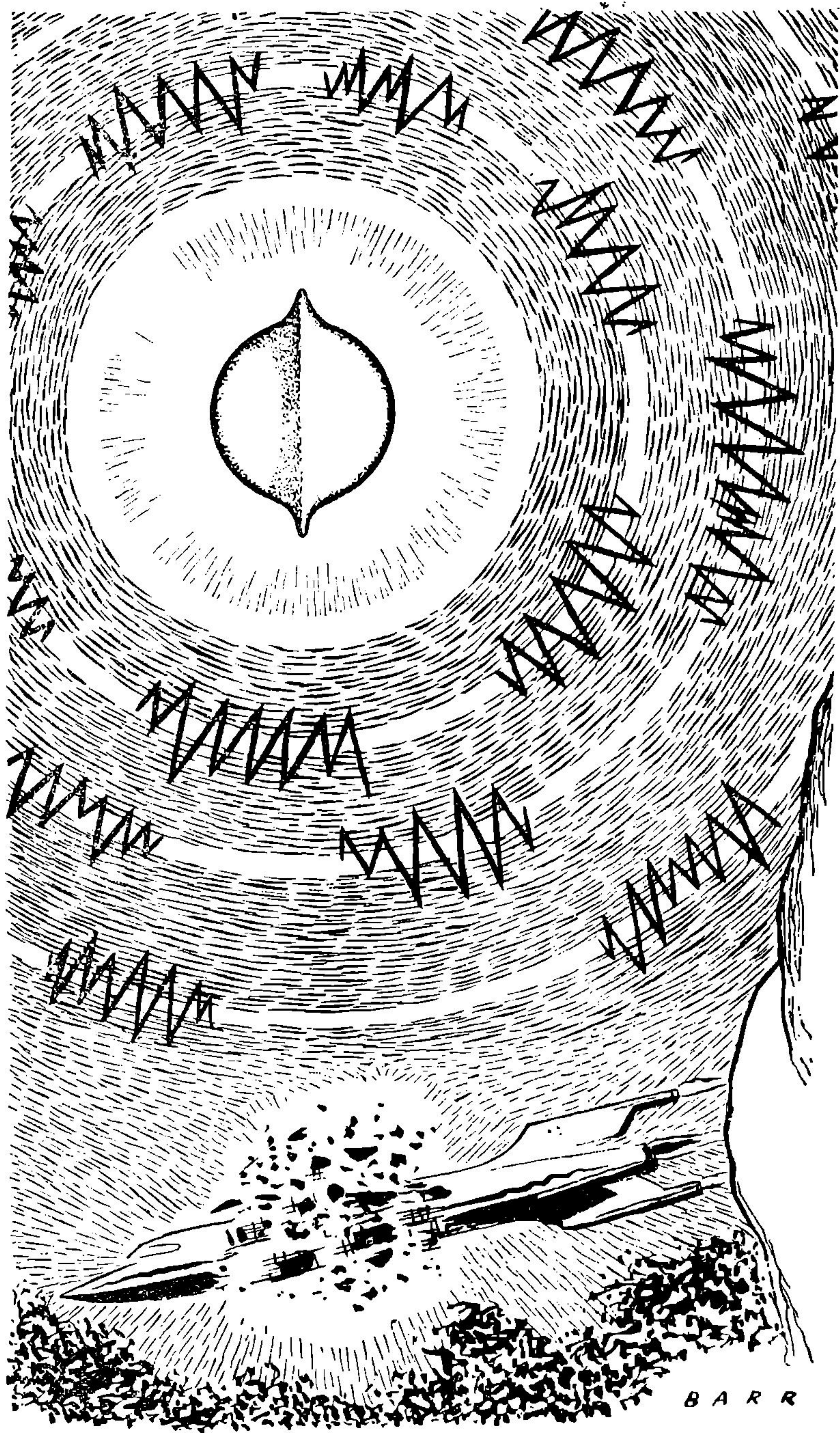
And the *pzissitt* hasn't even a painful bite or sting, thought Randall.

"That will do," he said. "You can go. You needn't come back."

He pushed the translator off the table, stamped hard upon the spherical transparency containing the brain until it shattered. It had told him enough. It had told him why he, notorious for his inability to learn another language than his own, had been posted to this planet. It had told him why the Captain, who must have known the reason for his predecessor's transfer, had been willing to sell him the potential goldmine of the translator for a few casks of wine. It had told him that he must live alone until the next ship dropped through the clear sky to the little space-port, until the Commission got his message demanding immediate relief. It had told him that if the music is good it is unwise to worry about the words.

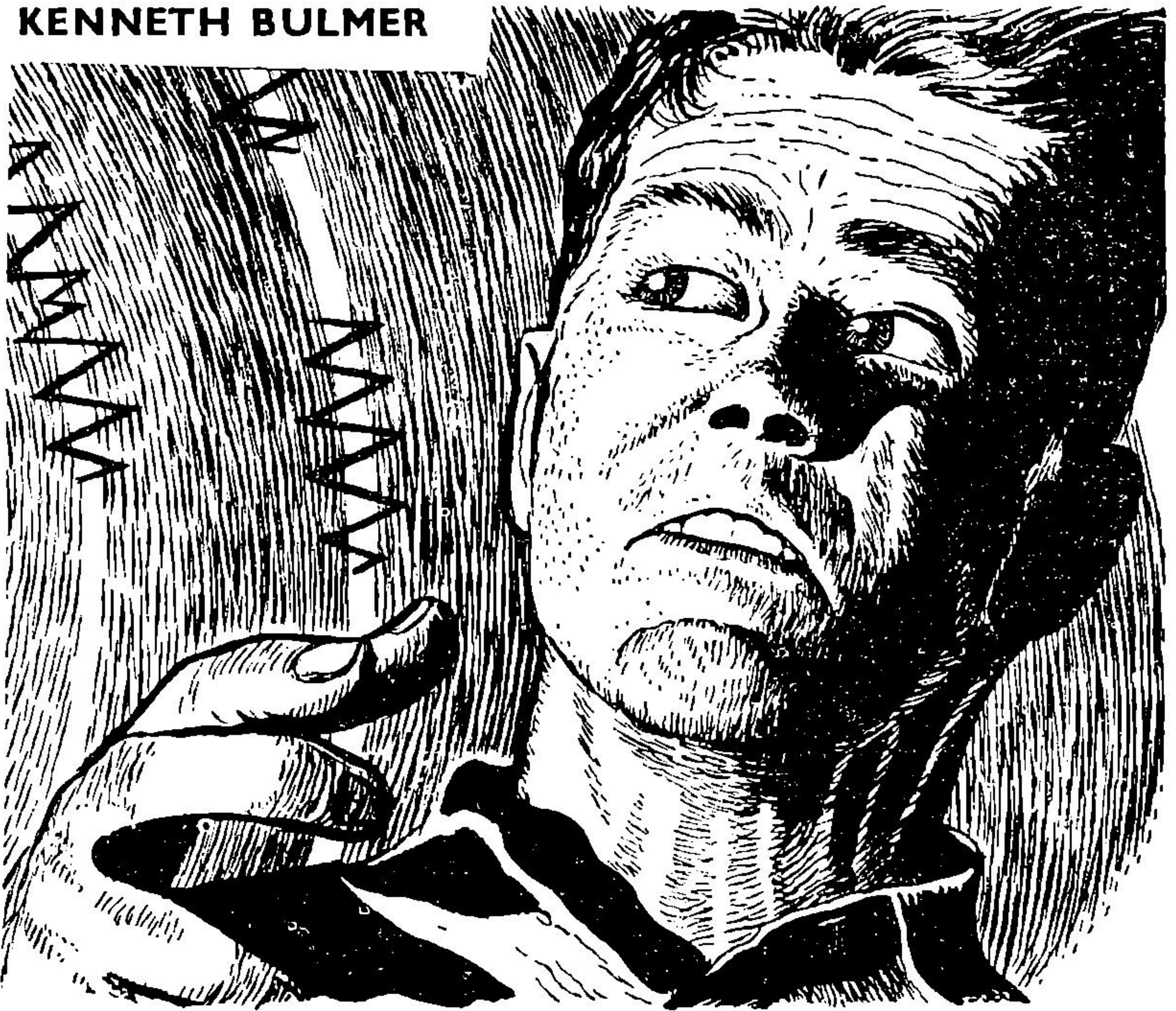
It had told him too much.

BERTRAM CHANDLER



BARR

KENNETH BULMER



Wisdom of the Gods

The priceless knowledge of a long dead civilisation had been sown in the minds of men—with disastrous results

Illustrated by Kenneth Barr

PROLOGUE

If the notion of abstract luck had not vanished from their civilisation's ideas many thousands of years ago, both Norval and Gundar would have considered themselves singularly unfortunate. As it was, they stared down at the forest-covered flanks of the planet that had providentially swung on to their screens, and tried to decide what best to do for the future.

There was no need of words between them. Like Ship, which

thought, planned and cared for them, they were sensitives, and dealt with the raw stuff of thought. Now, however, they must plan for themselves.

Around them, as Ship fled across the face of the planet, there seemed to be a sort of puffy vacuum, a sense of feather-stuffed deafness, where all thought would dry and expire. Ship was crippled, partially useless, and seeking desperately for a spot to land amongst the marching throngs of trees, and much of that mechanical frenzy was passed on to the two Crew.

Norval glanced down at the unreeling trees. His thought formed and was alive in his companion's mind.

"They don't look particularly strong trees. Tall and sappy. Perhaps Ship could land through them?"

Gundar thought: "Ship knows best."

"She failed to evade the enemy trap. We're crashing now because she was outwitted. She could be wrong about the trees, especially as she is wounded."

"What does the Galactic Intelligencer say about this planet?"

Immediately the thought had been framed and aimed, however casually, towards the Encyclopedia, the answer stood in both their brains. It was like suddenly remembering an old experience or piece of learning. The hope, however, was vain. The Encyclopedia inserted in their minds only the knowledge that nothing was on record about this planet.

"That doesn't signify," Gundar grumbled. "This is an old edition of the Galactic Intelligencer, and it has not been revised for some time." He looked down again. "It doesn't matter." His thoughts were sombre.

"However distasteful that summation may be, I'm forced to agree." There was an ironical overtone in Norval's thought-stream. "But had the Encyclopedia been the latest edition could it have helped us now? It is of use only when we have made planetfall."

"That's true. We can mould a world with the information in the Encyclopedia. Against almost any odds." Gundar looked across at the Galactic Encyclopedia. All he could see of it—all that he had ever seen—was the black and massive outer casing; but he knew that inside, tucked away in soft padding, lay the smooth walnut-sized egg of power that was the Encyclopedia itself. That protection was necessary. The knowledge of many civilisations lay within that dynamic egg and Gundar knew that should a naked flame play upon it the results would be spectacular. He looked up as Norval's thought rode in.

"I think we will not come out of this alive. I find I now regret many things."

"So do I," Gundar thought. "So do I."

Ship flew low over the forests. Before Crew could make any decision, before even fresh information could be sought from the Encyclopedia, Ship struck the tops of the trees. In a long vaporising channel of steam and smoke and destruction, she slid to rest.

The explosion that followed killed Ship, finally, and tossed scraps of metal and plastic in a wide circle of falling debris. Crew, also, were shattered in that detonation.

The Encyclopedia, in its strong metal case, fell through the sappy trees, brushing past their leaves which sprang directly from the trunks and branches without the aid of twigs. It struck swampy ground, rolled over half a dozen times and splashed at last to lie half-submerged in a muddy pool.

Presently, a dragonfly with wings that spanned two and a half feet bumped past overhead, inspected this addition to the forests, and blundered on. A spider and two cockroaches crawled across its black surface.

In quite a short time the box had sunk beneath the surface. And, in a not very much longer time, as time went on this planet at this period, the scale trees toppled and were submerged as the land sank. Presently, all in good-time, the silted-over land rose again and more sappy trees grew and flourished. In turn, they fell and were crushed and were replaced. In thirty years sufficient vegetation grew that would, in time to come, compact down to a layer an inch thick. As the slow years passed, like water running thickly from a bag, the box was crushed in its turn. But the builders of Ship and the Encyclopedia had builded well. Even under the enormous pressures and temperatures that groaned under the surface, the walnut-sized egg of power was not exposed to a naked flame. It lay, imprisoned, quiescent, unused.

Time passed.

