NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

MONTHLY

2/-

NUMBER 36

FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

THE GREAT NEBULA

The Great Nebula in Orion (Photo: Science Museum, London)

KENNETH JOHNS

Like some exotic orchid it sprawls across the galactic equator, an immense glowing cloud dwarfing the stars it enfolds—and yet itself a mere pinpoint of light against the unimaginable vastness of the Universe.

Astronomers, ever prosaic, catalogue it as a diffuse galactic nebula, M42; but it is better known as the Great Nebula in Orion.

Wreathed in luminosity, its delicate, formless traceries weave a shroud among the stars and draw from them the sustaining energy for its nebulous fluorescence. In return, the Great Nebula gives to the stars the means for them to generate the fantastic radiation needed to keep it bright.

This nebulosity is no simple effect; but is a hothouse of action where events, though they may extend for millions of years, create conditions that keep this as a private part of the galaxy. Luckily for astronomers, it is within our Galaxy, else the light, bright though it be, would not be distinguishable across the intergalactic gulf.

The Great Nebula is visible to the naked eye as a faint, greenish patch

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NEBULA
SCIENCE FICTION

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Look here . . .

Some of our more observant readers may have noticed that the article "First Breakthrough" which we published in the last issue of NEBULA was just a little cramped for space, and was not presented—from the topographical point of view, that is—with the elegance and neatness customary in our magazine.

The reason for this apparent back-sliding was hurry. The information in this article was hot from the U.S. and Soviet Embassies and was correlated and written up with lightning speed by our local team of scientific experts (Dr. A. E. Roy of Glasgow University and Donald Malcolm, the popular new science fiction author) specially for use in a forthcoming edition of NEBULA.

However, I realised on consideration that this was an article of very immediate interest to all our readers, and also one which by its very topicality was likely to become quickly out-dated if its appearance was delayed too long. Consequently I decided that the best course of action would be to print "First Breakthrough" right away, substituting it for another item already prepared for inclusion in our thirty-fifth issue.

This decision, even though it was made in haste, has proved extremely fortuitous. We were well ahead of all contemporary science fiction magazines in publishing this unique scientific data, gathered and sent back by Man's very first space going vessels. Once again—at the dawning of the space age, as always in the past—NEBULA has proved itself first *and foremost.*

Another occurrence about which we are particularly pleased is not scheduled to take place until next month, and this time it is in the realms of artistic, rather than literary endeavour. Gerard Quinn, now working exclusively for NEBULA in this country, has painted a cover for us which I personally consider to be among the very best we have so far used. I am certain that the majority of our readers will share this view when they see next month's issue.

Gerard tells me that he has recently become the father of a bouncing baby girl, but it would seem that all the trials and tribulations of fatherhood have done nothing to detract from his artistic ability—quite the reverse in fact. So, congratulations on the happy event, Gerard, and thank you for an outstanding cover.

Finally, I would like to say a few words to those of you who have so patiently sent in a ballot form to us after reading each issue of NEBULA. As most of you know, the author who receives most votes during any particular year is presented with a cash award of twenty pounds—a system which I believe to be unique in the science fiction publishing world. Now, in view of the large number of readers regularly taking part in our monthly poll, we have decided to extend the prizes to include the *top three* authors in each year's listing. Number two will, in future, receive five pounds, while the third in line will become the happy recipient of three pounds. The number one prize remains unaltered.

Naturally, these extra incentives we offer our contributors act as a guarantee that we will continue to receive the very best material they have to offer, and readers, by regularly expressing their opinions on the stories and articles we print each month by means of our Ballot Form, can be certain of having their particular preferences taken into consideration.

It is for these reasons, among many others, that you can count on something extra special in each month's NEBULA.

Peter Hamilton

E. C. TUBB

Wallpaper War

Working alone, Mark might just have succeeded—the trouble was that Lucy would insist on helping him

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

The portrait was that of a man pushing eighty. He wore a dignified combination of maroon and puce, his hair was a mottled gold and scarlet, his face looked like finely cracked porcelain. The artist had tried to instil the light of dedication into the bulging eyes and had only managed to achieve a slightly bilious expression. He sneered down from the wall at Colchis and his companion.

" Daniel Mervin," breathed Colchis reverently. " The greatest artist this world has ever known." He was a thin, undersized character well on the wrong side of youth. The fact that he was dressed, and looked, almost like the portrait was due wholly to artifice.

" Never heard of him." Mrs. Cora Hammond was a woman who always spoke her mind—unless it served her purpose to do otherwise. An ageing matron, she was no taller than Colchis but outweighed him by at least a hundred percent, a fact her clothing failed hopelessly to disguise. " Like Rubens, you mean?"

"Good heavens, no!" Colchis waved his hands at the insult. "Those primitive daubers didn't know the true meaning of art. They painted canvases for a few rich patrons and ignored the masses. Mervin cannot be classified with such people."

"Then what did he do?"

"He beautified the homes of the people," said Colchis with dignity. "He, like myself," he had the grace to cough a little, "devoted his life to surrounding people of taste and discernment," here he stared directly at his companion, "with a delicate blend of colourful harmony which both enhanced and reflected their personalities."

"I get it," said the woman. "An interior decorator."

"Yes," admitted Colchis. "But an interior decorator with a difference. Daniel Mervin was the first to break away from the stultifying limitations of static materials by his invention of the Mobile Interior Coverings."

"Is that so?" Cora was becoming bored with all this history. Colchis was quick to recognise the signs. History was forgotten as business stepped forward.

"Now, madam," he said smoothly, "I understand that you have a problem."

"I want a house decorated," she said. "If that's a problem then I guess I've got one."

"It is indeed." Colchis stepped back and stared at her with, what he hoped, she would recognise for the artistic summing up. She didn't.

"Quit glaring at me," she snapped, she was very conscious of her weight. "The girls down at the club said that you knew your stuff, that's why I'm here."

"I'm generally recognised to be at the summit of my profession." Colchis didn't believe in modesty, false or otherwise. Cora wasn't impressed, small men never impressed her.

"So's Mark Prentice," she said.

"Prentice!" Colchis shook his head as if pitying her for ever having found it possible to think of them both in the same context. "Prentice is a mere dabbler," he said. "Shall we leave it at that?"

Cora grunted, this little squirt certainly had a high opinion of himself, but then, according to the girls, he was entitled to. A Colchis decorated room came high, a Colchis decorated house would come higher and Cora was firm in her belief that expense meant quality. But Prentice had something too and it might be wise

for her to get in on the gound floor. She'd solved the problem in the most direct method.

"I'll make you a proposition," she said. "I've already contacted Prentice and he's agreed. Both of you decorate one room each in my new house. The one that does the better job gets the whole contract. Winner take all. Agreed?"

"Monstrous!" Colchis resembled the portrait even more as his eyes bulged from his head. "Have you no regard for ethics?"

"No."

"Have you no regard for the opinion of your friends? Would you risk the decoration of your house on a gamble?"

"Why not?" Cora had no objection to a gamble. So far she'd gambled on the lives of five successive husbands and won every time. "The way I look at it," she said, "is that you both think you're good. All right then, so we'll put it to the test. If you're better than Prentice then you've nothing to worry about. If you don't think you stand a chance then I don't want you anyway."

"It's unethical," said Colchis.

"It's a big contract," reminded Cora.

"It's unbusinesslike."

"It's take it or leave it."

Colchis took it.

"The trouble with old, fat women with more money than sense is that they don't know what they want or, if they think they do, then they want the wrong things." Mark Prentice scowled down at the papers spread before him.

"Mrs. Hammond?" Lucy Clarke swung one slender, sheerly nyloned leg as she sat on the edge of the desk. In looks, figure, youth and the rest of it she was what most men dream of. The fact that she was in love with him Mark put down to his having used the luck of a lifetime all in one piece.

"Our dear Cora," he admitted. He pushed aside the papers and fumbled for a pipe. "I've had a run-down on her past likes and dislikes, her favourite colour schemes, all the rest of it." He paused while he applied a match to the bowl. "She," he said, blowing smoke, "is a mass of artistic contradictions."

"A mess," said Lucy brightly. "Is that it?"

"That's it." Mark stabbed at the papers with the stem of his pipe. "She likes red, yellow, black and orange but doesn't object to green, puce, purple and violet. Her art gallery is a mess of daubs from El Greco to Picasso and she hasn't a clue as to their merit

other than that they cost a lot of money. She hates water but admires the sea, hates space but loves the stars, hides from the sun yet has a complete solar spectrum painted on her bedroom ceiling. I tell you, Lucy, there isn't a grabable handle in the female's entire personality."

"And that's important?"

"Very important." Mark had long ago ceased trying to educate Lucy into the mysteries of the interior decorator's art. This time she wouldn't be put off.

"How come?"

"Look at it this way. You go into a room and begin to feel irritated. There's no obvious reason for the irritation, you just feel it. The longer you stay in the room the worse it becomes. You can't put your finger on it but your subconscious is at war with the decoration. You wind up by hating the room."

"Why?"

"Just told you." Mark found refuge with his pipe. "Maybe, when a baby, you got hurt by something coloured yellow. From then on you've distrusted anything of that colour. Or certain lines and angles offend your inner artistic sense, and we all have such a sense, make no mistake about that. In either case you aren't comfortable in your surroundings. Your interior decorator, unless he can avoid such irritants, has failed in his job."

"Then no recommendations, no commissions, no money."

"And no marriage," said Mark. "Not unless you want to do it the hard way."

"Any way would suit me." Lucy bent and brushed her hair across his cheek. "What are we waiting for, Mark?"

"Get thee behind me, Satan." Mark shoved her gently to one side and scowled at his papers again. "I'm relying on Mrs. Hammond to enable me to make an honest woman out of you."

"I'm not complaining." Lucy nibbled at his ear. "Who wants to be honest, anyway?"

"I do." Mark shoved her away again, not so gently this time. "Tempt me not into dalliance, woman, there is work to be done and a deadline to meet."

"Sorry." She smoothed her skirt over rounded thighs. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Coffee," said Mark, and concentrated on his papers.

Always it was the same, this probing investigation before executing any commission, and the more thorough it was the better

the finished result. There were short-cuts, of course, not everyone got the same treatment, but Mark believed in topline work for topline pay. He had to believe that, it was the only way to get to the top and stay there.

Enviously he thought of the old days. Things were a lot simpler then. An interior artist would work in close touch with his customer. He would show them patterns, discuss colour combinations, get the customer's agreement for various schemes and then, just when he was getting to be a pain in the neck, would go ahead and execute the work. Then if it was unsatisfying, he could always point out that he'd supplied just what the customer had ordered.

Even now it was still possible to work that way. Most people kid themselves that they have a highly critical artistic ability and a high percentage of them, especially the women, were only too pleased to be "consulted." But not Mrs. Hammond. She'd thrown the bone to the dogs and now wanted nothing more to do with either of them. But, naturally, she would expect not only the best but the most satisfying décor for her new home.

And, unless Mark supplied it, his name would be mud.

The beauty parlour was a glittering combination of chrome, plastic and synthetic

marble. Soft music wafted through the scented air and the ushers, hand-picked for sex-appeal, stood like Greek Gods around the foyer. No women, Colchis noted that with approval. The old hags who came here for uplift and renovation didn't want any immediate comparisons.

A receptionist drifted over to him, eyebrow arched in a quizzical gesture.

"May I be of service?"

"You may." Colchis handed the man one of his cards. "I wish to speak with Mrs. Cora Hammond's personal beautician."

"You do?" The eyebrow lifted a trifle higher. "May I ask the reason?"

"You may not."

"Then I regret——"

"You will have reason to unless I receive service." Colchis retained his smile but it was a false one. "For your information I designed this place. I also own shares in it. I would be the first to be annoyed by any loss of custom caused by lack of co-operation on the part of the junior staff."

"Yes, sir." The eyebrow came down with a jerk. "A moment, sir."

Colchis yawned as the man hurried away. Within seconds he had returned to guide Colchis into one of the inner sanctums.

The beautician was a blonde whose expression alternated between utter boredom and avid interest. Her figure was a dream and her face matched her figure. She was a living advertisement for the skill of the house. She eyed Colchis cautiously as he put his questions.

"Mrs. Hammond, certainly I know her. A nice, kind, generous woman who——"

"She's an old hag and we both know it." Colchis had no illusions as to the regard in which the customers were held. "She probably spills more dirt to you than to her psychiatrist. What I want to know is——" He went into detail. The blonde first looked shocked, then disgusted, then, as she saw the money in his hand, avidly interested.

The session lasted quite a while.

From the beauty parlour Colchis headed for a fashionable restaurant. He dug out the head waiter, again used pressure and was conducted to Mrs. Hammond's personal waiter. This time the talk was all of food, colours of food, their spices and all about the

woman's eating habits. A short stop at the bar, this time to discuss her favourite drinks and Colchis was ready to leave. He remembered to ask the final question.

" Has a tall, wavy-haired man built like a football player been around on the same errand ? Name of Prentice if that's any help."

" Prentice?" The head waiter looked thoughtful. " No. No he hasn't."

" If he does then you know what to do." Money changed hands. " Get it?"

" Yes, Sir." The head waiter bowed almost down to the tips of his polished shoes. " Thank you, Mr. Colchis. I'll warn the others."

Colchis smiled to himself as he left the restaurant. Trust amateurs to neglect the obvious. Another couple of calls to Cora's fashion house and to her psychiatrist and he would be through. His agents would have gathered the regular data but there was nothing to beat the personal touch when it came to digging out the subconscious, almost unknown facets of a person's character.

Prentice wouldn't stand a chance.

The water was a glowing emerald green. Tendrilled plants lifted delicate fronds among which brilliantly coloured fish glided in graceful gyrations. Bubbles lifted from open mouths, sparkling like diamonds as they swept upwards through the plants. A faint odour of seaweed and kelp faded inches from the surface.

" Wallpaper." Mark disgustedly threw a switch and the gliding motion and glowing colour stilled into immobility.

" I like it," said Lucy. She was wearing one of the new slit-skirt, bare-midriff, naked-shoulder ensembles and, on her, it looked superb.

" It's not good enough." Mark glowered at the panel before him. " It's too primitive. We've improved the technical side but the artistic is still, basically, the same as they had in the old days. Colchis would laugh himself sick if he saw it."

" Would Cora?"

" That," said Mark sombrely, " is the question."

Inwardly he cursed the late Daniel Mervin. The man had hit on a brilliant idea, had made an easy fortune out of it, then had died from over-indulgence and left his successors with the headaches.

With the now general monoroof construction, rooms were as large or as small as the owner wished. Removable panels had

replaced static walls. Daniel Mervin had invented a mobile covering for those mobile walls. Prentice had to devise a mobile covering which would send Mrs. Hammond into raptures—or else.

"I was talking to a man who works for Colchis," said Lucy casually. "He told me that Colchis had been questioning the tonal effects of certain wires."

"He did?" Mark glowered at his beautiful fiancée.

"Yes." She saw his expression. "Mark! You're jealous!"

"That," he said tightly, "is somewhat understandable."

"I'm sorry." Her hair brushed his cheek as she threw her arms about him. "I only wanted to help."

"By spying?" Mark pulled hair away from his mouth. "You mean well, my sweet innocent, but don't underrate Colchis. He's quite capable of spreading a few red herrings around against beautiful young ladies who try to seduce his workmen into spilling the beans."

"You mean I wasted my time?" she said in a small voice. Mark heaved her from his lap and stood upright.

"Look," he said. From a sheeted off section of the workshop he drew a pilot screen. The frame was covered by a multitude of fine wires so that it resembled a harpist's nightmare. He threw a switch and the wires hummed slightly as power flowed through them. The humming died almost at once.

"We fit these gimmicks with activating locks keyed so that they spring to life whenever anyone enters the room," explained Mark. "Now watch!"

He walked past the screen and, with a delicate thrumming, melody flowed after him. He waved towards the screen and music replied to his gestures. From a drawer he took a flashlight and passed its beam over the screen. Again the tonal effects were out of this world.

"Wonderful!" Lucy stared at it with parted lips. "Mark, when we're married, I'm going to have every room in the house fitted with those wires."

"Over my dead body." Mark shoved the screen back where it came from. "Even the most fanatical music-lover would go crazy after a while of being followed by continuous melody." He chuckled at her expression. "So you see, my sweet, Colchis was smarter than you thought."

"I still think it's clever." Lucy didn't want to talk about her failure to act the alluring spy. She didn't even want to think about it, no girl likes to know that she's been taken for a fool.

"Clever, perhaps." Mark wasn't impressed. "Merely wires under tension and held within a magnetic field. Disturb the field and you vibrate the wires. Tune them correctly and there you have it. A fascinating, but horribly expensive toy."

"Wouldn't it do for Mrs. Hammond?"

"What will suit our dear Cora remains a mystery." Mark looked harassed. "The woman has no musical sense at all so the wires are out. Her conception of colour is a nightmare. The only thing I've been able to pin down is that she's a sucker for anything new and expensive which will create envy in the hearts of the rabble she regards as her friends."

"Something different?" Lucy was thoughtful. "And expensive?"

"Yes." Mark stared at her with suspicion. "What's on your mind?"

"Uncle Erasmus." Lucy made herself tidy. "I should have thought of him before."

She was gone, blowing a kiss, before Mark could stop her.

Colchis was a worried man. For once he had put himself out on a limb and he didn't like the position one little bit. Always before he had managed to browbeat his clients by a blend of superiority and condescension. He was the expert, the master, they were merely hiring his skill. They took what he gave and, if they didn't like it, then they daren't say so for fear of being thought uncultured, unsophisticated or downright ignorant.

In Mrs. Hammond he had found a tartar. Worse, he had learned that the challenge was now common knowledge and that all the social set would be coming to the judging. Unless he won and won outright then he might as well sell out and retire to some desert island.

"It isn't as if the results depended on merit," he confided to his head technician. "If they did I wouldn't have a care in the world. It's just that the woman is so unpredictable that we can't rely on merit."

"Couldn't you have a nervous breakdown?" The technician, the same man, incidentally, who had turned the tables on Lucy, was a cynic. "Strain, you know, the artistic temperament."

Colchis looked sharply at his employee.

"Well," said the man defensively. "It's happened before."

"To others, maybe," admitted Colchis. "A true artist never

admits the limitations of the flesh. Anyway," he added, "no one would believe it."

"Then you'll just have to produce." The technician was devoid of sympathy; privately he considered Colchis to be a posturing pip-squeak. Colchis considered his technician to be an unimaginative labourer. The two men normally got on well together.

"The woman likes raw steak well spiced," mused Colchis. "She drinks port and brandy, a horrible combination, and has an Id like a manure heap. What would you make out of that?"

"A Niagara of blood coursing over broken bones," said the technician promptly. "With sub-liminal effects not unconnected with the torture chamber." He looked interested for the first time. "Could be done at that. Use a triple ply screen with restless molecules and overlay with latent images and random patterns of Roraschach-type colour fragments."

"Crude," said Colchis, he wasn't the man to admit that anyone but himself could have a good idea.

"Effective," corrected the technician. "Don't know how the morality laws would be affected though."

"Red seems to be the operative colour." Colchis got down to hard facts. "Strong sex frustration as revealed by her beautician, her psychiatrist and her five marriages. She has no subtle tastes, a thing has got to hit with the impact of a sledge hammer, so pastels are out." He mused awhile, toying with a pencil. "Sunsets? Storms? Martian deserts?"

"Battle, murder and sudden death?" The technician was trying to be helpful.

"Cool forest glades which reflect the calm serenity of her inner nature?" Colchis sighed with frustration. With any other woman he could have talked her into becoming a victim of his propaganda. This operating wholly on research and lucky guesses was foreign to his nature. Casually he glanced at his companion. "Any news on the opposition?"

"Plenty." The technician was enjoying himself. "The girl got wise to me, I don't know how, but I managed to get close to an opposite number of mine. Incidentally, you'll find the item on my expense account."

"I hope the information is worth the expenditure?"

"Judge for yourself. Prentice has got hold of a new concept. Living M.I.C."

"Living!"

"That's what I said. Comparing it to the old stuff is like comparing a man to a robot."

"Living." Colchis frowned. "Flowers, you mean? Vines? That's old fashioned."

"I don't know the details, all I know is what I was told." The technician reflected his admiration. "If Prentice has managed to achieve half of what I was told then he'll be the new Daniel Mervin."

"Impossible!" Colchis glanced uneasily at the portrait. "No one could be as good as Mervin."

"Please yourself." Personally the technician thought of the inventor of mobile interior covering as a rampant old goat. "I'm only telling you what I heard." He rubbed salt on the wound. "I just thought that you'd be interested."

It was an understatement.

"God bless Uncle Erasmus." Mark, Lucy at his side, stared fondly at his latest creation. The pilot screen was only a hundred feet square but it threw everything else in the vast workshop into dull, drab and dingy nondescriptness. A soft moss-like growth spread over a multitude of singing wires, the vibration causing the growth to change in a constant kaleidoscope of colour. Tiny flowers bloomed unceasingly on the surface and their scent wafted through the air.

"The flower room," mused Mark. "Floral bower, flower room? What would you call it?"

"Why bother?" Lucy's delicate nostrils flared as she sniffed at the perfume. "It's heavenly."

"It's good," admitted Mark. "How come I haven't heard of it before?"

"You promised not to ask that," said Lucy quickly, "Uncle Erasmus wouldn't like it if he knew that you were using his mutated moss for interior decoration. You promised me that you'd keep it a secret."

"I know," said Mark, but——" He stared at her with a horrible suspicion. "Lucy!"

"Yes, dear?"

"This plant stuff, does Uncle Erasmus know that we have it?"

"Well——"

"Does he?"

"Not exactly," admitted Lucy. "You know what a fussy old man he is, always playing around with Venusian spores and X-rays and things. I just didn't want to bother him so I just helped myself." Her voice trailed into silence at Mark's expression.

"You told me that he'd agreed to help us and that the spores he sent, was supposed to have sent, would do the trick." Mark fought hard to remember that he loved this girl and that he was a gentleman. "For six weeks I've worked on that assumption, and now you tell me that I've just wasted my time."

"No you haven't," she said triumphantly. "How can Mrs. Hammond ever refuse her commission after she's seen that screen?"

"She won't see it." Mark almost pulled his hair. "How can I steal another man's work? How can I use his spore-moss without his permission?"

"Easy." Lucy was practical. "Just use it, get her commission, marry me and then let things work out."

"You'll look fine being married to a jailbird," said Mark bitterly. "Haven't you ever heard of ethics?"

"You mean the excuse people give for not doing what they want to do?"

"I mean the thing which business men operate on if they wish to go on operating at all." Mark gestured towards the screen. "So I use it, all right. So I get the commission, good enough. So maybe your Uncle Erasmus won't prosecute me for theft and all the rest of it, but what happens next?"

"We get married." Lucy was a girl with a one-track mind.

"So I get swamped with orders for more of the same and how can I sell what isn't mine?" He grabbed Lucy by the shoulders. "One chance. Can I buy it from your Uncle?"

"I don't know." Lucy looked worried. "He works for the government in some way, I'm not sure just how, and nothing really belongs to him." She brightened at a sudden thought. "Still, that makes it better, doesn't it? I mean, no one really regards taking things from the government as stealing, do they?"

"Only the government," said Mark grimly. He lowered his hands before he yielded to the temptation to put them around her throat. "Get your coat."

"Why?"

"We're going on a visit. You're going to take me to see this Uncle Erasmus of yours."

"I——" Startlingly she blushed. "Well, that is, he isn't exactly an uncle of mine, not by marriage, that is, but I've known him for a long time, longer even than you and——"

"You're just good friends," finished Mark for her. He shook

his head as he stared at her milk and cream loveliness. "I suppose you mean well, my sweet, but please, please do me a favour."

"Anything, darling," she said, and meant it. Mark pushed her well beyond perfume range.

"Just let me attend to the running of my business, yes?"

"Yes. I promise. Honest and cross my heart."

"Good. Now let's go and talk with Uncle."

It was a long drive but a wasted one. Uncle Erasmus was away on a field trip somewhere and wouldn't be back for quite a few days. It was just as well. When Mark and Lucy returned to the workshop they found that there was nothing left to talk about.

Someone had stolen the screen, the spores and all hopes of Mark's future.

Two weeks later came the day of judgment. Mrs. Hammond, gushing and effusive, had assembled her friends, various society columnists and certain selected representatives of her enemies for the great day. Colchis, looking smug and satisfied, wandered about sipping champagne and nibbling caviare. Mark, looking harassed, drank straight Scotch and munched a hamburger. There was an excuse for his conduct, for the past two weeks he had worked like a robot and slept, when at all, in the workshop. Now he was restoring his wasted tissues while the going was good.

"We haven't got a chance," he mourned to Lucy. "I did my best but——" He sought consolation in Scotch.

"I've been prying." Lucy, radiant in shimmering, translucent nylon, lowered her voice. "That nice man I met before, remember?"

"Colchis's stooge?"

"That's the one. Well, I know that he's got a soft spot for me, so I persuaded him to let me have just the tiniest peep at Colchis's room. Mark! They've got it all done out in Uncle Erasmus's moss!"

"I guessed it." Mark glowered into his empty glass. "I suspected Colchis all the time."

"But don't you see?" Lucy almost shook him in her impatience. "If we couldn't use it then neither can he." She saw Mark's expression. "Can he?"

"He'll have covered himself," gloomed Mark. "Probably he's already got some stooge ready to take the blame in case of trouble. Colchis is smart, make no mistake about that."

"That's more than I can say about some people," said Lucy stiffly. "If he can fix up a stooge then why couldn't you?"

" Ethics," said Mark. " Remember?"

Lucy told him what she thought about such ethics. Mark sighed and snared another drink from a passing tray. Sometimes he thought that Lucy, lovely as she was, had the morals of a cat. She seemed to think nothing of the idea of flinging some poor guy to the wolves just so that she could reap the credit.

Women, he decided, were the very devil. It was a conclusion which had been reached by many another more sober and intelligent man.

The room was getting crowded with the invited guests and the usual assortment of gate-crashers. Mark stared at them with a jaundiced eye, fitting them into their types and classifications. One man, an old, stooped, white-haired character defied classification. He looked like an absent-minded professor rather than a gigolo gone to seed. Mark gestured towards him.

" Who is the granddad?"

" Uncle!" Lucy squealed like a co-ed. "Uncle Erasmus!" She dragged Mark over to make the introductions.

" So this is the man you're going to marry?" Uncle Erasmus had deep-set, twinkling eyes. " You've picked well, girl," he said, and stuck out his hand towards Mark. " Congratulations."

" Thanks." Looking at the old guy Mark wondered why he had ever been jealous. Lucy's innuendos again, of course, she must have read an article somewhere on how to keep a man guessing. Erasmus seemed to read his mind.

