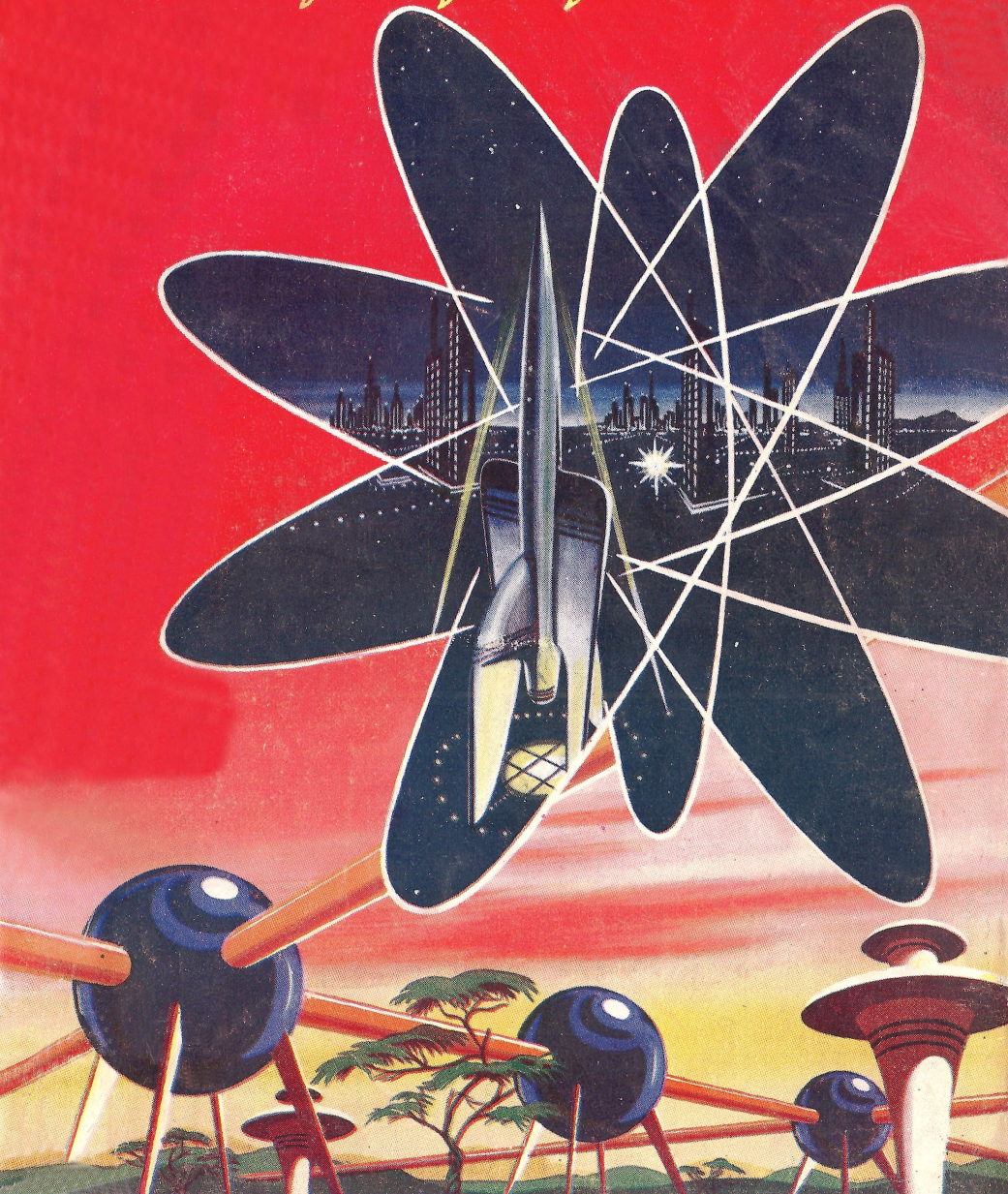
SIXTEEN

TWO SHILLINGS

NEW WORLDS

fiction of the future



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The International Fantasy Award Committee have pleasure in announcing the 1952 Awards winners, as adjudicated by the International Panel

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Runner-up John Wyndham's

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Published in London by Michael Joseph Ltd.

NON-FICTION ARTHUR C. CLARKE'S

The Exploration of Space

Published in London by Temple Press Ltd.
(To be published in U.S.A. this year by Harper & Brothers)

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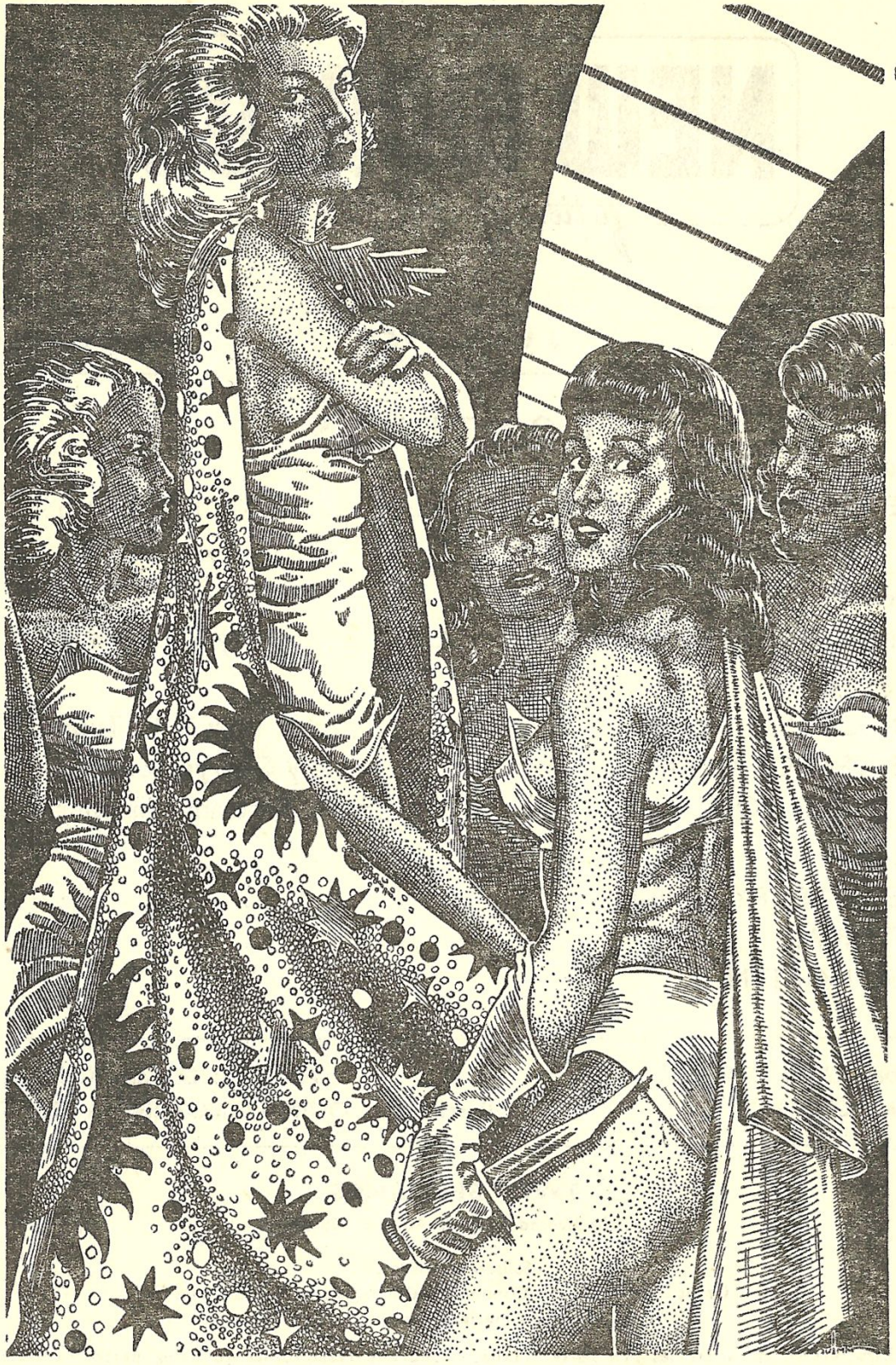