About two hundred and fifty million years, give or take ten million.

CHAPTER I

Steam climbed lazily into the limpid summer air. The brightly-polished brass whistle gave two impatient chirrup. Walter Colborne clamped the telephone to his ear with one hand and with the other

pushed open the kiosk door and then strained his head as far as it would go to look down towards the station.

He waved his arm as energetically as the door would allow, hoping that Beagle would see the signal and understand. Old Beagle was a stickler for punctuality. The shiny parts of the lovingly petted engine caught the sunshine and speared glints into his eyes. He let the door swing shut as clicks crackled in his ear, and shouted: "No! No! Terminus, not Central!" He snorted fiercely and then calmed himself and said as sweetly as he could: "Look, miss, I'm in a hurry. I've been trying to get through for fifteen minutes and pressure will be down if I don't nip back smartly."

The cool, uncomprehending voice said: "I'm trying to connect you." A pause, then: "Pressure? What pressure?"

"This is an emergency," Colborne said. "They're cutting her up today—pressure? The Saucy Sal, of course. Old Beagle'll blow her dry if you don't put me through."

A peremptory blast splintered the air. Colborne opened the door and thrust the telephone out as far as it would go. "Hear that?" he bellowed into the mouthpiece. "You're making me lose all that steam—takes me hours to stoke it up—come on, miss—I'm only calling seventy miles, not seven thousand. This is an emergency."

He listened to the squawking voice.

"Modern efficiency!" he raged. The whistle blew again and Colborne recognised despairingly that already its power seemed weaker. "Come on!"

A shattering crescendo of noise like the Victoria Falls landing on acres of corrugated iron assailed his ear. He stumbled back, caught his elbow a nasty crack on the edge of the telephone directory shelf, swore, apologised, and then shook the phone wildly. It had that sodden, dull absence of sound that told him clearly that he wasn't going to get through to the hospital at all.

He stuck his finger in the dial and called the operator.

"What number do you want, please?"

The whistle chirruped again. To Colborne it sounded like old Beagle clearing his throat before addressing a meeting of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society.

He began to croak out some request or other, when the dispassionate voice said: "I'm putting you through now."

He glanced at his watch, the first time he had dared do so since they'd been five minutes late. They were now ten minutes late. More clicks and rattles on the line and a mounting, idiot's whine

that cackled at him. He shook the telephone. The engine whistle blew again: three short sharp bursts. He could see in his mind's eye the pressure gauge with the bottom fallen out.

"Oh, blast it!" Walter Colborne said, and then, into the phone:

"Never mind, never mind! I'll pop up to the hospital on my penny-farthing. It'll be quicker."

The operator said something to him. He looked shocked, and said: "I didn't know you cared." Then he started to leave the kiosk. At the door he was brought up violently in mid-stride. He was still holding the telephone and the cord hummed under strain. Slamming the receiver back on its cradle he stumbled out of the door and then went running up the street, waving his arms and shouting: "To the sack! To the sack!"

An old lady suffocating in violet lace scooped up her poodle, her sagging neck wagging, and stared after him, unutterably shocked. "Disgraceful!" she said severely, and then began soothing the bored and supercilious poodle.

Puffs of steam were rising like opaque balloons above the scalloped roof of the toy-town station and Colborne groaned. He could see the last carriage projecting beyond the end of the ticket office. The gaudy yellow and red paintwork was dulled by contrast with the brilliance of the passengers.

"Bunch of kids again," he grumbled. "Old George'll slay 'em if they mess up his paint."

He came galloping up to the engine, panting and red-faced, and hurled himself aboard. Beagle was reaching up again to the whistle cord.

"I'm here!" Colborne shrieked. "We need that steam! Think of my blisters."

Beagle turned and peered at Colborne. His long yellow face turned from side to side as he tried to see through the unmisted patches on his glasses. Colborne found a rag and swiped the glasses haphazardly. "I'm here. Let's go."

Rodney Winthrop, his red and green flags tangled up awkwardly under his arm, his whistle dangling against his hideous and aesthetically revolting shirt, put his head in at the driving cab. He was tapping his huge hunter and shaking his head.

"Crass slackness, Walter," he observed loftily.

Colborne started back, kicking a spurt of coal dust over Winthrop's cheerfully pugnacious face.

"Sorry, Winny," Colborne sang out. "I'm ready. Why don't you blow that thing instead of massaging your middle-aged spread?"

Winthrop was not shaken. He brushed the coal dust off his face. He shook the hunter violently at Colborne.

"Look at this. Ten minutes late. We'll lose our licence to operate if this goes on."

"Well, why don't you cut back to your cage?" Colborne enquired. "Those kids are probably chewing the upholstery by now."

Beagle said sadly: "No upholstery on this train."

Winthrop said: "Bah! You need a little of the rigid training in mathematics that'll——"

"Oh, stow it, Winny!" Colborne picked up the fire shovel. "Go on, Beagle," he added. "Start without him."

"Can't start without being properly, correctly and duly flagged out," Beagle said.

"Blow your whistle, then, Winny," commanded Colborne.

This time Colborne gave Winthrop no time to say "Bah!" He leant down, holding the shovel out with his left hand to maintain balance, seized the whistle from its coy perch on Winthrop's stomach, and blew as hard as he could.

"Here! I say——" began Winthrop.

Beagle jumped as though he had backed into the fire door. Colborne waved the shovel. "All aboard!" he shouted. "Mind the doors! Right away, guard!"

What might have occurred then was anybody's guess. Any possible display of temper was providentially nipped in the bud by the tall, angular, leaning form of Lord Ashley. The gold leaf on his cap glowed green in the sunshine. He, too, was carrying a hunter open in his hand. It was, if possible, even larger than the one owned by Winthrop.

"I suppose you chaps know you're fifteen minutes late," he began conversationally.

"Just off, Jeffers," Beagle said promptly.

"What's the hold up?"

"Technical hitch," Colborne said, beginning to shovel coal into the fire like a man possessed.

"Technical hitch, eh?" Lord Ashley said. Then, as an after-thought, he said: "What sort?"

"Lack of pressure in the boiler owing to low firing," Colborne said, and smiled brilliantly.

"Well, cut along to your cage, Winny," Lord Ashley ordered. "I'll see her off from this end." He gestured imperiously to Beagle who immediately flew at his levers like a barmaid five minutes before closing time.

The Saucy Sal emitted an anguished wail. Steam hissed. Visibility became overcast. Slowly, so slowly that each separate movement became an individual jerking, the driving wheels turned. The train groaned and stopped. Then it bucked, buffers clashed, metal rang, and then the train bounded forward. At once it seemed to repent of this hasty movement, slowed and, one after the other like a salute of guns, the carriages crashed upon one another.

At last, chuffing gently, Saucy Sal rolled away. Lord Ashley vaulted nimbly into the cab and stood, swaying upon the plate.

"I say, Jeffers! You're the Station Master——"

"Quite right. If the Station Master can't ride on the train I'd like to know who can." Lord Ashley blew his sandy and nicotine stained whiskers out as though just completing the final move of a brilliant chess victory.

"I suppose Winny got aboard?" enquired Colborne, between shovelfuls of coal.

"Couldn't say," said Lord Ashley.

"Well, he's the guard," Beagle said, his long face doubtful. "How will we——"

"Oh, I've got a watch and a whistle," said Lord Ashley grandly. He mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"What about flags?"

"No. I don't, Beagle, make a habit of carrying a red and green flag about stuck in my pocket—unlike some people I could mention."

"Well," Beagle stuck to his guns. "If we haven't got a guard or the flags, we can't start up again once we've stopped."

Past them now telegraph poles began to flash faster and faster. Beagle twisted and pulled and peered at dials. Lord Ashley wedged himself comfortably into a crevice and gazed joyfully down the line. Colborne threw slashing layers of coal into the fire, beginning to sweat, feeling his blisters, wondering why, just because he wasn't a scientist, they all considered him the natural choice for fireman.

Winthrop, as a mathematician, had opted for the job of guard, with its precise details of time-keeping. Beagle, as a nuclear physicist, was the obvious choice for driver, and Lord Ashley, as the member with the money, was naturally Station Master, Chief Organiser and Great Cham of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society.

Even the ticket inspector was a chartered accountant, the signalman a radio-astronomy genius, the ticket collector a public school headmaster and the wheel tapper a senior metallurgist for a Steel Company. It all worked out very conveniently. Except when it had come to finding a stoker.

So the member who was a historiographer—ugly word; Colborne much preferred historian—was chosen by popular acclaim to fill that important post. Colborne supposed, between arm-cracking throwings of coal, that he couldn't really grumble. He wanted the post of assistant to the chair of History—Modern—at the University, and if throwing shovelfuls of coal into an obsolete railway engine was the way to get it, then he was prepared to go along. And he rather cared for the antiquarian flavour of it all; he had a genuine love of the valuable relic and he had joined the Society long before he'd had any idea that there might be anything in it for him personally.

Not that there had been much in anything for him so far in his life. It seemed, looking back on it—which he did as infrequently as possible—to consist almost solely of study, study and more study, with the steady hurdles of examinations breasted and flown over with deceptive ease. Because history had attracted him to the exclusion of everything else those things appertaining to history came easily. All else was a struggle. Within the framework of that dedication, his greatest problems had arisen in choosing his period. When nearly all the past epochs of recorded history were cramful with wonders and fascinations, how then to choose just one and cut himself off from the joys of all the others?

Finally, in deciding upon Modern History, with emphasis upon the Napoleonic and attendant phases, he had maintained a close touch with all new and advancing thought upon all other periods. It was exhausting work. He did not notice the strain; he could happily gloss the abstracts referring to work done on investigating periods covering centuries in a morning and arise refreshed; to fill in his income tax form took a whole day of exhausting toil and usually ended in hopeless chaos and a shamefaced pilgrimage to Winthrop's ready and knowing way with figures.

He became aware that Beagle was saying something over the bucketing crash and roar of the train.

He glanced professionally at the gauge. "Pressure's okay," he said, and leaned on his shovel. "You say something, Beagle?"

"Asked you how your sister was."

"Oh. Couldn't get through. Some nitwit of a girl on the line." Memory made him indignant. "You talk about your precious modern civilisation—if there wasn't a blasted telephone I'd never have agreed to come away in the first place. Foul invention, the telephone. Useless when you want it; always ringing when you're trying to get on with something."

"I suppose you'd prefer a relay system of post horses," Beagle said, digging.

"Huh," Colborne said, wiping his forehead.

Beagle peered through the oval window set into the cab. Then he reached up and began pulling on the whistle cord like a madman. The whistle shrilled and tooted and nearly played "Alexander's Rag-time Band."

The pressure gauge sagged. Colborne cast a malevolent look at Beagle and began hurling coal into the firebox like a maniac.

"Get off the line!" screamed Lord Ashley, shaking his fist. Whipping past like disappearing targets, a group of laughing girls on horseback flickered into Colborne's sight and out again. The train rocked around a bend. Smoke and sparks shot from her funnel. The wind and noise rose to a bedlam.

Lord Ashley leaned inboard. "I say, Beagle!"

"Got to make up time."

"Yes, I know. The confounded Railways won't let us operate the line if we don't keep to schedule. But I'd rather like to arrive at the Bay in one piece."

"The old Saucy Sal is pretty steady on her pins," Colborne said reassuringly. The whole cab swayed and lurched as he spoke. He dropped the shovel and gripped the nearest support. It happened to be Beagle. Colborne felt the physicist's trousers sliding through his grasp. He gripped tighter.

"Hey! Stop pulling my trousers off!"

"Sorry, Beagle."

The train rounded the bend and straightened up. Colborne grasped his shovel again.

"Anyway," Beagle said, going back to his lookout. "I hope your sister's all right. Pretty rough for you."

"Yes." Colborne did not elaborate. He put the shovel down again, took up the rake and smoothed up the firebed. Then he began laying down a nice even mat of coal.

Past them now, the swollen hills, under their coverings of green, were flattening out. Soon the line would swing round and decline gently to the little bay where there was good swimming and sun-bathing on the sands.

He could not hear the passengers in the carriages; but he could imagine them chattering as they gathered their beach baskets and wraps and children, preparatory to descending upon the sands and desecrating them. He'd caught a glimpse of girls in sun-tops and bronzed men in bathing trunks. Happy holidaymakers. He sweated



over more coal and then found he had to laugh. He was doing this for pleasure.

