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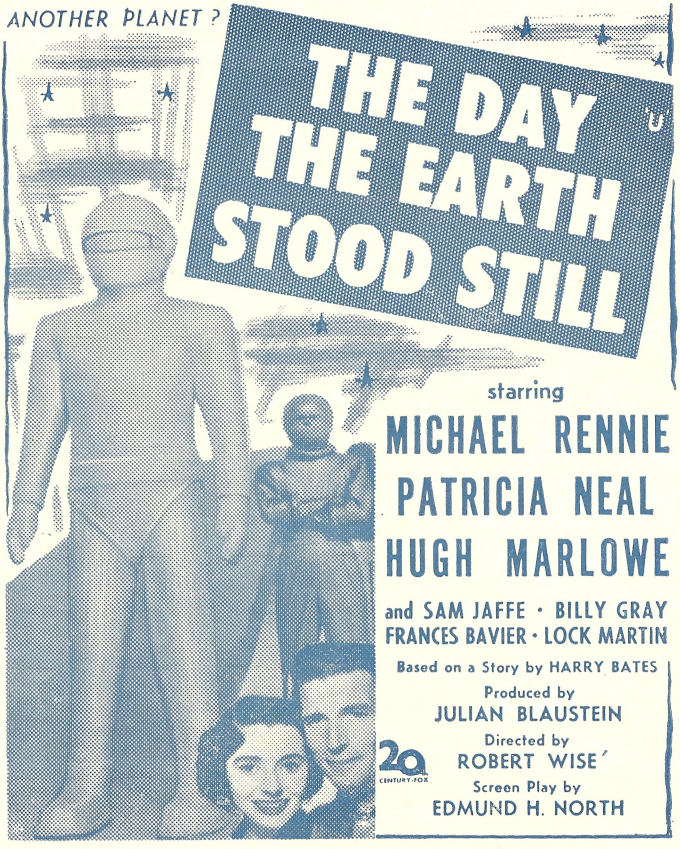

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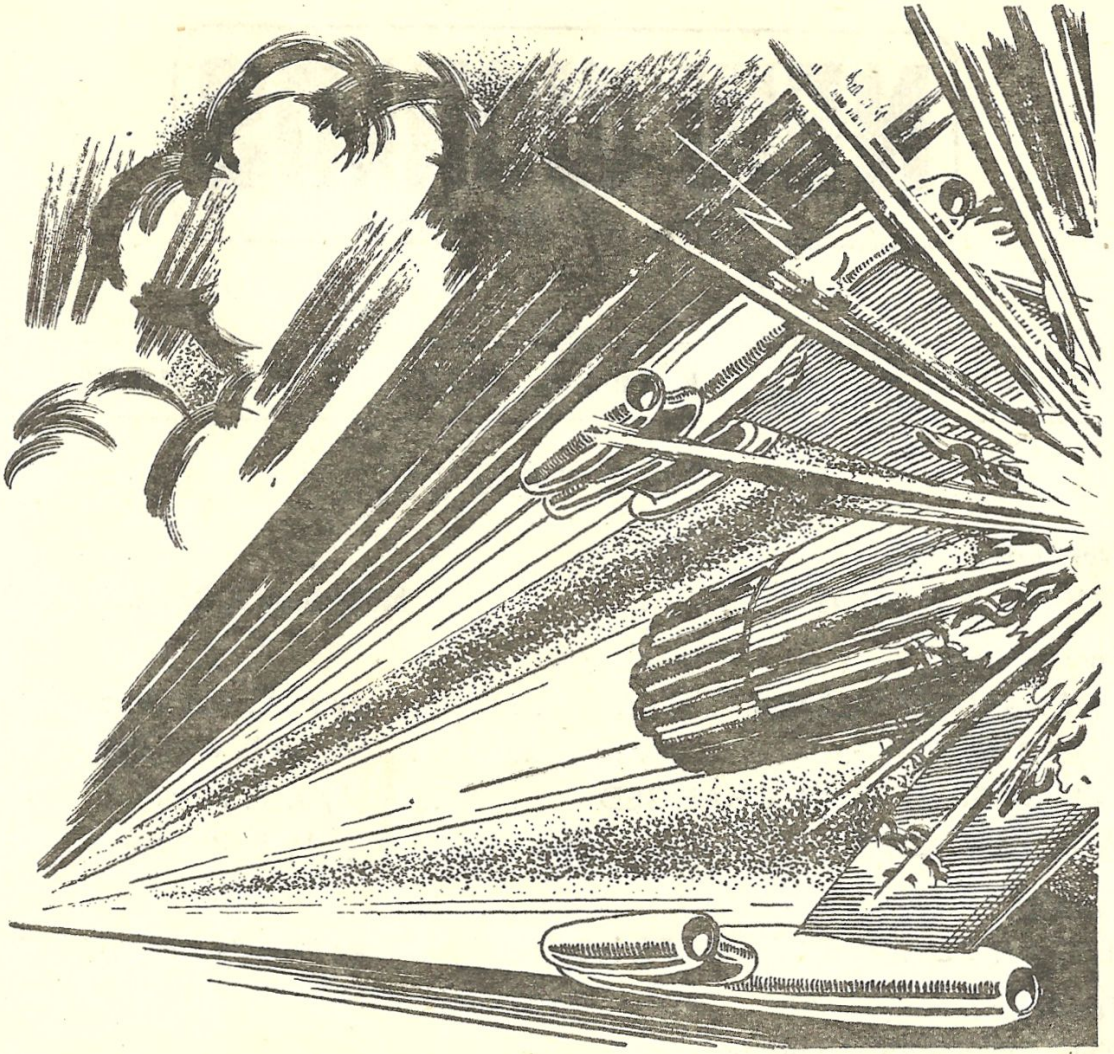


THE FLAME GODS

By SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

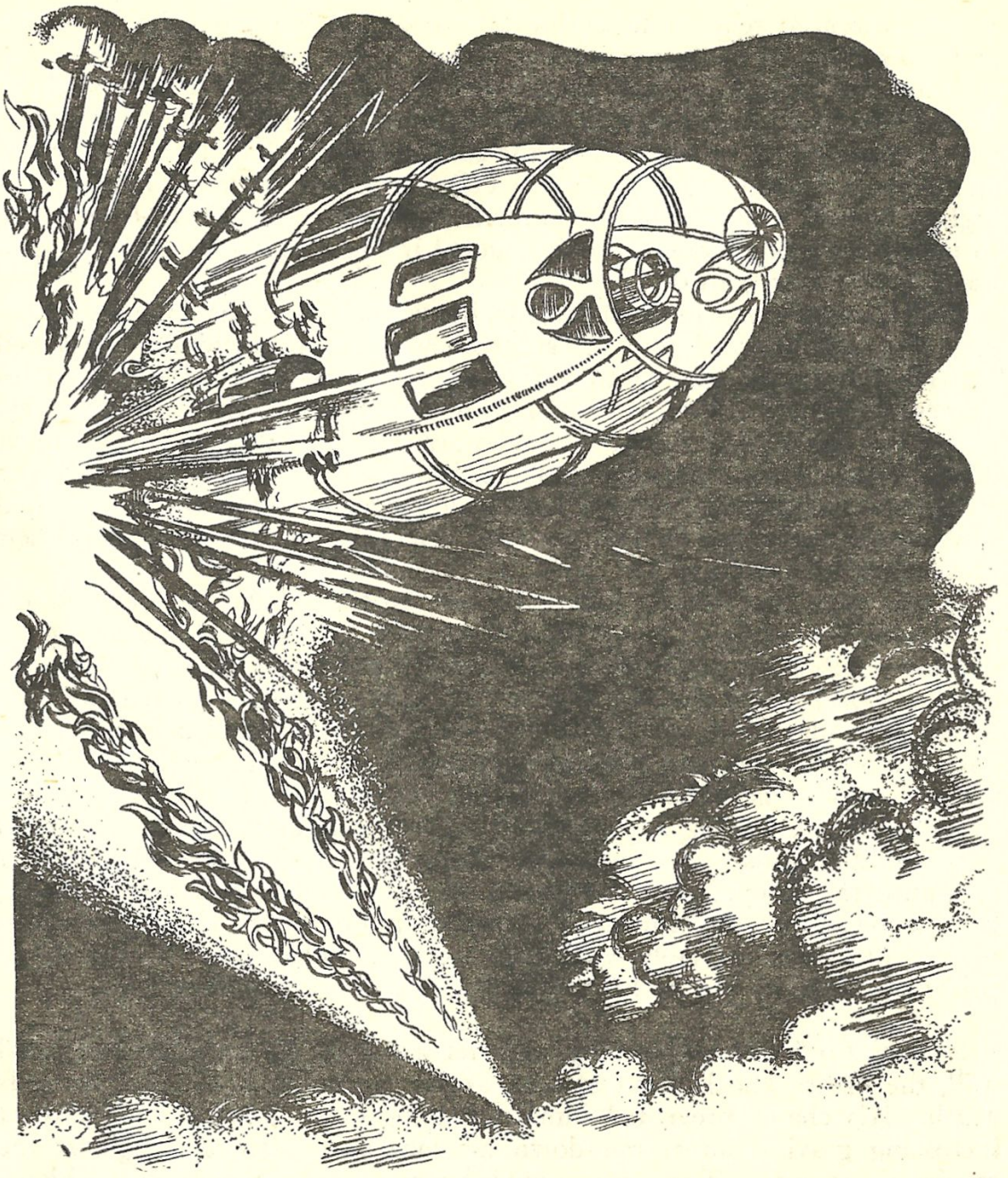
The remnants of post-atomic civilisation were governed by a pseudo-scientific-religious hierarchy. To defy the Keepers meant—the transformation chamber. Thereafter events became interesting.

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

I

He had never been shackled before. The metal bands chafed his wrists and ankles and the short chain fastened from the steel collar about his neck to the wall made it impossible for him to sit down. His legs ached and his empty stomach still suffered from the effects of a vicious gravity change at take-off.

He was alone in the tiny cabin, alone with steel walls and a thick glassite porthole, the chains and his thoughts. The only good thing about his position



was that he could see out into space. He stared through the porthole, into the black void between Earth and Moon.

Far away—so far away that the chemically fuelled rocket seemed like a toy—bright stars winked at him through the velvety folds of interstellar space. Perhaps, somewhere out there, lay another habitable planet, another Earth. It was the only hope! David Martel knew he would not live to see that hope realised.

The Moon was far behind, out of his view through the porthole; Earth swam towards him, ravaged and sultry red, strangely luminous with the radio-active fires that still swept its war-scarred surface. Here and there, isolated patches of blue and green signified small areas still habitable by the remnants of a once proud race. Martel viewed Earth with confused feelings; a nostalgic longing for home, for the planet he had left three years earlier—and hatred for the Keepers of the Flame, the ruthless hierarchy who used a

pseudo-scientific religion to enslave the last remaining peoples of Earth, and would shortly condemn him to death.

A lot can happen in three years; that it had happened was implicit in Martel's fetters, in his lined face and hopeless expression. At eighteen, he had been proud to be selected by the Keepers of the Flame for training as an initiate, a Science Student. To be called to serve the Flame Gods was the highest honour a slave could hope for in his dreary life. He had been sent to the Moon laboratories, to be instructed in basic principles and, later, to assist with research work.

Martel had proved a brilliant student, in two years he attained full professorship and was directed into research on sun-energy machines. This had frustrated him; he wanted to redevelop the work on nuclear fission, to harness the power of the atom and release the peoples of Earth from slavery.

But the Keepers of the Flame had warned him to discontinue his illicit experiments. In a shattering flash of intuition he had realised that the Keepers were concerned only with their desire for power, that they intended to maintain the people in bondage—and that any research threatening their power would be stopped.

It was then that Martel had gone over to the rebels, an underground organisation working to break the power of the Keepers of the Flame, to develop a spaceship driven by nuclear energy and reach the stars. Only on another world would the race have a chance to progress, removed from the threat of a radio-active Earth with its consequent mutational monsters. The colonisation of Venus and Mars was impracticable; the atmosphere of Venus was poisonous, that of Mars non-existent. Survival depended on a journey to the stars, on finding a planet with surface conditions similar to Earth.

In secret caverns below the domed Moon laboratories the work had gone on—until the Keepers had discovered the plot. There had been fighting, their crude atomic pile dismantled, the rebels put to flight. Tyrill, the rebels' leader, had been severely wounded—perhaps killed—and Martel taken prisoner. Now, he was on his way back to Earth—and certain death.

Rockets fired without warning. Martel was flung back against the metal wall, the breath knocked out of him, as the moonship decelerated towards Earth. His chains prevented him from lying down to ease the agony of increasing gravity; sweat ran down his face as he struggled against the crushing pressure. The crew would be snug on resilient air cushions, protected from the crippling deceleration. Not so, Martel; he had to stand, pinioned by steel shackles.

Earth rushed at him. He glimpsed a flat landscape glowing with radio-activity, strange growths that had sprung up in the wastelands. His vision blurred as the pressure increased; he began to black-out, fighting for consciousness. His body sagged, his head dropped to his chest, his legs gave out and only the chains kept him hanging from the wall. The blinding light before his eyes went out and he felt himself falling into a lightless void, plunging headlong down a spiral of blackness that reached out long arms to suck him into oblivion . . .

Heavy boots kicked him. Martel groaned, opening his eyes. Two guards, jeering brutally, took it in turn to kick him back to painful consciousness. The steel collar about his throat half-choked him; he pulled himself upright on the metal chain and gulped down air.

He slumped weakly against the wall as the guards unleashed him; his wrists were still handcuffed, his ankles chained together. One of the guards pushed him towards the open door. Martel staggered, the chain about his ankles would only allow him to take short steps, move forward no more than twelve inches at a time. His guards grew impatient.

"Hurry, Martel—the Keepers of the Flame are waiting !"

Martel cursed them. A guard hit him across the mouth, drawing blood. Martel shuffled through the door and along a passage to the airlock. The lock was open; it was only needed for the airless Moon. He went down the ramp, hurried by his guards. Earth's atmosphere had a salty tang to it he'd almost forgotten; he breathed deeply, enjoying an air that was not artificially vitalised by chemical compounds, as it was in the Moon laboratories. It might be the last time he would breathe fresh air.

Before him, a wide concrete avenue stretched to the steps leading up to the Temple of the Flame Gods. The temple dominated the landscape, a vast dome set above a rough-hewn cube of stone, each side a quarter of a mile long. Reaching out from each side of the broad avenue, a mottled greenish-brown grass merged into distant hills of ash and sand. Beyond the hills, the sky was lurid with the glow of deadly radio-activity.

Martel shuffled towards the temple, the short chain linking his ankles forcing him to take slow, measured steps. His guards urged him to greater speed. In the foreground, surrounding the temple, the stone houses of the guards jutted like ugly tumours from the bleak ground. Nearer the waste-lands, a wire-encaged compound contained the mud huts of the slave populace—fully nine-tenths of Earth's remaining people.

Martel caught glimpses of them, chained and harried by armed guards, tilling the small areas of fertile soil. This was the largest of Earth's still habitable areas, a tiny part of what had once been the continent of Europe. There were other, smaller, regions where tiny bands of people contrived to exist before the encroaching ravages of radio-active dust, terrible heritage of an atomic war, but none were as important as this last stronghold of the race, this, the domain of the Flame Gods.

He reached the temple steps and began the climb to the arched entrance hall set between massive stone columns. The guards urged him on, threatening him with explosive blasters, beating him when he paused to rest and refill his lungs with Earth's sweet air. He passed through the entrance and, inside the temple, tiers of faces stared down at him as he walked the central aisle; the eager faces of young initiates waiting for transport to the Moon laboratories to be trained as Science Students; the blank, hopeless faces of slaves; the hard, ruthless faces of armed guards.

Martel was forced towards the great dais under the lofty curving arch of the dome. His tall, thin frame shuffled awkwardly and the torn and bloody remnants of his synthesilk suit flapped about him; his pale face was set in grim lines; his snow-white hair—bleached by radiation—was short and straight; his large blue eyes stared emptily ahead. When he reached the dais, he stopped and looked up.

High above him, seated in a curved gallery, four Keepers of the Flame waited to pass judgment. Two men and two women. There was a fifth Keeper, but he rarely showed himself; rumour said he was a mutant, a

monster too horrible for human eyes to behold—but there was another reason for his absence. Martel knew that reason; he knew what to expect.

Strang, the first Keeper, stood up to speak; a gaunt, black-cloaked figure with slanting almond eyes and a hooked nose set above cruel lips. His voice whispered eerily round the temple.

"Science Student David Martel, you have been found guilty of blaspheming the laws of the Flame Gods. You have sought to unleash the power of the Gods, to destroy our world with the dust that burns and transforms human beings into monsters. For this breach of your sacred duties, I find you wholly evil and sentence you to death."

Strang sat down and Vogel rose to address the audience in the temple. The second male Keeper was short and round with a bloated belly and sagging chins; his beady eyes gleamed with sadistic pleasure.

"The peoples of Earth," he said, "know full well the displeasure of the Flame Gods. In the past, our cities warred with one another, releasing the creeping death across the width and breadth of our planet. The Gods were angered at this tampering with their power and smote the peoples with all their might. Only by obeying the laws of the Flame Gods, as proclaimed by their Keepers, can we hope to survive. David Martel, I proclaim you—*heretic*. I demand your instant death."

Undine, first of the female Keepers, spoke. She had the body of an adolescent girl, the face of an old hag; her withered hair was grey, her eyes cold and bleak.

"Science Student Martel has broken the laws of the Flame Gods—and for that he must die. After the war, when Earth was a holocaust of burning death, when the very air was poisoned, fish dying in strangely glowing waters and the crops withering on blasted soil, the Keepers of the Flame prayed to their Gods—and their prayers were answered ! The Flame Gods decreed that atomic power be outlawed, never again be used by the peoples of this planet. The Keepers have ensured that the will of the Gods has been obeyed, but a few recalcitrants thought to set themselves above the law. These heretics have been dealt with. They have been exterminated. Martel must serve as an example of what happens to Science Students foolish enough to turn against the Gods."

Undine sat down and Sala, the second female Keeper, came to her feet. Sala was a hunchback with spindly arms and legs, coarse lank hair and terrible eyes that burned like red coals. Her clawed hands raked the air as she screamed:

"Death to David Martel ! I call upon the Flame Gods to pronounce judgment—let *them* deal with this rebel !"

A sudden hush swept through the temple. A fearful silence crawled between the stone columns, blanketing the spectators. Not often did the Gods speak direct to the people; when they did give tongue, it was time for obeisance. Heads bowed in reverence.

Martel drew himself up to his full height. His blue eyes sparked angrily and the chains binding him rattled as he turned on the initiates, shouting:

"You fools—there are no Gods ! The Keepers have tricked you with scientific mumbo-jumbo, blinded you with religious clap-trap. They use atomic power to rule you, breaking their own self-made laws——"

The guards struck him, beating him to silence. The words stuck in his throat; his angry tirade ebbed away in painful sobs. Sala, red eyes burning, screamed again:

"I call on the Flame Gods to deal with this blasphemer !"

A dark cloud formed in the air above Martel's head; it coalesced into solid blackness, writhing into a fantastic shape. Light seemed to be absorbed into it and a coldness radiated through the temple chamber. Daylight faded to misty greyness and a bitter wind whispered round the walls.

Martel knew it was no more than a trick. The cloud was composed of negative energy particles which absorbed light and heat, but he had to admit the trick was impressive. The cloud grew larger till it dominated the whole chamber; a vast, lightless mass that appeared to be the very antithesis of matter. It was as if nothingness could be created.

The air became colder, darker in the temple. The cloud took on solidity, shrinking so that its edges conformed to a pre-set shape. Martel had no doubt it was controlled by Amur, the fifth Keeper. The darkness assumed the shape of a man, thirty feet high; it was a black silhouette in three dimensions.

A voice came from the man-form. Amur's voice, disguised and thrown by a mechanical projector.

"*Keepers of the Flame, I answer your call. Your peoples must obey the law—or perish ! Never again must atomic energy be unleashed. Martel, the traitor, will be sent to the transformation chamber. See that my will is carried out.*"

The black cloud faded, rapidly lost its shape. Light and warmth returned to the temple. Strang spread his arms towards the awed people, and intoned:

"The Flame Gods have spoken. The Keepers will be obeyed in all things. Guards, seize David Martel and throw him into the transformation chamber!"

Martel struggled, but he was weak and outnumbered. The guards unchained him, tore off his grey synthesilk suit, strippped him naked. In the eyes of the initiates, his self-respect and authority were discarded with his clothes; nakedness was regarded as the ultimate disgrace, the mark of the savage.

He was frog-marched to the heavy door behind the dais. Rows of faces stared down at him, some pale, some cruelly approving, others horrified. Once, the transformation chamber had been the atomic power plant feeding a great city; the temple was built over its site. Now, recalcitrants were forced into the chamber and left to die—but, before death came, deadly radiations transformed the victims in a ghastly way, reducing them to something less than human. It was a horrible way to die.

Martel shuddered as he imagined what would happen to him when the lead door closed behind him; he struggled, trying to force his guards to use their explosive blasters on him, to give him a quick death. But he could do nothing in his exhausted state.

The door of the chamber swung silently open and he was forced to the entrance. His guards were in a hurry to get away; they didn't want to be affected by stray radiations. Martel felt himself seized and, naked, he was thrown headlong into darkness. The lead door of the transformation chamber closed behind him.

II

In the darkness, David Martel stumbled, and groped blindly. He felt for the door, pounded it with clenched hands, tore his fingernails seeking the crack denoting the junction of wall and door. But the lead door of the transformation chamber had not been designed for opening from the inside; he wasted his energy in useless effort.

The darkness was not quite absolute. After a few minutes he became aware of a faint luminosity, a subtle radiation that set his skin tingling, bringing home to him the full horror and hopelessness of his situation. He wondered how long it would be before the radiation affected him, before the very cells of his body began to change. The thought made his flesh creep; he shuddered, blocking the mental image of what he might soon be from his conscious mind.

He must get out; somehow he must find another way out of the chamber. He clung desperately to the idea, despite the gnawing conviction that there could be no other exit. He moved forward, blundered into a metal wall that *burned* him; he recoiled, felt for the distant wall, moved along it, keeping contact with outstretched arms. The chamber was almost circular and he must be nearing the end of the circuit; hope began to fade . . . then he saw a distant light, bobbing towards him.

He stared incredulously. Bare feet pattered on the metal floor; a soft voice called to him:

"This way—hurry, please hurry !"

Like a man in a dream, hardly believing this could be, Martel went towards the light and the soft, feminine voice. He saw a tunnel burrowing into the rock, and a girl. She was young and unusually beautiful, with firm breasts and lithe limbs, dressed in a single tanned animal skin that draped her shoulders and was belted at her slim waist. The metal blade of a knife glittered from the belt; in one hand she carried a flaring torch, in the other a stone jar. She broke the seal and thrust the jar into his hands.

"Smear this ointment over your body," she said. "Cover yourself completely—it will delay the worst effects of the radiation."

Martel obeyed; the ointment was greasy, smelled slightly of carbide, and he noticed that the girl's golden-brown skin was already covered with the stuff. Holding the lighted flare in front of her, she watched him smear the ointment over his naked body. Martel felt embarrassed, even though the girl's eyes showed only admiration for his physique.

"There are not many free men amongst us," she said soberly, "and you are young and strong." She smiled suddenly, and it was as if something vital sparked to life within her. "I am named Carol. Come, we must hurry."

She led the way along the tunnel, deep in the rock. Martel followed eagerly, full of wonder at her miraculous appearance, startled by her beauty. As they fled deeper into underground passages, Carol told him of herself and her life, so that he should understand how it was she had come to help him.

"The transformation chamber," she said, "is not nearly so dangerous as it once was, though it is not good to spend too long there. The energy of the atom machine is almost expended, frittered away over past centuries, till now the radiation can be combated by the ointment I gave you. You

need fear no lasting effect of harm and the tingling of your skin will soon stop."

She talked without stopping to pick her way through the maze of tunnels; instinctively, she knew the way through long experience. Martel lengthened his stride to keep up with her, listening to what she had to say.

"My people live in the nearest habitable region to the temple of the Flame Gods. Every one of us has been condemned to the transformation chamber—" She laughed, tossing her long hair. "If only the Keepers knew ! The transformation chamber is not death, but escape to life. This tunnel leads beneath the wastelands to our country; we keep a watch specially to save those condemned by the Keepers. You would soon starve if you wandered alone in the tunnels."

Her young face grew sad.

"But not all of us came through—*untouched.* The early ones spent too long in the chamber, when the radiation was stronger; others were lost before we found them. You will see them, oddly malformed, and . . . frightening !"

Determination replaced the sadness in her face.

"But the Flame Gods will not rule for ever. Each person they condemn to the transformation chamber swells our numbers; soon we will be strong enough to fight back, to break the evil hold of the Keepers, to free Earth from slavery. That is our destiny."

"And you," Martel asked the girl, "why were you sent to the chamber ?"

A look of hatred blazed up in her eyes. Her voice was bitter with the memory.

"I was selected to serve the Flame Gods—and you know what that means. Some priest took a fancy to me; I was to be his plaything, till . . . till he lost interest and discarded me for some other girl who took his eye."

Martel found himself hating that priest. Carol's slim young form, her flashing eyes and long dark hair excited him; the curve of her lips fascinated him as had no other woman.

"The priest was alone with me, in his room. The fool—he thought I would willingly give my favours . . . I killed him ! Others wanted me, but they were scared, so I was thrown into the transformation chamber."

Carol looked at Martel.

"And your crime ?" she asked, laughing softly. "Why did the Keepers sentence you to death ?"

Martel started to tell her how he had been selected for training in the Moon laboratories, how he had joined the rebellion, but he stopped, embarrassed by the obvious admiration showing in her face.

"A Science Student !"

Her hand tightened on his arm.

"You know, then, the tricks the Keepers use to force the people to submit to them ? You can spread the truth about their evil religion—the people will listen to you. This is the first time a Science Student has come to us; it will make a big difference. We can fight the Keepers with their own weapons now we have someone who knows. You will be a very important man, David; perhaps you will become leader."

She grew thoughtful, and her expression revealed it as a fancy which appealed to her. They walked on in silence; ahead, a faint circle of light showed, grew larger into the exit of the tunnel. Carol beat out the flame of

her torch and dropped the stub.

"Do you like me, David," she asked suddenly.

Martel knew his face reddened. His lips tightened and the noise that came out was merely a grunt. She took this to mean assent, and stated, with pleasure:

"You will fight Jorgen !"

Martel was startled. "Jorgen ?"

She nodded. "He wants me—and I've refused him. You'll have to fight him, because he'll challenge you. So far, he's had no rival."

She laughed again, mischievously; though whether at the idea of two men fighting over her, or because she wanted Jorgen punished, Martel couldn't be certain. He began to get the idea Carol was going to be quite a handful—and found himself liking that idea.

They came to the end of the tunnel and stepped on to a grassy bank. In a hollow below, a collection of huts made from stone and mud formed the village; beyond were trees and a strip of ground under cultivation. The area was pitifully small, bounded by a wilderness of desert with glowing pools of radio-activity where strange new plants grew in the shifting, endless dust. Men and women of the tribe gathered to see the newcomer. Martel was appalled by the mutants, the first he had seen.

Their bodies were oddly distorted, each in an individual way, as if Nature had gone mad. Martel knew he should feel sympathy for them but, somehow, it was difficult. They filled him with revulsion . . . and fear. And these malformed creatures comprised one-third of the tribe.

Carol announced: "David Martel, condemned to the transformation chamber and newly among us, was a Science Student. Shortly, he will tell how the Keepers enslave the people; at last we have someone to tell us how to fight our enemies."

Martel was amused by the way she took charge of him, jealously guarding him from the tribe. She took him to her hut and gave him a dried skin which he bound about his waist with a leather thong. He rested while she prepared food; a simple meal of fruit and coarsely ground wheat, baked to hard biscuits, and goat's milk. The tribe gathered about the entrance to the hut, staring in and muttering amongst themselves. Carol waited on him with a frank possessiveness in her manner.

When he had finished eating, she led him outside again. One man, stunted and thick-set, with long, powerful arms and a hairy chest, pushed forward. His deep-set eyes glowered at Martel as he reached out for Carol.

The girl dodged behind Martel, snapping:

"Leave me alone, Jorgen—I'm not your woman."

He growled in his throat, facing Martel, hands clenched. Carol laughed from behind Martel, and Jorgen's face flushed.

Martel said: "Leave the girl alone."

Jorgen stepped back, his hands dropping to his side. For the moment he was baffled; no one had ever stood up to him before, and a flicker of fear and anger showed in his eyes. Martel, wishing to avoid the fight Carol seemed to want, began to speak quickly.

"I want to tell you about the Keepers of the Flame, to show you they are just ordinary men and women, as yourselves—they have no godlike powers

for you to fear. Their sole power over the people is that derived from atomic energy—the very thing they forbid in their laws. I tell you—there are no Flame Gods !"

The tribe clustered about him in a semi-circle, a few restless and muttering of heresy; the laws of the Flame Gods had been well ingrained in them, and not even their hatred of the Keepers could wholly overcome their servitude.

"Before war ravaged our planet," Martel continued, "scientists were already talking of government by science, but they lacked the power to persuade people to their way of thought. Then war came, unleashed in a moment of panic by irresponsible hot-heads, and our civilisation came to an end overnight. Radio-active dust spread across the face of the planet, bringing death and disease to countless millions."

"We know all this," Jorgen interrupted with a sneer, hoping to discredit Martel with Carol and the tribe. "The Flame Gods rose and appointed the Keepers, and the law was; never again must atomic power be used. Everyone knows that. Must we listen to the ravings of an exiled student ?"

"Shut up !" Carol snapped. "David has a lot more to say. Listen," she appealed to the tribe. "Learn the truth—and how we can fight back !"

Martel held up his hand for silence before going on.

"There are no Flame Gods," he stated again. "When Earth was in ruins, the few scientists left saw their chance to gain control. But they were cautious of the mob; science was under suspicion—so they started a fake religion, invented the Flame Gods and set up as the Keepers. Their object was to start civilisation again, with themselves in power, using atomic energy to create seeming miracles."

"This they did, hiding their science behind the cloak of religion. They succeeded, and life began again—but now, the people of Earth were merely slaves to the Keepers, kept in ignorance of the true position. The Keepers banned all research into atomic energy, fearing they would lose their power. They kept their secrets well; the people accepted the law of Flame Gods, afraid lest the Gods strike again—and so the new order was established."

Martel paused, looking round the ring of faces. Some seemed apprehensive, as if afraid the Flame Gods might strike them down for listening to such heresy; others showed the glimmerings of understanding, an eagerness to learn how to defeat their oppressors. Carol watched him with admiration in her dark eyes.

"Perhaps," he said, "in the beginning, the scientists intended to use their power to aid the race, to raise the living standards of the people, but scientists are only human beings with a systematic way of thinking—and power corrupts ! Over the centuries, the Keepers saw that their power gave them material advantages—they did no physical work, ate more and lived better than the people. All workers were taxed, driven like beasts, and kept under by the miracles of the Gods.