Illustrated by QUINN

Part One of Three Parts

THE ESP WORLDS

By J. T. M'INTOSH

Extra-sensory perception may be a highly developed science on other worlds. On Noya, for instance, where the dominant sex was female. Puzzle—find the mental point of contact between Earthman and Noyan.

I

The fight was all but over, Jeff saw, and they were beaten. There was nothing new in that. The pattern had been the same for a long time. The Noyans killed a Terran and returned his body, the colonists and UOF men massed and set out across the plain to attack the Noyans in their hill strongholds, and the Noyans picked them off one by one. That was the whole story.

Jeff whirled as a shadow formed on the wall before him. The blow that was meant to crash on his skull grazed his shoulder. And before he could retaliate the Noyan was gone. As usual.

How could anyone fight a race with the power of materialising anywhere? The Noyans didn't kill in these attacks. They didn't have to. It was only necessary for them to knock their attackers unconscious one by one, and keep on doing it until the attack became disjointed, then a retreat, then a rout. Battle was never joined. The colonists never reached the hills.

And the irony of it was—this was peace. An uneasy peace, perhaps, but not war. The Noyans, if they wished, could have swept the few Earthmen off their planet. That was one of the humiliating things about his position as Commanding Officer of the Universal Order Force on Noya. The other was the fact that the Noyans they fought so ineffectively were women. It didn't unduly upset Jeff, who knew the Noyans—but the comments on the situation from headquarters on Earth did.

Another Noyan was suddenly behind him. But he had placed himself with his back to the light, so that he would be instantly aware of anyone behind him. He ducked and turned, his arms wide, and he had the woman firmly in his grasp. Like all Noyans she was strong and tough, young, dressed in the uniform white garment that covered the trunk and left the limbs free. But as always she melted in his arms and he was holding nothing.

They would do that again and again while the fight continued, failing time and again to materialise in time to get in a blow with their padded truncheons, but bound to succeed in the end. The chaos among the vehicles massed between Jeff's emplacement and the foothills across the plain showed how often they had succeeded in the ranks of his men.

He spoke into the radio at his side. "Retreat. Back to Suntown. Pick up all disabled personnel and abandon their vehicles. Repeat. Retreat. Back to Suntown. Pick up . . ."

It was the inevitable end of all attacks on the Noyans' hill strongholds. From his pillbox Jeff watched it broodingly.

No one had entertained much hope that this attack would be different from any of the others. But the Noyans had killed two men. Ironically, they never killed in battle, but they killed anyone who came alone, without an army, trying to penetrate their strongholds and find their cities.

Anyway, two men had died. The attack by the UOF section had then been as inevitable as their defeat. The settlement of Earthmen was on the planet on sufferance, but they would never admit it. Acts of war meant reprisals. It didn't matter how often the attempt at reprisal failed. The Noyans mustn't be allowed to kill men and think they could get away with it.

Jeff wondered wryly how the Noyans could think anything else.

The order was to abandon all vehicles that could not be manned, but Jeff saw they were all moving, except two which had crashed together. Now the pressure was off. The Noyans were letting them go. There would be truce until the Noyans killed another UOF man or colonist or missionary. Then the same farce would be played out again.

Jeff saw Bill Johns' truck cutting over to pick him up. Bill was his second in command. He left the pillbox and slammed the heavy door.

Bill grinned as he climbed up beside him. "There's still one chance," he said. "The *Scylla's* due in the next few hours. You never know, maybe headquarters has decided at last we know what we're talking about."

"I hope so," said Jeff, grunting as the truck spun in its own length to join the rest of the little army. "I hope so. Bill, for the first time in my life I wish I were a woman."

"Me too," said Bill.

Jeff had another reason for wanting to get the Noyan affair settled. His assignment was to get things in order there, report, and go on to Nome, which, he was blandly told, gave every indication of being a much bigger job. So before he had one thing off his hands he had another lined up.

That was the way of the UOF, of course. A few men had a lot of responsibility. Jeff had a fine record, and now he was paying for it. He hadn't always thought of it that way; when he had heard eight months since that he was being put in charge of the two human-populated NO worlds, Noya and Nome, on which the shadow of the UOF had scarcely fallen as yet, he had been jubilant. The whole NO section of space handed to him on a plate—he would clean up any trouble there might be, on his own, in three months, and then come back asking for more.

To say that he was chastened now was such an understatement that it was almost a lie. He hadn't even been to Nome, eighteen light-years away. At first Jeff had been disappointed that there were only two human worlds in the vast NO region, with its seven systems. Now he was beginning to wish that humanity wasn't so omnipresent in the galaxy. It only meant more trouble for Major Jeff Croner.

Jeff ran his finger down the passenger list and swore. Bill grinned faintly in sympathy. "They still don't believe you," he said. "They still think men can handle anything anywhere."

"Muttonheads," Jeff murmured. Only he didn't say muttonheads. It hadn't been easy for him to revise his earlier ideas and ask for help, but he had done it. "I've told the Force as strongly as I could put it that only women have a chance of dealing with women—these women, anyway. I told

them in words of one syllable that the only way to handle Noya was to send a woman out here and put her in charge and let me get over to Nome. And what do they say? 'No female operatives of the necessary rank and experience available. But you have power to co-opt any civilian you see fit'."

He swore again. "Any civilian I see fit." His voice became heavily ironic. "Of course we have a vast choice of young, intelligent, courageous Earthwomen with telepathic ability. They walk the streets of Suntown in their thousands. I have only to go out for a stroll to find a couple of hundred possibles."

Bill ignored the irony. "Three Earthwomen on the planet," he said, "and none of them telepaths. Well, that's the list, Jeff. There won't be another ship for three months, so if the Noyans keep on raising hell, we have to handle it alone."

Jeff's mind was still stuck in the same groove. "Why can't they get it through their heads," he demanded, "that the Noyans have a pure matriarchy, and can't arbitrate properly with men even if they want to? You'd think that would be plain enough. There's only one answer. Women here, or at least one woman, as an accredited Universal Order Force representative, with power to speak for herself and for Earth, on the Noyans' own level. I never thought I'd be prepared to step down for a woman, but I'm not blind, deaf and dumb. This just isn't a job for us, Bill. We can't make the Noyans respect us when for centuries their men have been drones. Or, if we can force respect, we can't make them trust us. It's like asking men to deal with robots—looking at it from the Noyans' point of view, I mean. They may know our ways are different from theirs, but can they count on what they'll always think of as the inferior half of any race?"