He was bending over the open firebox, the shovel swinging in short economical strokes. Lord Ashley was looking out of the cab on one side and Beagle on the other. Colborne took a crisp swipe into the coal in the tender, swung, straightened his arms and shot the shovelful neatly onto the fire. As it fell he saw, quite distinctly and with a sharp clarity that later amazed him, a single large lump of coal strike and split. From the interior thus revealed he saw a smooth egg-shaped object spring out.

He thought: "I wonder what that is?"

Then it hit the flames.

The whole world exploded around him.

CHAPTER II

Walter Colborne recovered consciousness lying flat on his back.

Looking down on him was a ring of serious faces.

He smiled weakly and tried to sit up. He was lying on the

floor of the old inn—which now served Teas—with a cushion under his head. His head felt as though it were afire.

“Easy, Walter. There—that’s it. Steady, boy.”

Beagle had a hand under one shoulder and Lord Ashley a hand under the other. Winthrop was glaring at him anxiously. Colborne shook his head, waited until the bells had gone down and then took the proffered cup of tea. He refrained from saying: “Ah, that’s better.” The effort wasn’t worth the splitting stab of headache. The little tea-room hummed with people.

“I’m all right,” he said at last.

“You look it,” Lord Ashley commented. “White as a sheet and trembling all over.”

“I’ll live,” Colborne said jocularly. It fell flat. The accident had taken all the jollity out of the day. Lord Ashley was a good egg, though. The old peer might look like a hungry and uncared for eagle, but he had a keen brain behind that lined face and his worldly interests—when he remembered them—were of a philanthropic nature. Colborne hoped that, as a trustee, he would be philanthropic in the little matter of the job for a young and promising historian.

“What happened, anyway?” demanded Rodney Winthrop. “I’d only just got over my Olympic hurdling into the cage. You’re a dangerous lunatic as a driver, Beagle,” he finished severely.

“I got us here on time, didn’t I?” Beagle’s glasses caught the sun and flashed most diabolically.

“The trouble with you, Beagle,” Colborne said cuttingly, “is that like any other pure scientist you have no personal regard for your own person.” He snorted, held his head and said: “Damn!”

“Anyway,” Beagle said, choosing to ignore the old argument. “What did happen? All I saw was a reflected flash from the fire-box and then you were lying all of a heap across the coal in the tender.”

“Much the same as my experience,” Lord Ashley confirmed. “I heard no explosion, whatever.”

Memory struck hard upon Colborne’s brain. He sat up sharply. “Murdering idiots!” he exclaimed. He gestured with the cup and tea rose in a golden tide to the rim. “I’ll sue! I’ll have every last penny!”

“Who?” someone said exasperatedly.

“Who? Why, the Coal Board, of course, who else?”

Winthrop patted his stomach through the violent shirt, and said patiently: “And what exactly have the Coal Board done?”

"Done! I saw it quite clearly." Colborne suddenly realised just what had happened, and he shook abruptly with reaction. His teeth chattering, he said more calmly: "I saw a hand grenade mixed up with the coal. A Mills bomb. It fell into the fire and went off."

"A hand grenade!"

"That's what it was. Left over from the war, I expect. I'd just slung a shovelful of coal in, and I saw the bomb fly out, a smooth egg-shaped bomb, and as soon as it touched the flames it went off."

A new voice broke in. "Have you ever seen a hand grenade, young man?"

Colborne said, looking up: "No. At least, not before this morning."

He was looking at a short, chunky man wearing khaki shorts and an open-necked sports shirt. His face was square, good-humoured, thin of lip and firm of cheek, and there were the crows'-feet of the out-of-door man at the sides of his eyes. He looked about fifty and to have been a Pukka Sahib type before the British left India.

"I have. Many times. They are sectioned into squares by deep grooves so that, on explosion, they will separate and thus become a sort of shrapnel. They are not smooth, as the object you saw was."

"It was in coal," Colborne objected. "Coal dust could have filled in these grooves. It would have looked smooth then."

"Did it have a lever projecting from the top? Was there a ring?"

"I didn't see anything like that."

"Also, you say it exploded as soon as it struck the flames. A grenade wouldn't explode unless the pin had been removed and the lever allowed to rise. Then the delay——"

"Well," Colborne said huffily. "If it wasn't a British grenade, it might have been a foreigner."

The soldier looked taken aback for a moment. Colborne pressed his advantage, taking a malicious pleasure out of it. "After all, we're not the only people damnfool enough to go in for killing fellow human beings."

This nettled the soldier. He frowned down on Colborne. "I take your meaning," he said coldly. "I'm sorry you had your accident; but I am not convinced it was caused by a grenade. What you have described does not tally with the facts about any type of hand bomb."

A little doubt had been nagging at Colborne. Now, he said slowly: "You know, I could have sworn that the bomb actually popped out of a lump of coal. The coal split and this thing popped out like—well, like a nut from its shell." He paused, and then said: "And it was pretty difficult to see clearly against the glow of the fire—all orange and blue—but it looked to be about the size of a walnut."

The soldier said something that sounded like a polar bear sneezing, and walked off, shaking his head. Beagle said: "Out of the coal, Walter? I suppose you realise what you're saying?"

"Of course."

"Ah, you know, Walter," Winthrop began diffidently, swinging his whistle on its chain. "You know—you might have thought you saw all this, you might have imagined there was this—ah—bomb. You might have fainted from the exertions of stoking and—ah—worry over your sister."

Before Colborne could voice his indignant denial, a fresh voice broke in. Fresh and refreshing. Colborne looked up and immediately forgot all that was going on in a mere adoring gaze. He had had little to do with women in the past, for most of the obvious reasons; for the first time he was glad of that. He could start off with a clean sheet.

This girl had the sort of shape the world should be in.

Her bathing suit and light wrap did nothing to obstruct a rapid decision on that point.

She was standing near an open window and the sea breeze caught and played with her short auburn hair. Her smoky eyes were fixed on the group around Colborne in perplexity.

He slowly awoke to what she was saying. She must have just that moment walked in and heard the tail end of the conversation.

"But I saw the explosion," she was saying in a low, modulated voice that carried clearly to them all. "I was standing up in the first carriage, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sea, you know those open carriages are quite high, and I saw this very bright flash from the engine and then this young man fell backwards into the coal. I only saw the flash indirectly, as most of it was obscured by his head." She finished: "But there was an explosion."

The soldier had drifted back. Now he said: "Did you hear it?" He looked around, challengingly. "Did anyone hear an explosion?"

The shaking of heads spread around the group.

"No," the girl said. "I didn't hear it. But I saw it. Quite plainly."

"All right," Lord Ashley said judicially. "So there was an explosion without sound. And Walter here fell into the coal." He moved his hand in the air helplessly. "Are we agreed so far?"

Affirmation greeted this.

"Then we are told that a smooth egg-shaped object the size of a walnut fell into the fire. This gentleman here, ah——"

"Graham, Thomas Graham, Brigadier."

"——Brigadier Graham states emphatically that this could **not** be a bomb." Lord Ashley pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger and looked down it at Colborne. "And, finally, Walter says he saw this egg jump out of a piece of coal."

Winthrop said: "Probably two pieces. This thing, whatever it was, was caught between them and as they fell through the air, they parted to release it."

"It didn't look like that to me," said Colborne rebelliously. "More like a solid chunk of coal, which split open as it struck. I really throw that stuff in, you know."

"That's as may be," put in Beagle. "But do you understand what you are saying? I mean, comprehend?"

"Why shouldn't it have come out of the coal?" said an onlooker who had not spoken before, a mild-looking little man with shorts that were too large for him and a T-shirt that was too small. "I'm always finding funny things in the coal. Though it's nearly all slate these days." He laughed weakly, and then froze at the ensuing silence.

"Not *in* the coal," Winthrop said impatiently. "I'm prepared to go along with you that something fell into the fire and exploded, Walter; but I agree with Beagle. It couldn't have come out of the solid coal. It just couldn't."

The girl said firmly: "I've had some pretty fierce bangs from the fire at times."

"Trapped gas, probably," Beagle said. "And it makes a noise. Walter says his explosion was silent. And no-one else heard anything."

"Who would, over the racket the Saucy Sal was making?" Colborne heaved himself up, wincing. "I'll have to make that phone call. Ow, my head!"

He had made the move partly because he did have to find out how June was getting on, but also because he wanted to stop this rapid flow of talk, this question and theory, and get away somewhere to think out what actually had happened. Although he did not think so, he could have been mistaken. He had a king-size headache,

though. That, he knew. He began to walk a little unsteadily towards the phone booth at the rear.

"Are you all right?" someone called.

"Sure. I'll probably lose my temper more easily trying to call seventy miles than before. But that's life."

"If it's long distance," the girl's voice came to him from the region behind his right ear. "Let me get the number whilst you sit down."

He turned at once, ignoring the pain the movement occasioned in his head. He smiled. "That is good of you." He gave her the number. "It's Saint Angelo's hospital. My sister—that's Miss June Colborne—is having an operation today. Call will take time, I know. I've tried. Thanks a lot."

She smiled and went into the phone booth. Thoughts jumbled through his head. Before he allowed himself to think entirely of the new girl who had come into his life—he thought about it like that without any self-consciousness—he took time out to convince himself that he had in fact seen that enigmatic egg-shaped object fall from the split in a hitherto unbroken piece of coal.

And he knew what it implied.

Being a historian did not automatically debar him from knowledge of pre-history.

The phone booth door swung open and the girl put her head out.

"Hah," Colborne said. "Having trouble?"

"No." She spoke normally. "I've got the surgeon on the line. He's able to speak for a few minutes. Lucky." Her voice was controlled. "Lucky, I mean that he could talk to you at all. I've spoken to Sister and she's very helpful. I do hope your sister is through the operation successfully."

Colborne said: "Thank you," and took the outstretched phone.

The news was not bad. That, at least, was something to be thankful for. June was still under, but the operation itself had been successful; it remained to be seen if they'd got rid of all the growth. It was frightening to know that a tiny pinhead of diseased cellular matter left behind could start the whole filthy business over again. And June was such a good kid, bright and jolly and full of fun—Colborne said: "Thank you," and put the phone back. He stood for a moment, hand resting on the black plastic, mind quite blank.

The girl's hesitant, fearful-of-intruding voice roused him. "Everything all right?"

He swung round and came out into the room. "Yes, thanks. As well as can be expected at this time." He looked at her, and at

once it became easier to obey the stern instructions June had given him. "Don't worry," she'd said. "Don't be miserable. I'll be all right. Just go on your own sweet stupid way, laughing at everything. If you go all morose it won't help me at all and will injure you. We Colbornes weren't designed for sadness."

"I hope she gets well quickly."

"Not much hope of that, I'm afraid." He moved briskly towards the girl. "Anyway, she wouldn't thank either of us for getting maudlin. My name's Walter Colborne, as you've probably been made aware by my anxious friends." He gestured towards the group who were now busily arguing the pros and cons of the 'silent explosion' and explaining to the mild little man just why an object of that sort couldn't be found in unbroken coal. He laughed. "I don't care what they decide. I know what I saw."

"I'm Sally Picton."

Before she could say more, Lord Ashley spoke, leaning over as always. "Thank goodness you are fit, Walter. Funny things can result from a knock on the head."

"I didn't have a knock on the head, Jeffers," Colborne said testily.

"Once knew a man," went on Lord Ashley, unheeding, "took a crack on the skull at polo. Woke up and thought he was Gertie Millar. Terrible. Wanted to sing in the mess."

Intrigued, and noticing Sally Picton's little smile, Colborne said: "Well. What happened?"

"Oh, he got over it. Thought he was George Robey. That was all right. Kept tearing off his trousers before."

Everyone laughed. Colborne swallowed a couple of pills and drowned them with the remains of his tea.

"Will the train leave on time now?" Sally said. "I don't want to be late back. I've a job on this evening."

Colborne looked disappointed. "Job," he said. "I was hoping—that is——"

"Yes?" she enquired, more than a hint of laughter dimpling the corners of her mouth.

Colborne swallowed. "Well—I was hoping that you might care to have dinner with me tonight." He sat in a state of suspended animation after he had said it.

"Oh—I'd love to! But I've a job. The Mayor's to be at the dance, giving away prizes, and that I mustn't miss."

He felt acute disappointment. "I see. Well, I'll probably be at the dance, if my headache eases off. See you there?"