"Miracles ! Scientific tricks—nothing more ! Anyone can do what the Keepers do—when they know how. But a few Science Students, in the laboratories on the Moon, were restless. They wanted to change things—and saw that only on another world could the human race regain its dignity. They planned to redevelop the work on atomic energy to build and power a spaceship to cross the interstellar void. Their leader, Tyrill, wanted to

start a colony on the planet of another star system, far away from the radio-active Earth—and the Keepers.

"But the Keepers discovered the rebellion—and struck. Our work was stopped, most of the students killed; myself brought to Earth and sentenced to the transformation chamber to serve as a warning to other initiates. You know the truth now, about the Keepers and their Flame Gods—you know the only possible way of survival is to reach the stars."

There was silence, then Carol spoke. Her voice was sad.

"We have no equipment here, David. There is no chance of carrying on your work."

Jorgen laughed, pushing forward to the front of the tribe. He had little realisation of what Martel had said; he saw the opportunity to score over his rival, and that was all that mattered to him.

"So you are going to lead us to the stars ? And *how* are you going to persuade the Keepers to give us a spaceship ? You are a fool, Martel, a blustering, ignorant fool !"

Martel had his answer ready; he had to keep the tribe's attention now that he had it.

"We must seize a rocketship and reach the Moon. If we can organise a revolt of the people, particularly the students in the laboratories, we can build our ship. Somehow, we must reopen the door of the transformation chamber and take a ship by force. Then——"

Jorgen shoved out his bearded chin and growled an oath.

"Fool !" he jeered. "The chamber cannot be opened from this side. If that were possible, do you think we should be skulking here ? *I* should have led the attack on our enemies long ago !"

Martel was disturbed; he looked at Carol. The girl nodded confirmation of this unpleasant fact.

"It is true," she said. "The lead door of the transformation chamber can only be opened from the temple side."

"Then we must find another way," Martel declared boldly.

Jorgen snorted in derision.

"I suppose you think you can find a path through the wastelands ? Cross the dust that kills, and changes living things to grotesque monsters ? That, too, is impossible."

Martel was silent, thinking furiously. There must be a way, if only he could find it. He looked at Carol and knew that he *had* to find the way.

A cry from the tribe startled him. All eyes were lifted to the sky; arms raised, pointing. Martel saw a spaceship coming in to land. It moved in silence, without the roar of rockets, and he knew it must be atomic-powered. The shock staggered him. This was no ship of Earth—it could only be an alien, a ship from the stars . . .

Excitement raced through him; hope flared up.

"An interstellar ship," he burst out. "This is our way—the way to the stars. We must——"

But as the giant ship moved lower, a fat cigar-shaped shell of burnished metal, glinting in the sunlight, another thought came to him. Suppose the aliens were not friendly, refused to help the men of Earth ? What would happen if they were—*hostile* ?

III

The ship landed in the wastelands between the Temple of the Flame Gods and the hollow from where Martel and the tribe watched. All eyes stared at the alien from the skies; Martel smiled grimly, wondering what the Keepers would make of this new development, how they would react to this threat to their power. For a threat it surely was.

The spaceship shimmered with an eye-wearying light, an opalescent glow that brightened as it came into contact with the deadly radio-activity thrown up by Earth's blasted soil. At the moment of touch-down, an opaque cloud of dust rose and mushroomed in the air, hiding the alien ship for long minutes.

Carol moved nearer Martel, nestling against him, and he put an arm about her shoulders in a protective manner. Jorgen stared sullenly at Martel, but his fear of the strange ship unnerved him, and he made no move. Martel's attention was focused on the ship. The aliens had atomic power and their ship had a protective screen to combat Earth's radio-activity; that indicated a science of a high order, superior to that of the Keepers. If he could persuade the aliens to help him against the Keepers . . .

The dust settled and the spaceship and its iridescent screen became visible again. Martel felt a tension build up inside him, such as he had never known before. So much depended on the next few minutes. Would the aliens leave the ship ? Would they come in the direction of the tribe—or go towards the temple ? Would they prove friendly ?

"Light a fire," he commanded. "We must attract their attention. Somehow, we must persuade them to visit us before going to the temple."

The Temple of the Flame Gods dominated the landscape and the aliens would surely go there, if anywhere, unless the tribe forced their interest towards the hollow. The women gathered brushwood and heaped it up; Martel fired it. The brush was wet and burned with a dense smoke.

"Use skins to make signals with the smoke," Martel ordered. "And when the aliens come, we must show friendship. It is important that we win their confidence. Everything depends on that."

Men gathered about the fire, waving animal skins into the rising column of smoke, sending signals in puffs of billowing black smoke. Martel stood a little way off from the fire, Carol at his side, watching the ship. For a time, nothing happened—then he saw movement beside the ship. The aliens had come out.

There were three of them, tall figures screened by the same opalescent glow that protected the ship. Martel knew fresh excitement; the aliens had portable energy screens to enable them to cross the wastelands. He marvelled at the science which could devise an instrument small enough to be carried about, yet give protection from Earth's radio-activity. His respect for the aliens increased.

The three figures beside the ship seemed to be inspecting the soil and taking little notice of anything else.

Martel said: "Build up the fire. Increase the intensity of the signals."

The tribe hastened to obey and the smoke rose in dense clouds of irregular form. The aliens made it clear they were not unaware of the signals; from time to time they would look in the direction of the hollow, then continue their survey. At last, they began to move towards the hollow.

Martel let out his breath in a long sigh. They were coming. Could he make them understand, help in the fight against the Keepers? He glanced at the tribesmen, restless and uneasy, yet content to follow his lead.

"Conceal your weapons," he said. "We must show we want to be friends."

The three figures crossed the wastelands and reached the tribe gathered in the hollow. They switched off their energy screens, and Martel saw that the screens were generated and controlled by oblong cases strapped to their chests. He stepped forward, raising his empty hands slowly, and said:

"Welcome, men from the stars. We, the people of Earth wish to be friends."

They could not, he assumed, understand him, but he hoped that his gesture and tone would indicate the nature of his greeting. The problem of communication was one that would have to be solved in due course; at the moment, he was intent on studying the form of the aliens, and they him.

The three aliens were taller than Martel and naked except for the energy screen containers and hand weapons, resolutely gripped and directed at the tribe. Martel was quick to see they had developed thumbs. Their bodies were completely hairless and composed of a substance resembling transparent gelatine; Martel had a revolting view of their internal organs at work. They were bipeds and each foot had a toe developed as a thumb; he wondered if they could use their feet as hands, an idea that appealed to him as being extremely serviceable.

Their faces were almost devoid of feature; there was a slit for a mouth, an impression of hard gums in place of teeth, faceted eyes and tiny holes for nostrils. A thin flap covered the place where ears had been, generations in the past of the race, and their bald heads sprouted tendrils. Martel's chief impression was one of revulsion; he found it hard to get used to seeing the heart pumping, the stomach muscles digesting food, and the skeleton, similar to that of man, but differing enough to provide interest to an anatomist.

Carol, beside him, gave a little cry of horror; the faces of the tribe showed that they, too, were disgusted by the sight of the alien's digestive organs at work. Martel hoped they were less cold-blooded than they looked.

A voice spoke, *in Earth language*, seemingly inside Martel's head.

"We have come to warn you. Leave us in peace. We have landed in order to refuel our engines with the radio-active content of your soil. When that is done, we shall leave. We have no wish for intercourse with you, no desire to molest you in any way. But, be warned, our science and our weapons are far superior to yours and we shall not tolerate any interference in our plans."

Martel stared blankly at the aliens; their mouths did not move—only the tendrils on their bald heads waved slightly, in unison. It was an astounding thing, but it must be true—there could be no other explanation. The aliens were telepathic and spoke—no, *thought*—together.

He wondered if the tribe also received the message; and if the aliens understood his thoughts.

"Yes—to both questions," came the telepathic reply. "We wish to demonstrate our weapons, to prove how useless it would be for you to attack us."

The three figures moved together; three arms swung upward, pointing the muzzles of their weapons at a mud hut on the edge of the village. Three

long streaks of flame shot forth, engulfing the hut. The aliens lowered their weapons—and the hut no longer existed. It had been blasted to dust and the dust scattered on the wind; not even the ashes remained. The tribe backed away from the aliens, leaving Martel and Carol to face them alone.

"We have no desire to attack you," Martel said. "We wish to be friends. We need your help."

"There is no need for speech," the aliens thought together. "*Think* what you have to say."

Martel collected his thoughts for a clear exposition of the situation; he ran over in his mind the Flame Gods, the tyranny of the Keepers, the bondage of the people, their desperate need to get away from Earth, to reach another star system. He began to speak, forgetting the aliens' telepathy. The voice inside his head cut him short.

"Stop ! You have already told us what it is you wish to say. There is no need for further time-wasting. Your request is, of course, refused. We have no interest in your troubles. We shall not harm you, neither shall we help you. When we have refuelled our ship, we shall leave. We are completely indifferent to your fate—but, be warned once again, do not attempt to interfere with us, or we shall destroy your village and exterminate you utterly."

The aliens turned away. Martel, horrified by their cold-blooded attitude, appealed again for help.

"You *must* help ! Our race cannot survive without your aid."

"That is nothing to us. We wish only to be left alone, to refuel our ship and leave this planet in the shortest possible time."

The three aliens switched on their energy screens simultaneously and started aback across the wastelands to the ship. Martel watched them go, wondering how he could get hold of their screen generators; if he could equip the tribe with them, they could cross the radio-active desert to the Temple of the Flame Gods, seize a rocketship and reach the Moon laboratories. He was conscious of a feeling of failure, of bitter desperation.

Carol glared after the aliens, fury tightening the lithe lines of her figure. She shook her fists in the direction of the interstellar ship.

"So, we are nothing to them ! The—horrible walking skeletons !"

The tribe gathered about Martel. Jorgen sneered:

"Martel has failed us. He promised to gain the alien's confidence, to use them to beat the Keepers and take us to the stars. Is this the man you want for leader ? I say, no !"

He thumped his hairy chest, and boomed:

"I am leader—and I take Carol for my woman !"

His long arms reached out, grabbed the girl and pulled her towards him. Carol struggled, crying:

"David—kill him !"

Martel took a step forward, blue eyes sparking. He clenched his fists and growled:

"Leave her alone, Jorgen."

Jorgen released Carol and faced Martel. He felt confident of beating the thin, white-haired student in a fight; he thrust out his stubbled chin and flexed the muscles of his arms.

"If you want her, Martel," he challenged—"take her !"

Martel moved forward menacingly. Jorgen was stronger, he realised, but he was the taller, had the longer reach—and he didn't intend to let Jorgen have his way with Carol. Martel's breath hissed, and he swung a punch to the hairy man's jaw. It connected, and Jorgen stumbled back.

Carol shouted: "Kill him, David !"

Jorgen swore and came forward again, long arms swinging. The tribe opened up a space for the two men. Martel knew the fight was inevitable, that he loved Carol and had to beat Jorgen; he dodged Jorgen's arms and kept him at a distance by short, telling punches to the face. If Jorgen got his arms about him, the fight would be over. Jorgen had the greater strength —but Martel had the better brain.

Jorgen rushed in, intent on the kill. He wanted to get his hands round Martel's throat, beat him to the ground and choke the life out of him. He

growled in his throat and shook his head angrily as the white-haired student danced round him, punishing him with lightning punches to head and body. Martel seemed always to be out of reach.

Jorgen tired of these tactics. He gathered himself for the final onslaught, hurled his great body forward. Martel wasn't quick enough in moving back; Jorgen's arms went round his waist, knocking him off-balance, and the two men rolled on the ground, locked in each other's grasp.

Martel, underneath, gasped for air as Jorgen's hands moved up to his throat. He writhed under the weight of his rival's body, brought up his knee into Jorgen's groin. The hairy man winced, and tightened his grip on Martel's windpipe. A blackness swam before Martel's eyes; a roaring pounded in his ears and he heard Carol's agonised voice:

"David—*David!*"

Desperately, he flung up his arms, grabbed for Jorgen's head. One hand found a thick tuft of hair; he jerked the head back. His other hand thrust into a hairy face—his fingers gouged at the deep-set eyes. Jorgen, with a howl of pain, stumbled back. Martel came to his knees, hammered his head under Jorgen's jaw. He staggered upright, gasping air into his tortured lungs, seeing his opponent through a red haze. He struck viciously, slamming terrific blows to Jorgen's head. Jorgen went down in a heap and lay, unmoving, for dragging seconds.

Carol darted forward, pushed a knife into Martel's hand.

"Kill him—now !"

Martel pushed her away, waited for Jorgen to recover consciousness and climb uncertainly to his feet. The two men faced each other again.

"Well," Martel said harshly, "have you had enough ? You'll leave Carol alone, understand ?"

Jorgen, without a word, turned away; he'd had all the fight knocked out of him. He slunk away, like a cowed dog with its tail between its legs. Carol turned on Martel, scorn in her voice:

"You should have killed him, David—you are a fool ! You have made a bad enemy. Never must you trust Jorgen—he will be waiting for his chance to strike back."

Her tone softened, and she took his arm.

"Come to my hut and I will bathe your wounds."

He leaned on her shoulders as he stumbled across the rough ground to the hut, breathing heavily. Jorgen had been a tough fighter, but Martel didn't think he'd bother Carol again. It had been a fight well won. She washed the blood from his face and placed cooling leaves against his bruises. Martel relaxed, regaining his strength. He grinned weakly and reached out for the girl, wanting to take her in his arms and kiss her. If he'd had any doubts of his love for Carol, they were gone now.

"To the victor—the spoils !" he murmured.

She eluded his arms and stood back, her face clouding.

"No, David ! I love you, but——"

He stared at her, baffled.

"But what ?" he demanded.

Her face was sad and her dark eyes revealed an inward struggle.

"Not here," she replied, "not on Earth. First, we must reach the stars.

Here,"—she shuddered—"the radiation frightens me. I don't know which is worst—the thought that I may be sterile—or that I may give birth to some distorted creature."

She stood, limp and dejected, crying softly. Martel's hands fell to his side and he was silent. It was true; they could not be certain of birth any longer. With Earth a radio-active hell, any frightful mutation was possible. He clenched his hands and swore bitterly.

"You see, David," she said. "I cannot bear the thought that our love should be made a mockery. I must refuse you—until we reach another planet, where normal life is possible."

Martel said: "We may never reach the stars."

She trembled, her young breasts heaving, tears flooding her dark eyes.

"Then our love can never be," she replied. "I am a woman—and God did not make me to bear monsters. I shall refuse you, refuse our love, if I cannot be certain I shall bear normal children, as women did before men unleashed atomic horror across the face of our planet. Men started the war —now you must reach the stars. Only then will I consent to bear your children."

She turned and ran from him, from the hut. Martel stared after her, bewildered by the ways of women, as men have been since the beginning of time. Then he left the hut and walked to the edge of the hollow, to stare across the wastelands to the alien spaceship.

IV

"I wish Amur were here."

Undine, she of the youthful body and hag-like face, tapped nervously with her feet, looking across the courtyard before the Temple of the Flame Gods.

Vogel's bloated face scowled and his corpulent stomach shook like jelly.

"You know full well, Undine, that Amur never shows himself. He is afraid of the light, afraid that others will laugh at his malformed body. But he is watching—and waiting with hidden weapons."

Sala, the hunchback, turned red eyes on the double ranks of temple guards. Her manner showed impatience as she watched three alien figures, clothed in iridescent light, come out of the wastelands, towards the temple.

"We will make short work of *them*," she muttered, raking the empty air with her clawed hands.

Strang, the first Keeper, wrapped the black cloak tighter about his gaunt frame; his slanting eyes were keen and a frown appeared on his dark face.

"That is not certain," he commented. "The aliens have great powers or they would not be able to cross the interstellar void, nor walk unarmed through the wastelands. We shall wait—"

"Wait !" Sala screamed. "Are we not the Keepers of the Flame ? Are not the Flame Gods all-powerful ?"

"Keep such talk for the people," Strang snapped. "We know better. It is best to wait till we know something of these aliens before unleashing our own weapons. Then we can strike with the certainty of victory."

Vogel's beady eyes gleamed.

"The ship must be destroyed. It represents a threat to our power, to our very existence. It cannot be allowed to remain there, a challenge to the Flame Gods. The people will begin to think—"

"Not so loud," Undine warned. "The guards will hear."

The four Keepers lapsed into silence, waiting the approach of the aliens. They came at their own speed, unhurried and unimpressed by the armed guards before the temple. A telepathic voice beat in the heads of the Keepers.

"You will do well to restrain your guards from firing on us. Our weapons are greater than yours and you cannot harm us. Listen: our ship is short of fuel and we have landed to renew our supply of radio-active material from your soil which, fortunately, is well stocked with such elements. We shall leave this planet as soon as our stores are replenished—in the meantime, leave us alone. We mean no harm, but will brook no interference."

The Keepers were struck silent. This was so different from the audience they had intended; they, the custodians of the power of the Gods, to be treated in this manner—it was an insult, the supreme humiliation. It was not to be borne.

Sala screamed: "Guards—destroy the aliens !"

Two score of temple guards turned explosive blasters on the three alien figures. Energy bolts beat against the glittering screens—and had no effect. The aliens raised their hand-weapons and raked the courtyard with searing flame; the guards vanished as if they had never existed and the Keepers were alone and unprotected.

The aliens' tendrils moved in unison, sending a thought message:

"You have been warned. We have demonstrated our weapons—now you will leave us in peace. We shall not warn again. The man who thinks of himself as David Martel told us of you—"

"Martel !" Strang's face paled; it was incredible that anyone should live through the transformation chamber. He could not believe it. "Martel is alive ?"

"Yes. He told us of your tyranny and oppression—that is nothing to us, but do not think you can extend your rule to us, for we have the power to break you. But we do not interfere in the local struggles of any planet we visit; it is against our principles. We wish only to be left alone. Obey that command and we shall leave without destroying your temple and annihilating your people."

The aliens turned their backs on the Keepers, and walked into the waste-lands; their screens glowed brighter as they entered the radio-active area.

For a moment, there was silence in the courtyard before the Temple of the Flame Gods; then Strang spoke:

"We must consult Amur at once."

Though not one of the four Keepers would have admitted it, they all looked to Amur for leadership; the monstrous form of the Fifth Keeper housed a brain sharper and more discerning than theirs. Strang led the way into the temple, through a doorway behind the great dais and down a flight of steps to a darkened chamber. Amur spoke:

"I was watching. It seems that the aliens can outmatch our own weapons, but that is not the most important fact to be learnt from their visit."

"No ? You fool, Amur—the aliens must be destroyed at once." Sala's voice cracked angrily in the darkness. "The people have seen our power flaunted. They will begin to lose respect for the Flame Gods. They will cease to fear."

"That, too, is important," Amur agreed. "Certainly, we must take action

against the aliens—but in good time. There is a more pressing matter, that of David Martel. It appears that the transformation chamber is not the death trap we imagined. He lives—now consider the effect on the people that his sudden appearance would have. Martel must die—at once !"

Strang saw the import of Amur's words. Martel had been condemned by the Flame Gods—yet he still lived. If he returned, the power of the Keepers would be shattered; he would appear greater than the Gods . . .

"Yes," said Strang abruptly, "he must die."

The dark chamber was silent except for the sound of breathing, the strange noises of Amur as he shifted his malformed body. Vogel voiced their doubts:

"But how ? How to reach him ?"

Amur chuckled, a sinister sound in the lightless room.

"By following through the transformation chamber. Martel lived . . . so others can. We shall take armed guards and wipe out Martel and any others we find there."

"*We ?*" Undine asked.

"Why not ? Are you afraid ?"

"The radiation may still exist. Perhaps Martel has been disfigured—the aliens did not say."

Amur's voice was a sneer.

"Very well. I shall lead the guards myself—radio-activity can have no further effect on me." His voice changed, grew bitter. "*I* have reached the limit of metamorphosis—no further mutation is possible. I have nothing to fear from the transformation chamber."

Strang's breath came out in a hiss of relief.

"We shall leave Martel to you, Amur. Meanwhile, we shall make preparations to attack the alien ship. I suggest we drop an atomic bomb from a rocketship—I doubt if their energy screen will stand against that."

"It can be tried," Amur agreed, "but remember their warning." He chuckled again. "It would be amusing if I returned from the transformation chamber to find myself the sole custodian of the Flame Gods !"

Sala said, grimly: "We shall take care, Amur. And now, the Gods must speak."

The four Keepers returned to the upper chamber and called the people together. Guards, initiates and slaves lined the walls under the high arched dome. Strang rose to his feet.

"An alien people have come to this planet from another world. They have flaunted the power of the Gods—and, for that, must take the consequences. I call on the Flame Gods to deliver judgment."

The temple was hushed; heads bowed in obeisance. The dark cloud formed again, coalesced into total blackness, became solid, taking the shape of a man, thirty feet high. Amur projected his voice into the lightless mass:

"*Keepers of the Flame, I answer your call. The alien ship must be destroyed and those who struck down the temple guard punished. The Gods are jealous and all who flout their power must die. Know that a certain tribe gather beyond the portals of the transformation chamber and that this tribe mock my laws. These people must be taught that the Flame Gods are all-powerful. A Keeper will lead guards to destroy this tribe.*"

The guards stirred in apprehension at this command; for centuries, the Gods had proclaimed it to be certain death to enter the chamber. Amur,

sensing this, spoke again:

"*You need fear nothing. The Gods will protect you on the journey through the transformation chamber—and now, so that all may heed the power of the Flame Gods, I will make a sign.*"

A tenseness gripped the spectators; heads craned eagerly to see the sign of the Gods. Strang smiled, thinking: If anything does happen to the guards, steps must be taken to ensure that the people never learn of it. Perhaps it would be best if the guards never returned . . .

A violet light flickered through the temple, danced in a will o' the wisp manner and straightened into a single lance of deadly intensity. It seemed to poise motionless in the air above the heads of the people.

Amur spoke: "*Step forward, Greta Garnet.*"

A young girl, still in her teens, moved into the open space before the raised dais. She trembled with fear and her eyes were wide and tear-filled.

"*Know that this girl has sinned against the Gods—I make my mark—so !*"

She screamed: "No . . . no ! Mercy . . ."

The lance of violet light struck her about the head, formed an unholy halo round her slender form. She writhed in agony, stumbled; her mouth opened but no sound came out. She toppled to the ground and lay unmoving in death. The violet light disappeared.

"*Thus I make my mark, so that all may know the power of the Gods. See that my will is carried out.*"

As the dark man-shape disintegrated, the people chanted a supplication. If any had sympathy for the young girl who had been struck down, it was well hidden. She had sinned—and the Flame Gods had spoken. Strang thought: The fools ! But Amur does that trick well. To think that a common force-beam should strike terror into the hearts of the ignorant—that truly is an indication of the power of science.

Strang looked down from the gallery and spread his arms in a gesture calling for silence.

"The Gods have spoken," he said. "Return to your work and see that you keep the law. The guards will prepare to carry out the command of the Flame Gods."

The temple emptied, except for the guards. Strang spoke to Vogel.

"You will command the rocketship. Take off at once—and blast the alien ship out of existence !"

The fat Keeper looked apprehensive, but he dare not object. He made his way to ground level to prepare for the attack. Strang smiled.

"We can leave Martel to Amur. It will be interesting to hear what he learns on the other side of the transformation chamber."

Undine and Sala smiled back.

"Most interesting," they agreed.

Jorgen had an idea. Since his fight with Martel, he had been lying on the floor of his hut, keeping out of sight. His body ached with the punishment Martel had given him, and he felt ashamed to face the tribe until he had gained his revenge on the man who had humiliated him. Hatred surged through him like raging fury; Martel must die; Carol must be his . . .

The idea came slowly for Jorgen was a man of little brain. The Keepers hated Martel—*they* would kill him if they knew where to find him. And

the door of the transformation chamber must open when the next victim was condemned. If he, Jorgen, waited close by, he could dart through and tell his story to the Keepers. They would be pleased with Jorgen for telling what he knew; perhaps they would reward him; perhaps send him to the Moon to be trained as a Science Student—then Carol would think differently of him. Yes, the Keepers would help him.

So Jorgen left his hut and entered the tunnel leading beneath the wastelands. He carried a flaming torch to light his way through the underground passages and, presently, he came to the chamber that glowed with faint luminosity. He smeared his body with protective ointment before entering the chamber to take up his vigil by the door leading to the temple. He squatted on his haunches to wait, dreaming of the revenge he would have—and Carol.

He had no idea how much time passed. There was the slightest sound and he tensed, watching the huge lead door. He grunted with pleasure as it swung slowly open. His torch cast flickering shadows into the darkness beyond the door and he glimpsed a crowd of men pressing forward.

Some *thing* came through the door. Jorgen stared in horror, shaking with fear as a voice snapped:

"Put out that light !"

Jorgen was too petrified to move. He held the flaming torch in a trembling hand, gazing at the monstrous thing that spoke with human tongue. He knew it must be a mutation, that once, it had been a man—but atomic radiations had transformed the man into something *unhuman*. The monster hurtled forward and dashed the torch to the ground; Jorgen writhed in powerful hands. He cried out:

"Don't kill me—I can lead you to Martel !"

The hands—if they were hands—slackened their grip.

"Speak !" hissed Amur.

Jorgen gasped: "Martel still lives—and others who came through the transformation chamber. There is a tunnel leading under the wastelands, to a village in a hollow. He is there now. I can take you there."

Amur pushed Jorgen away from him.

"You will lead the way, but there must be no more light. I prefer darkness. When we reach the village, my guards will slaughter this tribe."

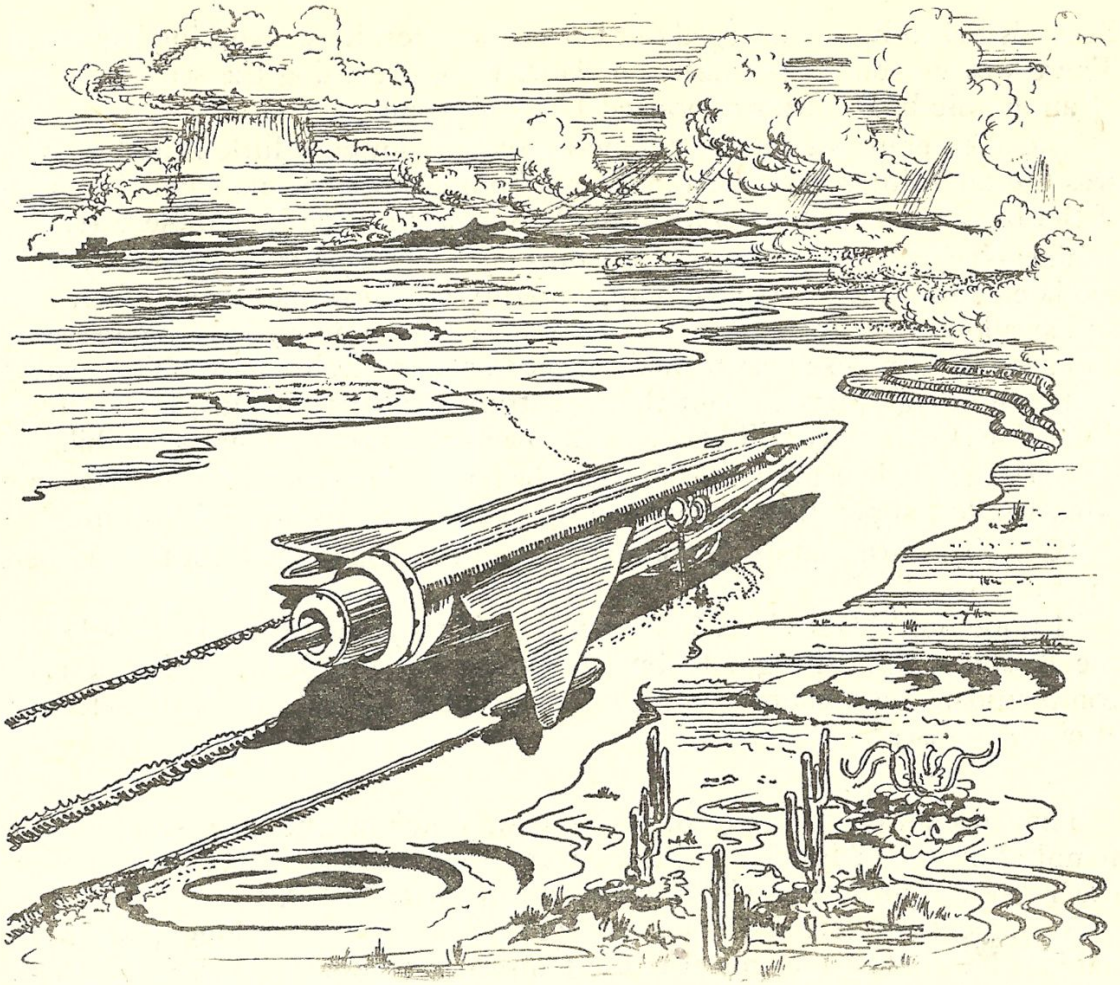
"That is good," Jorgen said, regaining his nerve. "I, too, hate Martel. But there is a girl I want—you will spare her ?"

"Perhaps," Amur replied. "Perhaps the Gods will reward you—but first you must show us the tunnel. Afterwards, we will see the girl."

Jorgen went through the hole in the chamber wall, along the tunnel through the rock. He felt his way along the wall, stumbling in the dark. Behind him, came Amur—and Jorgen was glad of the dark; he did not wish to see the fifth Keeper in a good light. He heard the sound of the guards' feet, following them. From the noise they made, he guessed there must be many men—and all armed. Martel would die—that was certain. The tribe would be unable to withstand this force . . . and then there would be no one to stand between him and the girl.

The tunnel wound on into the darkness, falling at a slight gradient, then rising again. Daylight glimmered ahead. Jorgen said:

"The village in the hollow. You will find Martel here !"



V

David Martel watched the alien ship in the wastelands with a growing feeling of frustration. The solution to his problem lay out there—and he could do nothing about it. The alien ship had come from the stars, from the great void where another Earth must circle a distant sun. If only . . .

There was a rushing noise from beyond the Temple of the Flame Gods. Martel saw, on the horizon, a slender rocket rise on a tube of flaming gases. It was one of the Keepers' moonships. Martel tensed as the rocketship rose, turning slowly through an arc, heading across the wastelands for the alien ship.

It was obvious that the Keepers were about to attack. He knew a moment of tortured doubt; if the Keepers destroyed the interstellar ship, all hope disappeared; if the aliens won, even if they carried out their threat to destroy the temple, Martel would be no better off. He still could not cross the radio-active areas, could not reach a moonship.

The rocket was high in the stratosphere, a glittering cylinder, circling to strike. Martel glanced at the aliens; they showed no signs of agitation. A black blob dropped from the rocket—an atomic bomb. It fell towards the interstellar ship, growing larger, carrying deadly menace with it.

Martel shouted a warning to the tribe:

"Down ! Keep down !"

He flung himself flat on the ground, his eyes fixed on the bomb as it plummeted down. It was about to strike; he held his breath, closed his eyes.

Seconds ticked by . . . dragged out like cosmic eternities. Nothing happened. There was no sound; no flash; no shock wave preceding the scorching heat of an atomic blast. Martel opened his eyes again.

The alien ship was intact; its energy screen glowed a little brighter—that was the only difference. Of the atomic bomb, there was no sign. It was as if the bomb had been *absorbed* into the screen in some incredible way.