Bill was looking at the letter from headquarters and the passenger list again. "It may be," he said cautiously, "it may be just as they say. There *are* women in the Force, sure. But not Majors and Execs. Not while they're still active operatives, anyway. And we're asking for a top man—top woman, rather. Probably they just haven't got any girl with that much drive."

Jeff grunted.

"Anyway," Bill went on, "there's still the *Scylla's* list. Remember, you can co-opt. Let's have a run through it, huh?"

"We're not looking for just any woman. We need a girl who is a woman and a half. Looking in that list for her is like looking for a needle in a haystack when you're pretty sure you haven't got the right haystack."

"Maybe," said Bill softly, "but remember how much we need her? We need a smart woman, but if we can't find one, we still need *any* woman. Maybe she can act smart."

The *Scylla* had touched down half an hour earlier with supplies, a few colonists and the mail for the UOF station. There was a lot of that, for there were fifty men at the station and the mail had been piling up for six months between ships. But Jeff had opened only the sealed letter from headquarters so far. The rest could wait.

Together Jeff and his second in command scanned the list. There were seven women. Four were wives out to join their husbands. Two were nurses. One was just a name—Janice Hiller.

"Janice Hiller," murmured Bill. "There can't be many Janice Hillers. That wouldn't be the novelist, would it?"

"Don't ask me. What does she write ?"

"Crap," said Bill briefly. "Do we have them in ?"

"Sure. It has to be one of them. Before you send for them, Bill, put up a short prayer, will you ?"

They left Janice Hiller till last, and by the time her name came up again they were desperate. Two of the wives were old, and as the Noyans despised old people they were out. One was little better than an imbecile, and the other had a nervous tic that made her almost unable to talk. One of the nurses was big and healthy but non-telepathic, and the other, though a good telepath, was so nervous before them that she clearly couldn't handle the Noyans. That left one last hope.

Sergeant Carter came into the hut.

"Where's Hiller ?" Jeff demanded.

"She won't come, sir," said Carter stiffly. "She says you've kept her waiting for an hour, and now you can wait till she's ready."

Bill opened his mouth, but Jeff waved him into silence. It was no use saying anything to Carter, who was taking refuge behind stiff formality.

"Okay, Sergeant," said Jeff. "We'll go and see her."

He and Bill left the prefabricated huts which were the seat of law and order on Noya—law and order on the Earth pattern, at any rate. They crossed the baked mud field to the ship, the only vessel Noya ever saw.

They entered the ship and were blind for a moment in the shadow after being in the brilliant sunlight outside.

"This way," said Bill. "She has cabin 47, and I know this old ship."

They reached the cabin, knocked briefly, and went in.

Jeff had had time to glance at one of Janice Hiller's books which was lying about in the mess. A glance was enough to enable him to confirm Bill's verdict. Janice Hiller wrote romances of the spaceways, with side-lights on the various worlds she had visited. The blurb said as much. The book, however, showed that if she learned anything on her travels she didn't let it affect her novels, which might have been written from a New York flat.

The book gave an impression of a middle-aged spinster, eccentric and self-important, but the passenger list said Janice Hiller was twenty-six. And it was no middle-aged spinster who turned as they came in and surveyed them coldly. She was blonde, taller than Bill, nearly as tall as Jeff, and if she hadn't written film scripts she could have acted them. She wasn't perfect; she looked too smart to be perfect. If they couldn't forgive her for her books, at least they could, and did, suspend judgment on Janice Hiller.

"I'd heard that in little outposts like this," she said coldly, "UOF men sometimes act like little dictators. I didn't believe it. It appears I was wrong."

"So wrong," said Jeff, "that if you don't come to my office right now we'll each take one of your arms and march you there."

That shook her, though she tried not to show it. "I'm not in the Force," she retorted. "If you touch me it's . . ."

"Perfectly legal," said Jeff. "Are you coming on your own feet, or do we help you along ?"

She turned from them. "You've taken the wrong attitude," she threw over her shoulder. "If you'd asked me to . . ."

She stopped as they seized her arms and turned her to the door. They were no more gentle than they had to be.

"I don't want to do this . . ." said Jeff.

"But you think it might be fun. All right. I'll come. I'm not giving you an excuse to maul me and say I was resisting."

She accompanied them back to the office. She didn't pretend not to be angry, but she didn't say anything when it would do no good. Jeff began to hope that he had found the girl he needed, against all the chances.

II

"Sit down," Jeff said. "Cigarette ?"

"It's a bit late to be polite now."

"I won't waste any time. I'm going to ask you to risk your life. More than that, if I'm satisfied you're the right girl, I'm going to make you risk your life. And I have power to do it." That was exaggeration, but he meant her to see it was serious.

The girl frowned. "I don't get this. You're making out there's some emergency that . . ."

"There is. We've got to beat the Noyans."

"I've read about them. They've got you where they want you."

"Yes, but not the UOF. They've got the whole human race where they want it, if they ever realise it. Maybe they have, I don't know."

The girl rose and began to pace the tiny room. "You'll have me taking you seriously in a minute," she said. "Take it I know all that anyone on Earth knows about the Noyans. What is it I don't know ?"

"Just why they leave us alone here in Suntown. As for that, nobody knows, except the Noyans. But we can make guesses."

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at her.

"You know the history. The first Earth ships landed here ten years ago. They found a race that was entirely human and like our own race in every respect except that it was the women who had the upper hand, not the men. There was also the fact that they'd been using telepathy for communication for centuries, while we'd only just begun to develop it.

"They didn't try to stop us landing. In fact, they cleared out of this area and left it to us. There was a little contact between the races for a time, and most of what we know about the Noyans was learned then. Their spoken language, for one thing. Naturally, neither race wanted to use telepathy for communication—it would give too much away."

"You tell me I know the history," Janice interrupted, "and then you give me it all over again. If you've got a point, let's get to it."

"They soon found in what ways our set-up differed from theirs," Jeff went on unheeding. "Since then this Earth settlement and the Noyans have never co-operated, never been at peace, never in all-out war."

"I know," said the girl. "But . . . ?"

"But this. We know they could throw us off the planet. They don't. And they don't fraternise with us either. Maybe they can't, with a race that isn't a matriarchy. That can only mean two things. Either they want to co-operate, but haven't found any of us with whom they can, or . . ."

"Don't be dramatic," said Janice impatiently. "Or what ?"

"Or we're guinea-pigs. We're left here so that they can learn about us

and what we can do. When they're satisfied they know all there is to be known about us, they either brush us off their world and keep us off—but they could have done that any time—or go to war, not with this settlement, but with the whole Terran system."

"They'd have a tough time of it," said Janice, unimpressed.

"Think so ? They have teleportation. They can materialise where they like. Maybe there are limits, maybe not. We know they've done it over thousands of miles when we sent spaceships to blast them out of the hills. Suppose they could appear anywhere they liked on Earth. They could take over whole fleets, immobilise all the defences . . ."

"I see the point. You may be right. What do you want me to do ?"

"If you can—I want you to go into the mountains. Learn about them. Discover their secrets. Even make agreements with them."

"As a spy, or as an official representative ?"

"As either or both."

"Do you think I can pass among them undetected ?"

