

NEBULA

MONTHLY

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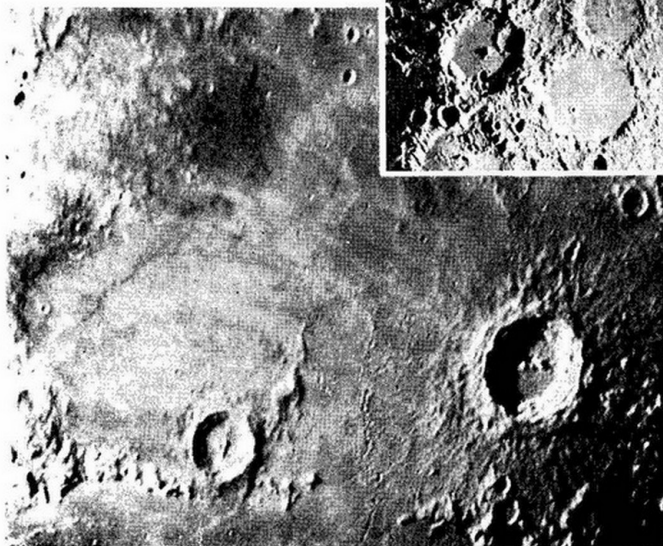
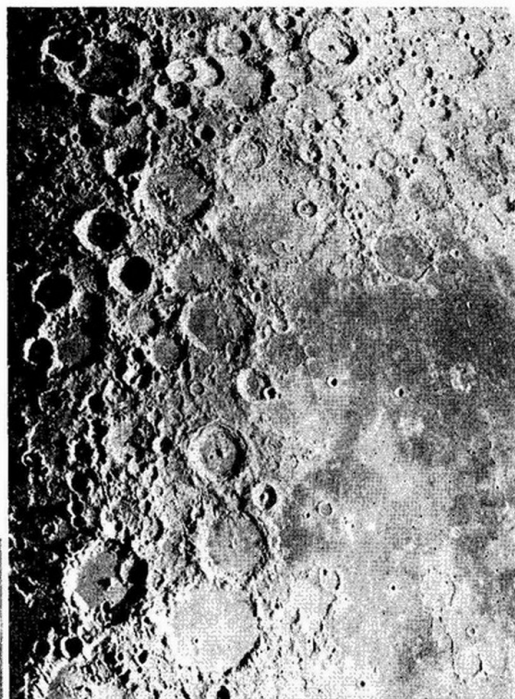
SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 33



FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

CINDERELLA OF THE SKIES



The Moon, Region from Ptolemaeus to Tycho (By Courtesy of Mt. Wilson and Mt. Palomar Observatories).

The Moon, Region of the Crater Copernicus (By Courtesy of Mt. Wilson and Mt. Palomar Observatories).

A. E. ROY, B.Sc., Ph.D., F.R.A.S., F.B.I.S.

The Earth has one satellite. Jupiter has twelve and Saturn nine, but the Earth is unique in that its moon is larger in relation to its primary's size and mass than any other moon in the Solar System. In fact the Earth-Moon system is more like a double-planet system, the Moon's diameter being more than one-quarter the diameter of the Earth while its mass is one-eightieth that of the Earth.

It pursues an elliptical orbit about our planet at an average distance of 238,000 miles in a period of revolution of $27\frac{1}{3}$ days. Apart from an occasional asteroid or comet, the next nearest body is the planet Venus and its nearest

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Edited by **PETER HAMILTON**

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Look here . . .

Much has now been said and written about the dawning of the Space Age. A great deal of it has come from the mouths and pens of those who, prior to the launching of the first Soviet sputnik, were at one with many of our leading astronomical "authorities" in deriding the whole conception of space travel; while rather less has emanated from those who have maintained throughout the truly scientific attitude of the Open Mind.

One of the most interesting single comments came from a man who has always shown a remarkably lively interest in the scientific, the technological and, indeed, in every worthwhile and forward-looking aspect of modern life. I refer, of course, to H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh, who, speaking at a discussion entitled "Britain Enters the Space Age", in April of this year, alluded to the research programmes currently being carried out both by the U.S.A. and Soviet Russia and stated that he did not believe that Great Britain and the Commonwealth would be prepared to sit back and allow others to explore the universe around them. "Research is almighty expensive," declared the Duke. "We could only possibly go in for this if we were prepared to make very considerable sacrifices in other directions."

This is all too true as far as it goes, but it should also be borne in mind that the people of Great Britain and, indeed, of every other civilised country in the world, are already making tremendous sacrifices to finance the manufacture and testing of nuclear weapons which, through their cumulative effect upon the level of radioactivity in the atmosphere of this planet can only have disastrous consequences for mankind—and this, even if they are never put to their evil and predestined purpose.

Such sacrifice as this—and it runs to truly gigantic sums of money each year—could just as easily be put towards a realistic programme of taming our environment here on Earth, with the ultimate result of providing security and plenty for all and thereby removing the fundamental cause of war (as well as the need for nuclear weapons) for ever. No less important, however, would be an intensified and, if possible, unified attack on the problems of spaceflight so that the human race, able to expand once more, would cease, mentally as well as physically, to stagnate and turn in upon itself.

The late Mike Todd has been quoted as saying that poverty is a state of mind while to be broke is but a temporary predicament. Which is it with we, the inhabitants of Earth? Let us sacrifice, by all means, but let our sacrifices be worthwhile.

Peter Hamilton

Talk Not At All

The Thaed were the engineers of life, working upon living tissue as the Earthly metallurgist fashions steel

Illustrated by Kenneth Barr

They say, those who claim to know, that when a man grows old death loses much of its terror and that, at the very end, he will welcome it almost as a friend.

It may well be so. The time will come, perhaps, when I will be able to make a personal test of this assumption. Until then I can only work on observed data and, working on such data, I have my doubts.

My data was the oldest and most terrified man I had ever met. His name was Gerald Lancaster and he sat facing me across a table in Lee Hung's Palace of Ineffable Delights which swung in a lazy orbit above the Earth a score of thousand miles below.

"I am a desperate man, Conwell," he said. "I want you to understand that."

Looking at him I could well believe it. He was tense with strain, a strain which had become so much a part of him that now it was

difficult to see how he could ever relax. He was thin with an almost painful gauntness and his face, hook-nosed, lantern-jawed, was a finely engraved mass of lines. Sparse white hair straggled over a domed skull and his eyes, sunken deep in shadowed sockets, were wary and furtive, darting like trapped lizards, beneath shaggy brows.

"Desperate enough," he continued, "to have sent for you."

A goblet rested before me, a delicate thing of transparent porcelain gilded with the misty touches of a hair-fine brush. A ruby liquid rested in oily quiescence within the goblet and the air above it quivered as if from heated vapour. I lifted it, swirled the contents with a turn of my wrist and held it beneath my nostrils. A heady vapour assailed my senses as I inhaled.

"Are you listening?" Lancaster sounded peevish, he was not used to having men do other than anticipate his wishes.

Again I inhaled and then set down the goblet. A troupe of winged Sirians danced into the open space above our heads and I watched their graceful gyrations as coloured lights sparkled from their iridescent scales. When the vapour had cleared from my head I looked at the man facing me.

"You sent for me and you are desperate," I said. "Two facts. Perhaps it would help us both if you were to tell me a little more. For example, what has made you desperate?"

"Fear," he said. "The fear of death."

"Assassination?" It was a logical question. A man as rich and as powerful as Lancaster would run the normal hazards. He dismissed the notion with contempt.

"I can take care of such matters," he said, and his eyes flickered to the surrounding tables. Men sat there talking to gaily painted women but the eyes of these men did not smile in company with their mouths.

"What then?"

"I told you. I fear to die."

"All men must die." I uttered the platitude without thought or feeling. It was obvious. All men had to die as they had to breathe. Lancaster startled me with the vehemence of his protest.

"Why, Conwell? Why?" His eyes burned like stars in the shadows of his brows. "Why must all men die? Because they have always done so? Follow that logic and what of progress? Men have to break away from what is and find new paths or we would not have fire, the wheel, the means to traverse the gulf between the stars." He controlled himself with an obvious effort; his doctors must have

warned him against excessive emotion. "Think of me as a fool if you wish, but I prefer to be considered a pioneer. Someone has to be the first to cheat death. Why not I?"

The Sirian aerial dancers had gone; in their place was a coiling amorphous being from some wayward planet, who hung suspended beneath drifting lights and emitted sub-audible harmonies of nostalgic sadness.

"You have summoned the wrong man," I said. "I am not a gerontologist and I have small medical knowledge."

"You are a space pilot, a trader, a man of many parts and a man of dubious reputation." Lancaster caressed the delicate porcelain of his goblet. "I know all about you, Earl Conwell."

I could have argued, but I let it pass. Instead I concentrated on the poignant thrummings from the thing above our heads.

"Medical science cannot aid me," said Lancaster. "I have financed my own group of gerontologists for the past half-century but, aside from devising certain means to give a transient strength to this worn-out body, they have failed. All modern science has failed. All available science." He stressed the operative word and looked at me, his eyes strange in the drifting lights.



"Available?"

"Let us rather say, readily available." His hand caressed the goblet again and I could sense his hesitation. The lure of escape from reality into a dream-world induced by the heady vapours must, to him, have been a temptation hard to resist. He thrust aside the goblet so that it slid from the table and shattered into splintered shards on the floor.

"I will be frank with you, Conwell," he said harshly. "I want to contact the Thaед."

I said nothing. Those who know nothing about the Thaед use their name as an atheist uses the name of God, without thought or feeling or understanding. Those who know a little talk about them less and those who know more than a little, talk about them not at all.

"You heard me, Conwell?"

"I heard you."

"Then you know what I want. The Thaед can help me, I'm sure of it, and I want you to arrange a contact for me."

The amorphous thing had been replaced by a living ball of coloured light, hypnotic in its rhythmic pulsations. From it hummed a singularly sweet melody which seemed to hang and quiver in the scented air.

I looked at Lancaster, realising for the first time the extent of his desperation. He had reached the panic stage in which he would try anything and everything and give thought or consideration to none.

"Do you realise what you ask?" I said. "Can you realise it?"

"I think that I can." He was breathing fast now, like a man who has run a long way. "I have little to offer," he said, and now he was almost humble. "I have only money, but I will pay you what you want. You can have anything you want—if you will conduct me to the Thaед."

"And if I refuse?" My answer was written on his face. It would not be hard for Lancaster to avenge himself on any who crossed his will. "It will be dangerous," I warned. "More dangerous than you realise."

"I can only die," he said, and seemed to gain comfort from what he said.

To disillusion him would have been unkind.

Memory is a treacherous thing. Seven years earlier I had fled from the planet of the Thaед vowing never to return. I had had my reasons, and yet time dulls memory as it dulls pain and fear and grief.

I had suffered much and yet I had been fortunate also. Sometimes I felt the prickle of fear as I realised just how fortunate I had been.

And yet I was again approaching the planet of the Thaед.

There is an awful fascination in danger and the risk of destruction. And the greater the risk the more potent the lure. Men have gambled their lives on the turn of a card or the spin of a revolver chamber and, winning, they gamble again. And they gamble voluntarily, without duress, and do not regard themselves as insane. So I could not, in all fairness, regard myself as other than sane for doing what I did.

I thought about it as I stared at the warp-drive. It sat like a fat spider in the heart of the ship, chuckling to itself with electronic power as it gathered the threads of space and time, spinning us along the web of the universe in a strange, half-real, half-dream dimension. We did not exist, the ship, the machine, those in the ship. We would not exist until our journeying had been completed and we were spat into reality in the environs of the planet of the Thaед.

It was quiet within the ship, aside from the chuckling of the drive there was no sound, and yet so softly did the woman move that I sensed rather than heard her as she came towards me.

"How is Lancaster?"

"Sleeping." Her name was Clitheria. She was tall with a well-developed body and hair which was like spun sunshine on a summer's day. Her skin was warmly saffron and her eyes were grey barriers to secrets no man has ever solved. She was Lancaster's doctor and, aside from he and I, the only person on the ship.

I remembered how I had protested when I had first learned that she was to accompany us.

"You're a fool for going, Lancaster, and I'm a bigger fool for taking you, but let us not add to our folly. The nurse stays behind."

"She is my doctor," said Lancaster. "I need her."

"But a woman. To Thaед!" It had seemed obscene to me then as it did now, but he did not, could not, understand.

"I trust her," he had said simply. "And she is willing."

I had argued no further. She was adult and, even though she was ignorant, it was not for me to educate her away from her desire. Once aboard she had taken charge of Lancaster while I attended to the task of plotting our course away from sanity. It was a long journey and it would have been easy for me to have allowed myself to be drawn towards her, but I remained aloof. A wise man does not permit himself barren emotions at any time and a man would be a fool indeed to fall in love on the way to Thaед.

"You are tense," said Clitheria, and her voice matched the perfection of her body. "Are we close?"

"Yes."

"Curt, too." She sighed and stared at the chuckling machine. "I am not used to such curtness from men."

"Why do you go to Thaed?" The question burst from me despite all my resolve not to interfere. "Lancaster said that he needed you but that was a lie. He may have thought that he did but you and I know better."

"Lancaster is a sick and frightened man," she evaded. "It gives him comfort to be attended by one he can trust."

"He can trust me." I stared at her in sudden suspicion. "Does he?"

"He has to trust you." Again she was evasive. "But out here, alone, with a man he has just met——"

"He is a fool!"

"He is a man who has lived solely by reason of unremitting caution. Would you be trusting if you were he?"

"If I were he I would not be going to Thaed."

"Perhaps, but you are going nevertheless."

"For a million deposited in my name. For the threat of assassination should I have refused." I looked at her. "Were I a wise man I would have run the risk of assassination."

"A live dog is of greater worth than a dead lion," she said softly. "And a million is not lightly to be refused."

"A million, on Thaed, is worth no more than the breath in your lungs." I moved from the chuckling machine and stared to where a spot of iridescent shadow rested on the wall. In normal space it was a direct vision port. Casually I said: "And you? How much is Lancaster paying you?"

"A quarter million." She said it simply, without shame or embarrassment. "The cost of a small hospital on Tanamasuri. There are still undeveloped places in our portion of the Galaxy, you know."

I knew that, and I knew of Tanamasuri also. I turned and looked at her with a new respect. It seemed odd that a woman with her grace and skill should choose to spend her life in the cesspool of the Galaxy. She noted my expression and, with a woman's skill, changed the subject.

"You fear the Thaed," she said. "Why?"

"I——" My throat seemed to close on what I wanted to say. "I can't tell you." And it was the truth, the literal truth. I could think, yes. I could warn, yes. But I could not go into detail. She

stepped towards me, halting with her face inches from my own and her hand, soft and almost caressing, touched my forehead.

"You mean it," she said wonderingly. "You are unable to tell me." The doctor replaced the woman and a glint of understanding hardened her eyes. "Conditioning," she said wonderingly. "Something has been done to your mind so that there are things of which you cannot speak." Her hand fell away from my face and her sharp, white teeth dug into her lower lip. "Now," she whispered, "for the first time, I am beginning to know fear."

"You do well to fear." My voice was harsh, unnatural. "It is not by accident that the name of the Thaед and the name of their planet is an anagram of death."

Then the machine abruptly finished its chuckling. There was an instant of twisting strain, the shadowed iridescence flickered from the port, and the cold stars flashed into being.

Below us the planet of the Thaед loomed against the glittering backdrop of the universe.

It was vast, that planet, a great, featureless ball shielded by crimson cloud and swinging its lonely path around a dying sun. It was vast, but I knew that its density was such that its gravity was a little less than Earth normal. I felt sweat bead my forehead as I stared towards it.

We had been seven. Seven men and a ship which was mostly junk, trying to scrape a living by dubiously honest trading among the scattered planets of the Rim. The natives had attacked on Fronden's World and then we were five. The pile blew while we were in warp and we'd emerged near Thaед with the ship a shambles and the crew more dead than alive.

We had landed on Thaед.

I felt someone close to me and turned to find Lancaster at my side. He had rested during the trip but, nevertheless, he had aged. His hands, thick-veined and with swollen knuckles, trembled as he rested them below the port.

"Thaед?"

"Yes."

"At last!" He breathed the words as if they were a prayer. His head tilted as he stared at something to the edge of the port. "Those?"

"Orbiting vessels of the Galactic Federation." I stared at the

strange, polyhedron-shaped vessels which, I knew, enclosed the planet in an invisible skein of watchful alertness. One day, perhaps, Earth would be admitted to the Federation and would share the benefits and responsibilities of that vast civilisation. When that day came we would be truly adult.

"Will they stop us?" Clitheria's voice sounded in my ear.

"No. The planet is in strict quarantine to the Federation but not to us. They regard us almost as if we were dirty little children toying with undesirable pastimes." My voice must have echoed my bitterness. "Perhaps we are."

"And yet they find it necessary to quarantine the planet against their own?" Clitheria was sceptical.

"You do not understand." I gestured towards one of the vessels. "They are not there to prevent entry to Thaед but to prevent egress of the Thaед to the universe. They are a barrier around a cancer."

"If they fear the Thaед then why do they not destroy them?"

"The Galactic Federation believes in the sanctity of life," I said wearily. "It is the reason for our own continued existence."

I was tired of the discussion, and left them while I went to the control room there to signal to the orbiting vessels. The face of the monitor, as was usual whenever I made contact with a Federation vessel, filled me with the depression of inferiority. Not that he was arrogant, quite the reverse. But it was as if an aborigine should contact a civilised man who has already discarded as unimportant the things in which the aborigine takes pride.

I did not like to feel that I was an aborigine and I was not proud of what I was doing.

Then came the moment I had been dreading, the moment of no-return. Even now we could have left the vicinity of Thaед, slipped back into warp-drive and headed back to sanity. It would have been the wise thing to do and it would have given us stature in the eyes of the watching vessels, but even as the temptation came, so it died.

I signalled to the Thaед.

There was no response and I had expected none. The screen remained blank while my words dissolved into emptiness, lost in space and the regions below the crimson cloud. I had shouted into silence and had not received even an echo in return. But, now that I had shouted, there was only one thing left for me to do.

I operated the controls which sent the vessel humming towards the surface below.

We landed on the shore of a vast, oily sea. There was no wind on this part of Thaed so that the thick, almost opaque waters rested stagnant beneath the crimson sky. A winged thing had guided us to this place. First it had appeared on the screen and then, almost immediately, before us, beating the air with tremendous wings, its razor-billed head pointed the path we had to take. We had landed and it had gone and now we were alone.

And yet, not quite alone. I spotted them as we left the ship and halted in my tracks, my hands catching at the others. Around us, tiny against the sand of the shore, rested a host of tiny winged insects. Smaller than bees and of the same colour as the sand, they were almost invisible. They surrounded us, crawling on the sand or lancing delicately through the heavy air before settling again. Clitheria tried to catch one, would have done had I not knocked her arm roughly aside. I stilled her protest.

"Don't touch them. They sting and their sting will paralyse."

"What are they?"

"You could call them the committee of welcome." I was not being humorous. "Should we try anything, then they will attack. Let us sit down."

"But——"

"We have a choice," I said gently. "We can sit down or we can lie paralysed and helpless. In either case we have to wait."

We sat and waited. Lancaster, naturally, was loquacious. He stared at the barren shore and the oily sea. He squinted up at the clouds and then distastefully at the watching insects. He was disappointed and he said so. And I knew why.

He had paid me a million for something he could have done for himself. There was no secret as to the location of Thaed. An autopilot would have both reached and landed on the planet. He had hired me to be his guide, his mentor, his agent to bargain with the Thaed for the thing he wanted. He had not realised that the Thaed operated under their own code. There were many things he had not realised. Discovering them would strain his sanity.

Something huge broke the water at the edge of the shore and slithered towards us. I seized both Lancaster and Clitheria as they started to their feet and instinctively turned towards the ship. There was no safety in flight, the insects would see to that. There was no possibility of retreat either and for the same reason. Once a person landed on Thaed he stayed until given permission to depart.

"Relax," I said softly. "It won't hurt us."

It was hard to believe. The thing was larger than the largest whale ever to swim earthly oceans. Its colossal head tapered to a whip-like body; the undulations of that body providing its motion. The mouth, scant feet away from us and extending half-way down the grotesque head, opened revealing a cavernous interior ringed with teeth and fringed with ropy cilia.

"Enter," it said.

The unexpected is always shocking; the unnatural always terrifying, and the sound of that thick, bubbling, yet vaguely human voice made a mockery of the ordered scheme of things. I felt the others strain against my grasp so that I had to exert my strength to hold them.

"Enter," the thing said again, and its ropy cilia reached towards us.

I stepped towards it, dragging the others with me.

"No!" Clitheria fought to free herself. "No!"

"We have no choice." I stepped within the great orifice of the mouth. "If we refuse the insects will sting us into paralysis and the cilia will drag us inside."

Darkness closed around us as the thing closed its mouth. Movement swayed us from side to side as it retreated back into the ocean. Then there was nothing but a gentle vibration from the spongy surface on which we stood.

I sat down, the others with me, and found that I could talk with a freedom impossible before.

"The Thaeds are biological engineers," I said. "They construct things from living flesh and bone and tissue as we build from steel and plastic and stone. This thing," I slapped my hand down on the spongy surface, "is little more than a means of transportation. It is self-repairing, self-fueling, self-sufficient. Probably it can also breed others of its kind."

"And intelligent?" Clitheria asked the question.

"To a certain extent, no doubt."

"It spoke," she said. "It spoke in our own language."

I did not answer.

"It had the voice of a man." Lancaster spoke from the darkness. His hand found my arm, the old fingers digging into my flesh with surprising strength. "Conwell! It had the voice of a man!"

"You thought that it did. Any voice speaking in a familiar tongue would give that impression."

"No." He remained silent for a long time, so long that I won-

dered whether he had fallen asleep. "You haven't told all you know, Conwell," he said thickly. "Are you trying to trick me?"

"No."

"How can I be sure of that?" I detected a thin note of hysteria in his voice. "You've been here before. You——"

"Stop it!" The thin note of hysteria had risen and that, coupled with my own fear, resolved itself into anger. "I warned you against coming here, didn't I? Now that we're here we'll have to take what is coming. Whining about it won't make things better."

"Information would," said Clitheria quietly. "You could tell us more than you have."

"What can I say? What do you imagine I know of the Thaed? Do you want to listen to rumours? Shall I tell you that they take human bodies and human brains and build them into monsters? Is that what you want me to say?"

"Do they?"

"I don't know," I said desperately. "I don't know."

But I did know and I shuddered in the darkness as the thing in which we sat carried us towards the Thaed.

I had seen them before and thought that I would never forget them and yet, when later I had tried to describe them, I found it impossible. How do you describe an attitude, an emotion, a sense of intangibles? But now, seeing them again, it seemed incredible that I could ever have forgotten.

I went to my knees before the tall, cowed figure and my head bent to the polished stone.

"Master," I said. "I have returned."

"Rise." The voice was emotionless, the voice of a machine. The word was without accent or inflexion yet it carried an authority I dared not question. I rose and heard the suck of breath behind me as the others noted my action.

We had left our living transport at the mouth of a tunnel drilled into a sheer wall of ebon stone. We had followed it to a small chamber and there we had waited until three cowed figures had stepped from an opening. My action and my words had been involuntary, something I could no more help than I could still the beating of my heart.

"Tell them," said Lancaster. "Tell——"

He fell silent, not because of anything said or done but simply because it was the thing to do. Men do not carouse in church nor do



they shout in libraries. By the same token here was not the place for speech.

The cowed figures left the chamber and we followed. Again no word was said or gesture given; we followed because it was the thing to do. Our path led along winding passages of polished stone lit from above by drifting lights which, somehow, gave the impression of sentient organisms. They clustered just before our path, dispersing when we had passed, so that we were constantly attended by a cluster of drifting lanterns.

Clitheria's hand stole into mine.

It was quiet, only the sounds of our own feet broke the utter stillness, the Thaed made no sound at all. I watched them as we walked, tall, cowed figures, their coverings touching the stone so that it was impossible to see their feet.

Did they have feet? Did they walk on pads or glide like snails? Did they, even, touch the floor at all? To ask was to indulge in fruitless speculation. I had been here before but I had never seen a Thaed. All I had seen were their cowls which hid even their features. If they had hands and arms they remained hidden; faces and eyes the same. I could only guess at the nature of their bodies.

We entered a vast hall and Clitheria's hands tightened on mine.

It was big, that hall, so big that the drifting lanterns seemed like stars as they hovered above. The light was a soft twilight which revealed shape but not detail. Against one wall hung a tapestry, a thing of shimmering fibres and sombre colour. Things moved over it

as if they were spiders spinning a web and, as I watched, one swung down towards me, strands streaming from orifices on its body.

It was not a spider.

I heard Lancaster suck in his breath and his voice, thickened with horror, rang in the stillness.

"God!" he said. "God!"

From the tapestry, from shadowed corners where distorted creatures toiled at their endless task of polishing the adamantine stone, from the upper regions beyond sight, came a thin, answering chorus, chittering and laden with the ultimate in despair.

Then silence resumed its sway, the stillness seeming even more tangible because of its breaking.

The Thaед had paused in the centre of the hall where stood a table of stone. Lights drifted down from the upper levels and illuminated our faces as we approached. I felt the edge of the table hit my thighs and halted, Lancaster to my left and the woman to my right. I tried not to think of what we had seen swinging from the tapestry. Silence mounted around us and then, suddenly, I knew the time had come to speak.

Lancaster felt it too and words tumbled from his mouth as if they were escaping from under pressure. I listened to him without paying attention, I knew what he had to say. Then it was my turn and I swallowed my fear.

"I want nothing from the Thaед," I stammered. "Once you gave me life and for that I am grateful. Now I have returned."

For a long moment I stood, the sweat starting on my forehead and then something, perhaps the impact of alien eyes left me and Clitheria began to speak.

"I am a woman who can never become a mother," she said evenly. "Radiation scars have rendered me barren beyond the aid of known medicine. I would be whole again."