The Keepers' rocketship circled once; jets fired as it angled away—but too late. From the interstellar ship, a mighty tongue of flame roared upwards and swallowed the rocketship. The noise was like a hundred thunderstorms, and a wave of intense heat turned the air to a shimmering haze. The roaring vortex of energy played about the rocketship for brief seconds, then winked out. The sky was clear. The moonship had disappeared—totally annihilated.

Martel smiled grimly; the Keepers had met their match. He wondered what would happen next. He stood up, waiting, and Carol joined him.

"Will they turn that on the temple, David ? I hope they blast the Keepers the same way."

"I hope not," Martel replied soberly. "If they destroyed the temple and the Keepers, well and good—but remember the people living in the slave compounds. That energy beam, or whatever it is, can hardly be selective. It simply erases."

They waited on the edge of the hollow, watching the alien ship and the temple beyond. Martel wondered if any of the Keepers had been aboard the rocket. Carol pressed his hand, murmured: "Look !"

A single alien left the iridescent glow, carrying an oblong case in his hands. He walked, not towards the temple, but towards Martel and Carol. The tribe had gathered about them now; Martel looked for Jorgen, but the hairy man was absent.

"They can't think we had anything to do with the attack ?" Carol said anxiously.

Martel shook his head.

"It's one of the portable screens he's carrying. I wish I knew what to expect. This seems——"

The alien, his transparent gelatine body clearly visible through the screen protecting him, reached the clearing; his thoughts penetrated Martel's head.

"Do not fear, men of the hollow. We know you are enemies of those who foolishly tried to attack us. I have come for Martel. Put on this energy screen and follow me to our ship; you will not be harmed in any way. We need your help."

Martel, filled with a new excitement, took the oblong case the alien handed him. They needed his help; his chance had come—if he could drive a bargain . . .

"We will discuss that—and other things—aboard the spaceship," the alien thought, reading Martel's mind.

The generator fitted snugly to Martel's chest, held in place by two straps; it was surprisingly light of weight.

"Press the top stud to operate the screen, the bottom to switch it off. Come now."

The alien turned to go back. Carol slipped into Martel's arms, clung to him. She trembled a little.

"Don't go, David. Something terrible is going to happen—I can feel it."

He kissed her, disengaged her hands.

"Steady, Carol. I'll be all right—remember, this is our only chance to reach the stars. I must take it. You want that, don't you ?"

She hesitated: "Yes . . ." thinking of another world, away from the threat of strange mutations. "No ! David——"

But he had switched on the screen, started across the wastelands, after the alien. She could not stop him now; she could only wait—and hope.

Martel could see clearly through the screen; he was surprised how little difference it made to his personal comfort. The air seemed charged with a tenseness that heightened his awareness, made him a little drunk; his body felt light and his legs behaved oddly, but he soon adapted to this.

He followed the alien across the wastelands, towards the interstellar ship. Radio-active dust made little eddies about his feet and strange growths dotted the landscape; the new plants were bizarre and fascinating. Martel noticed a fungus whose roots moved through the top layers of dust, writhing like snakes, carrying the mottled body of the plant nearer the greatest intensity of radiation. There was a yellow blossom, similar to a giant sunflower, whose petals swept the ground, closing to pick up some of the radio-active dust, opening minutes later to discharge it after draining off the energy. Further on, he saw an ever-changing patchwork of plants; seeds fell from full pods, grew into short stalks, blossomed into pale leaves with sallow yellow flowers, put out pods which opened to drop new seeds—and on and on. The whole life cycle of the plant took only seconds.

The alien reached the spaceship and passed inside through an air-lock. Martel followed, switching off his screen. The air was almost normal, strangely like that of Earth. His thoughts reached the alien, who explained:

"Originally, we came from a planet not unlike this. There are many such, scattered through the universe—the conditions under which planets are formed are not as diverse as you think."

Martel's hopes flared up. If——

"The radio-active content of this planet's soil is weaker than we at first supposed. Too, nullifying the effect of the atomic bomb dropped on our ship was a serious drain on our reserves. It is imperative that we recharge our energy reservoirs with the least possible delay—" The alien paused in his thoughts, then went on—"and, for this, we need the help of your tribe. We need additional man-power—we are only five in crew."

"What do you want us to do ?" Martel spoke aloud—he found it difficult to remember that these people could read his every thought.

"Your people will be equipped with protective screens. They will pass many tons of the radio-active soil through the refining machinery we will set up outside the ship. In this way, we shall separate the specific elements we can use in our atomic plant."

Martel said: "And in return ?"

"We shall allow you to keep the portable screens so that you may cross the wastelands."

"The Keepers ?"

"We do not interfere in the affairs of other peoples. If they attack again—and we do not think they will after this—we shall be forced to obliterate them."

"Will you carry some of us to another planet ?" Martel asked.

The alien's tendrils moved.

"Why should we ? You are nothing to us. We are making a bargain. Persuade your people to work for us—and we will give you the energy screens. We offer nothing more. Do you accept ?"

There was nothing else Martel could do. He accepted. The aliens brought out a score of portable screen generators and loaded them on to a sled.

"You will return immediately with your people," came the telepathic command. "We do not wish to be kept waiting."

Martel scowled; the aliens' coldly indifferent attitude to all but their own problems annoyed him. He wished there were some way he could get the upper hand, force them to help him, but, for the moment, he was powerless. He switched on his screen and started back across the wastelands, dragging the sled after him. The aliens busied themselves setting up the refining plant, ready for work when Martel should return with the tribe.

Martel made good speed with his load, thinking of Carol. He crossed the wastelands and came to the hollow—and was disappointed when he saw she was not waiting for him. The clearing was strangely quiet, seemingly deserted. Martel switched off his screen and looked round him. An uneasiness crept upon him. He called: "Carol ?"

He walked towards the huts, and it was then that he saw the first body —charred and still in death. Fear froze the blood in his veins. He stumbled into a run, almost tripped over another dead body. Thank God it wasn't Carol. He ran on, crying: "Carol ? Carol—where are you ?" . . .

Carol watched David and the alien till they passed out of sight in the energy screen surrounding the spaceship, then she turned and walked slowly back to her hut. She had an intuitive feeling that something was wrong and prayed that her fears did not concern David—he *must* come back to her . . .

The thought of Jorgen crossed her mind, and her hand closed about the haft of her knife. She glanced at his hut, but it was quiet; apparently he was still resting from the beating David had given him. She had nearly reached her hut when a shout went up:

"Guards !"

The sound of explosive blasters startled her. She spun round, stared towards the entrance of the tunnel leading underground to the transformation chamber, and saw a score of the Keepers' men running forward, blasters firing into the village. The tribesmen attempted to fight back, but armed only with knives and clubs, they were at a disadvantage. The blasters took a heavy toll, preventing the tribe from getting close to the guards.

Carol saw Jorgen behind the guards and her breath hissed sharply:

"The traitor !"

She saw another, shadowy figure lurking in the darkness of the tunnel mouth, but paid little attention to it. Jorgen had seen her and was running towards her. Carol darted for cover; it was not hard to guess he'd demanded her as his reward for betraying the tribe—and David. She felt glad David was aboard the alien ship; at least he was safe.

There could be no escape for the tribe. Flight was impossible with the hollow bounded by a radio-active hell; men and women, children and mutants, huddled together, fighting to the last. It was a massacre. Carol dodged between the huts, avoiding Jorgen. He lumbered after her, calling:

"Carol, don't be afraid—I can save you."

She ran on, desperate, seeking only to escape him. She would kill herself rather than submit to Jorgen—but she wanted to live, for David. He would return . . . if only she could hide until then. An idea came to her—the tunnels. If she could get past the guards and reach the tunnels, she could hide; she would be able to dodge an army in the labyrinth of passages under the wastelands. She wheeled about, heading for the entrance.

A guard's blaster had jammed; instantly the tribe swarmed over the man, burying him under threshing arms and glittering knives. Other guards turned blasters on the mass of heaving bodies; men and women died under the barrage—but the guard never rose again. Carol raced past them, pursued by Jorgen. She was yards ahead of him when she reached the entrance to the tunnel; the guards were too busy to bother with one fleeing girl. Jorgen laughed; he knew Amur was waiting in the darkness—she would not escape him.

Jorgen's laughter warned Carol; she slackened speed as she went through the tunnel mouth. She saw a shadowy figure ahead, tried to twist aside, but hands caught her and held her fast. She struggled, but the grip tightened till she could scarcely move. Jorgen came up!

"This is the girl, Amur," he said. "The one you promised me for my help."

Amur! Carol cried out, shuddering; she recognised the name of the fifth Keeper, knew now why the hands felt so strange, why the figure in darkness seemed so oddly formed. The man who held her prisoner was a mutation, one so horribly malformed that he refused to appear in the light. She had heard many stories of Amur—and the memory of them filled her with terror.

"She is young, and very lovely," said Amur softly. "I watched her as she ran before you. Jorgen, I think she is too lovely for such as you."

Carol stiffened. One of the hands went away from her. She saw the glint of a steel tube, then a violet light shot through the darkness, fixed on Jorgen and bathed him in its eerie glow. Jorgen stumbled back, froze, his mouth gaping open. He remained petrified in this manner for some seconds, then the violet light went out. She heard his body fall and knew he was dead.

"The fool!" Amur whispered. "He thought to strike a bargain with the Flame Gods—and has been rewarded for his blasphemy."

The guards returned from the village after completing the slaughter of the tribe. They left not one person alive in the hollow.

"Martel is not among the dead," reported the leader of the guards. "He is not in the hollow. Jorgen lied."

"Jorgen has paid with his life," Amur said. So Martel was not in the village—there was only one possible answer to that. In some way, he had persuaded the aliens to take him aboard their spaceship. He must return to the temple and inform the others of this new development.

"Back through the tunnel," he ordered. "There is no time to be lost."

Carol felt herself lifted in the air and settled across Amur's oddly-shaped body. He hardly felt her weight and he held her tightly with one strong hand. Carol moaned a little; she had been scared before, but now her whole body trembled with horror. She could not see the outline of Amur, but she knew he could hardly be called a man; there were hard, bony ridges under

her, and soft, squelchy hollows like festering sores. He moved with a gait that told her he did not use human legs and the scent of him turned her stomach. The journey back through the underground passages was a nightmare and she lay paralysed in a half-faint. Amur's whispering voice brought new terror to her.

"Jorgen betrayed the knowledge that you are Martel's woman—and I want Martel. You will be the perfect bait for a trap !"

They passed through the still open and guarded door of the transformation chamber, into a darkened temple. Amur dismissed the guard and carried Carol to his own cell; he locked her in and went to make his report to the other Keepers.

Carol, alone, searched the cell. There was neither window nor light; the door was massive and immovable; she could not escape. She found a couch in the centre of the room, a couch so strangely contoured she shuddered to touch it. Then the door opened. There was a faint light beyond and, for a moment, she glimpsed the full horror of Amur's being as he passed into the dark shadows. The door closed—locked—and Amur was with her.

"You are lovely," came the sinister whisper. "Can you imagine how lonely I have been, living in the darkness of this room ? The others think I keep you solely to bait Martel—" a low chuckle froze the blood in Carol's veins—"but there is another reason. You are too beautiful for Jorgen, or Martel. I shall make you mine, Carol !"

She heard the odd sound of his feet moving on the floor, and backed away. She felt round the wall, became trapped in a corner. Fear beat through her like waves in a rock cavern.

"Do not fear me," Amur whispered. "I am not handsome, but you need not see my face. It is strange how I feel about you."

The wall was solid behind her. Amur moved through the darkness towards her. His hands reached out, touched her, and his voice ran on, telling her of a loneliness that only those living in utter blackness can know. Carol felt pity for the unhuman thing before her. She stood against the wall, pressing her trembling body to the damp stones. The darkness, the sinister shadow crouching over her, the whispering voice that called as a child to its mother, frightened her with a new intensity.

Amur pleaded with her, tried to caress her. Carol went rigid; her mind tottered near insanity. She thought of David—and a cold resolution swept over her. She knew what she had to do. In the darkness, her right hand curled about the haft of her knife and she drew the steel blade from its sheath.

VI

The village was a shambles. Everywhere, Martel came across the blasted corpses of men and women of the tribe. The guards had done their work well; not one person remained alive to tell the story. Martel was almost out of his mind. Every body he came upon brought sweat to his brow; he hardly dared to look at their faces for fear he should find the girl he loved. He toured the whole village, forcing himself to search for Carol—but she was not among the dead.

Relief gave way to bewilderment, then to fear. He found the dead body of a guard and armed himself with the man's explosive blaster. In the entrance of the tunnel, he came across Jorgen, petrified in death; Martel recognised

the mark of a force-beam and knew that a Keeper had led the attack. And that Keeper must have taken Carol back to the temple—there could be no other explanation.

He hurried through the tunnel, shouting: "Carol—Carol !" But there was no answer. The underground passages were empty; the raiding party had returned through the transformation chamber and Martel could not reach them. Not that way. But he had the aliens' energy screen to enable him to cross the wastelands—and nothing could stop him from going to the Temple of the Flame Gods. He must save Carol . . . if she lived. The thought spurred him to action.

He sped back to the hollow, intending to set out at once for the temple, to strike a blow against the Keepers, but an unexpected sight momentarily checked him. A moonship was coming in to land. Had the Keepers called for reinforcements to attack the alien ship ? But the ship ignored the landing strip behind the temple, by-passed the interstellar ship and settled down close to the hollow. An air-lock opened and men came out, moving towards Martel. A familiar voice called:

"David !"

Martel stood still, shocked to immobility. The man he saw could only be a ghost—Tyrill, the leader of the students' rebellion on the Moon. It must be the same man; Martel recognised the broad shoulders and bulldog-jaw, the grey hair and twinkling eyes of the man who had organised the revolt against the Keepers. Tyrill stepped forward, holding out his hand.

"You thought I was dead, David ?" He grinned, gripping Martel's hand. "One of the guards winged me—but it takes more than a flesh wound to stop me once I get going. The rebellion flared up again, after you were taken to Earth and, this time, we were more than a match for the guards. The Moon is in our hands, David—the laboratories are ours !"

Tyrill's men crowded round, eager men with grim faces, clad in the grey synthesilk of initiates, armed with explosive blasters taken from the Moon guards. Their dress made a striking contrast with Martel's animal skin.

"It was a hard fight," Tyrill said, "but we won in the end. The power of the Flame Gods is finished on the Moon—and now we mean to settle with the Keepers ! We'll blast their temple to the ground and free the people from slavery." He paused, looked towards the alien ship, and his expression was questioning. "David, they *are* from the stars ? When we saw the ship land, our hopes rose—they'll take some of us to another planet, to start a colony, while those left behind build the ships to complete the exodus. It'll take time, of course, but we can make a start. Live again on a world free from radiation."

Martel scowled at the alien ship.

"It'll take longer than you think. They refuse to help."

Rapidly, he told Tyrill what had happened since he had left the Moon; how he had gone through the transformation chamber and joined the tribe, the arrival of the aliens and their bargain, how the guards had killed the tribe and kidnapped Carol.

Tyrill's face grew angry.

"The Keepers have had power too long. It is time we dealt with them. These energy screens will enable us to cross the wastelands—more, they will

protect us from the guards' blasters. Come, David—we may yet save Carol . . ."

Martel showed them how to operate the portable energy screens and they set out towards the temple. Passing the alien ship, Tyrill said, grimly:

"We'll teach *them* a lesson in humility later. I didn't conquer the Moon and bring my men to Earth to be thwarted by a collection of walking skeletons. We'll see how indifferent they are to us—when we've settled with the Keepers !"

The strange plants of the radio-active areas thinned out as they approached the Temple of the Flame Gods. The dust changed to fertile soil and grass grew again. Martel forced the pace, thinking of Carol, a prisoner of the Keepers. A hatred surged through him as he saw the guards lined up to protect the Keepers.

Sala, from the top of the temple steps, screamed:

"Kill them ! Guards, exterminate the heretics ! The Flame Gods are all-powerful !"

"No longer," said Martel coldly. "The advantage is with us, this time."

Tyrill shouted: "Men of Earth, stand back ! The Keepers must die for their treachery—leave them to us. Stand back—there are no Gods to protect you."

The temple guards opened fire with their blasters. Energy bolts lanced the courtyard, bounced harmlessly off the protective screens. Martel and the rebels advanced boldly, holding their fire in reserve. The guards broke before their determined onslaught, afraid now that their weapons were useless. They called on the Gods to save them, retreating up the steps, into the temple.

Strang and Undine rallied the guards in the main temple chamber and a bitter fight ensued. The rebels could not be checked, protected by the energy screens, and their weapons blasted all before them, forcing the Keepers into a corner.

Sala sprang at Martel. She held a metal tube in her claw-like hands, directed the nozzle at him and pressed the firing stud. A violet force-beam sprayed out, bathing Martel in its deadly light—but the energy screen held and Martel was unharmed. He raised his blaster and fired point-blank at the hunchbacked Keeper. Sala tottered and fell and Martel stepped past her charred corpse.

The guards panicked; the sight of a Keeper killed before their eyes unnerved them. Strang knew he had to stop their flight or all was lost. He raised his arms, and called, loudly:

"Hear me, mighty Flame Gods. Your temple is contaminated by heresy—a Keeper slain. Show your powers—strike down these blasphemers !"

The guards halted in their mad rush for safety. They knew what to expect—the dark man-shape would speak, unleash terrible death on the rebels. They renewed the battle. Martel pressed forward, wanting to finish the fight before Amur could play his tricks; he did not know if the fifth Keeper had a weapon which could penetrate the aliens' energy screens . . .

Blasters fired on him. Shots hammered at his shimmering screen, but none harmed him. He fired his own weapon cutting a path through the guards. Strang was badly worried. Amur had not answered his call for help. Undine's nerve broke under the strain.

"Amur, where are you ? Martel is here—help us !"

Martel sighted her with his blaster. He fired; and she dropped to the ground, her hag-like face burned away. Strang tried the force-beam again, but nothing could stop these grim-faced men. It was up to Amur . . .

"I call on the Flame Gods," he shouted. "Give us a sign of your power. Break these rebels as reeds before a mighty gale."

He was answered—but not in the way he expected. A door behind the dais opened and a young girl ran through. Her dark hair streamed out behind her and there was blood on her golden-brown skin.

"Amur is dead !" she cried, holding up a blood-stained knife. "The Gods will never lie again—I have killed him !"

Martel shouted: "Carol ! Take care—Strang—"

Strang's face was white and he seemed to age ten years in as many seconds. Vogel, Sala and Undine had died. Now Amur. He was the last of the Keepers of the Flame—he could expect no help, no mercy. His power was broken—the Flame Gods were no more. Snarling, he turned on the girl. She wore no protective screen; he would kill her . . .

Martel fought his way towards Carol. He saw Strang raise his force-beam, aim in the girl's direction. Martel's arm came up and he discharged his blaster at full intensity towards the last Keeper. The bolt struck the black-cloaked figure and obliterated it; there was the smell of scorched flesh and a hideous pool of animal fat spread over the ground. Strang would never again call on his fake Gods; he, with the other Keepers had paid for their tyranny with their lives.

Carol dropped her knife and fell into Martel's arms. Her slim form shook and tears welled up in her dark eyes.

"It was horrible," she moaned. "Amur—he was like nothing I had ever seen. Something that had once been a man. I had to kill him—I *had* to . . ."

Martel stroked her face, kissed her and murmured soothing words. Slowly, her trembling stopped and the colour came back to her cheeks. She smiled, letting her head fall against his chest, listening quietly as he told her of his love. She forgot the horror of Amur in Martel's arms.

Tyrill's eyes were twinkling when he joined them.

"Now," he grinned, "I understand why David was in such a hurry to get here—and I don't blame him !"

His face became serious as he looked round the temple chamber.

"The guards have surrendered—the rule of the Flame Gods is over. Now we must build the ships to take us to the stars, use atomic energy to help the race. And there are the aliens to see."

They set off across the wastelands for the interstellar ship and found the aliens beside their refining plant.

"All is ready," came the telepathic voice. "We shall give you instructions in the operation of——"

"The position has changed," Tyrill interrupted. "We are no longer forced to your one-sided bargain."

"So ?"

Martel thought: We can build our own ships—we have no need of you. We rule the planet—and the Moon. It is merely a question of time before we follow you into the void, to colonise the planet of another star system. Why should we help you, who have been so indifferent to our own troubles ?

Of course, we might make a new bargain . . . guarantee our advance party a passage on your ship to a suitable planet, so they can prepare the way for others to follow, and we will help refuel your ship. Is it agreed ?

The alien's tendrils waved in unison. Martel grinned as he saw Tyrill's face; the rebel leader appeared upset by the sight of the aliens' stomachs as they digested their food.

"It is agreed," came the thought-answer.

Martel went to organise the work on the alien ship and to prepare for the journey to the stars. He hoped that he and Carol would be on the ship when it left. Tyrill nudged his arm; he was grinning.

"You know," he said, "I'm sure the fat one was suffering from indigestion —I could *see* it !"

The ship sped through a dark void. The solar system was far behind and even the Sun was a dull speck in the velvet night. Martel put his arm round Carol's neck and pulled her close as they stared through a glassite porthole. To this atomic-powered ship there was no bright rocket-trail; it moved with apparently effortless ease between the bright jewels glittering in a night-dark sea. Ahead, a retinue of planets orbited the nearest sun. Martel whispered:

"Home, my darling. Here we will build anew, prepare a home for those who follow. Tyrill and—"

Carol's eyes shone with tears.

"And our children, David !"

THE END

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Apart from John K. Aiken's magnificent lead novelette "Performance Test," which is undoubtedly one of the finest stories published in Britain during recent years, the next issue looks like an all-star one from here. John Christopher is back with another Manager Larkin story entitled "Breaking Point," in which Max finds himself very much on the spot, and E. C. Tubb has the second of his poignant Martian stories—"Home is the Hero"—telling of the dust, and the futility of the small colony.

Equally as strong, in their own way, is a new Peter Hawkins story, "Hide-away," and "Precedent," by new author Charles Gray, both problem stories centred in space.

Final ratings on the Winter 1951 issue were:

1.	Time Was	F. G. Rayer
2.	Entrance Exam.	E. C. Tubb
3.	When Aliens Meet . .	J. T. M'Intosh
4.	No Heritage	George Longdon
5.	Question Mark	Gregory Francis
6.	Liaison Service	Sydney J. Bounds

International Award—1952

With the advent of another new year, fantasy enthusiasts have already begun speculating upon who will win this year's International Fantasy Award trophies for the best contributions to the science-fiction field published in hard covers during 1951. Just who the deserving winners will be in both the fiction and non-fiction group is still a matter for conjecture, but a vast amount of work is in progress attempting to smooth out the numerous problems such an International Award has posed.

For instance, who would be acknowledged as competent judges for such a difficult task? Should they, like the Awards, be International? Which type of book would automatically be eligible for the award—and which not? Was an anthology eligible? Was a magazine serial, published say in 1948, rewritten and published in book form in 1951, a contender for such an Award? Where decide the dividing line between science-fiction and fantasy?

The questions seem innumerable, and many misconceptions and misunderstandings have arisen during the past six months because these problems were not ironed out *before* the first Awards were announced at the First International Convention in London last May. When one realises that the original idea of such a yearly Award was conceived and put into operation only a scant few weeks before presentation, some understanding of the enormity of the task confronting the Award Committee can be visualised.

Unfortunately—or fortunately—there is no "snob value" attached to the International Award. No moneyed publisher or Literary Guild stand behind it to boost it on its way via radio, press, cocktail parties or free luncheons. The question most often asked is "Who are the people behind such a venture?" and few people, either in the professional publishing fields or amongst the silent ranks of readers can appreciate the philanthropic gesture of a small group of sincere people *without any personal axes to grind* donating two magnificent awards a year to authors in recognition of outstanding works of merit. Nevertheless, from a small but auspicious beginning, the International Award is gathering strength, and by the time the final snags are surmounted, the basis of a long-term policy will be firmly established.

I hope to be able to publish the completed details covering eligibility of titles, and the names of this year's small but competent panel of adjudicators, in a special article in the next issue—long before the announcement of this year's winners will be made known at the Second International Convention in London on May 31st and June 1st, at the Royal Hotel.

JOHN CARNELL

ENCHANTED VILLAGE

By A. E. VAN VOGT

The Martians had long departed, but their village still functioned against their possible return—unfortunately Jenner was an Earthman.

Illustrated by QUINN

Explorers *of a new frontier* they had been called before they left for Mars.

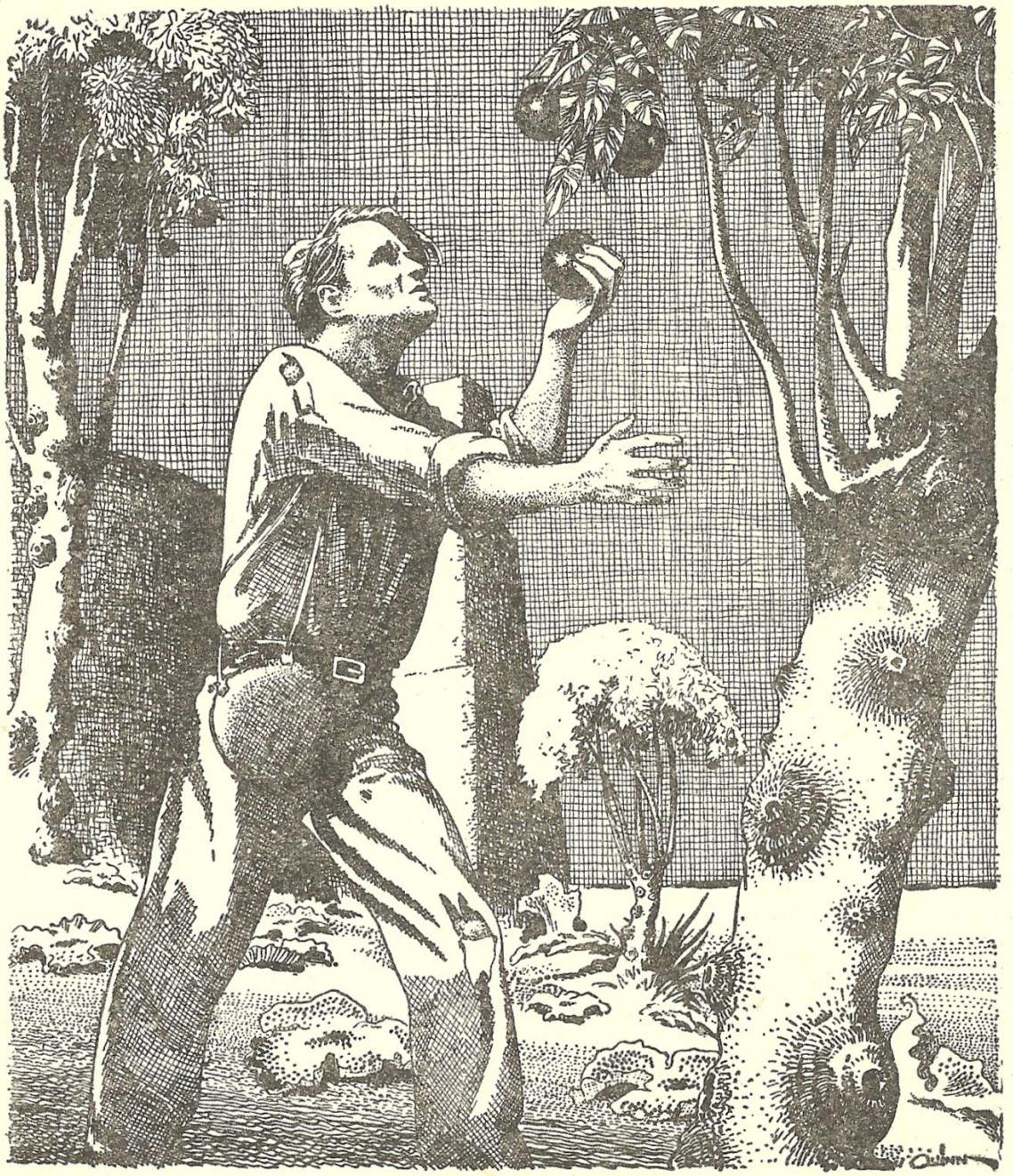
For a while after the ship crashed into a Martian desert, killing all on board except—miraculously—this one man, Bill Jenner spat the words occasionally into the constant, sand-laden wind. He despised himself for the pride he had felt when he first heard them.

His fury faded with each mile that he walked, and his black grief for his friends became a grey ache. Slowly he realised that he had made a ruinous misjudgment.

He had underestimated the speed at which the rocketship had been travelling. He'd guessed that he would have to walk three hundred miles to reach the shallow Polar sea he and the others had observed as they glided in from outer space. Actually, the ship must have flashed an immensely greater distance before it hurtled down out of control.

The days stretched behind him, seemingly as numberless as the hot, red, alien sand that scorched through his tattered clothes. This huge scarecrow of a man kept moving across the endless, arid waste. He would not give up.

By the time he came to the mountain, his food had long been gone. Of his four waterbags, only one remained; and that was so close to being empty that he merely wet his cracked lips and swollen tongue whenever his thirst became unbearable.



Jenner climbed high before he realised that it was not just another dune that had barred his way. He paused, and as he gazed up at the mountain that towered above him, he cringed a little For an instant, he felt the hopelessness of this mad race he was making to nowhere—but he reached the top. He saw that below him was a depression surrounded by hills as high or higher than the one on which he stood. Nestled in the valley they made was a village.

He could see trees, and the marble floor of a courtyard. A score of buildings were clustered around what seemed to be a central square. They were mostly low-constructed, but there were four towers pointing gracefully into the sky. They shone in the sunlight with a marble lustre.

Faintly, there came to Jenner's ears a thin, high-pitched whistling sound. It rose, fell, faded completely, then came up again clearly and unpleasantly. Even as Jenner ran toward it, the noise grated on his ears, eerie and unnatural.

He kept slipping on smooth rock, and bruised himself when he fell. He rolled halfway down into the valley. The buildings remained new and bright, when seen from nearby. Their walls flashed with reflections. On every side was vegetation—reddish-green shrubbery—yellow-green trees laden with purple and red fruit.

With ravenous intent, Jenner headed for the nearest fruit tree. Close up, the tree looked dry and brittle. The large red fruit he tore from the lowest branch, however, was plump and juicy.

As he lifted it to his mouth, he remembered that he had been warned during his training period to taste nothing on Mars until it had been chemically examined. But that was meaningless advice to a man whose only chemical equipment was in his own body.

Nevertheless, the possibility of danger made him cautious. He took his first bit gingerly. It was bitter to his tongue, and he spat it out hastily. Some of the juice which remained in his mouth seared his gums. He felt the fire of it, and he reeled from nausea. His muscles began to jerk, and he lay down on the marble to keep himself from falling. After what seemed like hours to Jenner, the awful trembling finally went out of his body, and he could see again. He looked up despisingly at the tree.

The pain finally left him, and slowly he relaxed. A soft breeze rustled the dry leaves. Nearby trees took up that gentle clamour, and it struck Jenner that the wind here in the valley was only a whisper of what it had been on the flat desert beyond the mountain.

There was no other sound now. Jenner abruptly remembered the high-pitched, ever-changing whistle he had heard. He lay very still, listening intently, but there was only the rustling of the leaves. The noisy shrilling had stopped. He wondered if it had been an alarm, to warn the villagers of his approach.