"That's what we want to find out. I can put you through a test and a course at the same time. Remember, I've been here six months. I've learned a lot in that time. I'd go into the mountains myself, but no man can accomplish anything among the Noyans. You might. You're a telepath. I've found that out already. Are you ready to try ?"

"I get thrown in jail if I don't, don't I ?"

Jeff grinned. "I hope the situation doesn't arise. No, I can't force you into the hills. In a real emergency I could, but while the Noyans leave Suntown alone I don't think I can call it that. You have to volunteer. I'll ask you after you've been through the test."

Janice shrugged her shoulders. "All right. Seems I take this test. Maybe I even volunteer—who knows ?"

She did volunteer. A month later Janice left Suntown at dusk on her way to the hills.

She was now Acting Major Hiller of the UOF. But no one who saw her in the white sheath of the Noyans would have guessed it. Noyans did occasionally come to the town. They didn't bother anyone and were bothered by no one. Once, nine or ten years ago, Noyans had been taken prisoner and even killed now and then. But the Noyans' reprisals, unlike the UOF's, went entirely according to plan. So now the colonist and the UOF men left wandering Noyans alone. They couldn't be held captive anyway, with their ability to appear and disappear at will.

Janice had learned a lot. She had had the usual telepathy training, but some of the Noyans' tricks which Jeff and Bill taught her weren't in the book. Fortunately she had great telepathic ability. Telepathy would never become general in the Earth system while there was so much variation in the abilities of different people. Everyone had a barrier, but not everyone could learn how to let it down to let thoughts out and in. Others, having let it down, couldn't put it up again.

But Janice, to pass as a Noyan, needed telepathic ability well beyond the average, and she had it. The Noyans had a spoken language, though it was rarely used—she had to learn that too. It wasn't a good language, however, and it was very simple. Among the Noyans it was apparently used chiefly

when for any reason telepathy was undesirable as a means of communication.

But it wasn't only in telepathy and in learning a new language that Janice had developed. In the course of vigorous physical training she had fought and wrestled with Bill and Jeff, and there had been no pulled punches. In the end there was no allowance made for her sex. Such was her concentration and vigour that if Bill or Jeff didn't go for her as if she were a man, he was liable to find himself on his back being counted out, or caught in a lock he couldn't break.

It was all necessary. The Noyan women were the superior half of the race not only mentally but physically. Even now Janice knew she was hardly a match for them. She might have as much strength, but they would always beat her on stamina.

Jeff had put her chances of coming out alive at one in a hundred, which she thought was about right. She had no plans. There was no point in formulating plans when the strength of the opposition was unknown.

She ran into trouble right away. On the plain in front of the foothills she encountered two Noyans, and they saw her in the dusk as soon as she saw them. She had not expected to meet them so soon.

She walked on towards them, well aware that her masquerade might end there and then. Why should she walk when she could annihilate distance like all Noyans ?

They greeted her conventionally with raised palms. So far she seemed to be accepted as one of them.

"Ala," thought one, and "Miro," the other. They were introducing themselves. Janice thought her own name back at them, and saw by their start that she had thought too hard. It was as if, in conversation, she had shouted instead of merely talking quietly. It was a mistake, but seemed to arouse no suspicion yet.

The Noyans might have been her sisters. There was no more variation in their appearance than that. Ala was bigger and stronger than Miro and Janice, but there was very little in it, and Janice and Miro probably had identical measurements. Ala was blonde and Miro very dark. They could see each other plainly as they stood close.

But now Janice saw she was supposed to make the next move, and she had not the faintest idea of what it should be.

Ala looked at her in mild reproof and suddenly and unexpectedly opened her mind. It was the greatest shock of Janice's life. Not that the mind revealed to her was alien or of dazzling power, but it was an entirely new experience. Few Terrans had sufficient control of their minds to do it even if they wished. And none of them wished.

But more than that, it was like reading a library in less than a second. Janice had it all, but would need weeks, perhaps months, to put it in order. She realised that a Noyan in such circumstances would have selected what she wanted, but without warning she had had to take it all.

Searching frantically among the information she had gained she realised that she had been expected to do as Ala had done and reveal her mind. When Noyans met it was customary. Then there was no question of suspicion.

Ala and Miro were waiting. Janice put in two seconds of the most

concentrated thought of her life. She found in what she had learned from Ala the only possible answer. She opened her mind and the Noyans frowned angrily. For this woman was of the lowest caste, a slave. And they had been misled into treating her as one of themselves.

Below the surface picture that Janice had hurriedly set up they would have found that she was no Noyan at all, and below that, her whole life on Earth. But they didn't look. Ala motioned her peremptorily to fall in behind them.

Suddenly they saw lights. A truck was crossing the plain, a truck from Suntown. There had been another skirmish that day, and this truck was presumably coming out to repair the three or four abandoned vehicles still lying on the plain.

Instantly the two Noyans were running. Janice followed them, puzzled. They ran from Earthmen, did they ? She probed cautiously, and found the Noyans in front were actually afraid. Not terrified, but with very much the feeling of a man in cover watching a wild beast.

They reached a large rock and hid behind it. That, too, was interesting. Janice searched in her mind for something in the material Ala had given her to explain it. But she had, after all, only picked up more or less surface thoughts. What had seemed like the content of a dozen minds was really only a small part of the content of one. Ala would have been at least as much taken aback if she had probed Janice's mind when she had the chance.

The truck stopped only two hundred yards from them. There were four men in it with a big arc lamp. They watched them work. For half an hour they remained there, and as Ala and Miro kept a hood over their minds, Janice learned nothing from them in that time. But she was grateful for the respite to enable her to put some of what she had learned from Ala in order. The more she managed to correlate, however, the more aware she became of the fact that she had really received very little hard information. Things were taken for granted to such an extent that hardly anything of what she now knew made sense.

At the end of that time the repair work was done, and each of the men drove off a truck. The three women in hiding watched them go and then stepped from behind the rock.

"You will come with us to Muna," Ala told Janice. It was not a suggestion, but an order.

They pressed on towards the hills. They were moving cautiously, as if through enemy country. But any danger from Earthmen was over once they left the plain. Did the Noyans, then, fight among themselves ? There had been no hint of it in anything Janice had learned about them.

She didn't have to wonder long. Faint as a cry over a broad river came a wisp of thought, and Janice learned from the minds of Ala and Miro that it meant danger. They were now well into a broad pass that was all white and black in the rays of Hollus, Noya's first moon. There was no vegetation, nothing but bare rock. And that afforded little cover, for the pass was old, and worn by weather to a certain smoothness of wall and floor.

They cut towards the face opposite to the direction of the thought. Janice, in the rear, did as the others did. Such experience as she had had so far of the Noyans' thought communication indicated that she was in no

way behind them in its use.

Again they caught an unguarded thought, closer this time. Ala sent a fierce, shielded beam at Janice. "You betrayed us. You told them where we were."

"Nonsense," retorted Janice coldly. "You would have known. I've never been nearer than you. Who are they ?"

Ala turned from her in irritation, but Janice persisted: "Who are they ? The more I know the better it may be for you. I may do the wrong thing in ignorance."

"The Meddo group," Ala thought shortly. "We have to pass them to reach Muna."

But further communication, even in guarded beams, the whisper of the thought-language, was dangerous. Janice sensed hundreds of Noyans nearby, and guessed the other two knew about them also.