"That'll be fine. But I can't promise to stay long."

So bang went any chance of pressing her to stay for a bite afterwards. The holiday camp where the Ancient Railways Preservation Society held an honoured position ran dances almost every night. If she couldn't skip just one, then either the dance must be very important to her or Walter Colborne very unimportant. Gloomily he conjectured that it was probably a mixture of both. She had found a beach wrap now and was concealing much of that gorgeous figure. She smiled brightly at him.

"I'll just go and collect my gear, Mister Colborne. Sure you feel fit enough to stoke the train? Someone else——"

"I'm all right," he said gruffly. "Miss Picton."

CHAPTER III

The dance that night was a dismal flop—at least as far as Walter Colborne was concerned. His headache had not gone. It persisted. He had changed into his single remaining respectable suit and now, feeling like a dressed-up toothache, stood with Winthrop and George Friant watching the dancers.

George Friant, it was a safe bet, always had a smear of paint about his person. He wore a small goatee beard—small and goatee because, as he would frankly admit, he couldn't grow more—and a tensed up manner. He said: "I don't know what's come over you blokes on the run today."

"I've caught your headache, Walter," said Winthrop.

"If it's anything like mine, I feel sorry for you."

The little village of Nether-Ambledon might not own many shops, or houses or churches, but nearby it did claim the holiday camp. This, in a roundabout way, had brought a measure of prosperity, so that the Mayor of the market town had no hesitation in descending upon this out of the way spot. Not much had been done about saving the four and three-quarter miles of railway running from Nether-Ambledon over the promontory's neck to the Bay, cutting off a ten-mile road detour, until the Society had stepped in willingly, and Lord Ashley had put his hand in his pocket—again.

Resplendent in blue serge and chain of office, the Mayor stepped forward. It was something to do with presentation of prizes, and the dance was to be interrupted for fifteen minutes for that, and to be further held-up whilst the dancers fed lightly on sausages on sticks and scraps of sandwiches. Colborne felt tired and his headache had

now settled down to a low pitched whine in his head, like a jet-liner forever taking off from his cranium.

"I feel awful," Winthrop said.

"So you observed, Winny," Colborne said unkindly. "But you didn't get a mysterious explosion to knock you out. If you haven't got any sympathy for me, I'm right out of it myself."

"Talking about that, are you positive, now, that you did see this egg?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've been thinking. I have enough respect for your powers of observation to accept that. Point one: What was it? Have you any theories? Point Two: I won't go along with you on your assertion that it jumped out of a piece of coal that just previously was in one piece."

Colborne said seriously: "I can't prove it came from a solid chunk of coal. I've no theories on what it could have been. But this I do know—I saw it."

The dancers formed a waiting semi-circle, with the pot-bellied little M.C. in the centre. He raised one hand, showing his dentures from a face like a suet pudding.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began. Colborne wondered why Jeffers hadn't turned up. "It is my great pleasure to welcome here tonight—" and so on. But Colborne wasn't listening. The pounding in his skull was rocketing about as though the Saucy Sal herself was imprisoned in his brain, and sparks were jumping before his eyes. He stood up, only hazily aware of his surroundings, and saw Winthrop holding his head, his face grey. The M.C. finished speaking with a verbal flourish.

The clapping sounded like surf upon the shore of time. Colborne for a horrified moment thought they were all slapping him about the head. He looked towards the cleared space. The Mayor, beaming, was standing there; but even Colborne could see that the man's smile was forced, and his hands were shaking.

"Ladies and Gentlemen—thank you—you must excuse me—terrible headache——"

What the Mayor was saying came to Colborne on washes of pain. So the Mayor had a headache, too. Colborne looked around the ring of dancers. Quite a number of them were holding their heads, or wiping their foreheads, and one or two were unashamedly holding wet handkerchiefs to their temples. Odd, this headache



business. Must be heavy weather coming, a depression in the atmosphere.

The Mayor was still speaking; his face had gone scarlet and his eyes were nearly all white—the irises a mere dot in the centre of each staring orb. Orb! Colborne struggled to bring himself under control. And then any struggle for attention outwards, any desire to do anything else but listen, was shattered by what the Mayor was saying—screaming rather.

“Horrible! It’s too much—I can’t—*These things cannot be!*” The Mayor gasped and choked, wrenching his collar open and breaking his chain so that the bright links and baubles clashed to the polished floor. No-one moved. They were all staring at the Mayor as though hypnotised.

“The Galaxy is insane to allow them! No! No! No! It cannot be so! No! I can’t—*no man should know!*”

The Mayor spread both arms wide, the fists clenched so that with the violence of the movement the blood from nail-punctures spattered outwards. He stood for a moment, rigid, the cords in his neck like the roots of a tree, his head flung impossibly far back so that he was gazing blindly at the ceiling.

And then he fell.

And with his fall, people all over the dance-floor began to fall, to collapse, to slump into unconsciousness.

Rodney Winthrop slid soundlessly down the bar, and Friant's drink poured over his recumbent body.

At least fifty people had fainted. Colborne rushed towards the Mayor, shouting to Friant to look after Winthrop.

He lifted the man's head, horrified by the blank fixity of the gaze—the eyeballs had rolled up—and felt for his pulse. He could feel nothing. Desperately, not thinking, he pushed and pulled the shirt away and listened for a heartbeat. Nothing. He looked up at the crowding dancers.

"He's dead," he said bemusedly.

Only then did he realise that his headache had gone; his brain was crystal clear.

CHAPTER IV

The buildings housing the department were a terraced row of faded noble mansions; their stuccoed walls and pillars, iron railings and delicately ribbed fanlights all sadly in need of attention and their chimney stacks a potential menace to pedestrians. But for all that, they still looked noble with a kind of solemn grandeur in their decay—and they were a perfect mask for the department's activities. John Roland, following Sir William's secretary into the inner office, felt a rightness about the place, a belonging that all the concrete and plastic could never in a thousand years have engendered. Even though he pressed for futurism in his thinking, he wanted that futuristic outlook to be tempered by the lessons of the past.

Sir William looked up, smiling under his heavy moustache, and waited until the girl, smiling in reply, had gone. No-one could help liking Sir William. Had his governmental duties lain along the public path, he would have found a softness and a kind line in the cartoonists' bitter pens.

"Good to see you, John," he said, indicating a chair. Roland sat, feeling the figure of his chief as the central part of the office, of the department, and, if the truth was told, of his life. Roland, as an agent of N.I.5, sometimes needed another brain and conviction on which to fall back when the going became tough. Except when he was out on a case alone—and then there was no help in all the world for him except what he alone carried in his mind.

Sir William began without preamble. "You saw that television

incident last night, John? Yes—well, M.I.5 are breathing down our necks, so is the F.B.I. and their nuclear big bosses. I tell you, this is serious. We must have an answer ready in twenty-four hours.” He looked crisp and efficient as always; but Roland recognised the little signs that told him that in all probability Sir William had been up all night, working and arguing. Nuclear Intelligence department Five—a counterpart of the better-known M.I.5—often became mashed between the big wheels. Radioactive fallout from an accident; missing secret papers; a great but absent-minded scientist to be discreetly watched—these and many more similar problems fell to their lot, and there were invariably carping critics.

Roland said: “The youngsters didn’t make too much sense to me, sir. But I’m aware that work along the idea that speed and not time is the fourth dimension is attracting a good deal of attention.”

“Yes.” Sir William leaned back, a reluctant admission of tiredness. “Those boys on the Quiz Programme had too many facts at their finger-tips—facts that were not known to the Quiz-master—facts, my dear Roland, that weren’t known by myself until last night. Good God! Here we are, sitting quietly watching a Quiz Programme, and, abruptly, the lads start giving answers that don’t make sense; all gibberish. I’ll admit that I wondered what education was coming to these days that they should so garble scientific knowledge. And then—v.i.p.’s start an avalanche. The latest research work is being bandied about on the television! What is my department doing? How can we expect to keep our nuclear secrets if even young children are able to blab about them—and so on and so on.”

“You’ve questioned the boys?”

“Yes. Funny thing was that they all knew a little of the subject—you recall the programme, they talked in turn—but they absolutely refuse to tell us where they heard it.”

“Why? Surely, their parents——?”

“The boys had been camping, a school holiday, and came back to town last night especially for this show. Their school stands a good chance of winning the coveted title ‘Cock o’ the College’.” He chuckled. “Usually it’s a pretty good programme; amazing what the young devils know. But this time——” He sighed. “This time I’m afraid it was a little too good.”

“You sound as though there’s no immediate danger of——”

“Oh. Good Lord, no! We know where they picked it up all right. They’d been camping out near the new Nuclear Power Station at Polder. They must have been talking to someone from there.

You know what these modern kids are like. Anyway, the police and security are tying up those ends. Our job, John, is to find out if anything else has been leaked. It may have been accidental—or the boys may have overheard more than we bargain for. You understand me. Nearest village is Nether-Ambleton.” He shook his head. “When I think of those boys calmly spouting secrets of the Realm over the television network—all my security hackles rise.”

“At least, I feel sure that no-one took them seriously.”

“Perhaps. All kinds of people watch TV, you know.”

“And you say they absolutely refuse to divulge their source of information?”

“Not exactly refuse. They all maintain that they have spoken to no-one about such matters. The little devils all sound innocent, too. But you know what modern kids——”

Roland interrupted his chief. “Nether-Ambleton. I’ve got it. One of those names—you know—nothing important. In the paper this morning. The local Mayor had a fit and died at a holiday camp dance last night. Wouldn’t have read it at all but for the name.”

“It’s unlikely that ties in with—still——” Sir William gestured vaguely. “You can always check.”

“I’ll do that.” Roland always would check; he was built that way. “It’s funny, all the same, that the lads won’t tell us where they picked up the information. They must know we’re aware they were camping near a Nuclear Power Station. Two and two make four—oh, well, that’s life, I suppose.”

He rose to his feet and shook hands with Sir William. As he went out, the briefing so characteristically terminated, he looked back to see Sir William engrossed in the reports that covered his desk. Amidst all their light-hearted way of referring to things, it was frightening to recall the dangers against which they struggled, the consequences of a single insignificant slip to the peace of the world.

The Saucy Sal gave a demure sneeze, and steam, all silver and silky soft, sighed from her cylinders. Beagle put his long yellow face out of the cab and shouted: “That’ll do! All right below?”

A voice, lowing like an unmilked cow, rumbled from some misty region between the vast driving wheels. Two dungaree’d legs twisted and scrabbled, and then Walter Colborne heaved himself out backwards like a drunken crab from its lodging shell. His face was artfully camouflaged with grease and dirt. He was holding an extremely large and formidable spanner. One thumb was jammed

into his mouth and through the obstruction he was swearing, fluently, ungracefully and very, very determinedly.

Rodney Winthrop scrambled out on the other side of the Saucy Sal and, jumping the rails, came round and clapped a hand on Colborne's shoulder. "Any thumb left, Walter?"

"Mumble-mumble—dangerous maniac—hammer——"

"You'll lose the nail," Winthrop prophesied cheerfully. "Bound to. I caught you an awful whack."

"Butchering again, Winny?" Lord Ashley's cheerful voice floated down to the group around the venerable steam engine, and they looked up to see the equally venerable peer agilely hopping across the rails of the terminus, his angular frame, as always, leaning into some non-existent wind. He was wearing an extremely small bowler hat with an extremely curly brim. His trousers were tight, his coat exquisitely cut; revealing a profusion of waistcoat, and he sported a fresh carnation in his buttonhole. As he used to say, chuckling: "These youngsters need a *real* Edwardian to show 'em how to dress."

Walter Colborne took his injured thumb from his mouth long enough to greet Lord Ashley, and to add: "Winny's a fumble-fingered idiot and oughtn't to be trusted with a hammer." He put the thumb back and glared at Winthrop balefully.

"What's the news, Jeffers?" asked Beagle.

"There'll be an inquest, of course. You'll have to be there, Walter. The poor chap died in your arms."

"Not exactly," Winthrop butted in. "From what I heard, he was dead before he hit the floor."

Colborne took his thumb out and rubbed it on his dungarees. He said: "I don't know. It wasn't very pleasant. Anyway, anyone know why all those people fainted? I mean—it wasn't the Mayor, poor devil. They were keeling over before he died."

"My headache was too much for me," Winthrop said. "Thank God it's gone now."