Anxiously, he climbed to his feet and fumbled for his gun. A sense of disaster shocked through him. It wasn't there. His mind was a blank, and then he vaguely recalled that he had first missed the weapon more than a week before. He looked around him uneasily, but there was not a sign of creature life. He braced himself. He couldn't leave, as there was nowhere to go. If necessary, he would fight to the death to remain in the village.

Carefully Jenner took a sip from his waterbag, moistening his cracked lips and his swollen tongue. Then he replaced the cap, and started through a double line of trees toward the nearest building. He made a wide circle to observe it from several vantage points. On one side a low, broad archway opened into the interior. Through it, he could dimly make out the polished gleam of a marble floor.

Jenner explored the buildings from the outside, always keeping a respectful distance between him and any of the entrances. He saw no sign of animal life. He reached the far side of the marble platform on which the village was built, and turned back decisively. It was time to explore interiors.

He chose one of the four-tower buildings. As he came within a dozen feet of it, he saw that he would have to stoop low to get inside.

Momentarily, the implications of that stopped him. These buildings had been constructed for a life form that must be very different from human beings.

He went forward again, bent down, and entered reluctantly, every muscle tensed.

He found himself in a room without furniture. However, there were several low, marble fences projecting from one marble wall. They formed what looked like a group of four wide, low stalls. Each stall had an open trough carved out of the floor.

The second chamber was fitted with four inclined planes of marble, each of which slanted up to a dais. Altogether, there were four rooms on the lower floor. From one of them, a circular ramp mounted up, apparently to a tower room.

Jenner didn't investigate the upstairs. The earlier fear that he would find alien life was yielding to the deadly conviction that he wouldn't. No life meant no food, nor chance of getting any. In frantic haste, he hurried from building to building, peering into the silent rooms, pausing now and then to shout hoarsely.

Finally, there was no doubt. He was alone in a deserted village on a lifeless planet, without food, without water—except for the pitiful supply in his bag —and without hope.

He was in the fourth and smallest room of one of the tower buildings when he realised that he had come to the end of his search. The room had a single "stall" jutting out from one wall. Wearily, Jenner lay down in it. He must have fallen asleep instantly.

When he awoke, he became aware of two things, one right after the other. The first realisation occurred before he opened his eyes—the whistling sound was back, high and shrill, it wavered at the threshold of audibility.

The other was that a fine spray of liquid was being directed down at him from the ceiling. It had an odour, of which Technician Jenner took a single whiff. Quickly he scrambled out of the room, coughing, tears in his eyes, his face already burning from chemical reaction.

He snatched his handkerchief and hastily wiped the exposed parts of his body and face.

He reached the outside, and there paused, striving to understand what had happened.

The village seemed unchanged.

Leaves trembled in a gentle breeze. The sun was poised on a mountain peak. Jenner guessed from its position that it was morning again, and that he had slept at least a dozen hours. The glaring white light suffused the valley. Half-hidden by trees and shrubbery, the buildings flashed and shimmered.

He seemed to be in an oasis in a vast desert. It was an oasis all right, Jenner reflected grimly, but not for a human being. For him, with its poisonous fruit, it was more like a tantalising mirage.

He went back inside the building, and cautiously peered into the room where he had slept. The spray of gas had stopped, not a bit of odour lingered, and the air was fresh and clean.

He edged over the threshold, half-inclined to make a test. He had a picture in his mind of a long-dead Martian creature laying on the floor in the "stall" while a soothing chemical sprayed down on its body. The fact that the chemical was deadly to human beings merely emphasised how alien to man was the life that had spawned on Mars. But there seemed little

doubt of the reason for the gas. The creature was accustomed to taking a morning shower.

Inside the "bathroom," Jenner eased himself feet first into the stall. As his hips came level with the stall entrance, the solid ceiling sprayed a jet of yellowish gas straight down upon his legs. Hastily, Jenner pulled himself clear of the stall. The gas stopped as suddenly as it had started.

He tried it again, to make sure it was merely an automatic process. It turned on, then it shut off.

Jenner's thirst-puffed lips parted with excitement. He thought, "If there can be one automatic process, there may be others."

Breathing heavily, he raced into the outer room. Carefully he shoved his legs into one of the two stalls. The moment his hips were in, a steaming gruel filled the trough beside the wall.

He stared at the greasy-looking stuff with a horrified fascination—food —and drink. He remembered the poison fruit, and felt repelled, but he forced himself to bend down, and put his finger into the hot, wet substance. He brought it up, dripping, to his mouth.

It tasted flat and pulpy, like boiled wood fibre. It trickled viscously into his throat. His eyes began to water, and his lips drew back convulsively. He realised he was going to be sick, and ran for the outer door—but didn't quite make it.

When he finally got outside, he felt limp and unutterably listless. In that depressed state of mind, he grew aware again of the shrill sound.

He felt amazed that he could have ignored its rasping even for a few minutes. Sharply, he glanced about, trying to determine its source, but it seemed to have none. Whenever he approached a point where it appeared to be loudest, then it would fade, or shift, perhaps to the far side of the village.

He tried to imagine what an alien culture would want with a mind-shattering noise—although, of course, it would not necessarily have been unpleasant to them.

He stopped, and snapped his fingers as a wild but nevertheless plausible notion entered his mind. Could this be music ?

He toyed with the idea, trying to visualise the village as it had been long ago. Here, a music-loving race had possibly gone about its daily tasks to the accompaniment of what was to them beautiful strains of melody.

The hideous whistling went on and on, waxing and waning. Jenner tried to put buildings between himself and the sound. He sought refuge in various rooms, hoping that at least one would be sound-proof. None were. The whistle followed him wherever he went.

He retreated into the desert, and had to climb halfway up one of the slopes before the noise was low enough not to disturb him. Finally, breathless but immeasurably relieved, he sank down on the sand, and thought blankly:

What now ?

The scene that spread before him had in it qualities of both heaven and hell. It was all too familiar now——the red sands, the stony dunes, the small, alien village promising so much and fulfilling so little.

Jenner looked down at it with his feverish eyes, and ran his parched tongue over his cracked, dry lips. He knew that he was a dead man unless

he could alter the automatic food-making machines that must be hidden somewhere in the walls and under the floors of the buildings.

In ancient days, a remnant of Martian civilisation had survived here in this village. The inhabitants had died off but the village lived on, keeping itself clean of sand, able to provide refuge for any Martian who might come along. But there were no Martians. There was only Bill Jenner, pilot of the first rocketship ever to land on Mars.

He had to make the village turn out food and drink that he could take. Without tools, except his hands; with scarcely any knowledge of chemistry, he must force it to change its habits.

Tensely, he hefted his water bag. He took another sip, and fought the same grim fight to prevent himself from guzzling it down to the last drop. And, when he had won the battle once more, he stood up and started down the slope.

He could last, he estimated, not more than three days. In that time, he must conquer the village.

He was already among the trees when it suddenly struck him that the "music" had stopped. Relieved, he bent over a small shrub, took a good, firm hold of it—and pulled.

It came up easily, and there was a slab of marble attached to it. Jenner stared at it, noting with surprise that he had been mistaken in thinking the stalk came up through a hole in the marble. It was merely stuck to the surface. Then he noticed something else—the shrub had no roots. Almost instinctively, Jenner looked down at the spot from which he had torn the slab of marble along with the plant. There was sand there.

He dropped the shrub, slipped to his knees, and plunged his fingers into the sand. Loose sand trickled through them. He reached deep, using all his strength to force his arm and hand down—sand—nothing but sand.

He stood up, and frantically tore up another shrub. It also came easily, bringing with it a slab of marble. It had no roots, and where it had been was sand.

With a kind of mindless disbelief, Jenner rushed over to a fruit tree, and shoved at it. There was a momentary resistance, and then the marble on which it stood split, and lifted slowly into the air. The tree fell over with a swish and a crackle as its dry branches and leaves broke and crumbled in a thousand pieces. Underneath where it had been, was sand.

Sand everywhere. A city built on sand. Mars, planet of sand. That was not completely true, of course. Seasonal vegetation had been observed near the polar icecaps. All but the hardiest of it died with the coming of summer. It had been intended that the rocketship land near one of those shallow, tideless seas.

By coming down out of control, the ship had wrecked more than itself. It had wrecked the chances for life of the only survivor of the voyage.

Jenner came slowly out of his daze. He had a thought then. He picked up one of the shrubs he had already torn loose, braced his foot against the marble to which it was attached and tugged, gently at first, then with increasing strength.

It came loose finally, but there was no doubt that the two were part of a whole. The shrub was growing out of the marble.

Marble ? Jenner knelt beside one of the holes from which he had torn a

slab, and bent over an adjoining section. It was quite porous—calciferous rock, most likely, but not true marble at all. As he reached toward it, intending to break off a piece, it changed colour. Astounded, Jenner drew back. Around the break, the stone was turning a bright orange-yellow. He studied it uncertainly, then tentatively he touched it.

It was as if he had dipped his fingers into searing acid. There was a sharp, biting, burning pain. With a gasp, Jenner jerked his hand clear.

The continuing anguish made him feel faint. He swayed and moaned, clutching the bruised members to his body. When the agony finally faded, and he could look at the injury, he saw that the skin had peeled, and that already blood blisters had formed. Grimly, Jenner looked down at the break in the stone. The edges remained bright orange-yellow.

The village was alert, ready to defend itself from further attacks.

Suddenly weary, he crawled into the shade of a tree. There was only one possible conclusion to draw from what had happened, and it almost defied common sense. This lonely village was alive.

As he lay there, Jenner tried to imagine a great mass of living substance growing into the shape of buildings, adjusting itself to suit another life form, accepting the role of servant in the widest meaning of the term.

If it would serve one race, why not another ? If it could adjust to Martians, why not to human beings ?

There would be difficulties, of course. He guessed wearily that essential elements would not be available. The oxygen for water could come from the air . . . thousands of compounds could be made from sand . . . though it meant death if he failed to find a solution, he fell asleep even as he started to think about what they might be.

When he awoke, it was quite dark.

Jenner climbed heavily to his feet. There was a drag to his muscles that alarmed him. He wet his mouth from his waterbag, and staggered toward the entrance of the nearest building. Except for the scraping of his shoes on the "marble," the silence was intense.

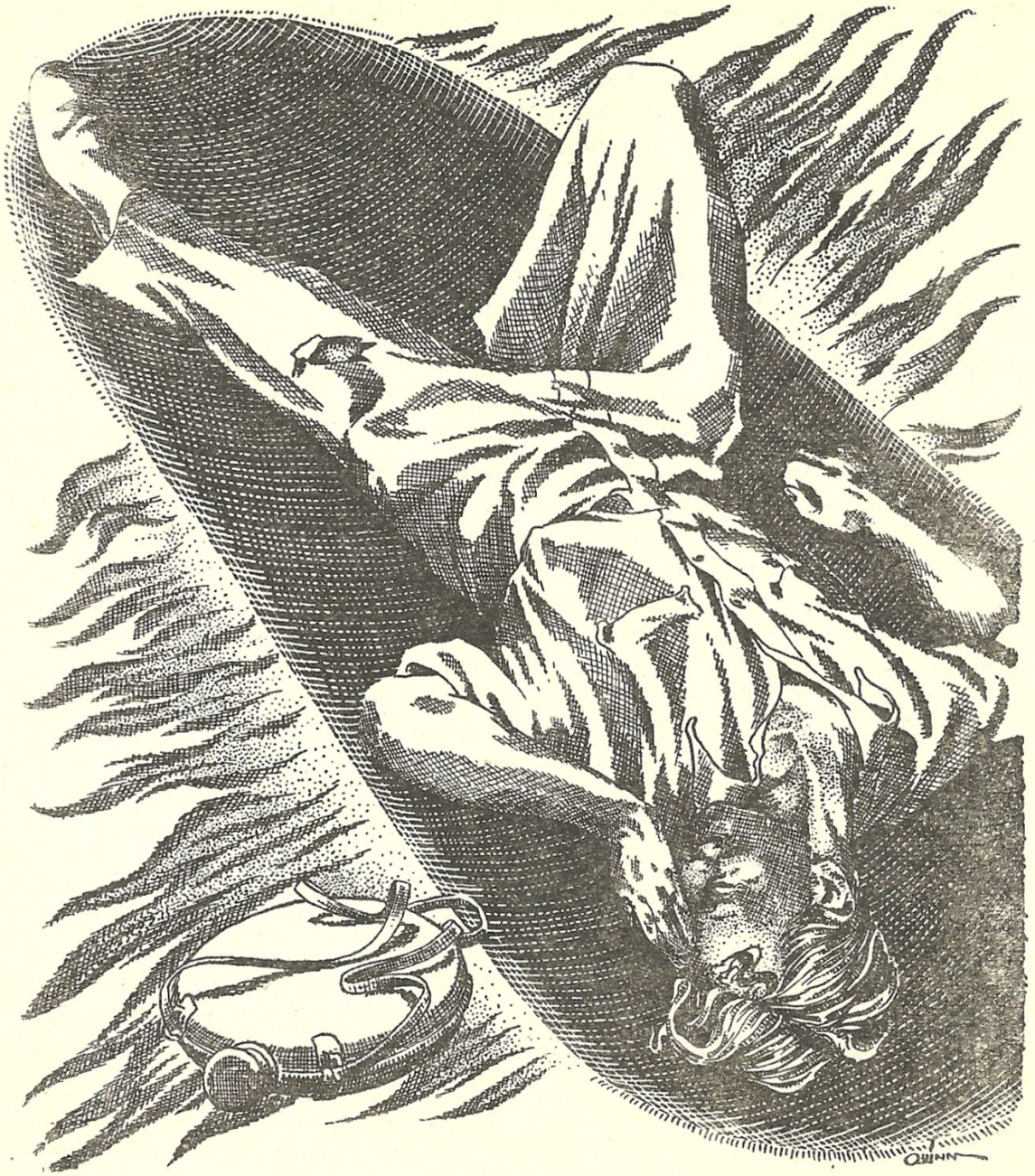
He stopped short—listened, and looked. The wind had died away. He couldn't see the mountains that rimmed the valley, but the buildings were still dimly visible, black shadows in a shadow world.

For the first time, it seemed to him that, in spite of his new hope, it might be better if he died. Even if he survived, what had he to look forward to ? Only too well he recalled how hard it had been to rouse interest in the trip, and to raise the large amount of money required. He remembered the colossal problems that had had to be solved in building the ship, and some of the men who had solved them were buried somewhere in the Martian desert.

It might be twenty years before another ship from Earth would try to reach the only other planet in the solar system that had shown signs of being able to support life.

During those uncountable days and nights, those years, he would be here alone. That was the most he could hope for—if he lived. As he fumbled his way to a dais in one of the rooms, Jenner considered another problem:

How did one let a living village know that it must alter its processes ? In a way, it must already have grasped that it had a new tenant. How could he make it realise he needed food in a different chemical combination than that which it had served in the past; that he liked music, but on a different



scale system; and that he could use a shower each morning—of water, not of poison gas ?

He dozed fitfully, like a man who is sick rather than sleepy. Twice, he wakened, his lips on fire, his eyes burning, his body bathed in perspiration. Several times he was startled into consciousness by the sound of his own harsh voice crying out in anger and fear at the night.

He guessed, then, that he was dying.

He spent the long hours of darkness tossing, turning, twisting, befuddled by waves of heat. As the light of morning came, he was vaguely surprised to realise that he was still alive. Restlessly, he climbed off the dais, and went to the door.

A bitingly cold wind blew, but it felt good to his hot face. He wondered

if there was enough *pneumococcus* in his blood for him to catch pneumonia. He decided not.

In a few moments he was shivering. He retreated back into the house, and for the first time noticed that, despite the doorless doorway, the wind did not come into the building at all. The rooms were cold, but not draughty.

That started an association: Where had his terrible body heat come from ? He teetered over to the dais where he had spent the night. Within seconds, he was sweltering in a temperature of about a hundred and thirty.

He climbed off the dais, shaken by his own stupidity. He estimated that he had sweated at least two quarts of moisture out of his dried-up body on that furnace of a bed.

This village was not for human beings. Here, even the beds were heated for creatures who needed temperatures far beyond the heat comfortable for men.

Jenner spent most of the day in the shade of a large tree. He felt exhausted, and only occasionally did he even remember that he had a problem. When the whistling started, it bothered him at first, but he was too tired to move away from it. There were long periods when he hardly heard it, so dulled were his senses.

Late in the afternoon, he remembered the shrubs and the tree he had torn up the day before, and wondered what had happened to them. He wet his swollen tongue with the last few drops of water in his bag, climbed lacka-daisically to his feet, and went to look for the dried-up remains.

There weren't any. He couldn't even find the holes where he had torn them out. The living village had absorbed the dead tissue into itself, and repaired the breaks in its "body."

That galvanised Jenner. He began to think again . . . about mutations, genetic readjustment, life forms adapting to new environments. There'd been lectures on that before the ship left Earth, rather generalised talks designed to acquaint the explorers with the problems men might face on an alien planet. The important principle was quite simple: adjust or die.

The village had to adjust to him. He doubted if he could seriously damage it, but he could try. His own need to survive must be placed on as sharp and hostile a basis as that.

Frantically, Jenner began to search his pockets. Before leaving the rocket, he had loaded himself with odds and ends of small equipment. A jack-knife, a folding metal cup, a printed radio, a tiny super-battery that could be charged by spinning an attached wheel—and for which he had brought along, among other things, a powerful electric fire lighter.

Jenner plugged the lighter into the battery, and deliberately scraped the red-hot end along the surface of the "marble." The reaction was swift. The substance turned an angry purple this time. When an entire section of the floor had changed colour, Jenner headed for the nearest stall trough, entering far enough to activate it.

There was a noticeable delay. When the food finally flowed into the trough, it was clear that the living village had realised the reason for what he had done. The food was a pale, creamy colour, where earlier it had been a murky grey.

Jenner put his finger into it, but withdrew it with a yell, and wiped his finger. It continued to sting for several moments. The vital question was:

had it deliberately offered him food that would damage him, or was it trying to appease him without knowing what he could eat?

He decided to give it another chance, and entered the adjoining stall. The gritty stuff that flooded up this time was yellower. It didn't burn his finger, but Jenner took one taste, and spat it out. He had the feeling that he had been offered a soup made of a greasy mixture of clay and gasoline.

He was thirsty now with a need heightened by the unpleasant taste in his mouth. Desperately, he rushed outside and tore open the waterbag, seeking the wetness inside. In his fumbling eagerness, he spilled a few precious drops on to the courtyard. Down he went on his face, and licked them up.

Half a minute later, he was still licking, and there was still water.

The fact penetrated suddenly. He raised himself, and gazed wonderingly at the droplets of water that sparkled on the smooth stone. As he watched, another one squeezed up from the apparently solid surface, and shimmered in the light of the sinking sun.

He bent, and with the tip of his tongue sponged up each visible drop. For a long time, he lay with his mouth pressed to the "marble," sucking up the tiny bits of water that the village doled out to him.

The glowing white sun disappeared behind a hill. Night fell, like the dropping of a black screen. The air turned cold, then icy. He shivered as the wind keened through his ragged clothes. But what finally stopped him was the collapse of the surface from which he had been drinking.

Jenner lifted himself in surprise, and in the darkness gingerly felt over the stone. It had genuinely crumbled. Evidently the substance had yielded up its available water and had disintegrated in the process. Jenner estimated that he had drunk altogether an ounce of water.

It was a convincing demonstration of the willingness of the village to please him, but there was another, less satisfying implication. If the village had to destroy a part of itself every time it gave him a drink, then clearly the supply was not unlimited.

Jenner hurried inside the nearest building, climbed on to a dais—and climbed off again hastily, as the heat blazed up at him. He waited, to give the Intelligence a chance to realise he wanted a change, then lay down once more. The heat was as great as ever.

He gave that up because he was too tired to persist, and too sleepy to think of a method that might let the village know he needed a different bedroom temperature. He slept on the floor with an uneasy conviction that it could *not* sustain him for long. He woke up many times during the night, and thought: "Not enough water. No matter how hard it tries—" then he would sleep again, only to wake once more, tense and unhappy.

Nevertheless, morning found him briefly alert; and all his steely determination was back—that iron will-power that had brought him at least five hundred miles across an unknown desert.

He headed for the nearest trough. This time, after he had activated it, there was a pause of more than a minute; and then about a thimbleful of water made a wet splotch at the bottom.

Jenner licked it dry, then waited hopefully for more. When none came, he reflected gloomily that somewhere in the village, an entire group of cells had broken down and released their water for him.

Then and there he decided that it was up to the human being, who could move around, to find a new source of water for the village, which could not move.

In the interim, of course, the village would have to keep him alive, until he had investigated the possibilities. That meant, above everything else, he must have some food to sustain him while he looked around.

He began to search his pockets. Toward the end of his food supply, he had carried scraps and pieces wrapped in small bits of cloth. Crumbs had broken off into the pocket and he had searched often during those long days in the desert. Now by actually ripping the seams, he discovered tiny particles of meat and bread, little bits of grease and other unidentifiable substances.

Carefully, he leaned over the adjoining stall, and placed the scrapings in the trough there. The village would not be able to offer him more than a reasonable facsimile. If the spilling of a few drops on the courtyard could make it aware of his need for water, then a similar offering might give it the clue it needed as to the chemical nature of the food he could eat.

Jenner waited, then entered the second stall and activated it. About a pint of thick, creamy substance trickled into the bottom of the trough. The smallness of the quantity seemed evidence that perhaps it contained water.

He tasted it. It had a sharp, musty flavour, and a stale odour. It was almost as dry as flour—but his stomach did not reject it.

Jenner ate slowly, acutely aware that at such moments as this the village had him at its mercy. He could never be sure that one of the food ingredients was not a slow acting poison.

When he had finished the meal, he went to a food trough in another building. He refused to eat the food that came up, but activated still another trough. This time he received a few drops of water.

He had come purposefully to one of the tower buildings. Now, he started up the ramp that led to the upper floor. He paused only briefly in the room he came to, as he had already discovered that they seemed to be additional bedrooms. The familiar dais was there in a group of three.

What interested him was that the circular ramp continued to wind on upward. First, to another, smaller room that seemed to have no particular reason for being. Then it wound on up to the top of the tower, some seventy feet above the ground. It was high enough for him to see beyond the rim of all the surrounding hilltops. He had thought it might be, but he had been too weak to make the climb before. Now, he looked out to every horizon. Almost immediately, the hope that had brought him up, faded.

The view was immeasurably desolate. As far as he could see was an arid waste, and every horizon was hidden in a mist of wind-blown sand.

Jenner gazed with a sense of despair. If there was a Martian sea out there somewhere, it was beyond his reach.

Abruptly, he clenched his hands in anger against his fate, which seemed inevitable now. At the very worst, he had hoped he would find himself in a mountainous region. Seas and mountains were generally the two main sources of water. He should have known, of course, that there were very few mountains on Mars. It would have been a wild coincidence if he had actually run into a mountain range.

His fury faded, because he lacked the strength to sustain any emotion. Numbly, he went down the ramp.

His vague plan to help the village ended as swiftly and finally as that.

The days drifted by, but as to how many he had no idea. Each time he went to eat, a smaller amount of water was doled out to him. Jenner kept telling himself that each meal would have to be his last. It was unreasonable for him to expect the village to destroy itself when his fate was certain now.

What was worse, it became increasingly clear that the food was not good for him. He had misled the village as to his needs by giving it stale, perhaps even tainted samples, and prolonged the agony for himself. At times after he had eaten, Jenner felt dizzy for hours. All too frequently, his head ached, and his body shivered with fever.

The village was doing what it could. The rest was up to him, and he couldn't even adjust to an approximation of Earth food.

For two days, he was too sick to drag himself to one of the troughs. Hour after hour, he lay on the floor. Some time during the second night, the pain in his body grew so terrible that he finally made up his mind.

"If I can get to a dais," he told himself, "the heat alone will kill me; and in absorbing my body, the village will get back some of its lost water."

He spent at least an hour crawling laboriously up the ramp of the nearest dais, and when he finally made it, he lay as one already dead. His last waking thought was: "Beloved friends, I'm coming."

The hallucination was so complete that, momentarily, he seemed to be back in the control room of the rocketship, and all around him were his former companions.

With a sigh of relief, Jenner sank into a dreamless sleep.

He woke to the sound of a violin. It was a sad-sweet music that told of the rise and fall of a race long dead.

Jenner listened for a while, and then with abrupt excitement realised the truth. This was a substitute for the whistling—the village had adjusted its music to him !

Other sensory phenomena stole in upon him. The dais felt comfortably warm, not hot at all. He had a feeling of wonderful physical well-being.

Eagerly, he scrambled down the ramp to the nearest food stall. As he crawled forward, his nose close to the floor, the trough filled with a steamy mixture. The odour was so rich and pleasant that he plunged his face into it, and slopped it up greedily. It had the flavour of thick, meaty soup, and was warm and soothing to his lips and mouth. When he had eaten it all, he did not need a drink of water for the first time.

"I've won !" thought Jenner, "the village has found a way !"

After a while, he remembered something, and crawled to the bathroom. Cautiously, watching the ceiling, he eased himself backward into the shower stall. The yellowish spray came down, cool and delightful.

Ecstatically, Jenner wriggled his four-foot tail, and, lifted his long snout to let the thin streams of liquid wash away the food impurities that clung to his sharp teeth.

Then he waddled out to bask in the sun, and listen to the timeless music.

THE END

THIRD PARTY

By E. C. TUBB

It was rather a special kind of encyclopaedia. Translated correctly it opened up whole new worlds of thought.

Illustrated by HUNTER

The book was so cheap that at the price it was a gift. A thick, hard-covered volume, with several hundred illustrations, plenty of full-page four-colour plates, and over a thousand pages of close-set type. The binding was of a blue-green cloth and bore the single word *Cyclopedia* in gold.

Ron Curtis hefted the book and marvelled at the workmanship. With the rapid skill of the inveterate browser, he riffled the pages, glanced at the colour plates, noted the contents page, and incredulously studied the price.

"This right ?" he asked the vendor.

The man glanced at him carelessly. "Right enough."

"But how can you sell at such a price ?"

"Why ask me ? I make my profit. Want it ?"

"Sure," hastily Ron counted out a few coins. "Thanks. Sell many of them ?"

"At that price it's worth buying as a paper weight." The sale completed the man grew more friendly. "How they do it beats me. The price hardly covers the cost of materials. Add distributors' charges and profit," he shrugged. "They must be giving it away."

Ron grunted. That seemed to be going too far.

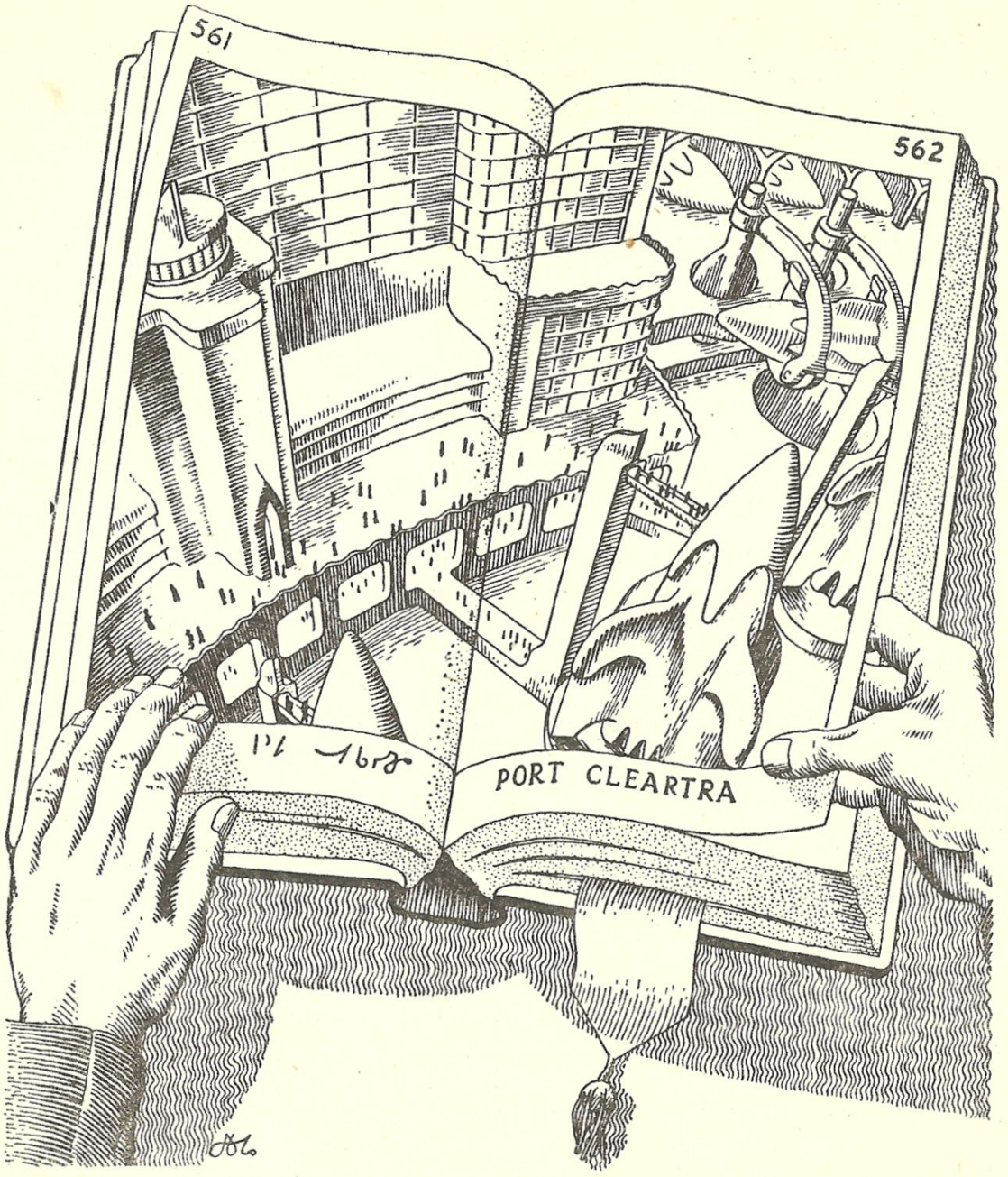
He didn't have a chance to look at the book again until that evening, and when he did, he began to wonder just what it was he had bought. There was nothing wrong with the book—as a book. It seemed to be just what it claimed, a cyclopedia, well arranged, and without a trace of shoddy workmanship. The only thing was that it just didn't seem to make sense.

He studied the atlas again. It was laid out in the usual Mercator projection, the seas in blue, the land mass in green and brown contour. Boundary lines were in red. Distances were given between cardinal points. It was all quite normal, but he just couldn't place any part of it.

He read the bold lettering. *Dysane. Marrian Sea. Port Cleartra.*

The last made him frown. Usually ports were on the sea coast; this one appeared to be in the centre of a flat plain. He shrugged and turned to the text.

The first part was a dictionary, or rather a foreign-English compendium, a collection of foreign words with their English meanings. He sat frowning for a long time over the weird-looking symbols. They looked a cross between



Arabic and shorthand, and were utterly without meaning to him at all. He turned pages. Another dictionary, this time the words were in English, at least they were recognisable.

"Arrage," he read. "Local court of jurisdiction since rendered obsolete by Central Justicar."