I felt horror grip me as I heard what she had to say. All along I had suspected some deeper reason than Lancaster's money for bringing her to Thaед. I damned myself for not having questioned more closely, warned more strongly while there had yet been time. And yet I knew that it was a vain regret. I could not have uttered the words to warn her away, not then and not even now.

The silence closed around us again when Clitheria voiced her wishes. The Thaед stood as immobile as statues of stone and only the drifting lights above our heads showed signs of life. I became conscious of a multitude of eyes staring at us from the tapestry, the roof, the shadowed corners,

"You may speak."

Which of the Thaed had given the command I did not know, but that it was addressed to me there could be no doubt. For now I could speak as I had not been able to do before. But not in warning, in explanation.

It was too late for warnings.

"The Thaed are masters of life," I said dully. "They are biological engineers working with living materials as we work with ores and minerals. As surgeons they are, and have ever been, unequalled anywhere in the known universe. They are an old race, how old even they have forgotten, and it may well be that they were responsible for adapting and spreading life as we know it." I hesitated, not liking what I next had to say. "It would even be reasonable to give them the credit for our creation."

I paused, wondering just how I had acquired this knowledge. Not for the first time I wondered just what they had built into my shattered body when I lay helpless in their chambers. A certain amount of conditioning, that I now knew, but what else?"

"They are an old race and a decadent one. They have retained their manipulative skill but it has turned upon itself. They distort flesh and bone to create objects which have no real place in the scheme of things and they do this for no other reason than that it interests them to do it."

And that was true, I had reason to know it. Words such as "amuse" could not be applied to the Thaed any more than words like "help" and "hate". But how could anyone explain the Thaed? How can anyone explain what it is that makes a man watch a line of marching ants and then, for no reason, either step on them or remove an obstacle from their path?

"Anyone can come to the Thaed," I continued. "And the Thaed will give them what they demand. But there is one stipulation. The Thaed will either give you what you want in the way you want it, or they will give it to you in a manner decided by themselves. In either case they will keep to the letter of your demands." The air seemed to have grown thicker around me. "Those terms apply to any and everyone who lands on this planet."

They did not understand, I could tell it from their expressions. Lack of imagination, perhaps, or a blind refusal to face the obvious. But they had to understand, it was essential.

"They can give me eternal life?" Greed shone in Lancaster's eyes. I glanced at the motionless Thaed.

"I don't know. If it is at all possible they will do it."

"That's all I wanted to know." He almost hugged himself with delight. He had forgotten what he had seen on the tapestry. Clitheria was not so blind.

"You said something about terms," she said. "Just what did you mean?"

"I said that the Thaed would keep to the letter of your demands, but there are two ways of doing that."

She was beginning to understand. I saw her face whiten as she glanced at the things scuttling on the walls. Lancaster was still bemused by his dream of immortality.

"A million and a quarter it's cost me to come here," he said. "But it's worth it, every bit of it. If you give me what I ask," he continued, addressing the Thaed, "I'll give you five million. Ten! Anything you want!"

"You fool!" Anger boiled within me, rage induced by fear and perhaps something else. Was I, all unknowing, the instrument of the Thaed? Was this why I found myself beginning to hate the cheap huckstering of this money-mad dotard?

"Seven years ago I landed here in a wrecked ship with two companions." I forced myself to speak calmly, hard though it was. "We were injured, all of us, injured in the worst possible way. The pile had blown and what wasn't broken was burned and what wasn't burned was rotting with radiation sores. Anywhere else we would have died within hours of landing."

"So?"

"So we wanted to live and the Thaed gave us what we wanted. I was the lucky one, I lived the way I wanted to, in the shape and form of a man. The others—well, they lived, too, after a fashion. If you can call it living."

"The tapestry!" Clitheria shuddered as she stared at it. "That thing——?"

"Jud Owens," I said bleakly. "Once a man and now what you see. They showed him to me before I left."

"And the other one?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. The only thing I am certain of is that he is alive and conscious and that every second of every day he prays for death."

"God!" Lancaster looked physically ill; I couldn't blame him. "Let's call it off," he muttered. "Let's get away from here."

"You can't." I was brutally frank. "You came here of your own free will but you will leave only by permission of the Thaed. And they will only let you go when the bargain is complete." I

sought for a word to express my meaning. "Bored"? It wasn't correct but it would have to do.

"They are bored," I said. "They have few diversions and are unable to acquire raw material because of the orbiting Federation vessels. They have to wait for fools like us to come to them."

"But you didn't suffer here," said Clitheria. "At least you are still a man and not a thing. Why you and not them?"

"I won the gamble," I said, and knew that I should have told them of this before. "There is a test, a competition, a chance of sorts and if you win it, then you win everything; if you fail, then you are their property, to do with as they will."

"What is the competition?"

"I don't know." It was the truth, I did not know. If I had ever possessed a memory of it, then that memory had been removed. I had even lost all memory of how I had been informed of the test at the time. Yet there was a vague recollection of a husky voice whispering to me from behind veils of darkness.

And, because of this, I acted like a fool.

"Master." My knees lowered to the stone and my forehead touched the ground. "I have made no demands and wish nothing from the Thaed. I returned with others. Is it your will that I must do as they?"

An aching moment of silence and then an unmistakable wave of negation. Elation was a living flame within me; I was to be allowed to go free.

I was tempted then, tempted almost to insanity, but I turned my head and caught a glimpse of the woman's face and read the horror that she was trying so desperately to conceal. And I thought of her as she might well become.

"Master." I grovelled when I would have preferred to stand and face the Thaed with the pride of my race. But I could no more help my actions than I could restrain the offer which blurted from my lips.

"Master. Let me take the woman's place in the chance proposed. Let her have what she demands without condition. Let me take her risk. If I win we both go free; if I lose she goes free and you do with me what you will."

"Earl!" Her instinctive cry of denial rang through the cloying stillness of the hall as a blade of light slashing through darkness. "Earl! No!"

I did not answer. Her cry died and stillness closed about us and the period of aching silence was longer than before. I seemed to

sense communion between the Thaeds and, had they been men, I would have had hope. Men would have known surprise, curiosity, a touch of wonder, perhaps, as to why one being should risk so much for another. But the Thaeds were not men and their emotions, if they knew emotion at all, were incomprehensible in their alien strangeness.

Then it came again, that wave of utter negation, and the breath sighed from my lungs and I was coward enough to feel relief.

My offer had been refused and Clitheria would have to face her ordeal alone.

I did not look at her as they led us from the hall.

I was alone in a living tomb an unknown depth beneath the surface of an alien planet and my thoughts were not easy to bear. We had separated when we had left the hall; each following a silent guide, Lancaster and the woman each to their respective chambers where they would be tested, examined, put to their ordeal, while I waited in my living tomb.

I looked at it again in the soft light of a drifting lantern, thankful that I was not wholly in the dark. The walls were of a soft, moss-like growth, the floor of stone. A raised portion, also moss-covered, served as a couch, aside from these the place was bare. There was no door but, just beyond the narrow slit, lurking at the edge of vision, squatted something I was glad I could not see. The Thaeds needed no inorganic barriers when they had their creations shaped to serve their purpose.

Waiting is always hard; when tormented by imaginative speculation it can be refined torture. A thousand times I thought of Clitheria and the primeval urge which had brought her to this place. I thought of her as I had last seen her and then I thought of her as she might well be if fortune was against her. And I thought, how often I thought, of the machinery of the test she would have to undertake.

I had passed through it and yet I had no memory of it. That memory could have been removed and yet, pacing the narrow confines of my cell beneath the soft light of the living lantern, I began to have doubts. How can a man understand alien patterns of behaviour? It was possible that I had been tested without even knowing the nature of the test or how I had won. A boy could set a barrier before an ant and decide that, if the ant turned to the left it would be allowed to live; if to the right it would be destroyed. And if the ant turned to the left and so was allowed to go on its way how would it know that it had won a test? How could it know?

And, to the Thaeds, men were less than ants.

Time ceased to have meaning in the soft-lit darkness. The smooth passage of the hands of my watch seemed divorced from reality and it was with something almost akin to shock that I found myself stumbling as I paced and the poisons of fatigue dulling my eyes and mind. I was exhausted, carried by nerves and tension to the brink of collapse. Or was it natural fatigue? Could there have been a subtle exudation from the surrounding moss? A vapour which dulled the senses, perhaps, a drug which quietened fear and induced sleep?

I did not know and had no way of telling but, as I sprawled on the yielding softness of the couch, it did not seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter but the need for rest, for sleep, for escaping the torment within my mind. I slept and, when I awoke, I was a helpless prisoner.

The moss was more than normally alive, that I had suspected; that it was a symbiote I had not dreamed. I opened my eyes and tried to rise and found that I could not. Tendrils fastened my arms to the couch, other tendrils laced across my chest, my legs, my throat. Something had grown onto my scalp and, as I lay in momentary terror, I realised that other extensions had penetrated into my body.

My terror did not last. It died in the moment of its birth and, in its place, came a wonderful tranquility, a sense of peace and termination of struggle. I and the moss were one. It would feed me, remove my waste, calm and soothe my fears so that, wrapped within its embrace, I could rest like a child in the womb. In return it took what little it needed and took it without harm to myself. Together we were greater than individuals apart.

And, somehow, it could communicate.

There were no words; words are clumsy things. There was no direct induction of concepts or visual images, our communion was more subtle than that. Instead I fell into a peculiar semi-dream state in which I seemed to see through other eyes and gain knowledge of things I had never been taught. Time and space ceased to be barriers so that, even while I knew my body was lying somnolent in the embrace of the symbiote, I seemed possessed of a strange mobility. It was as if I had left myself so that I stared down at my own figure and yet, at the same time, was aware of something looking down at me.

It was as if I had merged with the consciousness not only of the symbiote but of other sentient organisms.

And, with that knowledge, came understanding.

I was a man and, as such, I had a conditioned attitude towards the inflexibility of life. Things were as they were and, to alter them,

was something I could not regard with other than emotional reflex. A cripple aroused not only pity but a sense of revulsion. A man who was not whole was not wholly a man. Mutants, freaks, distortions of what was accepted as the norm, aroused hate and fear and disgust. Intellectually I could deny that; emotionally I could not. The inflexibility of life was, to me, a sacred thing.

But not to the Thaed.

Life, to them, was plastic, something to be adapted and altered, worked with as men work with metal, to be shaped and reshaped, built and torn down to be built again. I thought of an analogy; of the horror a race of machine-beings, creatures of geared limbs and mechanical bodies, of oil for blood and computers for brains, would experience if they saw how men tear apart their machines to rebuild them for other purposes.

To those robots, if they believed in the inflexibility of life, such actions would be obscene. To be subject to such treatment might well drive them insane. But, even if insane, their parts, to men, would still be of use.

I seemed to be drifting high above a table on which rested an amorphous being. From the edge of the table a line of tiny creatures, ant-like in their construction, marched towards and disappeared into an orifice in the colossal bulk. I knew that they would penetrate deeply into the creature and, at a selected place, they would shear away unwanted tissue with their razor jaws, digest it, smear exudations from their bodies on the wound so as to seal and heal it and, finally, their work done, would leave the creature as they had entered.

Life to work on life. Pygmies crawling in the heart of a machine, repairing and changing pipes, welding seams, replacing gaskets, reconnecting wires; work which a giant could do only by dismantling—killing—the machine. And the tiny creatures left no scars, required no clumsy surgery, gave no shock, caused no pain. They worked as beneficent bacteria work.

I thought always in analogy and, dimly I realised, it was because there was no other way in which I could understand. Understanding can only be gained by the use of familiar concepts; words only have meaning when aligned to previous experience. My symbiote was relaying information to me through the only channel it could utilise. But, to it, there was no difference between a man and a machine.

A machine can be built ten feet square and a hundred feet high. The same machine, the same parts, can be assembled ten feet wide by a hundred feet long and ten feet high. It will have a different

shape but it can serve the same purpose. A sentient being is a brain fed by a body which may or may not have useful appendages. The shape of the body doesn't really matter, it will still feed the brain. A brain can be in a compact, easily carried mass or it can be spread out to cellular thickness; it will still be a brain.

Shape, unless it determines function, is unimportant. Function determines shape; so men build their machines and so the Thaed build their creations.

Kindness is a concept peculiar to man. Consideration, thoughtfulness, mercy, the Christian Law, all are peculiar to one race of beings, and the converse is also true. The symbiote was being neither cruel nor kind, thoughtful nor inconsiderate; to be either required emotions which the being simply did not have.

It showed me Clitheria.

She was naked, resting on a table, her body surrounded by the lines of marching, ant-like creatures. A peculiar vegetable-like mass of veined and mottled convolutions rested on her skull and I realised that she, like myself, had been merged with a symbiotic entity. Superficially she appeared unharmed and yet I knew that, deep within her, were tissues undergoing a major transformation.

The thing which sent me rearing against the confining strands was the awful doubt as to just what was happening to her. Had she won? Was she undergoing the relatively simple manipulation required by her demand? Or had she lost and was I even now seeing the first steps of her transformation?

I felt the lacing tendrils across my chest yield and part a little. My legs threshed and my throat swelled as I fought the thing which held me. For a moment black tides of madness clouded my brain and, from a great distance, I heard the sound of harsh panting and did not recognise the sound for my own.

The symbiote knew of the change in my blood. It discerned the increase of adrenalin, the glandular fluids released when a man is wild with anger and fear, the rise in the temperature of the skin when he is under shock, the violent fluctuations of heart and respiration. It may also have discerned the disturbance in my emitted brain radiation. It adjusted its chemistry to quieten its host.

Darkness enfolded me. I lost the vision of Clitheria and, instead, saw oddly shaped colours and weaving patterns of sombre brilliance. Calmness steadied my heart and I ceased from the futile struggle against the tendrils which held me. I sighed a little and then, relaxing, I slept.

When I woke I was not alone.

The Thaед stood just within the narrow portal. Three of them, never had I seen less than three together, never more, always three. Their cowls made them seem taller than they must really have been and the drifting lantern cast their shadows in shifting pools on the polished stone. Around me I could feel the embrace of my symbiote withdrawing from my body, slowly, easily. With an impression almost of regret the living moss absorbed its extrusions and I was free to rise.

"Master." Again the genuflection, knees to the stone and head bowed to the ground. Why had they built this conditioned reflex into my body? Was it a precautionary measure? It seemed hardly likely that they would need such protection and, surely, it could not have been for any personal satisfaction they may have experienced at being so saluted. Once again I felt the baffling impossibility of trying to understand the motives of an alien race.

I rose to my feet, feeling an unnatural liteness when I had expected to be stiff and perhaps a little weak after my imprisonment. How long I had lain in the embrace of the moss I had no way of telling, but it had not been a short time, of that I was certain, and a little weakness would not have surprised me. But I was not weak. I was agile and felt stronger than at any other time in my life. The symbiote had taken good care of its host.

I followed the Thaед as they left the chamber and was pleased that whatever they had left to watch over me was no longer in attendance. I could not see it but I knew that the Thaед were far from defenceless. The creatures they fashioned would be within easy distance for both offensive and defensive measures. And yet, even while I thought about it, the concept of attacking the Thaед dissolved from my mind. It was one of those things which just could not be.

Together we walked in the stillness and, of the four, I was the only one making sound.

The passage led a winding path past narrow-doored chambers into which I had no desire to peer. The drifting lanterns clustered in ghostly attendance as we progressed and I had the impression of watching eyes. The Thaед went before me and the temptation to look over my shoulder became almost overwhelming. If we had not reached the hall when we did I would have yielded to that temptation.

Instead I stared at the thing on the table.

It was a cone, a foot in height and the same in diameter at the base. It was of a dull scarlet in colour and was utterly featureless. It could have been made of metal or glass or even of plastic, but I knew that it had been manufactured from none of these. There

was an aura about it, an intangible something which gave the impression of life.

I was looking at one of my companions.

I think my sanity was saved then by the conviction that it could not have been Clitheria. She had wanted the power to become a mother and this thing obviously could not breed. What it could do was beyond my conjecture. Why it had been fashioned at all was past comprehension. A man would use it as a door-stop, perhaps; a giant for a paper-weight. The Thaeds had constructed it for a whim, an exercise in their art. Their reasons were known only to themselves.

I followed them out of the hall, away from the tapestry on which things which looked like spiders spun in endless industry, away from the table of polished stone and the thing which rested on that table. The human brain locked in the cone-shaped body. Away from Lancaster who had wanted eternal life and who had received what he had demanded in a form to which death would have been a welcome relief.

We came to a chamber in which I seemed to catch a hint of sea-smell and there I was left to wait with a pounding heart for what was to come. I saw the clustered lights down the passage. I saw them draw closer and I saw the tall, cowed figures beneath those lights. And I saw who was following them, walking as if in a dream. Together they entered the chamber.

Clitheria bowed in utter subjugation.

"Master."

She was well, I saw that in the first glance. She was woman, all woman, whatever had been her test she had won her chance. She genuflected before the Thaeds and, even as she did so, my mind spun with questions. Why, Master? Why always the singular when addressed to the plural? Why not, Masters? And why, why had I never seen more than three?

Were they the very last remnants of a dying race?

The questions died in my mind as Clitheria rose and stood at my side. Together we stood waiting; two children in a world so adult and wise with time that we could never hope even to understand the smallest part of it. And, like children, we received our permission to depart.

"Go."

We bent as one. Our knees hit the polished stone, our foreheads touched the ground and our voices blended into a muted chorus.

"Master."

Then we turned and walked to our freedom.

Tanamasuri is not a pleasant place; some have called it, with reason, the cesspool of the Galaxy. But to Clitheria and me it is home.

To the small hospital, built and maintained by Lancaster's money, come the disease-ravaged creatures of a dozen worlds. They come for medical help, for drugs to ease their torment, for hope when there can be no comfort and for comfort when there can be no hope.

We are respected, Clitheria and I, though at times I feel that that respect stems more from fear than from true regard. Whatever the reason, we are never molested, our hospital is never robbed, our staff walk the streets of Tanamasuri as they would walk the streets of any civilised city.

There is a girl, so much like her mother that it hurts my heart to see them together, and a boy who, so people tell me, is the image of myself. We are happy enough, Clitheria and I, in our work and our children and our love for each other. But sometimes, when the hospital has been busy and medical science shown again for the crude, fumbling thing that it is, I catch her expression and I know of what she is thinking.

And sometimes, when we dine out, and I watch the strange, amorphous creatures provided for our entertainment, I grow thoughtful and memory becomes an enemy.

We talk then. Talk of gay, inconsequential things, of the routine of the day and the progress of our children and, even, of the distant past.

But of the Thaed we talk not at all.

E. C. TUBB

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Way Out

For this brief instant he held the life of a planet in his hands, and was as God Himself

There was no time for thought.

One moment he had been looking through the glass partitions surrounding his office, cutting him off in a world of his own from the general activity outside; the next he stared at a wall of grey concrete while within him his stomach rebelled at the sudden descent.

It had been fast, he admitted, but then it had to be. Thought, even human thought, was a slow and cumbersome thing when compared to the speed of electrons and nothing slower than these would have served the purpose. The external tell-tales had caught the warning, had relayed it at slightly less than the speed of light, the trips had operated and now he was falling to safety while above him the building disintegrated into radioactive slag.

It was, he had to admit, a neat and ingenious method of getting out from under.

Slow though conscious thought might be, yet still it was almost too fast for comfort. As yet the bare concrete of the shaft down which he was falling had hardly seemed to move. He could see, with startling clarity, the imprint of the wooden shuttering used to retain the liquid cement. He noted the coarse grain, the slight bulges between the planks where the concrete had oozed, the tiny

pockmarks where air had been trapped to form bubbles. He seemed to hang suspended in a moment of time in a fraction of space and little things took on a tremendous importance.

Shock, of course, they had warned him about that. The terrible shock of the abrupt transition from the routine of normal, everyday life to this sudden plunge into the shaft. That was bad enough in itself but coupled with the physical disorientation was the mental knowledge of what had caused it. And there was too the sick knowledge of what would have happened to him had he not been sitting in his chair, at his desk at that exact moment of time.

Then the lights went out as the connections finally snapped and he sat alone and in darkness.

If anything the darkness was worse than the light. He had always hated the dark, even as a small boy he had feared and so hated it. His mother had scolded him for his fears.

"Edward Ambler, now you go right back upstairs this very minute! A great big boy like you afraid of the dark! Why, what your father would say I don't know. The idea, indeed! 'Afraid of the dark! Stuff and foolishness, that's what it is. As if there was anything to hurt you in the dark.'"

She had been wrong, of course, as she had been wrong about so many things. There were things to hurt you in the dark, strange, distorted monsters which craftily took on familiar shapes under the impact of light. A chair, in the darkness, became a squatting, toad-like beast. A wardrobe, free from the freezing influence of light, became a tall and menacing entity waiting with incredible patience for some unwary human to step within reach of its swinging, door-like arm. And there were other things which could only live at night; queer creatures of the imagination, intangible but all too real to an eleven year old boy who had never known the security of love.

And it didn't help to remind himself that Edward Ambler, the scared eleven year old schoolboy was now General Ambler, C.W.H., with the responsibility of the lives of millions weighting the insignia on his shoulders. The Commander of the Western Hemisphere and the schoolboy who had been terrified of the dark still had much in common. They were still afraid of the unknown.

The soft moaning of the air being compressed beneath him had stilled now and he knew that he had left the concrete shaft for one of steel. Close fitting, this shaft, as air-tight as it could be made so

that the tiny platform on which he rode would be cushioned to a stop by the compressed air beneath it. By now he must be beneath ground level and, by now, he was surely beginning to slow down. The thought brought a new anxiety. While falling comparatively free there was little likelihood that anything from above could catch up with him but, as his descent slowed any debris from the shattered building above, which had fallen into the shaft, would certainly crash down on him.

But those who had designed the escape shaft had foreseen even this eventuality. The desk was merely a slab of steel supported at either end by ranked drawers. Between those drawers was ample space for a man to crouch and, so crouching, he would be protected by the steel surface above him. It was cramped, uncomfortable, but it was safe.

Squatting in the darkness, his head scant inches from the steel above, Ambler waited for his journey to end. When it did he regretted it. There was a moment of terrible pressure, as if something heavy were being piled on him from above and, at the same time, as if the metal floor on which he sat was rising so as to pulp his body. Something hit the desk above his head with a dull crunch and something else splintered on the floor beside him. The platform shook with a peculiar shuddering motion and, from a distance, came a peculiar hissing scream. Downward motion was abruptly altered to a sidewise slithering and light blazed around him as doors swung open.

"He O.K.?" The voice was muffled and anxious. A man, grotesque in his anti-radiation suit, stepped forward swinging a counter. Another man, similarly garbed, stooped and stared at Ambler through his goggled helmet.

"Seems O.K.," he said and held out a gloved hand. "You all right, Sir?"

"I think so." Carefully Ambler rolled out from beneath the desk, staggering a little as he climbed to his feet.

"Better get him out of here," snapped the first man. He swung his counter over the shattered fragment of concrete resting on the desk. "This stuff's hot."

"Seal it up, then." The second man led Ambler towards a short passage. "This way, Sir. Down the passage, turn right at the end and then left into the operations room." The eyes behind the goggles were anxious. "Are you sure that you're all right, Sir?"

"I'm sure," snapped Ambler irritably. Fuss always annoyed

him and to put an end to it he walked away from the technicians. But he wished that he felt as confident as he had sounded. His bones and muscles ached as though he had been beaten with rubber hoses and he had the flat, sour taste of blood in his mouth. Out of sight of the two men, he leaned against the wall for a moment to recover from a sudden nausea then, biting his lips, forced himself to continue. All the briefing he had received on the use of the escape shaft had done nothing to prepare him for the actual psychological effects but, at least, he was still alive. Others weren't so fortunate.

An orderly brought hot coffee and, sipping it, Ambler listened to the initial reports.

"It was a cobalt, Sir," said Carter. "No doubt about it. We were lucky to get away."

"Leyman and Goshen?"

"Leyman wasn't on his platform, Sir." Carter shook his head. "He must have left it for some reason, maybe he had to go somewhere urgently."

"And Goshen?"

"Dead on arrival." Carter's attempt at levity was quite unconscious. He, like Ambler and Laughton, was still suffering from shock. It isn't every day that a man literally races away from the effects of an atomic explosion. The three of them formed a unique and exclusive fraternity.

Ambler slowly sipped at his coffee and forced himself to relax. Around him technicians were busy at the boards gathering and collating information from the thousand watch points and monitoring stations scattered over the Western Hemisphere. To one side, Carter sat and stared at his hands while Laughton wandered about aimlessly. Ambler stared at him, wondering whether the man was still under shock and then, with sudden impatience, decided that if he were, then, he would have to be snapped out of it. This was no time for temperament.

"Laughton!"

"Yes?"

"Come over here and sit down." Ambler let acid sharpen his voice. "That's an order!"

Laughton grunted and slumped into a chair. He kept blinking and, high on his cheek, a muscle twitched as if with a life of its own. He touched it, stared at his hand, then abruptly felt for a cigarette. Ambler let him put it between his lips before interfering.

"Hold it." He gestured to a technician. "How are we for air?"

"Sir?" The man frowned, then his face cleared as he saw what Ambler was getting at. "We're sealed from the outside, naturally, so we have to avoid contaminating the air any more than we have to. There's a room set aside if you want to smoke, we've got a special filter and unit installed in it, but . . ."

"No smoking anywhere else," interrupted Ambler. "Is that it?"

"Well . . ." Awe of rank struggled with technical caution. Ambler ended the indecision.

"No smoking," he announced. "Return to duty." He glared at Laughton. "Put that thing away, otherwise you might forget and set light to it."

Slowly Laughton took the cigarette from between his lips and stared at it.

"The end of the world," he said bitterly. "And you worry about a lousy damn cigarette."

Put that way it did seem rather futile.