" I should spank you, young lady," he said severely. " When I told you that I'd help you I didn't mean for you to help yourself." He glanced at Mark. " You didn't use the stuff, of course?"

Mark hesitated, then felt Lucy's elbow dig into his ribs.

" No, sir," he said helplessly. " I haven't used it."

" Just as well." Erasmus pulled at his collar. " Unpredictable things, those mosses. Not exactly dangerous, of course, but it doesn't pay to take chances. The lichens now, they're different. I must have a talk with you about those when this gab-feast is over." He seemed to remember something. " By the way, I hope you win."

" Thank you."

" Don't think you will, eh?" Erasmus might be old but he was shrewd.

" Colchis is a pretty good man," hedged Mark.

" He's a posturing fool," said Erasmus. " Had a room done by him once, could have done better myself. Don't fall into his

manner, young man. Remember, the customer may not always be right but he always winds up by footing the bills."

Mark's comment was lost in a sudden commotion.

Mrs. Hammond was eager for the fun to start. Always impatient, she wanted to get on with her big moment and said so in her usual loud, raucous voice.

"Well, people," she said. "Let's see what these two bright young men have managed to produce for me."

Imperiously she beckoned both Colchis and Mark to her side. Colchis ignored his rival, gushing over the woman as if she alone were present. The woman ignored the little man and looked up admiringly at Mark's inches. If personal attraction could have sold the product, then Mark was already half-way the winner. But he knew that it wouldn't be as simple as that.

The three of them led the procession to the upper quarters of the house.

Mark's room was the first to be inspected. Baffled by anything concrete to work on and having had to improvise at a rush after the theft of his masterpiece, he had yet managed to turn out a good job.

The motif was peace, the peace of the countryside. The floor was covered by a thick, lawn-like carpet, the ceiling a pale blue dotted with fleecy clouds. Three walls resembled woodlands glades with flashing, half-seen birds darting among slowly waving fronds. The scent of pine and flowers hung in the air and, by closing the eyes, it was possible actually to hear and feel the unspoiled woodlands.

The fourth wall was an unbroken mirror. Flesh-coloured lights softened features and gave a spurious effect of youth. Mrs. Hammond, staring at her reflection, backed as it was by the countryside scene, saw something the beauty parlours had never been able to achieve. She looked almost young again.

"Beautiful!" said Lucy in a loud voice.

"Superb!" echoed Uncle Erasmus. "A work of genius!"

Others, not so partisan, murmured polite nothings.

"Banal," said Colchis's technician. He had been lurking in the rear ready to throw his bombshell. "Competent, perhaps, but banal all the same."

"Shame," said Lucy. "Mrs. Hammond, in this setting you look an angel."

"A moulting angel," said the technician, he had helped himself a little too freely downstairs.

"This room is a part of your personality," said Lucy desperately. "It fits you like a glove."

"Or like a coffin." The technician was enjoying himself. "It only wants the dog-song to make it perfect." In a loud voice he began to hum *Trees*.

"Shall we inspect the other room now?" Mrs. Hammond was shaken by the interruptions. She had liked the room, liked too the effect of youth the cunningly placed lights and mirror had achieved. But she had noticed Colchis's expression. The man had looked as a fond father who discovers his son trying to emulate a master without a hope of success.

A pitying, patronising expression. Lucy could have kicked him for it. Mark was too miserable to care.

"If you will step this way, Madam." Colchis smoothly took command. Taking the woman's arm he led her from the room while his technician, who had entered last and so was able to leave first, hurried ahead to reveal the masterpiece.

And it was a masterpiece, even Mark had to admit that.

Colchis was clever in his way and, coupled with experience, he had the entire resources of his personal laboratory behind him.

Propagating the stolen moss had presented no problem and, with that done, he had really gone to town.

The entire surface of the room was covered with the scintillating, ever-blooming, kaleidoscopic plants.

Erasmus tugged at his collar and gasped for air.

"Hot in here," he said. Then, warningly to Lucy and Mark. "Don't touch the moss."

"Why not?" Lucy stared, lips parted, at the beauty around her. "It looks so soft, so velvety, so . . . cuddly. I feel as if I'd like just to throw myself on it and sink in deep."

"Naturally." Erasmus grinned to himself as if at a private joke. Then, just for the hell of it, he made his audible comments. "Ghastly!" he roared. "Like a rotting jungle."

"Repulsive," lied Lucy, entering into the spirit of things. "It makes me feel all crawly just to look at it."

They were fighting a losing battle, but Lucy was determined not to give up.

"My dear," she gushed at Mrs. Hammond. "Why, this decor makes you look positively *old*!"

Mark just looked miserable.

"I like it," said Cora defiantly. She did too. It was new, unusual and, from the comments of her friends, such a decor would make her envied by them all. "Colchis," she said loudly. "I guess that you've done a good job."

"Thank you, Madam." Colchis bowed low at the compliment. "Not to be used in excess, of course, but just a sample of my art."

"Your own discovery?" Erasmus was grinning even wider than before. Colchis sidestepped the loaded question.

"Merely something one of my technicians discovered."

"How nice for you." Erasmus stepped forward and, before anyone could guess what he was doing, he shoved Colchis hard against the screen.

"Really!" Mrs. Hammond was astounded at the lack of manners displayed before her. "How dare you, sir! Leave this house at once! I——"

What she was going to say next no one ever discovered. Colchis had regained his balance and left the vicinity of the wall. Lucy's shriek echoed like a siren.

"It's growing on him," she screamed. "It's . . . it's *eating* him!"

Which wasn't exactly true.

"The trouble with experts," said Uncle Erasmus thoughtfully, "is that they know nothing outside their own field." He reached out and helped himself to a glass of champagne. He sipped, nodded and settled himself back with a sigh. "Good stuff. Pity there's no one here to drink it."

It was much later. The party had dissolved in a stampede in which Mrs. Hammond had been badly bruised. Colchis had been taken home suffering from hysteria. Mark, Lucy and Uncle Erasmus now sat in the almost deserted house waiting for the government research men to come and reclaim their moss. It was a time for quietness and conversation.

"Like you now," continued Erasmus. "Or like Colchis. You see a moss and, because it's pretty, you don't go beyond considering it as anything more than a wall decoration."

"It was pretty," sighed Lucy. "It was wonderful!"

"It's a symbiote," said Erasmus. "It has to look that way in order to grab itself a host." He looked at Lucy. "You know what that is, of course."

"Of course." She was indignant at his assumption of her ignorance. "It eats things."

"No," said Erasmus gently. "The reverse. It provides food in return for sensory perception. Quite harmless, you understand, but very difficult to get rid of." He looked thoughtfully at his glass. "From Venus, all the natives have them. You've heard about the natives?"

Lucy had. Compared to them Mrs. Hammond was a beanpole.

"Excessive heat and humidity accelerates the moss's maturation," continued Erasmus. "The time was about right and the conditions in that room did the rest."

"And Colchis?" Mark was concerned about his rival.

"He'll either have to be quarantined in a cold climate, be deported to Venus or undergo troublesome and expensive surgery." Erasmus chuckled. "Personally I'd suggest he keep the thing, he could do with some extra weight."

"Poor man." Lucy sighed then brightened at a sudden thought. "Mark, you've won!"

"Won?" Mark had forgotten the competition in gloomy thoughts of how close he had come to earning Colchis's fate. Lucy was impatient.

"You don't think that Mrs. Hammond will give him the com-

mission now, do you? She won't want him anywhere near her after this. Why, his name will be mud throughout the social set. What woman would trust him after this?"

Mark could see her point.

"That means that we can get married right away." Lucy squeezed his hand. "Darling! Just think of it!"

"I'm thinking," said Mark. He cleared his throat. "But maybe we shouldn't be too premature about this? I mean, I haven't got the commission yet. Colchis was unlucky, but he still did the better job and——" He froze at the expression on her face.

"Do you want to marry me?"

"Of course, darling, but——"

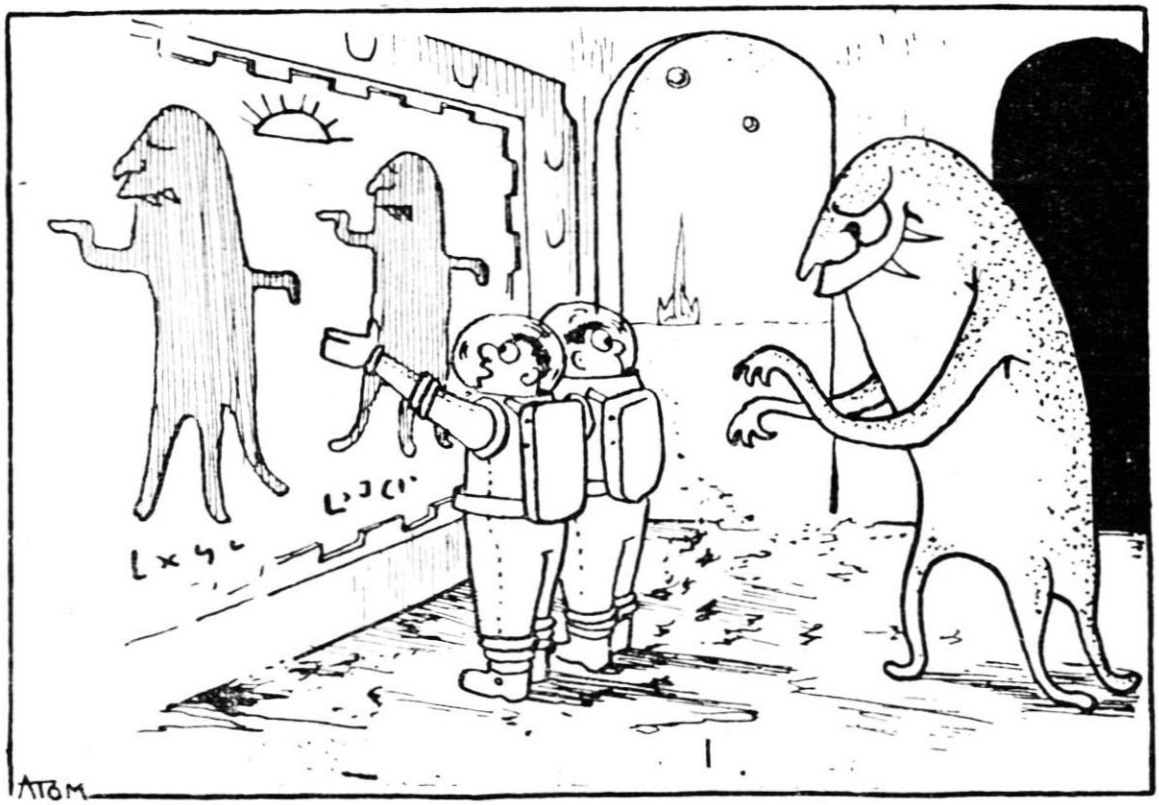
"Well?"

"You'll get married." Uncle Erasmus heaved himself to his feet. His face was red and he swayed a little. "You'll get the contract too, I'll see to that." He walked, not too steadily, towards the stairs.

"Fine woman, that Mrs. Hammond," he said. "At a time like this such a woman needs comforting."

Mark hadn't thought the old boy had it in him.

E. C. TUBB



"Think of it, Smithers, all gone these million years"

JOHN KIPPAX

It

He was but a pawn in the hands of a bitter enemy—and then fate too decided to intervene

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

Before he was put on detachment on Lidar II along with Rider, Huygens had imagined that there was no more room in him for envy and anger and fear and loathing, no more room for bile, spleen, or downright vicious abhorrence of his fellow men. He was wrong. Of course, Huygens had other names for it; he called it righteous indignation, smarting under injustice, and he blamed the you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours code which operated at many levels in the Space Corps and its ancillaries. Oh yes, Huygens had his names for it, just as many people in the bio and research and other sections had their names for Huygens.

The latest blot on Huygens's already smudged copy book had been the result of his association with a woman. Rosamund Ellis had been a delicious person to know; Huygens was pleased that here was another one who had fallen for his charm and his saturnine good looks, but Huygens, wise in the ways of the opposite sex (so he thought), had not counted upon the storm of gossip which had

broken out about him all over Selma base, the HQ of the thorough four-system exploratory probe that was under way. There was no doubt in Huygens's mind that when Commander Ellis had returned four earth months before he was due, he had received a highly coloured account of his wife's association with Huygens almost before his jets stopped sizzling. Maybe, even before that, Huygens had thought. No doubt some interfering hag of a base wife, with too little to do and too much time to do it in, had gotten the news to him on the sub etheric radio while he was still untold millions of miles from touchdown.

And Rosamund? Oh, she ratted. Wept on her husband's shoulder, confessed her frailty, and used all her now-obvious tricks to convince her husband that she had been a poor, weak, straying little woman who had been unable to resist the luring charms of the wolf of the spaceways, Dirck Huygens. Every time he thought of that pretty, pouting face, and the figure that matched it, Huygens said words about her which are not normally used about women, especially in the farther reaches of the galaxy where they are still quite scarce and much is forgiven them. And when he said those words, he also remembered what Commander Ellis had said.

" I believe my wife utterly, Huygens. She was frail, and I forgive her. But not you; I'll never forgive you. I know that you're not likely to come directly under my command, but I'll fix you, mister. I'll fix you good! It may take time, but I'll do it!"

" I can take care of myself," retorted Huygens.

" You wait. I'm in charge of the admin of the four systems. I know a lot of people. Somewhere, there's a planet and a situation that's right for you. You'll see. Now get out before I'm tempted to shoot you!"

Huygens was a great shrugger-off of past embarrassments, and he tried to class the Ellis affair with the unpleasantness over Maria Sciacci on Toyin IV, with the upset about May Kawashima on Goel III, with the fuss over the officer-grade mess funds on Mido IX, and similar highlights of his illustrious career. But, try as he might, he could not help feeling that there was a certain feeling, an intensity about this last episode which other incidents had not possessed. He had charm, of course; that was what women liked. He thought about Commander Ellis. The systems were fairly well explored now, transport and pick up methods were " set ". What could Ellis do to him?

One day Magnus, his chief, sent for him. This was soon after he returned from doing a soil analysis on a small planet where they were as yet undecided about the possibility of economic development. Magnus said: "I've got to rush you off to Lidar II." He pitched some papers on the desk. "There's the gen."

Huygens studied it carelessly. Three-quarter earth size, twenty-one hour day, wide temperate belts, much grass and parkland, well watered, no extremes of temperature. . . . "Looks good," he said. "What's the job?"

"You're on soil and grass. There's a small lab there already. That's the reason I sent for you. There were two men there with all kit, and the lab, and fifty odd sheep, checking the suitability of the temperate areas for meat production. Then one of them was taken sick, and had to be emergency-lifted. The one man left couldn't do all of it, and you were the nearest available. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Huygens. He would be glad to get off Selma base for a while. "Who's the other guy on Lidar II?"

Magnus frowned slightly, and shuffled the papers on his desk. "Now, that's funny. I thought I had his name here. Seem to have mislaid it."

"Never mind; anything else you ought to tell me?"

Magnus's face was a studied blank. "No, I don't think so. I should get your kit packed—or maybe you'd better get along to control and pick up your trip details."

"Right," said Huygens, "suits me. See you."

When he had gone, Magnus picked up the phone. "Commander Ellis, please." He waited. "That you, Ted? He's on his way."

The ferry left the parent ship and began to orbit down into the atmosphere of Lidar II. Huygens watched the wing protrusion indicator idly, then gazed at the growing green ball below. "Know the name of the guy who's down there?" he asked.

The pilot, a young African, thought for a moment. "Yeah. Somebody did tell me. Er—Rider, I think it is."

Huygens started. Then he seemed to go numb, all over. For a minute he sat quite still, hardly able to think. Then, when the numbness vanished, he began to boil, to seethe and to rage. He wondered who had been the patient clod that had originally been detailed to work with Rider, and if it had been Rider's manner and

attitude which had made the poor guy ill. If there was one man in the whole of the explored universe with whom Huygens could not get on, that man was Archibald Rider. To Huygens, the nearness of Rider was like a rigidly held pencil forever screeching over a slate. Though Huygens was incapable of admitting it, it was pretty well a case of Greek meeting Greek. Rider, he thought, that impossible wart, *Rider*!

The ferry landed at last. The pilot helped him dump his kit on the acres wide stretch of rolling parkland which had its five hundred foot landing cross firmly pegged across it. In the distance Huygens could see the huts of the two-man research team, of which he was now fifty per cent. There were the stockades for the sheep; their cries came faintly to him. A moving speck told of the landcar which was coming to pick him up.

The young African lit a cigarette as he stood by the pile of gear. "Don't think I'll be staying; I'll just see you clear of my line of fire, then I'll get up again."

"O.K., thanks," growled Huygens. He was watching the car.

"Looks a nice world," said the pilot.

"Does it?" grunted Huygens. Here comes Rider, he thought. He'll greet me like an old friend, curse him. So friendly! What damnable luck, getting sent off to work with this drip! It never occurred to Huygens that it could be more than luck. He had been threatened before, and lived.

Now the landcar was closer, and the pink smudge of Rider's face could be seen. He waved. Rider, that poisonous little squirt, with whom Huygens had been in training. Rider with his pansy ways and his lisp and his damn clever brain. Poison, poison! He preferred the Ellis types to specimens like Rider . . .

Now the car was almost up to them. Huygens could see plainly the rabbity little face under the peaked olive drab cap, the small eyes, the sallow complexion. And now the buck toothed grin spread out, to complete the reprehensible effect. The car drew up. Rider stared. "Huygens! Well I'll be——! Really, old man, this is a bit of luck! Old comrades together again, what?" He grinned at the pilot, hopped down from his seat, and proceeded to pump Huygens's hand up and down. Huygens let him do it, nodded steely and grim-faced to the birdlike chatter of the other.

Rider said to the pilot: "We were in training together, you know! Now that poor old Peel has had to go, he'll be the ideal man, absolutely the ideal man." He grabbed the bags, dumped them into

the back of the car, and grinned again with childish impartiality. Again he addressed the pilot: "Will you come up to the *nest* for coffee, eh?"

The emphasis he put on the word *nest* was quite absurd; it was typical of the silly things which the man said, and kept on saying. Huygens, sure that Rider was round the bend in more ways than one, began to wonder how long it would be before he, too, became touched.

"No," said the pilot, "I guess not, thanks. I'll have to get back. I'll see you clear before I leave."

"O.K., old man," said Rider. He seemed quite unaware of the fact that Huygens had not yet said a word to him. "But you *really* should have had time to come up and see how snug we are. So delightfully *twee*, don't you know?"

Huygens felt the heat beginning to rise, in spite of his efforts at self control. To be thrown into the exclusive company of this character for about six months was unthinkable! He said goodbye to the pilot, and then got into the car, sitting stiffly in the front passenger seat. Rider waved as they drove off. They passed by the pens and stockades where the fat sheep grazed contentedly, and they came to the prefabricated huts, where Rider drew up and stared back over the grass, remaining seated.

"Well?" snapped Huygens.

"Just a minute, old man," said Rider pleasantly; "always like to see these chaps take off you know. The *thrill* is still there for me. Think it's marvellous, still."

For answer Huygens got out; at the preliminary roar of the departing ship, he walked over to the sleeping-hut. There he found a comfortable little living-room, and beyond that a single-bunk room containing two bunks, one on each side of the door. He swore to himself. So he would not be able to get away from the fellow even at night! Was there no privacy, no escape from this little drip? At post-grad training school the poisonous Rider had nearly sent some of his classmates crazy with his chatter, and his childish outlook . . .

Suddenly, in the midst of his mouthing and cursing, Huygens stopped. This had been no accident; his posting here was part of Ellis's revenge! That was for sure!

The thunder of the ship as it swept up and away seemed to mock him. He lit a cigarette as though setting fire to it out of spite, and then stumped out to fetch his gear.

After three weeks, Huygens was absolutely certain that it was

an Ellis plot, and a cunning one at that. For, certainly, if it had not been for the presence of Rider, life on Lidar II would have been very pleasant indeed. The sun was warm, but not excessively so, the nights were cool, but not really chilly, and the work was mostly of the slow, easygoing order. Huygens had been through soil samples, had classified grasses for nutrient value, cellulose, for every conceivable constituent, and now regretted that he had time on his hands. Despite the fact that Rider was dealing with living things, watching their feeding, gestation, and everything about them in relation to the environment, he seemed to have far too much time to spend talking to Huygens.

And nothing that Huygens had been able to do so far had convinced Rider that Huygens did not want to talk. Nothing made the slightest difference; grunts and shrugs seemed to serve for answers, and Rider yattered on. When Huygens, in the interests of his sanity, had decided to bunk down in a pup tent outside, rather than share the bunk room, there had been yards of chatter about it.

"Well, if you think you should, old man——"

"I tell you," gritted Huygens, "that I snore. In two keys. Also, talk and toss and turn in my sleep."

Rider protested. "But I assure you, old man, that you don't, *really*. You may have done so once, but not now. Positively not."

Huygens controlled himself by a great effort. "It's stuffy in there," he opined, "and I must look after my health." He was determined not to afford Ellis the tiniest little bit of satisfaction over this affair. And he would not lose his temper. No, no, no!

"But it can't be stuffy, old man. You've only to read the air meter. It's fresher than the real thing. Bound to be, with that conditioner. It stands to reason——"

Huygens snorted deeply. His hands twitched, seeming to want to go of their own volition to Rider's neck. He said, with great care, "I am not interested in the meter; I just like being outside!"

"Well, old man, that may be so, but don't you think that it might be dangerous? We know a lot about this planet, but we can't say for sure that there's no danger on it. You never know, something might just beetle along and try to bite a piece out of you. Take those little lizards; some of the varieties——"

Rider nattered on. If he doesn't shut up, thought Huygens, my patience will give out, and then——! The man sounded exactly like the baaing of his English Southdown sheep.

Huygens said, elaborately, "do you mind? I would like to

sleep in a tent. I am a natural tent sleeper. Tents love me; a tent that has once sheltered me is never quite the same again. *SEE*?" He bared his teeth in a fierce smile, and Rider stepped back a bit.

"Well, all right old man, if you really want. You remind me of a fellow who was on a course with me at Selma base. Extraordinary case. He actually——"

Huygens, still holding back his terrible desire to scream and attack the yammering chump, walked deliberately away and into the lab. There he sat for a few moments, grinding his teeth and staring at his labelled bottles. He rubbed his hands over his face, saying "I will not, I will not, I *will* not let myself get upset over that creature!"

After a few minutes he felt a little better, and he went to the store hut. It was about two hours to sundown. He might as well find a tent and get settled in. If he became lonely, he could always think of fresh ways of controlling his temper.

Huygens did not know what had awakened him. It was as though someone had popped a paper bag quite close to his ear. He looked at his watch; it showed just past midnight. He turned on his elbow and listened attentively. There was only the sigh of a gentle wind in the distant trees, and an occasional mutter from the sheep. Then he stiffened; something was moving around outside his tent. He slipped his hand under his pillow for his gun, slid back the safety catch, and crouched ready. Now, whatever it was outside was against the flap. Cautiously, he inched forward, and with great care pushed the flap aside. The bright light of the unfamiliar stars showed a dark something, a humanoid shape which carried a long tube affair——

"I say old man," said the figure, "did you hear anything?"

Huygens nearly died; then he wanted to roar with relief and anger. Finally he whispered through clenched teeth, "what did you think?"

Rider squatted down, nursing the electronic rifle across his knees. "Sort of a pop, don't you think? Sounded almost overhead."

"Meteor," suggested Huygens.

"That pops?"

"Takes all sorts to make a new world."

"What shall we do?"

"Stay awake until dawn," advised Huygens. "You never know."

It did not occur to him that at the time of that little crisis, he had forgotten that he hated Rider.

Dawn flushed rose and gold, and the sheep made their monotonous music as Huygens prepared coffee and bacon. The huts were situated upon a gentle slope which led down over the rich grassland to a clump of trees, beyond which the ground fell away more steeply into a group of places that looked like small quarries, with their steep faces up the slope and much gentler ones down it. A stream, on which a purifier set was rigged, ran nearby, flowed through the troughs for the sheep, and then back again into the normal channel. Huygens was humming to himself, thinking that with every day that passed he was defeating Ellis in his attempted revenge, when the sound of feet over the grass, running, brought him to the door. Rider panted up. He carried in his hand a piece of greyish white substance of irregular shape, curved, and about two feet across. It was like a huge piece of eggshell.

"H—Huygens! What do you make of this?"

The other took it carefully. It had a texture rather like pressed

fibre board, but it was much harder on the outer curve than on the inner. He scratched at it, and small pieces came away from the inside. Rider was watching him pop eyed. Was he afraid? He glanced back at the substance in his hand; was it an optical illusion? He could have sworn that the piece was bigger than that! He gazed at it very intently, for a full half minute.

" Do you think so too?" whispered his companion.

" Eh?"

" That it shrinks?"

With a sudden convulsive movement, Huygens pitched the piece about three feet away from his foot. " Yes," he said, in a low voice; " I thought so. What the hell is it?"

Rider pointed. " I found it down there, where the ground gets steeper. There were all sorts of pieces lying about, some bigger than that, just like the bits from a huge egg." He whispered. " I watched several pieces. I saw them shrink. If it—came in the night, there must have been a lot of the stuff about at first."

Huygens began to wonder if this was part of an elaborate plot. He thought of Ellis, then he shivered slightly as he watched a stone on the ground come into full view from under the edge of the substance. He knew that he and Rider were not alone on this smiling world. Something else, something evil, had entered it now. This was a thing to be—fought?—together. Together—Huygens and Rider: *that* sounded odd!

Huygens said, " I'll come with you, and have another look down there. Let me have that other rifle first. Is it charged?"

" Yes. You really think it might——"

" I don't know what to think," replied Huygens, a shade sharply. His face, burned brown under the Lidar sun, looked more saturnine than ever. He took the rifle when Rider returned with it. He said. " I just don't want to be caught with my pants down. Sheep'll be all right?"

" Yes."

" Come on then."

The cries of the sheep grew fainter as they made their way down the slope and over the lush grass to the clump of trees. When they had passed these, they slackened pace, as though by mutual consent. Though the safety catch of Huygens's rifle was still on, he carried it at the ready.

They came to the place where a few fragments of the fibrous substance were scattered. " Nearly all gone now," muttered Rider.

Huygens's eyes roamed constantly as he talked. " What roughly

was the curve of that shell? I mean, have you any idea of the original size of the thing?"

Rider pushed back his cap and scratched his head. Then he found a bare patch of ground, took a stick and drew a curve. Then he stood back and said, " about that, I think."

Huygens looked at it with narrowed eyes. " If that's near, and the thing was spherical, it must have been about thirty feet across." He stared hard at Rider, and his dark face became darker. " Thirty feet. That might take some handling."

Rider said, " we were asleep. We ought to have examined that cell structure, while we still had some of the stuff. Now it's all gone."