"Bortalise. To Bortal. To render a substance static."

"Cleartra. Small sea creature noted for its tenacity and strength."

"Cleartra (Port). Second largest entry port on Lithia. Capable of handling five thousand millad per unic."

Ron blinked. Millad ? Unic ? He thumbed pages.

"Millad. Unit of weight. One millad equals weight of atmosphere at Lithia sea level on carsad squared."

"Unic. Unit of time. One-tenth of one revolution of Lithia."

"Carsad. Unit of measurement. Approx. ten square inches."

Ron snapped the book shut with an angry gesture. This was crazy. A mess of foreign terminology mixed up with English measurements. Why "carsad ?" Why not just ten square inches ? Curiosity made him pick up a pencil and work a rought calculation. He whistled at the result. It seemed that Port Cleartra, wherever that was, could handle over twenty-five thousand tons of freight an hour. Not bad !

Impatiently he opened the book again. The thing was beginning to get under his skin. It seemed so utterly insane. First the ridiculous price. Even if there were some eccentric philanthropist at work trying to distribute cheap knowledge, he would at least have made it usable information. This was useless. Or was it ?

"Geltogy. System of exercise designed to increase neural response and promote rapid healing."

"Dynatron. Hyper spacial engine. Standard on all space vessels."

He had riffled more pages before the import of what he had read struck him.

Space vessels !

Hastily he turned back. Yes, there it was. The book fell open at random.

"Xtrax. Youth serum discovered 300 artia scerti."

"Zytla. Biped. Almost extinct. Once a staple food in the Gonstatets region."

The man was small, elderly, and appeared to be very tired. He half rose from behind an enormous desk as the receptionist ushered Ron into the office. "Mr. Curtis ?"

"Yes. It's good of you to see me Mister Hardman, but you're my last resort."

"Yes ?"

"It's about the cyclopedia, the cheap one. I want to talk to someone who knows something about it."

"Why ?"

Ron blinked at the sharp question. "Have you read the book, Mister Hardman ?"

"I ? No. If I read all the books we distribute I'd have no time for anything else." He glanced suggestively at his watch.

Ron coloured. "Well, I'd like to bring to your notice that it is a very strange book. Certainly not a book anyone could have a use for. The title is misleading."

"How much did you pay for the book, Mister Curtis ?"

"Very little I must admit, but . . ."

"Thank you." He pressed a button on the desk before him. "Mister Curtis is leaving now," he told the receptionist. "Please refund him the price of the new cyclopedia. Good-day, Mister Curtis."

The door slammed behind him with a finality that was more expressive than words. Red faced, Ron curtly refused the coins the receptionist held out to him, and strode from the building. It was another blank wall.

The first had been when he wrote to the publishers. The letter had returned marked "Not known." He had tried the printers next. They knew less than he did. Proofs, colour blocks, payment, had all been made by post. The distributors had been his last chance. Now he was back where he had started.

It seemed more incredible the more he thought about it. Someone,

somewhere had caused a book to be written, printed, distributed, and then it seemed, disappeared.

Why ?

It bothered him. He had only one thing left. The book itself. He began to study it.

It was quite fascinating. It was such a normal book, the cross references fitting so neatly, the information so logical, that it was easy to forget that the terminology didn't make sense. Scattered throughout were clues, such as an occasional measurement in English, or an illustration serving to give the true meaning of a word. Before long he found that he could follow the text without the need to constantly cross check unfamiliar terms.

It was such a logical book. Try as he might, nowhere could he find any hint of contradiction. Terms, measurements, geology, geography, all fitted together. Every single item stood the test of suspicious scrutiny. Whoever had written the book had done a masterful piece of work.

The next discovery was that the foreign symbols at the beginning of the book were duplicated in roman characters further on. At the end of the book were several pages of this mystic writing, and it became a pleasant pastime translating it. Not all the words had their English equivalent, and it took some time. He checked, rechecked, doubted, but struggled through.

It was then that he discovered the entire purpose of the cyclopedia.

A bell chimed softly on Hardman's desk. He ignored it. It chimed again. Irritably he snapped a switch.

"Yes ? Hardman here."

"Barcon. Any luck as yet ?"

"No." Hardman's mouth twisted angrily.

"Are you vetting them properly ? There should be some positive reaction by now."

"None, I tell you. A few cranks. A few canvassers. A few complaints. Nothing definite."

There was silence at the end of the wire. Droplets of perspiration stood out on Hardman's forehead. Irritably he wiped them away.

"Strange." Barcon seemed to be talking to himself. "Psychology were quite sure that there would be some reaction. A tenth of one per cent. they surmised, optimistic, of course, they always are, but there should have been some reaction."

"Yes, sir," stammered Hardman. "But as yet results are negative."

"How long now ? Three months ? Four ?"

"Three. Hardly time . . ."

"More than enough." The voice grew curt. "One more should decide."

"But ?" Hardman shrugged. He was talking to a dead line. He pressed a button on the inter-com.

"Yes, sir ?"

"If anyone should call in reference to the new cyclopedia, show them in. Anyone. Understand ?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good."

He sat musing, drumming his fingers on the polished surface of the desk before him. He closed heavy lids over tired eyes. Strained his awareness, keened the surface of his mind. Thoughts became tangible.

"Yes ?" A whisper, an impression, a delicate scratching at his brain.

"Barcon is getting impatient."

"How long have we ?"

"One month, maybe less."

"So." The voiceless impression grew heavy with weariness. "Any luck?"

"None."

"Keep trying. We'll be ready at your word."

Hardman shuddered, opened his eyes, groped at his desk. Natural communication was never easy, wrapped in alien flesh it was almost impossible.

The inter-com. sounded a soft note. Tiredly he closed the circuit. "Yes?"

"A Mister Ron Curtis to see you, sir. About the new cyclopedia."

"Show him in."

For the second time Ron stared at Hardman, but this time with a difference. He smiled, stepped forward, and spoke, but he did not speak in English.

"I know why the book was published."

"You do ?" Hardman answered in the same tongue. "Have you studied it ?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure ?"

"Certain."

"Good." Hardman slid open a drawer in the desk, groped within. When he withdrew his hand it held a large automatic.

Without a word he shot Curtis through the chest.

He retched, groaned, tried to struggle to his feet. Beneath his hands he could feel cold metal. Light suddenly blazed at him, footsteps sounded close, clashing on the metal floor.

A harsh voice jarred his ears.

"Get up, Hardman."

"I can't," he choked. "I . . ."

A foot thudded into his ribs. Pain washed through him, he gritted his teeth, and climbed painfully upright. Barcon's face swam mistily into focus. He was grinning. The loose flesh of cheeks and jowls quivering with evil merriment.

"Well, Hardman ? Are you going to talk ?"

He drew a deep breath, and fought for control. Everything had happened so fast. One moment safe in his office, the next . . .?

"Where am I ?" he gasped.

A fist darted at him, splitting his lips against his teeth. He spat blood. Groggily he held on to his senses. He knew this technique too well. A combination of pain, bewilderment, and savage questioning. Not subtle. Not even clever, but efficient, very.

"Where is Curtis ?"

"I don't know."

More pain, he wilted beneath it, fighting the desire to end it all, to escape this rain of crippling blows. It would be so easy, and so damningly final. He dared not. He set his teeth, adjusted his mind, and held on.

They grew tired at last. Barcon stared down at the huddled figure and

gestured for them to stop. He kicked at the bloodied mass.

"Take him to surgury. Let me know when he talks." He had no doubt that he would talk. Surgury knew ways of making a statue scream. Hardman was only human.

A bell chimed from one fat wrist. "Barcon ?"

"Speaking."

"Observation report a ship orbiting above Center. Type 3, medium class. What orders ?"

"Is it possible to determine whether or not the ship has landed recently ?"

"Yes. Ion trails would have been reported. The ship has not landed."

"Good." Barcon sighed with relief. "Keep under observation. Report any movement."

He dialled the wristphone. "Torman ?"

"Danter here. Torman is dead."

"Dead ! How ?"

"Bortalised," the tiny voice sounded laconic.

Barcon bit his thick lips. "Take over. Remodel to Hardman. Be Hardman."

"How long for ?"

"Until we find Curtis."

He wiped perspiration from sagging cheeks, and cursed the body they had given him. Psychology had insisted. No one feared a fat man, but equally so, he wasn't liked either.

He waddled through metal corridors, pressed his palm to a dull metal plate, a concealed door swung open. Within a complexity of tubes and wires centred around a tall vision screen. He plumped into a seat, snapped switches, adjusted vernier dials. The screen began to glow with life.

A man looked down from the screen. He gave the immediate impression of alienness, then seemed quite normal. Closer study would have picked out minute differences, a slightly different skin colouration, a suble something about the texture of the skin, the eyes betrayed him.

Long, narrow, utterly cold and indifferent, inhuman. He stared coldly at Barcon, the thin lips parted into a close gash. "Well ?"

"No success. One prospect but we were betrayed by an agent in our midst."

"Lithian ?"

"Possible. Not certain."

"So." The alien looked coldly at Barcon. "Finish the operation within seven of your days. Report total success, or report for disciplinary action."

The screen darkened. Barcon wiped at his face. He was suddenly afraid.

Curtis groaned, clutched at his chest, and felt the desire to vomit. Cool hands supported him. Painfully he opened his eyes.

A man smiled at him. A strange man, wearing an all-enveloping suit of metallic mesh-like material. He grinned. "Just in time. Are you well now?"

Ron frowned. The words weren't English but he knew them. Memory came with a rush. Hardman. The book. The stunning blow in the chest. Startled he felt himself. There was no wound.

"You've healed yourself. If you hadn't we would have let you die."

"Why ?"

The man shrugged. "You would have been useless to us; as it is, you are the one we have been waiting for."

"Who are you ?"

"A Lithian." Weariness sounded in the cool voice.

"I see." Curtis nodded and climbed to his feet. He looked around him with interest. They were in a metal chamber, lights glowed from the ceiling, several tall cabinets stood against the walls. Of doors or windows there were no sign.

"Where am I ?"

The man smiled. "That I can't tell you, nor my name, nor why you are here. There is a reason. You will understand later."

"Well, why did Hardman shoot me ?"

"He had to. It was important to test you, to determine that you had really read and understood the book. Also you had to be unconscious, the beam would have killed you otherwise."

"Is that all ? Why didn't he explain ?"

"No time. Explanations would have taken too long. It was more important to keep you out of the wrong hands, than to worry about your life."

"Whose hands ?"

The man smiled and shook his head.

"Where is Hardman now ?"

"They got him. He bortalised the receptionist after you had gone, then they snatched him." The strangely youthful face hardened.

Curtis shrugged. If the man didn't want to tell him anything, then he couldn't be blamed for trying to find out in his own way. The man suddenly smiled.

"I've forgotten. You must be hungry."

Curtis started to shake his head, then nodded. He was hungry, and eagerly wolfed the food the man set before him. Dry slabs of biscuit-like stuff, yet wonderfully invigorating. With it was a thin dry wine, tart to the taste, yet sending a glow of satisfaction. He sighed and pushed the plate away.

"Who published the book ?"

"They did, the Alturins."

"Why ?"

There was no answer. Startled, Curtis glanced around. The man had gone ! Puzzled, he examined the walls. Nothing. No trace of even a crack. He frowned and turned to the cabinets.

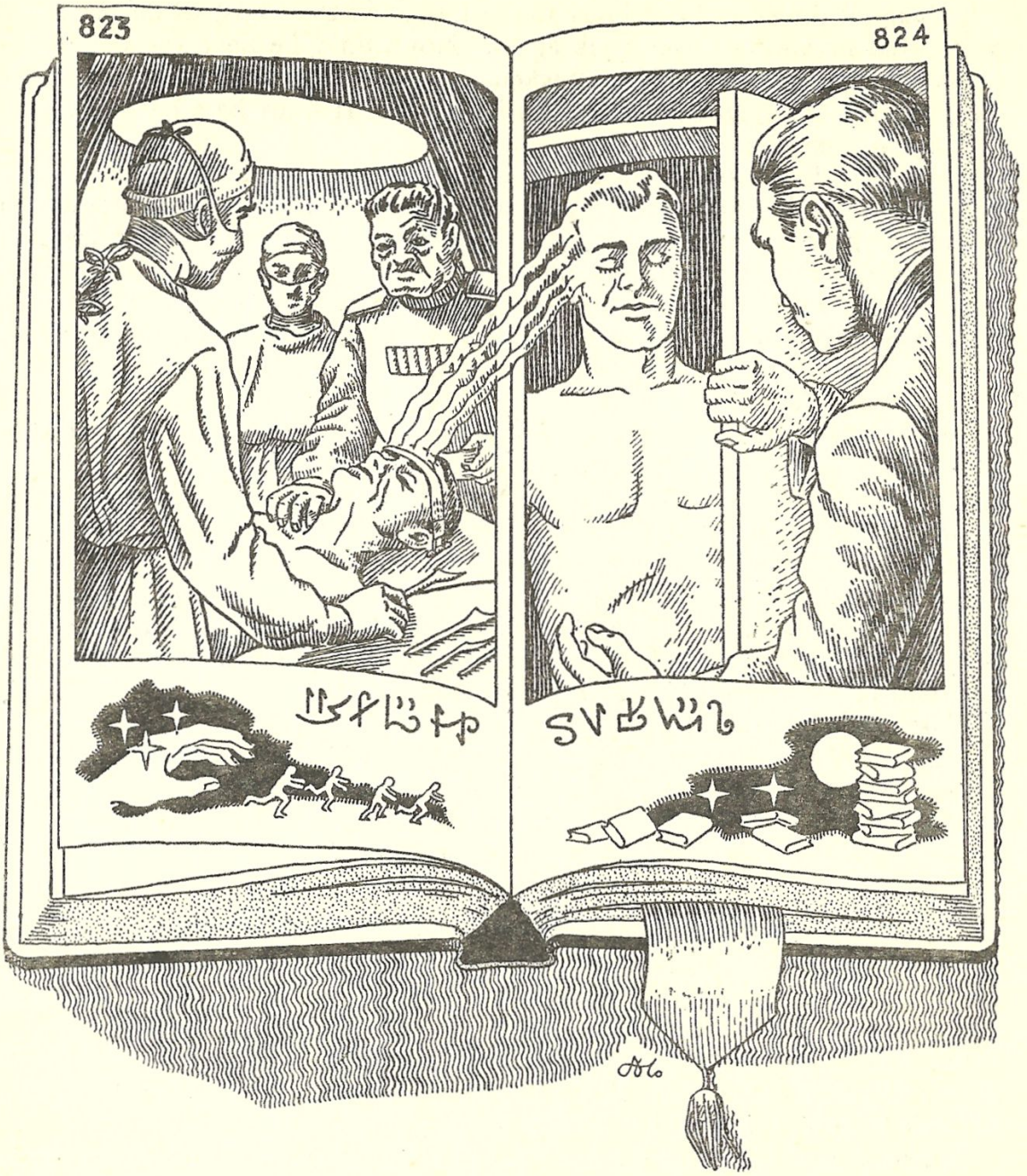
They were unlocked, the doors swinging open at a touch. The first held supplies of the biscuit-like food, and sealed plastic containers of the tart wine.

Others held instruments, what appeared to be more of the metallic clothing, a belt and holster, though there was no sign of a weapon.

As he walked and probed among the cabinets Curtis became aware of a deep humming, almost a vibration of the room itself. He tried to locate the sound. It throbbed, intensified, then died to a low throbbing.

He shrugged. Too many strange things had happened for one more to worry him. Somehow part of his brain felt numb, dulled; he stifled a yawn. The desire to sleep became overpowering. He fought against it. One cabinet, the largest, stood next to him, and for sake of something to do he swung wide the door.

The naked body of a perfectly muscled man reclined against an inclined



shelf. He wasn't dead. As Curtis looked, startled into wakefulness, the barrel of a chest heaved slightly. The eyelids trembled, opened, the body moved !

Hardman became aware of a smooth surface beneath him. Through puffed lids he could sense the glare of powerful lights. Something clinked near him.

He felt a surge of terror. Surgury ! Frantically he strained against his bonds, then fell back exhausted. With a sickening sense of defeat he knew that he could never get through it.

"Well, Hardman. Are you going to talk ?"

"I don't know," he croaked. "I tell you I don't know."

Barcon snarled, and gestured to the white-coated attendant. "Begin."

They were skilful. At no time did they touch the vocal chords, but that

left them all the rest of the body to work on. After a short while Hardman knew that he would never walk again. Nor would he have the use of his arms. Pain washed over him. Sickening, disgusting, tearing into his firm-held resolve. Desperately he wished for death. It must be a natural death. If they once suspected . . .

He groaned, screamed, pleaded. Cunningly shaped instruments picked, scraped, probed. Nerves quivered with sheer agony. He was bathed in sweat and blood. They were clever. Death was the last thing they wanted, but they had reckoned without him.

Gradually his heart weakened. Slowly, very slowly, he released his grip on this body. Finally, with utter gladness, he knew that he was going to die.

They knew it too. He heard the startled hiss from an attendant.

"Quick. He's going."

"If he does you take his place," Barcon grated. He bent over the sweating Hardman. "Talk, damn you. Talk."

He felt the bite of needles pumping stimulants into his veins, and fought against them. Pain suddenly ceased. Barcon was frantic in his sudden fear.

"Quick, tell me. Where is Curtis ?"

He grinned, and said nothing.

"I'll restore you, make you well again." Barcon grew desperate. "Tell me where Curtis is. Tell me. Curse you, talk will you. Talk !" His hand smashed across the blood-streaked features.

Hardman's lips moved silently.

"Quick. Water." Barcon sent a trickle of fluid between the parched lips. "Now. What did you say ?" Eagerly he bent over the supine form.

"Go to hell !" Hardman whispered. Grinned, adjusted his mind—and died.

Parvis stepped cautiously through the wall, the suit humming as it compensated for the change in atomic valence. He was worried. Curtis was safe but Hardman was an unknown quantity. If he talked, they were all in great danger.

He walked down the passage, the suit humming faintly as it vibrated at sub-level vision frequency. It did not make him invisible, merely extremely difficult to see. He would pass any casual glance.

A man passed him, and for a moment he almost called out. It was Hardman, small, elderly, tired-looking. He was scowling, and gingerly touched his features. Parvis sucked in his breath. A substitution. On impulse Parvis followed him.

The transbeam was not even guarded. Barcon felt quite safe here in Centre. The coils were still warm, and vibrating slightly; rapidly he read the vernier settings, and bit his lip. Curtis was safe, but ? Who else had understood the book ?

Voices sounded down the passage. In swift panic Parvis squeezed behind the main coil. Barcon wiped sweat from flabby features as he entered the room.

"He shouldn't have died as he did. Something went wrong. What ?"

The little white-coated attendant with him gestured helplessly. "I don't know. Terrestials are still something of an unknown quantity. I told you that I needed more time."

"We haven't got it." Barcon grunted angrily. "We have less than seven days to clear up this area. I'd still like to know how Hardman managed to neutralise his conditioning."

The little man shrugged helplessly. Behind the main coil Parvis breathed deeply with relief. Hardman had died, and he had not talked.

Barcon squinted at the vernier settings. "Danter has left. Any fresh reports ?"

"Three men reacted in the other hemisphere. All taken care of."

"Good." Barcon laughed. "At least we have some results to show for our work." He rubbed his chin musingly. "I'd never have thought that they would have reached this area. Must be all of three years' travel, and they had only light pleasure craft," he shrugged. "Vermin are always difficult to get rid of."

Parvis gulped air. Something was wrong ! Light flickered before him, the suit began to heat up, becoming almost too hot to bear. Eddy currents from the still active main coil. He glanced despairingly at the two men. They showed no signs of departure; in seconds now he would either betray his presence or attempt to kill them both.

He knew that he couldn't do it. One, yes, but not both, and failure would be as bad as discovery. The slightest hint that others were in Centre and the whole desperate plan would be negativated.

The main coil was very near to him. In sudden desperate resolve, he stepped up the suit power, took a final breath, and stepped into the coil.

Curtis stepped back in alarm as the superb body came to life. The man smiled, stepped from the cabinet, and stretched luxuriously. Muscles rippled beneath satin skin. Without a sign of being aware of him the man donned clothing taken from other cabinets, the metallic-seeming suiting that fitted him like a glove. He strapped the belt and holster around his waist, and with a casual air, reached into the cabinet, made a curious gesture, and holstered a squat, pistol-like weapon.

He smiled, put food and wine on the table, and pulling up a chair gestured for Curtis to help himself.

"Who are you ?"

The man smiled again. "I am, or rather I used to be, Hardman. You may as well call me Santon. Why don't you eat ?"

"Not hungry." Curtis stifled a yawn. "I feel tired."

"Parvis must have drugged you. Here." Santon poured wine, broke a capsule into it, and offered it to Curtis. He took it suspiciously, then at the other's broad grin, drank it down. Immediately his fatigue fell from him.

"I see that you've practised Geltogy," Santon said casually. "How many millads can Port Cleartra handle a unic ?"

"Five thousand."

"Good. So you are Curtis, I couldn't be too sure."

"Why am I here ? What do you want with me ?"

"Nothing." Santon laughed at Curtis's look of surprise. "I suppose that Parvis has been telling you all sorts of things. But he is an idealist." He stretched again. "Take my advice Curtis, don't let any of this bother you. You are quite safe, and in a few days, back where you started."

"But what's the whole point of it all ?"

Santon looked quizzically at him. "Curiosity is an attribute of your race, a good thing; it may even give you the stars; but a word of advice. Don't try ever to figure this out. I don't wish to insult you, but you are only important as a piece in a game of chance is important."

Curtis flushed. "I understood differently when I had read the book."

"A work of art that book," admitted Santon. "I have to agree that Psychology gauged you well. Not as good a reaction as had been hoped, but successful. Very."

Curtis rubbed his face in perplexity. "What—?" he began, but the other silenced him with a curt gesture.

He sat in strained attention, eyes half-closed, body immobile. Tiny droplets of perspiration stood out on cheeks and forehead. He slumped, and wiped his face.

"What's the matter ?"

"Nothing." Santon spoke absently. "Look, Curtis, I'm going to put you to sleep. Only for a few days, but it is necessary that your consciousness be subdued as far as possible." He broke a capsule into a container of wine. "Drink this."

"No !"

"Drink it I say ! Quick, man, we haven't much time."

Curtis hesitated, then made a sudden lunge. The weapon was totally unfamiliar, but it had a butt, a trigger, and he assumed that it was ready for immediate action. He backed away, keeping the squat barrel trained on Santon.

"I want to get out of here. Get me out."

"Kill me and you'll rot in this chamber." Santon was quite calm. "Better think twice before doing something you may regret."

"Get me out, I say." In sudden desperate fury Curtis swung the weapon to point at one of the cabinets, and squeezed the trigger.

A lance of vivid energy blazed forth. The cabinet slumped to a pool of molten metal, and heat seared the air. He blinked, and grinned through cracked lips.

"Do I burn my way out ?"

"No. Don't do that." Santon seemed worried. "Look ! If I get you out of here will you do as I ask ? For a few days at least ?"

"Why should I ?"

"If you don't you'll be dead. Well ?"

Curtis stood in sudden doubt. It was hard to know just what to do, but he had to trust someone. "As you say, but I keep the gun."

Santon looked at him a half-smile on his lips. He frowned, puckering his forehead, then stepped forward. Curtis tried to squeeze the trigger, tried to swing the gun, tried to move, and couldn't.

He felt the weapon removed from his hand, the tart taste of the wine running down his throat. A word from the book flashed into his memory.

"Bortalise. To render a substance static."

He heard Santon laugh.

Parvis shuddered, rapidly adjusted the instruments at his belt, and looked around. As he had supposed, he was in Hardman's office, and luckily it was empty. He breathed in quick relief, set the suit at sub-vision level, and made his way down to the street.

He looked with curious interest at the signs of normal activity around him, the crowds, the traffic, but it was only casual interest; he had too little time.

In a quiet place he stopped, keened his mind, and attempted direct contact. As usual it failed. He sighed and dialled at his wrist.

"Yes ?"

"Parvis. Contact Santon for me will you ?"

"Impossible. Barcon will pick up transmission."

"No. Santon is no longer directing Hardman."

"What happened ?"

"Hardman died under surgury. Successfully. No information was given. I must contact Santon."

"One moment." Miles above in a speeding ship, relays clicked, contacts made, delicate instruments vibrated. "Contact made."

"Santon ? Parvis. Where are you ?"

"Where do you think ? In the chamber, of course."

"Sorry." Parvis flushed. "I left Curtis asleep, he should be safe there."

"Curtis is very much awake. I expect him to be troublesome, it will be interesting to see what he does."

"Barcon is suspicious. Danter has replaced Hardman. I think that they have less than seven days."

"So long ?" Santon sounded weary.

"What are your orders ?"

"I'll keep Curtis quiet, he should be safe here. Meet me at the place we determined. How is your suit ?"

"Strained, but I think that it will last."

"Good."

The tiny instrument emitted a faint click. Parvis sighed, then looked up in sudden alarm. A man had sat on the bench next to him, and was blinking at the spot where he sat in puzzled unbelief.

He was a ragged looking fellow, unshaven, unwashed, blear-eyed. He squinted, peered, then thrust out a hand. Parvis shrank back in alarm. If he shorted the suit . . .? His hands stabbed to his belt, the suit hummed, and lightly he rose into the air.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of the man being an agent of Barcon's, but dismissed the thought after a moment's consideration. Barcon was too busy, his men too few for any of them to transform to this disreputable looking specimen.

He was tempted to experiment, but sudden awareness of time made him reluctantly give up the idea. Wafting away from the bench, he settled down, and rapidly made his way to a secluded area of the city. In a small park he searched for a while among close undergrowth, found what he had hidden, and carefully screened himself behind the bushes.

A rather pale-faced young man strode anxiously from the park, made his way to a busy intersection, and was presently joined by a splendidly built specimen of humanity. Both wore conventional clothing, and aside from the bigger man's exceptional development, neither caused a second glance.

Santon breathed deeply, chest muscles straining the fabric of his suit.

"I think we can spare a few days, Parvis. It would be a pity not to see something of this world now that we are here."

They disappeared into the crowd.

Barcon's fat jowls quivered as he stared miserably into the screen. The alien figure stared coldly back at him.

"It is time. Have you cleared this area ?"

"Not yet. If you would but grant a few more days . . .?"

The thin lips parted into a sneering gash. "Why ?"

"There has been outside interference. I . . ."

"Excuses, Barcon ?" The inhuman eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you pleading ?"

"No." Pride stiffened his shoulders. "I merely wish to record that the operation was initially successful, the book did bring the results I foretold, though not as positive as Psychology claimed."

"Can you claim a fully cleared area ?"

Barcon wiped his face. "One positive has eluded capture."

"So you have failed." There was grim finality in the statement. "Assemble your men. Return for disciplinary action."

"I protest." Desperation spurred him. "I have reason to believe that there are subversive agents working against us in this area."

"So ?" The face in the screen grew pensive. "It is of course always a possibility. On what do you base your assumption ?"

"Hardman, a Terrestial whom we had conditioned, negated his conditioning, killed a secondary agent by Lithian technique, and somehow has hidden the last remaining case of positive reaction from us."

"You say somehow. What period of time was allowed to lapse ?"

"Minutes only."

"The area was watched ?"

"It was," admitted Barcon miserably.

"You captured him, of course. What did he have to say ?"

"Nothing."

"What ?" Anger darkened the cruel features. "You failed to question him ?"

"He was questioned." Barcon sweated as he suddenly realised how he was damning himself.

"Well ?"

"He died." He glanced at the screen and trembled. "He died under surgury. He shouldn't have died."

"Of course not." Irony tinged the cold voice. "I assumed that he died saying nothing ?"

"He denied all knowledge."

"Naturally. He had none." The being gave a curt gesture. "I see no justification for your suspicions. It is clear that your enthusiasm has caused you to doubt your judgment. The area is cleared. Return to Base."

The screen darkened. Barcon sweated with relief. They didn't believe him ! He grinned in quick satisfaction.

Curtis opened his eyes and stared at the two men bending over him. They were smiling. The younger one helped him to his feet.

"Everything's all right now, Curtis. You can go home."

Santon, busy at one of the cabinets, spoke over his shoulder. "In a short while you will lose consciousness. You will awake in a secluded part of the city. My advice to you is to forget everything that has happened to you."

"I can't." He swayed a little and caught the edge of the table. "You said

that an attribute of my race was curiosity. Can you imagine the hell I am going to live with trying to puzzle this out ?"

"Why not be content with what you have ?" Santon crossed the room towards him. "You are alive. You have learnt things from the book of tremendous value to you, the ability to heal yourself, for example. Why not be content ?"

"How can I be ?" Curtis stumbled into a chair. "I'm intelligent. I could never stop thinking about it. Who are you ? *What* are you ?"

Parvis looked searchingly at him. "What's the matter ? Don't you feel well ?"

"A little giddiness," he gestured impatiently. "It will pass." He looked at Santon. "Please tell me," he pleaded.

Santon rapped a few words in a language Curtis didn't understand. "What's the matter with him ?"

"Delayed reaction to shock," Parvis answered in the same tongue. "May be serious."

"What are you saying ?" Curtis asked peevishly. "My head aches."

Parvis leaned over him, compassion on his features. "Couldn't we tell him ?" he asked Santon. "I don't think it will do harm."

Santon shrugged. "If you wish." He busied himself at one of the cabinets. Parvis looked hesitantly at him, then turned to Curtis.

"You have read the book," he said abruptly. "You know of Lithia, and you think that you know the purpose of the book."

"Yes."

"Lithia no longer exists." Parvis sounded bitter. "They destroyed it, a long time ago. Lithia and Alturin were enemies," he sighed and poured wine. "Some escaped, the Galaxy is wide, and a few hid themselves, tried to save something of Lithian culture, a hopeless task."

"Yes ?" Curtis reached for the wine. He felt sick.

"They weren't satisfied with destroying our world. They began hunting us down. All over the Galaxy they hunted, are still hunting. Not even the remote descendants of the original refugees are safe. Alturin hates everything Lithian with an insane hatred. To them it is a crusade."

"But ?"

"You wonder about the book ?" Parvis laughed curtly. "They are clever, diabolically clever." He glanced at Santon. "Somehow they got the idea of smoking us out, making us betray ourselves. The book was written. Anyone with normal curiosity would be interested. Any response could be attributed to racial memory," he gulped wine. "Your world with its highly complex use of the written record, is particularly suited to such a method."

Curtis frowned. "But I'm not a Lithian. I only read the book from idle interest."

"Are you sure ?" Parvis glanced strangely at him. "You assimilated the knowledge of Lithian technique and culture remarkably fast. It is highly possible that you are descended from the original stock." He sighed. "But does it matter ? Knowledge of the book made you their legitimate prey."

The chamber suddenly throbbed beneath a surge of power. The walls sang with a high-pitched metallic note. Curtis pressed his hands to his ears and screamed. Parvis leaped to his feet, hands stabbing at his belt. Santon alone remained calm.

"They have gone." The great chest swelled in triumph. "I have won !"

he laughed, a great roaring sound. "Again—I have won !"

Curtis wiped blood from his face and shivered with reaction.

Things seemed to blur after that. Parvis did something to his wrist, spoke inaudibly for a while, then set about packing things into flat boxes. When full, they seemed to fit into one odd-shaped whole.