There had once been a psychologist, Ambler had forgotten his name, who had gone to a tremendous amount of trouble to prove that men quite often get what they fear because they fear it. He had adapted his findings to nations and come up with the proof that, merely because a nation didn't want war, that was one certain way to get it. Defence, when carried to the ultimate, can only lead to war. The only true defence lies in the total elimination of potential enemies.

"What are we waiting for?" said Laughton suddenly. "Why don't we just blast them to Hell?"

"Who?" Ambler forced himself to remain calm.

"Who else could it be?" Laughton jerked a thumb ceiling-wards. "Can there be any doubt as to who dropped that bomb?"

If there was a doubt it was a small one, Ambler had to agree and yet, strangely enough, he felt no great urgency, no haste to get on with retaliation. The need for haste had gone and now there was nothing to do but decide the moment when he would unleash the destructive fury stored against this hour.

Carter rose from where he sat and came over to take a chair next to Ambler.

"I keep thinking," he said. "Do you know, I almost didn't make it. I was just deciding whether or not to get a cup of water

when it happened." He shuddered a little. "It was as close as that."

"It was too close for Leyman," said Laughton bitterly. He glared at Ambler. "You and your shop-window effect."

It wasn't Ambler's but he had agreed with it. Let the responsible officials remain in plain sight so that they could boost morale. No one would think that a war was imminent if they could see that those who would be in charge of hostilities were exposed like sitting ducks. Of course, none but a very few knew of the escape shafts and, apparently, the enemy hadn't dreamed of them. Their bomb had been well-aimed but it had failed in its purpose. The Western Hemisphere still had its teeth.

And it was up to Ambler to use them.

"The swine!" Laughton was glaring up at an illuminated map of the Western Hemisphere set above the communication boards. It winked with lights, red, amber, blue and white. The red stood for cobalt bombs, the amber for megaton H bombs, the blue for "small", "clean" atomic bombs and the white for retaliation bases. The map was sprinkled with a fair scattering of reds with more ambers and blues. Even as they watched a white light winked out to be replaced by an amber.

"Another base gone," fretted Laughton. "How long do we wait before we use what is left?" The muscle twitched high on his cheek and his eyes had a dull, glassy stare. He was, Ambler realised, a man almost insane with frustrated rage. He was also a man who knew the firing signals as well as Ambler did himself.

"Carter!"

"Sir?"

"Summon the guards." Ambler remained silent as Carter, after one questioning stare, went to call the guards. He returned accompanied by two men wearing sidearms. Ambler gestured towards Laughton. "Place this man under close arrest. Confine him and have the doctor give him sedatives." He backed his orders with an impatient stare. The guards, trained to obey orders from superior officers, never thought of disobedience. They escorted Laughton from the room, deaf to his screaming insults and accusations. Ambler looked at Carter.

"Do you agree with what he says?"

"Sir?"

"Just now he called me a saboteur, a spy and a traitor. Well?"

Carter hesitated. "I do not agree with him," he said cautiously, "but . . ."

"Yes?"

"I can understand why he said what he did." Carter gestured towards the illuminated map. "Why wait, Sir? Why hesitate? You know what has to be done, why not do it?"

It was, in the parlance of a now-dead era, the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

It was a hard question for Ambler to answer. A week ago, even an hour ago, he would have had no hesitation. But then, a week or an hour ago, he would still have had the comforting thought that, no matter what happened everything had been provided for. Now he wasn't so confident. He turned and looked at Carter.

"Would you give the word if you were I?"

"Yes, Sir, I would." Ambler shrugged at the unthinking reply, genuine though it may have been. Carter had said what he had to say simply because it had been drilled into him. But if Ambler had not come safely down the shaft, if, perhaps, Laughton had been in command, what then? Ambler shrugged again, annoyed at himself for posing ridiculous questions. Had he not come down the shaft, then, for him, all speculation would have had no reality. He would have been dead and out of it all and problems of all kinds would have ceased to exist. He returned his attention to the board.

The lights still winked. Several more ambers, a couple fewer whites but no more reds and he was thankful for that. Red spelt cobalt which meant utter and complete death to every living thing in the area of the bomb. He voiced a question to a pale-faced technician.

"Any reports on radioactive intensity?"

"A few." The man consulted a computer. "With the prevailing winds, cobalt contamination will mostly be carried out to sea and there dispersed. Of course, that won't help the atmosphere, the stuff will hang about too long as it is, but it could have been worse." He checked his instruments again. "Seems as if the bombs contain a cut-down element, something we didn't know about, the contamination isn't as wide-spread as we feared." He gave a short laugh, a vocal sound without humour. "Natural enough when you think about it. They wouldn't want to commit suicide as well as murder."

"That won't save them," said Carter grimly. Ambler ignored the remark.

"Any information on the state of population?"

"From the impact areas and recorded fall-out I'd say that it is pretty bad." The technician seemed to be a master of understatement.

ment. "Most of the densely populated areas have been wiped out and the prevailing winds have swept a mass of short-term fall-out over the centre of the country." He glanced up at the map. "See? Cobalt along the coast to shower the country with fall-out and H-bombs and straight atomics plastering industrial and manufacturing areas. They seem to have had a pretty shrewd idea of our bases too."

"That won't make any difference," said Carter, and he was right. One bomb was all it would take, one big cobalt bomb and then it would be the end of the play for the race of mankind. And the bombs Ambler commanded had no safety element incorporated to cut down the lethal fall-out.

It came as a shock to him to realise that he was contemplating the literal end of the world.

"Call the guards," he said to Carter.

"But——?"

"Call the guards."

He almost smiled as his aide went on his errand, half-guessing the thoughts which he must be thinking. And those thoughts were justified, in part at least. Ambler had no intention of being out-maneuvred in this, the most critical decision of all. While he waited Carter's return he visualised the intriguing concept of a man who was now a God.

It was like staring at a little red button. Press it and finish! Finish to everything. Finish to the possibility of life or the possibility that mankind could survive this latest wound as it had survived so many others. Just give the word; send the code signal which would operate the radio-controlled trigger mechanisms and Armageddon would soar from the underground launching ramps to plunge halfway around the world. It was a heady power, an intoxicating power and the temptation to press that little red button just to see what would happen was almost irresistible.

Ambler became aware of the guards standing at his side, but paid them no attention. He was thinking, trying to visualise the unknown and, deep within him, an eleven year old schoolboy cringed at the thought of darkness. Not night, that was but the symbol, but the darkness of the unknown, the darkness which must follow if he did his duty as the others saw it.

"Arrest that man," he snapped, and pointed to Carter. "You!" He stabbed a finger at the technician. "Radio a message on all frequencies. The Western Hemisphere offers unconditional surrender. Move!"

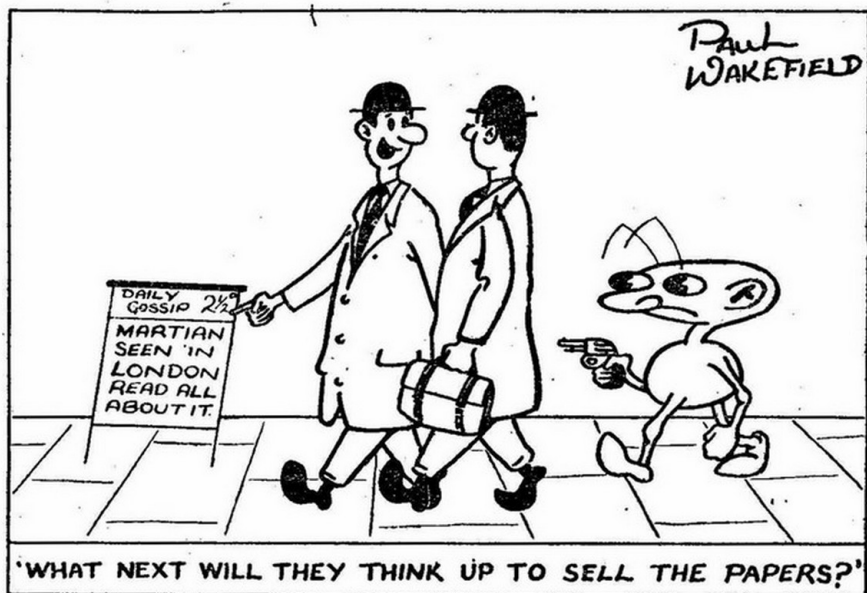
"What?" The technician stared and then, unaccountably, relaxed and laughed with an hysterical relaxation from strain. Carter took a step forward only to be restrained by the guards. He seemed dazed, unbelieving, appearing as a man would appear who has just seen the impossible happen before his eyes. Ambler spoke quickly before the other could protest.

"If we retaliate we lose everything," he said and knew while he was saying it that his words were mere justification for his decision. "By surrendering we at least ensure the survival of the race and what is left of our country. And our moral victory will be incalculable; we shall be the only true Christian nation history has ever known."

It was good and true enough as far as it went, but he knew that it wasn't the real reason for what he did. The real reason was far more simple than that. He had realised that, once he retaliated, then neither he nor anyone else would have anywhere left to run to.

And it is in human nature to demand a way out.

ROBERT LLOYD



Mute Witness

*The testimony of even his most despised companion
may well endorse the greatness of mankind*

Queenie drifted soundlessly along the pavement. There was an aroma from the other side of the wall, but she did not permit herself to be tempted. She remembered the occasion when she had scaled the barrier, and had barely escaped with her life. For the dog which guarded this particular house was both large and ferocious. Regretfully she continued on her way.

When she came near the end of the block she halted. There was only a vacant plot after this, and she would get no benefit from the weeds and old iron which was all which that space had to offer. She would do better on the other side of the street.

Nevertheless she went on, stealing forward on silent feet, until she came to the corner. There she froze, crouched as low as possible in the shadows.

For the plot was no longer vacant.

There were no lights showing from the structure. But it *was* occupied. The hair rose along her back. It was not only occupied, but the inhabitants were awake, and watchful.

They were watching her.

Cautiously she commenced to edge back. Then checked. Half a lifetime survived as a freebooter had strengthened her intuition. There was no hostility in the roundhouse on the site. She knew this as a definite fact. All the same, that was not enough. Not tonight. She had no objection to friendliness. At times she would

even go out of her way to provoke it. What she wanted tonight, however, was food. If they had food——?

Her tail moved, slowly, curving upwards. Her legs lifted her body a shade higher. There was food in the place. The scent of it rolled towards her, exciting her, drawing her forwards. She did not rush. It was rather that she yielded to the scent, but with all her muscles under control. She was still ready, if the need arose, to whirl and flash to safety.

A window slid open without noise. In the darkness only Queenie could have seen that there were two shades of grey behind the opening, and that one of these was alive. But she could observe this, and paused because of it. For a long time she stood without moving.

The smell of food came more strongly, and with it came sound. Barely audible sound. Nevertheless she heard it, and interpreted it. The sound said she was welcome. It invited her to enter, and to satisfy her hunger. It went further. It promised that no harm would come to her.

It repeated that she was welcome.

She trotted now, swiftly, without hesitation, her tail pointing straight up. Effortlessly she sprang towards the opening, touched the frame, and stood on the narrow rim. The one inside made a friendly, pleased sound, and lifted a hand and touched her.

Queenie purred.

The hand passed over her, caressingly, and she undulated her body against it. The hand moved in under her, raised her, and she lay along the arm. Her tail waved gently. She did not notice the window slide up once more.

In the main room were two more strangers. She was set down, and she stood, her eyes moving from one to another without fear. She had started to purr.

One of the three stooped, and placed a dish on the floor. An exultant shrillness exploded from Queenie, and she leaped forward. She crouched before the dish, stretched her neck, and began to eat, bolting each mouthful, and the three stood watching.

Only when she ceased, did one of them move. Approaching a cabinet fixed against the curved wall, he stooped to examine a battery of dials and gauges.

"No signs of interest outside," he reported. "We've struck a respectable, stay-at-home neighbourhood." He glanced down at Queenie, busily washing herself. But where do *you* fit into that?" he asked.

The others chuckled.

The speaker turned back to the cabinet, moved different knobs and dials. There was no noticeable effect, yet Queenie suddenly ceased her licking, and lifted her head. Then she was on her feet, her ears flattened.

"Sensitive to a degree," one commented with pleased interest.

From the third stranger came sounds of reassurance. She stared at him with expressionless, brilliant eyes in a mask face. Then, as suddenly as she had taken alarm, she relaxed once more, and resumed her washing.

"Steady at six thousand," the one at the cabinet reported.

The third nodded. He made soothing noises, bent down to Queenie, and lifted her. He carried her to a bench next to the cabinet, set her down on this.

There was confidence in all their movements. There was no hesitation such as could disturb a creature of fine-tuned nerves and muscles. What they were doing was something which was altogether familiar to them. This feeling transmitted itself to Queenie, so that she did not protest even when they set electrodes against her skull, fixing them without excess pressure. From the electrodes leads ran back to instruments on the cabinet.

"Ready," the first one announced. The second's attention was for a range of meters and lights. The third remained with Queenie, one finger moving in rhythmic reassurance along her fur. She lay quiescent under this finger.

"Ready," the third answered.

All the while, as the needles moved on the dials, and the lights flashed on and off, his finger stayed with Queenie.

Even when at times her fur rose, and her back arched, and she spat; or again, when she squirmed ecstatically, or perhaps whimpered, the finger did not cease its vigil.

Until, finally, the investigation ended, and the electrodes were removed.

"Normal?" Queenie's guardian inquired.

She stretched, and sprang down to the floor. Energetically she began again to wash herself.

The third one laughed. "A ritualist," he proclaimed. He looked at his companions. "Normal?" he asked again.

The examiner shook his head. "Altogether abnormal," he reported. "Altogether opposed to any sub-species we have met before." He considered Queenie with pleasure. "A discovery,"

he declared. "A rebel. Born domesticated, and deliberately choosing to be a vagabond."

"That is not new," the third objected.

"It is new when it is accepted as normal with a species. To be integrated into society whilst insisting on freedom to remain outside it at the same time."

"I see." The third walked over to a seat. When he sat down Queenie leaped upon his knees, purred, and made herself comfortable. He stroked her, and smiled.

"Her memory banks are instructive," the examiner went on. "She is accepted as a rebel, and tolerated as such. Even though she must shift for herself, there is no drive by the dominant species to destroy her."

"She is anti-social," the second enlarged, "and she is permitted to remain anti-social. That tells us a great deal."

"About the dominant species. Yes. It argues that individualism is not stamped out automatically. Even when the rebel, through her way of life, is a potential danger as a carrier of disease. That tells us more. Add the fact that from her stimulated memories instances of benevolence predominate. The answer can only be one of two alternatives."

"That the people of this world are ignorant of medicine?" The second shook his head. "No. Their buildings and streets are evidence of their stage of development. They could not, at the same time, be ignorant of hygiene."

"In that case——!" The third smiled.

The examiner nodded. "Yes. It means that Man, on this planet, is fundamentally tolerant in a developing civilisation." He crossed the room, and took Queenie from his companion's lap. "From our reading of the evidence of this witness we can all sign to that in our report?" The others murmured their agreement. "In that case," the examiner said, "we can return this world's representative to her unlawful occupation."

Once again the window slid open, and Queenie balanced on the rim. She lingered only long enough to judge her distance, miaowed once, slid her forepaws down the outside wall, and leaped.

She padded across the site until she reached the corner of the fence. A small wind behind her made her turn her head, but she saw only the weeds and odds and ends of junk, and she turned and drifted off along the street. There was a rubbish bin down the block which she should investigate.

CLIFFORD C. REED

Debt of Lassar

*The people of Earth were as zombies and without hope.
How to rekindle the fire which once so brightly burned?*

Illustrated by John A. Greengrass

It was raining when Thorval came to Earth, a thin, miserable drizzle that suggested a total lack of life or hope, even on the part of the elements. No brilliance of lightning flashed across the sky; no sullen rumble of thunder sounded a drumbeat of menace or warning. It was a planet where nothing flashed or thundered any more.

He saw one of the natives in the viewport of his ship as it touched down and the coldness that had been gnawing deep inside him since he first came to the planet, reached up an icy hand and gripped his mind with fingers of guilt.

We did this to them!

The Earthman still had the height of his ancestors, but stature was the only characteristic he shared with them. Once he had lifted his head in pride. Once his shoulders had been straight with that same pride. What was this creature of the abject, shambling walk? Was this a descendant of the ancient, glorious race?

We did this to them!

He tried to ease the heavy sense of guilt with the assurance that man was resilient, that the independent blaze of sheer, stubborn courage, the brilliant flame of genius, could and would be rekindled in the crushed and broken heart of Earth—but he could not overcome his reluctance to operate the telescopic controls of the port that would bring the pathetic figure nearer. Then he would see the expression in the man's eyes; then he would know what a thousand years of tyranny had put there.

Orare, in charge of the Earth based forces, met him at the newly converted Rehabilitation Centre. They walked to the office which had been set aside for Thorval with the quietness of old friends meeting on the status of equality.

Orare looked at the new Rehabilitation Director speculatively as the younger man sat down. It was the first time he had seen anyone who bore the imprint of the ancient Moranian race so clearly. It was in the thin, hawk features and the slant of the man's eyes, the quick decisive movements and, above all, the luminous darkness of the glance that returned his stare with faint amusement.

"Well?"

Orare grunted. "I wonder how long it will take you to realise you have an impossible job here."

"Nothing is impossible."

"No?"

Orare shrugged. The answer to that could be left to time—and the people of Earth.

"How do you intend to start?"

Thorval frowned thoughtfully. "I think the best thing would be to broadcast to the people first and explain why I've been sent here. As they would trust members of their own race more than they would us, I shall ask for assistants from among them."

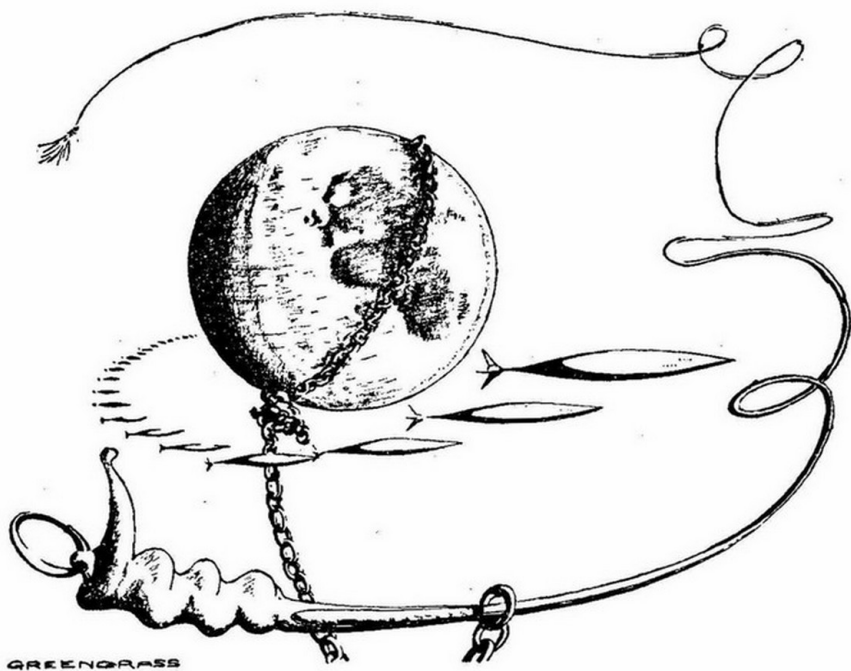
Orare gave him a strange look. "You expect to get Earth assistants?"

Thorval nodded. "They probably hate us for what we did to them, but there should be a few who'll be able to believe we're sincere in wishing to give them their freedom and helping them to rebuild."

Orare grunted again. "You haven't been long on Earth. Have you seen an Earthman yet? Really looked at him, I mean?"

Thorval nodded. "I've seen one—from a distance though."

Again he felt the rise of the chilling doubt in his mind, because he knew how reluctant he had been to use the telescopic controls which would have given him a close-up.



Orare smiled grimly. "I thought so." He leaned across the desk and punched a switch on the communications panel. "Bring in one of the Earthmen . . . any one will do." He turned back to Thorval, frowning slightly now. "Before you came here you studied the old history tapes of Earth?"

"Yes." Thorval's eyes glowed with an enthusiasm he did not have to keep at bay. "They were a great people, Orare. They weren't very advanced scientifically when they were found, but they had a streak of genius that would have made them the equal of any race in the galaxy."

Orare gave a short laugh of morose confirmation. "I thought that was what was making you so optimistic." He shook his head. "Those spools are over a thousand years old. You're living in the past. The race you see in them died—to the last man, if you want to be dramatic."

Thorval looked faintly puzzled. "I understood the population of Earth to be in the billions."

"Oh, it is," Orare agreed. He looked grimly at the flaming twin suns of Lassor emblazoned on the wall. "Only it's not the same

race." He paused again. "They cannot yet be called animals," he said slowly, "because they still have intelligence—of a sort."

The Earthman who had been brought in gave a queer little salute that was servility and slavery in movement, then he stood with his hands hanging at his sides, his head bent, mutely waiting.

Orare dismissed the soldier and looked over at the Rehabilitation Director. When he saw the aghast realisation break over his face, he knew also the sickness and bitter regret that would be clawing inside him, as it had torn at his own mind when he had first come to Earth.

"Well?" he demanded, but Thorval did not say anything, nor did the Earthman move. He just stood there, relaxed yet somehow not relaxed. A slave did not relax in the presence of his masters.

"Lift your head," Orare ordered.

The Earthman did so and Thorval met eyes that held an expression he had never seen before. It was not hopelessness, not resignation, but something that went far beyond both; something that had no name.

He looked away. He had to. It was impossible to meet that gaze any longer, knowing who and what had caused it.

"What happened to this race has no name," Orare said quietly, switching to code Lassorian, so that the native could not understand them. "A race like the old people of Earth couldn't bend, nor could it break. It had to go beyond both—and become this."

Thorval glanced at Orare sharply, seemed about to speak, but turned back to the Earthman instead.

"What is your name?"

"I have no name." He spoke in Lassorian, the only language he knew, because all languages of Earth had died, too, in the long ago. "I am No. 1374526 of Sector CB3 District 57." The same nameless thing that was in his eyes was deeply ingrained in his voice.

"That is your official designation. What name do you give to yourself?"

"I do not understand. Only the Masters have names. I am No. 137 . . ."

"Yes, I know." Thorval's voice was hasty, his quick nod halting the upraised arm with the branded number that was proffered as evidence.

"Didn't you know about their lack of names?" Orare asked.

Thorval nodded. "It was just an idea. They were forbidden names; all recalcitrant races were." A name gave a person individu-

ality. A number, a mere cog in a slave machine, would not be so eager to fight for personal rights—because he was not a person, just a number. “I was hoping they would secretly have given themselves names.”

“But that would have meant rebellion.”

“I know. That’s what I was hoping for as well.” As Thorval looked at the Earthman he began to understand at last what Orare had been trying to tell him. Once Earth had been a world populated by an intelligent, progressive race, aggressive and ambitious towards their future.

That was the past.

“What is your work?” he asked the Earthman.

“Third Assistant, Radio Isotopes Laboratory of the Central Hospital, District 57.”

“Radio Isotopes Laboratory!” There was a quick rebirth of the optimism he had felt on the journey out and he threw Orare a faintly smiling glance. “I thought you said the old intelligence was dead.”

“Not the intelligence—the reason behind it. They can be taught tricks, like animals.” Orare gave a short laugh. “That’s all his work is to him. He performs it without knowing the meaning of what he’s doing, or why. Try him for initiative and creative ability and you’ll get no reaction whatsoever.”

“I still believe they can be saved.” Thorval stood up decisively and sent the Earthman away, then turned back to Orare. “I shall address the people as originally planned. A week from today. That should give you time to see that receiver screens are set up in every Earth settlement.”

Yet in spite of his renewed optimism, he could not help remembering the expression in the Earthman’s eyes.

Thorval, Lessorian Rehabilitation Director of Earth, spoke to the people of the newly freed planet, and because he was a Lessorian they listened to him with dutiful attendance. He saw them in the screens, a quiet, almost unmoving audience—and on every face within range of view he saw the same thing that had been in the eyes of the man brought into his office.

There was no need to silence them. They were too still and too quiet. No mother quietened a crying child. No child cried. Their tears had dried long ago. Eight hundred years ago.

He told them of the civilisation they had once possessed, of the

names that had once given them individuality. In a controlled voice he spoke of the coming of the invaders, of great cities smashed by his ancestors; how, even though the science of Earth had been only a child to the invading ships of the great interstellar empire that had caught them in its steel net, the Terrans had fought, viciously, with every toy weapon in their possession. The cities of Earth had been smashed to dust, their people murdered by the millions, but for years no Lessorian soldier dared to walk alone, or even in groups of less than six together when venturing out of their camps. Some hidden sniper would sell his life dearly. Retaliation meant nothing to people who fought to regain the freedom they had once possessed and prized so highly.

"The heart of the expanding empire was Lessor," he continued. "Its inhabitants had always been aggressive by nature and when, with the coming of space travel, another race was found in their own solar system, it was inevitable that war should break out. The Morans, who occupied the neighbouring planet, had no chance from the beginning. Their civilisation had developed along entirely different lines. Ethically and socially they were far more advanced than Lessor, but they had no physical sciences. The quick contest and absorption of the Moranian race was only the beginning. An interstellar drive was developed and Lessor took her desire for conquest out to the stars. When a race is strong and ruthless, empire comes easily.

It was not until a thousand years after Earth had been subjected and added to our Empire that a revolt of any significance took place and surprisingly enough, the revolt started on Lessor itself. Perhaps the Lessorian race itself had changed. In any case, we found we could no longer accept as right the way of life forced upon the subjected races of our Empire and a rebel government was formed on Lessor. Not everyone had changed, of course. The governors of most planets and their immediate retinues and bodyguard had to be overcome, since they were reluctant to give up the power they possessed, but most of the space fleet and planetary armies were with us.