Moving against the plain grey rock they must be easily visible to anyone close enough, Janice knew. Their white garments—the name for them, she now knew, was *sirons*—must reflect Hollus's rays like a mirror. She wondered why they didn't stop and rub dirt on them. But she found the answer at once. The Noyans were fanatically clean. The thought of deliberately dirtying themselves, even to save their lives, was so disgusting to them that they would never consider it.

At last they stopped and hid in what cover they could find against the cliff face. It was hopeless. A triumphant, unguarded thought showed that they had been seen, and now that concealment was impossible they ran for it.

Janice, behind at the start, got further and further behind. She had always thought herself fast on her feet, and the toughening process she had gone through with Jeff and Bill had put her in better physical condition than she had been in her life. But Ala and Miro easily outpaced her, and it was only by throwing her last reserves of energy into flight and running as if she had only a hundred yards to do, not miles, that she was able to close the gap a little.

Noyans were all the same to her, she told herself. It made no difference whether she joined the Meddo group or the equally unknown Munan party. But despite this she ran on. With Ala and Miro she was partly accepted. The devil she knew was better than the devil she didn't know.

It made no difference. They caught her, and only a few seconds later, for all their speed, Ala and Miro were caught as well. In the grasp of a score of hands Janice stood panting, her heart pounding as if it would burst her breast and her lungs labouring. She stood there only a fraction this side of unconsciousness, her legs only just supporting her. And as she reeled in the grasp of the Noyans, a mind that she recognised as an ace among the Noyans stabbed at hers. For an instant of time she almost let it through, beaten, tired to death.

Then from the very last reserve of vitality she found strength to put up at least a token defence. She was utterly hopeless, but without hope she still fought with her mind.

III

Jeff threw his book violently across the room. There had been silence for hours, and Bill started at the sudden movement.

"What's the matter ?" he asked.

Jeff followed up the book and kicked it back across the floor of the hut. It was *In the Caverns of Mercury*, by Janice Hiller.

"I wish I'd read that first," he said moodily. "I'd never have let her go."

"I told you it was crap."

"Yes, but I never thought it was downright stupid. What sort of a girl is she, anyway ? She doesn't look a fool. She talks sense. And she writes that."

"It sells," said Bill, shrugging. "Maybe that's the answer."

"Oh, well, it's done now. She may be dead already. She must have met some of the Noyans. But I wish I'd read that before."

"You couldn't, with all the time we've been spending on Janice lately. We had to give her all we could."

"So that she could use it with the mind that spawned *that* !" exclaimed Jeff. "A man who writes good stuff must have some brains, however imbecilic he may appear. And a girl who writes sentimental, impossible tripe must have a weakness, however intelligent she seems. I'm worried for her own sake, Bill. We had no right to send a girl like that against a race like the Noyans. They'll tear her into strips and hang her out to dry."

"We had no choice."

"That gives us an out," retorted Jeff bitterly. "There wasn't anything else we could do. But suppose we're wrong ? Suppose the Noyans are no more dangerous than skimmed milk ? Suppose we've been imagining the whole danger from them ?"

"Then Janice will be quite safe."

Jeff wouldn't accept comfort. He paced up and down the hut, grunting anxiously. "If only we could do anything to help," he muttered. "Or at least, if we could hear something. Think she'll let us know if they get her ? She's a good enough telepath for that."

"What can we do if she does ?"

"What can we do ? You and I can go over the mountains in a plane, strapped back to back, and shoot holes in everything we see, inside or outside the plane. And we'll do just that if they get Janice."

"Could it be that you like her, despite her books ?"

"Who could like anyone who wrote like that ? Let's say I got attached to her. Anyway, if the Noyans harm her, I, personally, will see that they regret it !"

Janice still felt as if her lungs were bursting, and there was a throb in her head as if a band was being rhythmically tightened and loosened. But she was walking more easily and was beginning to take an interest in her surroundings again.

The Meddos were treating her with more respect since her encounter with Nera. She still didn't know quite what had happened. The tall Meddo had sent a beam boring at her and she stopped it, that was all. But since then the Meddos had been more careful with her, and, in fact, had taken her as the leader of the little group. A small band ahead was looking after Miro and Ala. The bulk of the Meddos—Janice estimated them at a hundred —were packed about her.

There was nothing to distinguish the Meddos from the apparently rival

group, the Munans. Like Ala and Miro, like Janice herself, they were young, tanned gold, wore the *siron* and thought and spoke the same way. It was now quite apparent that there was nothing physical to betray her Earth origin. In the struggle Ala had had her *siron* torn from her body, and Janice saw that externally, at any rate, the Noyans were exactly like Earth women even to the white skin shielded from the sun, in contrast to the tanned limbs. The only thing she had to fear was that the Noyans would see the marks of the two-piece swim-suit in which she had sunbathed, back on Earth. But that was long ago, and the traces were faint.

The mind—that was a different matter. Apparently she had already revealed more than she intended, quite unconsciously. All Noyans had developed mind-shields. Was hers stronger, quite unknown to her, or far worse, *different* ?

They walked on in the strong light of the first moon, augmented now by the second, Mabor. The floor of the pass was as bare as the plain behind it, but they were crossing it to the black shadow of the opposite cliff face. Janice knew from unshielded thoughts that in that shadow lay Medd, a Noyan city.

She wasn't wasting her time as she walked. Slowly, painstakingly, she was building up in the forepart of her mind a picture of the life she might have had, the details of which she was sifting from what she had learned from Ala and from what she was learning now from the women around her.

After all, she thought, she was a novelist. She was used to making a little experience go a long way. The picture she was creating was not of an ordinary Noyan. In that she was bound to fail. She had found that the Noyans were faintly superstitious, their superstition based on legends of a race in the south, the *ebru*, who were beings just this side of gods.

Whether the *ebru* existed or not Janice had no means of knowing. She knew the Noyans half-thought they did. Since they knew very little of the *ebru*, except that they were in human shape, obviously the *ebru* was the safest alias for Janice.

The column entered the shadow of the high rock walls and Janice shivered. Hollus reflected not only light but heat. Even at night Noya was warm, warm as tropical nights on Earth. But out of the rays from the satellite it was suddenly chill, if only in comparison.

A few hundred yards, and they passed into a vast cavern. How vast it was Janice had no idea, for in the dim shadow she could see nothing but that as far as her eyes could reach there was no sign of narrowing.

A sudden turn, a splash of light, and Janice saw Medd. She almost betrayed herself. It was immense, it was magnificent, it was beautiful. Under a high rock roof that was all light, beautiful white buildings, some of them quite tall, were spread in an ordered, artistic pattern never achieved on Earth.

Her whole picture of the Noyans had to be re-formed. At first, before she met Ala and Miro, she had rated them high. They had gone lower and lower in her estimation since. First the obvious caution of Ala and Miro when they saw the truck, then the knowledge that the Noyans were disunited, then the success of her defence against the tall Meddo, then the knowledge that the Noyans were superstitious—all had tended to diminish the race, until, just before they reached Medd, Janice had been wondering

whether the Noyans could really represent a menace even to her, let alone Earth.

But one glance at the city changed that. The race which had built that, and was still building it—she saw work in progress—was as highly civilised as Earth. It was not the product of a young race, that city. It was the work of a race that had grown up. The cavern itself was a miracle of engineering.

She didn't let herself pause and wonder. The Meddos were leading them towards the centre of the city. There seemed to be no vehicles. The centre of the city was miles away, and apparently the only way to reach it was to walk.

