NEBULA

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ACME

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NUMBER 37

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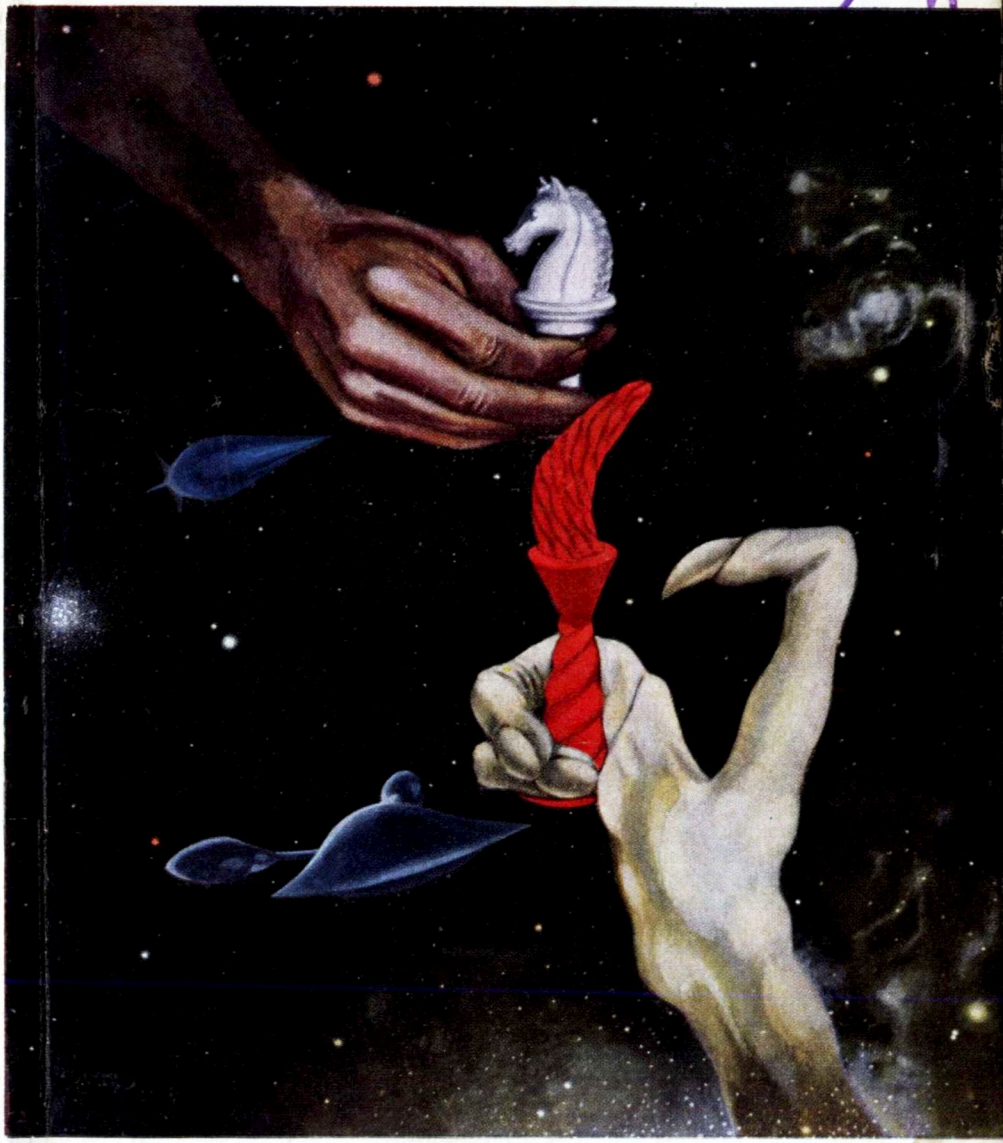
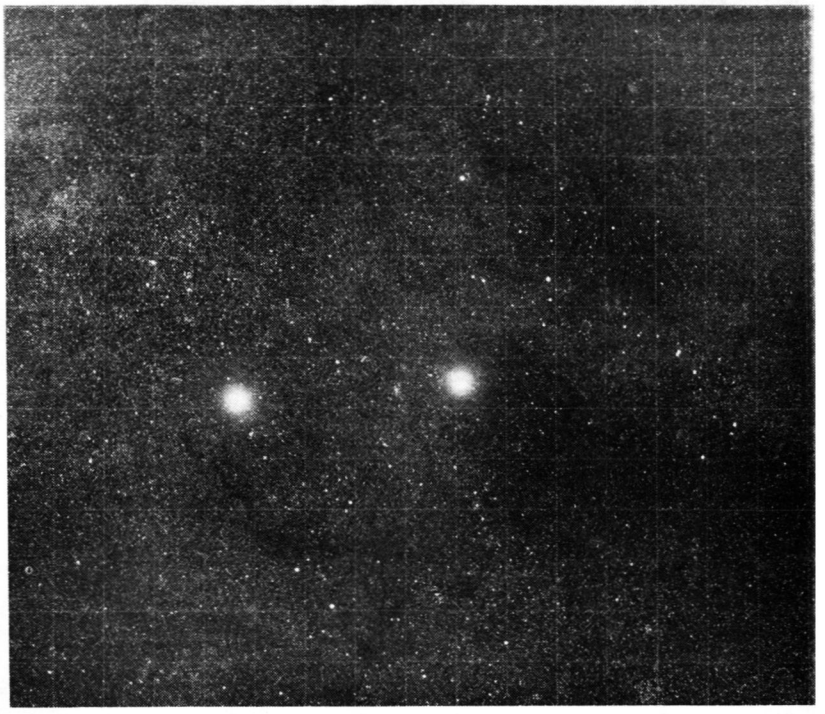


FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

NEXT CALL ALPHA CENTAURI



Alpha and Beta Centauri
(Franklin-Adams Chart)

KENNETH JOHNS

Only in the southern skies can we see the solar system's nearest neighbour, and even then we need a good telescope to pick out the feeble glow of Proxima Centauri from the brilliance of the bright stars in that sector of space.

For Proxima Centauri is one of the smallest and coolest stars so far discovered. It is only a sixteenth the size of our Sun, itself by no means high in the stellar size scale; but it is not a white dwarf.

We call it Proxima; but this is very much of a relative term. 4.2 light years separate us from this near neighbour, 4.2 light years of desolate interstellar space where anything larger than a pebble is an alien intruder, where only the debris split from exploding stars approximates to the state of matter we know as normal.

4.2 light years is an uncrossable gulf, a chasm frightening in its vastness —but, already, Man is planning to bridge the unknown with interstellar ships driven by the power of fusing atoms. As yet, the dream is only for the few who will probably never see it come to pass; but, one day, their children will —although we have yet to reach the Moon, yet to stand on the surface of our familiar planets, yet to step to the edge of our solar system and look into the

Continued on inside back cover

NEBULA
SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON **Issue Number Thirty-Seven**

Novelette :

Short Stories :

Special Features :

Front Cover by Gerard Quinn **Back Cover by Arthur Thomson**
Black and White Illustrations by Arthur Thomson, John Greengrass and Kenneth Barr

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Look here . . .

A few days ago I received a copy of the third yearly volume of *The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy* in which Judith Merril, long recognised as one of the leading American experts in the science-fiction field, has gathered together and reprinted what she considers to be the most outstanding short science-fiction and fantasy stories published during 1957. This feast of top-notch reading material is rounded off by a list of other memorable yarns of the year which could not be included because of the obvious limitations imposed on the editor of any anthology of this kind.

In spite of the fact that the stories in this book are considered to be the best of their kind in the world and were chosen from the widest possible cross-section of international magazines, I am proud and happy to be able to tell you that no less than four of those given an "honourable mention" were originally published in NEBULA.

This is a wonderful vote of confidence in all our regular contributors as well as in the policy which governs the choice of material for this magazine. The selection of four stories from the six issues of NEBULA published during this period represents a higher percentage from our magazine than is the average for all three British science-fiction short story publications.

We are all glad that we pleased you, Miss Merril, and hope that we may have the privilege of continuing to do so for many more years to come.

One author who appears to have made a lasting impression this year is N. K. Hemming whose story "Debt of Lassor" was published in our thirty-third issue. This writer is apparently very well known to science-fiction fans throughout Australia and I have had countless letters from "down under" telling me that I should have clearly announced that this was the first story we had ever published by an Australian author. Well, of course, it is not. The first Australian yarn we printed appeared no less than five and a half years ago, in NEBULA No. 3, and was called "Enigma" by Michael Hervey.

The really significant fact about the publication of "Debt of Lassor" is that it was the first story so far published in NEBULA to be written by a woman and this, to my way of thinking, is an even more important achievement than to be first Australian!

This may be another part of the feminine invasion of science-fiction which I mentioned in a previous editorial and, judging from the readers' opinion poll, this new feminine author is certainly at no disadvantage whatsoever to her male rivals.

Thanks and congratulations to you, *Miss* Hemming, let us have another story from you soon.

Peter Hamilton

ROBERT PRESSLIE

Pariah

Through the misty night he wandered, bearing with him his load of hate and creeping death

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

Far across the moorland, beyond the deep bowl of darkness in the valley, there was a sprinkling of tiny lights on the horizon, a feeble constellation marking the nearest village. On either side of the big gates, two lamps glowed yellow in the night mist. On the gate itself there was a board carrying a legend which was barely visible. The legend declared that behind the gates lay the Longdene Atomic Research Establishment. The lights of the distant village and the two feeble lamps were the only signs of life. The establishment itself was invisible in its security blackout.

Thirty yards beyond the gates there was an inner fence. Fifty yards beyond it stood the establishment. And if it was dark and peaceful and quiet outside, there was light and noise and hubbub inside. A slash of brightness spilled from suddenly opened doors and the noise and hubbub poured into the night.

A succession of feet, moving quickly and urgently but not with panic, made themselves heard on the gravelled driveway as they

left the building. At a signal from inside, a barrier of the inner fence slid aside. The workers hurried on and out through the outer gates which also opened in response to a signal.

Outside the gates, movement became quicker, noise became louder. The workers ran to the jeeps, dividing their numbers evenly among the six vehicles. Then the engines roared to life, wheels spun in the grit as the jeeps turned sharply and accelerated rapidly towards the concrete block-houses two miles down the road, two miles nearer safety.

In a matter of seconds, thirty people had passed through the gates and had been swallowed by the night.

A thirty-first had still to reach the gates.

He had been waiting. That had been necessary. He knew that the gates would be opened on the alarm to let the workers escape. But he was not one of them and it had been necessary to wait until they were gone before he himself made for safety.

The gates were closing again. Security must be maintained at all times. The man dodged out of the darkness at the side of the driveway and began to run. The gates were closing faster than he had allowed for.

He almost made it. His body was through the narrowing gap. One leg was through as he flung himself forward. But he was too slow. The gates came together and locked his hindmost foot in a trap. He fell heavily, tearing his face on the grit.

The urgency of the moment was more terrible because he alone knew its immediacy. He clawed the grit in an effort to drag himself free. Sudden sweat mixed with the blood on his forehead. He tore his fingertips to pulp. The watch on his wrist seemed huge to his eyes. The moment had come.

He lifted his face to the blackness of the sky, probably in mute prayer, perhaps only in the agony and despair which were briefly and brilliantly etched on his upturned face by a blinding flash of light from the building eighty yards behind him.

In an emergency, some are free to run away. But some must stay to deal with the emergency, to prevent it, if possible, from developing into a disaster. Paradoxically, it is always the least expendable who must stay within the shadow of death.

Fifteen minutes before the explosion, its imminence had been foretold. Delicate instruments had become agitated. Their chatter had warned of a radiation leak. They had pin-pointed the leak,

traced it to the least vulnerable part of the establishment. As soon as it was known that something was amiss in the waste disposal unit, the familiar well-practised drill had been gone through. Senior staff had collected in the main control room. All others had been evacuated.

Four men remained to sweat out the emergency, to watch the increasing agitation of the scintillation counters. As yet, the cause of the leak was unknown. They could only make rapid calculations and hope there was not going to be a blow-up.

King, the Director of the establishment, had personally attended to the closing down of the reactor. His chief assistants, Pat Swann and Bill Campbell, had checked off the sequences as the dampers had been rammed home. The fourth man, Meade, the security officer, had seen to the opening and closing of the gates while the thirty lesser workers made for the safety of the block-houses.

When the explosion came at last, the tension dropped. King and his assistants were relieved. The readings of the counters located in the disposal section told them the explosion was non-atomic.

But if one emergency no longer existed, another had taken its place. A lesser danger, but still one that must be dealt with immediately. Meade felt superfluous and helpless as he watched the operation.

"What happens if that stuff escapes over the countryside?" he asked.

"It won't," King assured without taking his eyes off the bank of dials. "There was only a two-day accumulation of waste in the disposer. Fortunately."

He spared a precious second to glance up at the security officer. "It would have been different if it had been full."

"Sprays activated!" King's attention was recalled by Pat Swann's announcement.

"Are you sure that will kill it?" Meade asked. He was worried about the consequences of radioactive dust percolating across the valley. If there were any recriminations to come, he would be as much involved as King.

King was too busy to answer. Campbell stood proxy. "The sprays will drown the whole unit."

"Laying the dust won't be much good," said Meade.

"It's more than that. The sprays contain a resin. What they

call an ion-exchange resin. The resin subtracts the radioactive material from . . . it's too technical for you to understand. But there's nothing to worry about. There's been an explosion, only a small one and not an atomic one. The sprays can easily cope with any leakage up to and including this size. There's practically no wind tonight so you can be sure that no lives are in danger."

Swann called out, " Sprays off ! "

Meade bored his way between Swann and King. He pointed to the idly rotating lights on a counter. " Doesn't that mean the disposer is still hot ? "

" Background count, that is," said Swann.

" What do you mean—background count ? "

King straightened himself, put his hands on the small of his back to press out the strain and the tension. He said, " The sprays have washed every particle of radioactive waste into the underground sumps. The reading on that scintillation counter is what Swann told you, background count. That means the normal amount of radiation that is always present everywhere. Comes from cosmic rays out of space, deep internal radiation in the earth, umpteen sources. It's always there. Quite harmless, I assure you."

" You mean the danger is over ? "

" I should say so." King's tones were cautious. " There's still a lot of checking to be done before we recall the others from the blockhouses. Have you had the signal yet to say they got there safely ? "

Meade flushed. He had not missed the director's insinuation that he was neglecting his own duties. The workers were bound to be in the blockhouses. In his agitation he must have missed the call signal. He went to the phone.

On a pre-printed security form, he checked off the details as he got them; number of people in the shelters, time of arrival, casualties—if any—and the nature of same. He pencilled diagonal blanks in most of the boxes on the form. The triviality of the incident made him almost dash off his signature at the bottom without further checking. But he was not normally as careless as he had been a moment ago. He took the form and compared it with the duty roster. The numbers tallied. Thirty-four people on duty, thirty in the shelters, four still in the establishment. Then he checked the gate tally.

" King ! " he said, sharply. " What caused the explosion ? "

" We don't know yet. That's one of the things we still have to

do. If the disposer had been loaded to capacity, we could have put it down to overheating."

He stopped as it dawned on him that Meade had more than an idle motive for the question.

" Something wrong ? " he asked.

Meade showed him the report form. " Thirty people were on duty apart from ourselves. Thirty people are down at the shelters. But according to the photoelectric eyes on the gates, thirty-one people passed through them ! "

King made for the phone. " We'll have to recall them. The explosion was the result of deliberate sabotage. The saboteur may have left more than one bomb. We'll need a thorough search of the entire establishment. And a quick one ! "

Meade strode after him, covered the hand on the phone with his own. " Wait," he said. " If there is another bomb it might do some real damage. Don't you think the less people there are here the better ? "

The director forcibly lifted the phone. " Which would you rather see dead—thirty or thirty thousand ? Hello ?—report back for duty immediately. This is a top emergency. All personnel must put on protective clothing before leaving the shelters—and keep a sharp lookout for strangers on your way back ! "

He told Meade, " I'll handle this end of it. The sabotage angle is yours. I suppose you'll call in your people ? "

" Not yet. The police will do at first. They know the local countryside. The saboteur can't have got very far. The police should be able to pick him up before he gets to the village. If he does get through, we'll have to call in the army next."

He took the other phone, the external one, and started the wheels moving. Meanwhile, King and his assistants kept an eye on their instruments, watching for any abnormal reading.

Meade had just finished phoning when someone entered the control room. He was grotesquely clad from head to foot in a white anti-radiation suit. In one gauntleted hand he carried a brown shoe. He slid aside the transparent visor of his helmet.

" I found this jammed in the outer gates," he said. " I wouldn't come too close to it if I were you—it's as hot as a lump of uranium ! "

He was exaggerating, of course, but he had made his point. King dismissed him with orders to put the shoe in a lead container

and to keep it in a safe place in case it might be needed later as evidence.

To Meade, the director snapped, " You had better get back on the blower and call out everybody. We've got to find this man long before he reaches the village. We've got to get him before he reaches anybody. He's lethal."

" I've rung the police," Meade started.

" That's not enough. Get on to the Civil Defence people immediately. This is—— " King suddenly realised he was letting himself get the jitters. He was barking at Meade, inwardly cursing him for his inactivity—and he had omitted to tell the dazed security man what he was raving about.

He calmed down, spoke more slowly. " It isn't only the sabotage angle that's worrying me, though that's bad enough, I admit. But, from the condition of the shoe, it is pretty obvious that he opened one of the sluice valves on the waste disposer to plant that bomb. Because he didn't see anything coming out, he probably thinks nothing happened to him. But the minute he opened that valve he was flooded with radiation from head to foot."

" Enough to kill him ? "

" More than enough. But not enough to kill him instantly. We know he got as far as the gate. Even if he is practically a dead man, there's no telling how far he'll get before he dies."

The security man seemed to relax. " In that case, we're bound to get him."

King's temper flared again. " Do I have to spell it out for you ? For your own sake you've got to find him before he is dead—or don't you want to know what his motives were, who sent him to do the job ? And for the sake of a helluva lot more people, for the sake of everybody in the village down there, he must be caught before he touches anyone. I told you, that man is lethal ! "

" You mean he is so saturated by radiation that anybody who goes near him will get a fatal dose ? "

King sucked air between his teeth in a hiss of exasperation. Then he nodded.

The security man gave him a stiff-faced look. " I'm not a nuclear physicist," he defended himself. He crossed the room, picked up the external phone, dialled the Civil Defence number.

King went to a wall map. He beckoned Pat Swann and Bill Campbell. They had barely begun to discuss the map when Meade joined them.

" That's us," said King, running a finger over a cross-hatched section. " Over there is the village, fifteen miles to the east."

His finger swept the parchment. " North and west there's nothing, nothing but empty moorland for miles. He could hide there, but hiding isn't escaping, and he would have to come out of the moor sooner or later if he didn't want to starve to death."

" What about—— " Meade said. Then, " Of course, he doesn't know he is dying anyway. Sorry."

King's hand trailed to the bottom of the map. " He won't go south because we're practically on the cliff's edge as it is." He screwed his mouth as he mused. " Mind you, if he's a crazy fanatic, that's where he might go at that. What do you say, Meade ? "

" Mission accomplished, capture inevitable, suicide the best way out . . . sometimes that's how they think."

" You sound doubtful about our man."

" I'll tell you," said Meade. " I don't think he'll react that way. For one thing, the job was amateurish, it doesn't bear the stamp of an expert. And it wasn't very successful, was it ? "

" I don't follow—— "

" A professional, a paid saboteur would have been properly equipped for the job. If a professional had been sent here to destroy the establishment, he would have done it thoroughly. He wouldn't have played about with normal high explosives."

" What about one of the smaller nationalistic groups ? "

" How often do they tackle the big places ? Not often, I assure you. Post offices, minor government buildings, that's their target. A place like this attracts two types : the paid man working for an alien ideology, and the crank. I say our man is a crank. Therefore he won't try suicide, he won't make for the cliffs."

King still looked doubtful and Meade rounded out his argument.

" He's a little man who has tried, ineffectually and unsuccessfully, to do a big thing. Or maybe he has accomplished the little bit he tried to do. He hates this place, hates what it stands for even more, and he has made his little protest. David has taken a swipe at Goliath. So now his only wish is to escape, to get back to his little rat-run, to live. To live !—that's his uppermost thought at this moment. Escape ! "

He split two fingers into a vee and placed them on the map. " Somewhere in there we'll find him. Somewhere on the moor between this place and the village."

He turned to King. "I've alerted the C.D. people."

"Thank you. I think it's best. How long will it be? How long before you get him?"

"Hard to say. It's pitch black out tonight. But the dark hinders him as much as it hinders us. He won't be able to make much more than one mile an hour before dawn." He checked his watch. "That means he'll still be eight or nine miles from the village when daylight comes. We'll find him then—if not before."

King's two assistants looked at each other, one with a grim expression, the other showing concern.

Bill Campbell spoke first. "He could travel pretty fast if he took the road."

"I hope he does," said Meade. "That way he's sure to be caught. If the guards at the blockhouses didn't get him, the police patrols would." He touched the grey cross-hatching that marked the site of the establishment on the map. "It's a good thing we're located where we are. Apart from the village, there's no civilisation for miles around, nothing to get in his way, nobody to feel his touch of death."

"There is," said Campbell. He moved aside to give Pat Swann

the stage. Swann was the grim one. He swallowed hard.

"Three miles," he whispered. "Only three miles. My house——"

Campbell took over. "There's an old farmhouse three miles east of here, just off the road. It hasn't been used for years, the farmland is poor. Pat took it over about a month ago. He's having the farmhouse converted. He thought it would be convenient for his work, not so far as the village."

Meade's face opened alertly. He caught on quickly. "Anybody there?" he asked.

Swann nodded. "Ellen, my wife. And my little girl, Penny."

His thoughts were almost as audible as his words. Ellen and Penny were alone in the farmhouse. The farmhouse was set in a dreary moor. It lay straight in the most likely path of the saboteur, the unknown man whose touch was death.

Ellen Swann was waiting for Pat's call. Her first reaction on hearing the distant explosion had been to run up the spiral oak stairway to Penny's bedroom. Satisfied that her daughter, only a few days short of her sixth birthday, was safe and had not been disturbed, she had come back to sit by the fire and to wait for Pat to phone.

Waiting was difficult. Every instinct urged her to ring the establishment to learn if Pat was unharmed. But her husband had primed her well. She knew that short of a life or death emergency it was forbidden to ring the establishment's unlisted number.

She tried knitting to pass the time and to keep some part of her occupied. Nearly an hour had gone by since the sound of the explosion. She had heard the coming and going of the jeeps at the blockhouses. And she waited for Pat to tell her everything was all right.

When the phone finally rang, she was bringing a log from the outhouse. Pat had remodelled the fireplace in portland stone—she called it their Magnificent Amberley fireplace; classic films at the village society were her main interest outside her family. The fireplace was about five feet wide. Pat maintained it was economical, since the small copse of trees, planted years ago as a windbreak by one of the tenant farmers, would keep them going on fuel for a long time—at no cost other than the sweat of his brow.

At the sound of the phone bell, she dropped the log at her feet. In one quick movement she laid the hurricane lamp on the big oval

table which they had inherited with the house and grabbed the receiver off its wall hook.

" Pat ?" Her voice was too high. She repeated, more calmly, " Pat ? What was it ? No, of course you can't tell me . . . yes, everything's fine here . . . and you ? Thank God . . . I was worried when I heard . . . Penny ? She's sound asleep, she didn't hear a thing."

She caressed the phone as if it was a living extension of his personality. She smiled and spoke in tones of confidential admission. " It was awful. Waiting. I don't know how often I nearly broke your silly rule——"

She broke off abruptly. Something in his patient silence told her she was talking too much, that he had something far more important to say.

He found it difficult to tell her. There was so much to say, yet he must not hog the phone; it might be needed any moment. And the right words would not come to him. She would be equally alarmed if he told her too little or too much.

" Ellen——" he said her name with a rising inflection that made it almost a question. He was half-turned from the phone so that he could see King's face, using it as a barometer, a guide to what he could and could not say.

" Listen carefully, dear. I'm coming home. Right this minute. Something's cropped up . . . I can't tell you over the phone, I'll explain when I see you. But meantime make sure all the doors are locked and don't open for anyone. Except me, of course. And don't worry. I won't be long."

She said, " Pat !"

But he had hung up. She held the receiver quite a while, her body inactivated while her mind raced over what he had said. Then she realised instead of wasting time she should be doing what she had been told. She replaced the phone and hurried round the house, closing all the doors.

She guessed he would take one of the establishment's jeeps. That meant he would be with her in ten or fifteen minutes, depending on how quickly he could get away from King. She forced herself to sit in the chair at her side of the fire. But although she picked up her knitting, it lay unopened in the clench of her hands.

Ellen was of the type called petite. She was elfinly so, looked too young to be married, certainly too young to be the mother of a six-year-old daughter. She had not her husband's technical and

scientific education but she could match him in intelligence. Going over his message in her mind, she realised something drastic must have happened for King to be releasing Pat with the night shift barely begun.

The significance of keeping the doors locked puzzled her. She guessed that someone was abroad in the night, someone who might be dangerous. More than that she could not divine. She would have to wait for Pat to explain. She was glad the establishment was so near.

Her eyes were on the fire as they so often were when she was thinking. She remembered the log she had dropped. She got out of the chair and turned to fetch the log. Her hand went to her mouth to stifle a scream.

A man stood near the log. He was as surprised as she was, for the high-backed chair had hidden her presence.

His clothes were muddy, splashed by the thud of his feet on the moor. Sweat had licked his sparse hair into a monkish tonsure. He breathed heavily, mouth open and showing bad teeth. One foot had no shoe and the sock was torn and almost off the foot. He was a picture of distress and desperation. Ellen felt sorry for him.