It was true; there was no scrap of the material to be seen. Only the bright green grass, and the good warm sunlight upon it.

Wait a minute; there *was* something else.

Huygens looked at the grass about twenty yards away from him, and what he thought he saw struck him rigid. He did not dare move, but a finger slid back the safety catch of his rifle. Rider saw his attitude, followed his gaze, saw what Huygens saw, and froze similarly. The grass was being flattened. There was no visible agency doing this, but it did seem that there was a certain fuzziness round the area; the flattened part was roughly a thirty foot circle. As they watched, some of the grass became shorter and shorter, with the whiter stalks at the base showing up with increasing clarity, until, in a matter of seconds, there was no grass at all, and the patch of bare grass resembled that upon which Rider had scratched his curve. There came a small rattling noise; it was Rider's teeth chattering. He made a little moan and said hoarsely, " it's coming towards us!"

The tide of no-grass was advancing slowly, at the rate of about an inch a second, and just before it was absorbed, the grass could be seen to flatten. And still *It* remained quite invisible. They retreated slowly, watching. The distant cries of the sheep came as from a purer, saner world. Huygens could hear Rider's breath, sobbing at each inhalation

Still they backed. " Watch it!" hissed Huygens, " Don't take your eyes off it." He took a calculating glance round, then hopped back. " Get about ninety degress out that way, ready."

" Eh?"

" To fire!"

" C—can it see us?"

" Go *on*, get out that way! Far enough! Now, stand and aim!"

Rider did as he was told. They waited, eyes on the sights,

gripping stocks with a sweaty tightness, watching the advancing line of the grass, as it was first rolled flat, and then—eaten.

"Hold it," whispered Huygens.

The thing was fifteen yards away; he could hear Rider breathing.

Twelve yards. Ten, then nine: eight. Now they could hear the rustling of the bent grass, together with a sound like thousands of little jaws cropping the turf.

Seven yards.

"Fire!" said Huygens. The rifles cracked simultaneously, the thin blue needles whipping hot and searing from the flared muzzles. At the point where they struck the invisible creature there was a great boiling and hissing; it lasted for five seconds, then rapidly subsided. For two seconds after that, the flattened area remained as it had been before they fired; then it extended suddenly, by a diametrical leap of twenty feet. Something caught at and ripped the toe of Huygens's boot. He leaped back with a yell, and ran in a wide circle, with Rider by his side. When they had put a hundred yards between themselves and the danger, they stopped, panting and shaking. Huygens swore and examined the toe of his boot. It had been taken right off, and the sock showed. He bent down; when Rider bent too, Huygens snapped at him, "keep watching! One of us must always have his eyes on the thing."

Looking in front of him to where a bare patch was growing in the middle distance, Rider asked, "are you all right, old man?"

"Yes," said Huygens, thankfully. "Here, squat down but keep watching." Rider did so. Huygens thought, my God, with this thing to contend with, as well as the blether that Rider usually talks, I *shall* go crazy!

Rider said, in a small voice, "it leaped at us."

"Yeah. A couple of full charges from Meissner rifles, and that's all that happens."

"And we can't see it."

"We can see where it *is*."

Rider voiced a terrible thought. "Only as long as it has some grass to flatten."

"Yeah." Huygens saw what he meant. "Look, get back to the radio and on to Selma Base. Tell them what has happened. Tell them we'll try the atom bazooka on the thing, but we might need help, fast!"

Rider turned to go, and then turned back. "H—Huygens, suppose there are more of these things?"

That had occurred to the other, though he tried not to think about it. He snarled: "Oh, get going. And mind where you tread!"

Rider went, half running, looking almost comically careful. Huygens stared at where *It* was feeding. Ellis, he thought, your plan is working out better than you expected; you knew that I'd be irritated and upset by Rider, but . . . then he stopped thinking like that as another idea hit him. There was more to it than he had realised. Ellis hated Huygens so much that the commander's object in putting him with this poisonous little drip might be that he should get so infuriated by his companion that he would one day up and kill him! Then, when the relief ship was due, Huygens would either have to come forward and tell his tale, which would be easily seen through, or else he would have to take to the woods, go native, the only one on the whole world of Lidar II. Yes, that was it!

Huygens squatted and nursed his rifle and swore and cursed and raved inwardly. Damn Rosamund Ellis and her baby blue eyes! He had got away with many minor kinds of offences on a dozen different planets, had known and dropped many good looking women, but Rosamund was the first one for whom he had really fallen. She had fallen for him too. His own especial brand of charm. . . .

He stood up to see where *It* was. He could see a rough circle, about sixty feet across, of bare earth and close cropped grass. "Grass feeder," he muttered, "maybe boot and man feeder too. Who knows?" . . . Why didn't Rider hurry up?

At length the other man showed up, coming at a slow trot. He was carrying a bulky tube and a broad pack, as well as his own rifle. He was panting and sweating. He gasped out: "The radio's dead!" He came and knelt down.

Huygens felt himself sag. "That's all we needed; don't you know anything about radios?"

"No. Can just tune, and send and receive. That's all." His eyes searched the grass. "Where—oh! Is it getting bigger?"

"Just feeding, I think." He took the pack of shells from Rider's shoulder. "We might as well try the bazooka now. Did you see any pups of the thing?"

Rider shuddered and shook his head.

"O.K. then." Huygens checked the bazooka, slipped in a propellent cartridge. "Will you do number two?"

"Yes." Rider squatted. "About a hundred yards?"

" Yeah. I'll go a degree above where the line of bare ground is."

" Right." Rider sounded fairly steady. There was a click as the shell dropped in. He slapped Huygens on the shoulder. A second later the bazooka coughed, and a shell of sufficient power to lay waste half a street whipped towards *It*. There was a boiling and a bubbling, but no explosion as they flung themselves down and hugged the ground. Huygens looked up.

" A dud."

Rider squealed. " Look, it's grown again! It's half way towards us!"

Rider was up and away, carrying his rifle and the shells. Huygens grabbed the bazooka and his own rifle and lumbered after the smaller man. They ran until they reached the clump of trees. From here they could see that the flattened area of grass, reflecting pale in the sunlight, was now over a hundred feet across.

" We mustn't shoot at it again," said Huygens. " It eats energy."

" But how——"

" I don't know how! You saw it, didn't you? It grew when we fired the rifles, and now look at it, after the bazooka's hit it!"

" Eats energy, eats grass," muttered Rider. He seemed to have shrunk now, to be wilting under the pressure of circumstance. " Whoever heard of such a thing?"

" You don't have to hear of it," said Huygens grimly, " there it is."

Rider stared out to where the view was fuzzy, and the grass slowly disappearing. " Do you think it might eat us when it can't get anything else?"

It annoyed Huygens to find that Rider had been thinking on lines similar to himself. He avoided the question. " We must keep watch on this thing. Will you go back to camp and get some food packs? Then maybe we can think about it as we eat."

Rider nodded and went off, adding: " I'll check on the sheep feed too."

" You do that." Huygens watched him go for a moment, then, lighting a cigarette, he continued to look at *It* while he considered. It was a hell of a situation, now that the radio had failed, and with *It* out there in the sunlight, moving slowly, feeding and presumably growing. Ellis could not have planned better than this. And once Rider had got used to the thing, he would be back again on his old maddening standards of burble and chatter; between the

non-human and the human, Huygens feared that the whole affair might become too much for him. But, while thinking like this, he found in himself no particle of regret for anything in his past life.

What would happen if *It* got bigger and bigger, maybe ate all the grass of the area, divided mitotically, ate more grass . . . ? What if the ferry didn't call, or Selma base failed to become anxious? The possibilities were limitless and far from cheerful.

He was grateful for the shade of the trees as the sun's fervour increased; to his right was the steeper slope with the small, quarry-like places, and in front, the grass and the shape of *It*.

Rider came back after half an hour. He handed Huygens a food pack and a can of beer and sat down.

"Thanks," said Huygens, and set about the beer.

"Has it moved much?"

"No." Huygens had his can tilted high.

"Well," said Rider in a slow voice, shaded with fear, "it's moving now."

Huygens set down his can and they both got up. "Forward, and to our right front," breathed Huygens, watching the horrid pressing down of thousands of whitely reflecting grass-blades; "what's it after?"

Rider sighed. "If only we could really see the dashed thing."

Huygens said: "I don't think we're in any immediate danger." What's up, he thought, is the poisonous little drip going to run? He added sharply: "Stay here."

It was now moving to one of the quarry-like places. They saw traces of it as it moved—flowed?—towards the semicircular scar. Then, by the haziness and the flattening of little bushes and grass clumps, they saw that it was moving in.

Huygens started forward. "Let's go and see." Rider hesitated, then followed him. "Up the slope here," said Huygens, "and round the side, then we can get above it. I want to know for certain if there is anything at all to see." He knew that Rider was trembling. They skirted the hollow, and came to the highest part of the edge, under the trees. They lay upon the grass.

"It's just about below us, now," whispered Huygens. "I wonder why it came in here. Maybe to get out of the sun. Though why should it, if it's an energy eater?"

"Maybe it has had enough energy for one day."

"Possible." Huygens hitched up on his elbow. A plan was forming in his mind. It was a plan hampered by the simple fact that he could only visualise the creature as a living thing in some-

thing approaching earth-like terms. But something had to be tried. He wriggled forward and looked down with caution. There was hardly anything to see; the rocks below were blurred in outline, and shrubs were crushed by the great, invisible weight upon them. He peered over a little more, and looked at the rocks of the precipitous slope below him, then at the less steep ones to left and right, and to the gentle slope of the entrance. Then he scuffed back to Rider. "Listen," he began.

Rider looked up from something he held in his hand.

"What's that?" asked Huygens, irritably.

"Photograph," said the other, dreamily.

"Girl friend?"

"Yes. I was wondering when I'd see her again." He gazed fondly at the picture. "I was wondering when I'd see Rosamund again."

Huygens felt his guts grow small and tight. "Who?"

Rider had the grace to blush. "You see, old man, it has to be a secret, really. Her old man doesn't—that is, her husband——"

"*Rosamund Ellis?*

"Why, yes. You see, her husband doesn't really understand her, poor thing. It's all terribly difficult——"

With his face a mask and his emotions boiling and bubbling like a volcanic mud pool, Huygens listened. Rosamund Ellis had dallied with this—this *drip*! He ground his teeth as he listened to the tale. So, she told this to all the boys! There was a not very nice label for that sort of woman. He and Rider, they shared her! And the rest!

"——must remain a secret from her husband until——" Rider was nattering on. Then, Huygens saw quite clearly that it *wasn't* a secret from her husband. He saw quite clearly, that Rider was a victim of the same sort of circumstances—if such a plot could be called circumstances—as himself. Rider, the dope. Huygens suddenly felt quite sorry for him, and was then surprised at his own feeling. He made up his mind that he would fight this thing with the weak, unhandy Rider, and they would, *would* both leave Lidar II alive. He thought about Ellis, and one or two interesting possibilities came savagely to his mind; one of them included a trap incorporating a needle gun . . .

"Listen." He interrupted Rider in mid-sentence. "It's my idea that this thing might be killed outright. Suppose we were to drop something really heavy on it, like a chunk of rock?"

" How do we get the rock?" asked Rider.

With a sudden rush of dislike, Huygens studied the other's face. However Rosamund could have ecouraged this poisonous little . . . no, he must restrain himself. He said carefully: " There's rock all round us. Look, see the way the strata goes. My idea is that we use the bazooka to close up the entrance of the quarry. We can get down the line of the slope, stick some shells near the entrance and fire them off with another shell, and that will fill the entrance and more. Then, with the thing trapped, we can drop rocks on it. Look, there's one ten-tonner on the edge that you could just about push down with one hand. We shan't be feeding it with energy, either, because we shan't be firing straight at it."

" Do you think we should ——" For a second a picture of Rosamund in Rider's arms flared redly in Huygens's mind; he killed it. He snapped: " We've got to do *something*! Now, you stay up here and watch it. I'm going down to set those shells and fire the bazooka. Give a yell if it moves. Watch for my signal, then duck."

He left Rider before the man had time to start his chatter again. He went down, skirting the opening widely. He put four shells down below the

entrance to where *It* lay, then retired a hundred and fifty yards, and took aim. He raised his hand, and dropped it. "Ellis," he hissed, "I wish this was for you!"

Then he fired. He flung himself down as the ground shook under his feet. The blue flash seemed bright as the sun, and rocks roared and rumbled. Bits spattered about him; distantly, the sheep made anxious noises. After half a minute, he rose and came forward. "All right up there?"

"Yes." A little shakily.

He saw Rider get up. Huygens hurried. Rider came and stood by the rock which balanced on the edge. Rider called, "the entrance is blocked, and the thing's still here. It isn't any bigger."

Intent on what he was saying, Rider placed a hand on the rock and leant forward. "I can't really make out——" He began.

"Hey, look out!" hollered Huygens.

It was too late; Rider had leaned too far forward. Huygens heard him squeal, a high, terrible sound, and then he slipped as the rock moved over its balance point, and both man and rock tumbled into the pit. There was another gurgling cry, cut short very sharply, and then, silence.

It was some minutes before Huygens felt strong enough to move; the occurrence had paralysed him, rooted him to the spot. He felt weak and shaking. Then he made his way up to the edge, from where the stone had fallen, and looked down.

There was nothing, only the flattened bushes and the haziness showing that *It* was still there. Of Rider, there was no sign.

Huygens stared for a long time. So, the thing ate flesh, did it? That meant that it would take the sheep, perhaps Huygens himself. Perhaps this foul, unkillable obscenity would range over all the planet, devouring everything in its path?

Huygens found that he was no longer brave.

After he had been to see the sheep, and having found the radio still useless, Huygens came back. Rider's catastrophic end put all other thoughts out of his mind. Now he was returning to the scene of the disaster, feeling very small and weak. The knowledge that the bazooka and the rifle, his only means of protection, were meat and drink to *It*, was little consolation. As he walked down to the trees he hoped that at least, now the thing was walled up, that it would not be able to get out. He doubted it, though. Such a possibility seemed too simple for this complicated situation.

Now he approached the edge carefully, and peered down.

And promptly he turned away and was very sick. After three uncomfortable minutes he looked again, and once more he retched. Then, controlling himself with an effort, he took in the scene. The thing was dying; it was beginning to show itself as lumps of grey-white, putrid smelling jelly which crept and quivered disgustingly. And it was clear what had upset it; upon the palpitant muck lay what appeared to be the partly digested body of Rider.

Huygens stared, his mind ignoring the horror and grasping slowly at the facts. So, it couldn't eat men. It had tried with his companion, and it had sicked him up and killed itself.

Rider—the poisonous little drip!

Suddenly, Huygens began to laugh. He always knew that Rider was a poisonous type, and here was proof! He gurgled, he laughed louder, he rolled and howled and hooted, kicking his heels and yelling at the top of his voice. Oh, it was rich, it was the cream of jokes!

And then he stopped.

Here, below him, was Rider, dead. The thing itself was disappearing; by tomorrow, there might be no trace of it. Who, who would believe his story? Not a specimen, not a shred of evidence would he have!

Ellis, on Selma base, would get the report about it, when they picked Huygens off Lidar II, and Ellis would know what to do with it.

Huygens realised that he had a lot of time to think up a really good story; one that was better and more convincing than the truth, but still doubted that he could do it.

His good sense told him that the truth would never do.

JOHN KIPPAX

BRIAN W. ALDISS

Sight of a Silhouette

She was as inconsiderable to him as a butterfly, as transient as the snowflake on the river

Sister Venice Rollands looked fascinatedly over the top of the journal she was reading. A man approached her down the long hospital corridor. As he drew nearer, her journal sank lower until it lay unregarded before her on the desk. When he got to her open door, he paused politely on the threshold, looking in, his face agreeable but unsmiling.

" Sister Rollands ? " he asked. " May I enter ? "

" Oh," she said, gathering her wits. " Yes, I'm sorry. Please come in. I am Sister Rollands."

She stood as he came towards her. The tone and intonation of the few syllables they had exchanged sufficed for them to identify each other as members of the Upper Layer. He stood before her, perhaps quietly appraising her dark good looks and the expression of surprise still apparent on her face. Abstractedly, she smoothed down her stiff skirt.

" I have come to see Alvira Hurdlestone, who is under your charge," he said.

He was slender, tall, tanned, with striking grey eyes. He carried himself with neither self-assurance nor diffidence, but—purpose. His air was neither grim nor gay, but—serene. Sister Rollands felt something open up inside her like a rose.

" You are Norman Dall, the explorer," she said.

If he was surprised, he gave no sign of it, merely nodding his head affirmatively. Normally poised, Sister Rollands suddenly felt unsure of herself; she had a terrifying idea that nothing she could say would adequately express what she meant to say. Above all, she was afraid he would imagine she was suffering from a foolish attack of hero-worship.

" It's not just because you're an explorer, and your name is known throughout the Twenty Systems," she blurted out hurriedly, and then stopped.

" What's not, sister ? " Dall asked gently.

She dropped her eyes. She had been on the dizzy verge of saying, " . . . that I loved you the second I saw you coming down the corridor." She smoothed her stiff skirt again, realised what she was doing, and put her hands behind her back.

" I mean I met you once before, long ago," she said. She knew she was blushing; she was a poised woman, cool, reserved, reckoned rather hard by the nurses under her; she never behaved like this. " It was on Atara, ten years ago," she added.

Norman Dall appeared to ignore all the nuances of the encounter, concentrating mercifully on her words alone. There was pleasure in his voice as he said, " I am very fond of Atara. It's a most interesting planet. But I regret that I don't remember you; I hope that's not too unforgivable."

" Oh, no, just the opposite," she said hazily. She was back for a second at that reception her mother had taken her to. Miss Venice Rollands was then sixteen, and still inclined to use too much powder. She had never got near to, or spoken to, Norman Dall, so timid was she, so surrounded by eager guests was he. But she still remembered how she had felt at the sight of his profile : the pain was as pleasurable and true now as it had been then.

" We met at a party," she said. Laughing shakily, she added, " I couldn't tell you who gave it. All I remember is that you were there, and I wore a green dress."

" It's quite a coincidence that we should meet again," he replied, " we must talk about Atara after I have seen Alvira Hurdlestone."

" I'm sorry . . . ," she said, dismayed at her own behaviour. He was perfectly right to snub her—if it was a snub. " Will you please follow me, Mr. Dall. Of course I will take you to Miss Hurdlestone at once."

Turning, she led him down a side passage which sound-absorbers rendered absolutely noiseless. At Room 6 she paused, opening the door to let Dall enter first. The artificial gravity was off in the room, but he drifted in with practised grace. The telewatch blinked, acknowledged their presence.

Floating in the middle of the ward, linen stays holding her in position, was Alvira Hurdlestone. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks grey; she was voluminously bandaged. The occasional cluck of a plasma feed was the only sound in the room.

" I expect you saw Dr. Carstain before he sent you up to me," Sister Rollands said quietly. " He will have given you a full report on the case . . . "

" The case." Again she felt she had said the wrong thing, making herself sound hard and indifferent. Glancing shyly at Dall, she found no pain in his face as he gazed at his unconscious Partner, but she was impelled to go on talking.

" It was so unfortunate that Miss Hurdlestone was alone on the Iri site when the accident occurred," she said. " Space suit punctures are always serious matters, despite all modern safeguards. The tissue of Miss Hurdlestone's left lung was destroyed; I expect Dr. Carstain told you that ? "

" Yes," Dall said, not lifting his eyes from his Partner's face. Alvira, wan and unconscious, no longer held any beauty; but beauty is only a gimmick, the archaeologist thought; I shall love her . . . always. For him it was a very big word.

" He was really splendid—Dr. Carstain, I mean," the sister continued. " He had a living lung brought up here from Luna-Medic within an hour, and operated on Miss Hurdlestone at once. I was in the theatre with him. It was a wonderful transference job; the new lung is already functioning smoothly and integratedly. Your Par—Miss Hurdlestone will feel no different when she wakes tomorrow."

Dall did not even blink his eyes to the pain brought by the unconscious irony of Sister Rollands' last words. He knew what the lung graft meant : Alvira would live out a normal human life span, but he had lost his Partner. Remotely, he was grateful to this uniformed woman who was trying to tell him the truth as gently as possible. Making an effort, he turned and thanked her.

Sister Rollands took the words like a rebuff, merely because she read his distance from her in his face.

" What else did you expect, you idiot, speaking to him like

that?" she asked herself, as she hurried away from Room 6, back to her office. She had to hide a temporary urge to lose control of herself.

For a long while after Sister Rollands had gone, Norman Dall continued to look at Alvira, watching her quiet breathing. Then he turned away to the round window, rotated the polarised glass, and looked out. A vast, curving segment of Luna was visible below. Over this glittering world of six billion people, another night was falling, so that darkness was pulled up like a blanket with a red hem over a restless child. But in the darkness, a thousand shapes and sizes of domes sparkled with the quenchless lights of man.

From the hospital satellite, four hundred and fifty miles up, it all looked remote, toylike. But Dall's eye, searching expertly, picked out a ragged patch of terrain where no domes were. That was Iri. There Alvira's accident had occurred. There his life had been wrenched once more away from its needed roots.

Without sigh or shrug, Dall turned back to the figure in the linen cocoon. He stood there for an hour—but Dall did not compute time like that—before producing stylus and plate from his pocket. Scribbling her a brief note of farewell, he folded it over, moodily watching the sides fuse themselves together. Even now, he refused to let himself think how long he and Alvira had been Partners; he concentrated on the knowledge that this was how she would want him to leave : before their eyes could meet again.

Tucking the note into her harness, he drifted from the room. When he returned to Sister Rollands' office, she started nervously.

"Hello!" she said. She guessed what he had been doing.

By the look on his face, she was tempted to fling her arms round his neck, kiss him, comfort him. Instead, she asked timidly, "I suppose you will be going now, Mr. Dall?"

He seemed to come back only gradually to this world. His wandering eye fixed on the multiple Luna-Earth-Solar-Celestial timekeeper on her wall.

"A taxi will be coming up from Luna for me in an hour," he said. "I shall collect my kit from Iri before leaving the system entirely."

Taking hope from the way he seemed to confide in her, Sister Rollands took the plunge. Rather breathlessly, she said, "I am going off duty at this very minute. I have a forty-eight hour home leave in Copper. Please let me give you a lift down in the station vehicle."

" Thank you, Sister," he said. " I should be grateful."

" Stay here ! " she said, almost running from the office down to her private room. There, stripping off her uniform, she opened the metal cyst on her wrist and dialled a personal number. When answer came, she whispered hurriedly into the radio.

" Argyre, darling ? Venice here. Are you in the recreation room ? Listen, please do me a favour and come hot foot to take over Wing G. *right now* ? Will you do that, darling, burning trails all the way ? Slip into your uniform as you come. It's only thirty-five minutes before you were due to relieve me, and I promise I'll make it up to you next shift. Never mind why—you'll see when you get to the office. You should be there by now. Blessings ! "

Excitedly, she switched off, adjusted her hair, slipped into a white skirt, threw a few things hastily into a grip, and hurried back to Dall. Sister Argyre got there at the same time. Venice squeezed the Martian girl's fingers gratefully.

Then she turned to Dall, leading him down to the transport bay, where one of the duty gravs waited. A minute later, they were sinking through space alone together.

Although he was restrained, although grief filled him, Dall possessed a quality which made him easy to talk to. Now she had gained her first objective, Venice was more self-assured.

" You told me you will be leaving the system; shall you return to Atara ? " she asked.

" I may do," he replied. " Fortunately, the spade work at Iri was all but finished, and certain clues there lead back to Atara. Also, my research is more easily carried out there."

He began to talk about his work. Some ten thousand years ago, roughly at the beginning of the Space Epoch, man had discovered a fragment of an unidentifiable building on Ganymede. Speculation on this had proved fruitless until, many centuries later, another and similar structure had been unearthed on Atara. This one was in a much better state of preservation, and proved to be a space craft of a hitherto unimagined kind. Modern dating methods showed both the Ganymede and the Atara objects to be some two thousand million years old.

" And all this time, right under men's noses, another such object has been lying here on Luna, buried far below the surface at Iri," Dall said. " The evidence we have collected shows that this one is contemporary with the other two. You realise what this means, Venice ? "

She was thrilled to hear him lapse into her first name. It irked her that she could only respond to this question with a shake of her head. Cosmic archaeology meant nothing to her.

" Two thousand million years ago," Dall said, " Earth, the cradle of mankind, was still hardly out of the molten state. Luna had not then been pulled from what is now the Pacific Desert—it was still part of the mother planet. In other words, the age-old Iri ship landed on Earth."

For the first time, he definitely showed emotion. He was full of wonder and speculation; his handsome face filled with a light Venice had not seen there before.

" This ancient craft may have brought the first seeds of life to Earth," he said, " but as yet we know little about it. Where did it come from? What were its occupants like? Why did they land on Earth? . . . Every answer we get raises a dozen more questions. So it has always been; so it will always be, until life is extinct. . . . "

Venice was uncomfortable.

" It sounds almost too big a problem to deal with," she said, knowing as she spoke that the remark was facile. Every problem breeds men to tackle it; Norman Dall was such a man.

He smiled at her, and she ached all over.

Copper swam up to meet them, a city planned and equipped like a great palace. Once upon a time, forgotten generations ago, this had been the ashy crater Copernicus. A great sphincter yawned open in a roof of hyaline tungsten, and their craft floated inside; the hole closed behind them, a mouth swallowing a metal pill. The gravs set them lightly in a landing socket without any perceptible bump.

" Here we are, and here we part," Dall said, briskly, standing up and smiling at Venice; his eyes were as grey as a neptunian sea. " Thank you for the ride. I can easily hire a transurfacer from here, pick up my kit at Iri, and catch a Twenty Systems ship for Atara and the Fringes within forty-eight hours."

" . . . When I shall be going back to the hospital satellite," she said hollowly. She tried, but could not raise a farewell smile. She held the hand that he had briefly shaken, watching as he walked away, tall, independent, with that same suggestion of purpose. Then he was lost among the trees and the people clustering round the entrance to the subway.

Five hours later, Norman Dall was again away from the throng-

ing crowds of Luna, stalking through the desolation of Iri. On his left stood the ruins of one of the last thermonuclear power stations, relic of the age before cosmu energy. As Dall walked across its grounds, the old dome still stretched high above him, ghostly reflections here and there marring its transparency, but the lunar vacuum had long since seeped in, making his light seal-suit a necessity. Here it was that Alvira had had her accident—although he tried not to dwell on that thought.

When he came to a great black ramp sloping steeply into the ground, Dall switched on his headlight and went in. The ramp dived down a long way. Once, it had borne radioactive waste into the bowels of the moon. Coming finally to a vertical gravity shaft, Dall activated it, stepping into nothing and falling controlledly down. He tried not to remember that his Partner, Alvira, had been with him on his last descent. Counting off the seconds, he decelerated, stopped, and climbed through a small air lock.