"I wonder who you really are ?" said Ala thoughtfully.

The Meddos had left Janice with Miro and Ala, now wearing a fresh *siron*, in a small room off the Justice Hall. The Noyans were not nocturnal. This was night for them as much as for Earthmen, and the business of the city would not begin again until dawn. The fact that the city was still as brilliantly lit as at any other time of the day made no difference. Janice and the two Munans were prisoners locked up for the night, just as on Earth.

But how could they be locked up, Janice wondered. The UOF had never succeeded in keeping a Noyan prisoner. Why didn't Miro and Ala simply materialise outside their prison—perhaps in Muna itself ?

She had no answer yet. Perhaps she could beat down the mind defence of a Noyan, perhaps not. She certainly couldn't do it without giving away things she had much better keep to herself.

"You know who I am," she said easily.

She was beginning to see the difference between the two she was with. Ala was the leader, the doer. Miro, who was smaller, more delicately formed, was the dreamer—far more like the girls Janice knew, back on Earth. Miro would be happy enough, in other circumstances, to be dominated by a husband. Ala, never.

They were talking, using their voices and the seldom-used Noyan language. Janice knew why that was. The guard outside could pick up their thoughts, but she could not pick up the quietly-spoken words through the heavy door.

"No," said Ala. "You said you were a slave."

"You know I'm a slave. You saw my mind."

"Not I. I wonder if anyone can see your mind, unless you allow it. The Meddo couldn't. And your accent is strange."

Janice tensed. So her words, so carefully practised, still weren't formed quite as they should be. It was as well she had decided to pose as a member of the *ebru*. That would explain everything.

She merely smiled at Ala. She was lying on a soft couch—the Noyans seemed to treat prisoners well—looking up at Ala. Suddenly the Noyan moved over her.

"You have at least one strange power," she murmured. "I wonder if you have any more ?"

She reached towards Janice. Her intention was clear. She was making Janice defend herself. A member of a strange race, attacked, will reveal more than he knows.

Janice slipped from the couch under Ala's body. She was thinking rapidly. She didn't want this. If they fought physically, Ala would certainly over-

come her. If she landed a lucky blow it would only enrage the woman.

"Do you think that's wise ?" she asked.

"Probably not. I want to find out."

"Mind if I suggest something first ?"

"I'm listening."

"Assume I have strange powers. I'm here with you, a prisoner of the Meddos. If I escape, perhaps you escape. Do you want me to show my secrets where the Meddos may observe them ?"

"It may be a trick," Ala admitted. "If it is, it's a clever one. At any rate, I can't take the risk. Lie down again. I won't touch you."

Janice lay down.

"You think we can escape ?" asked Miro hopefully. Janice was beginning to like her, for no reason other than that she had the kind of face it was easy to like.

Janice took a decision. She had got so far by playing safe. She had an idea she would get no further.

"Why stay here ?" she asked boldly. "Why not use the teleport ?"

She knew it was a mistake, and their reaction confirmed it. But she learned one vital fact. When the Noyans teleported themselves, the body remained behind. Ala and Miro could teleport themselves all over Noya and they would still be prisoners in a small room in Medd. Also if any of them made any attempt at teleport, the guards outside would know and could stop it. Janice didn't get the details, but she got the facts.

"Is that meant to be a joke ?" asked Ala.

If they talked of jokes like that, even their sense of humour must be exactly as in Terrans. But Janice could go no further on that line. She might be almost on the whole secret of the Noyans, but if she said any more she might betray herself completely.

Already she knew how Noyans, caught by Earthmen, must have escaped. Their bodies remained imprisoned, but the colonists didn't know that. The Noyans appeared to escape, but actually only went when the colonists thought they were gone. The details were still a puzzle to Janice, but the principle was obvious.

Suddenly, impulsively, she grinned at Miro. "I'll get you out," she said. "Now go to sleep."

"Sleep !" exclaimed Ala.

"It's the general custom at night," said Janice, closing her eyes, "even among the *ebru*."

It was a pity she couldn't see the effect of that. But there was dead silence after she spoke.

She didn't sleep at once. She wanted to know if it was possible to contact Jeff and Bill mentally. Already she had quite a few things to tell them that they didn't know about the Noyans.

She sent the merest thread of thought at the wall, not in the direction of Suntown. Immediately, about it began to form the awareness of a guard, not yet certain, but knowing there might be a thought there. Quietly Janice withdrew the thought, and was aware of the guard deciding she had been mistaken.

That way was out. She didn't even know the mental mechanism that enabled the guard to enfold the room in a mental net, but she knew she

had met nothing but the guard's unassisted mind. The Noyans still had their secrets.

IV

It was very like a court of justice on Earth, Janice thought. But she was aware of an undercurrent of vast difference, and she was a little afraid of it. The presiding Meddo, Retor, was not there to see fair play; the jury was not there to reach a decision; and the spectators, two hundred of them, were not precluded from taking a hand in the game.

Here for the first time Janice saw a big company of Noyans in their natural habitat. The first thing she had noticed when they brought her in with the two Munans was that in their own cities the Noyans rarely wore the white *siron*. That was, so to speak, battledress. Many wore it, but then it was of all colours, and the pattern varied. Instead of the plain though soft skin-tight garment, there were *sirons* that ended in shorts or skirts, *sirons* with ornamental buttons and jewellery, *sirons* cut with halter tops. Others wore clothes that were not the *siron* at all—shaksheer like Oriental women on Earth, slacks, shirts, gowns—everything but crinolines or riding breeches.

But there was no nakedness. In fact, she and the Munans had been given fresh clothes as a matter of course before they entered the Judging Hall.

Miro came first. They had graded them, Janice observed, in the probable order of quality as they saw it—Miro, then Ala, then her. She hoped they were right.

The process wasn't judging, though they called it that. It was forcing strangers to join the group. The fifteen who sat like a jury formed one vast mind and bent it on the prisoner. If they succeeded, she joined the group willingly. That was their success. If they failed, the verdict was death. Simple, fair, and ruthless.

But there was an alternative. If the jury not only failed, but voted freedom, the prisoner went free. Hastily Janice snapped up such thoughts on the subject as were swirling in the Hall. It happened seldom, but it happened. Usually the jury—the Persuaders, they were called—succeeded completely in their job. Occasionally, once in a hundred times, they failed and someone had to be put to death. Once in ten thousand times the prisoner went free.

Miro was led to a chair facing the Persuaders and strapped in. Then Retor nodded, and all mental hell broke loose.

In two minutes Janice learned more about the Noyans than all she had known before. With her Terran faculty of criticism she saw at once that this didn't matter. To her, at any rate, it made no difference whether she stayed in Medd or not, as a slave or as a Meddo.

But to Miro it mattered. Here she would be a slave. In any city but Muna she would be a slave. If vanquished she would stay in Medd willingly, but that was partly a matter of honour. Even a slave, among the Noyans, had honour. But she had little else.

To Janice the Judging meant only an opportunity of sifting thousands of unguarded thoughts. For everyone was in it, not simply the fifteen Persuaders and Miro. It was like a play in which everyone could take a part at will. Some joined the Persuaders, some Miro—it was all part of the game. The

real battle was still between the prisoner and the Persuaders. They were the only ones who cared about the result.