The revolt, although started only a few Earth years ago, is now entirely successful. Rehabilitation is now doing all it can to rebuild the civilisations of subject planets to the stage reached before they were occupied, or at least to a point where it can carry on unaided. That, at the very least, is our duty towards the people our Empire once enslaved. I have been sent here to direct the rehabilitation centres of Earth. For a time, officials of Lessor will still have to administer Earth, as you have, as yet, no organisation of your own, but we shall help you to rebuild your civilisation. You will govern yourselves

again and will be offered membership in the federation of free planets now being formed."

As Thorval spoke no suspicious voices cried out to question trickery. No memory remained of the civilisation Earth had once possessed. Freedom was just a word and who could tell them what it meant? How did one explain freedom? It was not a thing to be stated in words. It was something inside heart and mind. Even if a truly semantic explanation had existed, it would still have been difficult to get it across to these people.

He moved wearily as he added his last few words to them. "I think we can help you to regain your old civilisation, but I shall need your help. Those of you who have understood my words should stay by the vision screens nearest to you, wherever they may be. The rest of you return to your homes and your various duties. For the time being life will go on as before, but it will not be long before the work of rebuilding commences."

He stopped and they clapped, unreasoningly, dutifully, as they had been taught to clap when a Lessorian addressed them. They did not cheer though. That needed enthusiasm and enthusiasm was something that had died in them long ago.

Orare gave Thorval a quizzical glance as he came into the office. "Well?"

The other shrugged. "You were quite right. None of them stayed."

"The suppression took two hundred years. After that they had eight hundred years of complete slavery, both of body and mind. It's a thousand years since the old race lived. You can't expect to bring it back in a few days. I doubt myself whether it will ever come back."

"It must!" Thorval rose to his feet abruptly at a knock on the door. "I wanted you here for this interview. I'm trying something else."

A soldier brought in a man and a girl. Both were young and attractive, except for the terrible expression that seemed natural to everyone on Earth.

The manner of the Rehabilitation Director altered as he looked at them. Orare appeared startled for a moment at the air of harsh arrogance the younger Lessorian suddenly adopted, but he didn't say anything.

"You had chosen each other as companions and the choice has

been approved by the Selectors? Your bond was to have taken place two days hence?"

They confirmed respectfully that he was correct.

"That approval is rescinded." He called over the guard who had brought them in. "Take this girl to my quarters."

The Earthman did not even look startled, but Orare smiled slightly.

"You understand?" Thorval watched the Earthman closely. "You are to give up all claim to the woman, No. 59471. She is of a standard of attraction suitable for Lessorians. She will become first my mistress and afterwards will provide entertainment for the soldiers of Lasso."

The man gave the characteristic Earth salute. "It is as the Master wishes." He blinked unconcernedly. "May I now return to my duties?"

It was Orare who answered. "Yes, you may go." He gave approval. "And the girl?"

"She's to be taken to my quarters," Thorval answered curtly.

The Earthman went out, quite unperturbed at the sight of the girl being led away by the guard.

The Rehabilitation Director dropped his fake arrogance and sat down with a wry grimace. "All right—say it."

"I don't need to."

"I know—it won't work."

Yet for one moment it had seemed reasonable to hope that striking at the basic, biological urge of humanity would awaken, if only partially, the old spirit of Earth. If they had decided to mate, surely the feeling was strong enough to cause some resentment, even in them.

"Perhaps it needs time," he said. "It has to sink into his mind. He needs to brood on it."

"Not a chance," Orare said decisively. "That kind of thing was quite usual with the soldiers of the previous governors." He shrugged. "Try letting him think she's your mistress if you like, but I'll wager you don't get far. He'll merely pick someone else."

"What about the girl?"

Orare grinned sardonically. "She'll become your mistress if you want her to."

"Don't be a fool," Thorval snapped shortly. "I haven't an interest in the girl personally. She can be kept in my quarters for

the time being though. Let the soldiers taunt him with it. The least change in his attitude is to be reported to me."

Orare shrugged, as if he knew already what the report would be.

Thorval wrenched open the door that led into the room where the girl was confined. She was sitting on the edge of a large chair, her hands quietly folded and somehow her attitude increased the irritation already smouldering in him.

"Stand up!" he ordered curtly.

Unhesitatingly, she obeyed. She was slender and healthy. A well-kept animal, he thought bitterly.

"You remember the man you were to have mated with?"

"I remember him."

"He has now requested permission to marry someone else."

"He knows I am no longer available."

Thorval restrained an impulse to shake her. "He hasn't remembered you for very long. Don't you feel any resentment because of that? Don't you hate me for preventing you mating with the man you chose?"

"Hate and resentment?" She looked faintly puzzled. "What are they? And you are one of the Masters. It is for me to do as you wish."

"Jaros!" He swore in his exasperation. "Must you sound so much like an automaton? And, another thing, you will no longer be called by a number. You will have a name." He thought for a moment, then remembered a guerilla leader who had been great in Earth's history, a woman who had died tragically. "Jory Kildane . . . that will be your name in future."

"Yes, Master," she acknowledged tonelessly.

"And in the name of Lassar, don't call me Master!" he snapped irritably, inflamed again and feeling the name he had given her was an insult to the past. That great woman and this . . . this robot. "I have a name, too, and in future you'll use it."

"Yes, Thorval," she replied, with exactly the same shade of tonelessness as before. Already exasperated, it was enough to completely infuriate him. He shook her violently and pushed her with equal violence back into the chair. She landed in a heap and he waited tensely for any sign of resentment, for any flicker of life and hatred in the dull eyes.

With quiet acceptance, she straightened herself, mutely awaiting further orders or further violence, whatever he chose.

Grimly he pulled her up and shook her again. "Hit me, damn you! Hit back!"

She blinked slightly. "You wish me to hit you?"

He thrust her down into the chair again. Of course she would hit him—if he ordered her to. He swore again and stalked out.

Orare was in his office when Thorval arrived there. He looked up enquiringly. "How did she take it?"

"Need I say?"

For a moment he stood there undecidedly. He had been optimistic when he first came to Earth. He still was, in a way, but he had a better understanding now of what faced him. There had to be some way to break the shell that surrounded them—and he was sure that it *was* a shell, not just an empty husk.

"Perhaps we could try educating them," he said aloud, then quickly corrected himself. "No, I doubt if that would work." His mouth twisted wryly. "As you said, Orare, animals can be taught tricks, but there's no reason behind it. Even the children . . . it must be something inherited. We've got to find some way to break through that shell before we can do anything else to help them."

"Any ideas?"

"None at all, I'm afraid . . ." He broke off suddenly, his eyes narrowing, because, quite frighteningly, he knew how it might be done; frighteningly, because it could be either inspiration or ruin.

"There may be a way," he said slowly, and cautiously outlined the plan which had gradually been taking shape in his mind.

"You're crazy!" ejaculated Orare when Thorval finished speaking.

"Perhaps, but it might work. I can't imagine anything else which could."

Orare made a bewildered gesture. "I can't agree with you—and frankly, you'd be staking your whole career on it. Probably your life too," he added grimly. "I suppose you know what will happen if it fails."

Thorval smiled, but with the same grimness. "I'm willing to chance it. Stronger measures are needed than those we've been using so far. I'm certain that this is the only way."

He had to force himself to be confident, convince himself that he would succeed, or it would not have been possible for him to take the first few steps along the road he had decided to follow.

In Factory No. 93, Sector 19, Division 21, the workers discovered their overseers had been issued with whips. None of them questioned it. It wasn't in their nature to wonder or question. During the day, when they felt the sting of the whips, they merely, with deeply instilled obedience, increased their speed.

The stop-work sirens went two hours later than usual that evening, but they still didn't murmur or enquire about the reason for it. More tired than usual, with the increased speed forced on them during the day and the extra hours worked, they returned to their quarters and found the evening meal cut by half. In the morning they were roused two hours earlier, still tired and sleepy.

By the end of the week their bodies were beginning to rebel, but their minds still did not question. They were slow at their work and felt the stinging blows of the whips more frequently. Still there was no reaction from them.

All over Earth it was the same. Work was heavier, the hours longer and every minute made increasingly more unbearable. Overseers and guards began to ill-treat the Terran workers with deliberate and carefully calculated cruelty. Drunken soldiers raided their settlements, smashing houses and carrying off their women. Men were also taken from their homes and reports circulated freely of the tortures they had been subjected to in the "sporting" games of the soldiers.

Even the air they breathed seemed different. It lived now, and it throbbed with fear; alive with hatred and resentment.

To add to that, they suddenly found they no longer had numbers, but names. They gave their usual unconcerned blink. Some might even have gone so far as to wonder why.

"Still no reaction," Orare reported. "It had better happen soon." He shot a grim glance at his companion. "I suppose you realise the news of what you're doing here has already reached Lassar? A commissioner is on the way out to investigate."

Thorval nodded. "I heard."

After what he had done during the last few weeks, it had come to a simple statement of the position. Either the people of Earth came back to life—and he retained his own—or they were both failures.

"What about the girl?" Orare asked.

Thorval shrugged. "Still the same. I've got the room swamped with sub-sonics, but they seem to be doing about as much good as everywhere else on the planet." He stood up and took a couple of hel-

mets out of a case nearby. "Better wear one of these. The beams will affect us, even if they can't seem to touch the minds of the Terrans."

When they entered the room where she was confined, the girl who had been No. 59471 and was now Jory Kildane, was standing in front of a large screen that mirrored a tall, spreading city. The film was old and flickered slightly, but it was still clear.

"An old city that was called New York," Thorval said quietly. "These pictures were taken by spies before the conquest and sent back to Lassor." He flicked a switch and another city was there, serene and gracious. "London . . . centuries of tradition behind it." He caught the girl's shoulders, turning her to face the screen again. "Look at it, Jory. Your people built that city."

Obediently she looked. No comment, no expression.

"Well—what do you think of it?"

"It is pretty."

"Pretty!" Even Orare, because of his longer association with this race, more used to their dull acceptance of whatever happened, seemed to be catching something of his companion's irritation. "Is that all you can say? Doesn't it make you feel anything? Patriotism? Pride in your race?"

Thorval smiled slightly. "So, it's getting you as well." He looked at the girl. "Well, Jory? Doesn't it make you feel any of those things?"

She blinked stupidly and began the parrot cry, "I do not understand . . ."

"But I hope you do one day—and fairly soon at that," he added somewhat grimly, remembering the Commissioner on the way from Lassor.

It seemed impossible to Thorval, belonging as he did to the alien race that had destroyed the city, that he, personally, could feel the rising excitement he was trying to instil into this woman of Earth.

He flicked over the switch again and this time one of the small, ancient spacefields appeared on the screen. Slender rockets stood on their tails and blaring, stirring music rolled around the room.

"Look at them," he said. "That is your race, Jory. Reaching for the stars—a right we denied them. Look at it and keep on looking." He swung round. "Come on, Orare."

They went out and he locked the door after them, while inside the room the girl stood still and silent before the screen, with the music beating around her and invisible sub-sonics tearing at her mind.

Factory 93 was drawing near to the end of its day shift. No. 19567, now commanded to take the name of Paul Hilton, worked a machine that hissed out clouds of hot blinding steam. In the past it had not done so, but something had gone wrong and the overseer had not bothered to have it rectified. Almost dropping with fatigue and pain, he staggered as another boiling blast washed over him, stinging and scalding his exposed skin. A numbing bewilderment had been growing in his mind for days and with it a strange memory of a girl. He had chosen someone else as companion, but their union had not yet received official approval—and now he found he didn't want this second choice. It was the girl he had chosen first he wanted, the girl he had been ordered to give up.

But he shouldn't want anything that the Masters owned, nor should he resent the fact that they had the power to take what they wanted. It was strange. Why should it come to him now when it never had before?

His mind was so preoccupied with these new thoughts that it did not follow what his hands were doing and a second blast of steam scalded his skin. He staggered back with the shock of it and something that stung more than the boiling steam licked across his back. He winced, looked up and saw a Lessorian uniform. He thought of the weeks of pain and hunger, of the blows and the taunts—above all of another Lessorian and the girl he had chosen first.

The whip fell again—and then it happened.

He had never felt anything like it before. Something snapped like an overtaut rein and tearing fury boiled up in his mind. It was a red mist that deadened everything but the need and the desire to kill. He wanted to destroy anything and everything within reach and his hands reached out for that purpose. An incoherent noise growled deep in his throat and his weakened hands found maniacal strength to catch the thonged whip and swing it wildly against its owner. Then he dropped the whip, because that was not enough. He wanted to kill with his bare hands . . . to tear and scratch and see blood on them. Then something caught him from behind, slipped over his head and down his body to bind his hands at his sides, where they still twitched spasmodically as the growls muttered hoarsely in his throat.

It had happened at last.

What would he be like, Thorval wondered, as he waited for the man to be brought to him, this first of them, after a thousand years? He remembered them striding proudly through the old film-shots and he smiled, knowing that his faith in the spirit of the old race had

been justified at last. It had been crushed for two hundred years and sat on for another eight hundred but, given the chance, it had sprung back with all the triumphant resiliency humanity had been famous for.

They brought the Earthman in at last, but the Lassorian found none of the triumph he had expected. Eagerness died and cold apprehension crawled in his mind. The Earthman's tunic was torn from the fight with his guards and there were streaks of dirt on his face and clothing. That did not matter. It was the sign of his awakening. It was his eyes. They were no longer lifeless.

They were the eyes of a feral, mad animal.

"His mind . . . ?" Thorval's voice was quiet. Had he won and lost at the same time?

One of the guards shook his head. "The doctor at the factory thinks it's just a temporary state, brought on by desperation."

Some of the disquiet died and he walked nearer to the Earthman, who promptly spat something incoherent at him and struggled with the guards.

"Take him to Dorik Rehabilitation Centre," Thorval instructed and they took the Earthman away.

The communicator jangled and he reached out a hand to it. While he was speaking Orare entered. The old soldier waited until Thorval had finished, then he said quietly:

"It's the girl. One of the guards took some food into her . . ."

Thorval looked up quickly.

". . . and she tore him to pieces," Orare finished with a grin.

Some hours later the communicator on Thorval's desk rang again, "This is Dorik Centre reporting. The man and the girl have both come out of the madness stage. It was only temporary. They're both of high intelligence and are learning quickly under the hypnotutors."

"Let me know as soon as they are ready for discharge." The Rehabilitation Director switched off and looked across at Orare. "Well, it paid off, Orare."

The other nodded. "Yes." Abruptly he frowned. "There's something else has me worried. What's it going to be like when we finally have this planet restored to its former civilisation? It's not beyond reason to wonder if they'll strike back at Lassor. They might even unite with other planets to do so. We'd have difficulty defending ourselves from all of them."

Thorval shook his head. "I don't think that will happen, but if it

ever does, we still have our space forces. Central Government will have made some sort of provision for the situation, if it ever turns up."

Some provision that would avoid the use of force, if at all possible, he thought. The last thing they wanted to do was fight the races they had set free.

Jory came into the office first, followed by the man Paul. For a moment they looked at the Lassorians silently and the latter knew they were at last facing the living reality of the old film spools.

Finally Paul spoke. "I heard the recording of your speech," he said quietly. "I can understand it now."

"And you?" Thorval looked at the girl.

She nodded. "Yes. What do you want us to do?"

"Go out among your people, talk rebellion, stir them up to revolt; say anything you like to incite them to break through the barriers. You'll also be living proof of what they can become. That in itself might be a help. Notify us immediately anyone does break and we'll 'capture' them and take them off to the Centres for treatment. As you've probably already realised yourselves, a kind of temporary madness is going to be usual when the old conditioning breaks, but simple treatment soon completely clears it . . . with no damage likely to crop up later."

"There is one thing though . . ." Paul hesitated. "Why did you chose the way you did to . . . bring us through?"

Thorval hesitated a moment. Finally he got up and stood by the window, with his back to them.

"It goes back a long way and . . . it's something I find difficult to talk about." He turned and faced them. "It was the Year of Terror that gave me the idea," he added deliberately. He waved a hand towards chairs at his desk. "Sit down." Seated himself, he went on, "You know that the original suppression of your planet took two hundred years. Rebellions were always breaking out. In desperation, the central government on Lessor decided to put a stop to this insubordination once and for all. They sent a succession of specially trained governors and occupation troops to Earth. We have old records that tell us in rather too clear detail some of the things done during that two hundred years. It was two centuries of murder and terror for your people. Children were burned in full view of their parents, men forced to watch their wives and daughters violated only to be tortured themselves later, radioactive dust was sprinkled on what villages and settlements still survived. Some of the atrocities were too revolting to commit to record, but they came down more or less by

word of mouth. There was a final year worse than anything that had gone before. They called it the Year of Terror and that is what finally made your race what they've been for the last eight hundred years. A new governor took over then, with normal occupation troops." He paused and they waited patiently for him to go on. "For eight hundred years you lived a quiet, peaceful life, although, of course, you had no will power and no initiative. I tried everything else to bring you back and then decided to use the process that had made you what you were. Further cruelty. I had to bring you out of the dull, obedient rut you seemed so firmly settled in, so I faked another reign of terror. I had to make you live again, even if it was by hatred." He shrugged. "It worked."

That was all. No mention of what it would have meant if it had failed. But, surprisingly, they thought of that.

"What if it had failed though?" Jory asked. "What would it have meant for you personally?"

"Court-martial and a firing squad," Orare said shortly, before Thorval could evade the answer. "If you ever get around to planning to attack us, just stop and think for a moment that a Lassorian was willing to risk his career and his life for Earth."

"Don't get dramatic, Orare," Thorval interrupted, with a gesture that dismissed the matter. "It was something that had to be done."

"We won't forget that Lassar gave us back what they once took from us." Paul smiled. "We may even like to think it was the old Moranian race, assimilated by Lassar, that brought about the change in the Lassorian race."

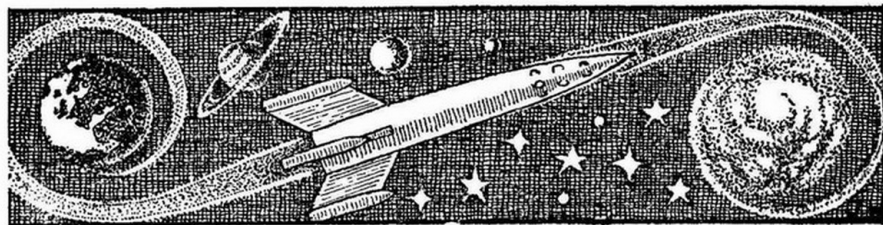
The communicator on the desk awoke with an excited clatter. Thorval reached out a hand to it, glad of the interruption. "What is it?"

"The Commissioner from Lassar has arrived, sir."

He looked at the two facing him on the other side of the desk and he smiled, because the flame had never died. It still burned behind locked doors and slowly those doors were opening.

"Ask the Commissioner to come in," he said.

N. K. HEMMING



Conflagration

*They offered a prize beyond the reach
of wealth—and with historic implications*

"To me," said Edward Conklin, "the problem is a simple one. To stay in circulation we've got to circulate."

"Sure," said the circulation manager. He shifted uneasily on his chair and wondered what was coming next.

"To circulate," continued his boss, "we have to sell papers. More papers, if possible, than all our rivals put together." He rested the tips of his fingers together and nodded as if he had just solved all the secrets of the ages. Brennard gave a noncommittal grunt; he had a shrewd idea of what was heading directly for him. He wasn't mistaken.

"The trick, then," said Conklin ponderously, "is to find some way to make the Public buy our papers." He uncoupled his hands and pointed a thick finger at Brennard. "And that, as circulation manager, is your job."

"Sure," said Brennard again. "Have I denied it?"

"No," admitted Conklin. "You haven't denied it, but——" He picked up a paper from his desk. "Your contract," he said pleasantly. "I notice that it's due for renewal very shortly now."

For one wild moment Brennard was tempted to tell the fat slob what to do with his contract. Sanity came just in time. He had a

wife. He had children. He had an expensive home and he had bills. How he had bills! He managed a sickly smile.

"I've done my best, Mr. Conklin," he said. "But things aren't easy." For once in his life Brennard didn't have to exaggerate the truth.

It was a worrying time. The good old printed word had fallen so far from favour that a man who now read a book was regarded as something slightly queer. With television in every home, public screens on every corner and portable sets for car and office the old-fashioned news dissemination channels did not stand a chance. With whisper speakers and subliminal gimmicks to contend with they had to scramble for the crumbs from the advertising tables. Reporters, as such, were an extinct species, all they did now was to subscribe to the news services, doll up the stuff with an amplitude of adjectives and illustrate it with posed stills. They worked under the deadening knowledge that, no matter how fast they operated, they could never beat the almost instantaneous telenetwork. A scoop, like hand-set type, was a thing of the past.

Conklin coughed and managed, surprisingly, to look almost coy.

"I've been giving the matter some thought," he confessed. "It seems to me that what we need to spur circulation, is some form of competition. I——" He broke off, staring at Brennard. "Is something wrong?"

What was wrong, though Brennard couldn't tell him so, not if he wanted to keep eating, was that no one should ever tell their Grandmother how to suck eggs. Brennard had been in the newspaper game since he could remember. Conklin on the other hand, had purchased the paper as a means to dodge overheavy income tax. To him it was a new toy and, unfortunately, one he knew nothing about. If he had, he wouldn't have thought up such a stupid idea. Brennard didn't tell him that the idea was stupid, instead he brought him up to date.

"We've tried competitions," he said wearily. "We're still trying them, but then, so is everyone else."

"Perhaps." Conklin was stiff. "But if we had something different; something spectacular?"

"You think that it hasn't been tried?" Brennard took a deep breath. "*The Daily Reflector* is offering a two-week vacation on the Moon. *The Clock* a four-week supply of household groceries. *The Lampoon* a round trip to Mars and a canal excursion as an extra to any couple married within the past year who give the right answers. *The Daily Post* offers six weeks at the North Polar resort and *The*

Daily Toiler all Union dues for the entire family for life." He spread his hands. "They are running at the moment. Past competitions include almost any and everything you can dream of." He dropped his hands. "Naturally, we have run, and are running, similar competitions ourselves."

"With any success?"

"We hold our own," confessed Brennard. "We just manage to hold our own."

"That proves my point," said Conklin triumphantly. "We're following where others lead, we should reverse that, lead where others will follow." He looked at Brennard as if expecting an answer. "Well?"

"Well what?" Brennard was genuinely puzzled.

"Well, can't you see that what we want is something new? Something different?" Conklin picked up the contract again with what, Brennard thought, was a significant gesture. "I'll be studying the paper from now on and I want to see something new. Something startling. Something which will make the competitions run by our rivals seem small and childish in comparison." He dropped the contract. "Need I elaborate?"

"No," said Brennard heavily. He felt suddenly old.

Passing the buck is not confined to the armed forces. From boss to circulation manager; from circulation manager to Chief Editor; down through the associate editors; sub-editors, copy-editors, proof readers and cub-rewrite men then, because it has nowhere else to go, up again to the sub-editors until it finally lands on some unfortunate.

"You sent for me, sir?" Julian Cody shifted from one foot to the other as he stared around the inner sanctum of the Chief Editor's office. Brennard, sitting to one side of the desk, coughed out a lungful of smoke and stared reproachfully at the owner of the office.

"Is this the best you can do, Sam?"

Sam Quashman shrugged as if the matter was of no importance and, to him, it wasn't. With his knowledge and experience he could have been editing the telenetwork newscasts at twice his present salary. The only reason he remained on the paper was because he had an old-fashioned hankering to do a job he liked and, he claimed, working at the top pressure demanded by the newscasts would have frayed his nerves.

"Take it or leave it, Jack," he said carelessly. "Cody is the only idea-boy we have around here."

"Then I'll have to take it." Brennard knew that he had no

option. Idea-boys found a ready home elsewhere, unlike circulation managers who couldn't operate if they had nothing to circulate. He glowered at the youth. "Well?"

"I've been giving it some thought, sir," said Cody. "I've always considered that we're wrong in offering our readers something they can obtain for themselves." He glanced quickly at the two men. "You see what I mean? No matter what the competition is, in essence all the competitors are offered is money. A glittering prize, perhaps, but always with a monetary option." He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his scrawny throat. "I think that is wrong."

"You do?" Brennard tried not to be sarcastic, but after all, he had selected and launched most of the competitions himself.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"You don't regard money as important?"

"Naturally, but if we're going to offer money then offer a lot. A million, say, or more."

"If I had a million to offer I know who'd win it," interrupted Quashman. He winked at Brennard. "Don't you, Jack?"

Brennard frowned at the levity. "We haven't that much money," he snapped irritably. "A few thousand, yes, much more than that, no. Not," he qualified, "unless the idea warrants it." He didn't want to damn the flow before it started.

"Then that's out," said Cody regretfully. "That leaves us with the need to find something which money can't buy to offer as a prize."

"Which is?" Brennard lit another cigarette and settled himself more comfortably in his chair. If Cody wanted to think of something which money couldn't buy then he was in for a long wait. Cody fooled him.

"Time travel," he said.

"Time travel?"

"Time travel. Going back in time," explained Cody. "Temporal journeying. Expedition into the past. Visiting history. Time travel." He seemed, so Brennard thought, a little impatient. Quashman voiced his objection.

"Impossible!" he snapped. "It can't be done."

"It can be done," said Cody. He elaborated. "I know a man, a scientist, and he can do it. It's expensive, of course, but it can be done and," he tapped one finger against the palm of his other hand, "it isn't something which you can buy."

"Why not?" Brennard pounced like a tiger. "Security?"

"In a way. There is a danger that, if someone goes back in time, they will do something so as to alter the present." Cody looked apologetic. "Some hothead, for example, might want to kill Oliver Cromwell or tip off Napoleon about Waterloo, things like that."

"And that would be bad?"

"It's all very problematical, but Smyth, the inventor, says that it might be fatal."

"Nice," sneered Quashman. "So what good is the thing to us?"