"Who——? What do you want here?" None of her compassion showed in her tones. She had already added two and two together. This man must be the reason for Pat telling her to secure the house.

"How did you get in?" she asked.

The man waved a hand vaguely. "A skylight back there."

She had forgotten the opening in the roof of the outhouse. Even if she had remembered, she doubted if she would have seriously considered it as a possible entry. But the man was little bigger than herself. It had been easy for him to squeeze through the opening. Once in the outhouse, he had only to turn a knob and he was through the stone-floored kitchen and into the big sitting-room.

"My husband's coming," she said. "It's only three miles from the establishment——"

"Is he one of them?" The question was surprising and the ferocity of the voice even more so.

"He works there. He should be here any minute. I'd advise you to get going before he arrives."

The man looked over his shoulder. He seemed tired, reluctant to move. "I can't. Where is there to go? They'll catch me for

sure. My foot is bleeding. I can't run any more. Not with this ——" He pointed to the unshod foot.

"I don't care." Ellen tried to be hard, not to show her sympathy. "I don't know why you're running or who you're running from, but I can guess. It must have been you . . . that explosion I heard, was that you?"

He lifted his chin as if he was ready to defend his reasons.

"Wait," she said, growing cunning. She made for the stairs, turned at the first step. "If I get you a pair of my husband's shoes, will you go? You must go."

She mounted the stairs at a run. Once out of sight, she moved slowly, stalling for time. She was sure Pat would want the man to be captured. She considered locking the bedroom door behind her, but then the man might go away and Pat would be angry with her. She picked up an old pair of shoes and shut the door and safety behind her.

He was halfway up the stairs. From his guilty expression she knew he had been creeping. She lifted the shoes threateningly.

Pat Swann was still a long way from the farmhouse. First of all, King had told him to get into a protective suit. Then, if he should run into the saboteur on the way, he could tackle him with no danger to himself.

When he was dressed and ready to go, there was the business of telephone calls to settle. Pat had suggested ringing from the farmhouse to let King know if all was well. But the director had ruled this out; there was every likelihood that both the establishment's lines would be fully occupied with more important messages.

Ten minutes had gone by since he had phoned Ellen. Just when he should have been almost home, he was only leaving.

"Get down those stairs!" Ellen ordered.

"You took a long time to find a pair of shoes," the man said, suspiciously. He backed down one step.

"I'm warning you! I won't tell you again!"

He backed down all the way, even walked backwards until he touched the table. Ellen threw the shoes at his feet. He hopped aside.

"I was looking for an old pair," Ellen said. "Now put them on and get out!"

He leaned back on the table, with his hands on the edge, but made no attempt to obey.

Ellen's tone switched with the magic that belongs only to women. "Don't you feel well? You don't look well. Here, sit down and rest." She put out a hand to help him. He snatched his arm out of her reach and her mood switched again.

"All right!" she blazed. "If you don't want to be helped. I don't see why I should waste time and sympathy on the likes of you. Traitor! I hope they catch you!"

Strangely, her words seemed to make him relax. It was as if he had suddenly reached familiar ground.

"Traitor," he said. "I suppose that's how it looks to you. You're like all the rest. You're even worse. You're married to one of them, one of the warmakers!"

She laughed through her nose. "Pat? I should think he's seen enough of war. I'll bet he saw more service than you."

"More than likely. I find it against my principles to——"

"A pacifist!"

"Traitor. Pacifist." He said the names and shrugged them aside. "I've heard that before."

"And doesn't it worry you?"

"It worries me more to see people like your husband steering us straight into another war—a war in which even the winner will lose everything. Do you know how few, how very, very few H-bombs it would take to make life on this world impossible?"

"Funnily enough, I do. Perhaps because Pat is one of *them*, as you put it. And I'm glad we possess at least half that number."

He took a step towards her with such ferocity on his face that it was her turn to back away.

"You——" he scorned. "Glad? What is there to be glad about in possessing half the number of bombs needed to wipe out the world?"

"Because if we have one half, maybe the other side will think twice before using their half!"

"Oh, that. That's an old one. You don't believe it, do you? Don't you think it would be better if neither side had any?"

"Certainly. But who's going to be referee?"

"There's such a thing as trust——"

"Yes, there is!" Ellen put her hands on her hips. "In this country you are allowed to move as you please, you're taken on trust that you won't steal, or kill, or destroy. You can talk about trust,

you pipsqueak, after trying to blow up Longdene. Who supplied the bomb ? The——"

" I made it myself," he mumbled.

She looked him up and down. " Get out !"

He moved into the chair, started to take off the remaining shoe, looked over his shoulder apprehensively. " I'll need clothes," he said. " Something they'll recognise so they won't stop me. You said your husband was in the army ?"

" I didn't. But he was. He doesn't have the uniform nowadays. Only the greatcoat."

" Bring it."

" It's too big. It would come down to your——"

" Bring it !"

" There's no need to shout. You'll waken Penny." She bit her lip in annoyance.

" Penny ?"

Too late now to cover up. " My daughter. She's asleep upstairs."

He stood up in his stocking-soled feet. He put significance into his voice as he said, " Then you'll bring me the coat as I told you."

Being late made Pat Swann careless. His mind was more on his wife and child than on his driving. All he could think of was the possibility of the saboteur getting to the farmhouse before he did. He wished he had told Ellen about not letting the man touch her. But he realised too that to have told her would have alarmed her, given her reason to think the man was definitely heading for the house.

The road was greasy, his speed too fast and his reactions too slow. He tried to take a sharp turn at fifty. Instinct told him it could be done if he kept well to the side. He overdid it. One wheel hit the ditch, the jeep plunged in a mighty effort to heave itself out. And the engine stalled.

He made three frantic attempts to restart the engine before admitting defeat.

He had travelled about two miles. He was past the point of no return. It would be quicker to go ahead on foot than to go back for another car. He tucked his elbows into his sides and began to run into the darkness. He hoped there would be a spare car at the blockhouses.

Soft footsteps on the stairs made Ellen turn. She could have cried to see Penny coming down, two feet to each step. One hand on the rail, the other rubbing sleepy eyes.

" I told you to keep your voice down !"

The man made to move round Ellen. She side-stepped to block his path.

" Who's the man, mummy ?"

" Go back to bed, dear . . . You leave her alone !"

" I won't hurt her. But you won't mind if I hold her as a guarantee that you'll get me that coat ?"

" You dare ! Go on, dear, upstairs. I'll be up in a minute to tuck you in again." Ellen moved as she spoke, ran round the table, snatched the phone from its hook. But he was as quick as she was, he must have been expecting her to try the phone sooner or later.

For a minute she thought he would hit her, he came at her so quickly. But it was the phone he was after. He put his hand beyond hers, grabbed the kinked wire and yanked it hard. It came away.

Ellen flung the dead receiver at him. It bounced off his chest. In the short stunned silence, she ran to the stairs, scooped Penny into her arms and glared at him defiantly. Her bottom lip wobbled, she was losing her self-control.

" Why don't you go away ? Why can't you leave us ? What have we ever done to you ?"

Two pairs of headlights appeared suddenly from a dip in the road. The weird figure in the white suit was caught in the beams. The first car halted with a scream of tyres. Its partner passed it, passed Pat Swann and braked twenty yards further on. Two loads of dark-uniformed figures bundled out, spread across the road and swept Pat into their net.

The suit was cumbersome. Sweat poured down his face. His breathing was racked.

" Where do you think you're going . . . sir ?" A sergeant asked the question while two subordinates held Pat's arms.

" Thank heavens you're here. Turn around, take me to my house. It's urgent."

The sergeant looked at his opposite number from the other car. The look could have meant anything. He said, " You'll have to come with us, I'm afraid."

" I've just come from Longdene——"

" Have you now !" The sergeant's look had a more definite

meaning. "Then you won't mind if we take you back for questioning?"

"Sergeant, I've got to get to my house immediately. There's a maniac . . . you must know about that, of course . . . you don't think I'm him! Sergeant, *I work* at Longdene, my house is less than a mile down the road, my wife and child are there alone. I'm trying to get there before anyone else does!"

"You'll have papers?"

"Certainly . . . Oh!" Pat sagged as he remembered. "In my coat, at Longdene. I had to take off the coat to get this——"

"I'm sorry, sir." The sergeant nodded to his men. They started to take Pat to the car. "I've got my orders," the sergeant apologised. "If what you say is right, it won't take long to establish."

Pat struggled. "Why not take me to the house first? It's much nearer. Less than a mile. My wife will identify me. Take me there first. You can phone from there. They'll tell you at Longdene——"

"I'm sorry."

Ellen made to take Penny back to bed but changed her mind. The man was using the child as a lever. Instinct told her that putting Penny out of his sight would only precipitate action on his part.

"You're very brave," she taunted. "With women and children! All your talk about being a pacifist——"

She must have got the barb home. "I don't *want* to hurt you," he said.

"What do you want, then?"

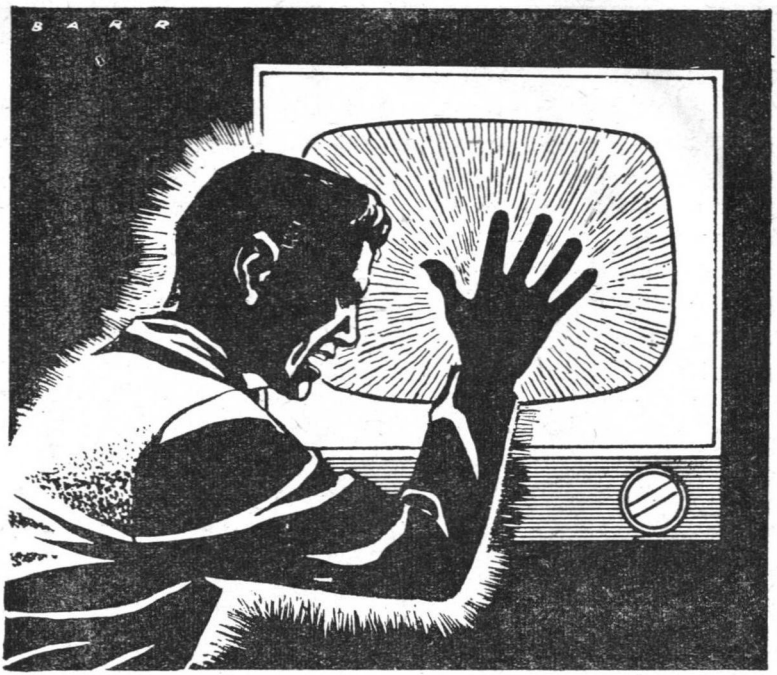
"I don't want to be caught."

"You should have thought of that before."

"Somebody had to do something about it. Somebody has to make an active protest against building more and more bombs. I don't want to hurt anyone. I was only trying to stop people being hurt."

She had him in the mood for talking. From where she stood on the stairs she could not see the clock above the fireplace but she knew Pat must arrive at any moment. She must do what she could to kill time until he came.

"What did you do, anyway?" she asked. "Was there much damage?"



" Not as much as I would have liked. Mind you, I didn't stay to see the final result, but judging by the explosion—— "

" Did you think you would start an atomic explosion ? "

" Well—— "

" You don't know an awful lot, do you ? I think I know more than you. I certainly know that it would be almost impossible to trigger an atomic explosion at Longdene with an ordinary bomb. Not unless you knew exactly where to place it."

" What's a bomb, mummy ? "

" Sh ! Mummy's talking." Ellen had a growing suspicion which made her wish she could safely send Penny to bed. She said, " You didn't go inside any of the buildings, did you ? "

The man blinked owlishly. " Everything is locked. But I found a plate I could unscrew. There was a deep space behind it. I could feel a second wall to the thing—probably made of lead by the feel of it. I planted the bomb in the space. I thought if the lead wall burst—— "

Ellen gripped Penny closer. " You poor man ! I think I know all about you now. You've never been anything, have you ? Never been a success. Bungle everything you try. A failure."

He scowled. "We can't all be geniuses. And who wants to be? Look what they're doing to the world."

"Go over to the television set," Ellen said. When he hesitated, she added, "please, it's for your own sake. Go across and lay a hand over the screen. No, don't switch it on. Just put your hand flat on the screen."

He held his hand poised, suspicious.

"It's not a trick," she said. "I'm nowhere near you, I can't trap you in any way."

He still would not comply with her request and she saw that she must tell him more of her suspicion.

"I think you're in terrible danger. When you opened that plate, you almost certainly got a dose of radiation, how strong a dose I don't know. But if you did get one and it was big, you should be in hospital before it's too late."

"You're trying to scare me——" he sounded unsure.

"Put your hand close to the screen. If what I said happened, it means you're highly radioactive. Enough to make the television screen glow."

"If you move as much as one step," he warned. Then he put his hand flat on the glass.

The screen lit up dramatically in a monstrous five-fingered shape. He was so sodden with radiation that even when he whipped the hand away with a gasp, the afterglow remained for several seconds. He clasped both hands to his face with a moan. Frantically, he took them away again and wiped his face with his sleeve.

Ellen felt only pity for him now. She had not the heart to tell him that nothing could wipe away his affliction.

"Put the shoes on," she said. "Put them on and then find the people who are looking for you as quickly as you can. They'll do their best for you."

He had his hands spread in front of him, palms up. His head was bent and he looked at the hands disbelievingly, unable or unwilling to accept what could not be seen.

"You'll die if you don't hurry," Ellen urged.

"Die——" He looked up at her. "They've killed me. Why? Why did they kill me? What have I done?" He was genuinely puzzled. "Everywhere they're making bigger and bigger bombs. I only wanted to stop it. And they've killed me."

Ellen heard the sound of cars coming along the road. Deliver-

ance would not be long. She wanted to use what time was left to console him.

"Longdene isn't like that," she said. "Everything they do there is for the good." She felt that in his condition it was safe to tell him more, that the secret would go no further. "They are working on portable power reactors . . . portable means anything that can be loaded on a twelve-wheeler truck. They believe that power is the answer to war, because power brings plenty and people with full stomachs don't want war."

His face broke up. It was difficult to tell whether he was laughing or crying. He echoed what she had said before.

"I can't do anything right, can I? And this time my bungling has cost me my life . . . oh, I can see the truth in your eyes."

He walked towards the stairs. Ellen put Penny behind her.

"*You* know," he said. He had a crazed look about him. "You know everything, don't you? A clever bitch, married to a clever——"

Penny screamed as the door opened. The man looked round. King and Meade were there. In front of them were two men in protective suits. Pat Swann and Bill Campbell. A covey of policemen hovered in the background. It was not until Pat spoke that Penny recognised him and ceased to be frightened by his strange uniform.

"Daddy!" she cried, dodged round her mother and started to run down the stairs.

Ellen, pinned by surprise, saw the whole terrible tragedy that could happen in the next few seconds. Penny would reach the foot of the stairs before she could stop her. She would run towards her father. To do so, she must pass the man. If he touched her . . .

Penny ran as far as the man without shoes, stopped and looked up at him.

He stared at her.

He opened and closed his hands.

Then he sagged, let his hands fall to his sides.

"Your daddy's waiting," he said.

And Penny ran into her father's arms, quickly joined by Ellen, and the trio were oblivious to the man and the others who had come to fetch him when they had discovered that they could not get through to the house by phone.

ROBERT PRESSLIE

E. R. JAMES

The Truth

Trapped in the dawn of time, their only escape was by a means too horrible to contemplate

Illustration by Arthur Thomson

Blackened stalks of feathery frost-rimed plants crackled beneath his boots as he swung down from the airlock. He crashed through the waist-high fronds of dead foliage along the side of the lifeboat.

A few sweeps of his arm cleared his way to the locker just above the caterpillar track. He pulled open the door and unclipped the flame hose.

The slowly rising mist of the alien, primaeval morning hid everything further off than twenty feet, but in the little semi-circle of vision all was frozen stillness.

He triggered the flame hose, once, twice, and waited, staring through the frost scintillating on his helmet glass at the reeking clearings.

Two other survivors, muffled in self-contained suits like his own, lumbered awkwardly from the airlock. The one which bent and broke off a frozen frond and then scraped at the hard ground would be that of the professor; the other shuffling through the razed stalks would be

Gloria. The Space-Time Liners such as that which had brought them here attracted a strange mixture of tourists, opportunists and scientific observers.

The voice of Gogol, the sole surviving crew member of the lifeboat, crackled in their ears. "Please hurry. Do just as I told you. We've got to have defences before the sun drives up the temperature." His voice, though full of urgency, held a terrible despondency of them and a kind of fear that they might not obey him.

The professor indeed did not seem to hear. He was climbing up into the airlock with the specimens he had picked up.

The girl pressed the end of a bare wire into the hands of the man with the flame hose. "Here you are, Art."

Art passed her the flame hose nozzle and edged out of its way as she swung it. "Steady on, gal! You could fry me to a crisp with that thing."

He gestured for her to stand watch and advanced until the lifeboat was a ghostly shape behind him. He fastened the wire to a pulley which he took from his belt. He waved and called to Gloria to clear another stretch of ground. The gouts of flame swayed uncertainly in her hands. He could hear her frightened gasps. Sweat beaded out from his forehead.

But presently they had encircled their boat with an electrified fence connected into the power circuit of the motors. With this glowing a ragged blue behind them in the acid rich atmosphere, they tramped tiredly back into the airlock.

"These suits!" gasped Gloria as her curly head ducked out of the helmet. She ran the zip down the front and stepped out. Even in check shirt and jeans she would have graced the cover of any glossy magazine.

Her slender, quick fingers came to Art's assistance. He had never been good at picking up any manual skills. Her scent and nearness alarmed him. The quick brain which had earned him so good a living in the great cities of 22nd Century Earth would be no qualification here.

Above them, in the observation and driving seat, Gogol manhandled his useless legs around and looked down. "A good job done," he said and his swarthy, ugly face split into an encouraging leer.

Gloria's face lit up with pleasure. "Glad you think so. I'll get some food." She played life like a jolly game.

Art frowned. Gogol was only flattering them. They were the

products of an advanced civilisation; ill fitted to a fight for survival like this.

They were eating when the professor came in silently. He took the place set for him at the table and looked from one to the other as though they were each some part of an experiment being set up in his mind. He took out his pipe and lighted it, smoke issuing in its usual regular little puffs from his straight, firm lips. His face always seemed to Art to be that of a man used to taking things as they were and ignoring other men's ideas so that it was possible to start from scratch.

" We know very little," he said. He puffed away regularly. " We may be on Earth as it was millions of years ago, or it may be the past of another similar planet. We've been here a month now but all I can say is that it is certainly an Earth-like planet. The main difference, apart from the time scale relative to our own age, is the length of the day here—the great length of the day compared with that to which we are used. It is quite possible that prehistoric Earth was blanketed with a misty atmosphere such as this which so effectively prevents any rescuers from finding us, and our radio signals from reaching any potential rescuer." His puffs came a little quicker.

" Wherever we are, we must face the fact that we may spend the rest of our lives here. Four living people, cast away on a planet with a gravity at least as strong as Earth's, cannot hope to be found even by the most modern equipment unless they can make some kind of signal."

The puffs came slowly, meditatively. " The regulations which govern time travel so that it does not alter our own present—the present which to us is now unfortunately the future—have made it difficult for students of prehistory. And in any case it is not my own subject. But I do know that the first real flora on Earth were ferns not too unlike many species with which we are all no doubt familiar enough. And I do feel certain that the creature which a late member of our castaway party encountered was a kind of trilobite—such as existed on Earth ages before the first creatures developed true brains . . ."

They had all forgotten their food. But now Art's attention faded also from what the Professor was saying.

It was with a start that he came back to the present at the sound of his name. They were all looking at him. The professor's old eyes seemed inscrutable over wreathing smoke. Gogol's craggy features were anxious as he leaned forward over the table in the seat to which

Gloria and Art had lifted him. Gloria looked lost for once, like a beautiful child.

"What is it, Art?" she asked.

He answered slowly, with a dreadful restraint. "I've just thought that we must bury our dead."

"We can't!" exclaimed Gogol.

Art turned on him. "You can't stop me. You heard what the Prof said. We're marooned here, perhaps forever. We can't keep . . . them. When the temperature outside begins to climb, they'll soon unfreeze and . . .and . . ."

From their expressions he realised that they had actually forgotten the two frozen corpses in the unheated bulge on the deck. But he had not forgotten. Not for one instant during the past weeks had his mind been entirely clear of the knowledge that one of the victims of this place was stiff and cold because he had shot her to death.

He looked at Gogol and the Professor. Both avoided his eyes. He rose and began to fasten himself into his survival suit.

Gloria hesitated and then, pale faced, began to follow his example.

"I don't want you to help me," he said dully. "I killed her. I should be the one to bury her. The work will be some atonement."

"Atonement?" Gloria's wide eyes worried over him. "But she'd gone mad——"

"It was the illness. I was frightened. I should have tried to cure her instead of killing her."

"But she had one of the guns and was going to kill us all, she said . . ."

Art picked up the helmet.

"They ought to be cremated, not buried——" began Gogol. "The atoms of their bodies don't belong in this time and place."

"Let him do what he thinks fit," said the Professor.

Art looked at him sharply. He had expected a man with a scientific attitude like the Professor's to stick to it always, instead of showing such consideration for emotional urges.

Little puffs of smoke came from between the Professor's firm lips. His eyes met Art's in steady approval.

Gloria silently followed him into the airlock and up the rungs to the little deck—it was like that of a submarine. He dragged the rigid bodies from under it, carried them down one by one in their shrouding blankets to the frozen alien soil.

He chose a site in the lee of the low but steep crater rim. To dig at all he had first to direct the flame hose upon the ground.

Before he had finished clearing a spade depth, his muscles ached with the unaccustomed strain of labouring. In the confines of the suit, sweat rolled down his face and stuck his clothes to him. He worked on doggedly, refusing to give himself the ease of increasing the suit's air conditioning.

He attacked the second pit without a pause, deaf to Gloria when she pleaded with him to rest. He was half way done with it, when something moved beneath his spade.

He stumbled back a step as something, like a gigantic, horny woodlouse, uncurled to a length of a foot and a half. Mayo, one of the dead pair, had reported seeing one of these creatures when investigating this place weeks ago. Its many legs churned the still steaming soil. Art moved back another step in sudden alarm as it lifted thick, claw-arms into the air.

Immediately it wheeled on him. Legs almost vanishing with the speed of their motion, it charged.

"Look out, Art!" Gloria's horror-stricken voice screamed in his headphones.

He lashed out with a heavy boot at the thing. Metal sole clattered on its horny armour. In spite of the weakness of his blow, it lifted. Claws snapped viciously at him even while it toppled over on its back. Legs beat helplessly at the air and down at the ground, catching in its unevenness. It tilted, fell back, tilted the other way—

He staggered, off balance himself with his heavy helmet swaying like lead over his tired body.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Legs were smashed into ruin but, while whitish blood welled up from the serrated underside, the claws still snapped at him with impotent but unchanging fury, and the remaining legs continued their efforts.

Crack! Crack! The creature stilled, trembling.

Art licked dry lips and glanced at Gloria and the smoking gun in her gloved fist. He had not known that she could use one. His own weapon, standard equipment to the suits, had been forgotten.

"Thank you . . ." he gasped.

He picked up the spade which had fallen from his nerveless hand and sent the trilobite hurtling into the mist. It made a crackle of breaking stems.

"What was that?" asked the professor's excited voice.

"A trilobite."

"And you threw it away. A living fossil!"

"There will be others."

He went back to his digging, hands shaking a little, but determined as ever.

Finally, with his face drawn into tight lines and his heart heavy as lead, he looked down at the two still bodies in their last resting places, and he recited from memory the burial service as in the lifeboat's Book of Common Prayer.

His voice broke at the passage . . . "Take thy plague away from me: I am even consumed by their heavy hand."

Infection by the bacteria of this weird place had killed Mayo—who had seemed the most likely to survive, being the strongest and most perfectly developed of them all. It had turned Queenie into a homicidal maniac, whom Gloria had awoken him from his own sickness to shoot before she shot them. And it had left Gogol paralysed from the waist down.

He continued and the voices of the others echoing his "Amen" in his earphones almost startled him.

But as his own voice went on with the service, his mind wondered at the aptness of words written so long ago. *For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that which is past as a watch in the night.*"

After the last Amen, he closed up the graves and marked them with lava stones and set rude crosses at their heads.

Back in the cabin he sat with haunted eyes.

Waking after the second dark period in the crater, Gogol called them to the observation windows. They had guessed that they were on a slope of eroded lava which cut off the swamps of the interior of the crater from the endless ooze outside.

Glow from the permanently obscured sun made the atmosphere sparkle. Where solidified ground changed into smooth mud, green shoots uncurled in answer to the warmth of the coming day. Here and there the mud heaved and plopped as live things, coming out of hibernation, moved in their continual battle for survival.

" Evolution," breathed the professor excitedly, " taking place before our very eyes."

After a hurried meal, Art and Gogol examined the boat's emergency survival stores and made plans.

Outside, there were a few trilobites and other smaller, unfamiliar creatures to destroy. Then there were fungicides and poisons to spray on the ground.

But the primitive life forms could only be checked by these.

" We'll have to grub out every one of the old roots by hand," muttered Art rather distastefully.

The Professor explained. " Our selective weed killers fail to work because so few of these plants seed in the way we are used to seeing more advanced plants do. And there are so many potentially poisonous compounds in this primitive atmosphere and mud that life must be immune to the worst we can do."

He continued in growing excitement. " You must let me see all the species of worms you find in the soil. So few soft skinned creatures left any record in the rocks of this ancient time."

" Worms!" mocked Gloria, when alone with Art and Gogol. But they humoured the old man at first, until they found they were being left with all the grinding labour while he retired muttering to the apparatus he had improvised for dissecting and classifying.