Lord Ashley unfolded his copy of the *Times*. "It's in here," he said. "Small para. Interesting item here——" The others read the report of the amazing gibberish—or knowledge—spouted by the boys in a TV Quiz Programme.

"Interesting," Beagle sat down on the Saucy Sal's board and crunched the paper up over his knees. His eyes took on a glassy expression.

Lord Ashley was about to make some heated remark about his

copy of the *Times*, when Colborne nudged him. Winthrop was awkwardly leaning over Beagle, trying to read the item.

"It's all about space-time and Einstein and stuff," Colborne said. "They'll be dreaming for another hour. And I don't know if the old steam-kettle will run."

"Mathematical preoccupation is a disease with these engine-drivers," Lord Ashley said disapprovingly. The twinkle in his eye warmed Colborne. "I fail to comprehend how they can talk about parsecs and novas and Cepheid variables when the much more absorbing topics of expansion co-efficients and diameter-ratios of driving-wheels, not to mention the sheer exhilaration of driving the Queen of the Rails, is theirs for the asking." He turned on Colborne. "Do you?"

Colborne chuckled. "I prefer to get inside the minds of, say, Marshal Ney and D'Erlon when their charges failed. Sort of salutary experience, the old red line." He added quickly: "But, of course, I know when to talk engine talk all right."

"Well, Walter. Talk it now. When will the Saucy Sal be ready?"

"Ask Beagle and Winny on that score. They're the experts. I'm just the fireman."

"I will." Lord Ashley prodded the two scientists with his silver knobbed cane. "I say," he said sweetly, "we've a schedule to maintain. And the engine isn't working and you two loaf around——"

Beagle looked up, a film over his eyes. He was mumbling to himself. "Schedule?" he said. "Oh—the Sal's all right. We'll be on time this afternoon." He stabbed at the *Times*. "But this is fantastic! Children talking about theories and ideas that aren't even acknowledged to exist by many of the leading brains—and it makes sense, too, in a twisted sort of way. I'd like to know where they got their information."

Winthrop drew his attention again to the paper and they went off once more, jotting notes in the margin and beginning to argue. Colborne looked at them in disgust. For all that they were among the brainiest—as he would disparagingly phrase it—scientists in the country, at times they carried that near-genius with a touch of juvenility. He said firmly: "If the Sal's okay then I'm off for a wash." He began to walk off, and then turned. "Coming, Jeffers?"

Lord Ashley cast a glance at his *Times*, mumbled something about the 'Change, and then followed Colborne.

They talked desultorily as they made their way to the Golden

Lion, with every now and then a break in the conversation as Lord Ashley raised his hat to a lady or acknowledged with courtesy a greeting from a passing pedestrian. Very well known, was the noble lord, and his affable way with people was natural, stemming from a conviction that in this modern world the scientist and research worker were every bit as good as the peer, and they all owed a debt to the ordinary man-in-the-street who in his own humdrum way kept the wheels turning. And any one of these bathing-suited figures acquiring a tan, or gay cavaliers and maidens riding horses, or sporting types, might well be a Captain of Industry or a back-room boy over from Polder. As part of the scenery, Lord Ashley didn't have it all his own way.

Walter Colborne was in something of a dilemma. He had no wish, apart from it being bad strategy, to push himself for the job as History Assistant. That he could lecture till the cows came home on his favourite subject he knew; to convince a sceptical authority with the power to engage him was much more doubtful.

Lord Ashley said abruptly, as they turned into the cool interior of the pub: "Why History, Walter?"

Accepting the challenge without effort, Colborne said: "Just because, I suppose. Nothing else has the same power to grip me. That's why I'm keen on the Saucy Sal—she's a part of history and the development of the land and the people. She's a living link with our grandfathers—through her we can open up a window into their minds."

"Humph!" Lord Ashley said. "The Saucy Sal and I are contemporaries, don't y'know."

"All the more reason to cherish her," Colborne said, and then, quickly, to hide his confusion, he added: "What'll you have? Double?"

"Thanks."

Colborne ordered a double whisky and a pint and carried them over to a corner table by the window. Sunshine flooded across the old wooden flooring and glinted from highly polished oak furniture and brass ornaments high on the walls. A bowl of violets glimmered dusky purple on the table. "Cheers," Lord Ashley said. "First today."

The bar was fairly crowded; there seemed to be a higher proportion of holiday makers down from the camp, their attire in marked contrast to the sports flannels and jackets of a group of men from Polder. Lord Ashley saw Colborne's gaze going round the busy scene. "Headache brigade," he said. "Come out

for some fresh air after their fainting fits last night. Deuced odd thing, though."

"Winny seems none the worse for it," Colborne said.

"One of those things. Why don't you chuck this History business, Walter?"

"I like it. It's a profession——"

"I'm no one to preach, you know that, Walter. But I'd have thought that the way the country's in now, and the needs of the coming few decades, a young man like you would have chosen to go into some branch of the sciences." He waved a hand. "Look at those fellows there. Building an atomic power station. Lips tight sealed. Building the future."

"They're only the small fry," Colborne said. "The important men go everywhere with shadows. Their brains are top-level security risks."

"And, with your outlook, if you went into science, you'd be a top-level man, eh, Walter?" Lord Ashley said shrewdly.

"Something like that. I can be a 'top-level' man, as you elegantly phrase it, in my chosen field without fear that what I say may be taken down and used against me. And I'm not helping to build weapons that might blow us all to Kingdom Come. There's altogether too much war-mongering tied up with nuclear science for my liking."

"Beagle and Winny don't——"

"They're the theorists, University men. But even then, what they dream up might one day blow up on some future battlefield and leave half the world in ashes. I can't see it that way, I'm sorry, Jeffers."

"This country does have a great need for trained scientists and technicians. Why, you know the Russians are training more than all of us over here and on the other side of the Atlantic put together. Someone's got to do the work."

"But I'm already committed. Surely, you see that? I'm a recognised authority—at least, in a small way—on my own period. My last book went pretty well. The next might well be the decisive factor in——" he stopped. He was just going to blurt out his desire for the job—and Lord Ashley might have considered that impertinent and altogether too much of a good thing.

"In what, Walter?"

"Oh—finding out what made men tick in the past, and adding up their mistakes does help in planning for the future."

"Not any more, I think. Now we have entered the Nuclear

Age all values are changed. You need a new type of thinking apparatus. A new type of man, come to that."

"I'll go along with you on a new type of man—we've needed that for some time. But not on the rest. The lessons of the past are plain enough. They still apply today."

A burst of laughter broke from the men at the bar. They were sharing some trade joke, all tied up with mesons and neutrons and neutrinos. The atmosphere in the pub was pleasantly relaxing, and yet Colborne felt tensed up, uneasy, as though just around the corner lurked a tiger. From what Lord Ashley had been saying and the drift of their conversation, it seemed a remote chance, now, that the job would come Colborne's way. But, dammit all, someone had to do the job! Why shouldn't it be Walter Colborne?

He glanced at Lord Ashley. Damn the old boy's preoccupation with science and this brave new world of semi-morons and TV hypnotics and football pool suckers. It prejudiced him against a man like Colborne who wanted different things from life. A faint unease stirred into something stronger in his mind; the headache had gone; but something else, something alien, had taken its place.

In that moment, sitting there in the pub, Colborne had an apocalyptic vision, like a thunderclap, of a lowering and hostile future closing down on him on wings of crushing power.

CHAPTER V

That feeling of growth in his mind stayed with him the rest of the day, during the run of the Saucy Sal, during the phone call by which he learned that June was 'doing as expected,' even during dinner. A group of them had gone down to the Golden Lion for a semi-official dinner in connection with the Railway Society; like the dance last night, Colborne had no feelings either way, for or against, the function. He looked around casually, noticing the people drifting in, wondering what made each one interested to this extent in the railway network of the past, and saw Sally Picton walk briskly into the long low-ceilinged upper room. At once, he came alive.

"Sorry I didn't turn up last night," she said at once, with a quick smile. "Had a frightful headache."

"You too?"

"Yes. I heard that quite a few people were complaining about

bad heads. Funny thing—most of them are all right now, yet they came on together and seem to have switched off together.”

“Oh, well, you know,” Colborne said, feeling the delight at her presence kindling fires in him. “Just the sultry atmosphere, I expect.”

People were filling the room, now, finding their places. Colborne felt quite proud of the manœuvring which placed him at Sally’s side at table. He noticed that she was carrying a camera case with flash attachments. She saw his quizzical look.

“I’m a spare-time photographer and gossip columnist for the local rag. Fills in the holidays—I was born ’round here and know quite a few people.” She laughed and then sobered. “Pity I missed the Mayor—poor man. Fit, I hear.”

“Something of the sort. He yelled a lot of gibberish.”

Later, a small group was sitting round Lord Ashley, when Colborne approached, introduced Sally and joined the ring. Talk flowed desultorily. The whole evening was wrong. Colborne felt that he would be irritated by the slightest thing, as though all his nerves had been scraped and now awaited the seasoning of salt.

A member, whom Colborne knew only as a successful astronomer, was talking about satellites and making the usual banal remarks. Surprised, Colborne was aware of Sally fidgeting. Suddenly she burst out, as though unable to control herself longer.

“You know, you’ll pardon my saying this; but you fellows who talk about satellites and space travel now with such all-fired knowingness were the very people who a few years ago were the first to decry any interest in the subject.”

The astronomer looked up quickly, a deep red stain spreading over his face and extending down into his collar.

“I’m afraid I haven’t the pleasure——” he began.

“But I know you. You jump on the bandwagon of telling the people in the street—that’s most people, by the way—your own garbled accounts of what is being done in the conquest of space as though it all happened just when you decided to take an interest in it. What other people, people like myself, for example, have been talking and dreaming and working towards for years just goes for nothing. There’s nothing new in sputniks; just that at last they have actually been used, put into operation. The details have been on paper for years.”

“I say, Sally——” Colborne said uneasily.

“No, I will say it, even if I’m sorry for it afterwards. The people who have been saying all along that these things will come to pass

and who were jeered at by crass idiots like this specimen here are now the very ones who are being pushed out of it. What does he know about it that he hasn't read in books published by men who have worked on the dream for years?"

"That cuts both ways," the astronomer said angrily.

Quietly, Lord Ashley said: "Recriminations are a waste of time. Always have been. Always will be. What you say, my girl, is absolutely right. But that's the way the world is made; we have to live in it, not fight it."

Colborne stood up. "I think we'd better push off, Jeffers. I'm not feeling up to scratch and I want to talk to Sally." He looked down at her severely. "Would you——"

"Yes, I would." She stood up with dignity. "I need some fresh air. These Johnny-come-latelies stick in my throat." As she turned to leave, she fired a parting shot. "And the figures you quoted are all up the creek. Getting to the Moon is an entirely different type of operation from what you were attempting to describe."

With that, as Colborne thought amusedly, "She swep' out."

As they approached the door a group of heatedly gesticulating young men formed a living barrier. The discussion was so engrossing that no one budged. Colborne looked across at Sally, smiling, thinking that these enthusiastic railway amateurs were spoiling the effectiveness of her exit.

He caught snatches of the talk.

never heard of it."

just made it up to catch us out
Tubby!"

"Pull the other one,

A short, dark and jovial individual, scarlet of face and perspiring with righteous wrath, fairly screamed at his tormentors. "I don't know where I saw it, you idiots! In some fusty old office somewhere, I expect. But it does exist, I tell you. You're just ignorant, the lot of you."

"Excuse us, Tubby," said Colborne, through a gap in the barrage.

Tubby Carew swung round violently and thrust out a dramatic hand. "Walter! You're a man of intelligence. Tell these low-brow clods you've come across the Galactic Intelligencer."

A ripple of cold premonition ran down Colborne's spine. "Why, no, Tubby," he said uneasily, and amazed and disturbed by that very unease. "I can't say that I have."

"But dash it all," Carew's voice rose above the cackling hubbub mocking him. "I tell you I've seen it! Just because I can't

remember exactly where doesn't alter the facts. The Galactic Intelligencer. It's plain as the nose on your face."

Colborne scratched that offending organ, trying to smile. "Doesn't ring any bells with me, Tubby."

Sally pulled his arm and he half moved away from the crowd, unwilling to pass up the opportunity of a little light-hearted ragging, aware that he didn't feel at all himself, and anxious to fall into the best relationship possible with Sally. He felt confused; his head didn't ache but had a stuffed, floating feeling as though it were a blimp tethered to his neck in a fog. "Just a minute, Sally," he said.