"With appropriate safeguards there shouldn't be any real danger," said Cody. "We'll send someone back with the winner so as to keep him out of trouble and it needn't be a long trip, in fact it can't be a long trip, it takes too much power to keep a thing in the past."

"Trouble," said Quashman. "I can see it coming. I can feel it in my bones."

"No trouble," said Cody, defending his idea. "Smyth wouldn't just let anyone go but he'd trust us to take the necessary precautions. And we could get permission from the authorities, if we had to, where an individual couldn't." He made an emphatic gesture. "And if we could swing it then we'd be able to offer our readers something they couldn't get in any other way."

His final point won the argument.

The mechanism of the competition was so simple that Brennard could have done it in his sleep. All the reader was asked to do was to mark a coupon from one to six, each mark being his choice of what the judges would consider the most attractive woman. For eye-appeal the women were almost nude. For business reasons each competitor was required to send in a batch of five coupons accompanied by a small fee. Brennard took care to see that the rules incorporated the usual safeguards.

"No employee or relative of employee to be eligible," he droned. "The winner will be the entry first opened which contains the correct result as determined by the panel of judges. The editor's decision shall be final. No correspondence will be entered into on this competition——" He threw down his copy. "In other words we pick the winner and no one can do anything about it."

"Let's make sure we pick a good one this time," warned Quashman. "Remember Waterman?"

"I remember." Brennard shuddered. Waterman had been selected to win a season ticket to an Oriental Joy House and had died

of acute frustration within two weeks. No one had noticed that he had been eighty years of age. Not until it was too late.

Cody came bounding into the office. He, naturally, had been selected to accompany the lucky winner of the Most Fabulous Competition of All Time! The youngster actually seemed eager to go.

"Smyth says that everything is ready," he reported. "He wants the data on the winner, weight and so on, so as to adjust the machine. And, of course, he wants to know how far back to send him."

"We won't know that until we pick the winner," said Brennard. He had been cunning in this competition, giving himself a double let-out. Not only did the competitor have to mark his entries but he had also to state which era he wanted to visit and his reasons for doing so. By this Brennard hoped to weed out the most obvious cranks.

"Well?" Cody had been in the game long enough to have lost his illusions. "How about picking one out now?"

It was only the third day of the competition but already there were over a hundred thousand completed entries from people who had managed to accumulate the five necessary coupons. The next two days would more than double the amount and a further batch would arrive after the five-day coupon run. The fact that those people wouldn't stand a chance of winning didn't bother anyone in the office.

"Why not?" agreed Quashman. He became suddenly busy at his desk. "Just run down to the post room and pick yourself a companion. The quicker we get this thing over the better I'll feel."

"I'll come with you," said Brennard, he didn't want a repeat of the Waterman incident. He followed Cody from the office.

The entries had been stacked on tables in the big dispatch room. Brennard went to a heap, tweaked out an envelope, opened it and threw it to one side.

"No good. Woman of seventy-three wants to attend a public hanging. Think of how that would look in print!"

"Here's one," said Cody. "Man of twenty-five wants to visit Cleopatra and save her from a Fate Worse than Death." He tossed it aside without comment at Brennard's expression. "Or this? Girl of twenty-three wants to tie up with Alexander the Great."

"She does?" Brennard looked thoughtful. "Nice sex angle there: *Young girl of seventeen wants to save dynasty*—" Regretfully he shook his head. "Probably get us sued by someone as well as arousing the Morals Committee. And it's tampering with the past. Try again."

They tried again, and yet again and again, with Brennard fuming more and more as entry after entry was tossed aside. Every crank in the world seemed to have come to light, each with his reasons for wanting to go back and do something to the past. For a moment Brennard was tempted to forget the entire thing and invent both a winner and an account of his trip, but discarded the idea after a moment's thought. With every other paper in the country watching and ready to pounce, it was a risk he dared not take. Not, that is, unless he was driven to it.

"Got it!" said Cody. He waved an entry at Brennard. "Man here, forty-five, musician, wants to go back to Nero's time and listen to his lyre playing."

"Sounds harmless," admitted Brennard. "He say why?"

"Just that it's of historical interest and that he'd like to do it for his own satisfaction."

"Nero," mused Brennard, his mind already busy with headlines. "Wasn't he the guy who fiddled while Rome burned?"

"Lyred," corrected Cody. "They didn't have fiddles in those days." He tapped the entry against his palm. "Yes?"

So it was decided.

The winner's name was Peter Freeguard. He was a thin, underfed specimen with sleezy clothing and too-long hair. His fingers were stained with nicotine and he chain-smoked constantly.

"I won a hundred thousand of these things in a competition," he explained. "Now I can't break myself of the habit."

Brennard grunted, not interested in anyone's problems but his own. He shoved forward a paper.

"You understand the terms of the competition," he said. "We provide you with transport, free food and accommodation and a guide to keep you out of mischief. In return you will obey your guide in everything he says and give us a full account of your trip to be used as we think fit. Sign, please."

"What is it?" Freeguard screwed up his eyes and then produced a pair of spectacles from an inside pocket. "What's all this about?"

"A waiver freeing us from any and all liability in case of your injury or death." Brennard was impatient. "The usual thing. Sign it and let's get moving."

Next stop was at the costumier's where both Cody and Freeguard were fitted with flowing togas. A professorial type inspected them for any anachronisms.

"No wrist watches," he warned. "No spectacles, matches, modern currency or tobacco."

"No tobacco?" Freeguard looked sullen. "How do you expect me to enjoy the trip if I can't smoke?"

"No tobacco," insisted the professorial type. "They didn't use it then."

"And how do you expect me to see without my spectacles?" Freeguard became even more sullen. "Say, what kind of a swindle is this?"

"No swindle," said Cody hastily. "We can fit you with contact lenses, they won't be noticed."

"And my cigarettes?"

"No cigarettes."

Freeguard looked considerably crestfallen but raised no further objections. From the costumier's they went to where Smyth waited with his machine. Both men were carefully weighed and stood around, shivering a little, as Smyth made his calculations.

"I can give you three days," he announced. "At the end of that time you'll be snapped back into the present. Good enough?"

"Let's go," said Brennard eagerly. Freeguard shook his head.

"Not until I get my contact lenses," he insisted. "I don't want to wander around as blind as a bat. And I want to take some paper and a pencil and my hearing isn't so good, so I ought to have one of those hearing aid things and——"

Brennard sighed as he listened to all the things which Freeguard thought he should take with him. Some of them made sense, the aspirin, for example, but each item meant a large load of trouble and, as Smyth pointed out, the extra mass would mean less time in the past. Finally Brennard jerked his head and drew Cody to one side.

"Think he's sold us out?" The suspicion was a natural one. Some other newspaper could have got to the winner and come to an agreement with him to louse things up.

"I don't think so." Cody was thoughtful. "I guess that it's just the fear of the unknown."

"That or he's got some private scheme in mind which we know nothing about." Brennard pulled at his lower lip. "But we've got to keep him happy, that's the main thing. Better fix him up with what he thinks he must have and then ride hard on him to see that he doesn't misuse it." He glared at Cody. "Understand? If he gets into trouble then I'm holding you responsible."

Which, Cody thought, was slightly unfair.

Three days later Cody sat wearily in the Chief Editor's office and stared at Quashman and Brennard. The youth looked the worse for wear. His toga was rumpled, torn and filthy. His hair was singed and he had a gash on one cheek. He stunk of manure and wood-smoke and his eyes held a wild, trapped expression. Freeguard had returned with him but Freeguard was in no condition to talk.

"He'll probably die," said Brennard sombrely. "He'll probably die and then we'll be accused of murder and all the rest of it." He dropped his head into his hands. "I wish I were dead."

"Snap out of it," said Quashman. He glared at Cody. "Well?"

"It was a bust," said Cody. He moved on his chair and winced at a twinge of pain. "That Freeguard!"

"What happened?" Quashman wanted to get to the heart of the matter, he had a deadline to make.

"We went back," said Cody suddenly. "That part worked all right. We stood in the machine and Smyth pulled a lever and suddenly we weren't in the cellar below the presses any more, we were standing by the Colosseum. I recognised it from pictures, though, of course, it looked a lot newer than it does now." He winced again as he altered position.

"There were a lot of people around, some dressed in togas and some in a sort of knee-length tunic. There were women too, classy dames and what must have been slave girls." He sighed and a wistful expression came into his eyes. Quashman saw it and rapped impatiently on his desk.

"Never mind the women. What happened to Freeguard?"

"I'm coming to that," said Cody. His Adam's apple bobbed in agitation. "Well, the first thing to hit us was that we didn't know a word of the language. That didn't matter so much as long as we just kept moving around, there were a lot of odd types in Rome at that period and we were taken for a couple of strangers. We even managed to get something to eat and drink by using sign language. They didn't argue about taking those gold coins you had made but I'm sure they short-changed us on the deal."

"What happened to Freeguard?" said Brennard. He lifted his head and stared sickly at Cody. "He looks as if he'd fallen into a combine harvester."

"He got roughed up a little," admitted Cody, "but it was his own fault." Anger darkened his thin features. "That nut! You know why he wanted that paper and pencil and hearing aid? You know why he wanted to hear Nero playing his lyre while Rome went

up in smoke?" He almost gobbled at the memory. "He wanted to take it all down. He wanted to copy the tune so that, when he came back here, he could make a disc and sell it as a Pop record."

"Smart idea," said Brennard thoughtfully. "Why didn't you think of that?"

"Did he get it?" Quashman was practical. Cody scowled at their lack of sympathy.

"No, he didn't get it, and serve him right." His scowl deepened. "After we'd eaten and drunk some of their sickly wine we had to find somewhere to spend the night. Rome was pretty full about that time, big doings at the Colosseum what with a new parcel of Christians ready for burning and being flung to the lions. Anyway, after a lot of wandering around I finally managed to get us fixed up in a loft down in the poorer section of the city. It was a crummy place, half-full of rat-infested straw and it stunk like a hen-yard. We rested for a little while and then I discovered that Freeguard had cheated us. He'd managed to bring some cigarettes with him and he just lay there smoking like a chimney and complaining about the smells."

"So they found you, figured you for a couple of wizards and threw you in the jug," said Quashman. He nodded. "I thought so."

"Then you thought wrong," snapped Cody. It was clear from the way he spoke how shaken he was. "I managed to persuade Freeguard to watch himself and got his promise that he wouldn't smoke in public. That didn't cause the trouble."

"It lets us out anyway," said Brennard. He became more cheerful. "We warned Freeguard against pulling a fast one like that."

"So what happened?" snapped Quashman. His patience was running out. Cody sighed.

"We'd timed ourselves to hit the year in which Rome was due to go up in smoke," he said. "The next thing was to get close to Nero so that Freeguard could hear him play his lyre. That wasn't easy. In fact that was downright impossible." He stared at their blank expressions. "Nero was on the Palatine Hill," he explained. "To reach him meant passing a haggard of guards and other officials. With a command of the language and plenty of gold for bribes I could have managed it but we had neither. The best I could do was to get a couple of seats at the arena and hope for the best. Nero

used, sometimes, to take advantage of a captive audience when he wanted to perform. But even that didn't work out."

"A pity," said Brennard. "That would have made a good eyewitness account."

"I'd left Freeguard in a tavern while I reserved the seats and when I collected him he was as drunk as a newt. He was smoking, too, but he threw away the butt when he saw me. I figured that the best thing to do was to get him back to the lodging and out of harm's way. Freeguard was getting some pretty queer looks by then, but we never made it."

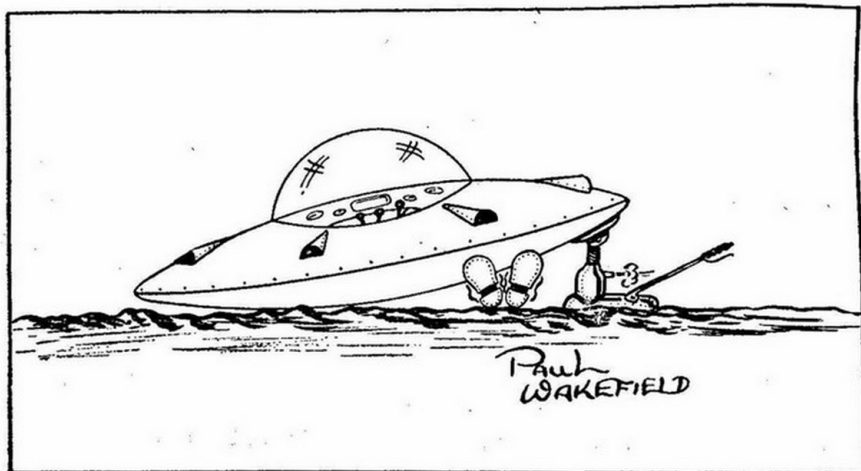
"No?" said Quashman.

"No," said Cody. He looked suddenly haggard. "You can see what happened, can't you? We'd gone back to a time in which Rome was due to go up in smoke and that's just what happened. How I escaped in one piece I'll never know; if it hadn't been for a handy sewer I guess that I'd be worse off than Freeguard, but I was lucky at that. The machine snatched me back just in time."

"And Freeguard?"

"To hell with Freeguard!" Cody swore with unsuspected bitterness. "He caused it all! He caused everything, the destruction of Rome, the works! Him and his damn cigarette butts!"

STUART ALLEN







Wisdom of the Gods

More and more, the wisdom of these ancient aliens was making itself felt. Was its only power to be one of evil?

Illustrated by Kenneth Barr

SYNOPSIS OF PART ONE

Two hundred and fifty million years ago—give or take ten million—a spaceship crashed upon Earth. She contained a Galactic Intelligencer, an encyclopædia of galactic civilisation's knowledge. Over the years the spaceship vanished and the encyclopædia was entombed in coal.

In the present day the Ancient Railways Preservation Society,

headed by Lord Ashley (known as Jeffers) and Beagle, a nuclear physicist, and Rodney Winthrop, a mathematician, run a small railway from the village of Nether Ambleton. Walter Colborne, a historian, is the stoker. His sister, June, is undergoing surgery for cancer, and he is trying to secure a job as assistant lecturer, a post which Lord Ashley can help him secure.

Unknowingly Colborne throws the encyclopædia, embedded in a lump of coal, on the Saucy Sal's fire. In the resultant soundless explosion of mental force all those people who are nearby receive scattered items of information. Colborne receives the most, and his mind is numbed. Sally Picton, a local reporter, also receives a heavy charge.

When a number of people scream gibberish and die, and when a panel of schoolboys give top-secret nuclear information on TV, Sir William, head of Nuclear Intelligence Department Five, sends John Roland to investigate.

Tom, a tramp, then reveals that he has the index of the G.I. Roland overhears this in the lounge of the Golden Lion, the inn where Lord Ashley is staying and which becomes the Headquarters of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society. Nether Ambleton is now a village where no-one dares speak of the G.I. for fear the information which springs into the minds of others will be fatal.

Neither Lord Ashley nor Beagle received any alien knowledge as they were outside the sphere of the explosion. Colborne can summon up no fresh knowledge in his mind and he realises that when he does remember, he will spend the rest of his life answering questions. The prospect appals him.

Then he realises that when he does remember, he might easily have information which will kill him or drive him insane. And the same is true of Sally Picton.

PART TWO

And even as he shrank from the fear corroding his system, that apocalyptic vision blossomed again as once it had before; but this time it was close and detailed and infinitely frightening.

He saw with dreadful clarity what his future life would surely be. Knowing the feelings of men like Lord Ashley and Beagle and Rodney Winthrop, knowing of their dedication to science and the technological processes, knowing, too, the stubbornness and consciousness of right that ran through them unremittingly, he saw

in that flashing stroke of revelation what lay in store for him. He would be regarded as an encyclopædia. He would spend the rest of his life being asked questions, and dredging up the alien answers; all his life, sifting the billions of facts that now buzzed unknown and buried in his brain.

His own life, his aspirations as an interpreter of history, would be as nothing.

But, before that blighting future, would the alien wisdom gathered by creatures long-dead from their starry homes, festering now in his numbed mind, break free in an avalanche of destruction?

CHAPTER VII

The hoary stones of the friendly little hump-backed bridge had probably been in the same service long before the Romans came with their meticulous road and bridge-building programmes. Certainly, when the humble artisan lifted his head to watch the knights and their ladies trot gaily across the bridge over the Amble, the stones on which he worked were ancient. During the smoke-blackened period of great Victorian ironwork the little bridge had kept its character, grown its moss, chinked a bit of mortar out, here and there, in hospitable fashion so the birds could find a cranny in which to nest. Only on the north-west approach was there any sign of newness. Here a few fresh stones—still of local rock and part of the feeling of the bridge and its environment—replaced those that had been smashed into chips one dark night in 1940. The Ancient Celtic bard, the Roman Centurion, the knight in full panoply of mail—all could have trod those worn stones and felt at home.

Until the armoured car poked its 37 millimetre gun arrogantly down the whitely dusty road, and bestrode the bridge approach with its heavy tyres that looked like cracked lava petrified around its wheels; until then, perhaps, the shades that once had crossed the bridge on their way to Nether Ambleton would have felt at home.

John Roland stopped his car on the near side, switched off, and then lit a cigarette before walking slowly across the bridge towards the officer who stood leaning against the rough metal of the armoured car. The officer wore battle-dress, with holstered service revolver and steel helmet, and his face, young and freshly laundered, was set in a blank expression that Roland recognised sympathetically was the youngster's attempt at cold efficiency. Very probably he had cold inefficiency and doubt gnawing at his stomach.

And then, again, probably not. He would have had that trained out of him, at the very least. Roland, feeling insecure, tried to take comfort from the thought.

"Hot day," the officer said, pushing himself upright.

"Useful breeze, though."

"Yes. Want anything special?"

"Waiting for my chief. Thought I'd drive out and make sure he got through without trouble."

"After the fuss you kicked up about keeping everyone tightly locked in the village perimeter, Mr. Roland, and the telephone calls that went out, I wouldn't let the C.I.G.S. through here without your say-so."

Roland blew smoke, feeling like a second-rate ham. "Just so long as we keep everyone in the village and the holiday camp and right across the promontory to the Bay in, and just so long as we keep everyone else out—we'll do all right. My chief was the man who got things moving, not me."

"Colonel Starkie was very impressed, I can tell you that." The young lieutenant wrinkled up his nose. "Mind you, we don't know a thing about what's going on. Rush down there, he said, and cordon the place off." A bird trilled suddenly, very sweetly, from the woods across the river. "I can't say I relish the waste of time."

"You'll have your hands full when the reporters get to hear of what's going on."

"What is going on?"

"You'd be happier not knowing, believe you me."

"Polder?"

"No, thank God. It's not a case of radioactive dust and milk and frightened families and children who might—well, what's the use." He ground the half-finished cigarette into the dust of the road. "It could be a whole lot worse. But it isn't Polder. Now—hold it—I hear a car."

They both walked round to the front of the armoured car. Before them the road unrolled, dipping and winding, running through pleasant countryside of rounded green hills broken here and there by the warmer colours of the ripening wheat. Small farming country, lush and quiet and restful. Roland wondered just what horrors had been unloosed upon that peaceful scene by the secrets that had exploded from an egg of inconceivably long-dead knowledge.

A Hillman Minx rolled up to the end of the bridge and stopped

under the stare of the pointing gun. Two men clambered out and puffed up to Roland and the lieutenant.

"Say—what's the idea? Nether Ambleside this way?"

"Amblefield," the other said. "You always were a lousy reporter for names."

Roland looked at the lieutenant, and made up his mind. He liked what he saw. The lieutenant said calmly: "I'm sorry, this road's blocked. You cannot get through to Nether Ambleton."

"Ambleton," the first reporter said. "See, muggins, just what I said."

"You said no such thing," the second retorted. Then: "If this road's blocked what's the quickest way through?"

The lieutenant broke the news gently. "I'm rather afraid that no-one is being allowed into or out of the village."

The first reporter's notebook was in his hand bare moments, it seemed, before the second's camera had been taken from the Minx. "Plague? Foot and Mouth? Polder?"

The second newsman was lining up angles on the armoured car. A soldier wearing a beret put his head out the turret and smiled ferociously, showing all his teeth.

"I'm afraid I have no information," said the officer.

"Censorship; okay—got that. Who do we see?"

Roland waited until the photographer had shot two frames and was fishing for the third in his bag, and then he said: "A Press Bureau will be set up in due course. You can have it on the record that Polder is not affected. Off the record, there's nothing you guys can do to break this story. It'll be military business from now on." He stopped speaking as the photographer, sensing the voice of authority, lined Roland up in his sights. Roland said smoothly: "Please do not waste a plate on me, friend. If you do, I'm afraid I'll have to confiscate your camera."

"Tough," the photographer said. He hesitated, glaring through the finder; then he lowered the camera.

A second car pulled up, spurting dust, and two men leaped out, cameras and notebooks rampant. "You lousy s.o.b.'s sent us on the wrong turning," the first one said unpleasantly. Then he chuckled. "And much good it did you, too, you twisters. What gives?"

As the lieutenant and the other reporters filled in the newcomers, Roland walked a little distance off. He was annoyed that Sir William hadn't arrived before the newsmen. If they decided to shoot a plate off on the mysterious man allowed through the barriers around Nether Ambleton, Sir William would be most dis-

pleased. Roland thought back to his hectic night of activity; phoning through for authority to close off this area, getting the military in, briefing the police, personally rounding up the leading actors in this incredible happening. He could still only half believe in it all even now. But that amiable and astute old peer, Lord Ashley, was not a man to fool with nonsense. For all his playing around with steam engines, Lord Ashley was a brilliant man, handicapped only in that people just wouldn't or couldn't accept him as an equal, merely because he happened to have been born a peer. That was his misfortune; not his fault.

Sound of an approaching car cleared Roland's mind. He shouted across to the lieutenant and then ran fifty feet along the road. He stopped the car, a late-model Bentley whose sleek lines were muffled by the white summer dust, and, opening the driving door, said: "If you'll push over, Sir William, I'll drive her in whilst you do the face-covering act. Newshawks, baulked, are like baying hounds."

"By God, John," Sir William said, sliding across to the passenger seat. "I've done all you asked. Military, police, arbitrary powers—there are some exceedingly short-tempered officials in town right now who were hauled out of bed in the middle of the night, ha!—purely on the strength of my trust in you. The steps we've taken are bound to raise questions in the House. If your story doesn't hold up—God help you!" He chuckled, then, and laid a hand on Roland's on the steering wheel. "God help both of us, rather."

"I can explain exactly what has been happening," Roland said, putting the car into motion. "When you've heard me out you'll understand why I couldn't say more than I did over the phone. That is, if you believe me."

"I've heard a lot in my time."

Roland guided the car past the temporarily withdrawn A.F.V., waved to the lieutenant, not envying him his task, and then drove straight into the village road, ignoring his own car. He could always pick it up later. He might need the walk in the fresh air, too.

Sir William lowered his copy of the *Times* from his face, tossed the paper onto the back seat, and said: "Well, John?"

"How do I begin?" Roland said. He took a grip on himself. Hell, he was an agent of N.I.5 used to handling the fantastic emergencies of the nuclear age; this last occurrence must be looked at in that light as being just another standard emergency. He rounded a tricky corner, where a decaying red-brick barn hovered over a ditch and a broken-down five-barred gate gave access to a rutted and

caked courtyard. The Bentley soared smoothly over the uneven road surface, and as it settled down Roland knew that what had been happening around here was nothing of normalcy, that ordinary measures would fail. He went on: "The situation is potential dynamite. I told you that two men have died—or been killed—and a third driven insane. The cause——" he swallowed, and went on doggedly: "The cause needs explanation and understanding with an open mind."

"Are you suggesting that I'm narrow-minded and unable to comprehend murder?"

"No, Sir William. Trouble is, I hardly believe the thing myself." Ahead the road dipped. He could see the red roofs of the village, the grey spire of the eleventh century church and the gilded railing around the roof of the Golden Lion. Roland switched off the ignition, bad driving, but setting a term to his decision. He brought the car to a halt and set the handbrake. "Listen to the end," he said firmly. "Hear me out."

Sir William, quite obviously, had sensed the current of unease and uncertainty in his lieutenant. Now, he produced a cigar, cut and pierced it, and setting fire to it, said, between sucks: "Don't be too long, John. I must telephone the P.M. and confirm the measures so far taken."

"Right," Roland said. "Something like two hundred and fifty million years ago a spaceship crashed upon Earth killing its crew, and——"

He stopped speaking and smiled wearily at Sir William. "You promised," he said. "Let me finish."

The cigar retrieved from the floorboards, Sir William put it back between his teeth, breathed deeply, and nodded. Roland went on speaking.

"Aboard this spaceship was an encyclopædia. It was in the form of a reservoir of facts, stored in an object about the size of a walnut. If this object became exposed to naked flame it would explode and scatter all the information it contained indiscriminately. Normally, in use, if you wanted to know anything, you apparently framed the question in your mind and directed it at the encyclopædia which at once reacted and placed the required information intact in your brain. You must understand that this information comes to us from a source that, I would suggest, is unimpeachable."

"Who?"

Roland paused, and then said: "Since you ask, a tramp."

"A tramp?"

"A gentleman of the highways and byways. He cannot read or write and speaks the Queen's English in an extremely free adaptation. Yet we have heard him talking in a manner normally associated with a scientist, dealing with stars and the Galaxy and alien beings and giving us an understanding of how the Galactic Intelligencer worked. The G.I. was the name of this alien encyclopædia."

"A practical joke!" snorted Sir William around his cigar. "A hoax. Another Piltdown Man, dressed in different clothes to suit the modern taste."

"You might very well come to that conclusion merely on the basis of what I have told you. But there is more."

"Well, go on, go on."

"The spaceship crashed, the encyclopædia was buried with it in its protective box. This was during the Carboniferous Period of the Palæozoic Era which ended about two hundred and twenty million years ago in the eruptions of the Permian Period." Roland shut his eyes, checking. "Yes, that's right. During the Carboniferous Period, as everyone knows, the forests laid down the coal seams of today. The trees were subjected to immense pressure. They compacted down—do you know, I found out that it took thirty years of plant growth to make up a single inch layer of coal."