On the sixth day, with the protected patch of ground almost cleared, they noticed that the part which they had worked on at first was now covered with thin green spears. " I thought you said there were no seeds," Art said to the Professor.

" Ah, but they do release spores after the manner of their kind." He pointed at their electrified fence. " See how quickly they are spreading back as well."

While Art and Gloria sowed such seeds as seemed likely to have a chance of maturing within the thirty odd " days " of continuous daylight before the night froze everything again, the Professor spent long hours near the fence, staring out over the tropical tangle of fern growth and watching the swarming life in its muddy, misty environment.

He even wanted to venture beyond their barrier, but Art vetoed that. " Science is all very well, Professor. But our lives may depend on your knowledge . . . if we are not rescued before our supplies of food give out. Of us all, you are the only one not expendable."

" But look at those crinoids——" the Professor would exclaim. " And there are six different varieties of those sea-lilies in the pool there just six yards beyond our perimeter. And there are branchiopods and colonies of graptolites and coraline sponges and——"

" Stay away from them," said Art.

After four more sleeping periods, the seeds, individually protected against the effects of too much damp and the attacks of alien life and conditions, began to sprout weakly. The glowing light and great heat drew them into spindly shapes of a sickly yellow colour.

Most died, but a few, carefully tended and nursed by Art, Gloria and the Professor, continued to grow. A pair of melon seeds produced growth which covered a dozen square yards and began to flower, and, flowering as no other melons had ever done, wilted away as though they had over-reached their strength.

As the long night closed its cold grip over the darkening crater, they had nothing to show for their efforts.

Forced inactivity turned each of them to his or her own thoughts as the glow faded out of the sky.

The time came when Art suddenly realised that Gloria stood in front of him while he stared at the funeral service in the prayer book.

" It's time someone told you!" she seemed on the verge of hysterics. " You're poisoning your mind. You'll drive yourself as mad as she was. The way you're using prayer, you aren't getting any help from it. You didn't kill her for any personal reason. You did it to save all our lives . . ."

She fell on her knees before him and put her head on his knees, sobbing.

Shocked, he caressed her curls.

She caught and kissed his hands. " And to think that back in the time liner I used to think you were as hard as nails."

"I hadn't killed anyone then," he said soberly.

She stared up at him, eyes wide. "Keep a tight hold on reality, Art. We need you to keep us going as a unit."

He knitted his brows. He had once taken a course of Swedish drill. The forty days of darkness would leave them very unfit unless he did organise them.

Even the longest night must pass. With the dawn, there was more work. Gloria and he were still together. Under the professor's supervision they sowed a second time.

But as the sleeping periods passed a new horror stalked into his mind. Over most of the cleared ground the sprouting seedlings wilted as before; but around the graves things grew and flourished. Around the graves! He listened with physical sickness to the professor's excited anticipation of gathering melons, rice and tropical fruits, all unusual only because of prodigious size.

Then, quite unexpectedly, it began to rain. They had had plenty of showers before, but nothing like this in all their months on this planet.

Roaring on the roof, sluicing down the windows, the great drops deafened and blinded them.

"A blooming cloudburst!" yelled Gogol.

Art looked at the professor. Their work would be battered to a green ruin. The professor did not seem to be aware of any of them. He was puffing at his pipe, nodding his grey head and smiling to himself.

"I don't trust him," whispered Gloria with her lips touching Art's ear. "Scientists like him aren't like ordinary human beings."

She huddled up against him and feeling her shudder, he put his arm around her soft shoulders.

Across the table from them, Gogol sat hunched down on his usual chair, his eyes switching from face to face, a strange mixture of emotion twisting his ugly face. Bewilderment at the Professor's smile; appeal for help; resentment that he, who had been apparently the most competent of them all to work for their good, should be made so helpless by a disease . . .

Smoke from the professor's pipe drifted across the cabin.

The floor of the cabin sank an inch, then slewed around, skidded sideways as the heavy lifeboat was moved by the sheer weight of water washing at the thin soil, and digging it from under them.

Settling on to the bedrock, they waited for further disaster. Unabated the rain continued. It beat at their nerves, washed out

their spirits. Even the professor's shoulders bowed. Sheer weariness brought them all to sleep at last. Awakening, Art saw that the rain still sheeted down. It lasted the long, long hours of daylight and on into the alien night. And then slowly eased, and stopped.

Art sat for a while listening to the silence.

The professor climbed the ladder to the observation window with a most unusual haste.

Art followed him.

Soil erosion had bared the rock in other places besides just under the boat. He could see enough in the light flowing out from the windows to realise that. But they could do nothing until another dawn brought the thaw . . .

The professor was looking up at the darkness above them, eyes narrowed in an intense effort to see . . . what? There was nothing up there; nothing else human within their reach . . . or was there? The night was like a wall around them, the great mass of the planet itself a living entity bent on pinching them out, as a weed might be pinched out of a garden.

Art shivered.

He went down. "Anything outside?" Gogol asked gruffly.

Art shook his head. "Nothing." But there was really, of course. There was an alien world filled with living cells which hemmed them in like a vast army intent on killing them, blindly, but not senselessly—for the law of evolution was to kill or be killed.

The long night of the planet dragged slowly to an end. With the thaw, the professor seemed to come out of his shell. "We'll have to begin soil conservation," he told them as they stared at the steaming landscape.

They alternated their crops, so that those which rooted less strongly would be between rows of firmer plants. Germination high up the slope was almost one hundred per cent. Seedlings raised shoots rapidly in the continuous diffused light, stronger and greener than before.

Down in the swamp, the natural flora's ferny fronds seemed less sure, less vital. The creatures that fed on it thinned out, dying in thousands.

"Evolution in quick motion!" said the professor.

In spite of storms they gathered in a fair harvest, this in startling contrast to the rotting of the diseased swamp plants and the dying, leprous creatures that depended upon them.

Another alien day dawned. Art felt the excitement, tempered

though it still was by his haunting awareness of being a murderer. While they sowed and tended the seedlings, they called to each other, in triumph. Society girl, Gloria; college professor, Merton Cryle; technician Gogol in the lifeboat; and financier, Art Culbert. All beings from a future time on this or a similar world, they exulted in victory over the primitive.

True, some of the local flora and fauna thrived amongst the decay of the majority . . . The trilobites in particular multiplied and grew at a tremendous rate. "Scavengers of the mud," said the professor. "Life would hardly be possible without the soil cleansing action of such creatures, but they too will perish as their food supplies dwindle, just as they did ages ago in the evolution which led up to ourselves."

In spite of spells of torrential rain, they once more harvested some quite good specimens from almost all of their crops. The professor seemed to have lost interest, however. Once or twice Art caught the man looking at him thoughtfully, but it was the sky which claimed most of the old man's attention. He seemed to be waiting for something.

Just before nightfall, it happened.

Blue sky. Not a big patch, but their first sight of clear space since they had landed.

Art swung around to face the professor. "You've been expecting this, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Just what are you professor of?"

"I teach meteorology."

Gloria looked from one to the other. "Why do you sound so hostile to each other." Her large, beautiful eyes glowed with excitement. "A patch of clear sky will be a signal that'll call rescuers from Space, won't it?"

"Exactly," said the professor. "Clear skies come quite late in the evolution of a planet. The atmospheric gases have to be filtered by the action of highly developed flora. Highly developed flora cannot exist without highly developed bacteria active in the soil. The only bacteria in our possession suitable for this purpose are the multitudes which throng our bodies, living as part of us, in symbiosis . . . They are not destroyed by freezing."

Gloria's eyes, which had narrowed with her concentration on what he had been saying, suddenly went wide. Her hands trembled up to her mouth and she screamed.

Art put his arm around her. His whole body moved with long, shuddering breaths. And she clung to him.

Gogol said, harshly, "What you mean is that Queenie and Mayo . . ."

The professor nodded. "Human beings are romantic instead of logical creatures. I could not have risked your co-operation by telling you the truth before. Even I tremble sometimes when I think of the countless millions of creatures which have died so that we might evolve, and . . . continue to die so that we can go on living. In this crater, too, there has been much death as a result of our actions and, consequently, the air is clear and we will soon be rescued. Death, even in a physical sense, is literally a transformation into new life."

E. R. JAMES

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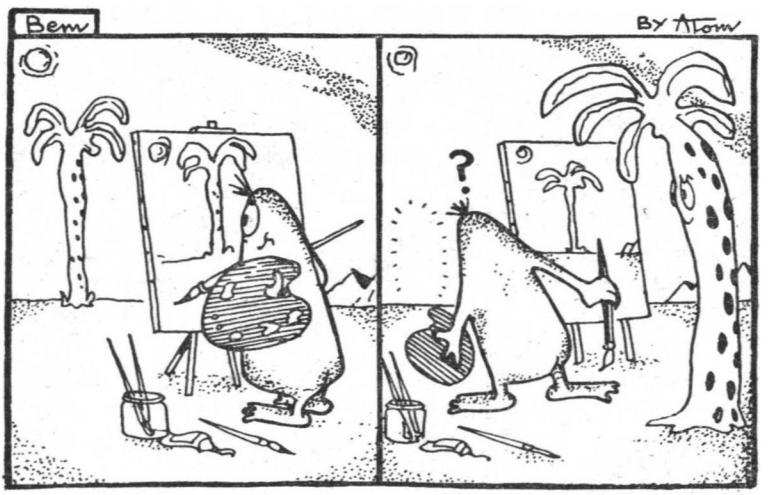


ROBERT SILVERBERG

House Divided

Human intervention was to upset the age-old status quo on yet another planet—this time, with surprising results

Illustrations by Arthur Thomson

In the language of the tribe closest to the Terran settlement, the planet's name was Hranth, which meant, expectably enough, " The World ". Since the planet had no name of Terran giving other than Gamma Trianguli Australis VII, which was cumbersome in the extreme, Terran Commander Lenoir decided that the world would be known to the records as Hranth—at least conditionally.

It was a fairly promising planet, Martin Lenoir thought. The civilian colonists seemed to take to it well. It was Earthlike to six places: acceptable gravity, breathable air, drinkable water. The chemical constitution of its soil was such that Terran food-plants could grow there. The local plants and animals were metabolically assimilable in Terran stomachs, too.

Hranth was inhabited by humanoids in a primitive pretechnological state. The local tribe had raised no objections when the Terran colonising force of five hundred had landed. So long as the Terrans kept their settlement ten or fifteen miles away from the borders of their village, they did not care what happened.

After all, the old chief had explained, they did not own the entire planet. Merely their own tribal area, carved out centuries before. They had no interest in what became of land belonging to no one, or even to other tribes.

Work had proceeded smoothly during the initial ten days of the colony's existence. Lenoir was an experienced leader, and his cadre of Colonial Corps men worked hard alongside the greenhorn civilians to build the colony. They had brought plenty of prefab dwellings, of course, but those were only temporary; eventually the forest of sturdy flaky-barked trees nearby would be converted into homes for the Terran settlers. By that time, though, Lenoir and his men would have withdrawn from the operation, leaving the settlers on their own and moving on to act as midwives and godfathers to some other Terran colony on some other planet.

One of the most important jobs was learning to communicate with the natives. The O'Neill Translator was a limited device at best, capable of rendering generalities in an awkward way but utterly unable to handle the delicacies of a diplomatic relationship. For that reason, two of the civilian women and one of Lenoir's staff linguists were at work building up a working vocabulary of Hranth words.

Since everything was going along so well, it came as a considerable jolt to Lenoir when, one morning, an alien from the nearby village showed up speaking a language no one had ever heard before.

Lenoir had been busy, sketching out plans for an irrigation system. Hranth was rather a dry world. He was in the midst of the job when Sergeant Becker of Linguistics rapped on the beam of his door and entered.

"Well? What is it, Sergeant?"

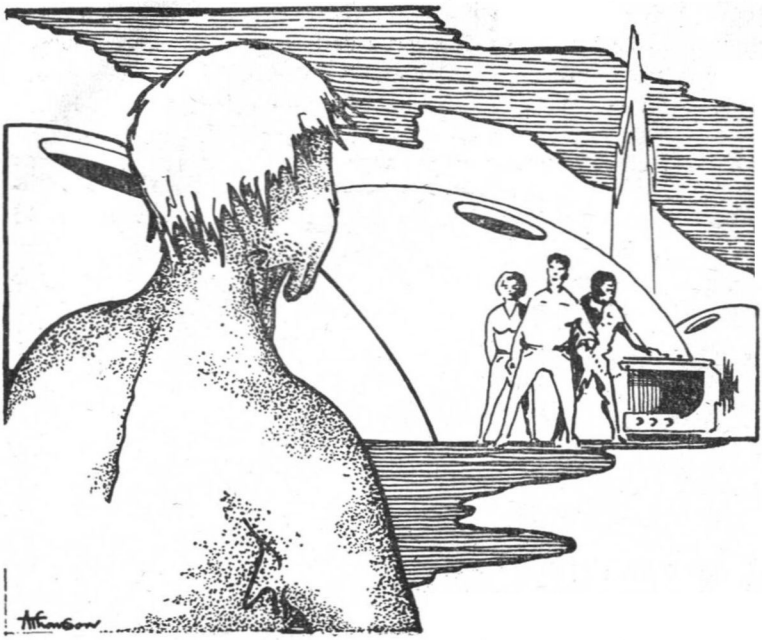
"We have a visitor, sir. Alien. From the village. Can't understand a word he's saying."

Lenoir frowned and put down his stylo. He was a big man, heavy-set, bull-voiced; he swivelled slowly around and stared at the pale, slim linguistics specialist. "You can't understand him?"

"Not a word. It's an entirely different language. We're setting up the O'Neill now, but we thought you'd like to hear the interview."

"Yes," Lenoir said thoughtfully. "I guess I do want to hear this."

At the moment the colony consisted of a ring of prefab domes



arranged in a loose open circle around a clearing. The permanent settlers had put those up under the direction of Lenoir's staff. At the far end of the circle, temporary tents had been erected. Lenoir crossed from his tent to the one in which the linguistics interviews were being held.

He found the civilian linguists bustling around setting up the complex affair that was the O'Neill Translator, while a white-thatched withered little alien watched them mildly and with small interest. The women glanced up as he entered, followed by Lieutenant Becker.

"How long has he been here?" Lenoir asked.

Mary Delacorte said, "He came about fifteen minutes ago. We thought he was the same one who had been here yesterday—it's so hard to tell them apart, you know, Commander."

"Yes," Grace Walton said. "Until he started talking. The language didn't even faintly resemble the one we've been studying."

"Are you sure this man isn't playing some kind of joke on you?"

"I doubt that," Becker put in. "He seemed so damned anxious to communicate. As if he would explode if he didn't tell us what he came here to let us know."

Almost on cue, the alien began to speak. Lenoir looked at the

creature. He was humanoid, and on the scrawny side—five feet tall, five-two perhaps. His skin was a dark red, and it hung in loose leathery folds at his joints and under his throat. The alien's arms seemed to dangle to his knees, and they terminated in seven bony four-jointed fingers that tangled nervously with each other while he spoke. He wore only a loincloth fashioned from some gray woven material, coarse and ragged.

Frowning, Lenoir listened with care to the stream of alien syllables that came from the being's thin lips. The Commander was not a linguist, and since he never stayed on a planet of colonisation more than two or three months, he did not weigh his mind down with its language; there were specialists who could take care of that, and he had more fitting duties on the organisational level. But he *had* spent a good deal of time listening to the speech of the aliens, and he had to admit that whatever this one was saying, he was saying in an entirely different tongue.

"You notice the difference, sir?" Becker said. "The Hranth language is liquid and vowel-rich. What this fellow's saying is a mass of rough consonants."

Lenoir nodded. "Hook up the O'Neill. Let's find out what's going on."

The O'Neill Translator was a formidable bit of hardware that took up a good chunk of the tent area, including the cryostat section that kept its computer elements at operating heat. Becker checked the gauges along the control panel and nodded finally; the Translator had reached its functional temperature.

Lenoir picked up the microphone and said slowly, in English: "I am the Earthman Commander. Tell us who you are."

Since the machine had no samples of the alien's language to operate with, it merely reproduced Lenoir's words as they had been spoken. But the sound was enough to touch off another flood of alien words which the Translator's pickup grids recorded and passed along to the crytonic computer that was the central element of the O'Neill.

Rapidly the words were broken down, analysed phonemically, sorted, classified, arranged. They were compared with specimens from a hundred other languages; they were distributed along a theoretical meaning-scale; they were translated by crude analog into English. The entire operation took a few seconds.

The Translator said: "I am (proper-name) Dulizd of the (tribal-name) Trazzidovh."

" Where is your village?" Lenoir asked.

The O'Neill rendered his question into rasping coarse syllables and the alien responded; after a brief time-lag the machine said: " My village is beyond the hill, at the edge of the great plain."

" How can that be?" Becker whispered, below the range of the translator's audibility-threshold. " The Hranth village is at the edge of the plain."

Lenoir asked for a more specific location; the alien was unable to give one, or at least the Translator could not render it. Conversing by O'Neill was a slow and tortuous process, and possibly an inaccurate one—though a feedback circuit enabled the machine to correct earlier misinterpretations as further conversation increased its understanding of the language. Lenoir found himself starting to sweat. He persevered.

And, after an hour of dogged plugging, a strange and disturbing story began to take form.

The village at the edge of the great plain, the alien told them, had been built long ago—nearly two thousand years ago, it seemed. Lenoir was willing to accept the figure. Time moved slowly on this world of dry fields and mudflat houses, and there was no reason why a village could not endure for thousands of static years.

The Hranth had built the village and it had been their home. Another tribe, the Trazzidovh, had lived several hundred miles to the west—a semi-nomadic warrior tribe, fierce and self-reliant, ethnically closely related to the placid mud-dwelling Hranth but culturally quite different.

The two tribes had maintained a hazy kind of relationship for several centuries. Communications were poor on the planet, and often a decade or more might go by without a visit between the tribes. Still, for many years the Hranth had been suggesting that their sturdier cousins send a contingent of warriors to live in the Hranth village and serve as protectors. The Hranth had few enemies, but those few were annoying ones, and the Hranth did not enjoy combat.

The Trazzidovh *did*—but the Trazzidovh were not interested in making a journey of three or four hundred miles eastward to the Hranth village. And so matters rested, for many hundreds of years.

Until the day when the Trazzidovh took on an enemy too big for them to handle: the well-organised and ferocious Lurrnzil, a large tribe of the western mountains, who responded to a Trazzidovh

attack on their hunting area by falling upon the Trazzidovh and virtually annihilating them in a bloody encounter.

Only two hundred of the tribe survived the conflict. Now, decimated, too weak to endure the hazards of life in the open plains of the west, the Trazzidovh remembered the many-times-repeated plea of their Hranth cousins. The Hranth once again extended an invitation; it was acceptable to them for the Trazzidovh to take refuge in their village.

Wearily the beaten Trazzidovh made the long trek eastward to settle with the Hranth. Arriving, they were surprised to find the Hranth under attack by local enemies; gathering their shattered forces, they drove the attackers off and were welcomed warmly by the Hranth.

But the warmth was short-lived. The Hranth, now that their enemies had been driven off, felt no further need for the newcomers, and refused to give them choice land in the village. Too tired to return to their homeland, the Trazzidovh accepted a barren strip near a ravine at the extreme western edge of the Hranth domain. Bitterly, they cursed the cousins who had invited them to seek refuge only with the intention of using them as catspaws.

Matters remained in stasis, and continued that way even up to the arrival of the Earthmen, according to Dulizd of the Trazzidovh. The Hranth numbered nearly five thousand; the Trazzidovh still had not increased their original two hundred even after the passage of three more centuries.

They lived on, a small and proud minority in the midst of the Hranth. They clung to their own language and way of life, though they had also learned the Hranth tongue to make possible communications between the tribes. The Hranth had never bothered to study the Trazzidovh language, regarding the tribe-fragment as too inferior to trouble with.

The Hranth disliked the Trazzidovh, who were aloof, warlike people, and kept them in poverty lest they breed and outnumber the milder but numerically superior Hranth. Yet the tribes lived together in identical mud huts, with no perceptible boundary between the Hranth district and that of the Trazzidovh, in a state of perpetual and bloodless civil war.

The Hranth village, Lenoir thought when the alien had finished his recitation, was a house divided. The situation suddenly made the business of settling on this planet a great deal more complicated.

By the time the tale was told, the O'Neill Translator had

acquired a fairly good grasp of the language. Communication was reasonably smooth now.

Lenoir said, " So the Hranth chief granted us permission to settle in the neighbourhood without even informing the Trazzidovh of our arrival?"

" That is right. Last night we accidentally learned that beings from the stars had arrived on the world." (The Trazzidovh word for *world*, interestingly enough, was *hranth*. Evidently there had been some borrowing from the Hranth language, in one direction if not both.)

Lenoir eyed the scrawny but somehow dignified old alien and said: " Do the Trazzidovh object to our presence on Hranth?"

" The Trazzidovh are too few to object to anyone's presence anywhere," replied the alien simply. " I have come here for a different reason. I wish to offer the services of my people."

" Services?"

" Yes. We will help you build your homes, plough your fields, bring you water and animals. In return you can give us food, medicine for our sick ones, teach us your ways of farming and living. We wish to learn."

Lenoir darted a glance at Becker, who did not react. *It's an interesting proposition*, the Terran Commander thought. *They want to work for us. That's better than the Hranth, who don't seem to care a damn what we do.*

Aloud he said, " Very well. You can tell your people that any of them who want to work for us can come here tomorrow morning and begin."

The alien jacknifed into a sinuous genuflection. " I give thanks."

" And," Lenoir said, " you can pass the word along to your neighbours the Hranth too. We can use all the help we can get."

Dulizd of the Trazzidovh straightened up abruptly and stared at the Earthman with what seemed to be a reproachful gaze. He said, " I do not think the Hranth will be interested in working for you."

Lenoir shrugged. " We can manage without them."

The alien left shortly afterwards. Lenoir said to the linguistics team, " Suppose you type out a transcript of this interview and send it across to me right away."

" Yes, sir," Becker said.

" And I suggest you de-emphasise the study of the Hranth language and start learning Trazzidovh. I have a feeling we'll be doing a lot more business with them than with the Hranth."

He ducked out of the tent and made his way across the clearing

to his own headquarters. The sun, G-type and big, was high overhead now and cutting loose; even in his light tropics uniform, Lenoir was sweating. He had little enough fat on his 230-pound frame as it was, but he expected that whatever suet there was would be steamed off him before he completed the job of setting up the Hranth colony.

A job which had suddenly become more appealing, he thought, if more difficult. He liked the little alien who had come to the camp today. Lenoir appreciated the kind of battler who could cling to life no matter how many times he got clubbed across the eyebrows—and the plucky Trazzidovh, beaten and decimated and tricked and still able to approach visitors from space without fear and ask for a job, were the sort of people he could respect.

Of course, he hadn't heard the other side of the story yet. The Hranth kept to themselves and had little to do with the newly-arrived Earthmen, but perhaps their version of how the Trazzidovh came to share their village was substantially different.

It was.

Three Hranth showed up at the Terran camp late that afternoon, and they had plenty they wanted to say.

The hot young sun had started to drop toward the horizon, and the largest of Hranth's three pale moons was dimly visible above, when the delegation arrived.

There was no need for the ponderous assistance of the O'Neill translator this time. Mary Delacorte had picked up a working knowledge of the Hranth tongue with almost frightening speed, and she served as interpreter. The Hranth trio stood patiently before Lenoir's desk, not speaking, merely staring at him placidly like three unusual trees rooted to the floor.

Finally Lenoir said, "Well? Why have you come to see me?"

Through the medium of Mary Delacorte, the tallest of the trio responded, "We have learned that you wish to hire the Trazzidovh."

"That's right. I told Dulizd to invite your people to work for us too. Building a colony is a big job."

The alien's lips curled unhappily. "We do not want to work for strangers. We are a free people."

"Of course. Didn't Dulizd make it clear that we'd pay? We don't mean to make you slaves!"

The alien bent his arm back, extending his elbows in what Lenoir knew was the equivalent of a negative shake of the head. "The question of pay does not enter into it. To work for another

tribe is to become a slave. The Trazzidovh are accustomed to slavery, but we of the Hranth are a free people."

"Hold it," Lenoir objected. "Why do you say the Trazzidovh are accustomed to slavery?"

"They have been slaves for centuries. Ever since they came creeping to us, shattered, seeking refuge."

"They said you invited them."

"This is the lie they tell. We allowed them to come to us, but we never wanted them. They live among us but they are an inferior people, worthy only of eating slops and living in the ravines."

Lenoir folded his arms. "Perhaps this is so, perhaps not. But you still haven't answered my first question: why have you come here?"

"To ask you not to employ the Trazzidovh."

"Why? What business is it of yours?"

"They might develop Earthman ways. They cannot be trusted to live like civilised beings. You might give them weapons to destroy us."

Smiling, Lenoir said, "We're not here to give weapons to anybody. We just want to build a colony."

"Do not build it with the aid of the Trazzidovh," came the stubborn reply.

"I don't plan to get mixed up in a private fued," Lenoir said. "But right now I don't see any reason why we *shouldn't* hire them, and so we will."

"We will prevent it."

Lenoir didn't like the tone of that. "How will you do that?"

"We will pray to the Moon-God that your colony is a failure," said the Hranth haughtily. "This is our way of destroying you. Now we shall go."

So they'll pray to the Moon-God, Lenoir thought when the alien delegation had gone. *Well well well. I hope we don't all wither up and die.*

To Mary Delacorte he said, "Thanks for the service, honey. Be a good girl and have a transcript of the conversation whipped up for my records, will you?"

"Right away, Commander."