Dall was some ten miles below the lunar surface, standing in a large cavern. Here the last load of radioactive matter had been vaulted. Here too, long after the plant had fallen into disuse, a collapse of part of the roof had revealed the ancient, unknown space vehicle which Dall had mentioned to Venice. The collapse had only been discovered by accident a year ago, when the local government had sent for Dall and Alvira to investigate the find.

A temporary, light alloy hut stood by the fall. Dall went over to it, his foot-falls noiseless here, even to himself. They had used this hut for their quarters through many happy, engrossed months. Switching the lights on, Dall hesitated only for a second before going in.

He worked methodically for a long while, sorting out papers, books, samples, photographs, tools and other paraphernalia, bundling things together to be taken up the gravity shaft. Once his personal radio called, but he worked on without so much as glancing at his wrist. At last he paused for a rest, strolling over to the door of the hut to gaze into the great cavern.

Venice Rollands was running towards him, unzipping her seal-suit.

He asked her no questions, perhaps because he guessed at once what she was going to say, perhaps because she hardly gave him a chance to speak.

" Forgive me for following you ! " she exclaimed, before she had reached him. " I tried to return to my home in Copper, but I

knew before I got there I should never rest. I *had* to come. I *had* to . . . I radioed you but got no answer, so I followed your footsteps in the dust. Oh, Norman, say you're not angry ! "

" I don't anger easily," he said, " but I wish you had not come here. There is nothing for you here."

" I hope you will soon feel differently ! " Venice exclaimed. She pressed past him into the hut, confronting him defiantly, looking at once excited and exciting. " I have come to ask you—humbly—ardently—to take me as your next Partner. I've loved you ever since I saw you, ten years ago. I'll fit into your life, go wherever you want to go, cover the Twenty Systems with you, do whatever you want. I'm not a child, or a fool. *Please* accept me, Norman, you'll not regret it."

Sighing, Dall half-turned away before answering, as if he could hardly face her.

" No man could say ' No ' whole-heartedly to so splendid a—an offer," he said, colouring slightly. " You are very beautiful, Venice, and the feel of life flowing from you is perhaps the most precious thing in the universe. But I cannot have you for a Partner."

" I know you are an immortal ! " she flashed. " That makes no difference to me at all."

" I fear it makes all the difference to me."

Venice clutched his arm, bending to kiss his hand when he resisted.

" I know you are over nine hundred years old," she said, " but I don't care. I'd love you. I want you—and I'll only stay with you for ten years, that's all. Then I'll be thirty-five, and I'll leave you when my face starts to line. I'll just vanish, Norman, I swear—I wouldn't saddle your eternal youth with an old woman ! "

" No," he said definitely. He moved round the table that he had piled with equipment in an attempt to keep away from her. " Such a liaison is not possible between a mortal and an immortal."

" Why not ? " she challenged. " I know it is possible ! Mentally and physically possible. Kiss me, make love to me here, you will see ! "

She stopped abruptly, putting one hand up to her face, letting tears well from under her closed eyelids.

" I'm not really the shameless creature I sound," she breathed. " Oh, Norman, I want you; try to understand. . . . "

" It is because I understand I say ' no ',' he replied. " This

situation is unpleasant and embarrassing for us both. Do not make me say more."

"You must say more! Why should you not? You have enough time . . . Centuries . . . always young! Norman, I know the statistics about the immortals; there's only one born to every ten million of the population. Alvira was immortal, but when we had to graft an ordinary human lung into her, to save her life, her gift was destroyed—she now has only a mortal life span left to her. You may be a long while before you find another Partner."

"And you call that saving Alvira's life," Dall said. "Can't you see, my dear girl, that this miracle of surgery you have performed will only seem like a ten minute reprieve to Alvira? She was looking forward to millennia of work and investigation—and now she hasn't half a century. . . . What you people have done to her is only a mockery, devoid of understanding."

Silence fell between them. Venice just stood looking across the table at him, staring, hit for the first time by a real intimation of what immortality must feel like.

"Let me explain a few facts to you," Dall said, keeping his tone cool so that she should not become excited again. "Immortality is the next stage in man's eternal development—we immortals are born of mortal stock. At present, as you say, we number only one in every ten million; but in a few more of your prolific generations, it will be one in seven million, one in a million, one in a hundred thousand. The day will dawn, eventually, when no man is mortal.

"This is the evolutionary trend. Contrary to all that has been speculated about it, it is painful for no-one. We are useful to mortals, we enjoy our own lives.

"We enjoy them simply because the temper of our emotions modifies itself to fit our condition, just as with mortal man. I do not anger nor cry; I make no excesses into lust—as you invite me to do—nor do I deviate from what I conceive to be the truth. Within me you would find no greed, envy or impatience, for these are the natural follies of three score years and ten. Everything for me comes, in Spinoza's noble phrase, *sub specie aeternitatis*, for I am the eternal species. I relish every day and week, but I relish it slowly. I can afford to be bored! But you would find me dull."

The words were provoking. At once, Venice was stirred into action again. She came round the table, clasping Dall's hands in hers; his were slightly cold.

"I would *never* find you dull, my dear," she said.

"But I should find *you* dull!" he declared. "A true, rich life needs a couple of thousand years in which to develop. There are so many kinks and complications of character to be aired and exercised, so many worlds and thoughts and experiences to be sampled . . . I could not begin to tell you, Venice. Can't you see that if you lived all your brief life with me, it would still appear so short to me as to be meaningless. That is why we immortals never stay among one group of mortals for long. To me—I do not say it to hurt you—you are as unreachable as a two-dimensional image. If we met every day of your existence, I could still have of you only the sight of a silhouette."

"Are not silhouettes sometimes beautiful?" she cried, lost, floundering. She no longer touched him, and he moved away. Without looking at her, he picked the first lot of kit off the table, carrying it outside and over to the gravity shaft.

He had gone to and fro, and was leaving the hut with the third load before Venice spoke again.

"You're dead inside!" she exclaimed. "You never die because all the while you are dead inside! All you care about is a buried, million-year-old space ship. You have no human feelings!"

"No mortal feelings," he corrected, politely turning back to address her. "As you say, I do care intensely about the riddle of the Ganymede-Atara-Iri ships; what's more, I have the time to solve that riddle eventually, though I know it will only lead to other riddles. But I care about other things also. I love my Partners, for instance, and shall find another some year. We shall probably produce a child—but we are not geared to propagate like rabbits, as mortals do, because evolution has this admirable way of dealing with things, cutting the suit to fit the cloth."

Bending down, Dall picked up his equipment and continued walking across to the gravity shaft.

Venice looked hopelessly round. All the stuff on the table had been cleared: Dall would not be coming back to the hut again. With a cry, she ran into the cavern, calling to him, till the heavy echoes pressed about her ears like ash.

"Norman, Norman! Listen to me! Things can't be as bad as you pretend. You're only upset because of what happened to Alvira: you need someone to look after you. And I was talking nonsense when I said you were dead inside. That's not how I think of you! I don't think of you as a monster but as a god. Let

me share that godliness with you for a year—there, I ask no more, just a year. A year, Norman—it wouldn't seem like five minutes to you. And I'd love and serve you all that year."

" Stop it ! Have you no—no dignity ? " he snapped. He drew himself up before the air lock, frowning at her, his body stiff, his alarming grey eyes narrowed.

" You will not face the facts," he said, almost gently, " which means you are unbalanced. You see me as some sort of an eternal father figure; I dislike the notion intensely. I dislike the thought of your feverish cosseting. And you also seem not to realise that every silly young female mortal that discovers what I am goes through the same set of obscene, undignified antics. You are all exactly alike, prancing like puppets. You are as featureless—and as inviting—as a flock of sheep. Even for me, there is a limit to patience. Good-bye, Sister Rollands."

He turned into the air lock and was gone.

The beautiful young man who would live for ever, who would be forever young, forever beautiful, forever ardent, had vanished. The girl stood where she was for many minutes, fists clenched, weeping at the injustice of life. Then she began planning how she would tell it all to Sister Argyre.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

STUART ALLEN

Sell Me a Dream

A miracle was his—and all the searching of a hundred years would not produce another

Illustrations by John J. Greengrass

Often I think that market places are the most romantic spots in the world. Not your glistening palaces with their serried shelves and all their wares ranked in solid array; they have merely stolen the name to give them a grace they do not have. They are cold places, sterile with their boxes and bags all wrapped and sealed and carefully devoid of all interesting odours. They are soulless in their mechanical efficiency and immoral in the way they shamelessly cheat with their large, economy sized packages which contain two parts of produce to one part of air. They are mere vending machines, nothing more, and I will have none of them.

But the market places, the real market places, how wonderful they are! London is well supplied with them as is every large city and, forty years ago, there were more than there are now. Those were the days when naphtha flares beat back the night, casting a flickering, ruddy glow over the stalls loaded with fruit from foreign shores.

Oranges and lemons, pomegranates and bananas, chestnuts in the winter together with great slabs of sticky dates, pressed, dried figs and muscatels, almonds and sweet walnuts. In the summer soft fruits from Kent and crisp lettuce, cucumbers, radishes and tender spring onions.

Those stalls have changed now. Together with the old staples other, even more exotic fruits have shouldered for themselves a place in the cramped display. Aubergines and peppers, uglis and ly-chees, fresh figs and the once luxurious mushroom, all have come to enchant the eye and tease the palate. But one thing has not changed.

In every market place you will find them. The stalls and corners heaped with apparent rubbish, the junk displays, the relics of a bygone age, once treasured and now tossed aside to this, their last resting place before final destruction. They fascinated me then as they fascinate me now, those stalls. Not so much for what they offer for sale as the questions and stories those articles hold. I used to spend hours wandering up and down, pausing by some interesting specimen, holding it in my hand, wondering at its past history, its past use, the care which went into its fabrication and the pleasure and pride it must once have given.

I was young then, and romantic, and still had to learn of the hard cynicism which the city instils into all who seek fame and fortune within the confines of its narrow streets. My work was hard, the hours long and I had little time and less money for pleasure. And so I, as many others have done, found what pleasure I could as cheaply as I could. And there is no entrance fee to the market places.

I became known after a while, and tolerated with that innate good humour which is a Londoner's birthright. I was chaffed a little and it would have been beyond the forbearance of flesh and blood to refrain from trying to sell, but my refusals were taken in good part and my presence at the stalls did no harm, did some good in a way for customers will always gather where there is apparently another of their own kind.

Loneliness was my companion then as it has been all my life and, inevitably, I sought escape from monotony and dull routine in the realm of books. I was catholic in my taste, reading avidly any and all tales of adventure, romance and fables of foreign lands. My reading did not detract from the pleasure I found in the market places, rather it added to it, so that I would stand, with, perhaps, an old, battered telescope in my hand, a half of a spectacle frame or a carved oaken toilet box, my thoughts winging wild flights of imagination.

Was this telescope used at Trafalgar? Did some sea-dog lift it to his eye to stare at some scudding sail? Were those dents the result of war, the thunder of the guns and the crash of round-shot splintering the masts and scuppers of some long-vanished ship of the line? Did that spectacle frame once rest on the ears of some noted wit of an age when wit was the essence of social conversation? Had some perfumed dandy kept his pearl studs in that box and, if so, why had it passed from hand to hand to reach this, its final resting place? Had there been a duel, pistols for two and coffee for one or, perhaps, the flash of small swords in a dew-wet park?

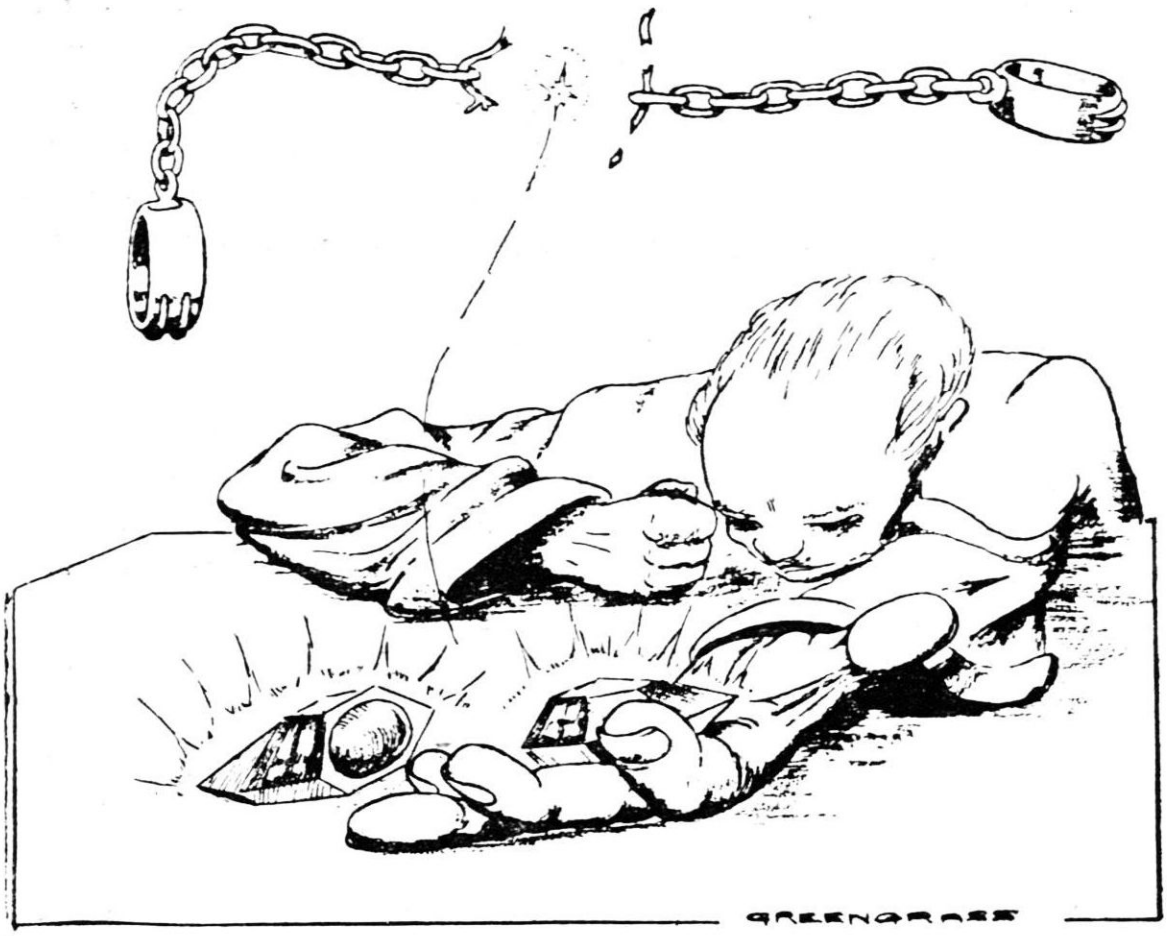
Wild speculations and yet they amused me and lifted my thoughts from the common round. And, in all my searching, admit it or not, there was the hint of even wilder adventure. I had been reading the *Arabian Nights* and kindred stories and my head was filled with tales of magic Djinn, strange lamps, Seals of Solomon and all the myth and fable of an unreal world. Other stories, too, had fired my imagination, tales of strange things being found in strange shops, articles which, all unknown to the vendor, held unusual powers.

It would be nice, I thought, to stumble across such a treasure in my wanderings around the stalls of the market places. Impossible, of course, but, hope being what it is and youthful imagination as strong as it was, desire led my common sense into a winding, mist-filled path. So it was that I took to rubbing every foreign-seeming object and muttering some half-shamed command as I rubbed. Brasses from India, probably manufactured in Sheffield, were my prime subjects. Then oddly shaped fragments whose purpose had become lost in time. I was self-conscious about it and yet, so strong was my conviction that such things had once happened and could well happen again, that I could not resist my search for an object which would contain more than it seemed.

And, incredibly, I found it.

I did not know then and I do not know now exactly what it was that I found. I can guess, of course, and speculate and toy with fantastic imageries but I do not *know*. And I shall never know, not for certain and never without a shred of sneaking doubt. But I believe now, as I did not suspect then, that I had found Paradise.

In shape it was a flattened ovoid roughly three inches in diameter and about half as thick in the centre tapering to a rounded edge. It looked like a sea-washed stone and yet, despite that initial appearance, it held within itself, either because of shape or substance, some-



thing which attracted both hand and eye. There was a feel about it, a sensation impossible to describe but oddly alien to the touch. It was a long time before I decided that the sensation was partly due to it not appearing to have any temperature but that was only a part of the reason; the true reason I never did discover.

I studied it, turning it over and over in my hands, searching for some flaw in the smooth surface and it was with a mounting excitement that I discovered that the surface at which I gazed was not its true surface at all. Somehow, either because of heat or pressure or, perhaps, by the design of some previous owner, the object had been coated with a rock-hard sediment of unglazed clay. Time and stress had flawed the covering so that it presented a false impression. It was smooth, yes, but that smoothness was superficial. As I stared I could discover a multitude of tiny lines, a microscopic network as if minute spiders had covered it with the delicate tracery of their webs.

It was not easy to disguise my excitement, harder still to put down the object, to lift other fragments of the displayed rubbish and to casually, seemingly as if by afterthought, to return to the rounded stone. It was a normal practice, the usual sparring of those who wished to buy from those who had to sell, but I was an amateur at the game and I deluded no one but myself.

Even so the thing was cheap. To the vendor it was a stone, nothing more, a scrap of rubbish he had collected together with other litter, but he lauded it before asking his price and shrugged when I demurred and offered a little less. So I paid his price and he must have thought me a fool to squander coppers on such a useless thing. Coppers, when, as I know now, the thing was of a value beyond price.

But that was forty years ago and wisdom, for me, still waited in the future.

My first task was to attempt to clean my new possession. I examined it carefully with a borrowed glass and, with the point of a needle, prised and dug at one of the minute lines. I acted with exaggerated care, I did not want to damage it in any way through my ignorance but, as I probed, a tiny fragment of heat-dried clay came free revealing something beneath. Then I rested while I considered what to do next.

The thing had a coating, of that I was sure, but how to remove it without doing harm was not so clear. In the end I compromised and, filling a saucepan with water, set it to boil and immersed within the bubbling liquid the stone I had purchased. It was, I realise now, a forlorn thing to do. Water will not soften heat-dried clay; I might as well have tried to boil a brick into its virgin materials, but I was ignorant and impatient and used what materials I had to hand. Even so I finally began to despair. For hours I boiled the object, replenishing the water when it was necessary and squandering more coppers on further supplies of gas and, when my patience was exhausted, I lifted the stone from the saucepan and rested it on my tiny table. With glass and needle I sat ready to attack the coating once more and it was then that I discovered one of the peculiarities of the stone. It had no temperature.

I had thought that it would be too hot to touch and logic was with me on that assumption. It had been immersed for hours in boiling water and should, by now, be as hot as boiling water. It wasn't, it was as when I had first touched it, strangely cool to the hand. It was while I sat considering this strangeness that I noticed that the clay-like coating was crumbling from the surface beneath.

Crumbling, not flowing or falling, but crumbling as if it yielded to pressure from beneath. Excitedly I picked up the ovoid and wiped it free of the last traces of the stuff which had covered it and then, entranced, sat and stared at what I held in my hand.

It was a jewel, somehow I never doubted that. It was smaller now; the substance covering it had been a quarter of an inch in

thickness, and it rested on my palm, cool and with very little weight. It was smooth and with the slickness of glass or of ice, of a peculiar granulated consistency, translucent and yet fogged so that the eye seemed to stare into limpid depths only to be baffled by inner walls of opacity. It was like staring into impact-shattered ice or layers of frosted glass but it was more than that for the eye was not repelled but attracted and it seemed to me, staring into the ovoid, that if I could but concentrate a little more, stare a little harder, then I would be able to peer into the heart of the misty dimness.

And, somehow, I wanted to do that, wanted to do it with every fibre of my being. To me, at that moment, nothing was so important than that I should stare into the heart of the stone. And so it was that I discovered the light within.

The stone was hollow, subconsciously I must have realised that all along, nothing of its size and composition could have been so light had it been solid. But even so it came as a shock to discover that, buried within the depth of the ovoid, a tiny suggestion of light floated and drifted like a thistledown on a gentle breeze. It was small, so small and so dim that I would never have seen it had not darkness fallen while I had sat wrapped in contemplation and had my eyes not been strained to focus on so small an area.

Rising, I lit the gas and by its flaring light examined the stone again. Because of the brightness or because of my breaking of concentration, I could no longer see the tiny speck of dim radiance within the ovoid and, indeed, I no longer cared to look. Tiredness had come upon me with an unusual swiftness and sleep beckoned like an entrancing woman. I yawned, and yawned again and, after what seemed like a long time, managed to summon strength to undress and turn down my bed. Two things yet remained to be done, one obvious and the other illogical but, nonetheless, I did them both. I turned out the gas and, picking up the stone, slipped it beneath my pillow. Why I should have done that I did not know. Perhaps it was the age-old instinct to guard a treasure or perhaps it was because of some deeper compulsion but, at the time, it seemed a perfectly natural thing to do.

And then I went to bed and fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow and, as soon as I closed my eyes, I dreamed.

I cannot describe that dream and, if I could, I would not. Some things are too personal for discussion, too intimate for anything but memory. I was young and poor and had few acquaintances and no friends. I lived in a cheap lodging and, as yet, I was a stranger to women. My days were a dull humdrum of monotonous routine with

the prospect of promotion a tantalising wisp of promise and success to come. This was my life, my real life, but in my dream! Oh, God, in my dream!

I woke with memory surging in my head and felt almost a physical pain as I stared at the tiny square of uncurtained window and the rooftops outside. It took a little time for me to realise that this was reality and that other, that glorious life, had been but a dream and, when realisation came, the sting of tears dulled my eyes and I wished that I could turn and sleep again and lose myself forever in that wonderful world.

I did not. Habit is a stern taskmaster and my fear of unemployment was a very real one. And, I consoled myself, there would be other nights and, perhaps, I could dream the same dream again and again. It cheered me, that thought, so that the world seemed to be not so grim after all. Breakfast, poor and hurried though it was, cheered me even more for I was young and the young find it hard to be sad when well fed. It was only as I was opening the door that I remembered the stone.

Last night, without thought or logic, I had placed it beneath my pillow. Now, driven by the same impulse, I took it out and placed it on the window ledge so that the diffused rays of the sun would shine directly on it during the day. And then, suddenly conscious of the need for haste, I ran from my room and down the stairs and only just managed to reach my office in time.

It was the beginning of what was to become routine.

I had heard men talk of the power of dreams and had never fully grasped what they meant. I now know that they were talking of a different form of dream; that they were really talking of ambition, but the words they used and the claims they made found an echo in my heart. Dreams, to me, began to replace reality so that each day when my work was done I would hurry home, snatch a hurried meal and then, almost with reverence, would lift the stone down from its ledge, place it beneath my pillow and retire at once to bed.

It was a bad habit and it began to have its effect. Without any form of exercise I grew thin and weedy, my natural paleness turning into a sickly pallor. My concentration suffered, how could rows of figures interest me when, each night, I was wafted to a world of my own? and it became more and more difficult to reach work on time. Fortunately my pallor was misconstrued; my superiors thought that it was due to too much studying at night, and I gained a false reputa-

tion which enhanced me in their eyes. My lateness, however, was more serious. Twice I arrived behind time and twice I was warned and, when about a month after I had first acquired the stone, I woke to hear the church bells tolling the hour and knew that I was already late, I felt despair.

Employers then were not as lenient as they are now and to be late again was to invite the threatened discharge. My only hope was to feign illness and this I did, sending a message by my landlady's son and then, sick with worry, settled down to spend the day as well as I might. Inevitably I examined the stone.

It fascinated me as it always had and now I had more cause for that fascination. The thing was alive, somehow I could sense that and, too, I sensed that it was the fount and cause of my dreams. Sitting with the ovoid poised in my hand, I stared at it as another man in a different time might have stared at a holy relic. But, unlike such a man, my mind teemed with questions.

How had it come here? Who had made it? What was its purpose and why had it been so thickly covered with a substance foreign to its nature? If it was alive, then who or what had given it birth? I sat with my back to the window, the ovoid in my hand, and I pondered with what wisdom I possessed on something which, I now know, I had no hope of understanding.

Holding it in shadow, as I was, the tiny light within the stone shone with an unaccustomed brightness. It moved with a strange, restless urgency, totally unlike the first drifting motion I had discovered. My dreams, too, had of late, taken on a new, disturbing quality. There was a poignant quality about them, a soul-wrenching impression of utter despair so that I woke with a dreadful unease and spent the day in a moody depression. There was something I felt that needed to be done, something which I had to do and, coupled with this, there was an overwhelming impression of nostalgia and a hopeless yearning for something I could not quite understand.

So must a prisoner feel, I thought, cooped and hampered in his cell, tormented by bright memories of what he had missed and was missing and, too, the fearful urgency of the sense of the passage of time, the terrible knowledge that, even were he to escape, it would be too late. I could not analyse these impressions, they were not clear enough for that and, too, I lacked the experience to recognise them for what they were. All I knew was that, more and more of late, I had woken from my dreams conscious of a thing which had to be done and which I should do. But what that thing was I did not know.

Now, staring at the ovoid, I began to guess. It was alive, the thing within, and, somehow, it had been imprisoned within the stone in my hand. I had fed it, all unknowingly perhaps and without that intention, but I had given it the strength it lacked. Heat, perhaps, the heat from the boiling water which had easily penetrated these minute cracks on the outer covering had, at first, awakened it. And I had rested it in the sunshine and so given it the radiant energy on which it survived.

Insane speculation? Perhaps, and yet a sick mind in a sick body drifts easily into fantasy. To me, sitting with my back to the window, the ovoid poised in shadow in my hand, staring at the tiny mote of darting light and with my being tormented with strange, unaccustomed, dream-induced emotions, it all seemed logical enough. It answered too, the reason for the outer coating. Some previous owner, a man of scientific bent, perhaps, had reasoned as I did now and, to safeguard himself from dreams, had insulated the thing from outside sources of radiant energy. And, thinking so, it seemed to me a cruel and monstrous thing to have done. It was like penning a singing bird in a too-small cage and there leaving it for the gross pleasure of those who found enjoyment in the pleading trills of a broken-hearted creature.

Yet a cage may easily be opened and I could see no way to free the thing within the ovoid in my hand.

It was a new train of thought and it came to me without conscious volition. Never before had I thought of the possibility that the stone could be opened and yet, now that I thought about it, it seemed obvious enough. It had been made and sealed after making; therefore it should be possible to reverse the procedure. The possibility excited me so that I ignored the thin, warning voice deep in my heart. Did I really want to open the ovoid? Did I really want to loose what darted within? I had stumbled on a treasure equal to the Lamp of Aladdin for, though it could not give me material possessions, it could give me a world of my own beyond the wall of sleep. And a man can spend half his life, more if he tries, lost in sleep. It would be more than a fair exchange, this world of dreams for the world of reality. And what did the real world have to offer me in comparison with what I had tasted?