She let go his arm, and Colborne felt a gulf open in his stomach as he guessed she meant to walk out and leave him. He made his decision, swung on his heel to follow—and then all heads were brought round by a jovial bellow from the group around Lord Ashley.

"Galactic Intelligencer?" the voice said. "Of course. Well-known encyclopedia. Refers to—that is—carries details of star positions and magnitudes—odd—galactic viewpoint—what the hell?" It was the astronomer, flushed still from his brush with Sally, half-risen from his chair and with a hand to his head in bewilderment. His face drained of blood and looked like a wrung-out dishcloth. He swallowed, and licked his lips dryly. "I can swear I've seen a copy of an encyclopedia called the Galactic Intelligencer. It's quite clear in my mind; but I can only seem to recall a small portion dealing with Cepheid variables. That is as plain as this room—but it doesn't make sense. The whole viewpoint is distorted, unreal; as though I'd read the thing when I was a child and had remembered it with a child's half-comprehension." He stared up appealingly. "And what I recall makes our modern astronomical theory absurd. Am I going insane?"

"Rot!" Lord Ashley said roughly. "How can an insane man ask himself the central question of his being?"

"'Course you're not going off your rocker," Tubby Carew said victoriously. "What did I say, you chaps? You're just a lot of ignorant layabouts. There is a Galactic Intelligencer."

The astronomer had now risen to his full height. He looked dazed. His lips worked together. "Of course," he said bemusedly. "Of course. It's obvious. If a variable acts as observed then it must be——" He began to walk as though in a dream towards the door. "I'll have to work on this right away." His voice soared in eager anticipation. "This is a revelation! Marvellous! Wait until the rest hear——" He was running by the time he hit the group at the door and he went through without stopping.

Tubby Carew stopped thumping a pal friendly on the chest and stared after the flying astronomer. "What hit him?" he enquired.

Colborne caught Sally's arm, drew her away from the laughing knot of young men. Someone shouted: "Any more for the star-gazers' stakes?" There was a chorus of laughs and cat-calls. The atmosphere of the after-dinner gathering had changed dramatically. Now all was good cheer.

Sally followed Colborne docilely back into the centre of the room. Colborne felt that choking feeling rising like banks of fog in his mind. He tried to throw it off. "Your pal the star-gazer seems to have more to worry him now than being brought face-to-face with his condescending newness where scientific speculation is concerned. What was it all about, I wonder?"

"I'm puzzled," Sally said. She lifted her head and looked past Colborne as Lord Ashley and Beagle joined them. "He reacted like a puppet on a string when that fat man mentioned the Galactic Intelligencer. I was watching him, looking back, trying to see if you were coming, Walter."

"That's right," Beagle confirmed. His long face was positively glowing in the soft lighting, and his sensitive fingers played with his watch-chain. "He was mighty upset about that tongue-lashing you gave him, young lady, and then he jerked up as though stung. Galactic Intelligencer." Beagle cocked a pouched eye at Lord Ashley. "Never heard of it, Jeffers. Have you?"

Lord Ashley shook his head decisively. "No."

"But I have," Sally said softly, as though frightened of what she was saying.

They all rounded on her. Walter Colborne spoke first. "What do you know about it?" He had to say it.

She tossed her auburn hair back with a little helpless gesture. "I don't know. That is, the name is familiar; I think I must have seen it when I was a child."

"That's what Daubney said." Daubney must be the vanished astronomer who was going to shake his colleagues.

"Nothing else?" Colborne pressed, both relieved and disappointed.

"It's like one of those things that's on the tip of your tongue, you know? I know, but I can't just recall . . ."

"This is most interesting," said Lord Ashley, leaning over to Colborne. "I feel like a detective—a sort of literary detective, if you follow me."

Beagle said slowly: "I'm not fool enough to claim that because

Jeffers or I haven't run across this encyclopedia before that it can't therefore exist. But the recognised encyclopedias are pretty widely known. I'd hazard a guess, purely a speculation, you understand, that this must be a fairly old publication that has dropped out of print, and a few copies still persist in out of the way places."

Lord Ashley nodded. "The sort of thing a kiddie would pore over for hours on end. Lose himself in it. I know." He sighed. "My father's library was a wonderland to me, where I could find dragons and knights and steam-engines——"

"Oh, Lord Ashley!" Sally burst out, laughing and bringing an amused smile to all their faces and a politely apologetic little grimace from Lord Ashley.

"Sally means you mean damosels in distress," Colborne pointed out.

Lord Ashley chuckled, almost standing up straight in the process. "Much too young for that, m'dear! I often thought the knights on horseback were mugs to fight on the wrong side—especially when my nurse had been exceptionally horrid."

"Really——" Sally began, laughing.

"Here comes Winny," Beagle said. "We'll ask him."

Winthrop, who had been out after the dinner checking the Saucy Sal, ambled over, his broad red face exceptionally freshly scrubbed. "What's wrong with old Daubney? He went past me like a 4-6-2 flat out on a down stretch mainline."

Before anyone else could speak, Lord Ashley said: "Seen a copy of the Galactic Intelligencer around lately, Winny?" They all caught the undercurrent of seriousness in the casual words.

"Huh? Galactic Intelligencer? Why—yes—that is—I recall it was about gardening. Raising vegetables of some kind under adverse conditions. Low atmospheric pressure and tables of possible poisons in the air." He wrinkled his red forehead. "Although why an agricultural manual should masquerade under the title of Galactic Intelligencer, I can't imagine."

Colborne felt awful. He glanced at Sally. Her face was white, drawn, and even then he was comforted to notice that her makeup had no power to rob her face of beauty.

Lord Ashley and Beagle immediately began a close questioning of Winthrop. He answered good-naturedly; but it was obvious he was restive under the interrogation. No—he couldn't remember when it was he'd seen the damn thing—no—he couldn't recall anything else that was in it—but this raising of crops under difficulties

was quite plain in his mind—and, anyway, what the hell was a pampluna fruit?

No-one knew. Winthrop insisted that he clearly visualised detailed instructions for raising a crop of pampluna fruit under half-gravity and with traces of chlorine in the air. Suddenly, the incongruity of that got under their skins. They exchanged looks that were veiled; frightened of revealing what each one was thinking. All Colborne knew was that things were in an awful mess inside his head and this talk of Galactic encyclopedias and pampluna fruit only made it worse. Sally put a hand to her forehead and swayed. Colborne wasn't far enough gone to miss the opportunity; he could even feel pleased when he had his arm around the girl's waist.

"It's—it's——" Sally said, her lips blue. "It's coming back to me. No. Nothing there. I seemed to catch a brief glimpse of a page full of equations. But they were meaningless, I know. I couldn't understand them."

"Here, come and sit down," Colborne said, now worried more by Sally's obvious faintness than by his own head.

They went across to a table and sat on the little round chairs. Colborne received the distinct impression that these three men—all brilliant, all gifted—were beginning to add up the odd events that had been going on and were coming up with an answer that was, literally, scaring them silly. Once Beagle started to say something, only to chop it off unuttered.

At the adjoining table a group who had been laughing and talking, oblivious to the furore at the far end of the long room, swivelled to regard this silent and grim-faced company.

A middle-aged man, with farmer written all over him, leaned across. He had a wide, pleasant mouth, hair grizzled at the temples and direct, straightforward eyes. He smiled.

"Hullo," he said pleasantly. "What was all that noise just now down there? Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No," Colborne managed to say. "Just a little literary detection that so far hasn't come off."

"Oh? Can I help?"

"Have you ever heard of the Galactic Intelligencer?" Lord Ashley said firmly.

The man's eyes glazed. He stood up. His face went beetroot in colour. Then he screamed horribly. He fell.

He was quite dead when they raised his head.

CHAPTER VI

Speculation, rumour, running fear, growing suspicion and an unpleasantly swelling distrust of friends marred the atmosphere of Nether-Ambleton. The Mayor had had a stroke and, shouting gibberish, had died horribly. A surprising number of people had complained of headaches coming upon them and leaving them at the same times. And now another man, a well-respected and liked farmer, had died. Another stroke. Another death in agony. Even though this time there had been no shouted gibberish, the very suddenness of the tragedy had struck chill into every thinking person.

Lord Ashley entered the Golden Lion and joined the other members of the Railway Society already gathered there. They all knew, but would not acknowledge, that there were strange happenings afloat on the calm and sunny mid-summer air. There was a haunted look in the eyes of more than one man, and Colborne guessed that these people had heard of the Galactic Intelligencer—and knew what it could do.

For, of course, that was what had killed the Mayor, wasn't it? No-one mentioned the name now, unless absolutely certain that it had already been heard—and you couldn't be sure of that. It was a formula for destruction.

A woman entered the Golden Lion on a gust of wind. She halted in the door, her face a blaze of terror. "Bill—Bill's gone mad! He was talking to a fellow from the Railway, and—and——" She collapsed. Her handbag made a harsh *clunk* on the floor.

After they had seen her home and helped put her husband into the hastily summoned ambulance, they returned to the inn which had become a central meeting point. The experience had been salutary and ugly.

In the small, familiar knot, they could talk about the Galactic Intelligencer amongst themselves. "It's like a once-and-for-all test," Beagle said. "You don't know what reaction you'll get if you mention the damn name; but you can't find out if a person is—safe—until you ask them."

"It's like sending up a spaceship," said Sally. "You only have one chance to be right."

"We'll have to refer to it as 'It'," Lord Ashley said decisively. "Until we know a person is safe."

Reluctantly, the words dragged from him, Colborne said: "Call

me crazy if you like. But I'm willing to make a bet that the people affected are those who went on the Saucy Sal run." He rushed on so that common-sense could not stop him. "And you'll find it's all tied up with that egg-shaped thing that exploded."

The others immediately made the expected pooh-poohing noises. Sally remained silent.

Lord Ashley said: "But Beagle and I were on that run. We don't feel any particular thrill of fear, do we?"

"But then, you see," said Colborne, "you've never heard of the Galactic Intelligencer."

"What's that got to——" began Beagle. But he stopped shamefacedly. They knew. They all knew.

They turned in the hiatus as the door opened.

The man in the doorway was a tramp. His broken boots, his corduroy trousers stained and ragged, his old pocket-bulging overcoat worn in such hot weather, proclaimed that. His moleskin waistcoat was an ancient miracle and his debonair wreck of a hat shaded a face that was grimed and stubbled. Only his eyes were out of keeping; deep, haunted, startingly alive.

"Gimme a drink, luv," he said, hoarsely, urgently, displaying strong brown teeth.

"Sorry, too late. And," with a sniff, "we don't——"

"*Gimme a drink!*"

Lord Ashley took control. He thrust his whisky into the tramp's shaking hand. The man drank it in one gulp. Then he shuddered. Waiting, Colborne could smell the ripe country aroma rising from the tramp's clothes.

"Stars," the tramp said, his eyes wide open and unblinking. "Stars. Millions of 'em. Coloured, spinning, like tops we 'ad when we was kids. Little tiny bits of earth, smaller than that, just little bits and pieces of stuff, all dancin' aroun' and aroun'. Makes me dizzy." His face was quite expressionless. "Rockets bursting all over. Reg'lar Guy Fawkes night. And funny men with big eyes and arms like scarecrows. Kind, though, you can see that. It's all in here," he shouted, his voice deepening and growing rough. He tapped his temples violently. "In here! All stuffed in like currants in a bun! Things I didn't know was. Wunnerful things. Makes me drunk with it, me, who never knew his ABC." He stopped as though his throat had been seized. He coughed. He seemed to shrink. He looked at Lord Ashley. "Got a bob for a night's kip, guv?"

Colborne said, very slowly and very distinctly: "This is our

Rosetta Stone." He swallowed and looked at Lord Ashley. "Do we risk it? Do we ask him if he knows—It?"

"No!" Lord Ashley said, shakily. "We can't destroy the poor devil!"

"It doesn't matter," Sally said dreamily. "He's already given evidence that he—knows—something. He's passed his test already."

Lord Ashley pressed a shilling into the tramp's grimy hand and then led him to a settle. As they sat down a young, sharp-featured man wearing an inconspicuous grey suit sauntered over and leaned against the wall within easy ear-shot. No-one paid him any attention. Colborne leaned over and said: "Tell us what you know about the Galactic Intelligencer."