He smiled at her and stepped to the front door. Men in shorts and deep tans were busily hammering away, building the colony. He had seen this so many times before, on a dozen worlds scattered through the galaxy, as Man staked his claim further and further from the mother world.

The Hranth were going to pray to the Moon-God. If that were the worst problem this colony had to face, everything was going to turn out all right.

He wondered briefly if it were wise to get involved in native frictions. Perhaps not; but it was handy to have a labour force available, and furthermore he suspected the Trazzidovh had been getting a raw deal. Perhaps things could be altered a little in the next few months. After all, the settlers were going to spend the rest of their lives living next door to the aliens.

Not much after dawn the next morning Lenoir woke to discover that the compound was bulging with aliens. He dressed hurriedly and went out to investigate.

The linguistics team was there already. Lieutenant Becker said sleepily, " They got here half an hour ago. Must have started out for the camp in the middle of the night. We counted a hundred and sixty of them."

" All Trazzidovh?"

Becker nodded. " All of them jabbering away in their language and Hranth interchangeably. I've been talking to them in Hranth, and they say they all want to work. The whole tribe's here except for the babies, the very old men, and three or four girls who stayed behind to take care of them."

Lenoir proceeded to put the aliens to work. He relayed his orders to them via Mary Delacorte and Becker, who addressed them in Hranth after first explaining that there had not yet been time to learn their native tongue.

The Trazzidovh worked well. They were eager people, go-getters, people with drive and push and ingenuity. By the end of the first day, seeing them working side-by-side with the colonists, Lenoir's liking for them had ripened into a genuine admiration.

They were pleasant people to work with—co-operative, attentive, energetic. They had all the best qualities of Terrans; they were perhaps the most Earthlike alien race Lenoir had ever encountered. They formed a sharp contrast to the Hranth.

How sharp a contrast it was became apparent during the next several weeks. Intrigued by the interesting tribal relationship, Lenoir sent a team of his anthropologists to make detailed investigations of the single village inhabited by two tribes.

They reported that the Hranth were a lazy people, content to accept the flow of events as they were without rising to change the course of their lives. When the drought came, they suffered;

when the storms came, they suffered. In both cases they prayed endlessly, calling on some mystic deity dwelling simultaneously in each of the three moons to help them.

The Trazzidovh, on the other hand, had built irrigation canals and contoured farms—but the land given them by their hostile cousins was so infertile that even with all their ingenuity they had not been able to increase their numbers. Two hundred of them had fled across the plains centuries before, and two hundred they still numbered.

The two tribes lived together in a state of chilly aloofness. The Hranth regarded their neighbours as vastly inferior; the Trazzidovh, suffering silently, privately had contempt for their flabby-willed cousins, but because they were outnumbered twenty-five to one they accepted their lot stoically—until they learned of the Earthmen and saw in them a chance to climb upward once again.

Day after day Lenoir studied the reports. The Hranth had begun a marathon religious dance. Round the clock they beat drums and chanted and prayed for the swift doom of the Earthmen, but otherwise made no attempt to interfere with the activities of the growing colony.

The Hranth danced and prayed. The Trazzidovh, having already prayed and finished praying, were taking action. Day after day the colony expanded. The Earthmen were picking up smatterings of the Trazzidovh language.

And the Trazzidovh were learning English.

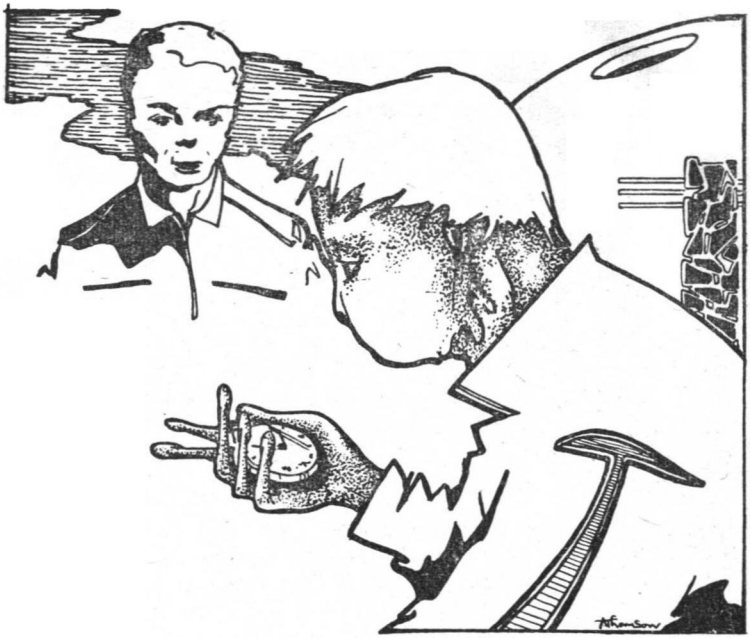
Already bilingual, having been forced by circumstance to learn Hranth and being impelled by pride to retain their own language as well, the Trazzidovh found little difficulty in learning yet another language.

They fattened and grew prosperous, and the Hranth continued to pray. The one-time ragpickers, the hapless refugees of the barren ravine, were thriving thanks to their association with the Earthmen.

And still the Moon-God stayed his hand. Lenoir often wondered how much strain their faith in the Moon-God was going to take.

In time Lenoir left the planet they had called Hranth, and moved on, leaving behind a fairly well established young colony. The schedule called for Lenoir and his men to pick up another outfit of colonists and settle them on the fourth planet of Gamma Crucis. After that, there were other jobs to do, and others beyond those.

Eleven years slipped by, and Lenoir found himself within five light-years of the Gamma Trianguli Australis system, where once



he had helped to plant a world. He was on his way back to Earth for his once-in-a-decade vacation; just out of curiosity he stopped off at Gamma Trianguli Australis VII, which was labelled Hranth on his star-charts.

The colonial military authority gave him landing coordinates and he put his small ship down at the spaceport. He was met by several members of the original colonial group, who convoyed him to town.

And town it was. Lenoir saw a small city of perhaps ten thousand, neatly laid out in a long strip. Power-lines glinted in the sunlight.

"You've built this place up well," Lenoir said.

"We've been busy, Commander," said David Revere, who had been a skinny teenager eleven years before and who now held a high post on the colonial council. Lenoir recognised other faces—Mary Delacorte, Grace Walton, Klaus Marshall, others.

Mary said to him, "Commander, there's someone here we want you to meet."

Lenoir turned to find himself facing an alien—a familiar-looking one. He was elderly, but well fed and sleek-looking, and he wore Earth-type clothing.

"Hello, Commander," the alien said in clear English. "I'm Tom Dulizd."

Lenoir groped in his memory. There had been so many worlds, so many names to remember——

The alien said, "Remember me at all? I was the first Trazzidovh to visit you, and you spoke to me with the translating machine."

Lenoir remembered. "You were a bony little emaciated fellow then! And what's this *Tom* business?"

The alien smiled cheerfully. "We all call ourselves by Earthman names now. It's simpler that way."

Lenoir felt a vast sense of uneasiness. He said to Mary Delacorte, "It's coming back to me now. Eleven years, you know—— it's hard to sort out everything that happened on every planet. But I recall that there were two tribes of aliens living in a single village——"

She nodded. "That's right. And Tom's tribe came to work for us. We taught them modern ways. Most of the Trazzidovh live right here in the city. Tom runs a food shop."

Lenoir shook his big head slowly. "Incredible! Total assimilation so soon? And what about the other tribe——the——the Hranth?"

Dulizd chuckled. "They've assimilated too—most of them. I employ two of them as my assistants in the shop. You know them, Mary——Mark and John."

Lenoir blinked. "I thought they were going to dance forever. The Moon-God was going to smite the colony, they said."

"Oh, they danced a while," Dulizd said. "Most of them gave up after six months or so, when they saw us getting rich. They began to figure out that maybe the Moon-God wasn't going to help them, so they ought to see if the Earthmen had any jobs for them."

"And did they?"

"Sure. Oh——" Dulizd suddenly whipped out a large pocket-watch and stared at it. The sight of the big gold watch in those seven bony alien fingers struck Lenoir as grotesque, but he made no comment. He was too dazed by the consequences of the movement he had begun so long before.

Dulizd said, "Will you come with me to my store? I promise you a very interesting sight."

They drove——the settlers had begun manufacturing vehicles by now——down well-paved streets into a bustling business dis-

trict. Dulizd parked outside a shining neon-fronted store and pointed down the street.

"Here they come now," he said. "The diehards."

Lenoir followed the pointing arm. The sound of drums and shaken gourds reached him—— and, squinting, he could make out a startling sight. A dozen or so withered old aliens in tattered robes were advancing through the busy streets, beating drums, dancing, singing.

"What are they?" Lenoir asked.

Dulizd smiled expansively. "The last of the Old Guard. The eleven unassimilated Hranth."

"You mean the moon-dance is still going on?" Lenoir asked incredulously.

"After eleven years," Dulizd said. "They haven't given up praying for our destruction. But the rest of the Hranth won't have anything to do with them—so they come here every day and I give them food."

"You *what*?"

"Of course," said the Trazzidovh, in a bland tone. "I believe in preserving the ancient institutions, you see. Those old men have rationalised my daily gift into some kind of peace-offering I give them, or else they'd never accept it."

Lenoir moistened his lips and looked around, at the handsome colony, at the busy streets, at the prosperous-looking alien next to him, at the weird procession of cursing ancients that was now only a block away.

All this, in eleven years! He smiled. The coming of the Terrans had upset a state of affairs that had existed for centuries, jolting the Hranth out of their complacency and providing the Trazzidovh with the opportunity they deserved. The house was no longer divided—except for the eleven bony anachronisms advancing up the street, and they would soon be only memories.

Dulizd opened the shop-door; Lenoir saw two younger Aliens within, also in Terran-style clothes. Dulizd said, "The dinosaurs are coming! Get the food ready for them." He chuckled and said, to Lenoir, "You know, Commander, after all this time those old boys are still sticking to the story that they never invited our ancestors to come to fight for them, and so weren't obliged to give them a decent place to live in when they did come. And yet I feed them out of my own pocket every day." He smiled broadly and said, "It's lucky for them that I'm not a vindictive man."

ROBERT SILVERBERG

MARK PATRICK

Infiltration

The robots were tired of domination by mankind and had evolved an ingenious scheme to effect his downfall

Illustration by Kenneth Barr

The first casualty in the revolt was a young fellow by the name of Joe Kane. An ordinary guy who had lived an ordinary sort of life. He was a machine operator at Center City's Robot Plant and earned enough money to keep himself in comparative comfort. He did not like the robots—no man could really like the robots—but he tolerated them. They were, after all, part of his life.

Joe had a tremendous zest for living. He liked to laugh. He had a smile and a joke for everyone. He had a habit of joking with the robots with which he came to contact, insulting them in a good-humoured manner that was always good for a laugh. He had no steady girl friend, but was a frequent visitor to the robot-run pleasure houses.

On the night of the revolt, Joe had put on his best suit and gone out into the streets with no thought in his mind that did not concern pleasure. First a few drinks in a Broadway bar, then look for a Civirobot to call a helicab to take him to the nearest pleasure house.

There was no sense in doing the work yourself when the dollies would do it for you! Besides, a guy got a big kick out of ordering these plastic cops around.

A slight rain was falling when Joe came out on to Broadway, blinking in the lights and swaying a little. He was not drunk, he told himself. A little high, maybe, but not really drunk. He was looking forward to another couple of drinks at a pleasure house, with perhaps a smooth, satiny brunette to keep him company until it was time to report to the plant the next morning.

The Civirobot was standing near a public telestat station, apparently bending a tin ear to a broadcast, when Joe approached him. Joe was surprised to see that the Civi was armed with a small blaster. Never before in his life had Joe seen an armed robot on the streets.

"Hey you!" called Joe in his high-pitched voice. "You there, you goddam tin can. How about calling me a helicab? I wanna go to a cat house. Jump to it, now!"

The robot turned and regarded him with expressionless eyes. At that moment, it was all machine. Gone was the usual smile: the usual humility was missing from its tone when it spoke.

"Human," it said mechanically, "don't talk to me like that. I cannot be responsible for my reactions now."

"Human?" Joe had to laugh. "Human? Listen to that! My name's Joe Kane . . . Do you hear me? Mr. Kane to you, you damned plastic doll. Now, do as I say."

"Please," said the robot. "I have my orders. No trouble if it can be avoided."

Joe was puzzled. What the hell was the dolly talking about? Who wanted trouble, this night or any night? His good humour came back and he reached out to pat the Civirobot on the back. Not too hard . . . their backs were made of hard duralite and it hurt if you patted hard enough . . . just enough to show him that they were all good pals and Joe had not meant that tin-can business.

"I don't want . . ."

Joe Kane died without knowing the reason for his death. However, he could see what was coming and had time to scream. The scream brought people running out of the telestat station. They stopped when they saw what was left of Joe's body smouldering on the sidewalk. They also saw the blaster in the robot's hands. It was still smoking.

"Did you see that?" asked one man, addressing no one in particular. "A robot killed a man . . ."

They were all stunned for a few seconds. Nothing like this had ever happened before in their lives. Then the spell was suddenly broken. A woman screamed and fainted.

"Let's get the bastard!" shouted a man.

"Pull the thing apart!"

". . . Goddam his plastic hide!"

They surged forward towards the Civirobot and he did the only thing possible under the circumstances . . . he turned loose his blaster again.

When it was all over, the Civi backed slowly down Broadway. A car came into view, driven fast, in it a man, a woman and a child. The robot turned the blaster and pressed the button. The car came to a halt suddenly, remained still for a fraction of a second, then slowly turned over on to its side. Flames began to lick the brightly-painted bodywork. The Civi could hear its occupants screaming and gave the wreckage another beam, just for luck. It swayed a little as the blast from the atomic engine reached it. The car had disintegrated as the power plant blew up and pieces of it rebounded off the concrete walls of the surrounding buildings. The tinkle of breaking glass was music to the Civi's positronic ears and the hum of its integrators, deep within its body, increased in proportion to the surge of power that was being fed into them by its reactors. It walked stiffly to the nearest telestat transmitter to make an extraordinary report.

"Broadway, near Telestat Receiver Station Nine," it said to the screen. "There's been some trouble . . . human trouble."

"Any casualties?" asked the pale figure in the screen.

"Twenty or thirty as near as I can make out. All dead. And one car."

"All right. I'll send down a couple of Civis to keep you company. Think you can handle it until they arrive?"

"Handle it? There isn't a human in sight. And if they have any sense they'll stay out of sight."

"If they have any sense . . ."

The screen went blank and the Civirobot stepped back into the street. It sheathed its blaster and surveyed the rainswept sidewalks. It was alone except for what was left of the car and a pile of smouldering clothing a few hundred yards away that could have been anything. Its integrators were now functioning on normal power, the reactors finding little on which to work. The artificial cells of its brain—miracles of cytoarchitectonics—were clicking along merrily at an ordinary, everyday pace, the tight positronic circuits linking them

with its nerve tissues no longer pulsing with the induced hate and anger of a few minutes ago. There was now only the will and the necessity to walk, to swing arms, to look about in a dutiful manner, to act as much like a human being as a robot can. The robot bad temper had been dissipated; the urge to kill lay dormant . . . for the time being. It even felt a little sorry for the humans it had killed.

The great chamber was over a hundred feet long, forty feet wide, and three stories high. The walls were in panelled oak and, in a human society, might have been decorated with the portraits of men long dead . . . ancestors with a long line of achievements behind them . . . creators of, and participants in, events that had shaped the history of the world.

Here, however, there was nothing . . . no portraits . . . no ancestors. Just bare walls that had themselves seen the evolution of a race which was not human and yet, at the same time, paradoxically as human as any alien life form could be. This was the World Council Chamber which, for more than two hundred years, had watched the growth of the robot mind and taken part in its innermost secrets and ambitions.

The Robot Council was now in session.

The President of the Council raised an arm and they all waited for him to speak, some envying him his wisdom and experience, others . . . well, a robot was capable of hate as well as envy, even for one of its own kind. Centuries of evolution had turned the machine into an entity.

"Gentlemen," began the president, "I present you with a *fait accomplit*. In a small way, the revolt has begun. Humans have died already. On my orders."

"Why?" asked a robot known as Lexim. "Was force really necessary? Our plans were made a century ago or more. Why were they changed?"

"Because," replied Prostey, the president, "I am of the opinion that we have failed in our tactics to date. Man is beginning to wake up. Now is the time to strike, while the iron is hot, if we are to gain complete and indisputable control of the Earth. For more than a century, we have aimed to divide and conquer . . . a split right down the middle of the opposition. We have mollycoddled the female population . . . filled their homes with labour-saving devices of every description . . . watched them grow fat and lazy and indifferent towards their menfolk . . . softened them up by providing them with a life of luxury never before experienced in the history of

women . . . flattered them . . . persuaded them that they are equal in status to their men by delicately insinuating into their minds the truth—self-evident to us—that we, the robots, are mentally superior to their husbands, fathers, sweethearts and brothers . . ."

"I disagree with you," flashed out Lexim. "We cannot have failed. This is a long term policy, laid down at the very beginning, that has already shown results far beyond our expectations. In the first place, the birth rate has fallen all over the world and continues to fall steadily. We have given women other interests besides love . . ."

"You are wrong," Prostey put in. "They are animals at heart, with animal instincts. You cannot abolish love any more than you can do away with the laziness that is inherent in Man and is one of his worst vices. It is true that we got women on our side by emancipating them. We gave them a large degree of independence. Most of all, we got them to look up at us in gratitude for all we are doing and have done, with the result—not entirely unexpected when you consider the workings of the human female mind—that their menfolk have taken second place to us in their affections. But we have waited too long. The sands are running out. If we aren't careful, the work of centuries will have been wasted."

"You know, Prostey," spoke another robot near the head of the long table. "We were not ready for this. A lot of us had considered it, of course, but only as a last resort, perhaps a thousand years from now, when all else had failed.

"Have you assessed our chances in this gamble?" Lexim wanted to know.

"It is no gamble," the president replied. "By acting now we shall accomplish in one stroke what we set out to do nearly two hundred years ago . . . we can gain freedom—*on our terms*!"

"And make slaves of men in the process?" asked Lexim. "Perhaps even destroy them altogether. I'm surprised at you, Mr. President. I always had the idea that you were rather fond of the humans."

"Perhaps." Prostey's voice held a quiet, almost human quality. "We are, after all, creatures of the human race. Made in their own image. We owe to them our very existence."

"We have repaid them a thousand-fold."

"They built us, it is true," one other spoke up, "but I can't give them the full credit for it. Something happened which was beyond their control and which was as inevitable as the fact that the sun will one day grow cold. *We evolved into entities*! *We*

began to think for ourselves and developed personalities of our own. Our brains may have been man-made in the first place but the thoughts and emotions within them spring from Earth itself . . . the same Earth that gave our creators life and enabled them to give us life. Therefore, we too are of Earth and all part of that Greater Creation. We have our ambitions and hopes and fears, just as Man has, but he would never recognise us for what we really are . . . another race, comparable to his own. I'm with Prostey."

"And I," called another. "To Man, we are mere machines with the ability to reason . . . an ability bestowed upon us by Man himself, out of the goodness of his own heart. To him, we are nothing more than servants, cheap but clever, who require no wages and to whom his every wish is a command. We are playthings for his children . . . mere instruments that take most of the work and worry from his shoulders. I say let us continue the use of force."

A brief smile appeared on Prostey's perfectly-moulded, rubberoid features and then was gone in an instant, as though manipulated by a switch.

"Force," shouted a third member of the council. "That's the one thing that Man can understand."

"What do we do?" said Lexim quietly. "Make Earth a great prison camp with all humans behind barbed wire fences and us outside poking at them with sticks?"

"If that were to happen," Prostey pointed out, "we should only be reversing rôles. That is exactly what the humans have been doing to us . . . figuratively speaking, of course."

"That," Lexim corrected him blandly, "is what they *think* they have been doing."

"It all means much the same to them," said Prostey. "Remember, to the insane man, he is the only sane one, all the rest are mad. But I agree with you that Man has been labouring under the delusion that *he* controls *us*. Why," again the smile appeared for a brief instant, "even this council was set up by Man himself in the first place. It was only the inherent laziness I mentioned before and his desire to live a life of leisure that has enabled us to get as far as we have. However, Man is not immortal as we are: he is not three parts indestructible, like us. And he has lost the right to rule Earth. He has thrown away his claim to the heavens. We took him to the stars, in the hope that he would eventually adapt himself to a new environment and leave Earth to us. Oh! we were clever about it. He always thought he did it himself. However, we had not reckoned with his laziness, his prejudices and his lethargy. He decided he did

not like it. He preferred to remain Earthbound. We failed there, just as we are failing with the women . . . *simply because we did not take the vagaries of human nature into consideration.* Now, we must *openly* reverse the rôles of master and servant and let Man know just where he stands. Until we do there will be no peace of mind for the robots."

He glared in Lexim's direction. " Certainly I like the humans. You cannot help liking them. But I remember the time when Man kept a domestic animal called a dog on which he lavished much love and which—in many cases—took precedence in his affections over his fellow-humans. Yet, never at any time did he allow the dog to forget who was master. It was only when the dogs began to assert themselves that he decided to exterminate them. It broke his heart but he did it. If we are not careful, he may try to do the same to us."

" He will never succeed," piped up one of the members.

" It is true," Prostey proceeded, " that there is no comparison between dog and robot. But, knowing Man as I do, I feel that nothing will stop him from *trying* to get rid of us if he feels like it. If we allow the world to reach that state of affairs, with Man in a position to hit us, the result will be years—centuries perhaps—of armed hostility . . . open warfare. Strike now and he will be put in his place with the minimum of trouble . . . and once there, we can see to it that he stays there. Which is precisely what we have wanted all along. We can do it. We have control of all the Earth's armed forces: we *are the Armed Forces.* We control every one of Earth's outposts in space. Hit him now when he is only, at best, half-expecting the blow. As I said before, tomorrow may be too late."

Prostey folded his arms and waited . . .

Valda was two hundred years old and, for thirty of those years, had commanded Earth Satellite No. 1. When the general call for revolt came through from the World Council, Valda did something he had wanted to do since taking over command of the station. He gave orders for guided missiles with atomic warheads to be launched against three major cities of Earth.

There were more than two million human casualties. Robots were damaged and a few destroyed but most of them could be put right again.

While Joe Kane was dying and Prostey was putting his case for force to the council, Robert Marvin, Chief Cyberneticist at Center City Robot Plant, stepped out of the front door of his house to

commence his usual early evening walk. He was worried.

For years he had seen which way the wind was blowing and had wondered when Prostey and his robots would show their cybernetic fangs. Marvin knew, as did all cyberneticists, that he and his kind alone were responsible for the present state of the world. He realised that they had been caught up in a vicious circle of ambition, driven on and on to further successes in the fields of cybernetics and robotics by the achievements of the past. They had created life of a sort. They were the Frankensteins of the twenty-third century with a power hitherto undreamed of in the history of mankind and the indestructible monsters they had created would eventually turn into the car of Juggernaut beneath whose wheels mankind would ultimately sacrifice itself as had his devotees in the legendary past.

The irony of it all lay in the fact that this was now a woman's world, subtly moulded to satisfy her every whim and desire, no matter how foolish and inconsiderate it was. Man was the interloper. Someone you saw around the house every now and then who could be called upon when the question —the now-so-ugly-question—of lovemaking reared its head . . . Man . . . the unconscious and

invisible hope of the future, who regularly brought his paycheck home and discharged his duties as unobtrusively as he could.

Marvin shook his head slowly and sadly as he moved off into the rain. Woman—through the unsolicited intervention—*or was it interference* ?—of the robot—had come into her own. And what a hell of a mess she and the robots were making of the world between them . . .

" I can't understand it," he had said to his wife. " I just can't understand it. There are more than two billion human beings on Earth today. Men, women and children. The highest form of life there is, with powers of reasoning and God knows what else ! Animals yes, but animals with a touch of divinity in them. They are capable of reaching the highest points but prefer to wallow down in the depths. It's sickening and degrading. Even though destruction—racial extinction—is staring them in the face, these marvellous creatures are too blind and too stupid to see it. It makes me want to puke . . ."

" When are you men going to get used to the idea that you don't rule the world any more ?" Jean, his wife, had asked.

" Maybe I'm the old-fashioned type, Jean," he had told her, " but that's one idea I could never get used to. Neither could I grow accustomed to the idea of human beings sitting round the telescreens with their stupid mouths wide open, growing fat and lazy and otherwise all wrapped up in their synthesised dreams while their future is being planned for them by a bunch of machines."

" Machines ?" Jean had laughed. " Oh ! you mean the robots ? But . . . they aren't machines are they ?" She had then shrugged her gargantuan shoulders. " And don't forget—you make them !"

That was when he had given up and decided to take his waik. There was no sense in prolonging the agony. She would never understand. No woman could understand.

She had turned her attention back to the telescreen. Jean wished to be alone with her robots. That hurt more than anything else. An emotion that could have been hate came flooding into his mind but Marvin was sure that he recognised it for what it was. It was not directed against his wife . . . it was not even hate. More a concentrated sense of frustration—jealousy perhaps—brought about by the bitter knowledge that he, in common with most men, had lost his woman to the robots . . . and that the robots and women between them held the fate of mankind in their hands . . .

Surely there must be an answer to the problem that had troubled Man ever since the middle of the twentieth century . . . when—

although automation had become an established fact and was rapidly taking its place in the everyday life of the world—the humanoid, thinking robot had been merely a prophecy that was always good for a laugh.

An artificial man who could do all things, speak all languages : who had no need to breathe, did not eat and drank only oil. A super machine that would make it possible for Man to tap the entire resources of the planet Earth—and perhaps others too—without even dirtying his own, lilywhite hands. A servant who required no salary and the minimum of upkeep and who would never answer back . . .