"Spare me the awe, John. Get on with it!"

"Well, the ship was crushed. I assume it can be taken for granted that nothing remained. The protective box around the G.I. must have gone, too, leaving the walnut-sized encyclopædia firmly embedded in coal. So it lay, through the millions of years. Who knows what has happened to its makers? Where did the civilisations that bore it depart? Why was there no rescue? These are questions that we shall never know, for the encyclopædia cannot contain knowledge of events after its fall upon Earth."

"But how——" Roland smiled slightly to himself. Sir William was being gripped by the grandeur of the conception, of this egg of knowledge lying for all the years, embedded in the bosom of the Earth, waiting until the day it was unearthed . . .

"That egg was mined recently. Where, we don't know, although a check will be carried out on that. The consignment of coal might be traceable back to the mine. Anyway, the encyclopædia in its coal sheath was part of a load of coal bought by the Ancient Railways Preservation Society and was used by them in their locomotive, the Saucy Sal. Their stoker, a man called Walter

Colborne, threw the encyclopædia on the fire. The flames touched it. It exploded."

"And everyone around received a charge of ancient and alien knowledge, implanted in their minds!" said Sir William. "I find this incredible, to put it mildly. But one thing gives me hope. Quite apart from the fact that I trust you implicitly, John."

He stabbed with his cigar at the ignition. "Start up, John. I happen to know Lord Ashley, the guiding spirit in the Ancient Railways Preservation Society. If old Jeffers, as well as you, says it is so—it must be so; even if I still can't believe it. Drive on."

CHAPTER VIII

The nerve centre of the Operations Room had been set up in the long, low-ceilinged upper chamber of the Golden Lion, and the scene it now presented was at once impressive, amusing, anachronistic and disturbing.

Lord Ashley and Sir William presided. On the wall between two windows, tightly closed for security reasons, had been pinned a large scale Ordnance Survey map of the district. Imposing red lines had been ruled methodically upon it, and flags and coloured pins indicated Colonel Starkie's defensive positions, together with a detailed personnel break-down appended in one corner. This was the military position map.

Everyone ignored it. They concentrated instead on the second Ordnance Survey map—an older and more tattered edition—which was pinned somewhat jauntily between the Stag at Bay and the left hand one of a pair of antlers that had been presented to the Golden Lion by a long-dead local landowner whose wife would no longer countenance the waste of the maid's time in dusting them. This map had no official title. Upon it the most conspicuous landmark was a heavy red line which indicated the track of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society's line. At a point rather closer to the Bay than to Nether Ambleton was a tear. This hole had been torn as the result of frenzied poking by excited gentlemen pointing out the exact position where the Encyclopædia had blown up.

The most potent symbols on this map, however, were the small—but growing—clusters of drawing pins. Each pin represented the known whereabouts of an individual who had travelled on the train on the day of the explosion.

Beagle, his long lemon face showing the suspicion of a flush,

and Rodney Winthrop, clad again in one of his revolting shirts, were engaged in a heated argument. The cause of their argument sat happily in a deep armchair, quaffing the unceasing procession of pint tankards that was passing before him. Tom, the tramp, his mole-skin waistcoat unbuttoned, boasted that he had never refused a drink in his life. His only fears now were that it might be necessary to lower the flag on that proud record.

Three tape recorders whirled hypnotically on the long table, tended by members of Sir William's staff. A mournful major stood at the window, gazing gloomily down on the queue below. The vicar, who had been admitted because he had not been on the train and who had experience of Group Dynamics, was working on notes for a suitable sermon the coming Sunday.

The long table was littered with papers, note-books, brief-cases, cameras, walking sticks and the Colonel's Sam Browne, which was too tight for him.

The local landowner and representative of the gentry, Norman Leighton, who had been known to press half-a-crown into the grimy hand of a fourteen year old boy to walk past the Church after morning service and say: "Good morning, Squire," Leighton had made his money as a tycoon of the metal industry. This meant that he had started as a rag-and-bone man and, on the declaration of peace, had bought up huge amounts of army surplus and sold it with a fine disregard for the petty restrictions of legal commerce. He had been admitted to the Operations Room only because he was a justice and could therefore give an extension. This he had done.

Sally Picton had volunteered to take notes; but as she was a prime witness this had presented certain difficulties, only resolved by Sir William's masterful stroke of diplomacy in importing the tape recorders. Now, she sat near the door and wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Outside, in the ante-room, was where the work was being done. Here, sitting on cane chairs before a baize-topped card table, John Roland and Constable Evans were interviewing the residents of the village. They tried to be kind, and not to frighten anyone. They asked a standard question. "Were you on the train?"

If the answer was "No," the culprit was told, sternly, to leave and skulked downstairs with the feeling that he had somehow let down the Empire.

If the answer was "Yes," the lucky man or woman was told to go through into the Operations Room.

How long it was before they discovered who was lucky and who not, remained to be seen.

Inside the Operations Room, amidst the flurry of activity, lay the cause of all the disturbance, Walter Colborne, his mouth open, and mumbling idiotic childish gibberings interspersed with bouts of cretinous glee.

Sally Picton looked down on him and sighed.

There was a disturbance at the door. Constable Evans pushed his country-nurtured features around the door and said huskily: "Gennelman wants to come in, Mr. Leighton." Constable Evans spoke naturally to Leighton, as the known and local seat of authority. Leighton started to say something about: "Tell him to take his turn," when Sir William intervened.

"Was he on the train, constable?"

"Nossir."

"Well, he can't——"

The words were drowned by a furious voice, a gesticulating arm seized itself fast around the constable's neck. The arm withdrew—as did the head of the law. A slight, pregnant pause. Then a small, dapper man with snapping black eyes and rosy cheeks, strutted into the room, breathing heavily. He was followed by what at first sight might have been mistaken for a great ape escaped from some zoo. Both men, for man the second undoubtedly was upon close inspection, wore raincoats and felt hats tipped down in front. John Roland sidled in after them and strode purposefully towards Sir William.

"Claims he's a Scotland Yard superintendent, Sir William," Roland said softly.

"Well, is he?"

"Yes."

By the time the situation had been explained to the C.I.D. man and he had been prevailed upon to partake of a drink,—at the expense of the government, he was informed,—his incredulity and contempt were apparent. His name was George Brown, and he maintained the normal scepticism such a name automatically conferred upon its owner.

"Lot of nonsense," he said tartly. He glared at Colonel Starkie. "I may say that certain quarters regard the bringing in of the military with some misgiving."

Colonel Starkie heaved himself to his feet. Up to now, he had been enjoying this little break from the routine chores of barrack life buried in the country. He had deep-set eyes, thin sandy hair and a sharp expression, and had proved himself in the mud of the winter

campaign of '44-'45 to be an exceedingly brave and intelligent officer. Now he rumbled ominously: "It's only by the skin of our teeth that I haven't declared martial law."

At these apocalyptic words the gloomy major involuntarily turned from the window and took a half-step into the room.

"And, if this rubbish I'm told is true, as you obviously believe, why haven't you done just that?" asked Brown.

"Well——" Colonel Starkie paused.

"Fact is, my dear fellow, if I did they'd want forms filled in in triplicate up at Horse Guards. I've never been fond of red-tapé. And we're getting along very nicely."

"The police have a right and a duty to be——"

"We have the able assistance of Constable Evans," pointed out Sir William, enjoying this, and quite determined that Superintendent Brown of Scotland Yard should not find out that he was dealing with the head of N.I.5.

Super Brown did not exactly grit his teeth; but everyone winced.

Lord Ashley sat back. Whilst Beagle and Winthrop were still getting the tramp to talk, were still prying into his brain and dragging forth all that Tom knew of the Galactic Intelligencer, he was prepared to delay indefinitely before he interrupted them. He had had a long and bitter experience of the way authority in its different guises loved to foul itself up deciding who was going to do what. Until they'd decided who was handling this, he was calmly going on doing things in his own way. He would not have been surprised if a battleship had heaved up, and a Vulcan had landed in farmer Longland's pasture, and an admiral and an air marshal had stormed in, demanding that it was their pigeon. Lord Ashley was already building his dreams of the future.

Sir William said icily: "What were your first reactions, Superintendent, when you heard that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima?"

Brown's rosy and healthy cheeks grew even more ruddy. He started to say something, paused, and then, obviously changing his mind, said a little sulkily: "Well, it took a bit of believing at first. But that was normal. I mean, we knew work had been going on along those lines."

"Like all thinking men, Super, you were incredulous. It took a bit of thought before you realised that science had taken a fifty year leap in the few years since Fermi and Rutherford. We have a

situation here, not quite parallel, but similar enough that serious thought must be given to it."

"It's serious all right," Brown said. "I'm not satisfied with the reports on the deaths of these two men. I should like to request your co-operation in any enquiries I may see fit to make."

"The local police——" said Leighton vaguely, with some idea of asserting his importance and displaying his knowledge of forensic procedure.

"I have complete clearance from the Chief Constable," Brown said stiffly. "He is happy to co-operate fully."

Most people listening knew what that meant.

A sudden shout from Beagle drew their attention.

Tom was nonchalantly scratching under his right armpit. He was also, with his unsure right hand, drinking from his flagon; the resultant movements were of an infuriating nature to Beagle, who was vainly attempting to persuade Tom to continue talking from the implanted memories of the G.I.

"Go on! Go on! What comes after: 'Emergency repairs to mark nine nuclear reactors?' Something about supplies."

Tom withdrew the flagon from his lips. His glazed eyes brightened, like the sun shining through mist. His leathery face crinkled into what passed for a smile. "By gum," he said in his husky voice. "That be interesting, that be. Catching them little critturs by thinking at 'em." He looked benignly on Beagle. "I'll have to try that yon up in Squire's woods. You make me the box o' tricks, like, and I'll split the bag with you."

Beagle said, very patiently: "All right, Tom. It's a deal. Now just think how you make the 'box of tricks.'

"Oh, I dunno that. Not nohow. Tain't here, in me head, like. You follow me, zur?"

Winthrop let out a sharp exclamation and Beagle sagged back, defeated. "Yes," he said resignedly. "I follow. You know *about* these gadgets. But someone else knows how to *make* them."

"Providing," Lord Ashley observed, "someone else happened to have their head in the line of that bit of flying information."

The three scientists looked as though at a single command across at the snoring and disgusting bulk of Walter Colborne, supine on the bench.

"Poor devil," said Lord Ashley. "He caught most of it. Numbed his brain. I can't say I blame him." His tall frame leaned over, peering across at Colborne. His eyes caught Sally's and he smiled.

"Don't worry, my dear. We'll be gentle with him."

Sally nodded. She could not find it in her to reply flippantly, as her life-time training dictated. She couldn't say, with a saucy toss of her head: "Why should I worry? He's none of my business." For she knew, helplessly, that he was very much her business. And the knowledge was strangely comforting, a warm friendly niche in her mind that had had solemn and alien thoughts impressed upon it.

Colborne snorted, and muttered, twisting on the bench. He flung an arm out, and his hand touched Sally's. Like the twining fronds of plants, their hands clung.

"Hullo," said Beagle. "He's coming round."

Lord Ashley said: "I hope he doesn't run into any knowledge that will destroy his brain. What he now knows is dynamite; and not only to him, but to the whole world."

Colborne opened his eyes and said: "What hit me?"

CHAPTER IX

"Just because I was late you didn't have to hit me over the head with the fire shovel, Beagle," Colborne complained bitterly. He swung his legs over the side of the bench and stiffly sat up. He reeled back against the wall, his face grey and the stubble showing strongly, and tried to focus his eyes.

Someone said: "Snap out of it, Walter."

Someone else, someone with a heavenly voice, said: "He'll be all right in a minute. Let him come round in his own time."

"Luvverly," Colborne said. Then: "Drink. I would like a drink of water."

The glass, thrust cool into his hand, stung him into greater awareness of his surroundings. Cautiously, he opened one eye. Light drilled like a dentist's instrument of torture. He winced and closed the lid firmly. He drank water, rinsing out his mouth, and feeling pains shooting through his head with the movement. He had to play this delicately, with an exquisitely fine touch. Otherwise he was sunk; and would sink into the horrors of that future life that had haunted him since the tramp's revelations.

Anyway, he had an infernal headache—quite unlike that other feeling of head-bursting from which now, thank God, he was relieved—and there was little play-acting about his drawn face, screwed up eyes and haggard look.

"How do you feel, Walter?" asked Lord Ashley.

Colborne took his time about answering, and then said: "Lousy." He licked his lips and shuddered. "God, what a hang-over."

"Can you remember anything——" Beagle began.

Lord Ashley cut him off with a quick movement of his hand and a murmured: "Take your time, Walter."

Colborne grimaced. He knew what it was all about. He knew what these buzzards wanted. They wanted to pick his brain clean, strip it of the alien knowledge that had poured in from out a splitting lump of coal. Only—they weren't really buzzards, were they? Not Jeffers, and Beagle and Winnie? They were his friends. Then Colborne remembered his prevision of his future, and of the way these friends would prod and probe and dessicate him, in the cause of science. He felt at once small and alone and afraid.

That feeling was intensified by the uproar in the room, which he vaguely recognised as the upper chamber of the Golden Lion, although its new furnishings, the maps, the tape recorders and the bustling people, intent on their interviewing and recording, created a sort of circus whirl in his head, and shrank his spirit still further into its shell of obscurity. He wanted to get away from it all and curl up and sleep.

Someone gave him some pills, and then, at a brisk command from an army colonel, an army medico walked in and genially shot a hypo into his arm. Shortly thereafter he really did feel better, and there was no longer time or excuse for procrastination. Now, he had to face up to his ordeal.

From the tightly closed windows came a hubbub in the street. Children's voices raised in laughter and excited shouts and indignant denials that they weren't playing fair. Everyone ignored the noise floating on the warm summer air; as though on cue, all faces turned in Colborne's direction. To seize on any excuse, to postpone the inevitable time when he must make his stand, one way or the other, Colborne began to enquire what was going on and who were all these people. As he learned their names and looked at the maps and reports, the picture filled in.

"You've made quite an operation out of it, Jeffers," he said, smiling weakly.

Lord Ashley shook his head. "Not really me, Walter." He gestured towards a competent looking individual in inconspicuous grey. "John Roland here, he's the driving force behind the organisation, with help from Colonel Starkie." Looking at Roland,

Colborne caught a glimpse of a familiar face; then he remembered. Roiland had been the man who had lounged casually up and stood listening when old Tom the tramp had been pouring out the first astounding news of the Galactic Intelligencer. That the man had believed it, and had had faith in his belief enough to bring in his superiors and the military impressed Colborne. Roland would bear watching in this game he meant to play.

Tom had been temporarily forgotten and now he was cheerfully guzzling the unending row of pint flagons. His eyes were fast becoming glassy. Lord Ashley saw this and shouted at Beagle: "Hey, Beagle! Tom'll be incapable of answering questions in a minute. Then," he added with a sidelong glance at Colborne, "that'll make two of 'em."

"I'm perfectly all right," Colborne said with dignity, "thank you."

Beagle's attention had been taken from Tom by his fierce argument with Superintendent Brown. Winthrop had joined the discussion. The C.I.D. man's supercilious expression and his maddening insistence on undisputable facts were both rapidly maddening the scientists and turning the discussion into a wrangle. Colborne listened with pleasure.

"I always thought you scientists prided yourselves on sticking to the facts," said Brown.

"So we do. But when the facts are as plain as they are in this instance we don't go on blinding ourselves to the obvious." Beagle was getting wrathful.

"Where do you think Tom picked up all this stuff he's been telling us, Super?" demanded Winthrop.

"Stuff's right. Why—it's a practical joke. And I can assure you it won't backfire on the public. Oh, no! The taxpayers won't pay for all this. Either you and your associates will pay up or we'll find out just who is behind this tramp and his wild stories."

"What about all the village people who were on the train when the encyclopædia exploded?"

"This could be a cheap plot to get publicity for the village and the holiday camp. Those people who run some holiday camps—not the reputable ones—will go to any lengths to secure publicity. I know. I've had some." He grimaced, and shook imaginary water from his hands, a typically French gesture. "Little green men from flying dustbin lids. Oh, yes. We know."

"Listen Super," Colborne said distinctly and belligerently. "Don't you go mixing the Ancient Railways Preservation Society

up with those cheap charlatans. That won't do you any good at all."

Superintendent Brown rounded on Colborne, his face no longer ugly, suddenly smooth and menacing. "Are you threatening the police, by any chance?"

"Call it that if you like. We're a reputable association. Not half-witted fanatics. Don't forget it."

Lord Ashley intervened before the policeman could work off the ire simmering in his breast. "Whilst that is quite true, we seem to be wandering from the point." He looked up as a fresh burst of noise and laughter and the quick clatter of running feet sounded from the windows. "We as a Railway Preservation Society were drawn into this by pure chance. It's lucky that we have among our members so many distinguished men of science. At least, we have been able to get on the job of tracking down all the information from the encyclopædia with open minds. I hate to think what might have been the consequence had this happened somewhere where the general reaction would have been such as ——" Lord Ashley hesitated, har-rumphed, and then Beagle finished it for him. "Like your crass and mind-bound stupidity, Super. That's who."

Colborne was really enjoying himself now. He stood up and went across to the window for some fresh air. The argument was generating enough sparks now for no-one to pay him any attention as he pushed up the catch and opened the window. Fresh, sweet, head-clearing air poured in.

"All right," Superintendent Brown was saying, his voice icy with suppressed rage. "If you're so all-fired clever, how is it that if all the people who were on the train received a charge of this wonderful alien knowledge that you, Lord Ashley, and you, Professor Beagle, who were actually on the footplate at the time of the alleged explosion did not receive any information?"

Beagle said: "Good Lord!"

Lord Ashley said: "Very fair, Super, very fair question."

Colborne turned from the window and said: "The answer is simple. The explosion occurred actually inside the firebox, surrounded on all sides but one by metal. The whole thing was like a gun. The explosion of the information, if you can follow that concept, was funnelled out in one direction. It went right down the line of carriages. Those people whose heads were obscured by other heads, or by metal, were not affected. Those with their heads out of the top of the carriages received some radiation. Lord Ashley and Professor Beagle were leaning outside the cab at the time and its metal walls protected them."

"Protected? Walter," said Lord Ashley wryly.

Sir William had remained silent. Now, he said with a little appreciative nod of the head towards Lord Ashley: "The clincher, Superintendent, is the overwhelming proof afforded by the reports we are receiving from people who were on the train. The knowledge they have could not have been obtained on this Earth, outside the pages of science fiction magazines. And what they are telling us has the ring of truth."

"And," Beagle said hotly: "The difficulty is getting it out of them. We have to dig around and ask leading questions. You have to start their minds working before you can get the stuff you want out."

Winthrop carried that thought on. "And the man who is a sort of index, Tom, here, is rapidly getting drunk."

Colborne welcomed every single one of these diversions. They prolonged the inevitable moment when he must give a straight answer to the question he must be asked. He still had not completely made up his mind to deceive his friends. He was frightened, alone, trying to see a clear path through the tangled trail between his duty and his inclinations. That a definite decision was upon him he knew. He turned again to the window and leaned out, breathing deeply. They couldn't trap him into answering random questions with specific alien answers. You had to lead into the subject of which you wished to acquire information; you had to frame a question, and then, if you knew the answer, there it was, hanging like words of fire in your mind. If you didn't know the answer, you could keep a blank, unintelligent face. It might be tricky.

Across the street children with cowboy hats and masks and toy six-shooters were playing cowboys and Indians. That fairyland would still go on, he supposed, if the whole world turned into automotive robots. Young and innocent and not understanding what was really involved when they shouted "Bang!" and "You're dead!" and their friend obligingly fell over, only to rise again and, in his turn, shout "Bang!"

When they were older they might press triggers and push buttons and, without having to shout "Bang!" would send men whom they had never seen to roll and lie in the dust. Only, then there would be no turn for getting up and being the good man. Then everyone would be the bad man. And by then it would be too late to teach them anything else.

From the shop-window shadows a boy pranced, brace of six-

guns proudly pointed. Above him the old daub and wattle fronts rose, leaning and ancient and friendly, their shop signs creaking slightly in the faint breeze, the whiteness of the paint and the blackness of the wood somehow right and proper in this quiet country village. The lath and plaster looked, frail as it was, as though it was prepared to stand another four hundred years to add to the four hundred already past.

"Walter," Lord Ashley said, speaking very kindly. "Have you fully recovered? Can you tell us now if you remember, that is, if any information is now open to you? Your brain received by far the largest part of the G.I. Can you tell us, now?"

Colborne put both hands on the windowsill. They were trembling. He looked down, feeling sick, hating the world, hating the time for decisions that must always come, hating the inner convictions that he was a weakling, unable to make up his mind.

The boy dressed in his cowboy clothes down there saw a friend come out of the shadows of the Golden Lion's porch. Colborne saw the newcomer, a lad foreshortened into almost nothing but his cowboy hat. The sun glinted from an object in his hands. A gun. Colborne could see, quite plainly, the two torch batteries, the little coil of wire, the crystal, attached to the barrel of the gun. He saw them only as through a mist, a fog conjured up by his agony of indecision. Selfish motives pushed at his feelings of duty to tell all he knew for the good of science. Without conscious effort his eyes followed the boy below.

The boy with the two toy six-guns raised them, pointing at the boy immediately below Colborne. "Bang! Bang!" the lad shouted, laughing.

"Bang!" said the boy below Colborne.

From the gun in his hand a pale violet beam lanced, lasting a heartbeat, flickering out so fast it appeared only a retinal image.

The boy waving his six-guns vanished.

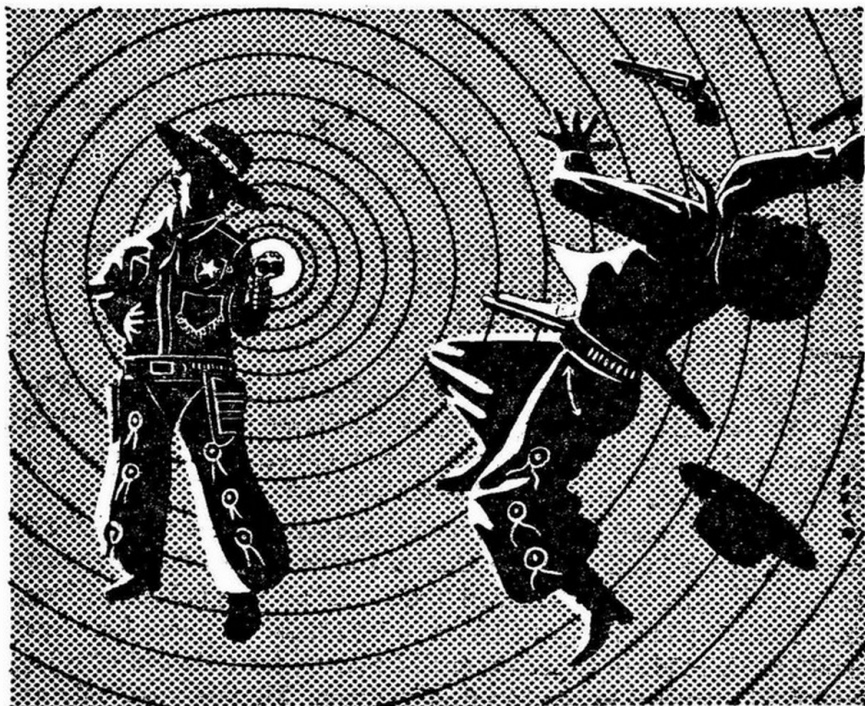
The old time-mellowed shops vanished.

An oak tree whose original acorn of birth must have fallen three hundred years ago vanished.

Four hundred yards away, across the fields, a rick began to burn.

The shops' upper storeys, left unsupported, fell to earth. Plaster and beams and dust puffed out, over the street. The noise was not loud. It was more like a long soft sigh.

A pigeon fluttered onto the top of the rubble. Its wing was broken. It stood there, flapping, dazed, frightened.



Colborne turned round, facing into the room.
"I'm sorry," he said firmly. "I can't recall a thing."

CHAPTER X

Sir William's big Bentley pulled into the side of the road and the passengers alighted.

Beagle pointed up the grassy slope to the railway line. "Just about there. We were just going into the downward run. You remember, Jeffers, you commented upon the speed."

"That's right, Beagle," Lord Ashley confirmed. "I was looking out this side. The crossroads just ahead were passing my view at the time."

Colborne looked back. "We swung round that bend so fast I fell against you, I think," he said.

"Well, let's get on up there," Sir William said. The other cars had pulled in neatly to park behind his Bentley, and now Colonel Starkie and the Engineer officer scrambled along the bank

and they all went up, striding over the grass and the daisies. Puffing slightly, they stood on the metals of the track. The boots of the soldiers scuffled loudly on the ballast.

The Engineers soon had their instruments set up, and their officer balanced his map and oriented it with the landscape. He was a tall, thin, intense man, devoted to his work, who had never seen a gun fired in anger. He had no wish to. Mapping, as an art, he had explained, was not surpassed by the masterpieces of Michelangelo or Leonardo. Now he began laying off lines, working with sure, swift economy of purpose.

Colborne walked a little way off and sat down on the bank. He picked up a handful of pebbles, tossed from the ballast, and began to throw them idly down towards a clump of bushes. Lord Ashley strolled up and sat down beside him with a little grunt of effort.

There was a short silence. Colborne felt acutely miserable.

"Pity your brain's still numbed, Walter," Lord Ashley offered at last.

"Yes."

"Those kids. Damned shame. Damned stupid. Just the sort of idiotic tragedy we're trying to avoid."

"Yes."

"It affected Sally pretty rottenly, Walter. She's a fine girl."

"Yes."

Another silence followed that. Then, speaking with a remote unfeeling voice, Colborne said: "Still, the military have that violet beam weapon now. Should prove pretty useful in a war."