So evil must have whispered to Judas and, fool that I was, I prided myself on being stronger than he.

I opened the ovoid.

How even to this day I do not know. One moment I was turning it in my hands, my thoughts on freeing what lay imprisoned

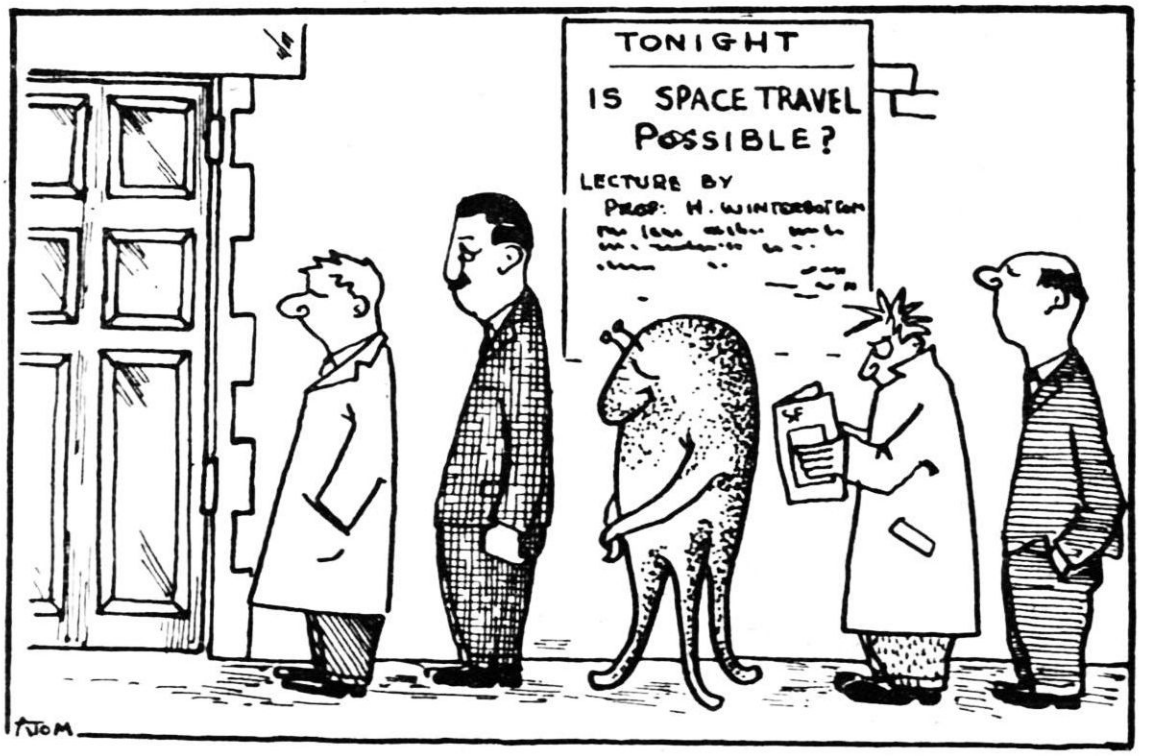
within, the next it lay in two hollow halves within my palms and, like a burning spark from some ancient fire, a mote of radiance darted past my head and out of the window and up and up into the infinite vastness of the sky. And I was left holding the broken ruin of what had been the most precious thing I was ever to know.

I was holding the broken shards of my life for, that night, I did not dream nor have I ever dreamed again.

Markets are wonderful places and part of their wonder is the people you meet. They walk slowly up and down, pausing at stalls heaped high with apparent rubbish and their hands pick and their eyes shadow as they stare at what they hold. Maybe they rub what is in their hand and mutter a little and that can be put down to the senility of age or the rash hope of youth. But the young do not deserve pity while the old deserve little else. So if you see an old man, bent now and with weak eyes peering through thick lenses, bearing the stamp of forty years of monotony and with a face almost devoid of hope, do not laugh at him as he picks and stares, examines and sighs and turns away to try at some other stall.

He is only searching for a dream.

STUART ALLEN



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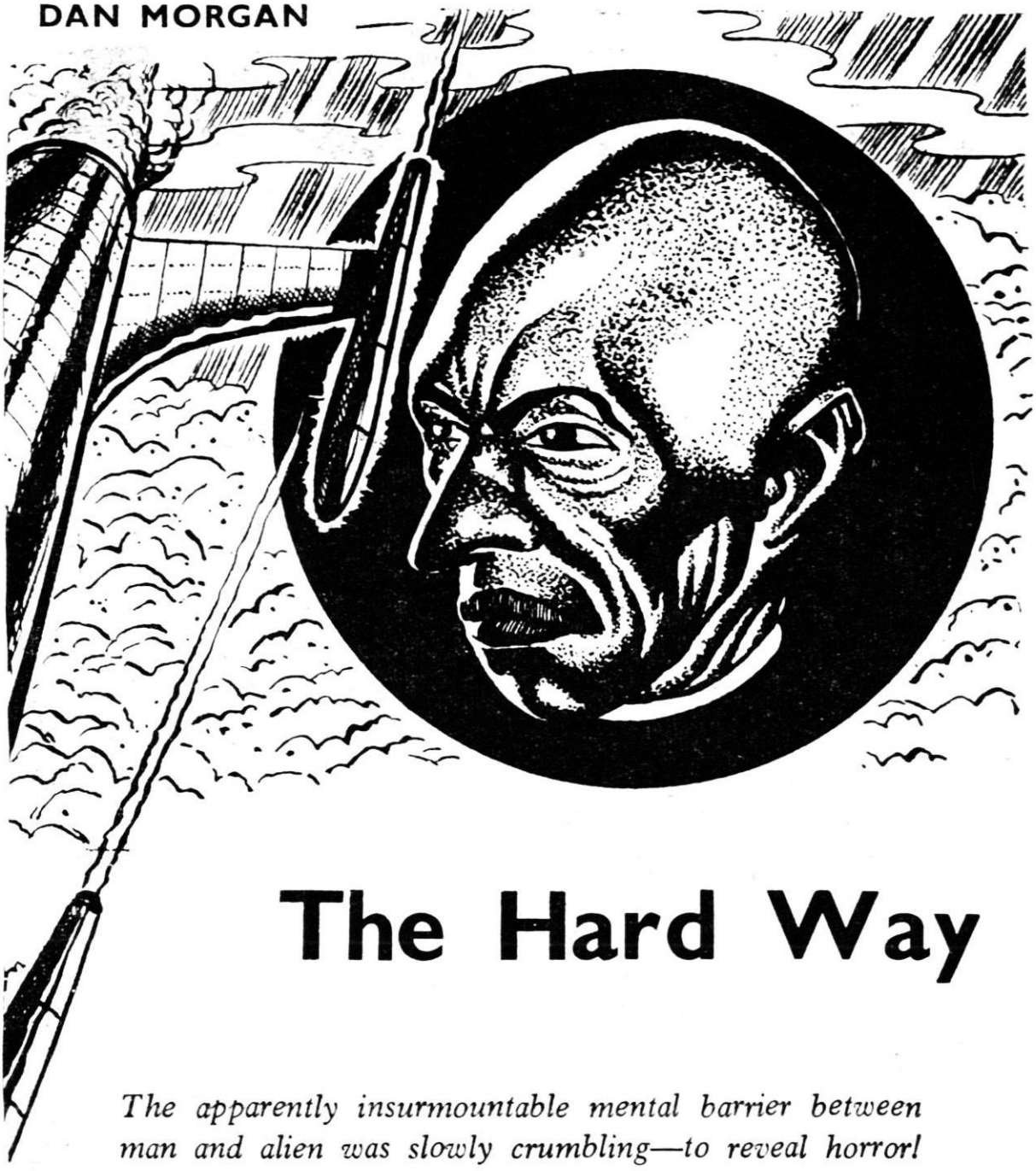


The Hard Way

The apparently insurmountable mental barrier between man and alien was slowly crumbling—to reveal horror!

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

I

When Tycho traffic control picked up the ship it was seven hundred and fifty miles out, coming in towards Luna like a bat out of Hell. There was no response to the routine identification call. Whoever was on board the little ship had enough on his hands trying to control her, without wasting time on such red tape details. Tycho sat tight long enough to plot a probable location and time of impact

then sent out a SCRAMBLE signal to all rescue units in the Mare Nubium area.

Ten pressurised Dust Cats were already on their way when the ship flashed into naked eye viewing range. It pirouetted briefly like a silver shuttle as the pilot made one last desperate effort to bring it back under control, then plummeted down to bury itself a hundred and fifty feet deep in the dust sea.

The rescue teams were at the point of impact within minutes, their powerful vacuum tubes biting down through the engulfing dust. Back at Tycho, the Duty Officer cursed the laxity of licensing regulations that made it possible for any fool with enough money to buy a ship and go joyriding round the system causing trouble. He put through a routine crash report, reflecting that non-scheduled commercial flights and private ships were just so many bugs which loused up his neatly plotted sector of space.

Two hours later the rescue crews reached the outer hull of the ship and cut their way inside. The leader of the party radioed back details of what they had found to the Duty Officer. From then on there was nothing routine about *this* crash report . . .

II

Mankind owes everything to its dreamers—not the navel contemplating kind, but the extraverts whose dreams are a constant needle, goading them on to batter their way through opposition and carve their name in the very stuff of life. General Charles Maclean was one of these. His dream was as big as the cosmos and STRADE was the tool he had forged to help him realise it.

The Space Travel Research and Development Establishment was a cluster of domes on the side of Luna never seen by Earth observers. Holidaymakers, businessmen and medical patients circulated freely through the domed city of Tycho, but STRADE was more remote and mysterious to them than the cities of Tibet to the people of nineteenth century Earth.

It had taken Maclean five years of lobbying and campaigning, running the politicians and himself ragged to get his plan past the paper stage. And even then he had to fight the U.N. Appropriations Committee every inch of the way on the budgeting of the project. But Maclean would not be denied, he drove hard and straight for the goal he had set himself. STRADE was his baby, his wife and his family—without him it would never have existed and through his

guidance it became in ten years a superbly integrated instrument which day by day probed closer towards the goal of interstellar flight. Sometimes there were gleams of hope, at others the blackness of disaster as experimental ships crashed or disintegrated, destroying the eager young men who piloted them. But Maclean was always there; a tiny, grey ageless man in his pale blue uniform, urging work forward again after each disappointment. Some called him a butcher and a tyrant, but those closer to him understood that each death was a personal, deeply felt tragedy to him, a sacrifice which only ultimate success could ever justify.

Maclean was perched explosively on the edge of a chair in the office of Colonel Avrom Bernstein. Bernstein was in charge of the Space Medicine department of STRADE, a man in whose ability Maclean had the utmost faith. And because of that faith he was nearer to despair than he had ever been.

"You must find a way of getting through to him, Bernie. It could save us decades of work and hundreds of lives," Maclean said, for the fifth time.

Bernstein, a big untidy man with a nose like a boot and gentle brown eyes, shifted sympathetically in his seat and sighed. Seven days before when the rescue squads had pulled the unconscious alien out of his ship and rushed him back to STRADE it had looked as though a break had come at last. For the first time in its history mankind was about to make contact with a member of a race from another star system. A being who by his very presence on Luna proved the practicability of faster than light travel, and whose mind might contain the information STRADE had been seeking for ten long years. But what looked like a break had so far turned out to be yet another of fate's dirty tricks.

"He doesn't seem unwilling to communicate," Bernstein said. "The linguists have miles of tape to work on, but it may take them months, even years, analysing syllable by syllable and searching for semantic content. They have no clues whatsoever to work on; his cultural background is completely unknown to us and there seems no way to get it out of him by any known form of two way communication. On his time scale we move like tortoises, our thoughts crawl so slowly that we can't even begin to comprehend a gesture of his."

"Isn't there some way in which he could be slowed down to our level?"

"Surgically, you mean?" Bernstein's bald head moved slowly from side to side. "I wouldn't dare tackle it. Even the basic step

of a suitable anaesthetic is beyond us at the moment. With a fantastic metabolic rate like his the brain would have such a high oxygen requirement that it could very easily be damaged by the toxic effects of the anaesthetics we use, and we have no comparable experimental animals on which to develop new ones. Even if we did not kill him in the first stages of such an operation there is a strong chance that his mental faculties would be crippled, and that would be no good to you, would it?"

Maclean ran pale fingers through his crisp, grey hair. It was maddening, like being presented with some delicate sealed mechanism and having on hand as the only tool to open it a crowbar; like trying to pick up a crystal wineglass with the grip of a fifty ton crane . . . Like anything that seemed so obvious and yet so damnably impossible.

"We've got to crack this thing, Bernie." Maclean's great fear was that if the secret of interstellar flight was not discovered within his own lifetime, mankind would stop trying. He had a recurring nightmare of humanity confined forever to Earth and the few barren planets of the solar system; multiplying endlessly and growing smaller in mind and body like some species of animal isolated on a tiny island. Life to Maclean was growth and expansion, an outward moving thing—only death was static.

Bernstein hesitated for a moment. When he finally spoke it was as if with reluctance. "There may be one way."

Maclean's small body was as taut as a whip. "What is it, man?"

"Surgery in the normal sense is not possible—but it might be possible to use a psycho kinetic Healer."

Maclean's face registered amazed disbelief. "For Pete's sake, Bernie! This is a deadly serious matter. Everybody knows that the Healers are just a bunch of charlatans and cranks."

"Everybody knows," Bernstein repeated softly. "How often have scientific advances been held up because 'everybody knew' that they wouldn't work? Less than a hundred years ago 'everybody knew' that space travel was a lot of bunk. I'll bet if you went back far enough you would find that the rest of the tribe laughed their heads off at the crackpot who invented *the wheel.*"

"All right, Bernie, all right!" Despite the seriousness of the situation Maclean had to suppress a smile. "You're quoting my own speech to the U.N. Assembly right back at me, the one I used ten years ago, remember? But if the Healers are so good, how is it that your own Medic Association doesn't recognise them?"

"One simple, damning truth stands in the way," said Bernstein quietly. "The fact that the most important basic ingredient in the

practice of medicine is the possession of the confidence of your patients. It took Medics centuries to gain just that and it cannot lightly be put in jeopardy. We've known for a long time that Healer techniques could help us in a thousand ways, but we don't dare take advantage of them for two reasons. One is the fact that a very large proportion of Healers are, as you suggest, either charlatans or cranks with no real powers, and the other is the attitude of laymen towards the very idea of psycho kinetic Healing. As far as we know the Healers are not telepaths in the true sense of the term, but to the layman the concept of another being invading his mind and penetrating to the inner secrets of his existence sets up an immediate reaction of fear and mistrust. We dare not take the chance of that reaction being extended by any freak of mass hysteria or inference to include the whole Medical profession."

"But some people go to Healers for treatment," protested Maclean.

Bernstein nodded. "Yes, but it is usually only as a last resort, when they have been more or less abandoned by the Medics and they are desperate enough to try anything. But there are a lot of others who are unable to overcome their natural prejudices, even in the last extremity. Man is a gregarious animal, but deep down he rates an invasion of his personal privacy as even more undesirable than death itself. Look at the resistance there was to the idea of psycho analysis at the outset, and the anti-hypnosis laws that were passed only half a century ago."

Maclean drew one finger along the knife edged crease of his trouser leg. He could see what Bernstein was getting at. If the Medics opened their ranks to include the Healers, whatever benefits they might gain from Healer techniques would be more than offset by the loss of confidence they would suffer in the minds of the general public. He prided himself on the flexibility of his outlook, but he had to admit that the idea of a Healer probing into his own mind brought about an immediate, irrational surge of revulsion which he was unable to dispel.

"And you really think that a Healer might be able to do this thing?"

"Not just *any* Healer picked at random," Bernstein said. "But I think I know one who might. As you know, before I came up here five years ago I used to lecture at one of the big teaching hospitals. The best student I ever had was a thin young fellow named Peter Gibson, who had an almost fanatical desire to eliminate pain and suffering. After the first year he came to me and told me that he

was thinking of discontinuing his studies. It was only then that I realised the reason for his amazingly accurate powers of diagnosis. Whilst the rest of us have to work for years to gain the necessary knowledge, he was able to carry out such a process on an intuitive level. He himself had not thought of this as abnormal until the seeming ineptitude of others had impressed itself on his mind and made him realise that he was a potential psycho kinetic Healer."

"What did you do?" asked Maclean.

"I told him to follow the dictates of his own conscience and to bear in mind the position he would be giving up if he became a Healer. But as I said the word I knew that he had already decided."

"A step like that would take a lot of guts," breathed Maclean.

"And an overwhelming sense of duty towards his fellow men," said Bernstein. "He left, but I've heard of him several times since in connection with the curing of cases that no Medic in the profession would have given a favourable prognosis. The police slapped him in jail once when some crackpot lodged an invasion of privacy complaint, but he managed to get himself a good lawyer."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. But it shouldn't be difficult for *you* to find out."

Maclean rose to his feet. "Right, we'll give it a try."

"Mind you, I don't know whether he'll take it on," Bernstein pointed out.

Maclean frowned, the thought had not occurred to him. "He's got to!"

III

Peter Gibson leaned forward across the shabby desk. His pale, long nosed face held no soothing professional manner, only a dedicated intensity behind which there was no calculation. The shifting bronze of suspicion was gone from the mind of the patient now, but the scarlet of his pain remained.

"Very well, Mr. Jackson. I believe I can help you."

Jackson was a short, thick necked man with a puffy, blue tinged face. "Give me a year without this knife twisting in my chest," he said. "And I'll pay you anything you ask."

"You understand that the pain is a warning signal?" Gibson said. "Without it you may overtire yourself, and that could mean a fatal coronary closure."

"I'll take that chance if I can *really* live in the meantime," Jackson said.

"In that case I'll accept you as a patient. Come and see me again tomorrow at the same time and we'll begin the treatment."

"Will it take long?"

"A week—ten days," Gibson said. He intended to use a method similar in effect to a *Sympathectomy,* but without the operation's surgical risks. Probing with his psycho kinetic power through the thoracic ganglia he would destroy those nerves which transmitted pain from the blood starved heart. It was not a cure, one did not exist, but it would enable Jackson to make the most of the time that remained to him.

Jackson rose to his feet, pulling a cheque book out of his breast pocket and laid it on the desk. "Write your own figure . . ."

The suggestion of a smile flickered at the corners of Gibson's firm mouth. "You trust me that much?" He picked up the cheque book and handed it back. "You'll get your value—but you can forget about this part of it."

Jackson looked around the sparse furnishings of the room, the cracked paint of the woodwork. "If you don't work for money, what *do* you work for?"

"Trust," Gibson said.

The patient shrugged his heavy shoulders in a baffled manner. "You're on a bad market, son. Let me know if you change your mind." He turned towards the door. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Gibson followed him out and looked into the small waiting room. Its only occupant was a tall man in a conventionally cut pale fawn sports suit, who was seated by the window scanning idly through a magazine. He had a tanned, high cheekboned face, oil slicked black hair—*and his mind was the wrong colour.*

"Good afternoon," Gibson said calmly. "Will you come in, please?"

"Thanks." The man rose, dropping the magazine carelessly to the floor. His body as he moved past Gibson into the inner office was like some hard, well controlled machine. The Healer caught flashes of shifting colour with his synesthetic emotional perception, but there was no well defined pattern. And the one important factor that should have been there was *quite absent.*

Gibson closed the door behind him and walked over to the desk. "Please sit down, Mr. . . . ?"

The man's alert brown eyes moved quickly round the unimposing room, taking in every detail, but he remained standing. "Names are not important," he said.

"As you wish," Gibson said smoothly, his hands on the back of his chair. "What can I do for you?"

"It's this migraine of mine." The stranger raised a big, scarred hand to the back of his head in a perfunctory gesture. "They tell me you may be able to help me."

"Who tells you?"

"Oh, you know, people . . . around."

Gibson let it go for the time being, and asked: "Is it troubling you now?"

"Yes—all the time. Some nights I don't get any sleep with it at all."

"What treatments have you tried already?"

The tall man shrugged. "Aspirin, massage, every darned patent drug I could lay my hands on."

The muscles around Gibson's mouth tightened. "You're lying," he said quietly. "*You have no pain.*"

The stranger laughed, a sudden metallic bark. "By God! You're the real thing, aren't you?"

"Had you any reason to believe otherwise?"

"Well, you must admit that it was more than a ten to one shot that you would be a fake like most of the others."

"Who are you—police?" Gibson asked.

"Now there's a thing!" The man gave a twisted smile. "You can't tell?"

"How should I?"

"You could get it out of my mind, couldn't you?"

Gibson's impulse was to call the man's bluff and tell him to get out, but he held on to his calm manner. "My profession is healing—not the reading of minds. If it's parlour tricks you require you should have gone to one of the fakers you mentioned."

"All right, all right, don't lose your sense of humour." The tall man pulled a wallet out of his pocket and flipping it open pushed it across the desk. "Here, take a look at this."

"Lieutenant Branch, U.N. Police," Gibson read the warrant card. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"I suppose you weirdies think the government gives you a raw deal," Branch said, as though musing to himself. "Funny, I'd never thought much about you one way or another until this thing came up."

"Are you going to arrest me?" asked Gibson curtly. "If so, let's get it over with. Otherwise I must ask you to leave, my time is valuable."

" Jumpy, aren't you?"

Gibson stifled his anger. Whatever the purpose of his visit Branch was only a very minor cog in the governmental machine, indulging in his brief moment of power.

" The next Luna Ferry leaves at 6.30 in the morning," Branch said. " And you will be on it. A ticket will be held in your name at the main booking office of Central Field."

The muscles of Gibson's stomach constricted. " I can't go to Luna. What sort of a bad joke is this? I've a practice here, and my wife . . ."

" No joke, Gibson," clipped Branch. " They need one of you people at STRADE—and you're elected."

" For what purpose?"

" I'm not authorised to tell you that."

Gibson realised that the man probably did not know anyway. A sudden feeling of being trapped mingled in his mind with thoughts of Jo. What did they intend to do with him at STRADE—use him as some sort of a guinea pig in their experiments?

" And if I refuse to go?" he asked.

" That would be foolish," Branch said mildly. " The organisation might consider it a disloyal action."

" And . . . ?"

" Don't be stupid, Gibson. When they say *come,* you do just that if you know what's good for you."

" But I told you—my practice . . ."

" And those of all the other Healers in the area?" said Branch, with quiet menace. " We could book them all and hold them pending charges. On the other hand . . ."

That was it, they had him over a barrel. He in particular out of all the Healers was the one they wanted, but if he refused they would all have to suffer for him. He had his own, very personal reason for not wanting to go to Luna—Jo. But strong as his tie to her was, his duty as a Healer must come first. It was blackmail of the lowest and filthiest kind, but as a Healer he could expect no better treatment.

" All right, Branch," he said tensely. " You can go and tell your chief that I'll be on the ferry in the morning. Now, get out!"

The Lieutenant walked slowly towards the door, then paused with his hand on the knob. " I tell you what you do, *mind thief.* Don't go, eh? So that we have to pick you up. The boys down at headquarters would just love to have a little heart to heart session with one of your kind." His mind emanated a strong red flecked

blackness which the Healer could not shut from his perceptions.

"Get out!"

Gibson stood trembling with rage as the door closed. This was the kind of unreasoning fear-hate complex that Healers had to face from their fellow humans; a reaction that was always near to the surface, even in the most balanced person towards the unknown quantity that the Healers represented. It was strange how it was possible to hate and despise the brute ignorance of the human race and yet at the same time be unable to watch a member of it suffer without feeling an irresistible urge to alleviate his pain. Even now, angry as he was with Branch, this thing within Gibson would force him to help if the man were sick or ill in any way. Perhaps some day a basis of trust would be founded and the Healers would be accepted, but that time was still far off.

IV

Gibson let himself in at the front door of his fourteenth floor apartment which was situated in the least fashionable part of the city. Jo was in the kitchen. He heard her "Hi, Peter!" of greeting and perceived the bright golden yellow of her mind that went along with it. For a moment his troubled thoughts were pushed back and he remembered how lucky he was.

She came rolling out into the living room, a welcoming smile on her broad mouthed, pixie face, the afternoon sunlight catching her halo of short cropped blonde hair. She stopped the wheel chair about a yard from him and looked up enquiringly, wiping her hands on her flowered apron.

He bent down and kissed her. "Hello, darling."

"What is it, Peter? What happened?" She had sensed it already, despite his careful control. She had no Esp powers, but they were closer than ever now. Through the treatment he knew every part of her body and mind as if it were his own very special creation. With her it was not like treating an ordinary patient. Not only because he loved her, but because of the origin of her need for his skill.

"You're thinking about the accident again," she said gently accusing. Reaching up she grasped his hand. "Peter, you promised!"

It was not true, but her remark ripped the half formed scar tissue from the memory. It was a year now since the shattering horror had

struck. The two of them, happy and in love, cruising together along a sunlit highway on the second day of their honeymoon. He at the wheel, stealing a quick, precious glance at those vitally alive feminine features and counting his blessings. Then, eyes back to the highway, just in time to see the heavy lorry shooting out of a side road, too late to do anything but slam on the brakes and sense the blinding green of her fear as she realised what was happening.

A sudden, smashing impact then blackness. A falling into a sticky, choking quicksand of horror and despair, to awaken at last in a hospital ward calling *her* name.

The blue fading yellow of the house surgeon's mind as he explained: ". . . your injuries are mainly superficial, Mr. Gibson. A touch of shock, a few bruises . . . But your wife . . ."

Her spine had been crushed, nerve trunks controlling the movements of her legs had been severed beyond the powers of surgical repair. She would never walk again, they said, or have any feeling in the crippled limbs. Modern surgeons could do many things, but they could not replace that which had been irrevocably destroyed.

He took her home from the hospital, a resigned, broken invalid. Older and thinner, though she tried to put up a brave front for his sake, but still withdrawn from him in her misery, feeling in her mind that she could no longer be anything but a burden to him and trembling forlornly on the brink of self pity.

It was only when he had come to accept the situation and recovered from the initial shock that he began to see some ray of hope. In his work as a Healer he had mainly dulled pain and made glandular adjustments that would help the body itself to fight disease; but now, under the impetus of his new need, a concept was forced up into his mind. If he could force the nerve trunks to grow again across that crippling gap she could regain control of her limbs once more.