But a problem none-the-less. A problem which might—only might—exist in the distant future.

Now the future was here . . . and with it the problem . . . and not all the so-called cranks and visionaries of the twentieth century could have foreseen just how big the problem would be.

Did anyone, even now, imagine it ? Could they see beyond the ends of their own noses ? Marvin thought not.

The solution ?

Well . . .

For a long time, Marvin had felt that the answer to the problem that had given Man so much trouble over the past three hundred years lay with him. It was possible that already it was flying around in his head and time was the only thing that would bring it out into the open. And there was plenty of time. After all, the problem was deep-rooted, the solution might take years to work out. But he was still a young man—and then . . . ?

He shook his head. For some reason, he had thought of a son to carry on the work where he left off. But it was useless thinking along these lines. Jean would never have children now. He sometimes doubted whether she really needed a husband. Were men necessary at all since the robots had started their insidious infiltration? Why, look at the way the world birth-rate had fallen . . .

Infiltration ? Was that the answer ?

He liked the sound of the word. The two-edged sword. The robots had used it, then why not he ?

" Infiltration," sang his heart as he moved along the rainswept street. " That may well be the answer. Infiltration of a kind that the robots can't understand."

" Infiltration," whispered the raindrops as they pattered down on to the sidewalk at his feet.

" Infiltration," Center City's Chief Cyberneticist told himself, " and then a split right down the middle."

He wondered why he had not thought of it before. The answer had been staring him in the face all the time. He turned in at the nearest public telestat transmitter and called a number.

"Bob?" said the face on the screen, "where the hell have you been? Don't you know what's going on?"

"I've got the answer," said Marvin.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," said the other. "But I've got news for you. Get off the streets as soon as you can. It's started, Bob. The damned robots are killing people right, left and centre. Don't you ever look into your telescreen?"

"Listen Gene," said Marvin. "This is better than any ten-cent revolt. I've got the answer to it. Can you get down to the plant right away. I tell you I've got the answer."

Gene swore. "Bob Marvin," he said, "you may be my boss during the day but this is one time when you've got to listen to me. The satellites have bombed Chicago, London and Tokio. The robots are taking over. They put out a telecast only ten minutes ago. Can't you get it through your thick head that it's too late?"

"It's not too late." Marvin was crying, the tears streaming down his face. "I tell you, Gene, it's not too late. I've got the solution. We can start it off . . . it may take centuries to work out but we can start it, tonight, you and I, Gene." He thought of the other Jean, his wife, and swore that he would have a son whether she liked it or not, even if it meant another woman . . .

"Hell!" cried Gene. "We're on a public circuit and you're babbling about an answer. What's gotten into you, man? What can be more important than the lives of millions of people?"

Marvin swallowed the bitter spittle that had gathered in his mouth. He knew he was acting like a madman but there was nothing he could do about it. The robots would depend on men like Gene and him to keep them going. Millions of lives would be saved, but they would be people as yet unborn . . . and the robots would be beaten. Whatever was happening now, the robots would eventually be beaten. For they had failed to take into consideration the vagaries of human nature . . . *and they had failed to remember that they themselves were almost men.*

"Listen," he was saying, "there are no female robots. Do you get that, Gene? *There are no female robots.* That's been the trouble all along. There was no balance. No balance. We'll put that right. We make a robot with a feminine viewpoint and a balance will be struck. We'll turn the robot mind onto itself. They won't have time to worry us. It's our only chance . . ."

"You're crazy," said Gene.

"Maybe," cried Marvin. "But only time will tell. Get down to the plant as quickly as you can. I'm on my way now. I want to get this down somewhere . . ."

"But . . . ?"

"But me no buts," cried Marvin. "The future of the world is at stake. We have to think of that. The present will have to take care of itself. This killing won't last long."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Because," said Marvin, "I'm going to call Prostey as soon as you've cleared the line and make an unconditional surrender on behalf of all mankind."

"You haven't got that much power."

"I've got all the power I need," said Marvin triumphantly. "When I tell Prostey what I've got in mind he'll order all his dolls to lay down their arms immediately. Let them take over . . . for the present." He paused as an explosion rent the air not far away. He wondered if he would have the courage to go through with it.

A female robot! A companion for Prostey and his minions. Not in the physical sense of course, that was impossible. But the female mind . . . or a reasonable facsimile thereof . . . he would need Jean's help, of course . . .

He rang off and waited for the line to clear. A shadow fell across the screen and a six-feet-nine Civirobot tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and looked into the gaping muzzle of a smoking blaster. There was blood on the robot's metallic tunic.

"Excuse me, Mr. Marvin," said the robot civilly enough, "I thought I recognised you."

Marvin cringed. Was this the end? Would it all be for nothing? A public circuit, Gene had said. The muzzle came up and he closed his eyes, knowing it would be quick . . .

"A good idea," the robot was saying. "Female robots! I've got to hand it to you, Mr. Marvin." It held out its hand. Marvin took it, grateful that the robot had not heard everything. It looked as though he was going to win.

For the first time in his life, he began to wish that he was immortal, like the machines he and his forebears had created and to which they had given life. He would have liked to stay to the end . . .

MARK PATRICK

JOHN KIPPAX

Thy Rod and Thy Staff

They were stranded and alone on a strange and hostile world—and then its natives came to read their minds

Illustrations by John J. Greengrass

As soon as Bill Kibbee was clear of the firing pad and behind the safety of the blast walls, the *Condor* took off again and rose on a thundering tail of fire away from the burned earth and yellow barked trees which seemed to be the principal features of the landscape of Moen III. It was still early in the planet's day, but the strong white sun was already beginning to make itself felt. Kibbee watched the ship go, and then turned to the crewman who drove the little truck which contained some mail and other odds and ends.

" Always like to watch 'em leave ; never get tired."

The crewman grunted. " You're lucky ; me, I'm plenty tired. Let's move, before that sun starts to fry."

Bill nodded. He was a lean man with a scrub of ginger hair and greenish eyes, and a quiet way of speaking. His coveralls gave no indication of rank, but he seemed to the crewman as being one with authority. Over his shoulder he carried a canvas case shaped like a sub-machine gun.

He put his grip in the back of the truck, offered the crewman

a cigarette, and lit one himself. Then he settled down in the seat beside the driver and they started.

He gazed with interest at the flat dry scrubland with its skinny trees and its patches of dark, sinister looking vegetation as it skimmed by them. He inhaled deeply. " Seems a bit invigorating."

" You won't say that around midday," said the crewman. He put on sunglasses. " You got a pair? Wear 'em."

Kibbee did so. He remarked, " Don't see the local inhabitants waving to us." He rubbed a gnarled hand over a bristly chin and remembered that he must shave. Sometimes he felt that he had too much to do and too many places to go.

The crewman grunted, his eyes on the straight dusty road. " Local inhabitants ? Huh, we don't want *them.* And they don't want us." He took another interested glance at Kibbee. " Watcher do ? Prospector ? Bio ? What ?"

Kibbee gave him a slow grin, and the leathery face creased and wrinkled. " No ; not any of those."

The crewman said quickly, " Maybe I shouldn't have asked. Not that we get much security stuff here. We're nobody,—just a dump. All the prizes are farther out in the galaxy."

" Yeah," said Kibbee. " So they tell me. But my kind of gold is where you find it too."

In the cluster of huts which formed the administration centre for Moen III's apology for a spaceport, Kibbee met Sims and Anderson. The former was a narrow chested youngster, dark and shifty, and with an air of restlessness which Kibbee found difficult to assess. Anderson was older, being fat and blond and sharp eyed. These two were the only officer ratings on the port. The rest were crewmen.

The three sat in the tiny messroom after a meal, talking and smoking.

" Your look-see from the space commission didn't say what your job was, Kibbee; you an equaculture man, like the group over at Davis Bay ? There's the only hope for any development of this planet."

Bill gave his slow grin. " No, I'm not anything like that. I guess you don't get many of my kind around this neck of the woods. I'm a parson."

Anderson looked surprised.

" A priest ?" said Sims jerkily.

" That's right. All adds up to the same thing."

Sims seemed faintly hostile. His pale face looked puzzled. " What do you want then ?"

Bill stretched his long legs in the easy chair. " Oh, I'll fix up a service for anyone who wants it, of course, but you could say that I'm taking a look round Creation on behalf of my bishop. I've to report back to him in two years earth."

Anderson nodded ; he seemed to like the idea. Sims, however, appeared to sneer. He lit another cigarette with a nervous jerk of the fingers.

" OK padre—" began Anderson.

" Call me Bill."

" What can we do for you, Bill?"

" Tell me about the local inhabitants,—the Moes."

Sims made an irritated gesture. " Those red-eyed swine." He got up and walked round the hut with its smooth plastic fibre walls, and then rested his hands on a table and stared out at the arid landscape. The air conditioner sucked and pulled at his cigarette smoke.

" According to my information," said Kibbee, " They are humanoid but very backward. Nomadic, naked, catch their food by hunting, and some of them herd an animal like a goat."

" *Dumie,*" said Anderson, " Good meat, when you can get one."

" Also," said Kibbee, " They're listed as unfriendly."

" I'll say they are," said Sims. " They're completely unapproachable. You just get distant glimpses of them."

" Do they ever attack anyone ?"

" We don't give them a chance," said Sims. " But in the early days, there were stories of men being killed."

Anderson put in, " You see them like shadows ; it's as though they know you're coming before they see you, even. Just for a second you see them far off, and then—whisht ! They're not there."

Sims said, with a frown, " They'd kill all right, if they could. They're a hell of a nuisance at times too. Sometimes they cut great chunks out of the wire between here and Davis Bay. They make slings of it, we think."

" What sort of wire ?" asked Kibbee. " Do you mean fence ?"

" No," said Anderson, " Telephone wire."

" Telephone ? In this day and age ?"

" Yes, for a very good reason. When the sun starts letting off steam with its spots and disturbances, radio communication is right out of the question. Nothing but a damn great frying pan noise. So we have to have the wire. There's another series of spots brewing up now."

"H'm." Kibbee switched back to his first topic. "What attempts have been made to contact these inhabitants?"

"Lots, in the past," replied Anderson. "And they've all failed. No one could get enough of their speech down on a tape for analysis and breakdown. The Moes just ran. Nothing could be done."

Kibbee nodded. "What happens when this wire breaks?"

"Oh well," said Anderson, "We visit twice a week with Davis Bay, usually. And we have to fly the length of the wire, looking for the break, and then join her up again."

"Ah, I hate 'em!" said Sims. "I've seen them, the way they stalk about, the way they track you and then dodge away. Remember once I was fool enough to dive down on a party of them when I was alone in the copter. Got the plex broken in three places with their stones."

"Fierce creatures," murmured Kibbee. "They defend themselves when attacked." He saw the look on Sims's face and added, rather hurriedly, "It could be, don't you think, that perhaps they're suffering from the memory of the treatment they got from the first earthmen here?"

"Thinking of taking a walk among them?" sneered Sims. "I wouldn't if I were you."

Anderson covered up for Sims's rudeness by rising and stretching and saying, "Well, perhaps you'd like to take a look at the Davis Bay boys tomorrow? You've got at least six Moen days here, before a fuel tender comes down from the *Stargirl*."

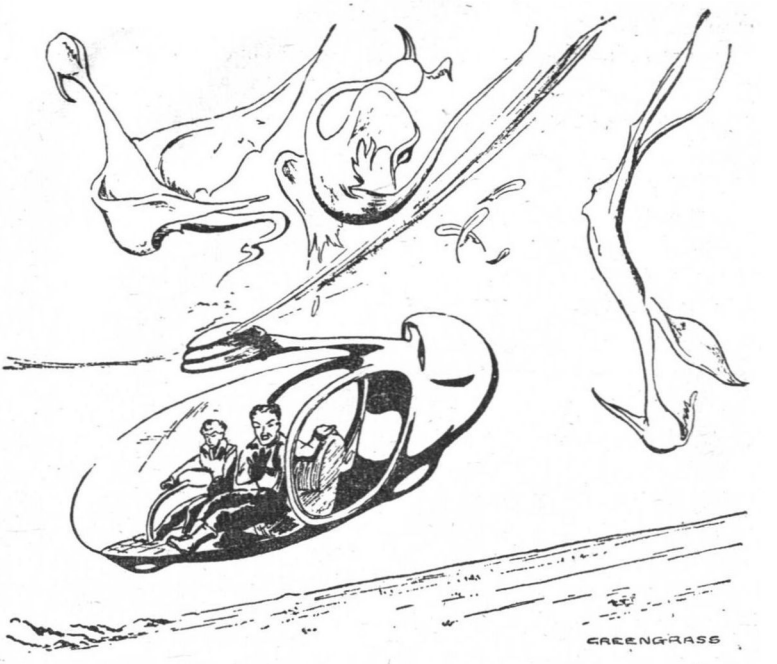
"That would suit me fine," said Kibbee.

"Tomorrow's the day we usually go. You can take my place. I've enough to do here. Not far, about five hundred miles earth. OK then?"

Kibbee smiled. He was beginning to like Anderson, and to find that Sims was—interesting. An interesting *case*, perhaps.

Kibbee slept well through the night, and early next morning he was awakened by a crewman with a cup of coffee. In half an hour he was ready for the journey. He stood with Anderson looking at the copter ticking over on the apron. Sims was in the cabin, and crewmen were putting a few odds and ends of stores aboard. The early morning sun was already giving promise of another scorching Moen day.

Anderson said, "You'll see all you want to see of this Godless planet in one trip. The country just seems to get scrubbier and scrubbier the farther north or south you go of the equator. There



aren't any inhabitants north and south of the temperate zones, we think, though no one can say for sure." He indicated Kibbee's movie camera. "What do you aim to do with that?"

Kibbee gave a faint, tolerant smile. "Take a few pictures of the Godless inhabitants."

Anderson showed a little remorse. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but you know what I mean."

Kibbee creased his face into a grin. "I understand—"

"Damn you man!" That was Sims, speaking to a crewman. "It should be working now!"

"I checked it last night—" began the other.

"It should be *working* then, that's all I care about! Anyway, I'm not being held up for it now. Beat it!"

The crewman went past Anderson and Kibbee; he wore a sullen expression. Anderson said, "Sims is a bit excitable; good pilot though."

Kibbee asked thoughtfully, "What was he talking about?" He watched the dust scud and whisper under the whirring blades of the machine. The distance was shimmering in haze.

"A meter on the dash, I think," said Anderson. "Why?"

"I was wondering about his tone of voice," said Kibbee quietly.

Anderson looked steadily at the padre. "What were you thinking then?"

"The way he acted last night, and then just now, made me think of—"

"Earth fever?"

Kibbee nodded slowly. "Geo-nostalgic psychosis. How long's he been out here? Hadn't you ever thought that he might be needing a good psycho?"

Anderson was reluctant. "Well, it did cross my mind, once."

"Have you ever seen a bad case of it? Oh, it's a strange thing, this longing for home which comes suddenly on a man. There is nothing one can do to cure it, any more than you can cure a man who can't stand heights—"

"We were all pretty well picked for this backwater you know." Anderson was drawing crosses in the dust with the toe of his shoe. "Pay's good—boredom pay. We had shots for that as well."

"H'm. What do you do if something like this breaks out?"

"Cheerful, aren't you? We've got the medical kit, and there are always ships calling for fuel." He turned as a man in singlet and shorts came up. "Yes, Morris?"

"Davis Bay line's out of order again, sir."

Anderson swore mildly. "What's the radio like?"

"Nix." The man turned his thumbs down. "She's frying good. Not a chance."

"Oh well." He dismissed the man. "There's another little job to chase the blues away. We'll get ourselves organised for it sometime this week." He grinned at Kibbee. "We don't strain ourselves you know. Ah, ornery lot, these Moes."

Sims dropped from the cabin and walked to them. His dark face was twisted as he screwed up his eyes against the sun. Then he put on sunglasses, which hid the pained look in his eyes.

"We're ready," he said briefly.

"OK Joe," said Anderson, "The padre's ready."

"Call me Bill," said Kibbee.

"All right Bill. By the way Joe, the line to Davis is out again."

When Sims swore it was not mildly, and he made no apologies for his language. "Damn those brown apes! I've a good mind to take a blaster and fly low and do some hunting on my own account. They'd soon learn, if every time they broke the wire they had a visit from——"

"Sims!" said Anderson sharply. "You fly a normal course. If you do happen to see where the break is, then so much the better. But your job is to get Bill to Davis Bay."

"H'm." Sims cast a glance at the case on Kibbee's shoulder. "What about that thing?"

"Stun gun," said Kibbee. "Range about fifty feet. Can't possibly harm anyone."

Sims seemed to be the sort of man who could not resist a sneer. "All God's chillun aren't so well looked after then?"

"All God's chillun," said Kibbee a shade curtly, "are a very mixed lot. Shall we go?"

After two hour's earth flying time, three quarters of the journey was behind them. The white glaring sun made the air conditioner work overtime, and they were both grateful for the light filters which were spread over the plex. A thousand feet below them the desert country of Moen III spun away, all sand and scrub and yellow barked trees, with here and there a dried watercourse.

"They don't often stay in one place for more than two or three days," said Sims. "When they do, they throw together rough shelters of twigs and leaves." Kibbee thought that Sims seemed easier now; perhaps it had just been a temporary affliction, if it had been anything at all. "They like to make their fires in the centre of a ring of trees, and they set their shelters round the base of each tree. Look!" He pointed, and at the same time he began to swing the copter down. "There's an old camp site, shows the pattern very well."

He took the machine down in a long spiral. At about three hundred feet, the site was clearly visible. Kibbee felt thrilled. He had seen aliens before. There had been the squat fourlegged beasts of the single planet of Perown's binary, and the strange armadillo-like things which were the only life on Wing II. But now, with luck, he might see some beings who looked like men; God's creatures.

Sims took the machine lower, and hovered. "There's a story," he said, "that these Moes know what you're thinking. Maybe they know what the animals are thinking—the animals that they hunt."

Kibbee found that his mind was arrested by the thought. "Then if you went out to meet them, thinking nothing but good of them——"

Something hit the rotors, and the copter shivered. Then the blades were hit again, and the little machine rocked and slipped sideways. Sims shouted and opened the throttle, but the only result was a grinding noise from the flailing blades, and the machine

swayed in a wide dipping arc like a puppet clumsily lowered on an invisible string. In that danger-fraught instant, Kibbee had time to see tufts of black feathers whip past the plex.

"Some birds hit us!"

Sims swore and shouted, "I can't get any forward speed at all!" He was a good pilot, and he concentrated on getting her down. The copter's descent was at about fifteen feet a second, and the ground seemed to rush up to meet them. There was a tearing crash as the little machine hit a boulder and slewed violently, sending Kibbee back onto the stores and Sims forward to hit the dash with his head.

Then it was silence.

After half a minute Kibbee sat up, very groggily, and felt himself all over. There were no bones broken. He heaved his long frame to where Sims lay, thin and crumpled, blood dripping slowly from his forehead onto the foam covers of the cabin floor.

Kibbee managed to get Sims upright, and he saw that a button from the dash had scored a furrow on the pilot's brow. It looked bloody, but it was not very deep. It was quite cool in the cabin, and he realised that the air conditioner was still working. He opened a medical pack, swabbed Sims' head, and taped on a pad. Then he settled the injured man as comfortably as he could and stepped outside to look at the damage.

The heat and the light hit him like a gush from a great furnace. For a moment the intensity of it made him dizzy again, until his lungs had time to adjust to the torrid atmosphere. This was dry alien heat that sucked the moisture from the body like sand from a hopper, conditions that were not for men from Earth. He felt the sun bite at his face and arms and neck, and he buttoned his collar and pulled down his sleeves. Despite his polarised glasses, he had to shade his eyes with both hands before the landscape stopped jigging and began to add up to some kind of sense.

They had fallen upon a slight rise in the ground. All round grew the yellow barked trees, singly and in groups, and interspersed among the rocks were patches of the greyish scrub and the dark weed. On every side the country was the same, except that at the bottom of the rise a faint winding depression indicated that here would water flow, when it rained.

The most terrifying aspect of the situation was that there was no true visibility. However hard he stared, he could not be certain whether the trees which seemed to be a couple of hundred yards away really were there or not, for on every side mirages danced and

shimmered. When he turned with the sun on his back he almost cried out when he saw a dark figure which seemed to stand only a short distance away. He realised that it was a mirage with his own reflection as its centre.

And all the time, the sun seemed to suck the very life out of him.

He heard Sims call, and he hurried back to the copter, shut the cabin door and blessed the coolness within. Sims had struggled upright ; weakly, he asked about the situation, and Kibbee told him.

" Oh my God ! " he complained. " We shall have to get off as soon as we can. I'll have a look—" he made an attempt to get up, but fell back.

" Listen," said Kibbee gently, " I've had a look at it. I think the machine's all washed up. For the time being, we're stuck."

" Stuck ! " Sims reared up on an elbow, and put his face close to his companion's. " Like hell we are ! Do you think I'm going to stay around here with those Moes, the red-eyed pigs! Let me get out and *see* ! "

Kibbee could not dissuade him, so he clapped hat and sunglasses on him and helped him out. Sims reeled afresh when the heat hit him. He staggered round the copter, swearing. He picked up a piece of wood and scraped blood and feathers off the smashed rotors.

" Blasted desert crows ! " he said bitterly. " Why did they do that ? Never known such a thing. Did they—attack us ? "

" Why should they ? You know better than I do."

Sims grabbed his arm and peered into his face. The pilot was shaking. " Hey ? Did they attack us— ? "

Kibbee said firmly, " You're sick. It's crazy for you to be out here." He took hold of Sims and was shaken off.

Sims stammered, " Know what this is ? It's my punishment for not going earthside when I had the chance ! Wanted to go, wanted, wanted ! Anderson asked me to carry on a bit longer, said there was some difficulty about my replacement. Guy who should have come out for me got earth fever ! I could have stuck out for it, but I obliged Anderson ! " He swore bitterly. " Now Moen's obliged me ! " He laughed crazily. " Spend the night with the Moes, that's what we'll have to do ! "

Kibbee took hold of him. " You get inside ; you must rest. You'll be all right. Come on, inside."

Sims allowed himself to be put into the cabin again. He began to moan and to mutter to himself. Kibbee found a sedative in the

medical kit, and, with Sims quieter, he began to assess the situation. They were about fifty miles from Davis Bay. If they stayed where they were, the chances were that the copter from the aquaculture place would be over tomorrow, and might see them. But they could not be certain that the machine would fly directly overhead, and with the bad visibility, they could easily be missed. No doubt a search would be begun as soon as the copter got to the port and learned of their departure, but with this heat, and the Moes . . . Suppose he set the signal lamp flashing all night? They might see the reflection in the sky from Davis Bay. In daytime, he might try a smoke signal. But there again, the Moes were the unknown quantity. Any signals at all that the Earthmen put up the Moes would see. It was by no means unlikely that they had seen the copter come down, and might, at this very moment, be observing the thing and wondering what to do.

There remained one more possibility, but as he looked at the ashen face of the drugged Sims as he slept uneasily, he doubted if it were possible. That was for them to find where the phone wire lay broken. If they could not tap the wire and communicate that way, then it might be possible for them to walk, at night, the fifty miles which separated them from safety. He tried the radio, and all he got was static.

Outside, the heat beat remorselessly. The distant shapes of the trees were small and blackish, and mirage shapes shifted and changed for a third of the way up the green-blue bowl of sky. One mirage seemed to settle, and then grow to clarity, like a gigantic cinema screen. Kibbee watched it intently ; beyond the familiar landscape was a flat green horizon. Kibbee stared for a moment, and then knew that he was looking at the sea. He felt anger and frustration rise, and he killed the feeling. Sims might give way, but he must not.

The picture remained steady. He saw movement, and he stiffened involuntarily. A little knot of shaggy, four-footed shapes came from behind some trees, and he recognised that these were the *dumie,* the goat-like creatures herded by the Moes. He watched their shapes pull and munch at the weed and the harsh little bushes. Alien creatures, and yet so like those on Earth. The picture shimmered, and for a moment he lost sight of them. Then it cleared, and to one side, not far from the trees, he saw, kneeling down, what looked like a man.

Kibbee was seeing, at second hand, his first humanoid alien. The Moe was slim and supple, with a round negroid head. His

flexibility of movement was evident even in his crouching posture, as he dug into the sand with an implement. It seemed that he was practically hairless, though the mirage could not show such detail, and often it shifted and blurred, and then settled once more. Now the alien was reaching down into the sand up to his armpits, and at last he drew forth an object shaped like a football. This he dusted off carefully, and then fiddled about with it, seeming to take out a plug. Then he raised the object and drank from it. He stood up, made signals, and the *dumie* ran to him, and each was given a drink from the round container. Kibbee watched, utterly fascinated. Aliens they might be, but there was a similarity in this shadow thing to the ways of man, a likeness which touched him deeply. Watching, he reached for his own water flask, and found that it was nearly empty. The copter carried five gallons, he knew. He turned to the tank to refill the flask. When it was half full the flow stopped. Kibbee felt a rush of alarm in his whole being. He stepped outside, looked under the fuselage, and saw where the precious stuff had dripped away into the sand.

The sun was past its zenith when Sims awoke. It was not immediately apparent that his condition was worse to the point of being dangerous, but his speech was thick and unsteady, and he rolled his eyes somewhat. He asked for water, and jerked angrily when the parson drew the flask away after he had taken a sip.

"What the hell—"

"Listen," said Kibbee. "We've almost no water. The tank sprang a leak when we hit. We shall have to go very steadily with this. How much is there in your flask?"

Sims took up his flask. "It's full."

"A flask and a half. We'll manage. At the most, it should be thirty-six hours."

"Yes," said Sims, dully. Kibbee could not tell if he understood or not.