The tramp's eyes blazed. "Oh, that." With a shocking change of tempo, his voice rattled on, as though he were reading from a page of print—a man who had never learned his ABC. "The Galactic Intelligencer, edition of 54876, should be dealt with purely on a basis of question and answer. No attempt should be made to systematize the contents; their order is immaterial to the finding of any information required by Space Exploration scouts. Any further information required that is not immediately projected into the mind at first call should be asked for by following up the key images of the submitted information. The G.I. is intended for primary use in cases where Ship is not capable of handling a problem, and due emphasis has been placed on survival on alien planets should Space Exploration scouts be forced to land outside the known limits of the explored Galaxy. Many civilisations of many solar systems have contributed their quotas of knowledge to the G.I. and the Encyclopedia should form the basis of any civilisation set-up as the result of a forced planetfall."

The tramp went on like that, in a droning sing-song that was like a stream freed from some vast dam in his mind. Everyone near him sat, stunned, scarcely comprehending what they were hearing. He mentioned figures, times, distances, stars. A picture built up of a complex and yet simple to operate tool, a system of reference for space travellers. When he mentioned that the Encyclopedia should at all times be kept encased in its protective jacket as it would explode on contact with flames, Colborne hunched closer.

"The Encyclopedia proper is small and if exposed to naked flame will explode, scattering its contents into the minds around it. This is not recommended. The mind is not complex enough to handle so many new facts and our present

human civilisation must rely on the G.I. as a source of information, as a subsidiary of the brain." The tramp stopped, and then said, hoarsely: "Though the word's not *human*. I dunno what it is."

Colborne felt very ill. Now he knew why his brain had felt as though overstuffed, as though something alien had entered it and expanded, driving the blood to pound in his ears. He knew, now, without any doubt, that he was the possessor of the secrets of aliens long dead, the holder of the knowledge of many civilisations of alien beings who had once sped from star to star, blazing in scientific glory throughout the Galaxy.

And yet, he could touch no new information in his mind.

His mind was numbed, it must be, under the shock of the explosion. He had been right on top of the Encyclopedia when it had exploded. He must have received a vast number of facts, thrust into his mind like stuffing into a turkey. And his brain hadn't yet got over the shock. But when it did? When, instead of knowing the fragments of information that had been picked up by the astronomer, and Winthrop and all the others, he knew much more, would this new information have the destructive power that had killed the Mayor and the farmer and had driven that woman's husband insane?

He thought that he had plumbed the deepest degradation of fear then. He sat there, an unmoving lump of flesh and blood and bone and sinew, feeling the dread knowledge sink into his mind.

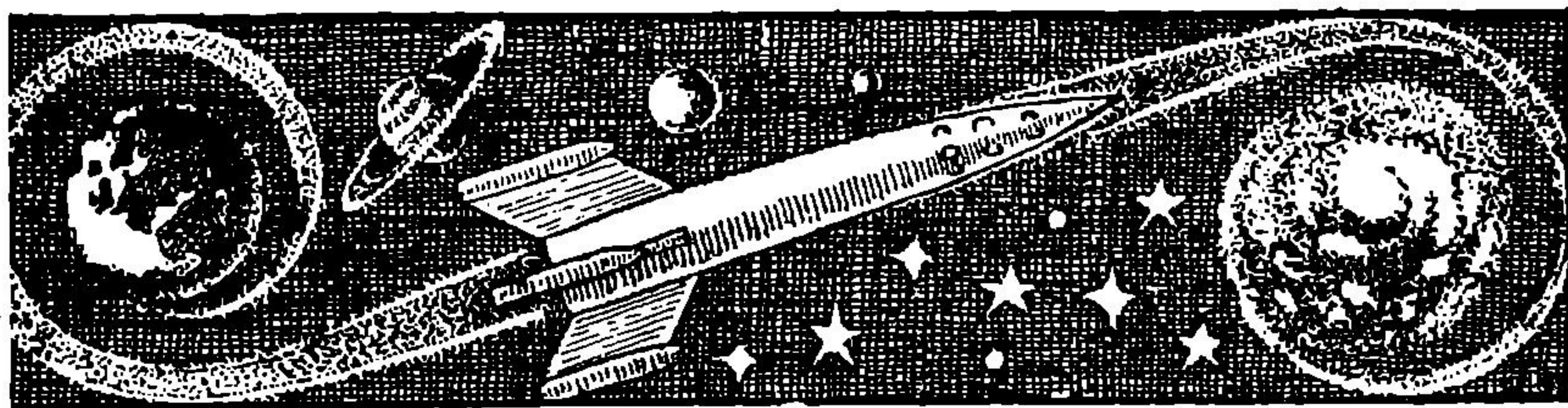
And then came the worst shock of all.

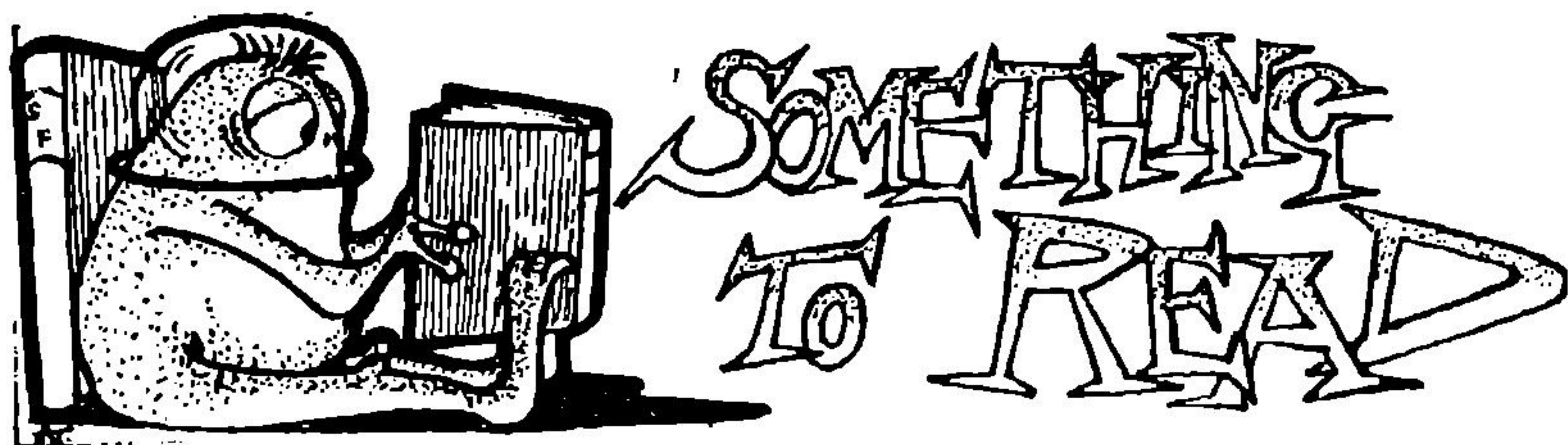
He was not the only person who had been close up to the point of explosion from whence this destructive knowledge had flown. He was not the only person who had been exposed to this flood of alien lore and yet had given no facts newly learned. There was another whose brain had been numbed by the violence of the experience.

Sally.

KENNETH BULMER

(To be continued.)





New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

A couple of worth-while items this month; a Heinlein novel and a Simak collection. The collection is **STRANGERS IN THE UNIVERSE**: Clifford Simak (Faber & Faber, 15/-, 264 pp.). There are seven stories in the collection, all good Simak stuff of recent years. **IN BEACH-HEAD** we meet the human planetary survey team who have to establish a beachhead on an alien planet, clearing it of alien life and holding it while the survey is conducted. The team has never met anything it can't handle, and Simak outlines the two viewpoints through Tom Decker, realist: "A job. That's all"; and Doug Jackson, romanticist: "Someday we are going to run up against something that we can't handle." Naturally, this is the story in which the team runs up against the situation they can't handle. Not a happy-ending yarn, but well treated. **TARGET GENERATION** is a short story based on the theme of the "long trip", the subject of Brian Aldiss' novel **NON-STOP** reviewed last issue. Whilst Simak uses the same system of a closed-economy, many-generations voyage, this is about the

only real resemblance. Simak's travellers are nearing the end of their trip, and the legendary prophecies of The End are being fulfilled; "The Mutter" of the rockets slowing the vessel, the stars stand still. What chance does the voyage have of success, when the ship is manned by illiterate, village-culture, humans who do not and will not even realise that they are on a ship? Simak has a solution, but I feel that the probability of one man in each generation preserving the ability to read, in the face of prejudice, is not great. In **THE FENCE** Simak plays with the "Men are property" theme, and I do feel "plays" is the word, for despite its excellence this short story offers no indication of how the situation described arose, and although it does end with the two characters aware of man's position, it does not show any real effort to solve the problem, or offer any possible solution. **KINDERGARTEN** gives the other side of this coin; man is being taken into the care of a superior culture—we never meet the culture, only its instruments—and the efforts of humankind to thwart this kind-

ness are brushed aside. But the story ends on a note of promise for at least a portion of humanity. **MIRAGE** is a straightforward yarn in which greed and kindness receive their just rewards. **SKIRMISH** is more fantasy than science fiction, presupposing the possibility of "awareness" in such things as typewriters and sewing-machines. The very weak explanation for this is that this "awareness" is made possible through the agency of some alien intelligent machines. Stories of this type are, I feel, some of the weakest ever put forward as "science fiction". The final story in the book, **IMMIGRANT**, is perhaps the most fully developed and certainly the one with the most plot, and makes an excellent conclusion to a very fair set of stories.

The Robert A. Heinlein novel is "**DOUBLE STAR**", which will be familiar to readers of the American "Astounding Science Fiction". So far as my recollection goes there is little if any change from the magazine version; unemployed actor Lorenzo Smythe is engaged, after dispute, to "double" for the Right Honourable John Joseph Bonforte, leader of the loyal opposition in the parliament of the Empire. Bonforte, due to be accepted in a Martian "family", has been kidnapped by people opposing his policy of equality for all races, who know that his absence from the ceremonies on Mars will be disastrous to his plans.

As always in Heinlein's stories the background is so well designed, so subtly presented to the reader, that it becomes real. The Empire, "ruled" by Willem, Prince of Orange, Duke of

Nassau (and a string of other titles) and governed by a parliament based on a mixture of the American and British systems, seems to be a perfectly natural derivative of the present set-up (although the process by which it came into being is not described). The question of the equality of the Martians (and other races) with the humans can be equated in the readers' minds with present-day problems of a like nature and unless the readers are violently opposed to racial equality the propositions and arguments are acceptable and natural.

The only thing with which some readers may quibble is the development of the egocentric, arrogant personality of Lorenzo Smythe into that of Bonforte, the man Smythe is doubling for, until "Smythe" is lost and only Bonforte remains. Whether such a change is possible I cannot say. Heinlein makes it perfectly plausible, and acceptance of the story rests on that plausibility.

There is in this novel of Heinlein's less of the gadgetry which made his earlier stories famous, and more of the characterisation which made "**The Man Who Sold the Moon**" (the short story of that title, not the collection) and the epic of "**Rhysling**" in "**The Green Hills of Earth**" (the short story as published in **NEBULA** No. 15), two of his best-liked stories in the "Future History" series. If you have not read the serial version of "**Double Star**," I recommend you to buy the book. If you have read the serial, and you prefer the more durable form of "between boards", I do not need to make any recommendation that you add this title to your shelves.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

For some reason I seem to have no fan magazines to review this time round, so you can take the knife out of your piggy-bank and relax—your bacon has been saved for another month. All that can be heard from British amateur publishers these days is a plaintive keening about the new postal rates, which are not only so harsh but so anomalous in their effects that they seem to have thrown British science-fiction fans into a sort of delirium. No doubt the Government would have quailed if they had realised what a blow they were going to strike at this finest delicate flower of western culture, but apparently all the members of the Cabinet must have failed to renew their fanmag subscriptions simultaneously and this is the dire result.

There have been postal increases in the States, too, but there the Government was cunning enough to announce beforehand that the revenue was going to be used to finance the space flight programme. In such a case, of course, no true science fiction fan could possibly raise the slightest objection. Every time he posts something he knows he is licking the Russians as well as the stamp—every postal item is a sort of mailed fist, as it were—and helping the march of Man towards the stars. Looking at the

envelopes I get from America; I can only imagine that each American fan is determined to finance the whole project single-handed.