Santon came over and sat at the table. He looked curiously at Curtis. "Well ? Do you understand now ?"

He shrugged, trying to absorb the startling concept of Galactic hunters with himself as their prey. Something didn't fit. He looked at Santon. It was growing harder to see, things kept wavering, he squeezed his eyes.

"Where do you come in ? Are you a Lithian ?"

"No." Subtle contempt tinged the calm answer.

"Then who are you ? Why did you save me ?"

"Does it matter ?" Santon glanced at his wrist, and shrugged. "There is a little time, I wonder if you could understand ?"

"Try me," Curtis said desperately. "Don't you understand ? I *must* know."

"So ? Imagine then if you can a race so long-lived that to you they would be immortal. A race with powers far beyond your comprehension. A race, satisfied enough—but bored."

Curtis nodded.

"You have similar men in your own world. Men who deliberately seek danger. What do you call them ?"

"Big game hunters," Curtis said dully. "I understand."

"Good." Santon stirred and glanced at his wrist. "This situation of hunters and hunted amused me. To rob the hunters of their prey. To substitute danger of death with the danger of discovery. Personal inconvenience and guile against all their technology," he gestured. "It was necessary to restrict my powers else winning would have been far too easy."

He glanced at his wrist again. Rose, and went across to the odd-shaped bundle. He seemed impatient, in a hurry. Parvis touched Curtis on the hand.

"Do you understand now ?" he asked bitterly. "They," he jerked his head at Santon, "are our only hope. We must be grateful, but we can never be proud."

He rose and joined Santon. Curtis heard the mutter of conversation in the unknown tongue. The room vibrated again, the high-pitched note shrilling against ragged nerves.

He felt very tired. His lips were cracked and parched. His skin dry and flushed with fever. He had a pain in the chest, and his breathing hurt.

It was all clear now. Horribly clear. The Alturins were the hunters. Santon, for all his powers, a thrill-seeking adventurer. As darkness closed around him, Curtis had a bitter taste in his mouth.

He knew what he was.

Bait !

THE END

THE CIRCLE OF THE WHITE HORSE

By FRANCIS ARNOLD

The newcomer to the *White Horse Tavern* may well wonder why there should be so much excited interest in the group of such ordinary-looking people relaxing in the saloon bar on a Thursday evening. He, or she, has heard perhaps that "science-fiction personalities" meet there and discuss their favourite subject. He notices the little piles of books and magazines that accumulate on the tables, and witnesses some of the friendly bartering and bargaining that goes on. If he too is interested in science-fiction he will probably want to know more about all this, and know too how long it has been going on, and how it started in the first place.

What a distance this group has travelled, from the days when it was a stolid, formal Association with Secretary and Treasurer and governing body, to the free-and-easy fellowship of to-day ! What a distance, and what a journey—a journey in time of fifteen earth-shattering years replete with disaster and achievement and concluding perhaps with the promise of triumph to come. This is the story that the newcomer will hear, in fragments of conversation, as he settles into the Circle of the White Horse.

In January of the now-distant year 1937 six young men went to Leeds as guests of the local Chapter of the Science-Fiction League, a body of enthusiasts originating in America and organised by a magazine publisher. These young men—E. J. Carnell, W. H. Gillings and A. C. Clarke of London, L. Johnson and E. F. Russell of Liverpool, with M. K. Hanson of Nuneaton —were drawn together by mutual interest in a form of literature: that flood of dramatic and exhilarating visions of the future known by the simple, rather unsatisfactory, name of "science-fiction." They were well read in the novels of H. G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon and other prophets, and they steadily acquired the American fiction magazines which followed the Wellsian tradition. They believed that this literature was something better than the cut-and-dried fiction of the day, that it had a unique high quality of its own, even an idealism, and a purpose. Their ambition—we might even call it an aspiration—was to forward that purpose.

At Leeds they helped found the Science-Fiction Association, as they called it, which later moved to London, with E. J. Carnell as Treasurer and another Londoner, G. Ken Chapman, as Secretary. Branches were established in London, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. They invited membership through the correspondence columns of their magazines, writing letters all over the country and all over the world. They accepted small subscriptions, and in return produced small mimeographed sheets of literary news. Branch meetings were held weekly, and national meetings, called conventions, were arranged annually.

Despite all this activity, the Science-Fiction Association achieved little. Its programme was "to forward the aims and objects of science-fiction in this country," and its members, full of ardour and excitability, made drastic

demands and counter-demands upon each other. Nobody, unfortunately, had a clue as to what the "aims and objects of science-fiction" were.

One thing desired by all, however, was a British science-fiction magazine. No spirit of transatlantic rivalry inspired this wish, for the American publishers, knowing that science and science-fiction are international forces, had done their best to offer stories with an international flavour, and in doing so had proved very hospitable to British contributors. Nevertheless, British readers felt that a home-produced magazine was needed alongside the very welcome imports.

Not only the readers but the writers wanted it. During years of economic depression, while British magazines were ceasing publication, British authors turned increasingly to the American market, and in the science-fiction field particularly many writers made reputations in the United States while remaining unknown in their own country. Thus there was a double demand for the magazine, and the need seemed to be met when Walter Gillings' experimental *Tales of Wonder* began quarterly appearances in 1938.

There were no luxurious haunts or club-rooms for members of the Association. The Londoners met in the Lyons tea-shops of Holborn, wandering from one to another and talking science-fiction until it was time to go home. Then two young men from the British Interplanetary Society, Arthur Clarke and William F. Temple, set up home in a large bachelor flat along Gray's Inn Road and kept open house for their friends every Friday. Here, in an atmosphere of books and astronomical pictures, the London Branch grew into a real fellowship of readers, writers and students of the future.

But for men and women of 1938-39 the immediate future held one sole appalling phenomenon: the Second World War, and all its abominations. *Tales of Wonder* was discontinued, the Association broke up, its members scattered to the Forces and to the far corners of the earth along with everyone else. Whenever they could they read whatever science-fiction they could get, and some of them even continued to write it. Mimeographed newssheets still circulated and kept ex-members in touch; the *Futurian War Digest*, produced by Michael Rosenblum of Leeds, appeared steadily for years. When on leave and visiting London, members often called on the present writer in his book-filled flat off Baker Street, which became, in its way, a minor echo of Gray's Inn Road.

Time hurried on, the war drew to its dreadful close, and towards the end I made an encounter which was to have a lasting effect on the progress of the group. At a literary circle which met for a while at a club in Soho I became acquainted with an adventurous author-cum-publisher, one Stephen D. Frances, to whom I talked enthusiastically of science-fiction. Twelve months later he invited me to prepare a collection of my own stories for Pendulum Publication, his company; and then, out of the blue, proposed that I edit his new science-fiction magazine. Hastily demurring, for I had no qualifications, I suddenly recollected that my friend John Carnell had left the Army only two days before and possessed most valuable property, in the form of some typescript stories for an abandoned magazine to be called *New Worlds*. And so, one grey afternoon in January 1946, we met at Charing Cross and hurried down the slushy Strand to the Pendulum offices in Lincoln's Inn, where, amid much argument, excitement, misunderstanding and enthusiasm, the new science-fiction magazine was born.

Meantime, with the war well behind us, demobilisation was setting in fast. One by one ex-members of the S.F.A. came back to rejoin old friends in old haunts. The Gray's Inn Road establishment was in other hands and its neighbouring *Red Bull Tavern* had been bombed, so they gathered round the three promoters of *New Worlds* in the *Shamrock*, in Fetter Lane, until their growing numbers forced them to cross the road to the greater spaces of the *White Horse*.

As the weeks wore on and men grew accustomed to peace-time life again, as they thawed out and recovered the sense of old acquaintance, talk flowed, laughter echoed and the old-time cheerfulness crept back. It was a stimulating group, that first post-war clutter of authors and artists. They included men who had already made reputations in the American magazines, John Beynon, A. Bertram Chandler, William F. Temple, and others. In time there appeared other young men whose names have become known to our present-day readers: Peter Phillips, E. C. Tubb, Sydney Bounds, Don Doughty, Peter Hawkins, John Christopher, Bob Clothier and Alan Hunter.

The six-year interlude had made one startling difference to the new London circle: there was no desire at all to revive the Science-Fiction Association. That body had been good, in its time, and in its three years of life it had created many friendships that might never have come about. But as an active group it had involved much tedious and unrewarding work for one or two people with no great benefit to the majority. For the future the Circle determined to remain as they had become, an informal, unorganised literary discussion group whence everybody came together to meet the boys and talk shop.

There was plenty to talk about. The scientific imaginings of twenty years ago had assumed forceful reality in the shape of radar, television, jet-engines, atomic energy, high-altitude rockets and ultra-sonic aircraft. A new generation of young readers was emerging with an appetite for these modern phenomena, and the writing fraternity of the *White Horse* was ready to cater for them and for the older generation too. The most enterprising of these was Arthur C. Clarke, one-time host of Gray's Inn Road who came out of the R.A.F. determined to put the British Interplanetary Society on the map. With a stream of newspaper articles, magazine stories, broadcast talks and books, culminating in his best-selling *The Exploration of Space* in 1951, he did more than any other man to make the nation interplanetary-minded, as it is, perhaps, to-day.

On his heels came the other resident of Gray's Inn Road, William F. Temple. After steadily building a reputation as a short-story writer of merit, Temple too soared to success with his novel *The Four-sided Triangle* of 1949, which so far has been published in six countries and translated into three languages. He followed this with a detective novel, also successful, and has kept up a steady output of short stories as well.

The most stylish and distinguished author of the group, John Wyndham, brought years of magazine writing to a climax with his outstanding story *The Day of the Triffids*, 1951, a novel which wrung astonished praise from experienced reviewers, some of whom were ready to hail the advent of a second H. G. Wells.

But long before these successes the literary men of the group had faced discouraging prospects. In its early days *New Worlds* had proved a winner,

but soon commerce as a whole was sinking into the ice-age of Austerity, and Pendulum Publications was feeling the pinch. Before the firm closed down in 1947 a third issue of *New Worlds* appeared and confirmed the magazine's success.

The irony of the situation was appreciated, but not enjoyed, by the promoters. They talked it over, week after week, at the bar of the *White Horse* until at last, in humour rather than hope, someone suggested that the group form its own company and publish the magazine themselves. The idea was all the more startling because none of those present had thought about going into business on their own; and whilst all of them were respectably settled in life, none of them were plutocrats. Nevertheless, a handful pooled their resources and in 1948 Nova Publications emerged as the proprietors of *New Worlds.*

There were difficulties galore—with paper, with printers, with trade distributors, with authors, with artists, and difficulties of inexperience too. Despite all this, the promoters knew they had one overwhelming advantage: a public that was interested in their goods, and ready to buy them. One after another difficulties were overcome, with impatient good-humour and the capacity to learn by experience. By 1951 *New Worlds* was an established periodical, selling steadily, and in its first five years it had discovered twenty-four new authors and six new artists—a striking achievement.

Meantime the Circle of the *White Horse* had grown out of all knowledge. An impetus was given by the advent of a new landlord, Lou Mordecai, a retired sailor with pronounced literary leanings and a fund of good stories. In the genial presence of their host the Circle members grew more than ever expansive, and eager to greet the newcomers who were appearing in a steady trickle. The "London Circle" had become known to science-fiction readers all over the country, and a recent glance at the Visitors' Book of the *White Horse* shows callers from (in order of appearance) Newport (Mon), Stoke-on-Trent, Rye, Trumpington, Glasgow, Gillingham, Spalding, Inverness, Cardiff, Leicester, Loughborough, the B.A.O.R., Stirling, Dereham, Nottingham, Wymondham, Entwistle, Weston-super-Mare, Oxford and Farnborough. A contrast, this, to the time when a dozen or so young men would gather in the rooms of Gray's Inn Road; now an average of forty or fifty men and women came together every week in the saloon bar to talk science-fiction. Yes, women too to-day, and in growing numbers. The reason was given us by a leading journalist, Mrs. Joni Murray, Editor of *Heiress*, who remarked that thousands of young women like herself had done scientific work on radar, aircraft engines and so on in the Forces, and had acquired a taste for science, and with it, for science-fiction.

The Circle was also becoming known outside the clannish world of science-fiction readers. Arthur Clarke's broadcast talks on rockets had brought a welcome B.B.C. visitor, John Keir Cross, author of *The Other Passenger*, who dropped in from time to time when duties permitted. Occasional newspaper men from neighbouring Fleet Street called and made interested enquiries. Most notable of these were two young journalists from Kemsley Press, Miss Joyce Emerson and Mr. Skelton Robinson, whose evening of interviews with Circle members brought a friendly article in the magazine *GO*. Our contacts with the Press brought some interesting and surprising revelations. The success of books like Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*,

Clarke's *The Exploration of Space*, Bradbury's *The Silver Locusts* and others which commanded widespread attention, showed that the legion of science-fiction readers was far larger than we formerly supposed. To clinch the supposition, the appearance of such films as "Destination Moon," "When Worlds Collide" and "The Day the Earth Stood Still" showed that many reviewers had been reading science-fiction since they were so high, and though they usually scoffed at it in public they belonged too to the great literary "underground movement," and could now admit it openly !

The Festival Year of 1951 saw the crowning achievement of the *White Horse* circle as a social group when the great international Festival Convention was held at Whitsun. Yes, "international" now, for the Circle was known the world over. Let us glance again at the Visitors' Book and see whence the visitors came: Minnesota, Vancouver, Wellington (N.Z.), New York City, Maine, Couchella (Calif.), Sydney (N.S.W.), Wassenaar (Holland), Haarlem (Holland), Dayton (Ohio), Melbourne, Toronto, Wallingford (Penn.), Los Angeles, Haifa and Chicago—all drawn by the potency of science-fiction to this port-of-call whence they could meet friends and talk things over. It was a happy state of affairs for the organisers. Men who had been to the pre-war conventions remembered how fifty or sixty young men met and chatted in a Saturday afternoon meeting. Now they greeted upwards of two hundred people including visitors from eight countries, and enjoyed two days each twelve hours long of continuous discussion and hospitality.

Guests of honour at this memorable gathering were Forrest J. Ackerman, the most famous science-fiction publicist in America, and his wife Wendayne, an acknowledged expert in "Dianetics—the new science of Mental Healing." It was Forrest J. who accepted, on behalf of the recipients, the International Fantasy Awards for the best science-fiction novel and the best technical book of the year. The idea of bestowing such an Award had been the inspiration of somebody at the *White Horse* only a few weeks previously and a Committee was set up on the spot, so that there was only time to make replicas for display at the Convention.

Soon after the Convention the *White Horse* group had the pleasure of welcoming L. Sprague de Camp, one of the three or four leading American authors in the field, who gave us a glorious hour or two of dissertation. There was a fleeting glimpse of another brilliant American writer, Poul Anderson, and his brother John, who dropped in while on a tour of Britain and Europe. In the autumn, Mr. Harry Pease, of the 20th Century Fox Film Corporation, kindly arranged a special showing of "The Day the Earth Stood Still" for a large *White Horse* party. A few weeks later Miss Dolly Gwynne, of the Chepstow Theatre in Notting Hill Gate, came to tell us of the remarkable interplanetary play, "6000 Years to Sirius" by Peter Tremlett, which was to be produced at her theatre, and was later much admired by *White Horse* theatre-goers. With this rush of visits and return visits an exciting year concluded. Newcomers to the Circle of the *White Horse* in the last weeks of 1951 were to find themselves in a group which had seen its much-loved literature, once derided as the most ridiculous of sensational trash, establish itself in books, plays, films, broadcasts and television as an intellectual force that had to be reckoned with. Well might they look into the future, as they usually did, with confidence, hope, and expectation.

THE END

THE WORLD THAT CHANGED

By J. T. M'INTOSH

Two years away from Earth wasn't a long time for a space pilot. Funny how Mother Earth didn't seem the same upon returning. A matter of conditioning?

Illustrated by HUNTER

An old joke concerned the spaceship crew who returned from the outer planets, went out on a sightseeing tour, and agreed on assembling again that Earth certainly had changed. The navigator said: "What d'you mean, Earth? This is Venus."

What kept that anecdote alive wasn't any wit in it, but the high percentage of truth in its assumption. If a man made himself a hermit on Earth he was warmed by the same sun, breathed the same air, resisted the same gravity as the people in the cities he had renounced. If he went out and spent a couple of years in space or on a strange planet, the strangeness of fresh air, one gravity and a sun ninety-three million miles away made the people, the customs, the bustling life of Earth every bit as strange as anything he had seen on his travels.

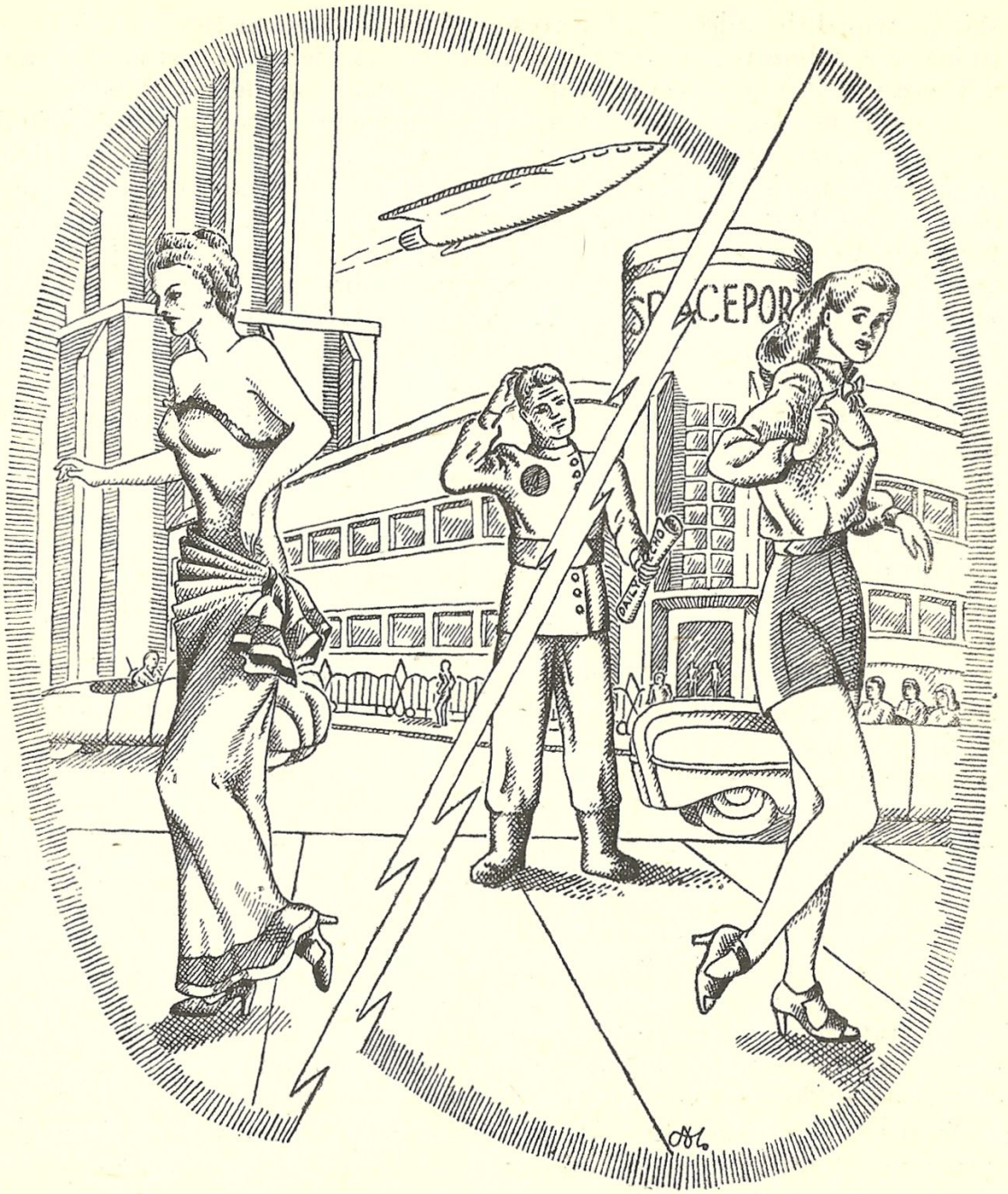
The first time Barry Lester returned to Earth from a two-year run he feared for his sanity. He went to theatre shows and didn't understand them. He read newspapers and let them drop from his dazed fingers. He talked to people and found them looking at him queerly and breaking off the conversation. And since the millions on Earth couldn't have gone insane in two years, it looked as if the strangeness was in him, not in everyone else.

The ship touched down in Paris. He passed through quarantine quickly and was out in the Paris streets almost at once, alone. He couldn't cross them. His reflexes seemed to have slowed down. With horror he watched children and old people stroll into the highways and thread their way unconcernedly between roaring, flashing cars and trucks and trolleys. His gaze shot to a girl who stopped abruptly inches from a speeding sedan, turned and casually walked back for something she had forgotten.

He didn't notice someone was talking to him until the flow of words ceased, and then his mind was able to disinter only one of them.

"Non," he said hesitantly, "pas aveugle." The man who had spoken was still staring at him, and backed without shifting his gaze so that a car had to swerve violently, but without checking its speed.

So they thought him blind. He moved along the sidewalk, stepped in front of a stationary car and poked his head cautiously beyond it. A truck



missed his projecting head by an inch, the driver momentarily staring at him incuriously.

He hailed a taxicab and mentioned an hotel, half afraid that the establishment would no longer exist. But the driver nodded and shot from the kerb into the stream of traffic.

The spotlessness, the newness of everything in the hotel was a shock. The ship was clean, and all metal parts were polished because often there was nothing to do but polish everything in sight. But the refinement of lush carpets, scented air, subdued lighting, and other things which he could not identify but which made their impression, kept him examining his surroundings with an emotion which had more of fear than of curiosity in it.

He spent five minutes in the bathroom waiting for a mirror to cloud as hot water vapour swirled in front of it. Every day when he shaved on the

ship he wiped the mirror with a corner of the towel as he brought the razor to his face. Here the mirror remained clear. He felt it at last and worked out hazily that it was heated deliberately so that it would not cloud.

As the days passed, however, he slipped gradually into the stream of life on Earth again. Seeing his shipmates helped. The fact that their reactions were similar to his, but retarded or advanced, enabled him to regain mental balance. He began to step into streets and expect to reach the other side. He opened conversations with an increasing confidence that the people he talked to would find nothing stranger about him than his accent and his notions of how French should be spoken. He started to whistle new tunes. He took girls on three successive nights to places of entertainment, and the third was surprised to learn that he was a spaceman.

But he understood at last why spacemen either resigned after their first trip or went on being spacemen for the rest of their lives. That first return to Earth hit you. You either found you couldn't leave it again or discovered you could take Earth or leave it.

Dan Thomson, his closest pal on the *Queen Bea*, was a different person on Earth. Barry found he didn't know him quite so well. They pretended hard, as close friends often do when both are aware they are losing a lot of what they had in common.

"I'll be glad to get back," said Dan. "You lose something in space, Barry, but you've got to recognise it. You've got to understand that you have lost it, and not try to get it back."

Barry didn't quite understand this, but their acquaintance had reached the stage where he couldn't very well say so.

When the *Queen Bea* took off again, Dan wasn't on it. He had sent his resignation to Captain Wallace the night before take-off.

The second time he came back Barry knew what to expect. He took the initial strangeness easily and aroused the wonder of Jim Becker, who had taken Dan's place. He tried to make it easier for Jim.

"Remember when you first drove a car ?" he asked. "You made up your mind you were going to stop at a corner, and ran through all the things you were going to do. As you were carefully doing them, someone shot past you, hovered lightly on the bend, and was away before you were quite sure he was there. This is like that, Jim. Take it easy for a day or two. You'll find life about you slows down again."

"It'll have to," said Jim.

Still, when Jim wasn't there, it was anything but easy to look at the papers and pretend they meant anything. The landing was in London this time. The play Barry had seen and failed to understand in Paris was in its third year on Shaftesbury Avenue. Others must understand it. Arty, abstruse plays didn't run for three years. Street accidents were on the downgrade. Domestic power from atomic energy was only ten years away. Radio books with printed circuits could be carried in vest pockets. Intelligent robots were only ten years off. The first glamour-girl M.P. had been elected—aged nineteen, she was shown in a bathing suit. Faster-than-light space travel was only ten years away.

Barry went and saw the arty show again. Perhaps the fact that it was in English this time helped; at any rate, he saw how clever it was. But since when had clever plays had three-year runs ?

He bought a book entitled *Space Psychology*, published by Nova Publications. It described the experience of returning to Earth in great detail. But it was soon obvious that the author and his subjects were all one-trippers. It was the story of the man who went into space, came back, and stayed at home. What made spacemen leave Earth again was frankly described as "space neurosis."

Barry wasn't orientated that time until a day or two before the take-off for Mars again. He discovered he was when he met a youngster who wanted to be a spaceman, talked to him for an hour about it, and was told derisively in the end he didn't know what he was talking about.

It was curious, that was the same as last time. Only when that girl whose name he had forgotten had failed to place him as a spaceman had he really felt at home on Earth.

Jim resigned and Barry was able to get his youthful and sceptical friend on the crew, to be trained *en voyage*.

The third time Barry came back was the start of an adventure. It was as he left the spaceport and looked around London that he seriously considered for the first time the possibility that humanity, except for spacemen, was changing radically and abnormally. Perhaps, he admitted to himself, that was the beginning of madness.

For the first time he had no contact with the rest of the crew. That helped. It was six weeks before take-off for Mars, time enough to gather a lot of evidence and reach some conclusions. The difficulty was that everything was evidence. He stayed in a boarding-house, not an hotel, because while he had plenty of money he was no longer looking simply for luxury and diversion.

The first day he walked circumspectly in the streets, fed birds in the parks, overheard conversations and watched the people about him. His resolve seemed to make the business of acclimatisation easier and swifter for him—as if, always easily identified as a foreigner in a strange country, he was able to pass himself off easily as a native when he went as a spy. The first man he talked to, a casual skirt-watcher in one of the parks, seemed to have no suspicion that he was anything so unusual as a spaceman.

"It's coming off the bottom again," said the man reflectively, "and going back on the top."

Barry followed his gaze unhurriedly and saw without surprise that he was looking at a pretty young mother playing with her children on the grass. On a warm day her shoulders were completely covered but her skirt was no more than an apron over white shorts.

"I see what you mean," said Barry. "Read the papers much ?"

"I'm pretty up to date."

"What happened to atomic power ? I haven't seen much about it lately."

"Scientists do what the man in the street wants—and he's gradually lost interest in atomic power."

"Oh. Might be right, at that. And what happened to the intelligent robots ?"

"That was a good idea, until the scientists began to be afraid they might be successful. Then they dropped the whole thing, quick."

"I haven't heard much about faster-than-light space travel, either."

"Who wants it ? Why get nowhere faster ? Look at that, will you ! I'm glad some girls still have that old-fashioned look. Stirs up happy memories."

But Barry only glanced briefly at the girl who was still wearing it on the bottom and off the top. He kept his attention on the man. The emphasis had shifted. He was looking strangely at others instead of being looked at strangely.

He spent the next day wondering why, if there really was some radical change, no one else seemed to have noticed it. It wasn't too difficult to find the answer. According to his vague premise, it would be spacemen or space travellers who would see anything there was to see. That was a small group. Most passengers were colonists who didn't come back. Nearly all the others made the trip once, then stayed at home. Some got what that book had called space neurosis, and became spacemen or stewardesses. Most spacemen made only one trip too. The rest stayed mostly on board ship while it grounded. There were few, very few, like himself who went on being spacemen and went on sightseeing in Earth cities. Perhaps he was in a special position to see what everyone else had missed.

He began taking each item—each newspaper, book, person, film and show—and studying it to the dregs, trying to drain from it all that had gone into it. He formed acquaintances and cultivated them until they said whatever came into their minds. It could be done very quickly when it was regarded as a job, when one ignored unpleasantness, selfishness and thoughtlessness in the search for information.

He spent a day going over one newspaper. Having taken the customary acclimatisation in his stride, he found nothing strange about it, at first. People still died, wrote books, got married, broke records, won huge bets, murdered each other. But as he began to write down anything which struck him as being in the least surprising, his dossier grew in volume and interest.

Why, for example, was one murder the second lead and another a small paragraph on page seventeen ? The circumstances of both seemed similar. One case was no more baffling than the other, the victim no more important. But the half-formed theory that some individuals had become more important than others in this world, for some reason, was stifled by the consideration that the accent was less on individuals than he remembered.

Crime seemed to be going down. Criminals were more often and more quickly caught. If one was the cause of the other—which one ?

People seemed younger, healthier, more agile. Did that mean anything, or was it merely a result of the admitted slowing-down of reflexes which came with space-travel ?

The fact that three scientific developments which he had noted on his last visit had been abandoned seemed to suggest something, but if science had failed unexpectedly here, it had succeeded just as unexpectedly elsewhere—in the sub-Atlantic tunnel, in world-wide television, in the cancer cure, in a dozen things which had been expected in ten years, but not in two.

It all came back to the same thing—people were the answer. He went out to look at some of them. Seven years since he had been one of them. He wasn't any more. How, then, had they or he changed ?

They were quicker-moving, quicker-thinking—or he was slower ? That had always been going on. A man from the sixteenth century wouldn't have much chance in a London street. But why . . .

Yes, he had something. Why were the passengers on the *Queen Bea* so normal ? If not at first, within a day or two. It wasn't just that one grew used to them. They were like the people he remembered, yet they came from this new Earth. They dressed differently, talked differently, even thought a little differently—but they didn't shock as a return to Earth did. Did that mean anything, or was it just another of the thousand things that anyone might expect ?

The feeling was growing that he was on the verge of discovery. He had ignored the others staying at the boarding-house because he didn't want to draw attention to his quest. Asking questions where he was unknown, of people he would never see again, had seemed as good a way as any of gathering data—apart from the few friendships he had formed, chiefly with people who didn't know where he lived. It was easy enough to call on them in such a way that they never realised they couldn't find him if they wanted to.

But suddenly as he saw the girl whose room was across the landing looking at him with an interest she did not attempt to conceal, he thought: You may know what I'm looking for. I may be able to get it from you.

He crossed the passage and leaned on her door. "Look," he said, putting on an expression of engaging frankness, "I've wanted to speak to you for a week now, but I was afraid you'd bite my nose off. Are you going to ?"

"I never bite people's noses off," she replied with a smile. She was a good-looking girl, the kind he would have cultivated much earlier if he hadn't had something on his mind. Somehow girls hadn't seemed to matter any more.

"Suppose you tell him you have a headache," he suggested.

"Who ?"

"Whoever you're going out with to-night. Try me instead. Money refunded if not satisfied."

"To-night ? When, where and why ?"

"When—now. Where—anywhere you like. Why—you pays your money and you takes your choice."

She smiled again. She was dressed in the new fashion, only half in yet—chaste blouse with wide, angled shoulders and concealing folds, and no skirt, only silk trunks. But that at least, Barry thought, meant nothing more than that fashion had swung again. Two years before women had been coy about their legs and unexpectedly casual above the waist. And yet—wasn't two years a very short time for such a change ? Fashion didn't usually move as quickly as that.