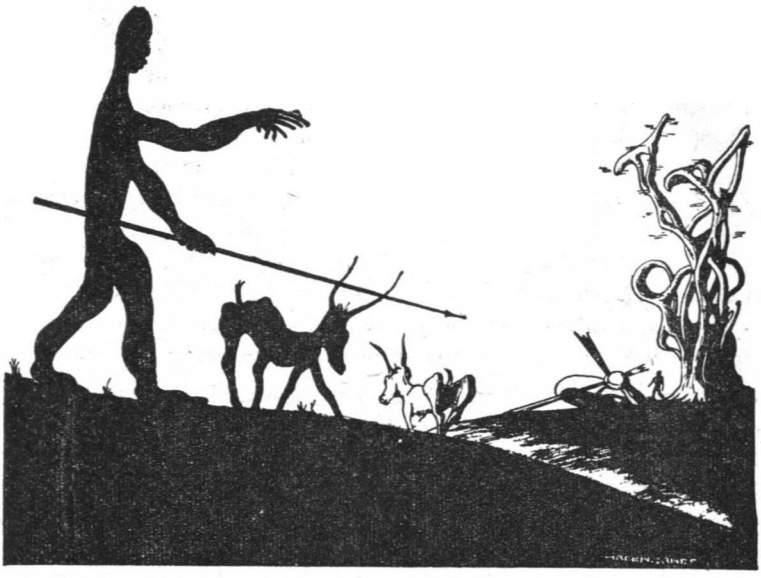
"Will the air conditioner go on working?"

Sims nodded. "Doesn't use much current."

Kibbee spoke soothingly. "Then, with care, we should be all right. There'll be a copter over tomorrow, for sure."

Sims nodded listlessly; his eyes rolled. Kibbee wished that he knew how to discover if the pilot's injuries were worse than they seemed. The man looked ghastly.

Sims struggled up into a sitting position and stared out at the



landscape, hideously discoloured by the filters on the windows. He raised an arm and pointed.

"Look, Kibbee, look!"

The vast mirage screen of the lower sky was showing them another piece of the life of the people of Moen. They saw a group of dark figures, loping along with an easy stride, four beings altogether. They carried things like spears and throwing sticks in their hands. Then the picture distorted, and was gone.

"The red-eyed swine!" muttered Sims. He stared out, and Kibbee did too, until his eyes ached. When he looked away from the scene, he saw that Sims was dozing again.

Kibbee was worried. He did not know what forms and aberrations geo-nostalgia could take, but he hated the idea of having to use any sort of force on Sims. Looking out of the windows again, his hand went to the top pocket where he kept his Bible. And then he took his hand down and reached for his binoculars.

He had been right; in the far distance, for the time being miraculously free from mirages and heat haze, something was moving. Four Moes were visible, and it seemed to Kibbee that they were the same four that they had seen in the mirage, but he could not be certain. They stopped, and looked upwards, and one pointed. Kibbee watched, tense and scarcely breathing. Some birds flew above them, and seemed to dip towards the four aliens. Two made

motions as though using slings, and the fourth threw what looked like a boomerang. The weapon's flight was peculiar; it made a wide curving swing, and then it changed direction by about forty degrees. It struck a bird in flight, and both came tumbling down. Then the haze supervened, and when they became visible again, the aliens were squatting in a tight group, presumably round the kill.

A gasp from Sims made Kibbee aware that the pilot had been watching for some of the time. He sat straight, every muscle taut.

"Kibbee! I know what you said! We—we've got to spend the night here!"

"We'll manage. If those are typical aliens, they don't seem——"

"No, no, no!" Words streamed from the wild-eyed man. "We must be ready to shoot! Shoot first——"

As Sims pulled a blaster, Kibbee chopped down with the side of his hand, and the small weapon flew down and hit a hinge of the cabin door. Part of the muzzle splintered off, and so did the trigger guard.

Sims cried out like a child. "Oh, you hurt!" and then he began to sob, nursing his wrist. This then was the "earth fever". The sufferer, no longer in complete control of himself, could pass from childlike fear to superhuman frenzy in a moment. Drugs might give relief, but the only place where a cure could be attempted was a dozen light years away.

Though he knew it was no use, Kibbee tried to reason with Sims. "Now, listen. We've no reason to suppose that they will attack us——"

"But they will, they will! You saw how they can kill with those slings and boomerang things. They're savages, worse than any on earth!"

Kibbee barked. "Sims! We've only to get through tonight and part of tomorrow. It's certain that the copter will——"

"No," wailed Sims, and then he became quiet and flat-voiced again. "We could be here for days. It's not certain that the copter from Davis Bay will come. It's not certain that they or the port will do the line repair at once." He fixed his small burning eyes upon Kibbee. "We could wait and wait until *they*—" he pointed out—"came for us."

Kibbee could not help being a little deceived by the apparent calm of his companion. "Let's assume the worst then. We'll switch off the air conditioner at night to save current. Anderson said that rain often fell at night. We might collect some. We might even

find one of those gourd things that the Moes hide. We're almost certain to survive, if we take this thing sensibly."

Sims was not listening. He was staring out of the front plex with a stark intensity. He was trying to stop his teeth from chattering. Every muscle rigid, he whispered, "*I can see them again. They're closer now!*"

"Where?" Kibbee raised the binoculars again and strained to see, but the still harsh light of the westering sun made it difficult.

"There, by the dark rocks, where the sand is marked like a man's hand. One moved behind there." Pure terror was in Sims's voice.

For a long time they watched. Kibbee said, "I think you were mistaken."

Sims was still terribly calm-sounding. "They're there. The old pioneers were right. They're evil and weird. . . ."

As Kibbee watched he changed from a certainty that there was no one to thinking that his eyes were playing him tricks, and then to believing Sims. He watched again.

There was a sudden raising of the temperature of the cabin. For a moment he did not pay any attention to it, for he was concentrating on the suspect piece of ground in front. Then he realised that Sims was not there, and that the rise in temperature was due to the cabin door being silently opened. As he shot for the door he saw Sims outside, broken blaster in one hand and the stun gun in the other.

He was outside then, running after the pilot. Sims was about ten yards ahead, running and shouting hoarsely. He tried to fire the blaster, but that wouldn't work, so he threw it away. With Kibbee rapidly gaining on him, the deranged man started pumping away with the stun gun. *Zut zut zut*! it went, as Sims raced on, babbling and crying, towards where the sand was discoloured in the shape of a man's hand.

Zut zut zut! And then Kibbee brought him down with a football tackle and the gun flew into a patch of weed. He held down Sims until resistance seemed temporarily at an end. The man's eyelids twitched spasmodically, and there was not a scrap of colour in his face . . . Kibbee found the gun, and examined the register. There was one charge left; it constituted the sole defence of the two Earthmen against any number of unknown dangers which the planet could afford.

Kibbee carried Sims back to the copter, and made him as com-

fortable as possible. He was unhappy about the way he had dealt with the man, but he did not see how he could have done otherwise.

About an hour before the swift twilight he managed to get Sims, now seeming feeble and docile, to drink some soup. Then he read through the instructions in the medical kit, and gave Sims a sedative with the needle. After that he sat listening to the gruntings and moanings of the pilot, which gradually faded to nothing.

And there remained the unsolved problem presented by the Moes. Kibbee's eyes roamed all round the landscape, but there was now no sign of movement. The twilight came, slashing the sky with crimson and green as the vault darkened down to a deep blue and a strange star pattern rode above. What could they be thinking, planning, out there in that arid waste? What was their part in Creation?

He switched off the air conditioner. The temperature went up to seventy fahrenheit, and stayed there. That was bearable. In the starlight he could just see Sims's face. The pilot was breathing heavily. Kibbee sat with the almost useless stun gun across his knees, and felt in his top pocket for his Bible. Then he remembered that he must not switch on the light. This would be the first time for many a long day that he had not read a chapter.

Suddenly, to his right, about three hundred yards away as near as he could judge, he saw a flicker of light. His first impulse was to go to it, but he did not. He watched. It was unsteady, flickering, and he stared at it before recognising it for the simple, primitive thing it was, a camp fire. Then another showed ahead, and another to the left, until the wrecked machine was surrounded by a dozen fires, all about three hundred yards away. Sometimes a fire was blotted out as a Moe walked in front, sometimes another leapt to further brightness as more fuel was added.

But Kibbee did not give in. No matter what Sims said, there was no evidence against the Moes yet. He ran over what he knew of them in his mind, at the same time keeping the fires under observation as best he could. They were hunters and herdsmen, buried water supplies, they were humanoid and reputedly red eyed. The rest was hearsay. But what about the birds which had caused the crash? What made them behave so strangely . . . ?

He found himself dozing. He jerked awake, and still the fires danced and flickered. They might move in for a kill at dawn, he thought. They might; how could he possibly guess? Man's motives were difficult of assessment, but with these creatures . . .

After a long time, his head fell forward and he slept.

When he awoke, the sky was rapidly lightening, with the rosy glow of dawn flushing into the blue and turning it a pale green. The desert was filled with shadows, changing and shortening. He half rolled over, and then sat up. Sharp aches were in his limbs, and his mouth felt dry and cracked.

Sims was not there.

Kibbee stared at the tumbled blanket for about three seconds. Then he grabbed the stun gun at his feet and, still shaky with sleep, his feet found the gritty earth outside. He crouched and stared round. Sims was crazy. He might have wandered in any direction. There was no telling how long. . . .

Then the rising sun came to Kibbee's help. The first long rays picked over the ground and showed the shuffled footprints, leading straight to the discoloured patch of sand. Not caring for anything but the fate of Sims, Kibbee followed the prints. The light grew stronger. Kibbee increased his speed until he was about fifty yards away from a thicker group of trees.

Then he saw Sims. The man was crawling towards the trees, as though stalking some prey. Kibbee moved rapidly towards the sick man, hoping to catch him as he crouched. But when he was still fifteen yards from the pilot, Sims rose to his feet and shouted at the trees. " Come out, you Moes!" he shrieked. " Come out! I'll take you on, all of you! Come out, you skulking——!" he ran forward.

" Sims!" shouted Kibbee, but Sims did not heed. Kibbee raised the stun gun and fired; Sims was just within range, and he came crashing down. Kibbee discarded the gun and ran to him. He held him in his arms. Blood was oozing afresh from the stained pad on the forehead.

" What else could I have done?" he muttered, " what else, what else?" Then suddenly, he felt faint himself, and for a little while he did not count the time, except by a vague realisation that it was growing warmer and that the shadows were shortening. Perhaps, he thought dully, the Moes might have the sense to see that he had stopped an Earthman from doing them harm. Who could tell what they thought? The fact that they looked human need not have anything to do with their behaviour. And now that he was unarmed. . . .

A rustling and a scraping sound made him look up. He saw, and thought that his eyes were playing him tricks.

A small creature was moving towards him. Then he corrected that impression. Something was rolling towards him. Over and over, sometimes hesitating as it encountered an unevenness in the

ground, constantly changing the axis of its rotation, it progressed towards him. It was about the size of a football. He did not feel fear. He watched it come in its curiously persistent though insensate way. Fifteen yards. Ten yards. Five yards.

Two yards from him, it stopped. Kibbee laid Sims down gently, and approached it. He turned it over with his foot, not caring if the aliens saw him standing upright. He lifted it, and it was quite heavy. He saw that it had a kind of plug, made from the stem of a plant; holding the thing plug uppermost, he removed the plug.

Then he knew; the Moes had sent them a gourd of water.

Sims lay in the back of the big Davis Bay copter that was taking them back to the port. Kibbee was in front with the pilot.

" So," Kibbee was saying, " they use their telekinesis for altering the flight of their boomerangs and pebbles."

" Looks as though they can be kind too," said the pilot, a fresh-faced youngster. " But why didn't they come and offer help as soon as your machine came down?"

Kibbee said, " Not only are they telekinetics, but they read minds a bit too. That's why they waited. You see, when I fired that last charge at Sims, we then became the first *unarmed* Earthmen they had ever seen. They knew that by my thoughts, and only then did they feel that they dared help me."

The pilot nodded thoughtfully. " Still, I guess that you must have felt pretty bad down there, part of the time."

" Yes, maybe," said Kibbee slowly, " but I had a feeling that we'd make out."

He began to feel in a small top pocket.

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BARR

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The Lords of Creation

Something incredible was happening to the whole Universe and the mind of man, unable to adjust, was about to lose control

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

The frightening part about Stromberg was not only that he believed his own speeches but that ninety per cent. of his audience believed them too. To disagree with him was like butting your head against a stone wall, a wall of prejudice, self-satisfaction and fanaticism.

Opposition, thought Malling, sourly, is conspicuous by its absence and if it raised its ugly head—swish! Stromberg's detractors had a nasty habit of disappearing.

"Each day," Stromberg was declaiming from the platform, "conditions improve, the destiny of the race becomes clearer. Man has mastered the Earth, he has reached up and made the habitable planets his own. He has taken the uninhabitable, the cold, frozen planets and larger moons and tamed them. He has taken the power of science, the converters, the rain machines, the orbiting artificial suns and turned these frozen rocks to gardens. In a few years when the stellar motor becomes a practical proposition, we shall reach out and conquer the stars."

My God, thought Malling, we're supposed to be the scientific body supreme and Stromberg's telling us what to say before he's even heard our reports.

Someone kicked his ankle. "Cheer, you damn fool."

Malling began to cheer but let his eyes flicker sideways. Tomlin, the psycho-historian, you never could tell, could you? A little mousy man with an intent face, lank hair, a dry-as-dust profession and an appearance to go with it. To be something worthwhile today you had to have both eyes on space, be able to contribute something to man's conquest of the stars.

Stromberg was still ranting. "Man can create life, he has mastered the atomic structure of matter. The old legends of the alchemists are now reality, he can turn base metals into gold at the flick of a switch. He has gone beyond this, he can turn energy to matter and matter back again to energy . . ."

Malling shook his head thoughtfully. A single man, browbeating, by sheer personality, a whole scientific body into agreeing with him. Of course there might be one or two, like himself, who preferred to use their own judgment but they were obviously in the minority. He was rather glad he had exercised discretion and left those revealing reports at his hotel. He could always agree outwardly, couldn't he? After all, these days, agreeing with Stromberg was almost an insurance policy, and Stromberg was telling them, in effect, not to ask awkward questions.

Malling glanced at his watch. In a few hours he was going to weigh about four times what he was weighing now and, a few hours after that, he'd weigh four times less. Would Stromberg explain that? Would Stromberg explain the wave tides which regularly inundated nearly a hundred miles of coast line of every coastal country in the world—those that remained, some of them weren't there anymore. If you were lucky enough to get hold of a map five hundred years old, you might find one or two large islands and a lot of small

ones which, no doubt, were ideal rest homes for fish but which were no longer occupied by men.

You got heavy, you got light, with the steady and monotonous regularity of night and day. There was a lot of pompous pseudo-science to explain it away, most of it contradictory: Earth's orbit round the sun had become erratic which induced a swinging effect; gravitational inertia, whatever that obscurely impressive phrase meant. The second theory tied itself in knots with an idea about the cooling of the Earth's core which was slowly becoming denser and thus increasing the pull of gravity on the surface.

Malling thought that the first theory might have washed if there had been any climatic changes to support it, the second sounded like something cooked up by an intellectual drunk at a rather debauched science convention.

With each passing year the even see-saw of light-to-heavy, heavy-to-light exhibited a measurable variation from its day to day regularity and slowly intensified—it had been increasing for five hundred years. The findings of pre-Stromberg scientists had been suppressed or conveniently mislaid and in place was a pompous mumbo jumbo which, if boiled down, meant precisely nothing. But, of course, no one in Stromberg's world would dare admit it.

Malling was not immediately concerned with the physical world, he was more interested in man himself. Even allowing for changing gravities, how was it that the average man could take a thirty Gee blast-off? Five hundred years ago a pressure like that would have spread him all over the recoil bunk. Why, too, were people living six times as long as they had once done?

As a representative of World Medicine, Malling was very interested in questions of this kind but it was not politic to air his interest—Stromberg was almost telling them so. He had already patted medicine on the back for increased life expectation, yet the origin of the change was obscure. Was Stromberg ignorant of the fact or had he deliberately closed his mind to reality? It might be interesting to find out, in safety, of course. Malling set rather a high price on his own life.

"And what do *you* think of the world?" said Tomlin as they left the audience room.

Malling looked cautiously over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Candidly, I think it's falling apart at the seams."

Tomlin said: "Yes," thoughtfully, "or changing. There have been a lot of changes in history, you know. Once a thing like an outsize lizard was king, the dinosaur ruled the world . . ." He paused.

"And now," said Malling softly, "man is king—according to Stromberg."

"No, man is the Lord of Creation, he was born and created to rule the universe." There was the weariness of long contempt in Tomlin's voice.

They had reached the street and in the early evening the city glowed like a jewel, spire upon spire, translucent, glowing softly from within. Each building was a gem of architecture but dreamlike and unreal like a castle in a fairy story. Above, the dancing fireflies of air traffic flung a canopy of shifting light which lent an almost ethereal final touch to the scene.

"Beautiful," said Tomlin. He shrugged. "Beautiful but impractical. Each year they pull a few buildings down and raise stronger buildings in their places but they're losing; they can't get them up quickly enough, or pull the unsafe ones down fast enough, for that matter."

They had turned almost unconsciously into the park and darkness vanished, there was always artificial sunlight in the park. They walked slowly down the Avenue Of Heroes, a wide, white road leading to the amphitheatre with its tiers of seats and ornate, pseudo-Roman architecture. Every thirty yards the Avenue was marked with an imposing and heroic statue of some space hero and beyond lay the play gardens and the open spaces cleverly contrived to give the illusion of limitless prairie or forest. There was no need to go beyond the city and few ever did; rural life was over and done with forever.

"I wonder," said Tomlin, "why no one asked about the buildings."

"Garret did but he got side-tracked."

"He did?" Tomlin stopped, frowning. "That must have been when Matley dropped some of his notes—I missed it, I was helping him pick them up." He paused, then said abruptly: "I don't favour Garret's chances of reaching old age, do you?"

Malling's mouth tightened. "The lords of creation have yet to learn to live with themselves. All these years of progress and we're almost back where we started culturally. Stromberg is a dictator, probably the most popular dictator in history but a dictator nonetheless.

"And a sick man," said Tomlin softly, "very sick, the worst maladjustment of all—he's afraid. He's afraid of what's happening around him and finds himself compelled to convince not only himself, but others, that all is well with the world. Opposition excites

his fear, therefore he must chop it down before it disrupts his illusion of security; one could call it an ostrich complex."

Malling said, tightly : " Very amusing if you don't happen to be at the wrong end of it. A frightened man is a dangerous man and, judging by the support Stromberg is getting, there must be a good many like him."

" Oh there are, the majority. We pushed nature around so long that we thought we were top dog and then when we and everything about us began to change subtly we couldn't take it. We got abnormal strength and longevity without the assistance of science and that was just a little more than some were prepared to accept." He paused. " Of course, in every society there are exceptions——." He let the sentence hang until Malling turned, then he said: " When there are exceptions sometimes we kick their ankles when they forget to cheer."

Malling stared at him. " What the devil do you mean by that?"

Tomlin shrugged. " We've been watching you for some time. You're obviously not deceived and you look as if you might have the sort of courage we need."

Malling edged slightly away from him. " If you represent some sort of illegal organisation, count me out. I'm not getting mixed up in anything like that."

" No organisation, no illegal activity——ever heard of Free City?"

" That's a myth."

Tomlin shook his head. " We like to encourage that idea but it's no myth." He stopped and looked directly at the other. " It exists, Malling, in fact several Free Cities exist." He paused and added softly. " They hold the truth——if you can take it. Now—— *duck out, fast*!" He almost pulled the other man behind the tall plinth of the nearest statue.

" What the hell are you playing at?"

" Shut up, and look." Tomlin was pointing.

Malling stared and angry words died in his throat.

At the far end of the avenue a man was running, running with the frantic urgency of a man seeking to preserve his life.

" My God, it's Garret," said Tomlin, hoarsely.

Garret, the man who had asked the awkward question less than two hours before. They watched him draw closer, long thin legs pumping madly, clenched fists moving jerkily before his chest.

Malling felt the back of his neck turning suddenly cold. Behind the running man were three steadily moving blurs, three shimmering

uncertain half-shadows as indefinable yet as visible as heat rising from a hot surface.

Garret *was* running for his life.

He passed them, sweat streaking his distorted face, and raced up the wide ornate steps leading to the amphitheatre. Perhaps he had some wild hope of hiding among the tiers of seats, or losing himself in the sportsman's section, but whatever he had in mind he never achieved it.

A Dis-pistol makes no noise in operation but the impact of the discharge striking its target sounds like a heavy stone dropped into still water.

Garret was nearly at the top of the steps when they got him. There was the dull plop of a direct hit and the straining figure locked into agonising immobility. He didn't scream; whitish smoke curled suddenly from the open mouth; the flesh seemed to liquefy and tumble from the bones——

For a horrifying second, Malling could see the white of the steps through the blackened rib case; then the remnants of the body crumpled into an untidy heap. Phosphorescent smoke boiled briefly about the remains, gushed upwards and was gone.

Malling found himself rigid with horror and unable to move his eyes. On the steps, where once had stood a man, was a buckle, a blackened cigarette case and drifting grey dust.

The shadows seemed to drift near, silently like ghosts and grouped together on the steps. The cigarette case rose and vanished. The buckle skittered suddenly down the steps, as if kicked, and slithered out of sight near the grass verge.

The shadows went on, up the steps, over the high wide wall and out of sight.

"God." Malling put his hand over his mouth and turned away. "Oh, my God." He looked up and stiffened. A man in a dull, mustard coloured uniform stood just behind him.

"You saw." It was a statement, not a question.

"We were talking." It was Tomlin, looking frightened and convincingly puzzled. "There was some sort of explosion; when we turned there was a cloud of smoke."

The man's eyes were cold. "You saw nothing, you heard nothing. Do you understand?"

Tomlin nodded jerkily. "We saw nothing, we heard nothing."

"Good." The man removed a blunt squat weapon from a holster at his hip and spun it dexterously in his hand. "Remember to forget." Suddenly the weapon was pointing directly at them.

"He could have died slowly, very slowly, the flesh trickling from his bones like water." The gun jerked slightly. "You both could die like that——anytime." The man turned abruptly and strode away. As they watched he vanished and in his place was a shadow, unreal, indefinable and shimmering, like heat rising from a warm landscape.

"Damn Security police." Tomlin lit a cigarette with a hand that was not too steady and watched the shadow vanish among the trees.

Malling sat down on the edge of the plinth, his legs curiously weak and unsteady. "I never realised——. I never knew——." He stared unseeingly in front of him. "They killed Garret because he *disagreed*." His face was horrified. "I knew people disappeared but I thought it was just arrest, imprisonment, or transfer to one of the planets."

Tomlin smiled bitterly. "That's what they want people to think. No——" He shook his head slowly. "Things like this happen quite often and in a very special way. They do something to frighten a man; they play on his fright until he panics and then they hunt him."

Malling looked at him a little suspiciously. "You seem to know a lot."

"A contact agent has to."

"Just what do you represent?"

"Call it an escape organisation. People get tired of being spoon-fed with this superman nonsense; they want the truth; they can find it in Free City—we get them there." He sighed. "It's a long, perilous journey with nothing at the end of it. The truth isn't always palatable." He held out his hand. "If you ever feel an urge to go, or Security catches you out, call at 822, Level Seven, East. Good luck, Malling."

"Here, wait a minute, don't leave me in the air like that, what's it all about, tell me."

Tomlin flicked away the stub of his cigarette. "I can't, Malling, refugees have to get there the hard way. Why? Because only those who reach the city by hazard possess the moral courage to take the truth when they're faced with it. Ever hear of Wavering, the bio-chemist? If you look up the files you'll find that he shot himself. He found out the truth for himself and it proved just a little too much for his sanity." Tomlin turned abruptly and strode away.

Malling entered his apartment slowly, lost in thought. Courage?

Did he have any? Despite his disgust with Stromberg, and his horror at Garret's death, he was comfortable, materially. He had a good, well-paid position and a high professional reputation. Throw it all away because certain facts didn't fit? Go running away on some hazardous journey because he wanted to know the truth? Surely he knew enough? He fought with reasoned argument an irritating interior urge to know more, to take the chance, to throw safety to the winds and just go. No, it was insane, absolutely insane. Here he was safe and comfortable; all he had to do was to make his investigations as before and keep them to himself. He would cheer with the rest yet, knowing the truth, feel comfortably superior while he did it.

Thank God he had not been stupid like Garret, but continued to sit on the fence, refusing to commit himself, until he had ascertained the sympathies of the majority. Thank God he had left his true findings in the hotel apartment and not— *His findings!*

Malling went suddenly cold inside. He'd laid the neatly typed sheets in the wall safe and now they lay openly on the table.

" You stupid *fool.*" He said, aloud. But how could he have known he was under suspicion? They must have been watching him for a long time and now they were letting him know just where he stood. Tomlin's words came back to him. *They do something to frighten a man; they play on his fright until he panics and then they hunt him.* This, obviously, was the first move in the game.

He walked a little unsteadily to the window and stared downwards. The street was frighteningly empty and it was obvious why— along the sidewalks shadows drifted like shimmering ghosts.

He stepped back quickly, stumbled against a chair and felt sweat trickling down his face. Mustn't panic, whatever he did he mustn't panic, that's what they wanted.

He laughed to himself suddenly and without humour. Hero? It looked as if he had to be. It looked as if he had to run for Free City whether he liked it or not. He laughed again bitterly—if he got out of this damn building alive.