It was Lord Ashley's turn to be taciturn. "I suppose so," he said, with a sideways turn of the head. His wise old eyes regarded Colborne steadily for a moment. He remained still and uncaring of that level gaze.

At last Lord Ashley said: "I expect there's a defence for it. Some sort of screen. We'll have to find the person who knows that."

"If someone received that information."

"Oh, I know it's a chance. But, then, it all is, isn't it? I mean, the good comes with the bad in any phase of civilisation."

"Only sometimes the bad runs ahead of the good. Seems that it always does, too, for some odd reason."

"I wouldn't say that. Not always."

"Nuclear science is as good a point as any. First we blow people up. Then, in between finding out better methods of blowing

them up more spectacularly and in more wholesale doses, we tinker about with peaceful uses. Cancer, for instance. Power. You tell me which way it works."

"I can't pretend to answer for the mysteries of history, Walter. All I know is that if you give mankind anything like a decent chance he'll opt for the good things. And by that I don't mean good in any wishy-washy way. Most of the great advances in science that have been perverted to warlike ends started off with a vision for the good of mankind. Circumstances force men to abominate their own creations."

"Funny, though, how good man is at devising means to destroy other men. He's got a knack for it."

"When you've been a weak and unarmed and unarmoured creature for a few thousand years, you develop that kind of knack. We wouldn't be sitting here if, a few thousand years ago one of our ancestors hadn't thought of hitting a sabre tooth with a big club, instead of letting the beast eat him up. That kind of conditioning can't be worked out of your system in the few generations that intervene."

"Okay, then. Let's not monkey around any more with wholesale means of destruction until we can control our fighting instinct."

Lord Ashley produced his pipe. He did not light it but turned it thoughtfully between his fingers. "You point to people being killed by aeroplanes. I point to people being saved by the flying doctor services, being able to get from one end of the world to the other, perhaps for a vital mission. You point to men killing others with rifles; I point to the times when man lived by his weapons, and when to be without weapons was to starve."

Colborne threw a stone. "The ratios are so out of proportion—I'm no mathematician, but you know what I mean—that one just doesn't balance the other."

"I'll quote, roughly, if I may? Whereso there is one good man, there will I spare a multitude of sinners. Something like that."

"Oh, I'll grant you that," Colborne said fretfully, standing up and kicking his last stone into the air. "I'll say that the average man is fundamentally peaceful and wants to live in peace. But you know the answer to that well enough. Tell him that that other man, over the hill, has a yellow face or beats his slaves in his factories, and, hey presto! there's a uniform on his back, a gun in his hand and all humanity squeezed out of his heart." He laughed harshly. "Until you can convince me that the men who tell other

men are fundamentally decent when they gang up together, then I'll interpret things as they are, not as I'd like them to be."

"Hey! You two!" Beagle's thin imperious call rang out.

They both turned. Lord Ashley put his cold pipe between his teeth, grunted again as he levered himself up. His tall body leaning into an invisible wind, he went off up the track towards the group, without looking back at Colborne.

"All mapped up," Colonel Starkie said. "We've got all the lines ruled out to a millimetre. Right, Harrison?"

"That's right, sir. I've quite finished now," the Engineer officer said, rolling up his maps.

The Colonel sniffed, and then swung round and gave energetic orders to the soldiers with the instruments. The ensuing bustle of efficient departure gave time for Colborne to simmer down. He had made up his mind. The only trouble was, it appeared that Lord Ashley had seen through his deception. Well, he comforted himself, so far no awkward questions had cropped up that might bring a betraying gesture from him.

The summer breeze flirted with men's hair, sported about the trees, quivering the leaves; high white clouds tumbled in fairy castles against the limpid depths of the sky. Around him there was a quickening spirit of being, of aliveness, as though all the little lives that were being acted out in that land and skyline were somehow joined to his, part of one whole.

He went slowly down to the waiting cars.

As he sat in the rear seat of the Bentley, he could not take his thoughts away from that child, whiffed into nothingness by the black alchemy of some alien star. It had been abundantly proved that the knowledge received unwanted had a deadly power. It was dangerous in the wrong hands.

Colborne hoped that his hands would prove strong enough to guard the deadly secrets entrusted to him.

So far he hadn't even bothered to find out what he did know. He had shied away from that new area of awareness in his mind as a blind man shies away from some unfamiliar echo on a foggy night. What fresh facts lay in his mind could continue to lie there, undisturbed, untroubled. He thought of his mind like some modern version of Pandora's Box. The slightest chink, the merest suggestion of raising the lid; and they would all come boiling out, good and bad, to engulf the world in a bath of flame.

He had made up his mind, quite sincerely, that he wished to save the world as it was. With all its imperfections, it could yet be

worse still with devilish instruments like that violet beamed gun let loose and on the prowl.

The cars started and rolled back to Nether Ambleton through the gentle countryside.

A message was waiting for Colonel Starkie. It was from the lieutenant out on the bridge. The reporters, it said, were growing tough. They demanded to be allowed to send one representative to interview the top man. Colonel Starkie crumpled the form under the protesting eyes of the major—who was responsible for paper work—and barked out his considered opinion of reporters. He finished: "And you can tell them no-one's coming in here. No-one at all, understand?"

Lord Ashley said: "Just a moment, Colonel. I'd rather like to discuss this with you and Sir William." He smiled at Superintendent Brown. "And you, of course, Brown."

The upshot of that discussion was that a form was decided upon and a certain story was to be released to the Press. Lord Ashley twinkled one of his favourite jokes. "Oh—and, when they arrive, I'll expect the age-old report. You know—'There are four reporters, my Lord, and a gentleman from the *Times*.' That is a splendid example of something; but what, I don't think I'll mention right now."

Those who had heard it before laughed along with those who had not. To Colborne, it was still more than funny, it summed up a whole civilisation, a whole way of life and manner of thinking. That that world was now long dead sometimes made him wonder. And then, looking around, he always knew that it was better so. Just.

Some time after that, Colborne saw Lord Ashley spend a considerable time speaking on the telephone. Before the reporters arrived, an ambulance had driven up, let into the perimeter through a little-used byway and unobserved by the reporters. The doctor aboard was, Colborne felt, in any case a useful addition to their strength. All available medical strength had been used up. Even the pigeon with the broken wing had been carefully tended by Leighton's head gamekeeper until the arrival of the vet.

Beagle and Winthrop had sobered Tom up and were busily running over tapes with him. The tramp had first inquired who the 'ell was speaking like that. He had flatly denied the possibility that it was himself. He still didn't believe it, even when Beagle ran a recording, and then played it back before the tramp's very ears. However, he was quite anxious to co-operate when the beer flagons were judiciously kept at arms' length until he did.

Watching the scene, Colborne wondered what carrot might be used to tempt him. He was roused as Lord Ashley came over, with his winning smile about to pass the finishing post, and with the newly-arrived doctor in attendance.

"Oh, Walter, this is Doctor Cremieux. I want you to have a thorough check-up. Now, no arguments. You've been through some remarkable experiences lately, to put it mildly." He chuckled. "And the ambulance driving off at the right time will add a splash of colour to the story we're going to spin those newshawks."

Colborne thought he detected an odd note of strain in Lord Ashley's chuckle. But he was too strained himself to take too much notice of little indications now—however much he had once prided himself on telling how other people felt by their mannerisms.

The army medico came back into the room, reported to Colonel Starkie and was brusquely told to go into a huddle with Beagle and Sir William. Passing them, on his way to the door with Doctor Cremieux, Colborne caught the gist of their conversation. It seemed that a story was being cooked up to satisfy the Press. Something about a disease that had to be kept under control. Danger of tactile infection.

Sir William said bluntly: "Tell the deputation that if they come we can't let 'em out. They can talk by the field telephone the army's set up. It won't satisfy them; but it'll keep 'em off our necks for a bit."

John Roland observed drily: "If I know the Press nothing'll keep them off our necks for long. And once that sort of story goes the rounds all hell will bust loose. You've only to look at the military precautions we're taking."

Beagle said: "That's out of my line."

Colonel Starkie said gruffly: "Well, it's not really mine. But we cannot allow the truth to be known yet. Any story is better than that one. Agreed?"

Doctor Cremieux coughed discreetly, caught the eye of his army colleague, and said precisely: "It might be better if the infection were droplet, airborne—tactile diseases may be combated by wearing gloves."

And so Colborne went out to the solemn nodding of heads. He wasn't sure if they were nodding so sagely over Cremieux's last remark, or the reflection that the Press didn't give up so easily.

The last thing he heard was the army doctor saying: "I'll requisition facemasks right away. You'll enjoy wearing those . . ."

An odd feeling of conspiracy, of being in the know, obsessed Colborne as he went down the old inn stairs and out into the street.

and, refusing to sit in the back, found a seat between the driver and the doctor. It was not at all difficult to keep his eyes away from the gap in the row of shops opposite and the hastily piled rubble shovelled back from the street. He could still see that child, waving his pitiful toy guns, the instant before his awful dissipation.

By the time the ambulance had traversed the main street and was wheeling around the corner past the corn chandlers, Colborne saw through the side window a Hillman Minx roll up to the Golden Lion and two men jump out and, arguing violently with the soldier on sentry duty, disappear within. He wondered how the army medico was going to deal with the obvious tardiness in the arrival of his anti-septic face masks. That, he'd find out when he got back. The ambulance rolled past the soldiers guarding the perimeter across the by-road, and set off into the countryside. Colborne, disinclined for conversation, shut his eyes and leaned back. There seemed to be no hiatus before he was opening them again and seeing and hearing the bustle and subdued frenzy of a large hospital around him. He was ushered out and up in a lift and so through into a large, airy, bright and quiet room on the top floor.

In the scrubbed whiteness, with the gleam of chrome and the strange other-worldly atmosphere of ranked banks of dials and meters he was jerked out of the spiral of his own self-centred thoughts, and guilty memory shot off at a tangent. He stopped stockstill.

"Holy smoke! June! I've completely forgotten her——" He swung on Doctor Cremieux. "Look, doc, can I use your phone? I must ring Saint Angelo's at once."

"Saint Angelo's?" the doctor said on a rising inflexion.

"Yes. My sister's there. Cancer. Had a big operation the other day and all this fuss has driven it right out of my mind. Thoughtless idiot! Ungrateful slob—where's the phone?"

"Just a minute, just a minute." Cremieux raised his hands in protest under Colborne's torrent of words. "You are here for a check-up, young man. I'll get through to Saint Angelo's for you. At once, I promise you. Who is it?"

Colborne didn't stop to argue. He knew that the doctor, in dealing with familiar channels, would get through three times as fast as he would. He gave him the details. Cremieux immediately picked up the phone and put the call through. "Now," he said professionally, cradling the phone. "Just put yourself in my hands. Come over here."

Colborne submitted to various checks. Some, he recognised; some, he didn't. At one stage he had to balance mercury in a glass

column by breathing out. The mercury fluctuated like a ball on a waterjet in a shooting gallery. At another point electrodes were fastened to his head and he lay down, thinking about June. Then his blood was taken, a sample drawn with expert precision—he didn't even feel the prick of the needle. He lay there, thoughts now of his guilty load of alien knowledge banished from his mind under the far more pressing impact of his callous disregard of his sister's well-being. If she'd died. . . . He refused to allow that possibility to exist. He willed it to be not possible. The threat of it lay over him, stultifying, choking, making him, if he could only let himself see, aware of his own instability under the new experiences weighing him down.

"Well, doc," he asked, sitting up wildly. "Is she all right?"

"Take it easy, take it easy," Cremieux said softly. "Yes. Of course she's all right. Angelo's is a first-rate shop. Of course, the news is not all good——"

"Tell me!"

"Your sister unfortunately shows a recurrence——"

"Oh, no! Not that! They said they'd cut it all out. They said . . ."

Cremieux spread his hands. "Cancer. It is a very strange thing. No one can really tell. It takes a long time. She will have——"

"Of course! And in that time? What will she be doing? Feeling?" Colborne's frustrated feelings boiled up in him. What could anyone do against the dark forces that swept in from nowhere over a bright life, selecting, it seemed at random, any target that was defenceless and helpless before it, striking it down mercilessly—and friends stood about quite unable to do a single simple thing to relieve a moment's agony. He was sweating now; he must be partially deranged. June, of all people, would not want him to carry on like this. But the time for cheerful acceptance was past. He felt he had to shout aloud his hatred of whatever black fate it was that stalked carelessly into ordinary people's lives, laughing with insane glee at destruction and agony and the blighting of all hope.

When he had mastered himself, when he had overcome that dreadful spasm of grief and wrath, he said: "Thank you, doctor. You have been very kind."

Cremieux was obviously embarrassed. Even for a doctor, callous in the normal friendly way, he had been shaken by Colborne's spasmodic utterances. He put it down, Colborne guessed, to the events of the past few days. And, who was to say he wasn't right?

"If you will put your coat on, we can return," Cremieux said.

Going out, Colborne for the first time became conscious of the

three silent men in grey who followed him and the doctor, men who had the wary-eyed look that he recognised in John Roland. So there had been no chances taken on this jaunt outside the Nether Ambleton abattoir.

"Will I live?" he asked, with a pathetic flicker of that old jauntiness.

"Possibly," answered Cremieux. And then he added: "I, personally, can only give you another fifty years of life. Beyond that it's entirely up to you, or Providence."

"Providence," Colborne said. It was a curse.

CHAPTER XI

Colborne asked the driver to stop on the corner of the High Street.

"Here," he said to Doctor Cremieux, handing over a couple of coppers. "As I don't suppose for one moment you trust me, would you mind nipping over to that newsboy and buying a paper?"

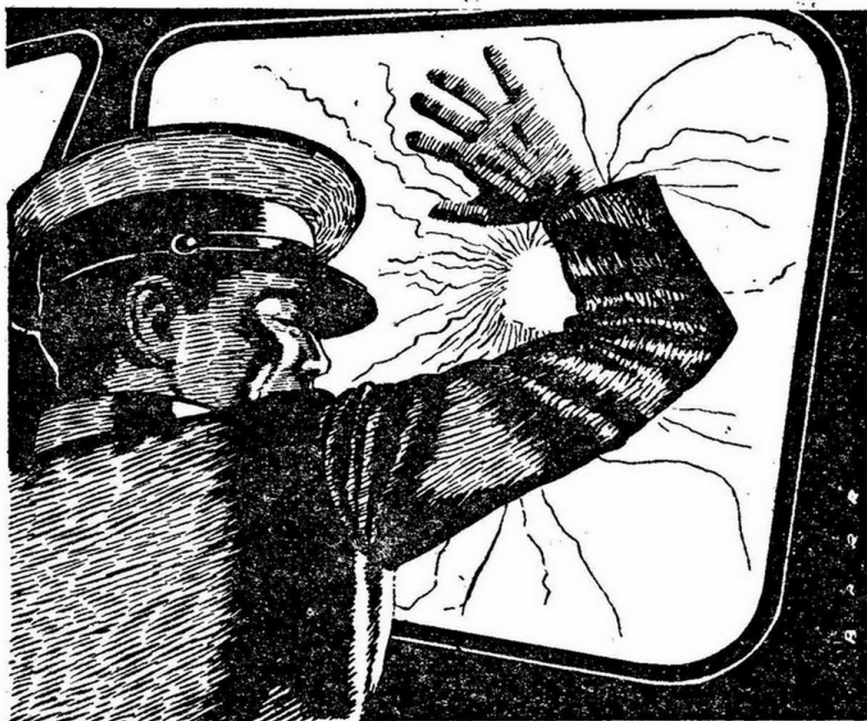
When the doctor came back, the headlines stared hard and black at Colborne. The Press had wasted no time at all, and with the cheerful acceptance of the infallibility of the newspaper, millions all over the world were now reading of the occurrences in the sleepy little hamlet of Nether Ambleton. At least, Colborne thought sourly, reading this rubbish. As the ambulance started again, he said: "They must have fed them a sweet line. Look at this. 'Mystery ailment near Polder. Atom brains refuse comment but say no danger.'" He snorted with disgust. "What the hell they mean by atom brains is anybody's guess."

Cremieux said quietly: "So they've decided to tie it in with Polder." He stared at the shops fleeting by. "After they'd agreed to use the disease story. I wonder what went wrong."

"Probably your opposite number in the mob didn't get those face masks through fast enough. Although that's probably not the answer, anyway. Seems to me that an old lady only has to fall down the backstairs and sprain her ankle within fifty miles of a nuclear power station and all the yellow sheets immediately blame the pile. Ignorant layabouts."

"Still, this might not be clever——"

"Of course it isn't clever! I can see half the county skedaddling off unless a satisfactory answer is forthcoming. And pretty



poor answers they'll get in the House. Someone must have the breeze up, all right."

"You sound particularly vicious, Colborne."

"Do I? I wonder why that is?"

Colborne shut his lips after that and the drive proceeded in silence. They left the town and purred quietly through leafy lanes, heading back to Nether Ambleton.

They went past the barriers easily enough, still keeping to the byways, and, all too soon for Colborne's peace of mind, the roofs and chimneys of the village showed through the greenery of summer trees. There was hidden deep down in him a sense of shame in meeting Lord Ashley and Beagle and Winthrop again. An odd sort of feeling compounded of guilt over a partially-felt betrayal of what they stood for, a defiant stand for what he believed in, and what he recognised for a stubborn feeling of resentment that it should have been him, Walter Colborne, selected for this outrageous act, angered and isolated him.

The ambulance dipped to a depression in the road and a startlingly loud crash of glass, followed by an oath from the driver, shook them all into shocked alertness.

A hole had appeared in the side window. Glass lay in small shards across their knees. The driver pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed his ear. The handkerchief came away red.

"Drive on," Cremieux said evenly.

"It's only poltergeists," Colborne was savage with his irony. "Don't worry about them. Windscreen smashing is as good a way as any to enliven the waiting till you get your ticket for hell."

"I dunno who it was," the driver said darkly. "But I'd like to put the toe of my boot to him."

The crash of heavy automatics came clearly to them from the rear of the ambulance. Looking through the little window, Colborne saw the rear doors open and two of the plain-clothes men leaning out and firing. They looked cold and hard and merciless. He turned round and looked through the windscreen.

"I always thought firing on an ambulance was regarded as unchivalrous; but I suppose if the ambulance fires back that's underhand."

"What on Earth is going on!" demanded Cremieux.

As no-one had any idea, no-one said anything.

"They might know something at the Golden Lion," the driver said. The ambulance swept past the corn chandlers and pulled up outside the Golden Lion. The Hillman Minx was still there, parked untidily against the kerb, and a soldier with a rifle and fixed bayonet stood over it as though he were a legionnaire defending Fort Zindeneuf.

Colborne jumped out and ran round to the back. He was almost decapitated by the swinging door as the agents sprang out, alert and suspicious. Colborne staggered back and fell flat on his back. From his reclining position, he looked straight up and saw the sentry's legs and battledress blouse looming menacingly over him. The rifle and bayonet looked, from his angled view, like a spaceship waiting to take off. The sentry had not moved a muscle. He stood, aloof, self-contained, on guard.

Colborne said something and then scrambled up. He turned on the agents.

"What the blazes is the idea? I thought you were along to protect me, not to knock me flat?"

The three men stared silently at him. Cremieux walked almost stealthily up and took Colborne's elbow with altogether too familiar a manner. "Now, just come along, Colborne——"

Colborne shook free. "What was all that shooting?"

The agent who had knocked him down said: "Sorry you fell

over, sir. That shooting," he crinkled up his eyes. "Someone fired a rifle at the ambulance. Sounded like a .22 to me. Caught a glimpse of someone moving in the trees. Couldn't stop. No orders."

"All right," Colborne said, annoyed at making a fool of himself. "We'd better report it to Colonel Starkie and get an armoured regiment out hunting the poacher."

"Poacher? This time of day?"

"There's a lot been happening around here recently," Colborne said darkly. He stalked off and went into the pub and up to the Operations Room. He wanted to see Sally.

Cremieux followed him, swinging his brief case, which bulged more than when he had left, Colborne noticed.

Lord Ashley greeted him with an outflung newspaper and a trembling and indignant finger.

"I know, I know, Jeffers," Colborne said crossly. "Yellow journalism trying to throw a scare into their sinking circulations. Where's Sally?"

Beagle said: "She went out about an hour ago, said she needed some fresh air."

"What!" Colborne told them of the shooting incident. Colonel Starkie got on the ball with commendable swiftness.

Lord Ashley's paper lay on the table where he had flung it. He and Doctor Cremieux were off in a huddle in a corner. Beagle and Winthrop joined them. Tom, the poacher, was lying full-length on a settle, on his face the blissful look of one who is utterly and disgustingly drunk. Superintendent Brown and his ape-like assistant had vanished, and Leighton was squiring it down in the private bar below. The Operations Room looked singularly cold and empty and cheerless. Although it was high summer, Colborne shivered.

Idly, he glanced at the paper thrown down. He had no idea where Sally had gone; but he knew it wouldn't be far with the soldiers and police on guard. He had no real fears of her safety; just that he felt that there was a time and place for a little anxiety; it toned up the nervous system in those around him.

The story in this newspaper was much the same as in the one he had asked Cremieux to buy for him. There was no sign of a reporter in the Operations Room; but Colborne guessed that the car he had seen drive up as the ambulance left, the car with the remote sentry guarding it, would not be leaving Nether Ambleton for a time yet. And the story sent out from here, after it had received the usual quota of inane sub-editorial crossheads, made lurid reading. Col-

borne turned the pages in slow resentment, angered that there existed people willing to believe all that they read.

The headlines held his attention. He began to read an inside story, written with all that heavy-handed humour of a revolting coyness that characterised some papers' attitude towards slightly off-beat events in the world.

"Self-professed high priest lands in U.S. Ignatius Q. Hackensack, recently respected industrialist, on his return from England where he had been a member of a trade mission, immediately on stepping from the Constellation, began an impromptu open-air religious revivalist meeting at Idlewild Airport. The meeting took place between the two wings of the Arrivals Building, but quickly spread to interfere with the working of the South-East taxiways. Police were called but were unable to disperse the crowds. Mr. Hackensack was taken into custody in order to prevent a riot."

There followed a garbled version of what the deranged industrialist had been preaching. Reading it casually, Colborne's attention sharpened. There was a grim familiarity within him as he read on. The man had chosen as his slogan: "Planetary solidarity is essential." He was preaching a survival religion; a means of life related to unspecified deities that, he claimed, enabled anyone to go on living in the most adverse circumstances. He spoke of a "revealed vision". He indignantly denied a suggestion that he heard voices in his head. What he had to proclaim to the world, he said, had come to him in an apocalyptic stroke from on high: "The letters of blood stand in my mind and I share them with the world." We must all work together, he said, and render our devotions to the mysterious beings who were able to control the world and guide our destinies, to close our ranks against any invasions from outside, and never to lose faith that one day "They" would come. "They" would not leave us to be cast away alone on the surface of this world.

Colborne sighed. He looked across the room at Lord Ashley and his friends talking earnestly with Cremieux, then he looked about for John Roland. Colborne knew who he was by now, although he was not quite clear as to the tie up with Sir William. Roland came over at Colborne's nod.

"Another one for you, John," Colborne said. He pointed out the item in the paper. Roland read carefully.

"It's not my pigeon; but I'll get the boys on to it. Interpol will be pleased—if surprised—that we can put some work their way. Work of this nature, that is," he added. He went off to the phone.

"See if you can find out where he had this 'apocalyptic stroke from on high,' John."

"Wilco."

George Friant, his wispy beard barely visible, his twitching fingers and thumbs doing a rhumba, put his head round the door, looked about him, and then crept stealthily in. He motioned to Colborne. The room seemed very quiet after the excitements, and there was quiet dust drifting in the sunbeams from the windows. Friant looked worried.

"What's up, George, someone scratched the paint?"

"No, thank goodness, old boy. Haven't had a lot of time with the engine since this fuss started."

"Didn't know you were involved. How come?"

Friant's restless fingers rubbed with a dry, rasping sound. One day someone was going to lean over and clap a rat-trap around his hands out of sheer self-defence.

"Member of the Ancient Railways," Friant said. "We're all persona very much grata around here these days."

"You surprise me."

"Yes. And, of course, I was interested, too, and wanted to get into the act." Friant smiled disarmingly. He wasn't too bad a guy, Colborne had to admit; and he had his uses where the coachwork was concerned. Friant went on: "Thing now is that there's a character downstairs wants to see the senior military officer. I've been handed the job of liaison by Jeffers, and so I'm liaising——"

"Lazing, you mean," Colborne said unkindly.

"——says he's Brigadier Thomas Graham and the looey below wants to know if he should send him up."

Colborne recalled the name. He wondered if the pukka sahib would bow to the inevitable and admit that there had been an explosion in the firebox—although, come to think of it, the soldier's main argument had been that the explosive agent had not been a grenade. And he'd been right. Then the implications struck Colborne.

"Sure," he said. "Send him up right away. I'll inform Jeffers and get Colonel Starkie."

"Wilco," said Friant, vanishing.

By the time the erratic painter reappeared with the Brigadier in tow, Lord Ashley's conference had broken up and they and Colonel Starkie, with Sir William, made an imposing little reception committee around the table.

The preliminaries took no time at all. Graham had been on the train; most of them knew that; but had had to leave on business immediately afterwards. Coming back to his lodgings in Nether Ambleton, where he and his wife were spending a quiet holiday, he had been met by the barriers. His rank and demeanour had brought him through to Friant's lieutenant, and thus to the Operations Room. He smiled in a manner Colborne could only think of as frostily, as he said: "Apparently there was something to this young man's story of an explosion. I have heard some details; but I'd like to know what is going on." He ceased smiling, and added: "My wife is worried."