More experienced Healers than he said that such a regeneration was not possible, that it might be dangerous, but for her sake and his own he had to try it. And so they had begun the long arduous months of exploration. The whole inner workings of her nerve system had to be scanned by his searching mind before the therapy could commence. At first a gradual stimulation of the severed nerve endings that racked her with the mother and father of all pains, so that she clenched her teeth and the sweat rolled down her hollowed cheeks. So that at last she had, many times, to beg him to stop . . .

He suffered the bright scarlet horror with her, and at the same time tried to keep his perceptions clear and perform the therapy, feeling himself in the role of the torturing inquisitor. It would have

been bad enough with an ordinary patient, but this was a part of his own emotional self which he was twisting and mutilating. To torture with love was a terrible, mind searing experience, and after several weeks he felt that he could endure it no longer.

But by that time she was so convinced that she would not allow him to stop. She pleaded that if there was really any hope at all what she had suffered already could not go in vain. So he persisted, though the anguish of it made him hate himself for what he was doing. And alongside it all the time was the knowledge that if he had not stolen that covetous glance when he should have been watching the highway, she might have been spared all this.

Then, at last, the first dendrite began to push its way forward, growing millimetre by millimetre through the flesh of her body under his coaxing impulses. One, out of hundreds which would be necessary if she were to regain the use of her legs. But at least the thing was proven—now it was only a matter of time and her will to endure more of the tearing, grinding pain.

The work had been going on for long months and she was still condemned to the wheel chair—but at least there was hope. Perhaps in another two months there might be sufficient neuronic telegraph system to her atrophying leg muscles and she could begin the preliminary exercising. Then the miracle of Healer induced regeneration would be fact and some of the burden of guilt that Gibson carried with him day and night would be purged.

But if the process were broken off by this trip to Luna there might be a dangerous regression, meaning still further pain for her. Pain to which he could not lightly condemn her. There was surely some limit to what her resolution could stand—a threshold beyond which even her brave spirit would not go. Gibson lowered himself on to the divan so that his face was on a level with hers and looked into those warm blue eyes.

There was a slight tremor in her lower lip. " What is it, Peter?"

" I have to go away for a few days," he said gently. He felt the sudden burst of bright green fear from her mind.

" Away?"

" Yes, to Luna—some special case they have up there for me."

" They called you? But Luna is a government project, surely they would not allow a Healer to practise in Tycho City ?" Her brows lowered in puzzlement.

" Perhaps they are beginning to realise what we can do for them at last." Gibson forced a smile. It was better to let her think that

he would be working in the therapy centres of Tycho than to alarm her further by mentioning the mysterious name of STRADE.

She was looking at him, very quiet and intense, her eyes wide and childlike. "Peter, I know since the accident it has not been easy for you . . ."

He realised that she was wondering, lost and helpless, if he had tired of being tied to a cripple. Moving closer he took both her hands in his. "Jo! Tell me you don't want me to go. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter—not if I am to lose you."

She smiled, a sudden golden caress that emanated from both mind and body. "No, Peter. I'm sorry. Forget what I said *and* what I didn't say. I know the importance of your work; we agreed on that a long time ago."

But it had been different then, she had been a whole, healthy human being. Now, because of his criminal clumsiness she was a cripple, fighting her way back to health through a morass of pain. "I'll call you every day—and I'll be back very soon," he said, wondering how much the words meant, just what lay ahead of him on Luna.

"When do you go?" she asked.

"Tomorrow morning, on the six thirty ferry."

She breathed inward sharply. "So soon?"

"I've been thinking about the therapy," he said slowly. "It would be best if you carried on. We don't want to lose what ground we have made."

Her eyes widened. "You mean with *someone else*?"

"Yes. I could get in touch with Carter, he's a good man."

"I . . . I don't know."

"It would save you a great deal of unnecessary pain," he urged. "We're at a crucial stage now."

She avoided his eyes. "I'll think about it. Leave his number on the phone desk."

"You'll call him?"

"If I think it's necessary." Her face was still averted, but he knew better than to try to persuade her. He could only hope that he would be back before she had need to call Carter; it would cost her a great deal in mental anguish if she was forced to do so. She trusted him because of their love, but the thought of Carter, a stranger, probing into her mind might bring out her natural prejudices. Gibson had a sudden feeling of desolation, as it was brought home to him once again how far apart from the human race he and his kind were, even now.

V

Some of the resentment that had been smouldering in Gibson since his interview with Branch died as he identified the paunchy man in the sagging uniform who rose from behind the desk to greet him.

" Doctor Bernstein . . . !"

Bernstein's gentle brown eyes wrinkled at the corners and he tapped his shoulder tabs. " Colonel, my lad, and don't you forget it. This is General Maclean."

Gibson accepted the firm, dry handshake of the man whom he already knew by reputation.

" Welcome to STRADE, Mr. Gibson." The voice was quiet and precise, every consonant sharply enunciated and the vowels lightly clipped. The mind behind the voice was a well controlled blur, with no obvious emotional peaks. " I expect you're wondering why we sent for you, so I won't keep you in suspense any longer. Sit down and Colonel Bernstein will give you the details."

Gibson lowered himself into the indicated chair and looked expectantly at Bernstein.

The big man smiled apologetically. " First there are one or two questions I shall have to ask *you*. What type of work have you been doing during the last few years?"

" In the main I've concentrated on the stimulation of the natural stress resistance mechanisms of the body," Gibson said. " Sometimes when the condition of the patient is irreversible I've used synaptic fusion as a palliative measure to relieve pain."

" This stimulation of stress resistance would entail glandular manipulation?"

" Naturally."

Bernstein nodded. " No doubt you have found that in some cases you would be creating endocrine imbalances?"

" Yes, particularly when working with the pituitary."

" How do you counteract this factor?"

Gibson shrugged. " Sometimes I am able to make a sympathetic readjustment in one facet of the glandular organisation; at others, a complete modification of the metabolic rate of the patient may be necessary."

A glance of satisfaction passed between Bernstein and Maclean.

" At what distance from the patient do you normally perform your therapies?" the General asked.

Gibson stiffened, wondering if this was the first feeler which

would lead into the dangerous topic of telepathy. " I usually work in close proximity—say three or four feet away."

" Can this distance be increased?" Maclean pounced in eagerly. " For instance, if the patient were in the next room?"

" What are you trying to make me say, General?"

" It may be important, Peter," Bernstein said gently.

Gibson relaxed slightly. " I've never found it necessary to experiment with such a method, so I have no sensible answer."

" But there is no doubt that this psychic manipulation *might* be performed over a greater distance?" pursued Maclean.

" Possibly," Gibson said without enthusiasm. " Healing is an intuitive functioning of the mind. Each of us has his own way of operating and there is no laid down scientific method; in fact no symbolism by which one could be discussed. The whole process is a matter of sensitivity to the patient's needs. The clearest analogy I can give you is perhaps the one of the musician with ' perfect pitch '. He will listen to an instrument, then make adjustments to make it sound in tune without reference to anything other than his own sense of sound values. We do the same thing with the body mind relationship of human beings—when we are able. As you no doubt know already, there are some cases in which a Healer is not able to penetrate."

" Let's hope that this is not one of them." Maclean's sharp featured face was quite unreadable as he gazed at Gibson, the light throbbing of a vein in his temple its only animation.

Gibson's limbs tingled with impatience under the scrutiny. " If we are to find the answer to that I suggest you allow me to see the patient and make my own assessment."

" Very well," Maclean said smoothly. " But before we go any further I must warn you that this is no ordinary case, anything you hear or see from now on is Top Secret and not to be divulged under any circumstances."

" That is understood," Gibson said.

" Right. The first thing you should know is that your patient is not a human being . . ." Gibson listened with growing interest as Maclean went on to give an account of the crash of the alien ship and the rescue of the pilot.

" What are the main physical differences?" he asked, when the General had finished.

Maclean made a gesture towards the Medic.

" He has a body temperature of 130 degrees," Bernstein said. " Despite the fact that we could find no obvious physical injury he

remained unconscious for some time and we were able to give him quite a going over. His metabolic rate is way up above the normal human scale. We decided that the best thing to do was to put him in a special isolation chamber with a temperature of around 100 degrees and enrich the air with added oxygen. Once we had done this he revived within a few minutes and started to move around. Then we discovered something which we might have guessed—not only is his metabolic rate a great deal higher than our norm, but his physical and mental processes are all accelerated, so that in effect he lives on a different subjective time scale from ourselves."

Gibson frowned slightly. "I don't quite see how I am supposed to fit into this. You say the alien is not injured?"

"No, as far as we can tell he is quite healthy," Bernstein said. "He is consuming terrific quantities of practically any human food we give him and he seems to thrive on it."

"Then why do you need a Healer?" Gibson asked.

"Isn't that obvious?" answered Maclean quickly. "So far Colonel Bernstein's department has been totally unable to establish any kind of two way communication with the alien. The drive principle of his ship is the answer to our major problem here at STRADE —with it we could break out of the solar system and operate on an interstellar level."

"Then surely you would be better to investigate the workings of his ship, rather than bother with him?"

"You think so?" Maclean's voice crackled with annoyance. "I have an idea that we might be in the position of a Cro-Magnon investigating a television receiver. But the question does not arise— the ship disintegrated explosively soon after we had removed the pilot."

"I see," Gibson said. "That was bad luck, but I don't see how I can help you. Doctor Bernstein must have explained to you that Healer powers are not analogous with the popular idea of telepathy. If the alien were sick I *might* be able to cure him for you, but as far as communication is concerned there is nothing I can do other than the things of which your own specialists should be more capable."

Maclean eyed Gibson coldly, as though accusing him of being deliberately obtuse. "Explain it to him, Colonel!" He snapped to his feet, his small body releasing some of its pent up nervous energy as he paced the floor of the room.

"The thing you must realise first of all, Peter, is that contact, real two way contact with this alien is *vital,*" Bernstein commenced.

" We must either accelerate ourselves up to his level, or bring him down to ours—those seem the only alternatives."

Gibson bit at his lower lip. " If I am guessing correctly, I was brought here under false pretences. My work is exclusively that of healing and relieving pain."

" I understand that," Bernstein said. " But hear me out before you make any rash decisions. If necessary we could no doubt find volunteers who would be willing to have themselves adapted, but such an operation is beyond the power of our surgeons. As you know it would require the re-routing and modification of the whole cortical and neural systems. The same difficulties are even greater when applied to the surgical modification of the alien. On the other hand, it is more than possible that your own experience in the manipulation of metabolic rates . . ."

Gibson jerked to his feet, an expression of horror in his eyes as he stared at the man who had once been his teacher, a Medic whose integrity he had respected above all others. " Are you seriously suggesting that I should tamper with the body processes of this alien without his consent? This is a thinking, intelligent creature you are talking of—not an insensate hunk of material to be moulded to your will. *The idea is monstrous!*" Even if Bernstein thought it were possible, it seemed against all morality to mutilate a being in such a manner.

" This is a matter of survival," Maclean said, his face very pale. " Spare us your pious attitudes and use some common sense. Just suppose for a moment that this alien is a scout investigating our system with a view to colonisation or invasion. Such a thing is not surely beyond the bounds of possibility? Imagine what would happen if he is followed by an attacking force, manned by people of his own race. What chance would we have against them? They could outthink, outfight and outdistance us in any combat with the combination of their mental powers and this drive of theirs."

" We have no right to work on the basis of such a supposition," said Gibson, ignoring Bernstein's warning gestures. " He may be a perfectly harmless traveller, stranded here because of the failure of his ship."

" This isn't a question of right!" Maclean returned fiercely. " Without communication we shall never know until it is too late. The threat of possible invasion will be hanging over us from now on, until we can find a *certain* answer. We *must* use every means in our power to find a way of contacting him."

" Has he made any overt action of hostility?"

"Of course not!" Maclean snapped. "What would be the point? He is being well treated, kept under the best conditions we are able to provide."

"I still don't like the idea," Gibson said.

"Look at it this way," Bernstein intervened. "Even if General Maclean's fears are unfounded, what does the future hold for this alien? He will spend the rest of his natural life cooped up in that isolation ward, with no real contact with other beings. Even if we do eventually find some method of communication, he still won't be able to live a normal existence whilst he is a prisoner of the differences between his body processes and our own. Can you imagine the suffering such a situation could bring about in a sensitive mind?"

Gibson lowered himself into the chair again, turning the facts over in his mind. It could not be denied that there was something in what Bernstein said. What would happen to the alien if Gibson refused to try this modification? Maclean wanted that interstellar drive and he would be prepared to do practically anything to get it. It would be as Bernstein predicted—the alien would go on and on like some laboratory animal, the subject of constant probing and experiment. On the other hand, if he undertook to do this thing he might at least be able to make sure that the alien did not suffer unduly at the hands of these people.

"Very well," he said, at length.

"You mean you'll do it?" asked Maclean.

"I'll see the patient," Gibson said. "Until I have I can't tell you whether or not what you ask is possible."

Bernstein heaved a massive sigh of relief. "Good boy, Peter. I knew you would see it my way."

VI

Two guards saluted and moved aside to allow the party to enter a room lit only by a yard square panel of toughened glass set in the far wall. There were two white coated men in the room already. One standing in front of the panel looking into the place beyond and the other seated in front of a bank of dials and controls.

Bernstein pointed to the controls. "We can tell the exact oxygen content, temperature and humidity of the isolation ward and adjust to a fraction of a degree." He turned to the men at the observation panel. "Everything all right, Blaydon?"

"Yes, sir. He came out of his usual four hour sleep cycle half an hour ago and he seems to be getting a bit of exercise."

"Well, Gibson—what do you think of him?" asked Maclean.

The Healer looked down at the figure of the alien. He was half as tall again as the average human, black skinned and quite hairless, and wearing a close-fitting metallic garment that showed the contours of his spare, lithe body. Gibson felt slightly sickened that an obviously intelligent creature should be kept in this way like some zoo animal, constantly observed by unseen watchers.

The isolation ward was large, some ten yards square and thirty feet high. Its only furnishings were the necessary toilet requirements, a plastiform covered divan and a table and chair. The alien was shuttling swiftly back and forth between the two side walls, his limbs at times were mere blurs of motion. His face, strange and bony by human standards, with a very large pointed nose and ears flat against the ebon skull, showed a constant flickering, an incredible mobility as expressions flitted across it in keeping with his accelerated thought patterns.

"That is what we call his pacing speed," explained Bernstein. "In moments of stress his action pattern is just untranslatable to the human eye."

The alien stopped suddenly and stood for a brief moment quite still, looking up towards the watchers.

"He can't see us, of course," Bernstein said. "But he seems to have realised the purpose of this observation window."

Gibson looked down into the jet black eyes of the alien, wondering if he had the right to tamper, to make such an unwarranted intrusion on the personal privacy of another intelligent being, the last privacy that remained to him.

"Can you do anything for us, Gibson?" Maclean said abruptly, his sharp face pointed like some efficient, enquiring machine.

"I don't know yet," Gibson replied. "First I must make a preliminary contact. Perhaps if I could go in there . . ."

"That is out of the question for the moment," Maclean said. "Apart from the personal discomfort to yourself, we can't take the chance of opening up the door of that room. One mistake and he could be out and away."

"Where to?" Gibson said. "He has no ship and none of our pressure suits would be of any use to him."

"You'll have to work from here," snapped Maclean, with a sudden, inexplicable irritability.

Gibson forced back a flush of anger. "Very well. I'll try an exploratory probe from here, but I shall have to ask you all to leave the room." He could not subdue an uncomfortable feeling that

there might still be some facets of the situation which Maclean had not seen fit to explain to him, but that would have to wait until later.

"Why do you want us out?" Sharp, bronze suspicion flooded from Maclean's mind.

"Isn't it obvious?" Gibson said. "The psychic vibrations of four people as close to me as you are set up an interference level too great for me to pierce and conduct an examination with any hope of success."

Maclean fingered the lapel of his uniform jacket. "I see. How long do you think this exploration of yours will take?"

Gibson shrugged. "I can't tell you anything with certainty at this stage."

"I'll give you five minutes," Maclean said briskly. "You heard that, men—outside, all of you!"

Gibson watched the door close behind them, then turned his attention back to the observation window. The alien was some fifteen feet away from him, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking down at the floor.

Gibson considered what his decision might mean to both of them. It would be very easy to stay here for five minutes and do nothing at all. When Maclean and Bernstein returned he could tell them that he had found the mind of the alien so unlike that of normal humans as to be impenetrable—neither of them would be in a position to call him a liar and he would probably be free to return to Earth on the next ferry. That would be the sensible thing to do as far as he himself was concerned, but that would leave the future of the alien in question and there was something about Maclean's fanaticism that he distrusted. He wondered if it was some sense of obligation towards Bernstein which might also have influenced him to go this far. It was always possible that contact with the alien mind might prove too much of a shock for his delicate powers, rendering him insane, or even killing him outright. *What would become of Jo then?* Even if he were capable of making the adjustments Maclean demanded there was the time element to be considered. If the process took too long the regression in Jo's condition might take place as he feared . . .

The precious seconds were slipping by as he stood, staring down at the alien. If this being could not be slowed down sufficiently for the investigators to make contact, what hope was there for *him*? Although what he had to do was on the face of it a mutilation, he must think of it as being for the good of the alien in the long run.

Cautiously, ready to withdraw at any moment, Gibson extended a tendril of mind stuff towards the alien.

It was like throwing the pebble of his consciousness into a madly whirling vortex of force. A kaleidoscopic shifting pattern impinged on his synesthetic senses, untranslatable, beyond his comprehension. Emotionally as well as physically the mind of the alien was on a different scale, with frequencies wildly different from those of humans. Gibson forced himself onwards, these byproducts of the alien's life processes were unimportant at the moment. He was seeking contact on a different level. Gradually now his perceptive thread was exploring the physical patterns of the alien brand, tracing down through the medulla and thalamus, along the neural connections to the pituitary, the first important key in any modification process and then towards the detailed workings of the body.

Broadly speaking the physiology was near enough to the human to present him with little interpretative difficulty, despite the much greater tempo with which the processes within it took place. With practice there was little doubt that he would be able to perform the task Maclean asked of him—but it would be a long process, made even longer if the alien himself became aware of what was taking

place and set up any kind of resistance. But at the moment he sat there unmoving on the bed, seemingly oblivious of the mind that was probing into the mechanisms of his very being.

Dimly, Gibson heard the door of the small room opening behind him and felt the swelling of the psychic presences of the humans who entered. He withdrew from the mind of the alien and staggered against the wall, suddenly weak.

"Hold him!" Bernstein shouted.

The two white coated men rushed over and helped him to a chair. He sat there for a moment, head in hands, feeling that the life force had been torn from him in great waves, leaving him totally exhausted. Whilst he was in the body mind relationship of the alien his own reactions had attempted to attune themselves in sympathy, racing far above what was normal. It was a factor he would have to watch in future. Too long an immersion in the psychic field of the alien could result in a degeneration, a complete draining of his own resistance that might be fatal. Contact would have to be strictly limited in time and broken off without fail at the end of the given period. Otherwise he would be in danger of committing unconscious suicide, especially as awareness of the drain did not appear until he returned to his own body mind relationship.

"Well, can you do it?" Maclean crowded in on him eagerly.

Lowering his hands shakily to his knees Gibson said: "I . . . think so, but it will take some time."

"How long?"

"I can't tell you that at the moment," Gibson said wearily. "You'll just have to wait and see."

"I think we'd better talk about this later," put in Bernstein hurriedly. "I'm going to take Gibson along to his quarters—he needs rest."

"Very well," Maclean said grudgingly. "Call me at H.Q. dome as soon as he is ready to commence the work. I shall require a detailed report on every stage of the operation."

VII

The quarters were reasonably comfortable, with good quality furnishings, a videophone, television receiver and a small library of book and music tapes. Gibson might have been in some comfortable apartment back on Earth—save for the fact of the armed guard who stood on duty outside the door. He was lying on the well sprung

bed. His body felt reduced and ravaged as though it had just passed through a bad bout of fever and there was an oppressive weariness in his mind.

" Thanks for getting me away from there," he said to Bernstein, who was stacked massively in a nearby chair, hands interlocked over his ample paunch.

" Don't kid yourself, son," Bernstein said. " I'm just as eager as Maclean to know all the details, but I could see the way things were with you. Was it bad?"

Gibson nodded shakily. " The process will have to be very gradual, with short daily sessions if either of us is to survive. Any sudden modification of his bodily rhythm could prove fatal, but done a degree at a time the danger is a great deal smaller."

" And to *you*?"

" I may get used to it after a time. The main snag is to find some way of resisting the temptation to accelerate my own reactions."

" Temptation?"

" A figurative way of putting it," Gibson explained. " When your consciousness is extended inside the body mind relationship of another person you naturally tend to assume the physical and psychic rhythm of that person. In a normal case, for instance, the pain of the patient is essentially real, as real as if it were my own—and the mood, say it is of depression, or fear, is assumed by my own personality."

" You can really sense things like moods, then?"

Gibson was conscious of the mental shade of suspicion behind the remark, and reminded himself that he must be careful, even with Bernstein. Any suggestion of telepathy did strange things to the most normal people. " Only vague impressions, you understand. There is no actual perception of thoughts . . . It is something of a parallel with the interpretation *you* make when you see an emotion reflected on the face of a person—nothing more detailed than that."

Bernstein seemed satisfied. " And what did you get from the alien?"

" Untranslatable in terms of human emotion," Gibson said. " Perhaps after I've worked on him for a time I may be able to assimilate his terms of reference, but at the moment his mind is just a meaningless whirlpool."

" I see." Bernstein rose to his feet. " Well, I won't stay here bothering you any longer—you need some sleep. Just let me know when you wake up, eh?"

Gibson pointed to the videophone. "Can I call Earth on that thing?"

Bernstein turned. "We're on Top Security here, you know. Whom did you wish to speak to?"

"My wife—she was crippled in an accident soon after we were married. I had hoped to cure her in another couple of months of therapy."

"I didn't know—I'm sorry," said Bernstein, frowning. "I'll speak to Maclean and find out what can be arranged." He shambled towards the door, then paused for a moment on the threshold, looking over his shoulder at Gibson. "He's really quite human underneath the brass, you know. He drives people hard because he feels that is the only way—but he isn't easy on himself either."

Gibson gave a tired smile. "All right, Bernie, I'll behave myself, don't worry."

VIII

The work of modification was slow and arduous. Day after day Gibson probed into the alien's body mind system making tiny adjustments. The non-human balance of the system made the sensing of any danger signals more difficult and he had to be doubly careful, knowing that if he pushed the living tissue too hard or failed to maintain an endocrine balance he might cause the death of the patient.

At the same time there was the strain on himself to be considered, the withdrawal which left his own body limp and gasping, his mind drained of its vitality. After the first few days he fixed his tolerance threshold at five minutes, and arranged for Bernstein to bring him out of rapport with an injection after that time. It would not be safe to rely on his own judgment. The alien system drew him inwards like a whirlpool and he lost all consciousness of time when he was part of it. Now, with the flood of stimulant from Bernstein's hypo helping his recovery there was no fear of him going beyond the safety limit.

He saw little of Maclean, but he was always conscious of the general's guiding hand not far away and aware that Bernstein would be relaying every scrap of information he was able to give. Bernstein had other duties, but he seemed pleased to spend as much of his spare time as possible with Gibson, who was glad of his solid, friendly companionship. When he was alone his thoughts slipped too readily into the closed circuit of wondering how Jo was getting

along without him and a painful consciousness of the quarter of a million miles that separated them.

This feeling of desolation was temporarily removed on the morning of the fifth day, when Bernstein informed him that Maclean had arranged for him to call Jo on the videophone. He warned Gibson that the calls would have to be carefully monitored, but that as long as the conversations were kept to purely personal matters there was no reason why such contact should not be made once a week.

Jo's face looked thin and hollow cheeked in the small screen of the videophone. But her smile was as bright as ever.

"Hullo, darling. What a wonderful surprise!"

Gibson returned her greeting and looked at her for a long moment, taking in every detail of her appearance. "How have you been?"

"Missing you terribly. How is your case?"

"Progressing, but I may have to stay here for some time." Gibson felt a pang of fear at the shadow which passed over her face. "Are you *sure* you're all right?" he asked. "You're not in pain, are you?"

"Of course not," she replied swiftly . . . too swiftly. "Now tell me what you're doing up there. What was all the mystery?"

"I'm sorry, we can't talk about that. In any case, *you* are my most important case." He felt sure that she was holding back something.

"Don't *worry*, darling." Her voice was tired.

"Promise me one thing," he said, desperately conscious of those quarter of a million miles. "If you get *any* pain, call Carter. He will be able to help you."

"I'm all right," she said again.

"*Promise!*"

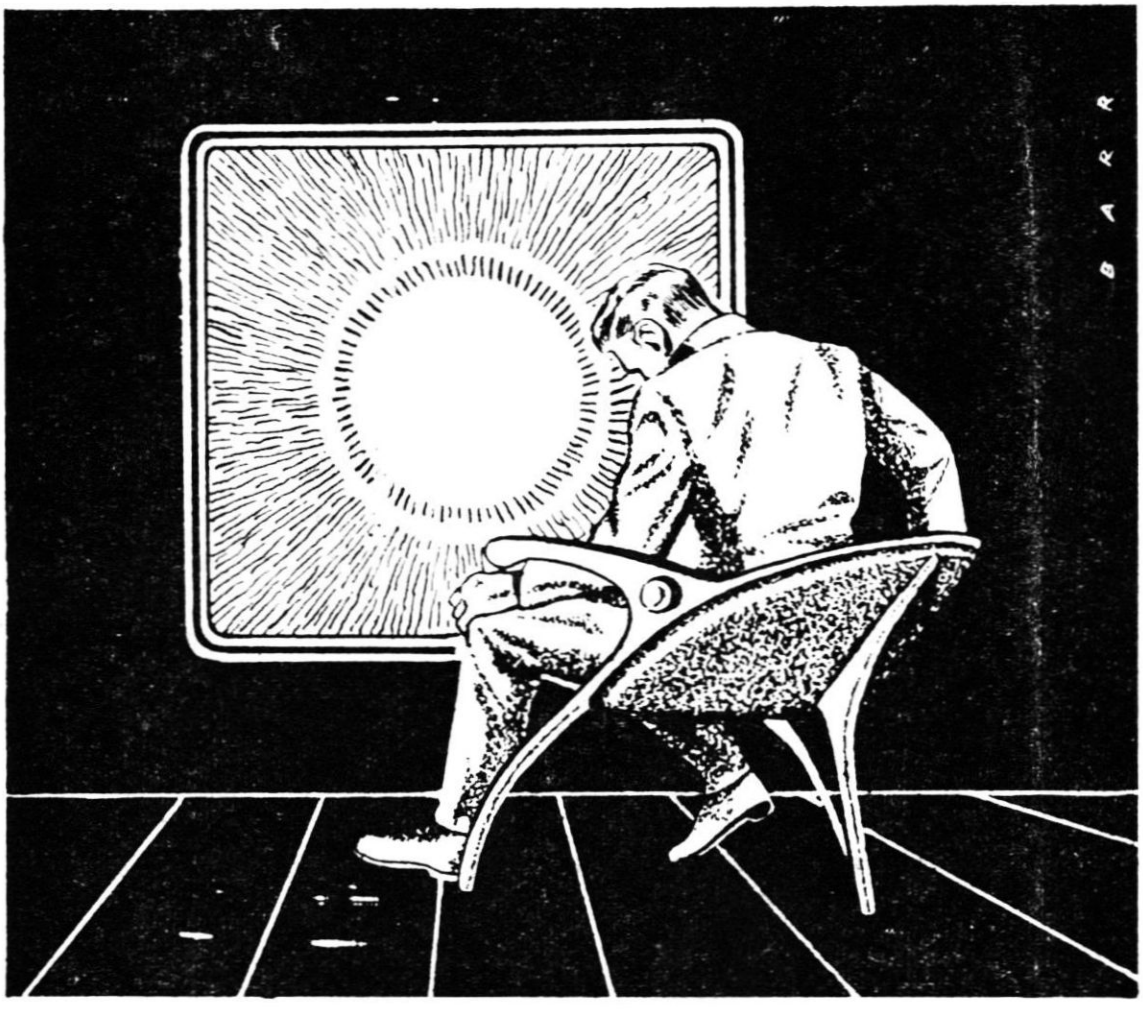
Her hand moved tremblingly towards her forehead. It was so thin and frail. "Yes, Peter . . . yes. Anything you say."