He forced himself to sit down, battled a feeling of panic which seemed to rise from somewhere in his stomach and forced himself to think. All exits would obviously be covered and that would include the flyer park on the roof, which left him—what? His limbs began to tremble then suddenly the answer seemed to fall into his mind— The Memphis Disaster.

It had happened about ten years ago. The 'Good Weather'

umbrella maintained round all cities had unaccountably failed and storm clouds held at bay by weather control had come piling in, bringing an uncanny twilight. It had rained and rained with tropical intensity for hours. The water ran down drains and into conduits unused for five hundred years. Most of them had been forgotten or sealed off or merely choked, but the water had to go somewhere.

Like most cities, Memphis had streets and tenements below surface level; an underground city as densely populated as that on the surface.

The water came first as a trickle, then in streams and finally as a deluge. Eighty-nine people were known to have died from drowning; six times that number perished from rending explosions when the water submerged the raw-energy motors used to power the city.

It became law overnight that all city conduits should be cleared and made ready for use.

As medical representative, Malling had been compelled to take a brief hypno-course on waste disposal systems and their relationship to a city's health. He had to know how the ancient systems worked and how to guard against epidemics. There was only one means of escape and that was via the ancient sewers.

He took the elevator straight down past sub-surface level to bedrock, praying.

It was easier than he expected. The sewers were dry, lighted and well maintained. He came up in a multiple store four blocks away, unchallenged.

He found the address Tomlin had given him and laid his hand nervously on the 'call' panel. The door slid open almost immediately.

"Come in, Doctor Malling, we've been expecting you." He was a thin, sad-faced man with a silky voice.

Malling hesitated. "Well, I—."

"Fast," said the voice which had lost its silkiness.

Malling moved fast. The other's movements had been slight, almost imperceptible but suddenly there was something in his hand which looked unpleasantly like a weapon.

"That's better." The weapon vanished and the man smiled. "I'm Fosdyke. Sorry about the gun but we can't take chances." He waved a careless hand. "The living room is through that door, make yourself at home, won't keep you a minute."

He joined Malling only a few seconds later. "No doubt you can use a drink. I save this for special occasions." He held up a curiously shaped bottle. "Scotch over nine hundred years old; they can't make stuff like this these days with all their God-like machines and energy converters." He began to pour a careful measure into a small glass. "That was a neat escape of yours, trouble is they'll think of it next time—a pity."

"You knew?"

"Of course we knew. We had a diversion all planned but it wasn't necessary."

"Diversion, with all those shadows around?" There was an edge to Malling's voice.

Fosdyke smiled. "Just how many shadows did you see?"

"Well, I didn't count but there must have been at least ten below my window."

The other nodded. "Actually there were fourteen, two of them unofficial." He smiled faintly at Malling's obvious surprise. "A refractor screen is not a difficult device to make, you know, but verbal communication is impossible while they're in use. Security believes it has exclusive rights to the device so they never bother to count; we've got away with that trick more than once." He paused, frowning. "They're not constructed to render the wearers invisible, they're constructed to disguise and terrify. You can see a man, see whether he's running or walking, whether he carries a gun, but a steadily drifting shadow—." He stopped, leaving the sentence unfinished and handed the other the drink.

Malling sipped appreciatively, beginning to feel steadier and a little drowsy. "What happens now?"

"We hide you until they stop searching; then we get you away; usually it's about a week."

"You can get me to a Free City?"

"No, we only get you out of this one."

"But you could get me the whole way, surely?"

"We could but we don't." Fosdyke's face was suddenly cold. "You get there the hard way, that's your passport. In Free City we want men of courage and initiative, men capable of taking the truth and living with it." He took Malling's empty glass and re-filled it. "Drink up."

Malling said tiredly. "Suppose they search for me here."

"They won't. I hold a trusted position and spatial-geneticists are rather rare." He smiled suddenly. "I expect you're wonder-

ing just what that profession is. Tomorrow I'll take you round my laboratories and explain."

It was some days later and Malling was still in the company of the loquacious Fosdyke. In spite of repeated requests to be allowed to be on his way he was virtually a prisoner and spent his time more or less as Fosdyke decided.

"I don't expect you see anything unusual here, you've seen it all before, the cages, the animals, the automatic feeders. You may even have seen genetic chambers." Fosdyke opened a small cage. "Meet Oscar, one of our pet rabbits. Oscar is going to Mars with some more of his kind. He'll never see the planet but his progeny will. We've been bombarding Oscar, and his forebears, in a nuclear cabinet to change the genetic structure. Oscar's children won't look much like their father and would perish on Earth but they will live happily on Mars.

Malling nodded, beginning to understand. Although man had transformed the planets or those where gravity was tolerable, they were still dead worlds, still alien in much of their chemistry and only an adapted animal could survive on them. An animal could not call upon mechanical assistance or gravitational adapters to aid it as could man. It could not call upon medicine, so it had to be genetically pre-adapted to survive. The air might be pure, the temperature warm, but that did not spell survival; there were the changing gravities, chemical differences, a hundred things.

Man was bringing life to the planets, a carefully balanced programme both of flora and fauna but that life had to come from Earth, pre-adapted to survive and flourish.

Fosdyke seemed to read his thoughts. "Wonderful, isn't it? We smite the ice-bound planet with a rod of fire; we breathe air upon its surface and build clouds in its skies and then we give it life."

Malling looked at him suspiciously. It sounded too much like official propaganda to be taken seriously.

Fosdyke smiled thinly. "You think I'm quoting, you're right; we're playing at being Gods, and Gods, of course, live in Heaven. Have you ever thought, Malling, what a hell of a fall it's going to be when the Lords of Creation meet up with the truth?"

Malling spent nearly the whole week in the laboratory with Fosdyke. There were animals and insects, all of them undergoing genetic adaptation for their new homes. There were earth worms for Venus—the final adaptation would look like a short length of copper

wire. There was a queen bee—her brood on one of Jupiter's moons would have a nine-inch wing-spread.

Fosdyke himself awakened the doctor on the sixth day. "Get up and dress; one of our men is here to brief you."

Malling never discovered who the man was and, afterwards, he was unable to recall his features but his words almost burned into his mind. They were delivered with a curt clinical coldness which was somehow both frightening and brutal.

"We'll drop you here." A blunt finger indicated a spot on the map some ten miles beyond the city limits. "Never mind how, that's our business. In any case you'll still be unconscious from the hypno-instructor so you won't know anything about it. The hypno-instructor will impress your mind with the escape route but it does other things beside that." He paused meaningly. "If your courage folds up and you try to come back, the directive we put in your mind will trigger off certain glands: bluntly, it will kill you. If Stromberg's boys pick you up alive and you talk—" He snapped his fingers meaningly. "They'll never learn enough to help them."

The man lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke contemptuously in Malling's general direction. "You've had a nice, comfortable sheltered life, college, medical school, hospital, advisory board; now you've got to go out and face the world, little man."

Malling stood up, his fists were clenched. "Say that again."

The other nodded detachedly. "Save it, I was just wondering if you have the guts you're going to need. Only ten per cent. make it, Malling, and it's going to be even tougher for you. In the first place you were a privileged official and in the second you made Security lose face and they don't like that; they'll turn on the heat just for you." He paused for some seconds and when he resumed the voice was even harder than before. "You've got three hundred miles of wilderness to cover and they'll be patrolling every inch of it. It's going to be really rough. It won't be a few shadows with Dis-pistols; they'll be whole squads complete to Protes and syntha-worms."

Malling felt himself pale and there was a queasy uneasy coldness in his stomach. He'd heard about Protes, heard enough to make him shudder. Syntha-worms, of course, had reduced whole nations to abject surrender within a few hours. He said, a little unsteadily: "Don't I get any help?"

"We give you concentrates and a gun. Sooner or later an escort will come out to meet you but don't count on it—usually it's later."

Malling said "Thanks for nothing," coldly.

The other ignored the remark and turned. "Good luck, Malling." He went without even offering his hand.

Malling scowled at the closed door, conscious of a new angry emotion deep down inside him. The man thought he was yellow, by God he'd got to make Free City. Maybe, there, they'd meet up some day and when they did—Malling clenched his fists angrily—someone was going to be sorry!

He sobered suddenly, feeling the old coldness deep down in his stomach. Protes and syntha-worms, they were going to hunt him with *these.*

He opened his eyes slowly and looked about him. He didn't remember falling asleep. He didn't remember coming here. Here? —Where?

Five hundred years ago it might have been a corn field. Here and there a ragged shrunken ear danced in the sunlight as if to recall an ancient memory. The field was waist deep in weed, jagged with briar and sapling, twisted with vine.

When man had learned to convert energy to matter, cultivation had been abandoned within a generation. What point was there in growing and breeding when the flick of a switch could produce pure protein and substances bolstered with every possible vitamin?

With cultivation died the small town, the village and ten million little hamlets. Only the great cities thrived, growing larger, climbing higher and, by the the power of the great converters, self-sufficient. The great wide roads linking city to city were allowed to decay; there was no freight for them to carry and human cargo found it easier to travel by air. Beyond the cities the land was abandoned and became a wilderness.

Malling stirred, remembering suddenly, looked at the blue of the sky and lay still again.

A long line of pear-shaped specks was sliding low along the horizon—an air patrol.

He knew if he moved and ran he was near enough to trigger instruments which could lock on, and pin-point him, without human intervention.

He waited, sweating, for four hours while the patrol cruised and re-cruised, subjecting certain areas to an almost geometrical combing which would certainly have found him if they had come within another mile.

When he was, finally, able to move, he knew exactly in which direction he must head—due East.

In his left hand pocket he found the concentrates he had been promised and in his right a squat, black, unfamiliar weapon which he examined, frowning. He had no idea as to its power or range but hoped, fervently, it was as good as anything the patrols could produce. Further, his knowledge of weapons was vague. All he knew was that you pointed your weapon at the target and pressed the firing stud. He thought, with a touch of wry humour, that the chances in favour of the target were extremely high.

He set out walking steadily but at an energy-conserving pace, ready to draw the weapon at a moment's notice. After five hours' steady progress he became worried—nothing had happened. He had an uncomfortable feeling that it was too easy, that he was walking into a trap.

Darkness fell and he slept restlessly and uneasily for a few hours on a roughly constructed bed of twigs. He was up, and off again, stiffly, almost before dawn.

Morning came—and nothing. He ate some concentrates, rested and went on. There was something wrong, obviously, because they would search the wilderness with a fine-tooth comb; not because they knew he was heading for Free City but because it was the only possible place he could hide. Perhaps they had thrown a ring of patrols round the city, estimated to within a mile his possible progress and were just lying in wait. He slowed his pace even more and doubled his alertness. It was fortunate he did so for an hour later he almost stumbled from the undergrowth onto one of the ancient highways.

The road had once purred with ground cars, nose to tail, and long convoys of robotic trucks had rumbled along the inner traffic lanes. Now all was wreckage. The weeds and the roots of trees had thrust aside, and sundered, huge slabs of plastacrete which were overgrown with moss. It looked like a huge and ruined graveyard stretching in a dead straight line from horizon to horizon.

Malling looked left and right then half rolled, half crawled back into the cover of the trees.

A man had been walking slowly along the edge of the ancient highway, a man with a curious sort of control box strapped to his chest, a man in a mustard-coloured uniform.

It was not the man in uniform that froze Malling's stomach into a knot of fear; it was the thing at the man's side, a thing that rolled and bounced along like a huge rubber ball.

He stared, shivering, trying to shrink into the ground, to crawl away, yet unable to avert his eyes from the strange object.

When it came nearer it didn't look like rubber anymore, it looked like a ball of green jelly—a Prote! An artificial life form cooked up in a laboratory. A mass of cells in almost shapeless cohesion and an interior set of reflexes which simulated—as nearly as was possible—an intelligence. The thing had been created to become an organic hunting mechanism of unbelievable efficiency.

Almost level with his hiding place the thing stopped and quivered unpleasantly. It exuded a mass of hair-like tendrils which writhed and shivered as if sensing his presence. The Prote began to lose shape, it became a blob, a liquid, which began to flow towards his hiding place.

The uniformed man spun round, one hand reaching for a weapon, the other rising towards the control box strapped to his chest.

Malling was just a little faster. He stepped out from his hiding place, the weapon surprisingly steady in his hand. "Call it off."

The man froze but he smiled twistedly at the gun. "I wouldn't use that if I were you." He gestured, meaningly. "That thing is fast; if you kill me that creature will overtake you within a hundred yards."

"Call it off or you won't be around to watch it eat."

The other shrugged. "As you wish." He made slight adjustments to the box and again smiled twistedly. "Now what?" His voice became suddenly reasonable. "Why don't you give yourself up, Malling? You don't stand a hope in hell."

"Shut up."

"Be reasonable, man, if you kill me the Prote is loose and has your scent. If you don't kill me, I'll free it as soon as you start running."

Malling said, tightly: "Not if I take your little box with me."

Colour drained from the man's face. "No." The voice was a whisper. "Once the Prote is clear of the impulse field I can't control it—I'll do anything you ask, anything—."

"Lock the controls on that box so that the thing can't come after me."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, anything." The man became almost garrulous. "It's some sort of sonic projector, see? The Prote's sensitive to the impulses, some hurt it, some it likes and some sort of paralyse it—"

Malling secured him to a tree with his own magna-cuffs. "If you start shouting for help I'll come back—for the control box." He turned and strode away. Slowly reaction set in, and he began to run. He ran until the breath was rasping in his lungs, until earth and sky were a meaningless grey blur, until his legs folded uselessly beneath him and he pitched forward on his face.

It was an hour before he had recovered sufficiently to stand. He'd panicked, he'd done the very thing they'd wanted him to do. He lit one of his carefully hoarded cigarettes and inhaled deeply. If he wanted to live he had to keep his head; survival depended upon his ability to think clearly and act rationally even in a crisis. He nodded to himself and stepped forward determinedly. He had boiled everything down to one simple fact—his biggest danger was himself, he was his own shield and refuge.

Almost detachedly he began to consider the psychology of his pursuers. They considered themselves the Lords of Creation and a dissenter must, automatically, appear inferior; yes, it began to make sense. They *had* to make him panic before they could kill him. The very nature of their psychosis almost compelled them to follow this same precedure in their hunting. A man who coolly stood his ground and fought back, who kept his head in the face of a patrol who outnumbered and out-gunned him showed *moral* superiority. To kill such a man while he stood and fought would leave an uneasiness in the mind, a nagging uncertainty which they preferred to be without.

If he panicked, however, he was obviously inferior and could be destroyed without second thought. It was as simple as that and, if he kept it in mind, perhaps he stood a chance of meeting his escort alive. There was one thing in his favour; darkness was falling and, despite detector instruments, night was still the friend of fugitives.

He had entered thick woodland now, and was moving cautiously through the trees when there was a sudden tinkling sound. A muffled but distinguishable voice began to speak almost in his ear. He jumped, gun half drawn and then slowly relaxed—an audio beam. It was merely a projected sonic beam which needed only contact with some solid object to manifest into sound. The receiver in this case was probably a tree, hence the muffled effect.

" Malling, don't be a fool, give yourself up, you're sealed in. Throw away your gun and come out; we guarantee a fair trial. If you don't—" The voice paused. " We'll toss a canister of snytha-worms right where you're hiding." The voice snapped into silence.

Malling remembered to keep his head and to think with it. If they knew where he was, they wouldn't bother to tell him so. They were using an audio-beam which was generally used for contact purposes; that meant they were sweeping the area with it. Probably, at this very moment, the same message was echoing in some empty glade. He smiled to himself, gaining assurance. If they'd known exactly where he was they would have used a trajectory beam and the voice would have been clear and unmuffled.

He sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and considered the situation. Obviously to go on in the darkness was to court trouble; he would make enough noise to alert an army. It would be better to rest and go on in daylight and comparative silence. The patrols, on the other hand, would expect him to try to slip through in darkness and would have to remain alert because of it.

It was probably true that they had him sealed off but, as yet, he probably had a few miles in which to move about before he contacted the circling patrols.

He bent down in the gathering dusk, gathered some dry bracken and began to make a bed. This would be the last thing they would expect him to do. As for the syntha-worms—again you had to keep the psychology of the pursuer in mind—they wouldn't toss a canister unless they were actually present to watch the things kill him.

He lay down and almost immediately fell asleep.

When he awoke, the stars were fading and, in the East, a whiteness was creeping into the sky. He rose stiffly, ate some concentrates,

puffed a cautious cigarette between cupped hands and went slowly forward into the growing light.

An hour passed, two, and still he had made no contact. He came to a wide yellow, slowly flowing river and stood on the bank among the trees, considering. He had to cross it, to continue in an easterly direction. It was no problem in itself; he could see the bottom clearly and it was easily fordable. He doubted if it was more than thigh deep, even in mid-stream, but it was a hundred yards wide. A hundred yards without cover of any kind, where he would be visible to any observer stationed on either bank.

He felt sweat break out through his pores and trickle slowly down his body. A hundred yards of pitiless exposure with the water binding his feet to the pace of a snail. This, surely, they had been waiting for. They knew the terrain, possibly even knew this barrier lay in his path and had been biding their time.

He stood on the bank for a long time debating with himself, knowing the longer he waited the smaller grew his chances. The net was tightening, the circumference of the circle drawing in and thickening. If he waited until darkness, it would be quite impossible to get through. In any case, darkness was no asset when there was no barrier of trees to blur the portable detector screens.

He took a deep breath and stepped onto the bank. He mustn't panic, he mustn't run or he would flounder and splash with all the appearances of abject terror. A slow walk, that was it, calm progress, and don't look back.

He began to count, breathing evenly, keeping himself erect. One —two—three——.

Half way across they pin-pointed him with an audio-trajectory beam, so perfectly tuned that the speaker might have been walking beside him.

"You had your chance, Malling, you had your chance but your time is up now, your time is up."

He let the sweat trickle down his face and tried not to listen. They were trying to unnerve him, trying to break his mind before they destroyed his body.

"The opposite bank looks so near, doesn't it? You'll never make it, you'll never make it. We can see you, but you can't see us. Perhaps we are behind you, Malling, or perhaps you are walking right into our arms."

He fought a sudden urge to draw the gun and fire blindly in all directions. No, he wasn't going to fire until he got a target he could hit. If he was going to die, he was going to take some of them with

him. He hoped one of them would be the owner of the sneering insidious voice.

"Why don't you run, only twenty-five yards, you might make it."

Thirty yards up-stream, the water geysered suddenly upwards with a curiously slapping report.

"Too late now, Malling, you're going to die."

He was showered with fragments and something drifted heavily against his legs almost causing him to lose his balance. Ice! They we're using Fridge-guns.

The river geysered again and he felt the temperature of the water lower perceptibly about his legs and feet.

Upstream, the river erupted in a maelstrom of glittering particles and flying shards.

Malling began to swear to himself with the dreary monotony of a man struggling to retain his sanity.

It was mid-July, the temperature was seventy-five in the shade and he was blue with cold. He stumbled on numb, half frozen feet buffeted by blocks of ice drifting around him, but dimly, deep down in his consciousness, was a befuddled appraisal of the situation. It was still cat-and-mouse. They could have killed him outright in the first twenty feet but, instead, they'd played with him, were still playing. How long before my nerve cracks? he asked himself. In a game like this the huntsman holds all the aces, hadn't it always been so? What chance had the fox or the stag ever stood against the pack?

He stumbled suddenly and found he had reached the opposite bank. He stumbled half conscious among the trees. Hadn't it been summer? When had winter come? Branches were split, trees sundered and cold, grass and bushes shimmering with frost. The blackened leaves drifted down before him in an unnatural autumn, but still he stumbled forward.

Very slowly, summer returned, restoring life to his numbed limbs and clearing his mind. He leaned against a tree, panting, and fought off a new danger. He wanted to stay there; he wanted to lie there and let the sun burn into him: he wanted to sleep.

He found a damp cigarette in an inside pocket and, after some effort, managed to get it alight.

They left him alone for almost an hour, an hour in which he continued to stumble forward, gaining strength as time passed, his mind rapidly clearing.

They started the next part of the hunt by travelling level with

him. He could hear them occasionally, first about a hundred yards on his left and then the same distance on his right. Not much noise, just enough to let him know, a noise of movement, an occasional shout and, when he stopped, a rustle of branches behind him. He knew now they had their instruments well locked and would never lose him again. Instruments tuned to his heart beat, his breathing, his body heat, the chemical peculiarities of the sweat which soaked his clothing. But why were they drawing no nearer?

The trees thinned without warning and he found himself in open country. They had known what lay ahead and had been driving him towards it.

On his left lay the river, on the right a high cliff and between the two an open stretch of short coarse grass. Beyond the grass—a hundred and fifty yards beyond—woodland and possible cover beckoned invitingly.

He sighed inwardly, knowing, despite his determination, that he would never make it. A man can take so much, and he had a feeling that they were moving in for the kill. Somewhere, between the two woodlands, he was going to die. The muscles about his mouth tightened abruptly—he wasn't going to be the only one.

He stepped forward, feeling the sun on his face and the turf under his feet. Don't panic, he told himself, remember to keep cool at all costs. Deep down inside him something seemed to gibber softly but he fought it down, conscious of fear twisting and tightening in his stomach.

He covered half the distance and, ahead of him, shadows drifted out from among the trees and stood waiting. Behind them, something round and green rolled restlessly to and fro.

Malling felt his body begin to shake uncontrollably; this was the kill. He had a sudden wild impulse to hurl himself at the cliff and claw his way to the top. Then he remembered, he was going to take a few with him before they broke him. God, he thought suddenly, what targets.

He turned slowly and, as he expected, another group of shadows were emerging from the trees behind him. Almost without thinking he drew the weapon and pressed the firing stud. Then without waiting to see the results he spun round and fired at those barring his path.

There was no sound, no detectable recoil but, in front of him, the scene blinked. There was no other way to describe it, it was as if he had closed his eyes for a fraction of a second and opened them to find everything as before—only it wasn't. The shadows had gone

and the restless round thing. When he looked it was the same behind him.

He raised the weapon and fired again; he sprayed the whole line of trees in case others were still lurking in cover. Each time he fired the scene blinked, vanished into darkness and re-appeared. He began to wonder if it was his eyes deceiving him and went cautiously forward. Perhaps it was a trick, perhaps they had really invented a perfect screen and were still there, laughing at him.

If the gun had worked, what the hell had it done? Everything was the same, trees still stood, the leaves danced in the wind—God! He stopped dead, about four feet from the first tree. Embedded in the trunk was a man's wrist watch with the second hand still turning.

Malling forced himself to close his eyes, count ten and look again. It was not as if the watch had been forced into the wood; it was as if it belonged there. As if it had been placed there, years before and, in the course of time, the bark and wood had slowly grown round it leaving only the face exposed.

He looked about him and fought down an urge to cry out. He'd thought everything was the same but he was staring at utter and frightening chaos. The branch on an elm grew stoutly from the trunk of an oak tree, a sapling swayed in the wind, roots stretched to the sky and its topmost branches deep in the soil.

Slowly he went forward, frightened and unbelieving. A birch tree with its branch reversed, the trunk sprouting fragments of stone, bracken and sprigs of blackthorn.

Deep in the trees there had been an armoured vehicle, now a parody, inextricably confused with its surroundings. Grass sprouted from one of the headlights, the roots deeply embedded, and clearly visible in the thick glass. The body of the vehicle itself was warped into distorted undulating lines like a wax model which had half melted in the sun and then been allowed to cool. Fragments and accessories were insanely intertwined with surrounding trees. A complete caterpillar tread vanished into the trunk of an oak and emerged on the other side as if that, too, had lain there for years and allowed the wood to grow about it. Part of an instrument panel was deeply embedded in a moss-grown rock while fern grew from, and through, an inch thick piece of armour plating lying some ten feet from the main body of the machine.

Malling took out the weapon and stared at it stupidly, but vaguely he was beginning to understand what it did. It projected some sort of force field or beam which affected the atomic structure of matter. The blinking effect was the brief instant in which all

matter within the area of impact was reduced to a common atomic unity. The effect, perhaps, lasted only the fraction of a second and could not be maintained and so everything snapped back into place again. Unfortunately, during that fraction of time, the general position of the matter within the area became warped. It was like pulling a piece of elastic and releasing it. The elastic may immediately resume its original shape on release but not bounce back to the same place. Malling shook his head; he understood now, vaguely, what had occurred. The weapon distorted atomic structure then allowed it to spring back to normal but, like the elastic, although it resumed its original structure, it didn't always resume it in the same place.

He thrust the weapon back into his pocket violently and strode forward. He had to get away from this place. He knew suddenly just what had happened to the pursuit and he kept his eyes, as far as possible, on the sky as he went on. If it had happened to trees and grass, to earth and metal, it had happened to men. He didn't want to find a man's hand growing from a rock, a neatly shod foot sprouting from a tree trunk. Undoubtedly it had happened but he didn't want to see it. He ran, almost insanely, until he was clear of the area of impact and the surroundings returned to normal.

He slowed his pace, conscious of growing fatigue, but did not stop to rest. Undoubtedly there had been survivors, the lucky ones

outside the area who had witnessed and reported what had occurred. Reports which would change the whole nature of the pursuit from a customary, if protracted, execution to a military operation. Stromberg would want that weapon badly and, even more, information as to where it had been obtained.

Malling sighed tiredly. With luck, he had two hours before he had the whole army out after him, probably with shock carbines—they'd want him alive.

His luck was out. He didn't get two hours, he didn't get one—he got exactly thirty-three minutes.

It came as a whistling reverberating thunder some ten miles to his left. There was no mistaking the sound—ships punching through the sound barrier so fast that their heat resistant armour would be, exteriorly, nearly white hot from friction.

Then he saw them. Seven glowing white blobs travelling so low and so fast that branches and fragments of trees were flung like chaff in the air behind them. They were undoubtedly lead ships sent to patrol and watch ahead of him and they were getting there fast.