But here in Britain we have no space flight programme (shame!) and the money we give to the Government is just frittered away on necessities. I warn them they are asking for trouble. One of these days the ingenious minds of science fiction fans are going to work out a way to retaliate and get their own back from the Post Office. To clear logical minds like ours the approach is quite obvious—a simple anti-gravity device, small enough to be popped inside a postal package—and no doubt some science fiction fan, after a diligent perusal of all the stories dealing with this development, is at this moment knocking one together in his laboratory. No wonder he hasn't published an issue of his fanmag lately! While he is toiling away there I suggest we might start operations with an even simpler weapon, the flat balloon. Made out of the new pre-stressed plastic, each balloon would contain enough helium or similar light gas to lift a weight of 2 oz. By merely tucking one of these inside a 4 oz. parcel you would be able to send it at the 2 oz. rate. Or by enclosing two minus-

2 oz. balloons you could, of course, send it for nothing, since the Post Office in its helpless innocence bases its charges on weight not volume. But this would only be the trial skirmish. When sufficient supplies of balloons or anti-gravity plates are available, every fan publisher will flood the Post Office with packets weighing huge minus quantities. The Postmaster-General will then go bankrupt paying out money and the Government will be brought to its knees. Simple, isn't it?

Tentacles Across the Sea

In progress at the moment is the 1958 election campaign for the Transatlantic Fan Fund, a project to send a British fan to the American Convention in Los Angeles in September by public subscription. Any contribution to this worthy cause, however large, would be welcomed by the British organiser, Ken Bulmer, 204 Wellmeadow Road, Catford, London, S.E. 6, who is even now trudging from travel agent to travel agent trying to find a way to Los Angeles on the limited funds at present available. In this case money seems to be the evil of all routes.

In Memoriam

Within the past few months the science fiction world has suffered two very great bereavements, with the sudden deaths of Henry Kuttner and Cyril Kornbluth. I haven't space here even to start summarising the debt we all owe to these two writers, and even those of us who have been familiar with the science fiction field for a long time find it difficult to take in at once the extent of the loss it has sustained. It is

a shock, for instance, to realise that in the same grave as Henry Kuttner are interred the ghostly figures of Lewis Padgett, Edward Bellin, Paul Edmonds, Noel Gardner, Will Garth, James Hall, Keith Hammond, Hudson Hastings, Kelvin Kent, Woodrow Wilson Smith, Robert Kenyon, C. H. Liddell, Scott Morgan and Laurence O'Donnell. Not to mention half of several famous collaborations.

The End of Anarchy

British Fandom seems to have taken to heart the remark made some months ago by your editor about the dearth of properly organised science fiction clubs in Britain. Anyway, at the British Convention at Easter, a new national organisation has been set up, the British Science Fiction Association. In the past, British fan organisations have had a fine record for stability and efficiency, and it looks as if this one will be well worth joining. At the moment of writing all the details have not been quite finalised, but enquiries may be made to Eric Bentcliffe, 47 Alldis Street, Great Moor, Stockport, Cheshire. One of the most interesting things about the new organisation is that Ted Tubb has been named editor of the Official Organ.

News and Gossip

Bob Shaw, fan writer of genius, and a NEBULA discovery as a professional author, is returning to Ireland at the end of this summer after a two-year stay in Canada. . . . Your film correspondent, Forrest J. Ackerman, recently edited a highly successful 300,000 circulation oneshot magazine entitled *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. . . .

GUIDED MISSIVES

LETTERS TO
THE EDITOR

Dear Ed.: How on earth do you expect any author who puts a reasonable amount of thought into his depiction of future societies to create believable concepts unless he recognises that codes of morality are changeable, not only from place to place but also from generation to generation? It's conceivable that there may be a swing back to Puritanism—say in a century's time—meanwhile this trend which you define as "towards violence and loose morals" and which I personally regard as an increasing recognition of the individual's responsibility to think about the system under which he lives and not to accept it uncritically, exists, and will probably increase.

JOHN BRUNNER,
London, N.W. 3.

* *No matter what high-sounding reasons you chose to explain it, John, the fact remains that today's standards of good taste, moral ethics and sobriety are fast becoming non-existent.*

Novels and films which suggest by their subject-matter that the ideal way to spend a pleasant evening is in the close proximity of a co-operative female with a plentiful supply of alcohol to hand are quite unworthy to be classified as science fiction, regardless of how well-written or produced they are, as they sully the high ethical and moral ideals in-

herent in by far the greater part of this type of literature.

If the current moral decline is, as you suggest, the result of the individual's reassessment of society, his automatic return to murder, rape and violence is a sad revelation of just how far homo sapiens is still removed from homo superior.

Dear Mr. Hamilton, stories and art work in the latest issue of NEBULA which I have received, continue to be top-notch, and the acquisition of Gerard Quinn only enhances your position as the leading Science-Fiction Magazine in Great Britain. I think John Greengrass should appear regularly, as he is probably your best current interior artist.

More *original* stories by Eric Frank Russell will be appreciated instead of the reprints which you seem to have been using lately. I would also like to see more stories by E. R. James, Brian Aldiss, and F. G. Rayer.

I am glad someone other than Tubb won the 1957 Popularity award. This makes for competition and a general intensification of effort on the part of all your authors.

JEREMY A. BARRY,
San Francisco,
California.

* *The Russell stories you mention could not have been read elsewhere than in NEBULA*

by the vast bulk of our readers, Jeremy, and were well worth a "second glance" for the minority who had seen them before.

Dear Mr. Hamilton, although I have been reading NEBULA ever since you commenced publication I have never before written to offer an opinion. However, there is always a first time.

First of all the Covers; I like Stark's work and the painting for Number 28 was particularly good. Gerard Quinn can do better than he did on Number 29 and I would like to see Clothier back with something like the one he did for Number 9. For the back covers I would rather see an advertisement than the current monotonous trail of space-suited men playing with furry animals.

I enjoy your Editorials and always read them first (I particularly agreed with you on the question of the Sputnik dog). I am afraid, however, I can see no reason for the retention of mere space wasters such as the columns of Ackerman and Willis, but I enjoy both the photo features and the book reviews.

GRAHAM A. RILEY,
Bootle,
Lancs.

** Only one back cover to date has featured a space man playing with an animal, furry or otherwise.*

Dear Ed., as yet I have not made up my mind whether Kenneth Bulmer is a genius or a complete idiot! "Advertise Your Cyanide" in NEBULA Number 29 was wonderful in parts, but again in other parts it was not so good.

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.

Sense of Proportion	
Carriage Paid	
Bighead	
No Time At All	
They Shall Inherit	
Words and Music	
Wisdom of the Gods-Pt. 1	

Name and Address :

Mr. T. M. Bell, of Glasgow, C.3., wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 28. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was :

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| 1. OLD MACDONALD | |
| By Robert Presslie | 27.3% |
| 2. MOTIVATION | |
| By Bertram Chandler | 23.2% |
| 3. ADVERTISE YOUR CYANIDE | |
| By Kenneth Bulmer | 19.0% |
| 3. GODLING, GO HOME | |
| By Robert Silverberg | 19.0% |
| 5. END PLANET | |
| By John Kippax | 11.5% |

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 34.

Perhaps Bulmer was using symbolisms which only he understood.

"NEBULA has always struck me as being the most "fannish" of British professional magazines and I like it! Where else do we get Arthur Thomson illustrations and a regular column by Walter Willis?

"Godling Go Home" was good, but then I like most of Bob Silverberg's stories. "End Planet" and "Motivation" were good in plot content and were handled well.

"Old MacDonald" left me flabbergasted; the ending was preposterous! This was a very poor way to end a story. It looks as if the author did not decide on the conclusion until he was past his deadline, and had to use an inferior ending to get his copy in.

PETER FRANCIS
SKEBERDIS,

Imlay City,
Michigan, U.S.A.

* *Having met and conversed with Mr. Bulmer quite recently, I think it is safe to give him the benefit of the doubt.*

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Nr. MANCHESTER

Dear Mr. Hamilton, I thought that the cover of NEBULA Number 26 was excellent. "The Autumn World" I would call it. A delightful blending of colour and an imaginative and intriguing landscape. The back cover was a welcome change of style and of an almost magical appeal.

"Dear Devil" was reminiscent of "Somewhere a Voice" and from the same source, too, I note. I found it warm and amusing, tender and powerful, and quite different from any of the other stories. The prodigies of the Earthmen were the only things I questioned. Eric Frank Russell has a marvellous ability to depict nice people, and to make them interesting and alive.

"Training Aid" was another first-rate E. C. Tubb yarn, and very good to see it. Characterisation was non-existent, but it was exciting, posed a clearly discernible question and answered this, I thought, satisfactorily.

"Fiends for Neighbours" was brilliantly written, and the ending was a horrible surprise.

If Aldiss imagines that he has hit on the "Australian vernacular" in "Ten-Storey Jigsaw", give him a hearty boot from me. Even I, an Australian, have not lived long enough in the bush to distinguish an Australian lingo. A fair story, but the premise seemed unreal, despite the fact that it was probably a sound extrapolation.

Thanks for another top rate issue.

NIGEL JACKSON,
Melbourne,
Australia.

* *And thank you, Nigel, for being so explicit.*

THE CRATER CONTROVERSY—*continued from inside front cover*

used crater—and those with central peaks, were the results of the ejection of material from the centre of the craters. The typical rays were, quite obviously, flows of lava.

One or two objections cropped up. Lunar craters bear no resemblance in shape or size to Terrestrial volcanoes. The cone of Etna, for instance, presents a volcanic shape difficult to observe on the Moon. Also, there is no evidence of lava flow or present volcanic activity on the Moon.

Since Doctor Urey calculated that there was no possibility of the Moon having a molten interior, and thus eliminated volcanic activity as a crater cause—much to the relief of real estate men selling Lunar ranches—and the collision theory has become pre-eminent, further experiments have been undertaken. Before finally rejecting the volcanic theory it might be wise to look at what the meteorite school have to say.

The Moon revolves around the Sun, in an extremely complicated orbit, at $18\frac{1}{2}$ miles a second. Small asteroids could collide at 30 miles a second, the impact having the destructive power equivalent to 250 times their weight of dynamite. As the asteroid hits, its power would be converted into heat, giving a temperature of millions of degrees, at which all materials become gases. The resulting high pressure would create a tremendous explosion which would blow out the surface to form the craters.

Well—the ball bearings plopping into mud bear little resemblance to those conditions.

Astronomy does not lend itself readily to laboratory experiment; but Dr. Wegener in 1918 developed an approach approximating to true conditions by using fine powders. Cement dust spread evenly over a flat surface simulated the Moon's surface, and blobs of dust or plaster of Paris the meteorites.

Results were promising. Similar experiments can be carried out in the back garden. By using layers of differently coloured powder and another colour for the missile, the effects of the impact can readily be measured by damping the plaster, allowing it to set and then slicing it into sections.

Very fine ring walls and central mountains have been produced in this way, the miniature craters being one to five inches in diameter. At the same time, quite large quantities of the missile powder spurted out radially for several yards creating radial streaks, similar in every way to the mysterious white rays extending from many Lunar craters.

Also, shorter streaks were formed by base material spurting out from the ring walls, and some of the ejected powder remained sufficiently compact to fall and create small craterlets 8 to 12 inches from the main crater. So that one meteorite could have caused more than one crater. This effect can be quite clearly seen on the photograph, which is of regions around the South Pole and Mare Nubium. Also visible are rounded dark areas scattered on the blank areas of the seas, and it has been suggested that the seas are remains of really large meteorite impacts—missiles 125 miles in diameter—covering everything with their debris.

The photograph shows the Moon's surface at the most interesting time, when the terminator—the dividing line between night and day—is seen at its most rugged. Even a few moments' observation through a telescope brings new mountains into view, bathed in intense sunlight as the Moon slowly spins. And still swathed in shadow, fresh heights are hidden, all but their peaks, which gleam like sparks as the sunlight catches their peaks rising from the featureless dark.

As the Moon spins, so the sun rises above the ring walls, throwing their shadows across the crater floors. Gradually, the crater floors turn a dazzling white. Another little mystery is Plato. As the Lunar day progresses, the crater floor becomes darker instead of white, until it crouches there like a great blob of ink. Mists? Vegetation? Melting ice? No-one knows.