Janice sought first the secret of the Noyans' teleport, without result. No one was thinking of that. But she did find, among hundreds of other things which she stored away for future examination, that the Judging did matter to her, after all. For it was the Munans who operated the teleport against the Earth colony. She learned no more than that, neither why nor how, but that made it clear that she had to leave Medd and go on to Muna.

In two minutes it was over and Miro was a slave. Looking at her delicate face, pretty rather than beautiful, but capable of expressing so much happiness or sorrow, Janice remembered her promise and was ashamed. But she had not known about this.

Then Ala was in the chair. This time Janice ignored everything but the struggle between the sixteen minds, searching for a way to beat the Persuaders.

First the prisoner put up a barrier, which occupied the Persuaders for varying periods depending on the quality of the prisoner. Miro's had been down in ten seconds. Ala's was still up after a minute, though wilting. But inevitably that went down sooner or later. One mind couldn't hold off fifteen.

Then a kind of argument started. The prisoner stated her case and the Persuaders beat down her statement. A total period of roughly eight minutes was set. The Judging might be over long before then. If it was not, the prisoner died—unless she had beaten the Persuaders and forced them to vote freedom for her.

Ala took the full eight minutes. When she was released she stood up defiantly, unbroken. The inevitable verdict was pronounced.

Two Meddos prepared Ala. She was to die on the spot. But it was a solemn, moving ceremony, for she was unvanquished and therefore respected. She was sentenced to die not out of hate or sadism, but because she could not be allowed to live among them and yet had not been strong enough to force them to let her go.

Janice watched as the Meddos lifted a shimmering silver gown over Ala's head and let it ripple down over her body. Over the heart was a golden star. Then Retor stepped down from her pulpit and drew a silver dagger.

Janice had thought she had no feeling for Ala—had thought of her even as an enemy. But as the knife went up and she knew that in another second it would be piercing the star and Ala's heart, she found she had to intervene.

"Wait !" she thought. She beamed it like her first thought to Ala, so that it was a shout, tearing into the minds of everyone in the Hall. "Let her live until after my Judging."

"Very well," agreed Retor at once. She returned to her high desk.

Janice was placed in the chair and strapped in. Ala stood watching, calm, magnificent in the silver gown. For her it was only a period of suspense, but she showed no sign of weakness.

It was madness for a member of a race who had only just learned some of the power of telepathy to expect to succeed in what was at best an unequal test with fifteen members of a race which had used telepathy for centuries. But Janice intended to fight with a weapon they didn't know she had.

When the Persuaders sought her barrier they found it rock solid. She kept it steady for four minutes, knowing time was valuable, knowing and seeing how the Persuaders' morale was sapped with every moment the barrier stayed whole.

Perhaps they could have broken her barrier if they had known who she was. But they didn't know. *They tried to beat down the barrier of a Noyan.* They assumed its calibre, and tuned their minds to break into the kind of life Janice must have lived.

But she was thinking of Earth. They hadn't a chance.

Merely keeping them out, however, wasn't enough. That would only land her with Ala. She had to attack.

She lashed out suddenly with a question. It was so unexpected, after four minutes of pure defence, that the Persuaders were unable to strike back while the barrier was down. And the question itself was so unexpected that they had to consider it.

Had they considered the engines which the Strangers used?

Of course they had considered them. But the Noyans had no machines. They had magnificent tools, an incredible chemistry, they were masters of medicine, surgery of all kinds was easy to them—but they had no machines.

Rapidly Janice explained to them the principle and specifications of a machine. She chose the internal combustion engine as the best for her purpose. Electricity was dangerous, for the Noyan use of electricity was utterly strange to Janice. Atomic power was also risky, as the Noyans might be ahead in the chemical principles. The steam engine was too simple. The internal combustion engine was just right.

She made them argue on her own ground. She made them say a thing was impossible, then proved it possible. She had an unshakable barrier behind which she could rest. And she had them arguing about what was to them wild theory—to her, simple practice.

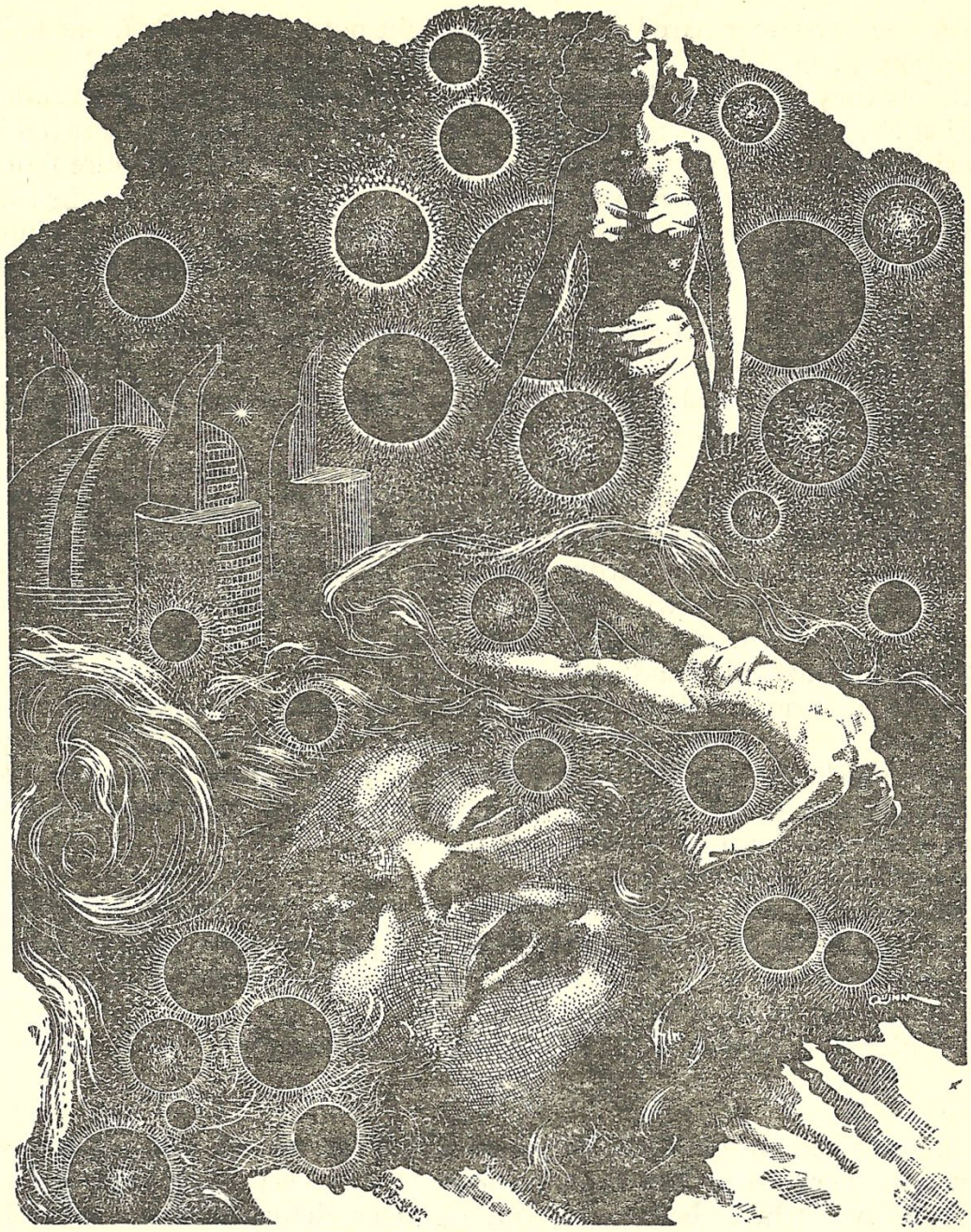
All the time she had an inner eye on the Noyan clock. She couldn't read it, but the brains she was tapping could. She knew to an instant how long was left.