She looked so helpless and alone. He realised that he had ruined what was meant to be a pleasant interlude of reassurance by his over-anxious attitude. He must be more careful in future.

"Good girl!" he said. "I didn't mean to bark at you—I'm sorry."

A small, sad smile flitted across her mobile lips. "Everything will be all right, you'll see. Goodbye, darling."

"I'll call you again soon . . ." He stopped as the image faded. She had broken contact.



He sat for a long time, biting his lips and staring at the blank screen. He wanted more than anything to go to Maclean and demand to be put on the next ferry for Earth. But he knew what the answer would be; for the time being he would have to make the best of things as they were and hope that Jo would be all right.

IX

Time dragged onwards for Gibson in a blur of fatigue and mental strain. Each encounter with the body mind system of the alien left him more and more drained of energy, despite his careful precautions. His mind seemed wadded with cotton wool, his perceptions of everyday things dulled. Several times Bernstein suggested that he miss a day and try to recuperate some of his strength, but he refused, the task once begun must be pushed through in the shortest possible time.

The only bright spots were the weekly contacts with Jo over the videophone. She always had a ready smile of greeting for him and a hope on her face each time that he would tell her he was coming home. Despite the fact that the subject was never brought into their

conversations after the first few weeks, he knew that it was always just beneath the surface and the sense of her disappointment remained with him long after her face had faded from the screen.

Always he questioned her closely about her condition and she made reassuring sounds, even essaying a little joke sometimes. Wrapped in the insulation of his own exhaustion he was prepared to let the matter go, telling himself that she would contact Carter if there was any doubt. She had promised him that.

The body temperature of the alien was down to 120 degrees now, and his movements visibly slower. Perhaps soon the work would become easier. Then, one morning almost two months from the beginning of the modification process, Gibson felt the light prick of the needle in his forearm and the growing warmth of the stimulant flowing through his veins, the signal to withdraw. He began to gather the tendrils of thought, which were extensions of his being inside the system of the alien, back towards the medulla, their point of entry, and found a new resistance. He was being *held* by something, a definite pressure.

Panic caught at his throat and he stiffened in the chair—a half man in his body, the rest of him extended across the distance between himself and the alien, some twenty feet away.

Seeping into his consciousness, along the pathways which he had built for his own outward going impulses, was something else—*a sense of awareness*. It was as though the conscious mind of the alien had at last sensed the presence of an intruder and was making an exploratory effort towards communication.

Gibson was temporarily helpless, held there in the grip of the alien's waking thought. A flood of hostile impulses might surge along that thread of contact at any moment, a flood with all the tearing, ravening force of the accelerated awareness of the alien. And each second past the tolerance threshold Gibson was growing weaker, less able to resist, suspended paralysed on a tightrope of fear.

Beyond all this he was half aware of Bernstein, shaking his body, trying to bring him back to full consciousness. Then suddenly, the prick of another needle and a spreading fire as the stronger drug raced through his system.

Holding his extended mind taut, whiplike, Gibson made one final effort. A wrench, a blinding fire inside his skull and he was free. He slumped forward in the chair, his shaking body drenched in sweat.

Two orderlies carried him back to his quarters. He attempted to talk, but Bernstein motioned him to silence and plunged a hypo

into him again. This time it was a sedative. He fell into a black, writhing pit of sleep.

Bernstein was at his bedside when he awoke again, the gentle brown eyes full of concern. "How are you feeling now?"

Gibson searched himself for the answer and found to his surprise that much of his fatigue seemed to have left him. "Better, thanks."

"You should, you've been out for nearly thirty-six hours," Bernstein said. "What happened exactly?"

Gibson explored the fresh memory. He sensed again the way in which his mind had been gripped by the alien and wondered if now, when he was stronger and knew the danger signal he might be able to avoid that embrace. At least he was certain of one thing—he wanted to go on now more than ever before. Direct contact with another conscious mind was not possible with humans, but it seemed that it might become reality with this alien, opening up a new and exciting field of exploration.

"What happened," repeated Bernstein.

"I was overtired," Gibson said. He felt strangely elated on the edge of this new experience, but he wanted to know more before he confided in Bernstein.

"You're sure there's nothing else?" Bernstein's face was troubled.

"No," Gibson shook his head. "Thanks for giving me those jabs, though."

"That's what I'm here for . . ."

Thirty-six hours! Gibson pulled himself from the bed with a jerk. He remembered that he had planned to call Jo right after the session. She would be worrying herself sick for fear something had happened to him. He walked over to the videophone.

"Please put the usual call through to my wife on Earth," he said as the face of the operator flowed into focus.

"Hold on please, Mr. Gibson." The screen went blank for a moment, then another face appeared.

"Hullo, Gibson." It was Maclean. There was something wrong with the muscles at the corners of his mouth.

"I was calling my wife," Gibson said.

"I know," Maclean said. "I'm afraid it will not be possible at the moment. We've been out of contact with Earth for a couple of days now. This is the sunspot season, you know, and the whole planet is blanketed with static."

Gibson felt the nervous tension stiffening his body. It had

suddenly become very urgent that he should see Jo. He found himself trying to remember what had passed between them on their last conversation . . . just how she had looked. He had been in a stupor of exhaustion at the time.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" he asked.

Maclean's pale hands fluttered at the bottom of the screen. "I'm sorry, Gibson. There's nothing anybody can do under the circumstances."

"When can I expect to get through, then?" pursued Gibson.

"In two or three days, perhaps . . ."

"That long?"

"How the devil do I know?" snapped Maclean with a sudden explosive irritability. "You'll have to wait and see." His image faded abruptly from the screen as he broke contact.

Gibson turned to Bernstein, who had been standing quietly by during the call, but he was only in time to see the broad back of the Medic disappearing through the doorway.

X

Maclean looked up as the door of his office burst open to admit Bernstein. The big Medic's face was set and there was a dangerous light in his usually mild eyes. He blundered over to the desk and stood looking down at Maclean.

"I know you outrank me, Mac, but what the hell do you think you're playing at? I was in contact with Earth myself less than two hours ago, so what's all this rot about sun spots?"

"Simmer down, Bernie," Maclean said with quiet authority.

"Don't you realise the risks that boy Gibson is taking for this damned project of yours? He's on the edge of a complete collapse. If you don't let him make this regular contact with his wife I won't be responsible for his mental state."

"What did you want me to tell him, the truth?" Maclean said tensely. "I had a call from Earth half an hour ago saying that she was taken to Central City Hospital this morning."

Bernstein's shoulders slumped. "My God!"

"Now perhaps you'll stop acting like an hysterical woman and tell me what this means—it's the report they sent me on her condition." He thrust a sheet of paper across the desk.

Bernstein lowered his bulk into a chair and read through the report quickly. "It looks as though the neural degeneration Gibson

was afraid of is beginning to take hold. They have been able to deaden the pain with drugs, but if she doesn't get real treatment within a few days she may die."

"Then why don't they treat her?"

"This is something beyond surgery, Gibson has actually been stimulating the growth of new nerve cells within her body. Now, without his guidance, the same process is in danger of becoming malignant." Bernstein slammed his fist on the desk top. "You've got to let Gibson go back to Earth and help her!"

"I can't, Bernie. Every day counts in our work here. We must have the secret of that drive."

"Even at the cost of the murder of this girl?"

Maclean's face was suddenly very old and tired. "Do you think I'm enjoying this? I don't dare allow Gibson to go back there at this stage, not to save a hundred lives. I need your help, Bernie, isn't there some other way?"

"There is *one* thing I don't understand. Gibson told me that another Healer named Carter was supposed to be keeping a check on his wife's condition."

"You think this Carter may be able to help her?" Maclean said with a new animation.

"Gibson seemed to have faith in him when we talked about it."

Maclean sprang into action like a well oiled machine. Switching on his intercom he made a brief call, then turned again to the Medic. "Right, Bernie. Can your man Blaydon take over the supervising of Gibson for a couple of days?"

"Yes, I suppose he could do it, but . . ."

"No time for arguments—my personal ship will be waiting for you outside B dome in twenty minutes, ready to go. In the meantime I'll call Earth and have them locate this Carter. You will supervise the therapy on Gibson's wife and send me a report the minute she's out of danger. Does that satisfy you?"

Bernstein's face softened. "Thanks, Mac. Sorry if I flew off the handle just now."

"Don't stand around apologising," snapped Maclean. "Get over to B dome on the double."

XI

The alien was sitting on the edge of the bed, his chin resting on cupped hands, staring up at the observation window. It was as though he was waiting for something—perhaps for the opportunity

to strike out at whoever attempted to invade his mind again.

Gibson was slightly uneasy about the sudden absence of Bernstein, but he could not hold back now. "Five minutes deadline. But if I seem to be in trouble, give me a shot before that and pull me out."

"I understand," said Blaydon, a small sandy man, with an intelligent ferretlike face.

Gibson wished again that Bernstein were there, although he knew in his heart that there was little anybody would be able to do for him if this experiment went the wrong way.

"Good luck." Blaydon retreated to his chair on the other side of the room, next to the instrument panel.

Gibson relaxed and closed his eyes. Then gradually, with greater caution than ever before, he began to project his psycho kinetic sense towards the alien. In again, through the medulla, coursing down the nerve channels, feeling the racing tempo of the alien body.

Then suddenly it was there again, a sense of identity, a questioning. It took all Gibson's self control to resist his self protective instinct to withdraw. *He must not fight this thing.* Carefully, with a studied gentleness, he transmitted his own self awareness pattern: "*Gibson . . . Human . . .*"

A moment later a jumble of swift thought, strange in form with the semantic overtones of an unknown culture. "*Kardril . . . Driflyn . . . Your mind is slow, but I understand your talk without words . . . Human . . . but different?*"

"*We are . . . slower than you. You are being kept here because you could not live in our environment . . .*"

"*Yes . . . I guessed.*"

Gibson's link of mind stuff was taking the two way traffic, amplifying the weak impulses of the alien's mind. "*Your ship crashed . . . you are on our satellite Luna.*"

"*Yes, it is not important—they will find me . . .*"

Gibson stiffened. "*WHO?*"

"*The rescue party . . . It will not be long now . . .*" There was a great deal of activity going on behind the actual communication, a high noise level which at times threatened to blank out the coherence of the alien's thought, but it was on a plane which Gibson was unable to probe.

"*You contacted them before your ship crashed?*"

"*No—there was no time, but it is not necessary. They will come . . .*"

"How will they find you?"

"My ship itself is a beacon, transmitting a constant wave pattern from the structure of the hull itself . . . You have been trying for a long time to contact me?"

"Yes . . . we are slower." Gibson was guarding his private thoughts carefully, although there was very little chance that the alien would be able to extract anything from him he did not wish to give.

"It is good . . . You have helped me . . . but soon it will be better, when my people come."

Gibson felt a prick in his arm, and realised that this strange, laboured conversation with its clumsy interchange of half understood symbols had taken up his time.

"I must go now. I will be back . . ." He eased his consciousness away from that of the alien. This time there was no resistance to his withdrawal.

"Are you all right?" asked Blaydon anxiously, bending over him.

Gibson nodded, and pulling himself up from the chair he walked towards the door, totally immersed in his thoughts of the bravery of the alien, Kardril, who awaited his rescue with such patient confidence. Mankind had something to learn from these people in self discipline. Kardril had no way of knowing that his ship had been totally destroyed soon after he was taken from it—and that the rescue party he was waiting for would thus never come. Gibson wondered if he had the right to rob the alien of that hope. Kardril did not know about the modification either, his environment had been changed with such subtle care as the process moved on that he was totally unaware of the differences in himself.

Gibson walked slowly back to his quarters, aware that he had a deep moral problem on his hands which he could discuss with no other person. The decision lay with him alone. If he told Maclean he had made this contact he would be forced to thrust on regardless of any other considerations, asking questions of the alien which might break down the link of trust that seemed to be forming. Kardril was not just an experimental animal, he was a real person towards whom Gibson felt a growing responsibility.

XII

Maclean felt a sudden lurch of alarm as Bernstein's face appeared in the vision screen. "Well, what's happened? Did you get Carter?"

One corner of Bernstein's heavy mouth twitched. "Yes, your people had him waiting for me as soon as I arrived, we went straight by copter to the hospital."

"Good! And the girl?"

"There is no change in her condition."

"But this Carter—he was able to help her?"

"She would not let him," Bernstein said dully.

"What the devil do you mean?" Maclean tensed forward.

"Just that—she refused to allow him to treat her," Bernstein said. "The idea of any other Healer than Gibson entering her mind is unthinkable to her."

"I don't understand. . ."

"It's quite simple. People have died before rather than let a Healer treat them—it's a deep unconscious fear of violation. Her love and trust for Gibson enabled her to overcome it in his case, but Carter is a comparative stranger."

"Why doesn't he treat her anyway?"

"It might mean permanent injury to her sanity if he tried against her will. You've got to send Gibson down here to help her—it's the only way."

"No! You'll have to get somebody else." Maclean's pale hands had taken on an agitated life of their own, fluttering along the desk top out of range of the videophone camera. He wanted to help this girl and Gibson, but there was something more important than any of them. Men, good men, had died trying to find the road to the stars. He had a duty to those men.

"There is nobody she will accept," Bernstein said solidly.

"It's no good, Bernie. I can't give up on this thing now."

"You're sentencing her to death!"

Maclean's hands flew to the control in a sudden frenzy and cut off the accusing image. There was nothing to be gained by talk. That was the trouble with civilians in uniform like Bernstein, they failed to understand that there are some things on which a soldier just cannot compromise. This was no time for sentimentality; the importance of the issues involved were quite clear cut. If the forfeit had been his own life, there would still have been no hesitation.

His head slumped forward onto his arms, eyes tightly closed. But it was impossible to shut out that inner vision of a young woman, dying painfully. . . *under his orders.* He stayed like that for a long time. . .

XIII

Gibson was sitting listening to a music tape, letting the cool waves of sound wash over him. Soon, in a couple of hours, he would have to go to the isolation ward and carry out yet another modification session—and the question of how much of the truth of his situation the alien should be told was not yet settled in his mind.

He lit a cigarette and tried to concentrate on the music, pushing Kardril out of his mind. But a flicker of familiar melody opened another door of memory and he found himself thinking of Jo, longing for her presence. If only this sunspot business would clear up. How much longer would it be now? Poor Jo, she must be very lonely there on her own in the apartment.

The videophone buzzer broke in on his reflections. He walked across and switched it on.

"Hallo, Peter," Bernstein said. "I'd like you to come along to the sick bay right away, please."

"Of course. Pleased to see you back, Bernie. Where have you been? Nobody seemed to know."

Bernstein gave a big grin. "You'll find out soon enough."

"I'll be with you in two minutes." Gibson switched off and headed out of the room.

Maclean and Bernstein were sitting alone together in the office of the sick bay.

"I still don't see how I didn't come to think of it myself," Maclean said.

"I'll tell you why, Mac," Bernstein said gently. "For one thing you're getting old, and for another you're so fixated on this darned interstellar drive of yours that it never so much as occurred to you that there was a way of arranging things so that you could both have your cake *and* eat it."

"But I wouldn't have thought that in her condition such a trip was possible."

"There was a certain risk," Bernstein admitted. "But the human spirit is a pretty unconquerable thing, you know. When I told Jo that I was going to pack her full of Stranamin and bring her up here to her beloved Peter I thought that she was going to jump right out of her bed, sick as she was."

"I felt pretty rough about it," Maclean said quietly.

"I know, Mac. Don't blame yourself. You run this place in the only possible way, I understand that."

"Do you think *he* would feel that way?" Maclean said, pointing to the closed door of the ward.

"All the 'woulds' and 'ifs' in the universe don't matter two pennyworth of stardust," said Bernstein, rising to his feet. "I don't see any possible reason why he, or anybody else, should ever know anything about it."

Gibson smiled down at the sleeping figure. She looked so young and helpless, like a tiny child. Even now he could still sense the golden white of love and confidence that surrounded her mind like an aura.

In this, the first occasion he had used his healing powers on a human since beginning the work with the alien, he had been amazed at the increase in his facility. It was as though the hard, gruelling months exploring and resisting the whirling body mind relationship of Kardril had tuned up his ability, giving him a new confidence in his powers. It had been only the work of minutes to probe straight down into Jo's trusting, relaxed mind and move along the nerve paths to the centres of her pain.

When she awoke again the pain would be gone and in a day or so they would be able to continue the therapy where it had been broken off. With his increased ability the whole matter could be cleared up in a couple of weeks, and here under the lesser gravity of Luna she would have ideal conditions for the exercise which would bring back the use to her partially atrophied leg muscles.

The treatment of Jo had brought something else to him—a new realisation of the value of Healing, of his obligations as a Healer. Although he was grateful to Bernstein and Maclean for their action in bringing Jo here to Luna, he would not be true to his principles if he went on mutilating Kardril without his consent. He must be entirely honest with the alien, telling him the true facts of his position, that his ship was destroyed and along with it the beacon which could guide any possible rescue attempt. Then he could tell Kardril about the modification process and suggest that he should carry on so that the alien might at some time in the future be able to live a normal life amongst human beings. That was the only way it could be now. He had allowed himself to be swayed by Maclean's rationalisations into commencing the metabolic adjustment, but now, *if the alien wanted it that way*, there would be an entirely different reason for carrying on with it—a reason which was not in conflict with his convictions as a Healer.

He walked out of the ward, closing the door softly behind him. Bernstein was waiting to go along to the isolation room with him.

XIV

This time contact with the mind of the alien was immediate and clear. It was as if Kardril had been waiting for him. Gibson had no doubts about what he intended to do. There could be no lies between himself and Kardril from now on. He felt a deep sympathy for the alien, a realisation that Maclean's interstellar ambitions and the secret of the drive were unimportant beside the fact of his responsibility towards this fellow creature.

After they had exchanged greetings Gibson began to explain: *"I have to tell you about myself, Kardril. As you said, my race is slow—living on a different time rate from yours. I want you to trust me when I tell you what has been happening to you over the past months. . ."*

"Happening? I don't understand . . . I have been waiting here, and you have been trying to contact me. Isn't that all?"

"No. This contact we have now is not what I was trying to do . . . The others of my race do not communicate in this way—but they were too slow to use speech with you. Now, quite soon, it may be possible . . ."

"They have changed?"

"No—you are the one who has been changed. There is another facet to this power of communication which I possess, through which I have been gradually slowing down your body and mind processes."

"But I feel no different!"

"Of course not—you are within your own frame of reference, so there is no way in which you could know. You have not been harmed—just slowed down. Even now, you are considerably faster than our normal."

A flash of multi-coloured alarm showed in the thoughts of the alien. *"But my own people! I would be a freak—slower than a Ugri (image of some tortoise like creature). When the rescue party comes I shall be a hopeless cripple, an idiot creature. Why have you done this to me, Gibson?"*

"I am only telling you this for your own good . . . If you want me to stop now, I will do so, but first listen to me . . . "

Coruscating rage. *"No! Leave me, you monster!"*

Gibson struggled to maintain his contact against the surge of

rejection. *" You must understand, Kardril . . . The rescue ship you are waiting for—it will not be coming."*

" You lie!"

" No! The ship was destroyed soon after you were taken from it. There is no message, no beacon to guide them here. You will never leave our solar system, at least until we have the interstellar drive . . . You must make . . ."

Gibson broke off as the mind of the alien exploded in a desperate paroxysm of madness and pain. He was no longer conscious of any coherent attempt at communication as the chain reaction of rage and fear which he had set off blossomed outwards, robbing Kardril of all control over his emotions.

With a sickness of recognition Gibson realised that he was responsible for this. Not content with mutilating Kardril he had now robbed him of all hope and reason for living. It was too late to correct the mistake, but there was perhaps one way, one desperate method by which he could save the alien at least some of the pain.

Instead of withdrawing, as all his instincts told him to, Gibson thrust forward, on into the conscious mind of the alien where he had never before ventured. Soothing, deadening, lobotomising his fear. Calming the storm that lashed there with such fury. The alien was so wrapped in his own tight circle of self-pity that he was unaware of the probing tendrils of Gibson's thought. Unaware and unguarded . . .

Gibson withdrew at last, with a sickness in his own mind at what he had found. Tracing the source of the eruption he could now see just how Kardril had been lying to him. His own state of mind had been such that he had been too ready to accept the alien and sympathise with him.

But now he knew *what* Kardril was. A scout, one of many thousands sent out by the Driflyn, a race who lived for war and conquest. Ravening, bestial creatures who raped planetary systems and destroyed civilisations as part of their way of life. An entire culture based on the pursuit of war and destruction—a swift, deadly enemy against whom the solar system would have lain helpless, if it had not been for the lucky chance that Kardril's ship, the beacon which would lead the first wave, had been destroyed by accident. Now he would be presumed lost, and the vicious pack would follow another scent through the maze of hyper space to where another of the scouts was waiting. But Earth would be safe—it might be another thousand years before a scout happened in this particular sector again and beamed his message back.

The prick and thrust of Bernstein's needle brought Gibson back again to the physical world. Without even a glance at the observation window he rose shakily from his seat.

It was over, he wanted no more part of this thing into whom he had read the virtues and failings of a human being. He knew that whatever method he tried he would not be able to obtain the secret of the interstellar drive from Kardril. The Driflyn would not have allowed such knowledge to be carried in the mind of a mere scout, to be extracted by one of their prey.

He turned to Bernstein, the memory of the roiling corruption that was the mind of the alien a physical nausea in him. "I've got to see Maclean right away."

The big Medic's gentle eyes took in his physical condition. "Hadn't you better rest first?"

"No—there's something he must be told—*now*."

"You've made some sort of contact with the alien, haven't you?"

Gibson nodded. "Yes, Bernie, but I don't want to talk about it until we're with Maclean, do you mind?"

XV

Maclean sat quite still, like some small grey statue as Gibson talked.

It was not easy to rob Maclean of the hope that must have been in his mind ever since the arrival of the alien, but Gibson knew that it was something which had to be done. He talked on and on, explaining the things he had found in his sudden, panoramic view of the unguarded mind of Kardril. He spoke as though today had been the first real communication and he had immediately uncovered the alien's secret; what had gone before was not important.

Then at last he was finished and there was only the throb of the air conditioning in the room. Maclean was so still that he hardly seemed to be breathing, and his pale eyes were out of focus.

Bernstein eyed the stricken general for a moment, then said: "Thank you, Peter. I think we understand the position. You had better go along and get some rest now. I'll call in and see you later."

Gibson rose to his feet and stood awkwardly, looking at the figure behind the desk and sensing the blue black aura of despair. "I'm sorry, General. I know how . . ."

"I'll see you later," repeated Bernstein, jerking his big head in the direction of the door.

Gibson nodded and left the room.

When he was gone Bernstein said: "I know, Mac. It's a hell of a disappointment, but we've struck rough patches before. At least we can be thankful that the alien ship was destroyed. If it had remained intact and continued to send out its signal we might already have been invaded by a force of monsters such as Gibson describes."

Maclean rose to his feet jerkily. "*But it wasn't destroyed, Bernie.*" Moving with the bizarre precision of a clockwork toy he was out of the door before Bernstein had recovered from the shock sufficiently to speak.

The big Medic stood, turning words over in his mind like a child watching the coloured pieces in a toy kaleidoscope. Then the pieces fell together and he knew. Maclean had realised from the very beginning that he would not consent to assist in the mutilation of the alien if he thought there was any other way of finding the secret of the drive. The attainment of his dream meant more to Maclean than any petty considerations of morality. A question formed in glittering ice clad letters and froze the mind of Bernstein—*Did the dream mean more than the survival of the human race?*

XVI

Maclean walked on, pace unchanged, until he came to the main airlock. Then he rapped out brief orders to the captain of the guard. Five minutes later he was heading across the Lunar plain in a dust-cat towards M dome, the drive testing department which stood well away from the rest of STRADE as a guard against the danger of the experiments which were carried out there.

On his arrival at M dome he hurried to the main laboratory and gave instructions to the Colonel in charge. The colonel was too well trained to ask for reasons, but even he hesitated for a moment before complying with Maclean's orders. Only a moment, because he knew how much this decision must be costing the old man. He *was* an old man—here at this moment he looked withered and haggard, a burnt out shadow too small for his uniform.

Half an hour later two dustcats left M dome. Maclean was alone in one, driving himself this time. The other carried a squad with atomic demolition equipment and pulled a large trailer. The alien scout ship was on the trailer.

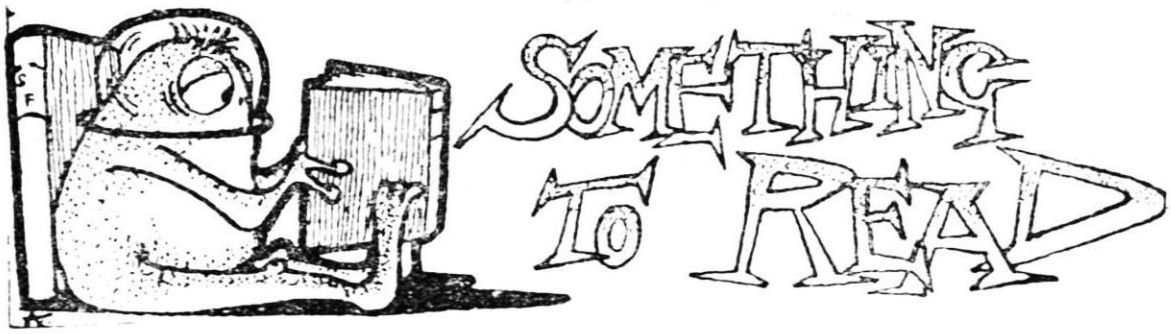
After the explosion Maclean sat for a long time looking at the new crater in the pitted surface of Luna. If the aliens were already

homing in on the signal it might be too late. *No*! he dismissed the possibility from his mind. There was work to be done. The team at M dome had been unable to wrest any useful information from the fused wreck of the alien ship's drive mechanism, but that was not the end, there were other lines of research which could yet lead to the realisation of the dream.