Colonel Starkie explained. The Brigadier took it quietly. At last, in a pause in the conversation, Lord Ashley said cautiously: "As you were on the train, Graham, you very probably have some of this information buried in that head of yours. You know what happened to three people with pieces of this learned shrapnel in their brains. The trigger words haven't yet been spoken. When they are, you will become aware of the knowledge you possess. That knowledge might very well drive you insane, or kill you, or turn you into a homicidal maniac, or have no effect whatsoever. We——"

"I'm a soldier," Graham interrupted. "Colonel Starkie here probably knows my record——"

"Indeed, yes. Very distinguished."

"——and I'm quite used to taking calculated risks in my profession." His face sagged a moment, then tightened. "That is, in my late profession." Colborne remembered the way the Brigadier had said: "Retired." Graham went on: "It seems to me, from this violet beam weapon, and other things, and the way in which civilians chose to be made aware of what lay in their minds, that if you intend to ask me if I want to go ahead—well, you needn't. I've already made up my mind."

Just like the man, Colborne reflected wryly. Straight in and damn the jumps. Very probably he'd had quite a success that way. But what good would that do if a crawling tendril of alien information sucked the sanity from his mind? All kinds of information had been in the encyclopædia. Anything—literally anything—could now be lodged in a human being's brain. He stared at Graham as Lord Ashley hesitated. Sir William, so alike and yet unlike the peer, took the initiative. Sir William spoke clearly. "I feel that your attitude is the only correct one for a servant of the Crown. Even though you may be retired, your duty is quite plain. But we like to know where we stand. Have you, Brigadier Graham, ever heard of the Galactic Intelligencer?"

There were the usual fear symptoms. The cramps, the sweats, the flushes, the stifled cry of amazement. They were familiar symptoms in cases where information quite out of the ordinary was present. In mild cases, the information could be acknowledged without a watcher being aware. This time, it seemed, they'd struck pay dirt. Although, what it might be, no-one, not even Beagle, would care to hazard a guess.

"Good God!" the Brigadier said. He found a chair and sat down, heavily. His eyes were staringly focussed on nothing, and he sat bolt upright, one hand twisted behind him on the rail of the chair. His face registered much what it would have done had he seen the Coldstream Guards doing a battalion rhumba during a Trooping of the Colour.

Then, without warning, he threw back his head and burst into laughter.

The others sat, petrified and waiting.

Graham, spluttering and gasping, wiping the tears from his eyes, sobered up and said, between racking bouts of semi-insane laughter: "What did the ten-legged Pruill from Antares IV say to the Sirian water-eating plant? No, wait, it'll kill you." He suffocated in his own chortles, and then, braying it out: "No dice today." Saying it out loud nearly ruptured him. He rolled about in the chair, gasping and choking, red faced, the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Gradually, the ring of frosty faces was borne in on him. He looked around, gurgling weakly, saw the expressionless faces. "Don't you see? Ten-legged—that's the 'd' in front of ice . . . Ice . . . Water-eater . . . How else could you eat water . . . Funniest thing I've heard in parsecs . . . And here's another one——"

"Just a moment, Brigadier," Lord Ashley said gently.

"Yes? What is it? I've another one here, even better——"

"Not just now, thank you. If you don't mind. You see, this humour, well, it's——"

"But surely you must see how funny it is?"

Colborne had had great difficulty preventing himself from bursting into delighted laughter. Not from the alien pun-type joke; but from the very ludicrousness of the situation. Here they had been, sitting tensely awaiting some dread revelation—perhaps the antidote to the violet beam weapon—and all they'd got was the comic section of the encyclopædia.

Really—it was beyond a joke!

"My wife was terribly upset about my headache, and when I fainted——" he spread his hands. "Well, she was frantic. But when I tell her all these wonderful jokes she'll know it was worth it. My land, yes!"

"Nothing else?" asked Lord Ashley.

"Eh? Oh, some equations. I can see 'em flaming away in my mind every time I dodge around the jokes, if you follow me."

"Yes. We know how the information appears."

Graham tensed, sitting up. "Hold it. Now—wait a minute. Good God! The beginning of the equations—I can't pretend to understand them—indicate that this is some sort of weapon. Yes. A weapon that makes cobalt bombs look like Christmas crackers. The power—all from—yes—here——"

He seized a pencil and, with the eager help of Beagle and Winthrop, began to scribble rapidly, turning out a flowing four pages of complex equations that looked to Colborne like the aftermath of an ink-drunk spider. "That's all there is—at least, all I have. But there is more of it. That I know. Someone else has the rest."

Colborne, staring at those spidery tracks, struggled to keep his face impassive. He knew what had hit those others, now. He was now experiencing all the horror of feeling your mind a receptacle for thoughts you had not put there of your own free will. But on top of that, over-riding any feelings of personal discomfort, came the dread knowledge that this super-weapon, the ghastly object that could destroy a planet's life, the murderous instrument that could be built from the complete set of equations, could only be built if he chose to give up what festered in his own brain. A sheet of figures rose in his mind, figures of fire, beginning where those scribbled by the Brigadier left off.

As though drowning he fought to keep his head above the tide of emotion choking him. He stared round the table, lips firmed down, eyes open, teeth jammed down hard on his tongue. Lord Ashley was staring at him. Staring, staring, staring. So was Beagle. And Winthrop. Looking at him. Studying him as though he were a bug under a microscope. Not saying anything. Just sitting and staring. Staring . . .

At last, Lord Ashley said in his gentle voice: "Walter, it's no good, you know. You had an electro-encephalograph test at the hospital. Cremieux brought your charts back. We've been studying your encephalic rhythms."

"Is that important?" Colborne didn't realise he had spoken.

"Oh, yes. You see, Walter, your encephalic rhythms show all the normal pulses—plus a completely alien pulse no-one has seen before—except where knowledge of the G.I. is possessed." Lord Ashley's face was sad and grave and compassionate. "I'm afraid we know you know."

KENNETH BULMER

(To be continued)



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Who Rules In Space

In this interesting and up-to-the-minute article, a well-known contributor to our pages discusses some controversial points in International Law regarding space travel and the colonisation of other planets.

In a recent exchange of notes between Marshal Bulganin and President Eisenhower, the Russian Premier, as he then was, stated that the U.S.S.R. was willing to discuss a ban on the use of "cosmic space" as a theatre of military operations.

The implications behind such a ban raise important questions in international law. Do the Russian and American satellites violate the sovereignty of every nation they pass over? A country's air space extends up to—where? Could a spaceship captain, merely by landing on the Moon and planting the flag of his State, lay claim to our whole satellite as one of his State's possessions? Fortunately, international lawyers are alive to the need to solve these problems, only a few raised by the progress of men into space.

Some Latin American countries recently suggested tentatively that the present 3-mile limit of territorial waters should be extended to 200 miles. You can well imagine the farcical situations, as well as the more serious aspects, that would accrue from the adoption of this limit.

By international agreement, all nations with a seaboard have jurisdiction within the 3-mile limit. Also, each country "owns" the air space above the country. Air space extends up to the "top of the atmosphere". Fine—if we knew exactly where the atmosphere ends and space begins. Planes have been forced down by States who considered their passage a violation of their air space. Before space flight becomes practical, the questions posed at the beginning of this article must be answered.

The International Air Transport Association's legal adviser John

C. Cooper, reminds countries that the Chicago Convention, 1944, binds national signatories to recognise that every State has complete and exclusive sovereignty over the air space above its territory. He considers that the "territory of each State should extend upwards into space as far as the scientific progress of any State permits such State to control space above". It is doubtful, however, if this ruling would be popular or even practical for reasons that are obvious.

Here we may consider briefly the question of artificial satellites. All the nations participating in I.G.Y. have tacitly agreed to the passage of satellites over their territory, so that the first poser seems to have more or less solved itself. In this, we can see a glimmering of hope for agreement over the other problems.

Ideally, the "air spaces" agreement should be extended to include interplanetary space. But, unfortunately, any examination reveals this solution to be untenable.

A ship, either leaving or returning to Earth, would inevitably cross a section of space belonging to some nation or other. To complicate matters, who decides where a State's jurisdiction in space ends? The problem of control of even a small volume of space would provide many headaches. And that volume would increase with height away from the planetary surface.

The law applying to the high seas might fill the bill. The seas are free to all and no country may claim to any part, nor police any part, of them. Outer space should have similar laws applied to it and space stations and space ships must have the same laws applied to them as govern vessels on the high seas.

The "territorial waters" of space could be defined as that part of Earth's atmosphere above a nation's territory and ending, perhaps, at a 550-mile level. Although it is not known exactly where the atmosphere tapers off into the void, air of any appreciable density is virtually non-existent at this altitude. As no artificial object can last in the atmosphere, manned space stations would orbit above 550 miles, thus safeguarding them from continually infringing anyone's "territorial waters".

In interpreting the law as applied to space vehicles, an American ship, for instance, would carry the Stars and Stripes so that the normal jurisdiction of the United States could be exercised on board as is done on sea-going craft.

What of the law as applied to the Moon and the planets? Can they be considered as *res nullius*, free for occupation, so that one State could conceivably claim the Moon?

On Earth, if a country wishes to have her claim to a certain

piece of land recognised, she must prove that she *controls* and *administers* the territory. Planting the flag is meaningless, here, or on the Moon. Even assuming that a nation has a fleet of ships and established bases, she would have a hard time convincing all other countries that her claim to the Moon, with all its natural and mineral wealth, was absolute. As other States acquired space fleets, the claim would become increasingly hard to maintain.

International control of new worlds—providing, of course, that there are no tenants already there!—seems to be the solution. A body analogous to the International Trusteeship Council of U.N.O. could govern the newly opened-up planets and regulate communications and travel between them. Should disputes arise, they could be referred to a specially selected panel of space lawyers attached to the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

C. E. S. Horsford, writing in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, said, "The political consequences of any substantial conquest of space are so far-reaching that an international body would seem to be essential. So great would be the need that it should certainly not be impossible to create agreement through international co-operation."

For thousands of years, men have looked longingly through the window of the atmosphere at the majesty of the Universe. Now they stand at the door, ready to be initiated into the mysteries awaiting them.

Will the door open? Yes, if they can frame a code of space law, agreed upon and adhered to by the nations of the Earth, the problem will be solved and the human race will claim its heritage.

DONALD MALCOLM

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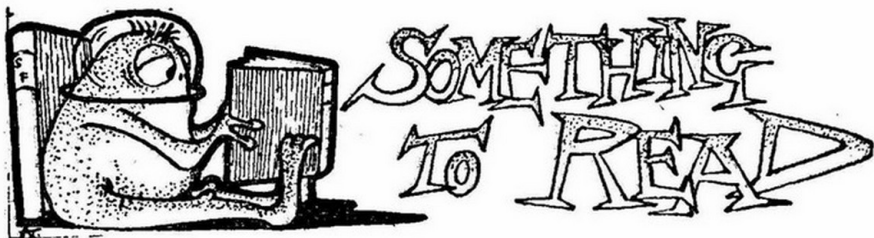
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New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

From Faber & Faber comes **BEST SF THREE**, which I think can be fairly called a very good book in a welcome series. Edited and with an introduction by Edmund Crispin, the 224 pages of this work contain eleven stories. One of these show that Mr. Crispin is extending the field of his selection—he has time-jumped back to October, 1942, and picked Murray Leinster's **THE WABBLER** from *Astounding Science Fiction* (American edition). This story, only nine pages long, is a gem, cut and polished by a master-craftsman. Written without any human or even humanoid characters, it is *the* example of the possibilities and scope of science fiction writing. It is also a timeless story—I'd never realised that until now; when I originally read it, in a battered copy of the magazine which had finally caught up with me down on Salisbury Plain after it had taken a detour round the Shetland Isles and sundry other places, I instinctively made the "hero" of British design and the scene of action Germany—or German coastal waters, rather. But Leinster avoided such dating references and a modern reader

might well fit entirely different people and places to the story. Good work, Mr. Crispin—I trust your exploration of the past of science fiction will uncover some equally timeless tales.

All of the other stories are worthwhile and, for fifteen shillings, this book is a very necessary addition to the "must keep" shelf, and of course an essential item for you to read, even if you only borrow a copy. Incidentally, I understand that a soft-cover edition of **BEST SF** (one) will be available shortly, at around six shillings. Watch out for it if you missed the first of this series.

Also from Faber & Faber (rapidly reaching the level of Britain's best and most persistent publisher of science fiction) is **THE DOMES OF PICO** by Hugh Walters (196 pp., 13/6), a sequel to **BLAST OFF FROM WOOMERA** which was published in 1957. Primarily a juvenile, it should not be overlooked by the adult reader. Mr. Walters has had much to contend with in writing a sequel to a story which was scened in the not-so-distant future, and which concerned Britain's first man-carry-

ing rocket to go above the atmosphere. A string of assorted satellites and sputniki which didn't exist when he wrote the first book, for instance. Usually, efforts to write sequels to stories which history has by-passed are not too effective, but this time I think the author has managed extremely well, and the rather frantic and hectic re-writes which I am sure must have occurred are not obvious.

But despite that, some parts of the story I just can't swallow. In the first book, photos taken of the moon from above the atmosphere (Earth's) revealed the presence of some domes, almost certainly artificial. Now to these domes has been added a cone, and from this collection of constructions a neutron stream is emitted. A neutron stream of such intensity that all the atomic piles on earth run wild, apparently irrespective of location. The governments of the world decide that something must be done to put the domes out of action, and the British, American and Russian governments take the lead. The Woomera range is decided upon as the most suitable for the blast-off, while American rockets with Russian warheads are to be used to home on a pilot beacon which will have to be dropped on the site by a human-guided rocket. Chris Godfrey, a young hero of the first British rocket, is talked into the job of piloting the rocket. Unknown to him, and kept secret from the majority of the people of the world—including those working on the project—is the fact that not only is his survival unlikely—it is impossible!

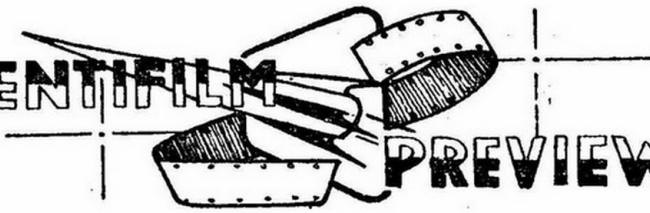
To keep him alive close to the

source of the neutron bombardment long enough to drop the beacon into position, the cabin of the rocket must be so heavily shielded with lead that insufficient fuel for return can be carried.

As others on the project are told of these facts, or as they become aware of them, the position becomes tense. Sir Leo Frayling, in command, the man who has always known that it will be necessary to sacrifice Chris, ploughs down all opposition, and carries the project through. And, in the end, by using the duplicate but unshielded rocket, manages to save Chris, although at great personal risk.

Having sunk my differences with Mr. Walters, I quite enjoyed the yarn. If those differences—or at least a couple of major ones—are not apparent to you from my comments above, you should enjoy it equally. If they are apparent, you can make your own mind up. A couple of things come to mind, here. Why is it that, in "close to here and now" stories even smallish stretches of the unlikely can spoil a yarn, but in "far from . . ." tales the imaginative acceptance of less-than-plausible distortion of the future is so much more elastic? And in view of the (at the time of writing) heralded imminent American rocket-to-the-moon, how Mr. Walters will manage to fit in the sequel to this book? For sequel there must be, the reason for the domes and cones of Pico has yet to be given us. Mr. Walters must either beat the rocket with his book, or else have another difficult revision session—I believe him capable of either, but I'll be waiting with most pleasure for the latter!

SCIENTIFILM PREVIEW



News and Advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

"The more preposterous a horror film is, the more the audience seems to enjoy laughing at it. Those who seek such pleasures should have plenty of fun at **FIEND WITHOUT A FACE**, a wildly gory fantasy," is the opinion of one fellow reviewer. Another agrees, "Easily one of the goriest horror pictures in the current cycle, it oozes and gurgles with Grand Guignol blood and crunching bones. Story, direction and acting are primitive, but the macabre effects will satisfy even the most jaded of the bloodthirsty."

FIEND WITHOUT A FACE had its genesis in 1930. In the beginning it was called *The Thought-Monster*, and it appeared in *Weird Tales* magazine. Like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley 110 years before her, young author Amelia Reynolds Long was also a teenager when she wrote and sold what editor Farnsworth Wright described as "A goose-flesh story of the sudden and frightful deaths caused by a strange creature in a panic-stricken village."

In the original story the scien-

tist recorded in his notes: "I shall create a mental being by the concentrated power of pure thought!" As November the 24th happens to be my birthday, the experimenter's entry in his diary for that day amuses me: "The strain of my experiment is beginning to take my strength." Ofttimes nowadays I have the same feeling about reviewing the latest scientifilms: the strain of finding new ways to describe how abominable the snowmen are saps my waning strength, while it keeps me hopping to keep coping with the depredations of the flea-men from the Dog Star . . .

FIEND WITHOUT A FACE has set some sort of record for typographical errors. It has erroneously been referred to in print as **FIELD WITHOUT A FACE**, **FRIEND WITHOUT A FACE** and **FIEND FROM OUTER SPACE!**

Filmed in England (with special effects created in Germany), the faceless **FIEND** takes place in the vicinity of a U.S.-Canadian air base and radar station located in the backwoods

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.

Talk Not At All	
Way Out	
Mute Witness	
Debt of Lassar	
Conflagration	
Wisdom of the Gods—Pt. 2	

Name and Address :

Miss J. A. Wood of Wallington, Surrey, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 30. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| 1. THE WANTON JADE | |
| By E. C. Tubb | 21.6% |
| 2. JOURNEY TO THE INTERIOR | |
| By Brian W. Aldiss | 16.2% |
| 3. P.S. | |
| By Eric Frank Russell | 15.9% |
| 3. LONE VOYAGER | |
| By Donald Malcolm | 15.9% |
| 5. NOTHING FOR MY NOON MEAL | |
| By Harlan Ellison | 10.6% |
| 6. TRAINING AREA | |
| By E. R. James | 9.9% |
| 6. THE COVETOUS | |
| By H. Philip Stratford | 9.9% |

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 36.

of Canada, where the American "Operation Dewdrop" is attempting to improve its Arctic Circle warning screen by a nuclear step-up of power. A retired scientist in the area takes advantage of the governmental stockpile of energy by siphoning off some to employ in his personal unorthodox experiments in psionics. His theory crystallizes dramatically and disastrously when his concentrated thoughts condense into the form of aerial craniums with spinal appendages that exhibit a sinister passion for strangling human beings. "A combination between a scorpion and a spider" is the description of one viewer; "winged hamburgers" the tasty word-picture of another. Complete with ketchup and relish, it might be added, when the thot-propelled brains are bashed by bullets.

But have no fear: brawn triumphs over brain. Contemporary columnist Jack Moffitt has summed the situation up in a "nut" shell when he observes: "By the time of the picture's conclusion the protagonists, like scripter Herbert Leder, have been through too much to distinguish between a brain and a thought."

The Fair Warning Dept., a new service to NEBULA readers:

Watch out for—

THE PHANTOM PEOPLE.

THE BRAIN SNATCHERS.

WILD WOMEN OF WONGO.

THE ASTONISHING 12-INCH PEOPLE.

And THE HIDEOUS ROCK 'N' ROLL CREATURE—!



WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

Many of you, I know, are in the habit of going to see a science fiction film every time you're down in the dumps (convenient, because that's where they're usually playing these days) and you may have noticed that often there are other films in the programme. These are sneaked on by the management in a feeble attempt to discourage you from waiting for the sf film to come up for the third time, and the result of this unethical practice is that acknowledged masterpieces of the cinematographic art like *I WAS A TEEN-AGE THING* and *THE EARWIGS FROM OUTER SPACE* are flanked by fillers with queer names like *SHANE* and *HIGH NOON*. As a result of a lifetime's study of the cinema as an art form (my mother used a lot of jam) I am in a position to explain some of the oddities of these supporting films to you fellow science fiction fans, so that you may be able to gain some slight interest from them as you sit there patiently munching your potato crisps and waiting for the real programme to start. (A member of the younger generation reading over my shoulder queries that reference to getting into cinemas for jamjars. Appar-

ently nowadays they have to surrender other articles—razors, bicycle chains . . .)

In the first place perhaps I had better warn you that these "westerns", as they are called, are pretty fantastic. Far-fetched, I would call them, and you'll have to exercise your credulity pretty hard. Unlike science fiction, which takes place in the infinitude of the future where everything is possible—even likely—they are set in an era of the past which is not only imaginary but frankly impossible. However, many of the plots are obvious adaptations of the plots of some of our lesser science fiction writers and with a little imagination you should be able to visualise them as a sort of half-baked science fiction. It helps that the scenery is vaguely reminiscent of that of Mars or the Moon. The local inhabitants are made up of two races living in a symbiotic relationship, one biped and humanoid, the other quadruped. It is obvious that the quadrupeds are the ruling race because none of them is ever hurt in the frequent ray-gun battles in which the humanoids fall like flies. Obviously they are protected by force-fields. They transport the humanoids about in

cages called "wagons", obviously much against their will because they're always trying from inside to turn the wheels backwards and go in the opposite direction.

The humanoids are of two kinds, the normal ones and the evil mutants. The latter are unable to face solar radiation and spend their time in banks and offices further protected by black clothes and moustaches. The normal humanoids are protected from them by an ability to move their own guns and deflect the bullets of their enemies by telekinesis. Further evidence of this telekinetic ability is shown by the recurring episode of the small town newspaper. This scene has always been a favourite of mine as an amateur publisher and I have studied the details very carefully. Briefly, what happens is that the villain holds up the newspaper editor at ray-gun point and forces him to run off, there and then, a special edition containing false news. I have studied this newspaper office very carefully and the only equipment seems to be a flat-bed proofing press and an old man with a rusty composing stick. It would, I calculate, take him

approximately three days to set up one page of the newspaper, letter by letter, and another half day to run it off on that old press, by which time the old man would have collapsed from exhaustion and the Mon-Tues-Wed audience would have gone home and left the Thurs-Fri-Sat audience wondering what it was all about. Obviously what happens is that the stress of the situation awakes the old man's supernormal faculties. This is just one of the unsuspected facets of westerns which can be appreciated by the science fiction fan.

Being held up at gun point isn't a thing that happens to science fiction magazine editors much these days, presumably because most of our villains live on Mars or even further afield, but the stress of the job must be pretty tough all the same. Just think, for example, the time it must take my boss Peter Hamilton to re-arrange the words of all the stories so that all the lines end neatly together! I hear the turnover in some magazines has been so rapid the publishers were thinking of asking De Gaulle to take over. One of the most interesting new appointments has been that of Damon Knight as the new editor of the American magazine, *IF*. Knight, an old time science fiction fan, an efficient critic and one of the best writers in the field, had a previous brief spell as a professional editor of a magazine called *WORLDS BEYOND*. Unfortunately the magazine was sunk in the backwash from the collapse of the last boom in science fiction, but its three issues are still remembered with keen nostalgia.

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CINDERELLA OF THE SKIES—continued from inside front cover

approach to Earth is some 26,000,000 miles, over 100 times as far. For this reason the Moon is the best known of our nearer neighbours in space but nowadays is largely neglected, especially in the present century, by the professional astronomers.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Moon was the celestial body most closely studied and by 1813 various lunar maps had been drawn of the surface the Moon constantly turns towards us, also of the one-tenth "round the edges" part sometimes shown during the librations. By the 1850's the picture drawn of our satellite was of an airless, waterless, bleak, lifeless world, alternately scorched by the burning rays of the Sun and exposed to the cold of space. The surface was covered by jagged peaks, mountain chains, craters, seas of pumice dust and lava, and great ravines. As telescopes became larger and photography and the spectroscope confirmed this picture, astronomers' attentions were drawn elsewhere, leaving the Moon chiefly to the amateurs.

Certainly, since then, the picture science has drawn has not changed radically, but interest in the Moon is not dead and the old statement that nothing ever happens on the Moon should perhaps be changed to "nothing *much* ever happens on the Moon."

The first indication that changes take place came in 1866 when the director of Athens Observatory announced the disappearance of the crater Linné. From an easily-seen crater of seven miles diameter, Linné changed to an insignificant crater-cone, difficult to see even in large telescopes.

Other lunar changes have been reported since then by observers, notably Dr. H. P. Wilkins, P. A. Moore and K. W. Abineri.

Although any lunar atmosphere that exists cannot be more than 1/10,000 as dense as ours, mists have been seen on many occasions obscuring well-known surface features. On August 2nd, 1939, Moore saw a white mist covering completely the boundary and floor of the great walled plain Schickard, while the interiors of Plato and Conon have been seen mist-filled. Possibly these mists are the last traces of volcanic activity.

Since 1895, a number of observers have studied certain systems of streaks or radial bands on some of the inner slopes of many crater walls and on some of the crater floors. In the system in Aristarchus, dusky streaks radiate from the brilliant central mountain over the floor and up the sides. Various astronomers state that these bands become larger and broader as the lunar day passes, reaching their peak about lunar noon, and then fading away. Moore and Wilkins hold the theory that they may be due to some low form of life, probably akin to lichens or fungus.

A long-standing argument among astronomers is the origin of the most prominent surface features of the Moon, the craters. Ranging in size from Bailly, 170 miles in diameter, to thousands of smaller craterlets a few yards across, they are scattered over the surface of our satellite, often arranged in chains as if along fault-lines. Large craters often have smaller ones superimposed on them, with still smaller craters destroying parts of the walls of the latter. This effect is well-shown by the upper of the two photographs, taken by the 100-inch reflector at Mt. Wilson. The other photograph, of the region about the crater Copernicus, is by the 200-inch Hale telescope.

The parts of the lunar surface free from craters are likely to be formed from solidified lava under a few millimetres of pumice dust. One theory seeks to explain the craters as products of volcanic action, while the other main theory holds that the impact of giant meteors—debris left over when the Solar System was formed 4,000,000,000 years ago—would cause craters of the form and range in sizes seen on our satellite. Recent support has been given to the meteoric hypothesis by the noted British astronomer Gold. In fact both processes probably played their own part in carving the majestic features of the Moon.

Perhaps we shall know the answer to all these problems by the end of the century when the first Moonbase is established.