When it came to him, it came suddenly. Barry seemed no nearer the solution than ever, or even knowing for certain there was a solution. Then, suddenly, it was there—a wild guess, but the only answer. He hoped desperately he was wrong, but he knew he was right.

The girl asked him in while she changed. Her name was Anne Martin, and she looked about twenty-two. She smiled a lot, and she had an attractive laugh. She had the gestures and the manners of a good hostess, as if she passionately wanted him to feel at home, waiting with him until she was sure he liked the drink she had mixed for him and that he was comfortable.

Then in the same spirit of hospitality she changed in the frame of her bedroom door, as if knowing she was good to look at and ready to do anything for her guest's diversion. But there was more to it than that. There

was the passionate wish, the hunger, that Barry, whom she had just met, should like her and find her attractive.

As he watched her put on an evening dress Barry thought of the man who had answers for the abandonment of three scientific projects. It wasn't curious any more that he had answers. Barry remembered the murder that mattered and the murder that didn't. The drop in crime. All the other curious things that weren't really curious.

He rose and strolled casually across to Anne. He knew that what he was going to do was a terrible mistake if he was wrong and perhaps a no less serious mistake if he was right. He kissed her, to make sure, and when it didn't settle anything he went on anyway.

She took a long time to die. He had to hit her again and again, and when she was down kick her until his boots cracked. Hitting her in the stomach or diaphragm made no difference to her. It was only when he found the weak spot, the shoulders, that he managed to put her out of action.

She had flesh, there was no doubt of that. He cut it, and it bled. There were discolourations where he had struck her—ordinary discolourations. Even when he was satisfied that she was dead it was difficult to believe that the thing at his feet was anything but a human body.

It had been a terrible risk. But he couldn't afford to be meek about it. He thought ironically: *Blessed are the meek, for the robots shall inherit the earth.*

There was no machinery about it. It was man-made organism, on a different model from that of nature, but little less effective. At first he hurried over his investigation, afraid that these robots, or whatever they were, had some kind of communication which might have given the alarm. But the brain, a curious blue jelly, implied no better telepathic qualities than ordinary human protoplasm.

How it had happened he could only guess. How many robots there were was another guess. But some things were clear. Things like Anne Martin were gradually taking over the Earth. Their presence explained the things that had troubled him. Perfect models of humans, they—thought differently. Barry was sure now that he could identify them as he had identified Anne Martin.

They had an inferiority complex, the robots. They wanted something from humans—love, perhaps, admiration. And they had limited themselves, so far, to Earth. There might be some hope there. It might be that the robot mind could not stand the stresses of space.

Anyway, Barry's course was clear. The *Queen Bea* would leave without him. He had something on his hands—an investigation first; then, perhaps, a fight. There must be some way . . .

Others must know. It wouldn't be difficult to convince them, but when the robots found out what was going on, as they soon must—then something would start.

There was a knock at the door. Barry's eyes darted round the room, found the fire-escape outside the window. Perhaps when he got down it there would be something waiting for him—something that looked like a human being. He would soon find out. Go for their shoulders, he told himself. That's the weak spot.

THE END

ASTEROID CITY

By E. R. JAMES

The Three Worlds depended upon each other for their existence—no single planet could have the balance of power. To Earthmen went the task of keeping the peace—in a lax, decadent manner.

Illustrated by QUINN

I

Across the breath-taking depths of space, a line of stars winked each in turn, and Phillip Henry Penn, standing with other passengers upon the promenade deck of the Asteroid Ferry, turned conversationally to his companion.

"That's odd, Mr. Rosay. I thought only atmospheres caused stars to flicker—"

"Eh ?"

The plump Venusian's smile faded as he stared into the vastness. Then, with unexpected speed, he grabbed Phillip's arm, swinging him around.

And incandescence glared in. Passengers' shadows stood like skittles on the longitudinal bulkhead.

Several women screamed, one ear-splittingly close. A blast of radiant heat that had its origin outside the liner momentarily stilled the commotion. As light and heat died, however, someone bumped into Phillip's back.

He glimpsed a slender woman staggering away from him. Her hands were over her face and she moaned as he caught hold of her.

"My eyes ! I can't see ! Those devils—"

"Steady, Miss—"

She was close against him, in his arms, as he realised another man was trying to take charge of her.

Phillip surrendered her in embarrassment. He glanced at Rosay. "What in heaven was that flash ?"

"Probably liquid aluminium and oxygen. The Martian patrol, you know. Coming out from the Sun as we do, we might have been anyone—so they illuminated our dark side instead of going through the more lengthy tele-recognition." The Venusian smiled blandly.

Phillip turned from the bewildering sparkle of stars. "Bit high-handed, wasn't it ? That poor girl . . ."

"Oh, she'll be all right in a few minutes. Come along, now. We'll have

to go to the saloon to be inspected—and meanwhile you'll see what's happening better in the 'scope there."

Phillip glanced a trifle regretfully after the slender woman and her escort, and Rosay leant towards him, smiling and confidential. "Her name is Helga Lanry. She is a citizen of the City. The man is . . . her brother."

"You—" Phillips hesitated. "You seem to know everyone . . ."

The Venusian shrugged. "Excuse me, please."

"Er—of course." Phillip watched him hurry off to overtake the uniformed figure of the First Officer who was heading for Control and reassuring startled Earthmen and suave Venusians as he went.

The three-dimension 'scope in the centre of the luxurious saloon showed five black warships, the largest craft boxed in by the others, closing in with naval precision towards the ferry. A spaceboat left the centre ship and crossed the intervening space.

To imagine both the non-apparent, but violent motion of warships and ferry as they coasted on silently, and the obvious, secondary movement of that tiny craft strained Phillip's earthbound imagination.

The clang of contact reverberated faintly into the saloon and he turned with the others silently to watch the double doors of the main companionway.

The Martians strode in. Sombre in tight black, they seemed out of place beside the brightly-clad Venusians and the more conservative Earthmen passengers and crew. Phillip could hear their rasping breath. Evidently they felt the effect of the extra gravity of the ferry. Gaunt, dry-looking men, all of them, they seemed to match their stiff, drab uniforms.

"Humans ?" a fellow clerk had said, his voice a curious mixture of envy and scorn. "Aliens, I'd call them. Extremes of humanity. Venusians born in a swamp; Martians in a desert: only one thing common to both—that's envy of us. Hardly any of them have been to Earth. All that way— The isolation. Don't be a fool, Phil. What's a chance of extra promotion—against the probability of a wreck lost in space, a hole in your back or disgrace through something you don't understand ?"

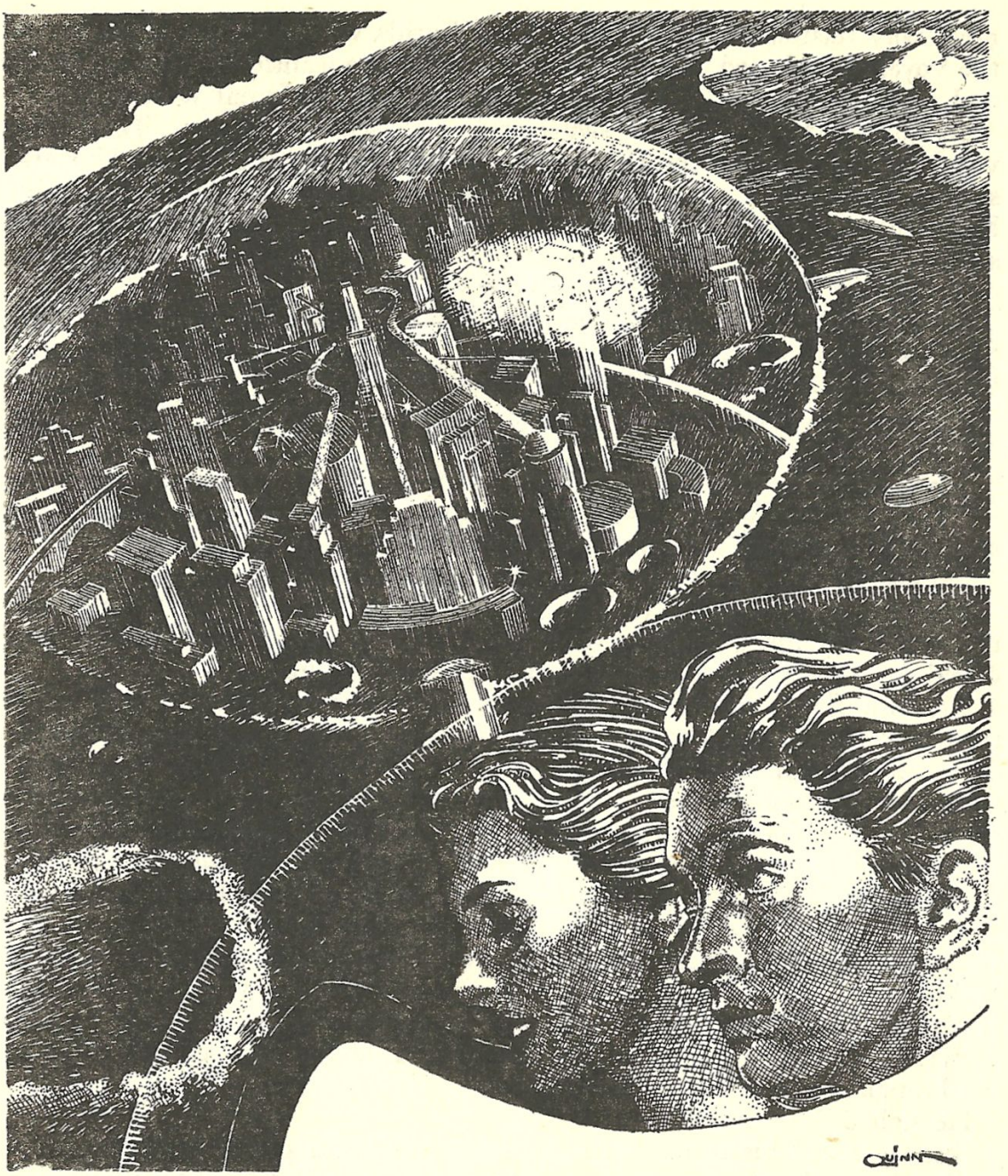
Twenty-five years since the founding of the Three Worlds' Alliance . . . Long enough for colonists to found a whole new generation . . .

But Rosay had smiled at the notion of colonists. "How like an Earthman," he had murmured. "You forget the great Exodus. Think of the relative sizes of populations."

Phillip had indeed been amazed by the size of Mars City, its culture and smooth machinery, rising out of the grim, monotonous desert. Rosay had told him something of the lush fecundity of Venus, too, and had chided him, half-mockingly.

"Progress ? And why not, Mr. Penn ? Have you been so taken in by Earth propaganda not to guess at such things ? Is it not to be expected that Earth will not be surpassed in some fields of human endeavour ? Why, it was one of your own Earthmen Elders who expressed the rate of progress as a simple mathematical equation . . ."

Put like that, it was not surprising. Once people had been conveyed across the vastness, it might not be so easy to get them back. And those in charge, aware of great, new power, would not want to lose it, and would hinder such return.



Because of vast supplies on hand, the man-hours of ordinary living would be extremely low for years. The resources waiting to be tapped were staggering, and the inherent ability the best Earth could send. Work and research would make the people feel at home, and they would stay . . .

So that Venus became the larder and Mars the workshop of the Three Worlds—

A Martian paused before Phillip. "You are an Earthman ?"

"Yes."

"Your papers, Earthman ? Hurry—you are not on your own degenerate planet now !"

"What !" Phillip flushed hotly—hesitated— No! taking offence would only cause a distasteful scene.

The incident, however, rankled in his mind. He felt he could understand,

now, why relations between the Three Worlds were so often strained. As the voyage continued, too, he sensed a different meaning in Rosay's smiles and gentle mockery. Three worlds indeed—three different worlds !

At last the ferry began to swing around its gyro-stabilisers. To Phillip, watching from the promenade deck, the sensation that the glittering Universe swung around him was startlingly vivid, and a feminine voice at his side broke through his absorption without any understanding of what had been said.

He turned with a start. "I beg your pardon ?"

"Not at all, Mr. Penn." The eyes of the slender girl twinkled at him. "It is a wonderful sight to you, I know." She put her hand on his arm. "I shouldn't interrupt, really, but to tell the truth I've only just plucked up courage to thank you for what you did . . ."

"But, I didn't do anything . . ."

They stared at each other awkwardly.

"You're from Earth—" she said suddenly. "I've heard so much about it— Won't you tell me what it's like ?"

"What it's like . . ." he repeated rather foolishly.

She was young and pretty, and her eyes shone. Earth would be a legend to her. Even the great city—so like Mars City—at which the ferry had called for a brief few hours had not dispelled her illusions.

To him Earth was chiefly the vast, sprawling building of the Interplanetary Bank. Eight hours a day, four days a week, he passed behind his own little section of the long, long counter. Nothing romantic about that. Customers presented their credits, cashed cheques, and the click of the recording machines, the hum of the tele-checking devices connecting with branches all over the Three Worlds, and the soft conversations all merged into the general monotony. Should he tell her he had left Earth because he had felt so very bored. Even the theatres showing the plays of the old romantics, the great artists, had only served to add to his restlessness. Even holiday glimpses of other countries were mere whets to the appetite which craved to climb to the stars.

Earth . . . How thrilled he had been when he had been chosen to go to the branch office at Asteroid City !

He sighed.

She squeezed his arm. "It must be a wonderful place, Mr. Penn. . ."

"Yes." He looked out at the revolving Universe and tried to picture the Earth she wanted to hear about. And he began to find it easier than he'd feared, and warmed. "And yet," he ended, "I suppose we take it all for granted, living there."

"You're joking !"

And they chatted on. She had been to visit her mother's people on Venus and, although she had enjoyed the change, she was glad to be going back to the City. Her work was in a low-level office, not far above the Asteroid mines, but she often visited the Interplanetary Bank in the course of a week. After the uranium content of each new vein of carnotite rock had been estimated and its extent plumbed, she was the one who calculated the value and reported to the bank and other interested parties. Off duty, she spent most of her time in the top-level, right underneath the City dome, either in the old apartments in which she lived or in the Interplanetary Gardens beside them.

II

By the time the ferry began to settle down upon the spacial dust-mote which was the Asteroid of their designation, Phillip was calling her Helga.

Disembarkation separated them, she heading for Customs, while he entered Immigration.

The Venusian there smiled at him. "Please sit down. Er— Well, Earthman, may I offer my best wishes for your happiness here . . . and at the same time give you some advice, and a warning.

"You will find all modern amusements here for your pleasure, and are, in theory, completely free of the City from the moment you leave this office.

"You will find a small colony of other Earthmen in the Lotus Club, however, and you will do well not to venture into lower levels than that, until you have become used to living here. You see, the population of the City is 65 per cent. Martian, and the deeper levels and certain areas of the higher levels are equipped to provide gravity and other conditions to suit them.

"The majority of Earthmen are engaged in the entertainment industry." The Venusian smiled as though at a secret joke of his own. "Only a few are scattered in other work. As the Governor, however, is of Earth, he will tell you more of this than I have time to do.

"Most of the employees of the Interplanetary Bank here are Venusians, and I am sure you will get on well with them. Men of my planet also manage the civil administration, and you will find them ready to assist you in any way.

"The Martians here are either members of the police—this being their responsibility—or else mining engineers. The police are . . . strict—but efficient. The miners are, you will find, best left to their own society. They are low class." The Venusian smiled deprecatingly.

He caressed his double chin. "My warning is for you to keep clear of any subversive elements. You will find Martians amongst the police who would like to see their planet in full control of this valuable mine. They consider it is theirs by right of the proximity of their home. And you may meet others who will try to undermine your loyalty to the Bank with bribes. The value of uranium fuel is continually rising. Should you be convicted of any breach of trust, the very least of the penalties which we can inflict is deportation."

He bowed Phillip out.

The white-haired Governor shook hands warmly. "Always pleased to welcome an Earthman. Tell me, you didn't happen to see that last test series at Lord's . . . No? Oh, well . . .

"Hurrumph! Yes. Have a whisky? Soda? Well, young man, you've dropped in on us at a bad time. The Martians supply the labour and machines; the Venusians finance the place; we sit on the fence and try to steer a middle course between their quarrels. Damn difficult! And things have been too confounded quiet of late.

"Hurrumph! Well, I'll tell you what. Nothing to do here for a while. I'll run you down to the Lotus Club and you can meet some of the others over cocktails before you go on to your hotel for dinner."

The Governor's small, Earth-green runabout conveyed them to the nearest lift and they sank from under the great, translucent dome into the thronged, lighted levels below. Phillip caught glimpses of the colourful Venusian people and buildings as they went.

He followed the Governor into the Lotus Club with mixed feelings. The men and women of Earth who rose to meet him seemed familiar and yet strange. An impression that they lived in the City only because they must, grew in his mind as he was plagued with questions of Earth. What was on at the Palladium ? How much did roast beef cost at the Corner House these days ? What season was it in Vancouver ? Had there been any more hurricanes on the Maine coast ? Was there any decent Earth-grown food in the holds of the ferry—or was it all the watery and insipid products of Venus?

They made him stay for dinner, fed him well but gave him no respite from the barrage of questions. He was glad to get away. In the taxi—piloted by a Venusian—he sighed. Were all the Earthmen here middle-aged and disillusioned ?

His hotel—the Green Bower—was on the Third Level. As the taxi ascended the lift towards it, carried up by the rising air current, Phillip suddenly thought that the traffic was denser than before.

The Venusian slipped his machine deftly out of the stream, peered ahead through the traffic land and soared up near the roof, and hovered.

He turned, smiling regretfully. "Your hotel seems to be on fire, Sir."

"Good heavens !"

A crowd milled angrily below. Fire-fighters hovered and poured chemicals through smoking windows. Traffic swarmed like disturbed bees in the air all around.

"You would like to call the Governor, Earthman ?" suggested the Venusian. "Accommodation is hard to find in the City."

Phillip looked at him. "No. Land near the entrance. There will be arrangements made by the manager for his guests."

"Very well, Sir. But the manager will probably have been arrested. He is Venusian . . . and the police are Martian."

"That's ridiculous !"

"As you say, Sir. But the police will say he has endangered the City. He will be charged with negligence—it is supposed to be our failing—and if the case is proved, he will be deported, and a Martian manager will be installed."

"You're joking !"

The Venusian shrugged and smiled. He dropped the taxi with a seeming utter disregard for its safety through the swarm of traffic.

At once a police car gonged them.

"I was annoyed by my passenger . . ." murmured the Venusian.

"What ?" The grim Martian frowned. "Just the sort of excuse I'd expect from your kind." He glanced at Phillip, and then stared. "You're an Earthman ?"

"Yes."

"New here ?"

"Yes, but—"

"No argument, Earthman ! I'll overlook this, but in future, do not cause trouble. Do you understand ?"

"All right." Phillip contained his irritation. What had he done or said . . .? But standards were different, here.

"Well, Earthman—" Rosay sidled through the crowd, smiling greeting. "So we meet again. I hope this was not your hotel ?"

To Phillip's consternation, the man confirmed the taxi-pilot's suspicions.

"You'll get no help here, I'm afraid, Mr. Penn. Perhaps I could be of use ?"

Phillip thanked him, but no. He did not feel happy about worrying the Governor, either. Suddenly the solution presented itself.

The taxi he called turned out to be piloted by a Martian. The man dourly took him to the upper level and stopped beside a moving way. There was a machinery curfew, he stated. The moving way would take Phillip the rest of the way, while he made the descent to his own level, before the power supply was cut off.

As the deserted road-strip carried Phillip smoothly on the last lap of his journey, he marvelled at the wonder of the giant "blister" that capped the City. An example of Martian engineering, he supposed rather bitterly. In one way, though, the gardens all around the occasional houses were more wonderful. The distant, ever-shining Sun was scarcely enough to support the multitudinous varieties that swayed and moved in the man-made breeze. Venusian gardening, most probably. Earth, a tiny light in the sky—even now when at conjunction—seemed most remote.

The road-strip slowed, and stopped. Phillip blew through his nose with impatience. He picked up his heavy zipbag and began to walk. A figure in the red of the Martian police emerged quite suddenly from the shrubs beside the road.

"Hey, you."

Phillip crossed to him.

"Earthman ?" queried the Martian.

Phillip nodded.

The Martian paused. He seemed to be listening intently. "Do you hear anything, Earthman ?"

"No . . ." Phillip hesitated. Distant sounds as of booted feet tramping, tramping caught his attention. "Yes." He looked ahead. "Yes. Over there."

"Sounds like soldiers, doesn't it ?"

"That's right—"

"Yes. Wait a minute while I report in—" The policeman, fumbling with his pocket radio, suddenly turned, his hand reaching for the gun at his belt.

He stopped, choked, and suddenly sank to the ground.

Phillip tensed. The palm fronds moved gently, rustling. All other sounds had ceased. Beneath him the roar of the City was stilled. He crouched, and felt for the dead man's radio.

A large, police-red flier, like an open-top bus, zoomed up from below. Its spinning vanes tainted the air with fumes as it landed accurately at Phillip's side. Police leapt from it. Two advanced to watch Phillip in silence. Sitting on his zipbag, feeling shaken and chilled by his unaccustomed nearness to sudden death, he watched men beat away through the undergrowth, while others began a scientific investigation of the crime.

A second, but smaller red flier streaked up and landed as efficiently as the first. Officials already on the scene saluted the Martian who stepped out.

"My name is Lief Swenson !" he barked at Phillip, "and I am Police Commissioner. Why did you report this crime to the Governor instead of through normal channels ?"

Phillip stood up. "I am new here . . ."

"I know that." Commissioner Swenson consulted a punched card in his

hand. "Earthman. Age 24. Unmarried. Counter Clerk in the Interplanetary Bank. Name: Phillip Henry Penn. Correct ?"

"Yes."

The Commissioner nodded. "Remain here." He stalked off to receive the reports of his men. Phillip sat down again. He had thought himself clever in calling the Governor; but now he began to wonder.

A Venusian-blue flier floated leisurely up from the lift shaft. Phillip noticed Swenson glance up and then ignore it contemptuously.

A few moments later Rosay strolled, smiling, towards Phillip. "Are you having trouble, Earthman ?" He glanced at the body of the policeman but showed no surprise.

Phillip wondered suddenly how many people had listened in to his broadcast. "No," he murmured, "I'm all right, thanks."

He looked up hopefully as a fourth flier shot up from the distant shaft. Yes, at last the Governor's reassuringly Earth-green runabout— It hovered a moment, darted right, hovered again, sidled gently left and then came rushing down in a long dive.

The Governor stepped out, pushed back his white hair and hurried forward in some agitation. Rosay smiled and bowed. The Commissioner turned smartly, saluted perfunctorily and kept them waiting.

"The assassin," he said, as he finally came up to them, "seems to have been concealed in the undergrowth. He was, the preliminary tests show, of a similar height and build to Mr. Penn."

"But," said the Governor brightly, "Mr. Penn is an Earthman."

"Exactly." The Martian's eyes glared into Phillip's. "You will report your new lodgings to the police before noon to-morrow." He turned.

The corpse was being removed. The investigators began to move their equipment into the undergrowth.

Phillip looked blankly at the Governor. "What did you mean when you said I was an Earthman ?"

"Well," said the Governor seriously. "Well, you can—hurrumph !—take it as you please. It might be that he takes your word, or . . . it might be that he thinks you do not have the cunning—being of degenerate Earth—to have reported a crime which you could easily have committed."

III

"Come in, Earthman," said Helga. "We thought you might come here."

"Did you ?" Phillip cocked one eyebrow.

Her eyes sparkled. "I said 'we'."

"I know you did," he murmured.

In the act of entering, his arm was seized by a ginger-haired, big-boned young man. "Did you kill him ?"

"Did I . . . No, I didn't. What—"

"All right. Just wanted to know for sure. I'm Gregory Cromwell. See you later."

"Eh ?"

"Never mind him, Phillip," said Helga. "You'll be hungry. Go on in. It'll have to be Venusian breadfruit and lamb. That do ?"

"Fine." She nodded and hurried along the hall. A little bewildered, he entered the room she had indicated.

"Hello," said a dark young man. "Helga's forgotten me. Norman Leatt, Mr. Penn." They shook hands. "Come and sit over here. I'll not be a minute . . ."

He turned to a curious little machine, rather after the style of a portable radio. While Phillip sat down, he tuned and listened to the rhythmic sound pattern and to a second, fainter background clatter which grew in volume until it suddenly merged with the first.

"Righto," said Leatt, switching off.

Phillip frowned. "What is it?"

"That?" Norman Leatt grinned. "A device for checking your identity, old man. Had to be sure. Don't mind, do you?"

"No-o . . ." said Phillip.

The ginger-haired man almost sprang into the room. "O.K., Norman?"

"O.K., Greg."

"Right. Bring him up, then."

Phillip, half-inclined to protest, found himself being rushed up a flight of stairs. "This'll explain a lot," said Greg, rather condescendingly.

The room was almost filled with what, even to Phillip's bank-clerk eye, was quite obviously some kind of mechanical brain.

Greg pointed. "Punched cards—see them? 21,053 Martians; 16,104 Venusians; 978 Earthmen; 63 City Citizens. The principle is the same as radio-active decay. You can't say when a certain radium atom will disintegrate, but the average life of a great number of atoms can be accurately predicted by statistical information. This hot-spot here in the City leads to two kinds of situation, in the same way. And by the analogy, I cannot say when any individual will die or cause trouble, but I can say when a general flare-up is to be expected—"

"Meal's ready," sang out Helga from below. "Talk to Phillip after he's eaten it while it's hot."

"No," Greg shouted back. "He's got to see me run this one sequence."

He busied himself feeding punched card data into the secondary analyser. "These are the latest developments—including the death of that Martian." He flicked a switch. Valves lit up. "I've cleared its memory of old stuff," he murmured as mechanical fingers shuffled rapidly through the card files. "It's having to re-learn. See?" Away in the back of the mechanism a switch snapped over, another clicked near the control panel. Secondary movements began, cards rattling at speed underneath scanners. Valves brightened momentarily at intervals. Switches clicked as the data mounted. Suddenly the machine shut itself off and a light glowed . . . a red light.

Greg nodded. He pressed a button. A clatter of keys preceded the delivery of a typewritten card. He picked it up and passed it to Phillip.

Prediction: Martian newscasts will give biased version of slaying, hinting broadly at Venusian killer. Martian public opinion, already convinced that Asteroid is ethically theirs, will rapidly reach fever heat.

Venusian authorities, hoping to maintain situation, will make as great a show of force as possible. This will be taken, by Martians, as preparation for aggression.

Mounting tension indicates police intervention. Mutual distrust will cause violence. Violence will swiftly lead to open fighting.

Outcome uncertain, owing to introduction by means unknown of additional troops of good quality by Venusian authorities.

Solution: Hour-by-hour report of true state of affairs on all theatre screens and over the Earth-controlled newscast system. This will cast sufficient doubt of murderer's identity and of warlike intentions of conflicting interests to limit rioting and consequent actions to manageable proportions.

Waking early on the following "morning," Phillip turned luxuriantly on to his back, and stretched. Life was good.

He smiled to himself. Venus exported her vast surplus of easily grown food, but her climate made men too relaxed and soft to man the space-ways. So Earthmen ran her cargoes out and brought back the industrial products of Mars. For Mars was too busy exploiting her own resources and exploring Space, and her peoples made too proud and individualistic by their environment to engage in commerce or the arts.

The three worlds, in fact, depended upon each other. Neither Mars nor Venus could have maintained a modern civilisation without aid from the other, and both needed the moderating influence of Earth.

Phillip felt a swelling pride. That was elementary school stuff, but it had needed the reminders of the others here to make him realise the truth.

Martians had discovered the uranium here below the City, Venusian wealth had financed the work, but Earth brains had designed the City, were responsible for its upkeep and, ultimately for ruling its contrasting peoples.

"Take a lesson from the Governor," Norman Leatt had said. "His word is law, yet he acts like a fool half of the time. We're a tiny minority, you see, and racial pride of the others means that they must have the impression that they are the most important.

"Remember what happened when you reported that policeman's death ? The Governor allowed plenty of time for the Martian's official check and investigation. And he knew that the Venusians would be listening to police broadcasts and that they would want to know what was going on. Yet, the moment he came on the scene, neither party made the slightest protest when he suggested, however indirectly, that you were innocent."

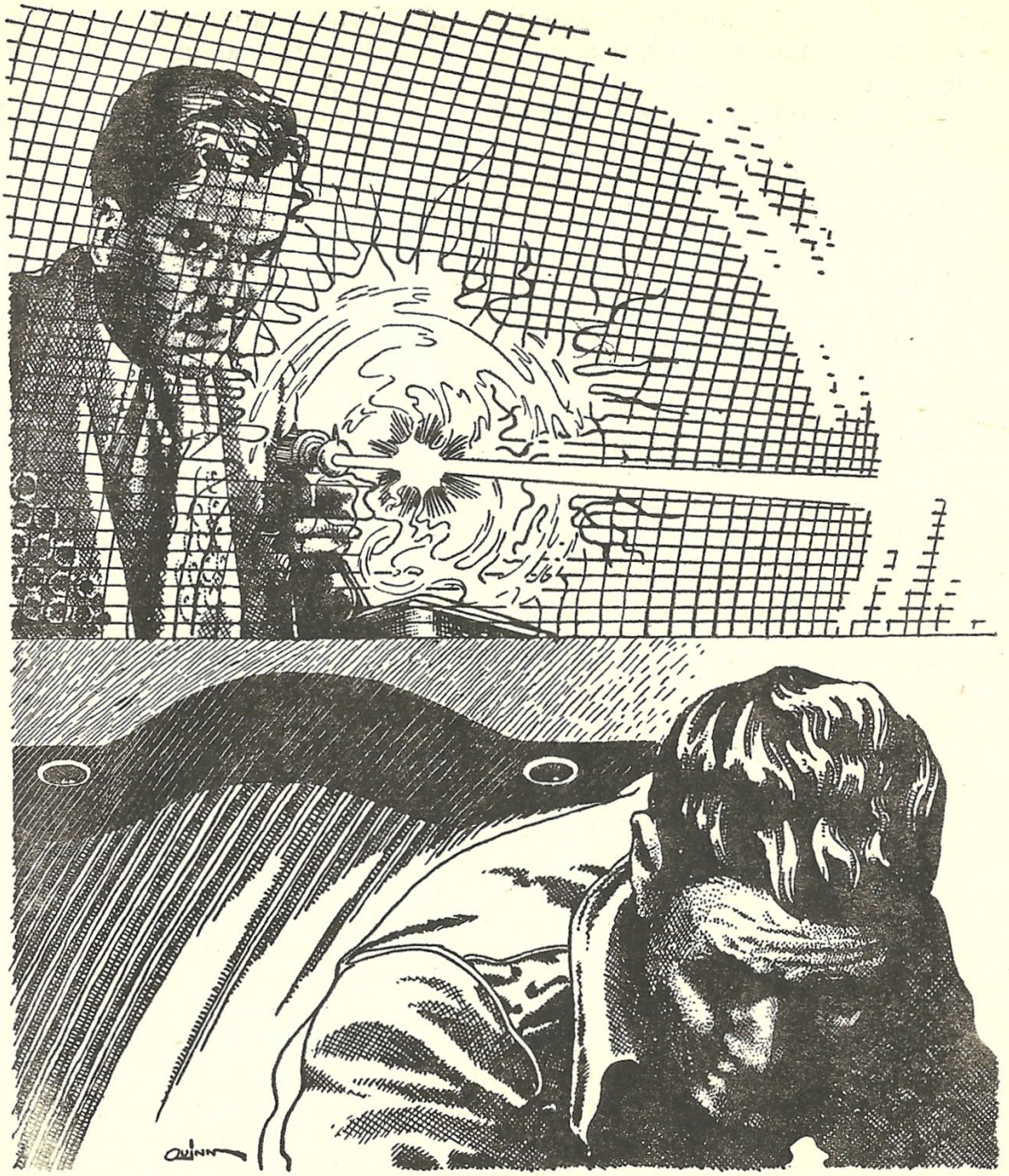
It was true. The rule of Earth was so unobtrusive that it seemed scarcely to exist. Its yoke was as light and unhampering as ribbed duralium, yet as strong as steel.