Maclean jerked the dustcat into gear and headed back towards STRADE. It was not true to say that nothing had been learned from the alien ship. The dream was nearer to reality now because he had proof that it was attainable. He looked up at the unwinking flecks of light that swarmed overhead and reaffirmed his acceptance of their challenge.

There were no short cuts, but mankind would make it to the stars, the hard way . . .

DAN MORGAN



New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

It seems that "science-fiction" is considered a dirty word (or two dirty words) in the publishing trade. When the American edition of GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION changes its title to GALAXY MAGAZINE, it is not surprising that Charles Eric Maine's latest novel is described as "a novel for adult minds only". And it doesn't really surprise me that I nearly passed the title by, as the majority of the novels I have on the shelves containing "adult" or "adult mind" or "adult reading" in their descriptions are of the semi-highbrow, semi-pornographic type. Not always semi-highbrow, either.

Hidden somewhere in the last few weeks' published titles there may be other s-f novels (possibly described as "star-grasping romances"?) but I can't find any.

Reading other people's opinions and reviews of Charles Eric Maine's earlier works I get the impression that he is either liked reasonably well, or else intensely disliked. Or rather, his writing affects the reviewers that way. But no one raves over his work (at least, in the s-f review columns). I've tried to analyse my own reaction of medium-warmth, but not to my satisfaction.

In THE TIDE WENT OUT (Hodder & Stoughton, 12/6, 190 pp.) he takes a logical course from a basic premise which holds up quite well. Whilst I am no expert on vulcanology or any geological subject I have read at least two works which tend to support the premise put forward —that it would be possible for all the waters of the earth to drain away into the interior of the planet, leaving the crust desert and desolate. The cause is, naturally, atomic explosion experiments which unsettle the crust, and permit the seas to drain away. Admittedly, I can't envisage it happening quite as simply and swiftly as Mr. Maine indicates, but he is entitled to force the pace a bit, just as another author may be permitted to dream up an FTL drive.

Philip Wade is editor of OUTLOOK (a PICTURE POST type magazine) and has run a feature on recent H-bomb test series, in which he develops the theme of possible disaster by the explosions penetrating the earth's crust and letting the water drain away. The article is supported

by certain factual data about falling sea levels, radioactive rain and so forth. The issue containing the article is pulled off the stands by Government edict, and a thinly disguised censorship clamped on all similar material.

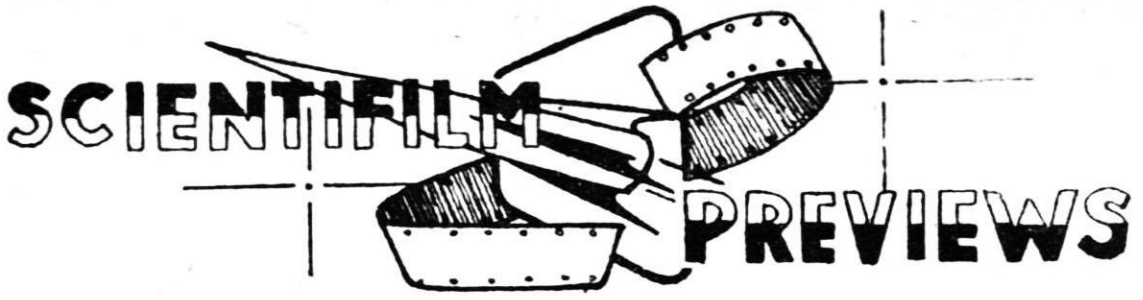
Wade is called to see Sir Hubert Piercey, ex-officio in charge of the ex-officio government department handling the censorship, and offered employment in the Information Bureau, and it becomes apparent that his article was uncomfortably close to the truth.

Wade is a married man, with a son, but due to a past defection his home life with his wife, Janet, is not too happy and although it is obvious he is trying to reform, Mr. Maine depicts his character with defects that will permit Wade to "go wrong" again under pressure—despite a strong desire to remain "true"; considerable internal conflict results.

When Wade accepts the job with the International Bureau of Information it soon becomes obvious that the world is in a very shaky position; water rationing is imminent, and the only probable places of safety and continued life-supporting conditions are the Arctic and Antarctic regions. On the old human principle of keeping a good thing to yourself, the Information Bureau is primarily concerned with making sure no information leaks out before it has to be released, and then that it is released in the best possible light. At the same time those in the know, following the same principle, are seeing that they, their immediate (and liked) families and friends, people of use to them, and similar classes of associate/useful persons are the ones selected for evacuation to the "safe" territories. People working like Wade, with a good idea of the general set-up and probable end, are kept "loyal" by having the safety of their families guaranteed.

With Janet and his son safe in the Arctic camp, Wade lets himself go somewhat, and strikes up a liaison with a girl employee, Sue. Incident and action are fast and vary from the tragic to the almost humorous, but you will understand that the overall tone of the book is, needfully, dramatic, and Mr. Maine hurries his proto-Earth and his hero through to a very sticky finish. Oh, yes, there is no saviour-scientist coming to the rescue in this book, although a final and somewhat ironical addendum to the story proper reveals that Janet and young David are safe in the Arctic camp.

I can think of no good reason why this book should not be attention-gripping, why it should not hold the reader in one of those spells where it is impossible to relinquish one's grasp of it until you have read every page. But the simple fact is that somehow, somewhere, it failed to work that sort of spell over me. It is a good story, a not-unoriginal story (although the reader will appreciate some resemblance to other "catastrophic" yarns is unavoidable in the early pages), an exciting story, a story wherein the characterisation of the main players is quite well-founded and well-explored. But . . . somewhere it just fell short of what one hoped for. But definitely you must read it. Maybe you'll have to read it in one session.



News and Advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

THE BLOB (at least it isn't "Colossal", "from Another World" or "Teenage") could have been the surprise film at the 16th World Science Fiction Convention. Paramount Studios offered it (with a string: call the masquerade the Blob Ball), but the title did not inspire confidence and the con committee feared another fiasco like the Souwestercon (Texas) preview of THE SPACE CHILDREN. As it turns out, THE BLOB is not America's equivalent of QUATERMASS I (THE CREEPING UNKNOWN, cis-Atlantic), but it is not a bad job. It's a plot that was prevalent in the amazing stories of the late 20's, reaching the screen 30 years later but not too late to entertain audiences yet unborn when Gernsback was in flower. In the crude old days we had the monthly menace that seemingly couldn't be stopped but penultimately was and the world was saved for another four weeks for scientification, and my very real regret in these crud new days of earth-in-peril pix is that the authors who pioneered—Hamilton, Cummings, Williamson, Starzl, even John Russell Fearn—are not reaping the yellow harvests of Hollywood gold rather than the Odd-Johnnies Come Lately who do the "original" stories.

THE BLOB is a voracious gob of carniverous goo that arrives via meteor express on the outskirts of a small town in Pennsylvania and ingests its way, victim by victim, into the heart of the community. There it puts in an impersonal appearance at a midnight Spook Show, devouring the movie operator just as he is projecting the final frightening reel of *Daughter of Horror*, a mythical Bela Lugosi film co-billed with (also imaginary) *The Vampire and the Robot*. People generally like jello, and this switch on jello liking people is novel enough for the general public to eat it up. The Blob itself, in colour, is convincingly realistic, and while it is not destroyed but only frozen into inactivity, a sequel seems unlikely unless Son of Blob melts the polar ice onto which his pop has been parachuted.

I MARRIED A MONSTER FROM OUTER SPACE will in-

evitably be compared with THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, to which it is inferior, but it is not inferior *per se*. In the Andromeda constellation the lethal rays of a pre-nova sun kill all of an inhabited planet's females before survival ships can be constructed. The hardier males escape by saucer and land on earth to perpetuate their race. By gaseous absorption, an absorbing process to watch, they kidnap earthmen, wire them for matrix-transmissions, and thereafter appear as simulacrum twins of their captives. During brief lightning flashes, or when one wills himself to make his true appearance evident to a fellow Andromedean, the alien form is glimpsed beneath the human guise. When forthrightly revealed, the complete aliens are fine horrors by earth standards, hideous, phosphorescent, with criss-cross trunks for noses. When they disintegrate at death, as 99 per cent. of film monsters have the tendency to do, they really go in a glue of glory. The special effects are very effective and the acting quite acceptable. This may be classed as one of the better monster pictures.

EARTH *vs* THE SPIDER may *not* be classed as one of the better monster pictures, and I say this realising I am biting the ham that feeds me, for producer Bert Gordon throws a plug my way by including (ta) four shots of my *FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND* magazine. I am surprised that after TARANTULA a lesser studio would attempt the same theme so soon. In the hierarchy of THE BLACK SCORPION, THE DEADLY MANTIS, THEM !, ad insectum, this one is pretty low on the scale. A few characters spend most of their time in the Carlsgood Caverns endangered by a giant spider. Super arachnid spins some time rather unconvincingly superimposed here and there in a small town. Once when the spider's been doused with a super dose of DDT and is presumed kaput, a group of rock 'n' rollers jolts it back to life with their raise-the-dead dance session.

TEENAGE CAVEMAN reprises the by-now-prehistoric stockshots from ONE MILLION BC and UNKNOWN ISLAND (magnified Gila monsters and men in dime store dinosaur suits) and introduces the monster later to be seen in NIGHT OF THE BLOOD-BEAST. There is one surprise : at the end we learn we have been viewing savages of the *future*, after Atomigeddon.

HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER is distinguished for the do-it-yourself frontal lobotomy formula prepared in simple salve form during the unfolding of the picture by a rich man's Paul Blaisdell. Disenfranchised by the studio to which he has given his awe for 25 years, the unwanted make-up artist wreaks revenge by manipulating zomboid teenage actors as though they were real werewolves and frankensteins.

In a HOUSE OF WAX type finale 17 monster masks go up in smoke and flame. The last reel's in colour, otherwise the instructions on HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER are, like the players, black and white. Good haunting!

WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

There was once a man in America who made his living by putting small ads in large circulation magazines reading ACT NOW. DON'T DELAY. SEND $1.00 TO ME IMMEDIATELY AT THE ADDRESS BELOW. HURRY—TOMORROW MAY BE TOO LATE. Among the hundreds of millions of people in America there were always enough of the idly curious or simple minded to provide him with an adequate income. The law got after him once, but it was ruled that since he offered nothing at all he couldn't be accused of fraud.

Only slightly less startling are the people who live by selling names and addresses. I don't know if you've ever noticed their advertisements, but they read RECEIVE INTERESTING MAIL. APPLY TO . . . These people make lists of those who write in and sell them for hard cash to mail order firms, charity organisers, etc., rather like the mathematicians who sell lists of random numbers to research workers. The product is known as " sucker lists " and the reasoning is that people who answer such an advertisement are likely to be people who will write away for things, or who at least can read.

To want to " receive interesting mail " is a very understandable desire, but one not so easily satisfied. I suppose it all started for us as children, when about Christmas and birthday time the postman became a rich unpredictable uncle delivering surprises from all over the world into our hot little hands. But, alas, most of us have long lost the thrill of seeing the postman coming up our path : we expect nothing more colourful than a Final Demand in red ink, and we almost wish we were a dog so we could bite him. This all changed for me when I became actively interested in science fiction fandom, and it's one of the most rewarding things about the hobby. Instead of lying resentfully in bed in the mornings I dash downstairs for the morning's mail—driven, as you might say, from pillow to post—and instead of every day being a dull stepping-stone to Saturday it's enlivened by two consignments of the Unexpected. Everything comes that you can think of, and a lot that you can't, because sf fans are people with highly original minds—complimentary copies of books, gramophone records, picture postcards from the most unexpected places, recorded tapes, quotecards, toys,

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, 101 Greenhead Street, Glasgow, S.E.

Wallpaper War	
It	
Sight of a Silhouette	
Sell Me A Dream	
The Hard Way	

Name and address:

Mr. P. Hazeldine of Chertsey in Surrey wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 33. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:

1. TALK NOT AT ALL
   By E. C. Tubb 24·2%
2. DEBT OF LASSOR
   By N. K. Hemming 18·9%
2. WISDOM OF THE GODS (Pt. 2)
   By Kenneth Bulmer 18·9%
4. CONFLAGRATION
   By Stuart Allen 15·4%
5. WAY OUT
   By Robert Lloyd 12·5%
6. MUTE WITNESS
   By Clifford C. Reed 10·1%

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 39.

novelties, souvenirs, photographs, maps and of course fan magazines and letters from all parts of the globe full of friendliness, humour, drama and sheer incomprehensibility. I've also received in my time such unlikely items as a wooden box of exotic fruit from Disneyland (that was Forrest J. Ackerman), letters with handpainted full colour illustrations in the margins, a slab of guava jelly from New York and a device for blowing bubbles from the top of your head from Damon Knight. When I was a very active fan stuff like this used to surge in by every post and when on rare occasions the postman didn't call we began secretly to suspect that the world had been plunged into atomic war and it was being kept out of the local papers. Once I didn't get any mail for a whole day and was considering digging a hole in the front garden when a red van drew up outside with my mail all tied up in an enormous bundle with thick rope, in what I thought was an unnecessarily pointed manner.

This was all brought home to me by reading Sandy Sanderson's "Inchmery Fan Diary" in his fan magazine APORRHETA, in which he recounts day by day the variegated imports of that lively fan household. This is heady stuff and I can well imagine a newcomer being fascinated by the colourful life which active sf fans live. In which case perhaps a word of warning might be in order. This is not quite like sending a postcard with your name and address and getting a seed catalogue. Before you can attain the dizzy

eminence of receiving devices for blowing bubbles from the top of your head from Damon Knight —and understand I cannot positively guarantee that—a certain amount of activity on your part is necessary. The Diary of a new fan might read more like :

" Jan. 1st. Got Nebula and read Willis's column by mistake. Remembered that out-of-date Postal Order they wouldn't cash and sent away for a sample fan magazine.

Jan. 10th. Fanzine arrived. Sent away for another.

Jan. 15th. Discharged from hospital, having promised doctor not to open staples with my fingernails again.

Jan. 25th. Second fanzine arrived. Decided to publish one of my own and show these people how it should be done. Jewel-like reproduction, tasteful lay-out, multi-colour illustrations, regular monthly schedule, mailed in envelopes. Wrote for material to Robert Heinlein, Arthur Clarke and a couple of Big Name Fans.

Jan. 28th. Still no word from Clarke. Wonder if I should have sent a stamped envelope—that frogman stuff must be expensive. The BNFs don't answer either, the slobs.

Feb. 10th. No word from Heinlein. Wonder if 'Robert Heinlein, America', was sufficient address.

Feb. 11th. Soap coupons.

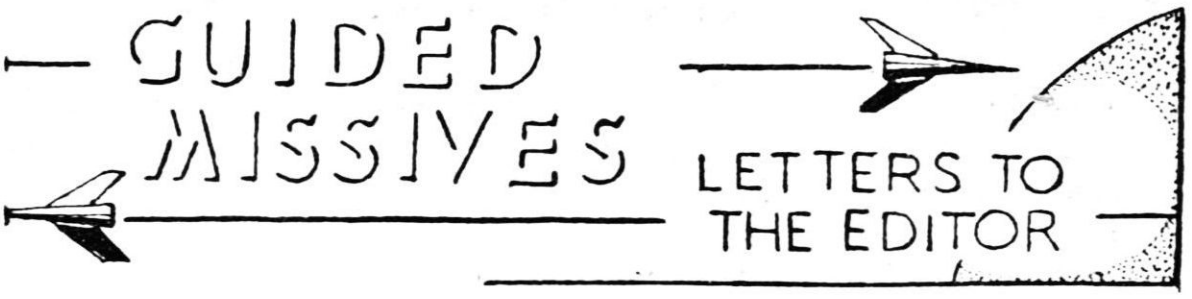
Feb. 12th. More soap coupons.

Feb. 13th. Letter from Mr. Littlewood.

Feb. 14th. Letter from Mr. Vernon. Decided to give up idea of fanzine of my own for the time being. Wrote letters of comment to the editors of the two I got and to a couple of people who sounded nice from their letters in the readers' sections.

June 12th. Haven't had time to keep up this diary but nothing much today so can catch up with my reading, just a letter from some neofan looking for material for his crudzine (some hope) and a note from Damon Knight that he's sending me a parcel."

Sandy Sanderson's address is 7 Inchmery Road, Catford, London, S.E.6, and if APORRHETA isn't available at the time he'll have you sent something else equally worth your money. If he doesn't, ask me for a refund. I'll bet I don't get enough requests to force me to leave for South America. Among the fascinating melange of news and views in the current issue, incidentally, are quotes from the hurried notes of Ron Bennett, Transatlantic Fan Fund winner and Bradbury worshipper, written during his hectic tour of the States. One typical one reads, " Have shaken hands with Bradbury six times. So far."



Dear Mr. Hamilton,

I was interested in the editorial page of your NEBULA (No. 30), in which you discuss the contents of recent science fiction stories. I agree with you, and I am very glad to read your opinions on the mores of the future, whether on this planet or some other.

Being a woman as well as a science fiction addict, it is particularly painful to me constantly to see women portrayed in the brave new worlds of years from now in much the same state as at present. It is a source of wonderment to me to see how people are able to envisage machines so very far advanced, but the human race so very much the same. The men are always virile, aggressive, cantankerous, white and from some of the western countries, mostly the U.S.A. The Earth is always engaged in conquering this galaxy or that . . . all the planets are peopled with inferior beings, or with monstrosities which come to Earth to conquer it, but fail. The women are always for work or to relieve the sex drive of the intrepid space men. If scientists, they are never anything but very unfeminine, or else weak.

Another thing is that a society which is anything less than the dog-eat-dog type, with all the trimmings of propaganda, advertising, tycoons and a dumb mass of workers, is supposedly bound to become effete, degenerate and generally crumbles—being saved only by the rugged individual who is the space-counterpart of Davy Crockett or a similar type.

This characterisation isn't true of all science fiction, of course . . . but it is true of too much of it.

I have the idea that the type of science fiction as written in the U.S.A. particularly, can be explained by the attitude of the people here. If they can go on about their business in face of the threat of the nuclear bombs, even supporting the production and testing of them, then it is not very hard to understand why they will tolerate the type of science fiction they do.

I am also at a loss to understand why it is that scientists who know the profound changes that occur by radioactivity are not completely horrified at the potentialities that lie in the indiscriminate use of nuclear energy. The fate of mankind and the world will not be fiction if the bandits that are responsible for the misuse of this power are not brought to a screeching halt.

MISS L. KELLEY MAYHEW,
Oakland,
California.

* *An interesting letter, Miss Mayhew, which I hope will prompt many other readers to write to us.*

Dear Ed.,

When NEBULA (No. 30) recently appeared on my favourite news stand, I spotted it at a glance. Upon discovering it to be from overseas, I realised that this is the very first science fiction publication I had ever seen from abroad. Welcome to the U.S.A.!

Being a science fiction purist, I dropped " The Covetous " to last place on my list, as it tends a little too much towards the fantastic. The remaining six stories were very good to excellent. I reserve the first place for " P.S."; a truly beautiful story.

Your sincere desire to put out a good science fiction magazine is outstandingly apparent. If NEBULA continues to appear here, I for one will continue to buy it.

C. L. SISCHO,
San Francisco,
California.

* *Glad to get your letter, Mr. Sischo which, incidentally, expressed the reaction of many of our other new friends in the U.S.A.*

Dear Ed.,

Kenneth Bulmer's serial " Wisdom of the Gods " is well worth waiting for each month. The first two parts were very good. In issue No. 32, " Sense of Proportion " was well above the rest. Tubb had me hating Thompson from the start. "No Time at All" had me guessing, and was a thoroughly well worked out story, while " They Shall Inherit " was up to Brian Aldiss's usually high standard. The remaining three stories were much poorer. " Carriage Paid " came above the other two, because I had never seen that plot before, the others, however, were time-worn.

When William F. Temple has concluded his "Against Goliath" series, I hope it will be published in book form. If it is you can have my order in advance. In the meantime, I am looking forward to more stories in this series.

Walt Willis intrigues me. How can such a genius remain unrecognised? His plan for defeating the post office certainly has a spark of genius in it.

In issue No. 33, " Talk Not at All " was another brilliant Tubb epic. I loved it. Stuart Allen seems to be a fairly new name in science fiction, and this time he came up with a beautifully worked out story that had me fooled to the very last line. N. K. Hemming, the newcomer, also produced a lovely story; well worth my two bob. The other two yarns in this issue are also of high standard, but in comparison to Tubb and Bulmer, have a long way to go.

ALAN RISPIN,
Higher Irlam,
Manchester.

Dear Mr. Hamilton,

The reason that Aldiss is down so far in my ratings for issues Nos. 31 and 32 is that in each story I feel he sacrificed too much in his efforts to maintain an off-trail originality. This is a fault I feel he should watch; if he guards against it, he will place himself securely in the élite of the world's science fiction writers. Inability to be explicit about the new art form in " Ninian's Experiences " gave the story an impression of unreality. In " They Shall Inherit " I feel that such an ending is impossible. Isn't lan-

guage an acquired skill rather than an inherited power? Even in animals? Are there any biologists reading NEBULA who could give us an answer on this?

If you have noticed, Bulmer's last four stories all got very poor ratings from me. Thus, pleased though I was to see a serial in NEBULA, I viewed "Wisdom of the Gods" with suspicion. I was surprised. It is a light, humorous, straightforward science fiction suspense yarn. It has begun very well indeed.

Most of Patrick's theme and plot were old stuff, but I nevertheless think he is your most promising newcomer for some time. He shows signs of knowing how to write a good story.

Bert Chandler's quiet, unassuming style can sometimes turn out some beautiful stories. I enjoyed "Words and Music" very much. His experience on ships has helped him to depict spaceship atmosphere with an uncommon fluency. What about chartering a longer story?

NIGEL JACKSON,
Melbourne,
Australia.

* *Thank you both for your long and detailed commentaries—these are the kind of letters which help everyone concerned in the production of our magazine to know exactly what our readers want—and, in the long run, to give them it.*

Dear Ed.,

The disappearance of the readers' letters is only temporary, I hope. Please don't let NEBULA drift towards that horrible state at which certain other magazines have now arrived—no articles, no features, no illustrations, just a cover and the fiction.

JOHN J. GREENGRASS,
Coventry,
Warwickshire.

* *That state you describe may make things easier for the Editors of the magazines concerned, John, but the policy in NEBULA continues to be "readers first".*

Dear Mr. Hamilton,

I just had to drop you a line after reading "Dear Devil", by Eric Frank Russell in your January number. May I go so far as to say it is the best science fiction novel I have ever read? I felt like jumping up there and then and shaking Mr. Russell's hand, but as that is impossible, could you do it for me?

I know I am rather late in writing, as I borrowed this number, but in future I'll be buying NEBULA and keeping a look out for more of Mr. Russell's fine stories.

H. BURNARD,
Welton,
Lincs.

* *Nice to hear from you, Mr. Burnard. I am glad to see that, like most other NEBULA readers, you enjoyed thoroughly "Dear Devil".*

Continued from inside front cover

surrounding the central star of Orion's sword. It must have been familiar to the ancients, for Orion, the hunter of the starways, was named long before Homer told of the constellations he could not see.

The luminosity of the Great Nebula is star-inspired. It shines only because of a knot of bright, hot stars within it.

The group of stars that illuminate the Great Nebula is known as the Trapezium, eight of them are visible and the remainder are buried deep in the nebulosity. These stars have their strange beauty and interest. Most are double stars, whilst Theta Orionis is a quadruple star, each of whose stellar units shines with a distinctive jewel-like colour. In such a system, shining white, lilac, garnet and ruby, a planet would have a sky view unequalled in our Galaxy. For, surrounding the planet and extending far out into space, the glowing veils of the nebula would combine to destroy the entity we call night. The World Of Day—a planet of no-night and multi-coloured day which will become the wonder holiday resort when we travel to the stars.

Fed by the cloud they excite, the hot trapezium stars radiate harsh energy that is absorbed by atoms of gas in the cloud. So intense is the radiation from these stellar surfaces that it literally blasts the cloud away from the stars and light pressure alone keeps them free from gas.

Colliding with gas atoms, the radiation knocks electrons off, giving ions and a cloud of electrons to spray through the near vacuum of space—not a true vacuum since there is an average density of 1,000 atoms in every cubic centimetre of the Great Nebula. On average, each atom of the Great Nebula loses one electron every ten years, and the electron careers around at sixty miles per second for a further ten years before it hits another atom and creates one quantum of the weird nebula light. But such is the enormous volume of this nebula that every square centimetre of its surface facing us represents a bulk of a million million atoms, and within its depths sufficient energy is transformed into light to show up all the fine details of the nebular structure.

Observations show, in fact, that the nebular glow from such "rare" elements as oxygen and nitrogen completely swamp the hydrogen glow, although hydrogen is the commonest element in the Universe.

In general, we see this light as a characteristic green glow; but in the few places where the electron density is high it is an eerie blue.

Another strange family of stars within the Great Nebula in Orion is that of faint, irregularly variable stars. They are ten times more common in this nebula than elsewhere in our Galaxy, as though the Great Nebula were directly responsible for their presence—as it is. Whilst these stars are cooler than the Sun, they have the colour of very hot stars, and their spectra show white hot gas *around* them. They emit a variable amount of light as their output rises and falls quite randomly, entirely unlike the well-known regularity of the Cepheid variables.

The high temperature of their atmospheres is explained by the infall of vast quantities of gas from the surrounding nebula. The kinetic energy of the gas gained during its long fall towards the star is transferred into thermal energy by collision with the enormous chromospheres of these stars. Since the concentration of gas in the Great Nebula varies widely from place to place, the amount that is captured by these stars varies widely, in the never still maelstrom of gas clouds, and the result is that we see them as irregular variable stars.

Against the fierce beauty of this sprawling formless tracery, Man may seem a puny thing; a cosmic accident sunk in his petty strifes and living out his few cosmic seconds on a ball of mud. Yet, within him, is the ability to see outwards, to stand in humble awe before the incomprehensible grandeur of this majestic fragment of the Galaxy—and then to think on its meaning so that it no longer remains incomprehensible.