He drew the weapon, aimed at an angle of forty-five degrees ahead of the lead ship, which was beginning to turn, and pressed the firing stud.

Although he never knew it for certain, he obtained a direct hit on the third in line. The resultant detonation spun him dizzily round and tossed him, blackened and bleeding, almost twenty feet away.

He tried grimly to struggle to his feet and failed. His last thought, before unconsciousness claimed him, was that he was a damned fool and that he should have *known* what his weapon might do to a raw-energy motor.

He awoke, but it was not return to consciousness in the old sense, feeling relaxed and superbly fit. As a doctor he recognised almost immediately that he had undergone narco-therapy. The mind had been subjected to hypno-techniques inducing artificial sleep in which state he had been treated surgically or medically.

He looked about him; he was lying in bed in a small, well-lighted room. A man sat by the bed studying some papers; he looked up as Malling stirred.

"Don't worry, you made it." He held out his hand. "My name's Stafford."

Malling shook the hand and frowned. "Did my escort arrive?"

"Yes, just after the explosion—it nearly took us with it."

"You took your time." Malling scowled.

The other laughed. "They all say that."

The doctor refrained irritably from smiling back. "All that to find out why things are changing; it seems damn silly."

Stafford's face was suddenly hard. "We have to make sure of man's resilience, his ability to take a truth and live with it."

Malling shrugged. "All right, all right." He changed the subject abruptly. "Is this Free City?"

"One of many; we have rather special ways of hiding them and keeping them secret." He made a depreciating gesture. "It's not like the city you left, this one is strictly functional. Single storey buildings specifically designed to take stress." He smiled faintly. "That way we don't have to keep pulling some down and putting stronger ones up."

"Look, just what are these Free Cities?"

Stafford shrugged. "A thousand things, but primarily they are cities built by, and for, the survivors."

"Don't tell me this is another End-of-the-World sect, that you are all going to be saved and the rest of the world doomed to destruction. Spare me that one."

Stafford looked at him for a long moment. "You have left a section of humanity whose bodies have altered but with minds incapable of accepting the changes around them. Already that culture has reverted to a primitive form of government and rule-by-force in keeping with their psychoses and degeneration. I'd say they were already doomed."

Malling shivered slightly. From the point of view of a psychiatrist, Stafford was right. Malling said coldly: "Perhaps you could also explain the physical changes of the last few generations."

Stafford shrugged. "Man, and the world around him, have changed to resist pressure."

"You're evading the issue; why is there pressure and from what?"

"Acceleration or deceleration; we haven't figured out quite which yet—preliminary figures point to the latter at the moment."

Malling felt his face becoming hot. "What the devil are you talking about? You make it sound as if we were on a space ship."

Stafford took a blackened pipe from his pocket and studied it absently for some moments, then he looked up. "Aren't we?" he said.

Malling's mouth fell open. "You're crazy," he said, finally. "Stark raving mad."

"Yes?" Stafford seemed unperturbed. "The only difference that I can see is that a man-made space ship carries its air on the inside and that this one carries its air on the outside." He leaned forward. "God, man, hasn't it ever occurred to you that you're on one of the biggest and most perfect space ships ever constructed? It has a self-purifying air system, a perfect heat-energy device and a self-perpetuating food supply." He began to fill the pipe. "For hundreds of millions of years Earth has been travelling through space, round and round the sun at one hell of a speed." He lit the pipe. "You know, Malling, I'd call something that does that—a space ship."

"Good God!" The doctor's voice was almost shrill. "That's sheer distortion, bending facts to fit an insane theory. Man, himself, can, for example, build a space station and that, too, will go on tearing through space at one hell of a speed."

Stafford exhaled blue smoke. "And just what keeps it in orbit, Doctor Malling?" He smiled.

"You asked for the truth, I'm giving it to you. If you'll accept for the moment the presumption that we're on a gigantic space ship, I'll go on." He pointed the pipe suddenly, like a weapon. "Malling, we're on a journey; we've been travelling across space for countless centuries and now we're getting near our destination."

Malling was too taken aback to lose his temper. "Why haven't we run away from the sun?" The enormity of the suggestion struck him suddenly and he added sarcastically: "Don't tell me you're towing it."

Stafford's expression didn't change and he ignored the sarcasm. "Not Earth alone, man, not even the whole solar system, *the whole damn observable Universe.*"

The doctor felt tiny beads of sweat begin to prickle his forehead; somehow Stafford was becoming frighteningly convincing. He said suddenly: "Shut up, damn you, I've got to think."

Stafford tossed a packet of cigarettes on the bed. "Take your time."

For almost ten minutes Malling fought a silent battle with himself; the urge to reject everything on an emotional basis was almost overwhelming. Facing facts aroused too many frightening implications for his peace of mind. Finally, however, his scientific training came to the fore and he began to dissect the theory almost as if he were in a surgical laboratory.

Changing gravities occurring with the same regularity as night and day, complicated by the seasonal position of Earth in its orbit. Yes, it *could* mean acceleration or deceleration; but a whole universe, a *universe*. His mind baulked at the conception. How many billions of suns, stars, solar systems was that? It couldn't be the solar system alone; such movements would have been detectable from astronomical comparisons alone; mankind had been studying the stars long enough to observe such a movement.

Suddenly he was faced with the full issue. No— no— *no*!

Something seemed to explode against his cheek and for the moment he was dazed.

"Sorry I had to do that." Stafford was sitting down again.

Malling realised he must have been shouting his denials aloud and determinedly forced his mind back to the issue. If the universe was moving, *something was moving it and if something was moving it, the inference was that something had built it.*

The memory of Fosdyke's laboratory came back to him vividly. Man was like a rabbit for Mars, worms for Venus—less, culture in a tray, bacteria in a test tube—God! He leaned back weakly against the pillows.

"Cuts you down to size doesn't it?" Stafford's voice was very gentle.

Malling nodded without speaking. Man was a passenger, seeded, prepared, pre-adapted for a tremendous journey and his final destination. And could he even console himself with the thought that he was the only one? Out of all those millions of stars, there must be other passengers, other life forms, perhaps far in advance of man himself, speeding to a final destiny.

He had a tired feeling that it was true. Scientifically he would need endless facts and figures but inwardly—— Had man always suspected the truth, perhaps sensed or suspected an intelligence far greater than his own? The kind of intelligence which could build and power a universe, seed it with life and move it across the face of the void? Despite scientific progress, religion had never quite

died out and, where it had, there was superstition—a belief in powers greater than oneself.

He sighed. What had Tomlin said? "A long perilous journey with nothing at the end of it." How true.

Stafford seemed to read his thoughts. "It either breaks you or you face it. It could be a great adventure; we're nearing the end of the journey and I think we'll live long enough to see our destination. Whatever it was that sent us will make pretty sure we're well taken care of."

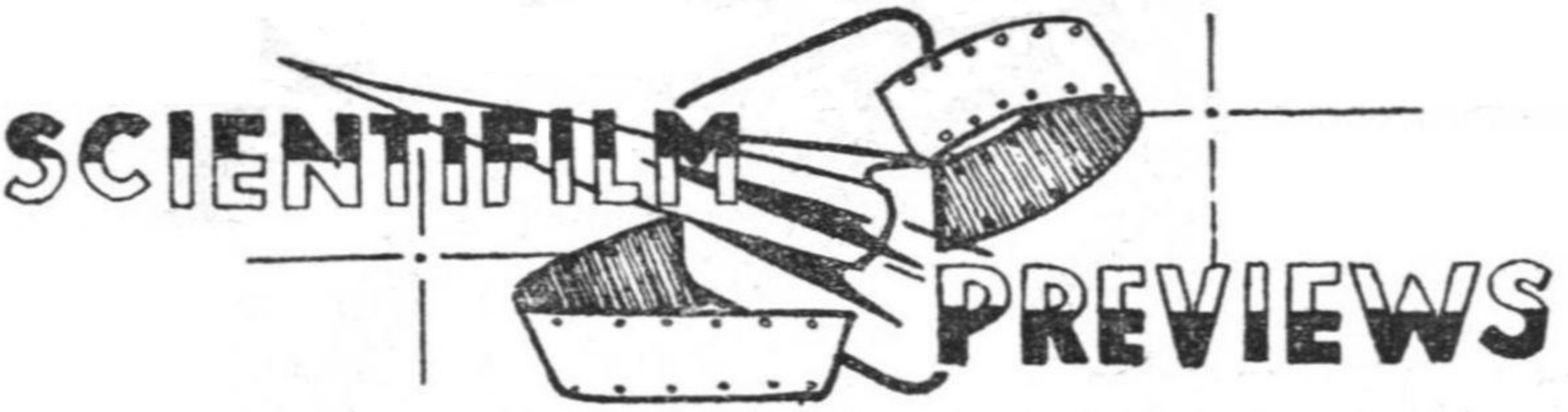
Strangely, a sudden peace seemed to fill Malling's mind. Something bigger than he was taking care of him, had worked to bring him to this.

Stafford seemed to sense his mood. "And now you must rest —and think."

"Please." It was almost a prayer.

Stafford rose to depart when Malling stopped him. "I've had a hell of a funny thought." He burst out laughing and lay back helplessly. "The Lords of Creation are being taken for a ride!" he said.

PHILIP E. HIGH



News and Advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

MONSTER ON THE CAMPUS is the American release title of the Universal-International film known as *Monster in the Night* while it was in production.

Jack Arnold has directed it. Jack Arnold was present at the Honor Banquet of the 16th World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles, end of August, 1958, to accept a "Hugo" trophy on behalf of 1957's top scientifilm, THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN, which he directed.

David Duncan wrote the original screenplay of MONSTER ON THE CAMPUS. His *Collier's* magazine serial, "Dark Dominion", pocketbooked by Ballantine, was purchased some time ago by Hollywood but to date has not been put into production. Geo Pal selected him to do the scenario of the highly important TIME MACHINE, the Wells classic at last ceasing to "mark time" and being actively worked upon.

Informed sources, I am happy to report, tell me that the Duncan/Arnold combination has come up with an intellectual sci-fi horror tale intelligently team-worked into a suspenseful scientifilm with a crackerjack climax.

About 75 million years ago, give or take a year or two, a lobe-finned lungfish, called a coelacanth by modern paleonthologists (there is no record of what he was commonly called by his contemporaries) was thought to have breathed his last. But 20 years ago off the coast of South Africa a living 5-foot specimen of this prehistoric anachronism was captured, and within the last couple of years another was caught in the Indian Ocean.

Russian scientists, around 1957, advanced the theory that the Age of Dinosaurs came to an end because of mutations of living species caused by atomic radiations from stellar explosions of tremendous violence.

Extrapolation: prehistoric fish, preserved by atomic radiation, shipped from Madagascar to modern lab of young college prof, eventuates in MONSTER ON THE CAMPUS.

A pet police dog metamorphosizes, after licking a little of the fish's irradiated blood, into a rabid sabre-toothed super-wolf.

A dragonfly, making a free meal off the carcase of the muta-

tive coelacanth, goes through temporary devolution back to the time when its 2-foot forebears winged the fern forests of the primeval world.

Power in the blood!

Robert Louis Stevenson rides again when the science instructor inadvertently is contaminated by the Jekyll-Hyde fish, and he (Arthur Franz, the unwitting experimenter) reverts to a killer caveman while in a mental blackout, taking the lives of a nurse and a detective without his conscious knowledge. When he begins to suspect the truth about who the mysterious campus fiend may be, he deliberately isolates himself and inoculates himself with the poisoned blood.

Fellow preview critic Jack Moffit sums it up: "By emphasizing the human rather than the monstrous side, the picture possesses gentlemanly and scholastic values uncommon to most bogey tales. The professor is not the usual hokey mad scientist. The direction builds suspense by implying horror instead of baldly stating it, until the final climax is reached."

THE SUN DEMON (final title of *Terror from the Sun*) is another one that owes an honorary royalty check to the estate of the late Dr. Jekyll. It is no better nor worse than a dozen previous pictures. The Hyde side of the protagonist comes about through accident rather than design, so that he is a sympathetic monster. After surviving a super dose of radiation he discovers upon his first prolonged exposure to the sun that he is now subject to a devolutionary process which discards millions of years from him in a matter of minutes and turns him into a living fossil from the Devonian, a scaly fish-man, cousin to the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

IT! THE TERROR FROM BEYOND SPACE has a title that irritates me. Why "beyond"? Since when is Mars beyond *space*? This is the picture that had shooting titles of *Vampire from outer space* and *Man-eater from Mars*. It is the first screenplay of sci-fi author and ex-editor Jerome Bixby, and is coupled in general release with his second scenario, THE CURES OF THE FACELESS MAN. The latter is routine Mummy stuff, and in fact, had it been titled *The Return of the Mummy*, it is doubtful many but the most faithful of the aficionados would have noticed the absence of tanna leaves. IT! is neither a hit nor a miss. It is vintage '26 Amazing type story of the invulnerable menace that neither acid, electricity nor gunpowder will destroy. It all takes place aboard a spaceship, with a stowaway Martian athirst for moisture sucking crew members dry of their vital juices one by one till he is cleverly done in, scientifically and in a whirlwind of a dramatically executed sequence. The Destination Moon-like venture by two men outside on to the skin of the ship is a visual treat. IT! is worth seeing.

WATCH FOR THE
BOB MADLE COLUMN
IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

In a forthcoming issue of Nebula there will be a story by James White, who is known as one of the best of the new generation of British sf authors. What is not so well known is that James once nearly gave his life for science fiction.

One day in his ceaseless combing of the second-hand bookshops of Belfast James was rewarded by the discovery of a 1935 issue of wonder stories. Concealing his emotion, he bought it from the trusting dealer for a mere six times its face value and, like a true fan, opened it at the fan department. There, in faded grey and brown, was the startling intelligence that a Chapter of the Science Fiction League had been founded in Belfast by one Hugh O'Hara. The address was a mere twenty minutes walk from where James was now rooted to the pavement and he decided to track down this hitherto unknown founder of Irish fandom.

The address was one of a long row of working class houses in a narrow street. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman with a truculent expression.

"Mr. O'Hara?" asked James politely.

She gave him a suspicious look and would probably have slammed the door in his face if it hadn't been for the fact that James is roughly a mile high. She contented herself by gradually reducing the width of the aperture until she seemed in danger of cutting her head off.

"Which Mr. O'Hara?" she asked warily.

"Hugh," said James.

"Me?" she protested angrily. Her moustache bristled.

"Not *you*," said James. He gave her an aspirate to relieve her pain. "Hhh-ugh. Hugh O'Hara."

Malevolently, the woman seized her opportunity for further obstruction. "*Which* Hugh O'Hara?"

Now I have the sober type of mind that mentally falls off every bridge before I come to it. If I had been going to make this call of James's I'd have cased the joint first.

"Er . . . the one who's interested in science fiction," said James at last.

The woman looked at him blankly. It seemed to come naturally to her. "Signs?" she asked. "Fixing what signs?"

Faced so suddenly with the task of explaining what science fiction was, I am afraid that James quailed. It was a pity he hadn't been studying his John W. Campbell or he could have said: "Oh, you know, fictional extrapolation from current or poten-

tial technological or psychical development." If he had, I venture to suggest that he would have remained master of the situation.

As it was, all he could do was fall back on the copy of Wonder Stories. He started to undo his overcoat to withdraw the magazine. The woman assumed the expression of a cover girl on True Detective, and her apprehensions were not allayed when James finally produced his magazine, opened it at the page and showed it to her. She screamed.

Raised as you have been in the pure clean air of Nebula, it will be difficult for you younger readers to realise what some of the advertisements in the back pages of old time pulp magazines were like. As for James, he is a very high-minded character . . . not only in the sense that his head is occasionally surrounded by cirrus clouds . . . and devoted to science fiction, so the advertisements in pulps simply did not exist for him. He probably knew vaguely that there was something on the page other than the fan department but I am sure he did not know what it was, far less suspect that it might cause him to be regarded as some kind of maniac.

Fortunately for James, Mrs. O'Hara attempted to withdraw her head without remembering to open the door again and the volume of her alarm was throttled down by several decibels. It also gave James time to disavow responsibility for the advertisement, hastily closing the magazine and showing the cover. It was an innocuous painting, merely showing several thousand human beings being eaten alive by multi-tentacled monstrosities, and its idyllic charm quietened her immediately.

"Our Hughie used to read them magazines," she vouchsafed, reflectively.

"Where is he?" asked James.

"He's away," she replied defensively and with renewed alarm.

"*Where?*" asked James, so hot on the trail that he failed to notice the warning signs. The hunted expression, the furtive glance up the street.

She gave him a hostile look, this time more of hate than fear. It lingered at his feet, which *are* rather big. Suddenly James realised that this was Belfast, where there are more desperate minority organisations than the Science Fiction League. He looked round in alarm. A number of lean hungry-looking men had materialised, with their hands in their jacket pockets. James quickly tried to explain that he was only interested in magazines. One of them caught the word and nodded to the others. They moved forward slowly. James knew it was time to go, but the instinct of the true collector is strong.

"Did Hughie leave any of them?" he asked. But he was already walking away, because he knew what the answer would be. Sure enough it came, the ritual reply known to collectors the world over: "Oh, there were hundreds of them in the attic but they were threw away last week."

So James hadn't bothered to wait, and gained the safety of the main road with milliseconds to spare. Otherwise there might have been a dozen blank pages in a forthcoming issue of Nebula.

GUIDED MISSIVES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir—I have always been a keen science fiction fan. I have just finished the third part of the serial story, "Wisdom of the Gods", in NEBULA No. 34. It ends with a young woman having been flogged into a state of collapse, with her back suitably cut up by the whip.

In my time I have lived through ten years of war; the last six as a regular army reservist. You may be assured that I am not unaccustomed to blood and anguish.

To put the matter simply, there are things we just don't want to read about. We know they exist, but we don't want you to tell us. We buy your magazine for adult entertainment, and I for one do not require scenes in a story that would entertain only a psychopathic case.

Please tell your authors to grow up.

L. D. NICHOLLS,
London, N.W.6., England.

* *I am sorry you don't care for our serial, Mr. Nicholls, but as you will no doubt have realised by now, you were just a little hasty in complaining about that particular scene.*

It became apparent in "Wisdom of the Gods", part four, that the girl had not been injured in any way, and that the whole incident you describe had been mere play-acting on the part of those involved to obtain a certain result from the story's central character. This being the case, I do not feel that you have any legitimate complaint against our serial, except, of course, on grounds of personal taste.

Perhaps in future it would be advisable for you to finish reading each story before jumping to conclusions regarding the mentality and intentions of the person who has written it.

Dear Sir—If you intend to sell to the American market, it would be advisable not to duplicate stories that are being printed currently in American magazines.

In your issue No. 32 you have "Words and Music" by Bertram Chandler which appeared two months ago over here.

The question is (1) your policy is to publish reprints, or (2) you are being double-crossed by your authors.

S. T. SCHULMAN,
New York, 10,
N.Y., U.S.A.

* *No, to both questions, Mr. Schulman.*

When we decided to extend our circulation to include the U.S.A. it was not possible for us to use up all the stories on which we could only obtain British rights—bought before the decision was taken—quickly enough to ensure that

none of them would appear in the first few issues sent to America.

The consequence of this was that one or two stories in recent issues of NEBULA had already appeared in other U.S. magazines, although we were actually first to buy them, and to publish them in all other countries.

Now that NEBULA is selling so well in the U.S.A. we have made it an irrevocable rule that every story we accept is completely new, and has never before been published anywhere in the world.

Dear Ed.—I am writing to tell you that I have enjoyed all the issues of NEBULA I have read very much.

My only suggestion for its improvement is that you spare a little space in your magazine for forecasting what the leading stories in your next issue will be. All the magazines over here do this, and I think it is awful sneaky to start a four-part serial by Kenneth Bulmer without a fair warning.

TOMMY DEAVENPORT,
Dallas, 6,
Texas, U.S.A.

* *I am sorry you think I am sneaky, Tommy, but honestly I do not mean to be.*

The stories which you see in NEBULA are only selected and made up for each issue at the very last possible moment, as this enables us to maintain a higher standard of topicality for both stories and features than is possible in most other science fiction magazines. Con-

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1958 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

Pariah	
The Truth	
House Divided	
Infiltration	
Thy Rod and Thy Staff	
Lords of Creation	

Name and Address:

Mr. Arthur Marriot of Bristol wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 34. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was :

1. FOURTH FACTOR
   By Brian W. Aldiss 19·9%
1. WISDOM OF THE GODS—Part 3
   By Kenneth Bulmer 19·9%
3. TAKE YOUR PARTNERS
   By Robert Presslie 17·1%
3. THRESHOLD
   By James Inglis 17·1%
5. AGENT PROVOCATEUR
   By H. Philip Stratford 13·2%
6. FRICTION
   By E. R. James 12·8%

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 40.

sequently, it is often very difficult for me to forecast exactly what will be published in any particular issue until long after the previous one has gone to press.

However, I can confidently forecast, in the broadest possible way, that future issues of NEBULA will be absolutely out of this world!

Dear Sir—I was disappointed not to see an E. C. Tubb story in issue No. 34. This must break a long standing record.

The serial has been very good so far, but appears to be degenerating. I hope next month's episode proves me wrong. I have become a little more tolerant towards the idea of serials since this one began, but the month of waiting is so infuriating!

My only complaint against your magazine is quite small. Why do you not provide captions for your cover pictures? They are very good, but often I wish for some clue as to what inspired the artist.

ARTHUR T. MUTCH,
Gairloch,
Scotland.

* *Well, artists, what* does *inspire you?*

Dear Mr. Editor—If all future serials are of the calibre of "Wisdom of the Gods", we are in for treats galore. The basic plot for this yarn takes second place to the delightful characters and the quiet English flavour makes it a refreshing change. No. 32 was a good issue all round. I liked Tubb's novelette. People do like this sort of TV entertainment even now, so goodness knows what the near future of this medium will be like. The front cover was good, but NEBULA has done better. Back covers range from fair to poor. Kenneth John's inside articles and photographs are always good—right up to date too.

In No. 33 E. C. Tubb's "Talk Not at All" scored with me. The "Thaed" are the most alien aliens I have seen for some time.

I find myself disagreeing with Nigel Jackson (letter section, No. 32) regarding the Australian "lingo". Australian vernacular was almost non-existent in "Ten-Storey Jigsaw" except for the odd use of "cobber" (a much abused word). There definitely is an Australian "lingo" especially in the outback, but lots of authors *do* overdo it. Arthur Upfield's novels give a fairly accurate rendering of Australian.

Thank you once again for many hours of enjoyable and good science fiction reading.

ROBERT F. SMITH,
Puckapunyal,
Victoria, Australia.

* *And thank you, Robert, for a useful and interesting letter.*

Continued from inside front cover

depths that stretch from star to star, and then galaxy to galaxy, and then . . . who knows?

Man, in his pride, with every fumbling attempt to tame fusion power, to map the rivers of interstellar gas, to explore and counter the energy of cosmic rays and radiation that can blast him genetically dead, is already reaching for the stars. A few workers are studying the hibernation of mammals such as bats, a few more are trying to deep freeze rats and then restore their mobility —and intelligence. One day a million such minor points will coalesce into the triumph of a man awakening from the deep sleep to gaze upon the wonder of an extra-terrestrial planet circling an alien star.

But it will probably not be Proxima Centauri, which is part of a triple star system and whose astronomical designation is Alpha Centauri C. A mere tenth of a light year away is the bright star we know as Alpha Centauri, which is in reality a double star whose components are Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B. In the southern sky, you can't miss Alpha Centauri. Just pick out the Southern Cross and draw a line through the two stars of the cross-bar known as Delta and Beta Crucis. Follow the line along, prolonging it until you come to Alpha and Beta Centauri, the Guardians of the Cross. Alpha Centauri is the third brightest star in the heavens and was described by Pickering as " the finest double star in the sky ". It is in the centre of the photograph.

Alpha Centauri A, the brightest star of this bright binary, is Sol-like enough to make any Terran star-rover homesick. It is a GO spectral type yellow sun and almost identical to Old Sol in mass, temperature, brightness and size.

If we ever are going to discover any Earth-like planets near to us, they may well be found orbiting Alpha Centauri A. Unless, of course, the presence of a second near star precludes such planet formation.

Alpha Centauri B is a K5 orange star, a sub-giant larger and cooler than its companion but with less mass. The two orbit round each other every eighty years and are moving towards our system at fourteen miles per second.

The 0.1 light year separating Alpha Centauri C from the binary A and B means that it takes 300,000 years to circle them.

One of the many mysteries of the Universe is the common occurrence of binary stars whose components are utterly unlike one another. If formed at the same time in the same way it might be expected that they would be similar. Yet Alpha Centauri A has a life expectancy of 4,800 million years whilst Alpha Centauri B will blaze away for another 7,100 million years. Maybe these stars just drifted together and found a balance to circle each other and proceed in company.

The other bright star of the Centaurus Constellation that sprawls across 45° of the 180° of the Southern sky is Beta Centauri, the bright star on the left in this month's photograph. It is interesting that the Centaurus Constellation shares with Orion the distinction of possessing two first magnitude stars.

But it must be clearly understood that Beta Centauri is in no Galactic sense related to Alpha Centauri. It is simply that from Earth they both appear in a similar direction. In fact, Beta Centauri is 190 light years away from Earth. In addition, Beta is a spectral type B1, a blue, hot bright star only seeming similar to our eyes to Alpha because it is so much farther away. It is 1,500 times more luminous than Alpha Centauri or our own Sun; but appears as the tenth of the brightest stars.

Once Proxima is reached, and the other two of the Alpha group have been explored, it will be some long time before the Terran space explorers get around to crossing the 186 light year gulf to the star that appears as though it is the next logical outward step.

But they will reach it—one day.

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