Key men from Earth, chosen for their stability, trustworthiness and adaptability, were in all important points from Norman Leatt in the Power House and himself in the Bank right up to the Governor himself.

And then there were the Citizens. Of all worlds, men and women such as Helga Lanry, they had chosen this as their home, either because they knew no other or because their life interests were bound up in the Asteroid City.

They had the most to lose in the event of trouble. Helga . . . Her almost luminous eyes seemed to smile at him in his imagination. And he decided to get up. She had said she would run him down to the Bank for his interview with the Manager that morning.

That morning . . . he thought as he dressed. Even the time here, although the Asteroid always presented the same side to the Sun, was of Earth reckoning.



Urgent knocking on the door of the little apartment interrupted his shaving. An envelope had been slipped under the door and he picked this up before answering the summons, glancing at his name on the front and slipping it into his pocket.

"Mr. Phillip Henry Penn ?" queried the smiling Venusian.

He nodded. "Yes ?"

"Earthman, you are required urgently to report to the Interplanetary Bank. I have a taxi waiting."

"Just a moment . . ." He wolfed a quick snack from the hot plate, looked for Helga but, finding the apartments empty, left a message with the janitor, and was on his way.

As the taxi sank into the great vertical tube of the down shaft, the Venusian put his hand on Phillip's arm. "The Bank," he murmured blandly, "is on

the dividing level between the Venusian and Martian quarters. The Martians are behaving unreasonably this morning, but do not be alarmed. Our own viligantes are unobtrusively supporting the police."

Compared with the branch on Earth, the Asteroid Bank was small, but it was brighter, cleaner on this weather-free world—and familiar enough in the layout of the Transaction Hall and the offices behind.

Phillip entered the Manager's office and stopped as the Venusian behind the big plastic desk looked up with a smile. "Mr. Rosay !"

"Yes, Mr. Penn. Yes, I am the Manager. Does it surprise you so much ?" He shrugged. "However, no matter." He glanced at the piezo-electric clock upon the wall, and pressed a button.

Two Martian policemen entered from the rear. "I am regretful, officers," said Rosay, "that you should have to wait." Rising to his feet, he nodded to Phillip. "Come with us, please."

In the lofty, murmurous Hall, behind the tenth cubicle, a Venusian turned, bowed slightly to Rosay and smiled enigmatically.

Rosay held up his hand and Phillip and the policemen halted. Rosay inclined his head to the counter clerk. "Have you anything especial to report ?"

"Only that withdrawals have been well above average."

Rosay nodded. He waved the policeman forward. "I charge this man with embezzlement of funds. You will find a ticket for passage on the ferry in his pocket."

As the man was led quietly away, a plump, bright figure between the gaunt Martians, Phillip saw that the Bank was closing up.

Rosay sighed. "I desired that you should witness this unfortunate incident. This compatriot of mine, alarmed by the admittedly increasing tension in the City, has been taking money and attempting to make the checking machines cover up the thefts for the past two weeks. It was his intention to escape the friction which is bound to come by leaving upon the ferry which brought you."

"Oh ?" said Phillip rather blankly.

Rosay smiled. "It is with pain that I show you that a man can be made a traitor by fear and temptation . . . And I know that your tour of duty is supposed to be from 4 to 6 in the afternoon—but, unlike my countrymen, I thought—" Rosay spread his hands— "that, as you are accustomed to working long hours on Earth, you would not object to doing your usual duty this afternoon and taking over the morning shift on this cubicle to-morrow and continuing that too until I may obtain a suitable worker from the labour pool."

"As you wish," said Phillip.

Rosay pressed his arm. "You are a good man, Earthman. I am sure you will be of great usefulness here."

He went on to explain the responsibilities of cubicle 10. The key to the storehouse of the incredible valuable uranium freight was kept at the disposal of this clerk. The ferry was due to return on its voyage back sunwards at 6 p.m. At 5.30 a ship's officer would present credentials and take charge of the key—a wafer of quartz which, when inserted in the bullion store upon the upper level beside the Government Buildings, would set up an oscillation to free the lock—and the transfer of the Asteroid's wealth would be made

under close escort, and the take-off of the ferry made immediately afterwards.

Rosay paused smiling. His eyes, however, seemed curiously introspective. "Come into the office once more, Mr. Penn," he said abruptly.

In the privacy of that place he leaned across the desk. "Earthman, I am no fool. You will of course be aware of the real situation between the Three Worlds."

"I . . ."

"Please do not mince words. The illusion of superiority is all right for the ordinary citizens of Mars and Venus. But you must not think that the leaders are not aware of the interdependence which exists, or of the superior adaptability of Earthmen. Martians and Venusians are not blind—it is just that the unthinkable distances between the planets have created great moral differences. There are good and bad Venusians, good and bad Martians . . . and good and bad Earthmen . . ."

Rosay's smile seemed nervous, hesitant.

Phillip nodded. "Now that's good sense."

"Yes. I am delighted you agree. Then, perhaps, you will not take offence when I suggest that, behind this trouble here, I believe that there is an Earthman, or group of Earthmen; that they are trying to take advantage—for a reason not yet known to me—of national differences ?"

"What ! Great heavens ! Have you any idea who'd do such a rotten thing ?"

"None that I can give you, Mr. Penn. But a host of small things have disturbed me. That is why I asked to have an Earthman sent out to this branch of the Bank."

Leaving the Bank, Phillip thought of the letter which he had found in his apartment. He opened it there and then.

Dear Phillip,

All experienced Earthfolk and City Citizens are required on duty at once so I'll not be able to drop you at the Bank. But please be careful how you move about. For the first time in history the Earth broadcasting station has broken down, and there may be trouble . . . without its moderating influence.

Good luck,

Helga.

Sudden uproar across the moving way made him look up sharply. Two overalled Martians came out of a café and one paused to hurl a bottle back inside. But, even as it shattered and a voice howled in pain, blue-clad Venusians were moving swiftly from a crossing. They seemed to gather up the Martians as they went and to lose them upon the top of a down-moving escalator.

A Martian policeman stopped, scowling, beside Phillip, obviously dubious about becoming involved.

Phillip touched his arm and the man turned sharply. "Ah ! Oh, yes, Earthman ?"

"Do you happen to know Helga Lanry ?"

"Yes, Earthman, it is of course our business to know Citizens and Earthfolk."

"Fine. Then have you any idea where I could get in touch with her ?"

"Yes, of course. A new carnotite vein was scheduled for opening this

morning. It is being proceeded with as normal, although the mine has temporarily closed owing to a Venusian engineered strike. I'm afraid, that owing to heavy communications traffic, the only way you can contact her is by a personal visit."

"Oh !" Phillip scratched his chin. "And that wouldn't be permitted, I suppose."

"Of course it would. You are an Earthman, and can prove it, can't you ? Oh yes, but you're new here. You can go down to the mine gates in that escalator . . ." The policeman pointed.

Phillip followed the instructions and was amazed at the way a sullen Martian crowd parted to permit his approach to the shining metal portals.

The Police Captain of the guard there listened to his request. "No, Earthman, I am sorry but the communication lines are all being kept open for any emergency message. But, if you wish, you may go down in person."

"I can . . .?" But the Captain was already beckoning a mining official.

Encased in a heavy, all-metal suit—"To protect you in case of a fall of stone. We work in a vacuum. Although we do open pockets of very heavy gases at times"—he and a guide were passing through an airlock into the upper gallery of the mine almost before he realised the effect his presence had had.

They climbed on to a tiny, open runabout and moved down in eerie silence through the vacuum passages. Mining equipment lay about the floor below as the runabout jetted weirdly towards a wide shaft. "No artificial gravity down here," said the guide's voice in Phillip's earphones.

Phillip turned his head and shoulders stiffly. "But the mine official said something about rock falls ?"

"Yes, it does. It comes down so slowly you do not realise. But once down its inertia is such that you are pinned down and slowly crushed . . ."

Pin-head lights in the walls of the shaft slid up past them. Phillip reflected how easy it would be for a traitorous Earthman to operate.

He jumped as the runabout slowed and as something rapped on the metal sheath about his arm. The Martian guide was pointing.

A mine transport was coming up the shaft, its equipment glittering in the light, its passengers upside down to Phillip.

The guide turned the runabout in its own length and it began to climb. "They must have finished early, Earthman."

IV

Helga laughed merrily as she took Phillip's arm and they went out of the mine buildings. "You'll have to be more careful what you ask for—or you'll have the Governor on your tail for interfering with routine."

The crowd of Martians had dispersed. A pair of policemen nodded to them as they stepped on to a moving way. The few passers-by seemed too absorbed in their own affairs to remark the passage of two Earthfolk.

"Seems very quiet," said Helga as she paused at the foot of an escalator and looked back at the silent buildings and near-deserted moving ways. "Perhaps the Predictor was wrong, and it'll all blow over . . ." Her eyes twinkled at Phillip. "But we can kill two birds with one stone by looking in at the Power House. Norman'll be there and can show you around, and he'll tell us what's happening."

Leaving the escalator on the intermediate level, they passed the façade of the Bank. Another pair of policemen nodded to them as the moving way carried them past a big café filled to capacity with gesticulating Venusians.

A major of Police inspected their papers at the entrance to the Power House, and Phillip looked up at the massive concrete wall of the place.

Norman Leatt hurried to meet them. Helga apologised for breaking in. "But," she said, "if there is trouble, Phillip should know his way about. And, as Martians and Venusians both seem to have struck for the duration, I've nothing to do now the seam's estimated."

On a high platform, from which they could survey all the great machines of the Power House, Norman showed them the dials and controls and they looked down through periscopes at the atomic engines and vast converters which had been constructed to last for the entire life of the Mines and the City dependent on the ore for its livelihood.

It was not until they were about to leave that Helga asked for news of the possible crisis.

Norman hesitated. "Well," he said slowly. "There have been one or two nasty incidents, but nothing to worry about so far. Greg's been down here. He said the Predictor returns the same answer each time, and that it looks as though there has been sabotage at the Broadcasting Station . . . For myself, I'd feel a lot easier if we knew more of what the Venusians have up their sleeve."

"So'd I," Helga shivered. Her eyes twinkled at Phillip. "You've been in the depths already this morning. How'd you like a glimpse of the surface—

outside the blister, I mean ?"

"Anything you say."

For safety's sake they lunched in the Lotus Club. Here Phillip's first impression of a siege soon gave way to calm. Although men and women came and went in a variety of kit from engineer to spaceman and many wore sidearms, they came and chatted to him as he ate, or drank at the bar, or gossiped of Earth news over their tables, as though nothing was wrong.

A taxi was unobtainable, but they borrowed a runabout without difficulty and went up on the air current past the silent, peaceful levels of the Venusians. The gardens of the Upper Level, however, were crowded. Nowhere did Phillip glimpse the red uniform of a policeman and he could not tell whether the bright people below them were making holiday or holding meetings.

"Who knows what a Venusian thinks," said Helga as, having landed beside a spaceship hangar at the edge of the great, curving cap of the City, she switched off the motor and turned to step out.

An Earthman nodded to them. "Hello, Helga. Looking for Mr. Cromwell?"

"No." Helga paused in surprise. "Why ? Is he here ?"

"Yes. I let him in an hour ago. He's been checking everything, I think. I suppose the Governor's been working him hard. Worst of being Deputy for a man like that."

They did not see Gregory Cromwell, however, although Helga pointed out his personal ship—a great, gleaming cigar shape that looked capable of travelling anywhere in the System. Instead, Helga's own tiny spaceboat carried them out through an airlock out over the airless surface.

At a height of twenty miles above the cratered surface of the Asteroid, the City's blister looked like a gigantic, inverted saucer, glowing with subdued light against the sharp black and white of gloomy crater depths and sunlit ridges. The gleaming spire of the ferry—shortly due to leave on its inward passage—seemed like a handle stuck on to the tiny planet of the City.

A few miles from the blister another spaceship—equally big—rested on its side, silent and unattended although lights shone from its shadowed side. "Venusian ship," said Helga. "Somehow it avoided the patrol and landed here . . . for repairs. It certainly has a big hole smashed in its side, but they're taking far too long putting it right. Greg reckons that it's here for a purpose. He sent me to keep an eye on Rosay on the last ferry trip. I didn't find out much, but there's something up."

"I see." Phillip stared down. "So that's what the Predictor meant about the introduction of Venusian troops by some means unknown."

Helga shivered. "Don't talk about Greg and his machine, Phillip."

Just before 4 o'clock, Phillip presented himself at the Bank. Rosay met him at the door. "I regret very much, Earthman, but we are the only staff here." He smiled dubiously. "And I, too, must go up very shortly into the Gardens. Do you think you could remain alone, and close up . . .?"

Phillip gasped, and looked along the fifty cubicles of the Transaction Hall. He felt dwarfed—and yet there was no reason, with the machines at his control, why he could not do as he was asked.

He opened up the tenth cubicle and pressed the button which opened the door. For fifteen minutes he dealt with a rush of customers. As his machinery

checked signatures and recorded payments in and out, he hoped that—with no mechanic on duty—nothing would go wrong.

Shortly after the last of the queue had departed, his reflections of the levelling influence of money—customers had been a mixture of Earthfolk, Martians and Venusians—were interrupted by a latecomer who ran in, asking breathlessly for his strong box.

Phillip operated the remote selector mechanism and the box came sliding up from the vaults.

"Just want something out," said the man.

He opened it on the counter. Phillip could not help but see the guns resting inside. The man shoved them into the pockets of his bright red and green clothes, found that one long-barrelled gun would not stay out of sight, put it back, and turned.

"Please lock the box, sir," said Phillip.

But the Venusian did not look back. Phillip blew through his nose. Well, there was but this one ugly, long-range weapon left. Not of any great value. He moved the box into the counter safe. That would do until he closed up and could get duplicate keys.

From that time until 5.15, the Transaction Hall remained empty. He set the alarm system and, assuming that he would have nothing further to do, he began to prepare all he could before closing up. Anything was better than just sitting in the enveloping silence, watching the clock pulse off the minutes.

"Hello, Phillip."

He started violently, looked up into Gregory Cromwell's face. There was a small box upon the counter and Gregory was looking down at a window in the top of it. The snub-nosed gun in Greg's hand jerked as Phillip glanced in surprise at the alarm mechanism.

"It won't work, Phillip. I've smashed the alarms and televisors all over the city by a bomb in the Central Exchange—and there's only one Earthman there to make the repair."

Phillip's foot reached surreptiously for the local alarm, which would surely bring police from the neighbouring streets.

"Touch that, Phillip, and I'll blast you. I can see your every move in this box's screen."

Phillip froze. "You—you were the one who sabotaged the broadcasts—"

"That's right. Things are moving fast now. Troops are pouring in through a secret entrance in the blister edge—Venusian troops. Just as the Predictor warned, the Martians are marshalling in the deserted levels below the gardens. They have already blocked off all retreat for the Venusians on top. In an hour or two there'll be open war in the City." Greg, his eyes blazing with triumph, gloated over the situation he had deliberately let mount to critical mass.

Phillip stared at him, wide-eyed. "Have you gone mad ?"

"Mad ?" Gregg roared with laughter. "Hardly, old man. Don't you see how clever it is ? The Martians and Venusians are at each other's throats. Earthfolk are trying to keep peace by personal action—and also doing what they can to protect their interests at the same time. Nobody has any eyes for the uranium store . . ."

"Why, you blood-thirsty robber—"

"Steady !" warned Greg, levelling the gun in his hand. His mocking smile returned slowly. "That's better. I don't want to kill one of my own kind,

but don't try me too hard. Now ! Hand over that quartz key !"

"Wait a minute . . ." Phillip tried desperately to think of a way to stall. This man was paranoic—did not care how many were hurt, as long as he could get away with the uranium bullion. "Why— You're crazy, man, to think you can get away with this—"

Greg's laughter mocked him. "I am, am I ? Don't be such a soft-hearted fool. This trouble was bound to come sooner or later. I'm just doing them a favour by getting it over with. As soon as I'm clear of the City with the bullion in my hold, I'll let Norman shoot a hole in the blister. That'll stop the fighting. Venusians and Martians will fall over one another to patch it up before the leakage exhausts the capacity of the atmosphere machines. They'll forget their differences—and Swenson and Rosay and the Governor will secretly bless me for the harmony that'll follow—even though they may offer a reward for my capture."

He leant forward. "Hand over the key ! You can always say you thought it'd be all right to give it to the Deputy Governor . . ."

Phillip seized the opportunity to press the alarm. As the gongs jangled in the empty streets outside, he leapt back.

Greg cursed him, stepped back and blew out the grill with his gun flaring like a torch. Blinded, Phillip staggered away.

His vision was beginning to come back when a spitting exchange of shots outside made him start nervously to his knees.

He heard the whirr of some kind of flying machine and, expecting more danger, thought of the weapon in the counter safe. Half-blind, still, he nevertheless found it at last, fumbled it out and leaned, heart thumping madly, against the counter.

The gongs had ceased their alarm. Only his own heavy breathing and the thumping of his heart broke the silence. There must be no one left on this level to come to his assistance.

Suddenly his hand contracted on the gun and he peered nervously around, as a voice bellowed from the rear of the Bank. Filling the great hall, stretching his nerves, it said:

"Martians ! Venusians ! People of the City ! This is the Voice of Earth appealing to you to cease this madness. Do not attempt to take the law into your own hands . . . Let the law take its course, and submit other differences between you to arbitration like civilised people . . ."

Phillip relaxed Earth-controlled broadcasts had begun again. Would they be too late ?

As though in answer to his thought, a great rumble shuddered down through the levels of the great City. He shook his head and ran for the blurred doorway.

He was on the moving way before he realised that it had stopped. Of course, Earthmen would have shut off power to hamper military operations. Common sense, that.

His feet caught on something and he fell. The jar and the need seemed to combine to bring his eyes back nearly to normal.

He scrambled to a sitting position and looked back. The body of a Venusian, bright blue blouse blackened and charred, was lying across the moving way.

The whistling rotors of a flier made him look up. A red police craft was

crash-landing beside him. He stood up as a grim Martian sprang out, gun in hand.

"Put down that gun, Earthman !"

Phillip glanced at his hand. He had forgotten the weapon. "No !" he said, and he levelled the barrel at the policeman's midriff.

Guns in hand, tensely, they faced each other. Phillip felt sweat start upon his skin, but he held his voice very steady as he told of what had happened.

The Martian's eyes moved steadily around the deserted way. "Right," he said, and he lowered his gun. "I can see that your weapon has not been fired—and, if it had, it would have blasted a hole through a few buildings." He holstered the weapon and walked forward to kneel and turn the dead man over on to his back. "A taxi driver." He stood up. "Well, Earthman, what do you want done ?"

Phillip gulped. Now that the initial shock was over, he felt rather sick at the sight of violent death. But the Martian was looking at him—looking to him, in fact, for guidance.

"We—" He gulped. "We've got to try to stop this bloodshed . . ." The respect in the Martian's steady gaze began to give him confidence and clear his muddy thoughts. "If I tell them over the broadcasting system, they'll take no notice, I suppose. It's got to be something dramatic !" He glanced at the police flier. "Has—has it got a loud-speaker ?"

"Yes, Earthman ?" The Martian was puzzled.

Phillip caught his arm. "If we flew up the main shaft, everyone would look at us. And they'd listen, wouldn't they ?"

"Yes," breathed the Martian. His leathery face seemed to pale beneath the hard-burned tan, his eyes widened. "Yes, they certainly would—if they do not blast us out of the air." He braced his shoulders. "I come from a grim planet, Earthman, but this is a grim scheme of yours. I respect you." He saluted.

Phillip climbed into the flier, trying to hide his own nervousness. The policeman paused on the step. "I rather think your evil friend has gone up the same desperate way—and had to kill his driver because he would not fly him . . ."

The flier lifted into the shaft and went screaming up under its own power, siren blaring. Martian craft, bringing up men from below, parted hurriedly before it. An opening appeared in the clutter of fliers about the top exit. Phillip grabbed the arms of his seat and held on. He had a confused impression—like a still from a moving picture—of great activity all around him, of men and weapons marshalling. Then, abruptly, their horizon widened as they shot out under the blister.

"Here, Earthman !" The Martian was thrusting a microphone into his hands.

Phillip grabbed it, held it to his mouth. "Listen to me !" he croaked through drying lips. "Listen to me !" he yelled. "You must stop this mad business. Fighting is what you're supposed to do. While you fight, men are making away with the uranium you've mined during these past weeks."

He paused to wipe the sweat from his mouth. The silence under the blister was somehow more terrifying than actual battle.

The Martian sucked in his breath as the flier rocked with the concussion of a blast from below. The floor tilted crazily left and right as he made evasive action.

"Don't fire at us ! You fools—that's what the robber wants. This is an Earthman speaking. Listen to me !" But the roar of blasts from below was drowning his words, and Phillip's heart sank as he shouted.

The flier tilted up. "No good, Earthman. Hell take those jumpy Venusians ! But—we'll be safe if we can get near the dome. They'll not dare to fire at us th—"

A side of the flier dissolved in searing white. Debris fell away below them. Phillip clung to his seat desperately. The flier slipped sideways. The blister and torn gardens below spun crazily around and around, as they fell.

Phillip heard the Martian cursing harshly. The flier righted itself with a sickening stop, it fell like a shot sparrow, lifted, slid sideways, hovered crazily, turned almost over, righted itself, and crashed into soft earth.

Phillip, blistered already, scrambled desperately after the Martian, through the smoking gap in the flier's side, into a long furrow of a crater.

"Good try, Earthman !" said the Martian. He wriggled up the crater side and peered over the edge, looked back as he slid down again. "Nothing'll stop them now. And we'll get our packet. We're in no man's land between them. Still, it was worth it." He looked up at the lofty roof of the blister, resigned to his fate.

Phillip eased his position. Something was sticking in his stomach, and of more immediate discomfort than the searing discharges blazing between the two opposing forces above them.

He pulled it out of his tunic front. The long-barreled gun. Must have thrust it there before getting into the flier. Forgotten it in the rush.

"Down !" The Martian dragged him down and they clung to the earth as it shuddered and heaved with the violence of man-made thunder and lightning above them.

At last a lull came. The Martian cautiously lifted his head. "All right, Earthman ?" Dust and debris slowly settled about them.

The rumble of heavy vehicles and whistle of aircraft came from opposite sides. "Now for it !" growled the Martian. "How the devil did those cabbage growers get tanks in here . . .?"

"Part of the traitor's plan !"

Phillip caught his breath. Gregory Cromwell's boastings came back into his mind like a revelation.

He lifted the long barrel of the gun in his hand. He hesitated. It was a terrible risk. Suppose such a shot, fired blindly, shattered the blister entirely ? But—it was worth it, surely. He fumbled with the range control. He pressed the trigger and the discharge crackled up in a blinding, unending stream.

"What have you done !" screamed the Martian.

He clutched Phillip as though he would strangle him. The gun's discharge ploughed into the earth at their side. Dry dust enveloped them, choked in their throats as they struggled.

With an effort, Phillip released the trigger. At the same instant a crack as of gigantic thunder split the air.

And slowly, the battle, like a dying engine, ground to a halt. Voices, raised in alarm, mingled with a shrill, ear-splitting whistle—air shrieking out into the void.

"It's stopped !" The Martian froze. Phillip flung him off. They scrambled to the lip of the crater together.

Everywhere men were dropping their weapons, deserting their armoured vehicles, running for the emergency stations to which they had been trained. Common danger had united them—as nothing else could have done.

"Good work, Earthman !" The Martian held out his hand. Dazedly, Phillip took it. He felt the pressure on his fingers, and then the man had saluted him. "I have my part to do !" and was gone.

Phillip climbed to his feet. The Interplanetary Gardens were a wreckage. From the slight elevation of where he stood, he could see a few bodies, but only a few. One armoured car was on fire, blazing furiously, smoke wafting up towards a hole, starred with incredible cracks, in the blister roof. The battle was over.

From the Martian lines, a large, police-red flier streaked across the battlefield. For a moment Phillip looked for a place to hide, then he watched in resignation as it landed with smooth efficiency beside him.

Commissioner Lief Swenson, followed by several of his men, marched up to him. "Phillip Henry Penn ! I thought I recognised your voice and manner of speaking, Earthman. You will be glad to hear that I have acted on your denunciation and have been successful in arresting the traitor. It is, I may say, with personal regret that I arrest you for endangering the existence of the City."

A Venusian-blue flier, having approached unnoticed, landed almost at

their side. Rosay emerged, smiling. "Excellent work, Commissioner. Congratulations on apprehending one who has put us all in such danger." He put his hand on Phillip's arm. "With your permission I will take charge of the prisoner—whose crime, you must admit, comes under my authority."

"Not so !" Swenson signalled his men forward. "He is in my charge until trial can be arranged. You could not provide him with the protective custody he will certainly need . . ."

He broke off, and all looked up as a little Earth-green runabout flew overhead, circled around and landed.

The Governor fussed up to the group. "Ah ! Mr. Penn. Hurrumph ! You are guilty of a crime greater than any other since I have been appointed here. I will, therefore, hold myself personally responsible . . ."

Phillip followed him into the flier.

The Governor's eyes twinkled at him. "Well, Mr. Penn, you've done a wonderful job. Whoever was responsible for sending you here certainly picked the right man." He seized Phillip's hand and pumped it up and down. "It is a pity that no one can ever know." He reached for the controls. "Just time to get you aboard that ferry . . ."

Phillip averted his eyes as he saw a line of stars flicker, each in turn. Passengers were few in number on this, the return voyage, but he had kept very much to himself. He turned and went down into the saloon.

In the 'scope he watched the Martian ships close in with naval efficiency. There was, he noticed, an extra craft with them this time—a sleek, long ship which somehow seemed familiar.

As he waited for the boarding party, his thoughts wandered. He still felt a little queasy when he remembered the corpses he had seen. He kept thinking that he had left the Bank wide open in his hurry to do something. But through all his thoughts, bad and good, ran the vision of a pair of sparkling eyes—as though they symbolised his regret at having to leave the City.

He thought he was still dreaming of her, when the door opened and a slim girl burst in. Then she was in his arms and he heard her murmuring: "Oh, you wonderful Earthman . . ."

But a hand touched his arm and he looked up. A man was trying to attract his attention.

"You must excuse my sister— The great acceleration of Cromwell's rocket has affected her . . ."

"Don't you believe him !" Helga freed herself, laughing. "I'm so excited ! I've always wanted to visit Earth—and I couldn't imagine anyone I'd rather have to show me around—"

She broke off. "Phillip, what are you frowning at ? Don't you want me to come with you ?"

"Yes. Of course—" He forced a smile. "I—I suppose it was the surprise of seeing you. I expected . . . Martians, I suppose."

"Oh, them ! We had to make use of their technical excellence to trace the ferry in flight. That's all . . ."

Her brother squeezed Phillip's arm. "You hoped to go back to the City, didn't you ? You thought they'd have sorted out the blame by now . . ." He shook his head. "You still don't realise how deep-seated racial hatred and prejudice can be. They'd fight over you if you ever do go back—for

the privilege of killing you." He sighed. "Some of the high-ups'll be grateful to you as long as they live, but I doubt if they'd have the nerve to stick up for you openly. And the most your own people could do, would be to try to smuggle you out again."

"But—" Phillip hesitated. "The truth would be bound to come out at a trial—"

"Of course," said Helga. "That's the trouble. And then the fat would certainly be in the fire. The trouble would break out all over again—and the system of government would crumple . . . You think it out for yourself."

Her eyes, looking up at him, sparkled. "But it's not important to you, Phillip. You're going back to your wonderful Earth . . ."

"And," said her brother, rather lamely, "the Governor's confidential report is bound to bring you a promotion."

"I see." Phillip suddenly chuckled. "Sorry," he apologised. "But it is rather funny."

They stared at him in bewilderment.

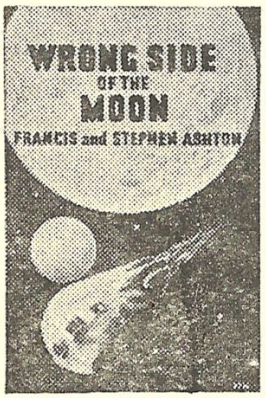
Like aliens, he thought.

THE END

* * * *

BOOK REVIEWS

Wrong Side of the Moon. By Francis and Stephen Ashton. T. V. Boardman & Co. Ltd., London. 191 pp. 8/6.



Fictionally, the first trip out to the Moon in a spaceship has been written about so many times that most readers accept it almost as an accomplished fact. Theoretically, such a trip, when it is made, will not be at all commonplace, and some interesting—if not disastrous—events may be expected to take place on the short journey to our satellite.

Francis and Stephen Ashton have pooled their literary ability and technical knowledge in *Wrong Side of the Moon* in an attempt to portray not only the dangers of space, but also the political and economic upheavals such an attempt may well bring, if they are not already with us !

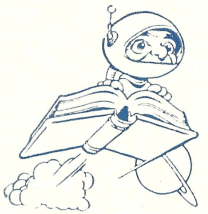
Of the events leading up to the launching of the *Silver Rocket* from the back of its carrier craft at a height of twenty miles, much could be written. Of the philanthropic millionaire devoting several fortunes to his ideal; the secret base in Eire; the political and financial intrigues behind the scenes in various capitals of the world; the alarms and excursions and high adventure attendant upon such a project which could never be wholly secret. These are but the trappings which lead to the focal point of the story, upon which much interesting speculation and conjecture will undoubtedly focus.

The spaceship, with its three-man crew, are launched to circumnavigate the Moon and return to Earth, where they will glide into the atmosphere in a series of "breaking" loops before reaching a normal landing speed. Amongst the numerous technically accurate inventions on the ship is a radar-operated meteor detector, which will automatically trip a booster charge in the ship's stern sufficient to move it off a collision orbit, assuming the million-to-one chance of such a cosmic pebble getting in the way.

The "pebble" which gets in the way happens to be quite large and the entire booster charge is exploded in one instance, throwing the ship completely off its prearranged orbit. In fact, it throws it into a 700,000-mile ellipse and on a six-week journey, with its perigree remaining some thousands of miles outside the Earth's atmosphere. The problem then resolved is how to save the crew upon their nearest approach to Earth.

The technical discussions and details in the book are excellent and show considerable knowledge of the astronautical field. One thing alone stops this from being a great book, however, and that is the somewhat archaic "romantic novel" approach—the story being told through the eyes of the hero's friend.

J. C.



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