When she had proved the practicability of the internal combustion engine nearly three minutes remained. Thought was as fast as that.

She made them argue about the slide-rule. They had nothing of the sort, and unlike the engine, the mention of the device didn't necessarily suggest Janice's origin. The Noyans had no idea the Earthmen used such an instrument. Again, using her solid barrier as an anchor, she was able to make them argue on the ground she had chosen, not theirs, and prove the virtues of the instrument.

The whole Hall was seething with excitement and awe, but Janice had no attention free for that. They didn't know, of course, that she was drawing on the entire resources of another culture, and she did all she could to prevent them knowing.

With a minute left Janice told them of movable type, which was again new to them and unconnected with the Earth colony. Now she was aware of the puzzlement in the excitement that filled the Hall almost visibly. What could she hope to gain? They knew that here was a mind of power, imagination, and stability. But why was this woman tying the Persuaders



in knots over physical objects, however valuable ? Why didn't she fight and vanquish them on the level of pure thought ?

Few of them would have believed it was because she could not. Janice had used what was to hand—to her. But in her armoury there was no mental power strong enough to take fifteen powerful Noyan minds and twist them to her own ends. She was doing her best with what she had.

When time trembled on the brink of death for Janice, she summoned everything in her mind, all the force of her being, and threw it at the Persuaders in the thundering roar:

"Do you dare murder the ebru ?"

It was beautifully conceived. The thought tore deep. Janice had pulled in superstition, even religion, on her side. She had shown them she was invulnerable; she had thrown them in mental chaos; she appealed to the depths of their capacity for fear.

Not one Persuader dared speak. She might not be of the *ebru*, but no one was prepared to risk it. If she was not of the *ebru*, *what was she* ?

And as they hesitated, Janice threw her mind open. There was no depth to what she showed, but no one knew that. The whole thing was invention, and she had invented depth as well. What the Noyans saw was pure fantasy, but they hardly knew there was such a thing as fantasy. They saw the things Janice had done, they saw the things she meant to do. And, credulous, because they had been bludgeoned into credulity, they believed it all.

"By this time," said Jeff moodily, "they probably have her staked out in the sun and left to rot."

Bill hefted a large volume in his hand. "Have you ever looked her up in *The People who Matter ?*"

"No, why ?"

"You'd find that she's always fallen on her feet. Since she was three years old. Read that notice. The girl it's about couldn't die alone, helpless, a failure on a planet that hardly anyone on Earth has heard of. She might die in a blaze of glory with her job done, I grant you that. In fact, that would fit nicely with what they've got here."

"Cheerful buzzard," said Jeff.

"No, I'm serious. Read it. It doesn't say she's a genius. Not if you read between the lines. It doesn't say she writes great stuff. It says—between the lines—that she writes the kind of tripe that people like. That if she backed a horse with three legs, the rest of the field wouldn't finish. That when she married a man with . . ."

"Married ?" exclaimed Jeff.

Bill grinned. "It's all right, he's dead. When she married a fortune-hunter he turned out to be just the fellow to quadruple her income and then die. She's loaded, Jeff. Not only loaded with money, loaded like dice. She just can't help turning sevens."

Jeff looked doubtful, but he felt vaguely reassured.

V

Janice walked out of Medd free to go where she wished, and Ala and Miro went with her. Miro had been restored by the very Persuaders who had made a slave of her. Janice had won a greater victory than she could have dreamed.

At first as they walked slowly in the shadows, avoiding the blinding afternoon sun, the Munans were inclined to treat Janice with awe. With Miro it was natural enough, but it didn't sit well on Ala.

"I never said I was of the *ebru*," she told them suddenly.

"But you must be," said Miro.

"Perhaps. Anyway, remember I've never claimed to be more than an ordinary—girl."

The word meant what she meant it to mean. Her mind was partly open as she spoke. They knew that she regarded herself as an ordinary girl. That meant Noyan, to them. To her it meant something else.

"What do you want with Muna ?" Ala asked. She asked it cautiously, prepared to be blasted with that awful shriek of thought in which Janice had screamed her last question at the Persuaders.

"You are wrong about the Strangers," said Janice flatly. It was a safe enough statement. Whatever the attitude of the Noyans to the Earth colony was, it could be wrong, and it might be her job to change it.

"The Strangers ?" Ala thought. "How can we be wrong ? They seek to bring another way of life to us. And they are males. What can we do but fight them ?"

"Learn from them. As I have."

"Yes, you have learned much. Much that will be useful. We are not ashamed to learn."

"And they are not all males. No human race is." Janice had seen a few of the Noyan males in Medd. They were delicate, good-natured creatures, of high intelligence but no drive—and utterly content. The slaves of the Noyans, like the leaders, were women. There was no question of liberating the men. Luxury and sensuality were their life.

"I have seen their women," said Ala contemptuously. "Beasts. Dead flesh and broken minds. Child-bearing machines. Old and fat and ugly."

From the mental pictures that went with her description Janice realised at last why no Noyan had ever considered for a moment that she might be a Terran girl. She needn't have worried about the uneven tan on her skin, or anything else. Any explanation would be accepted sooner than that a strong, firm body and a powerful, fully telepathic mind could belong to a Stranger woman. No one would ever believe that a girl who was what Janice was and could do what she had done could be one of those half-human derelicts.

But that wasn't the whole picture. The Noyans, some Noyans, must have seen strong, young, healthy girls from Earth. Not many, perhaps, but certainly some—nurses, doctors, biologists, stewardesses, young wives. In other circumstances the Noyans would have seen her—as an Earth woman.

No, there was an emotional blindness too. The Noyans were incapable of respect for women who could "obey" men. They knew that the Earth men were a different breed from their own. But they recognised in any contact with Terrans a threat to their whole system of life.

As she thought of that Janice realised with stunning clarity that there never would be much co-operation between Noyans and Terrans, not while the Noyan matriarchy remained in power. And it always would.

Until that moment she had hoped that two great races who had each come a long way could go even farther together. But now, having seen Earth and having seen Noya—more, having seen inside a Noyan's mind—she knew that anything more than an uneasy alliance was impossible.

Earth still had men in control, and it worked. They were bigger, stronger, more ambitious, cleverer than women. That didn't mean that a clever woman couldn't be cleverer than most men. You couldn't legislate for geniuses. Men ran things on Earth, and for the most part women were content to let them run them.

Noyan women were on top because their history must have been different. They didn't hunt—there were no large animals on Noya—so strength wasn't necessary for survival. They didn't have wars, they didn't need land. There was enough for everybody, so no one had to be ambitious. Women's qualities were wanted, so women ruled. It was as easy as that. It worked, and it would continue to work.

"How do you do it ?" Ala asked.

The thought carried the whole detail of the question. Janice knew she meant the impenetrable barrier. Suddenly she stopped. She had been blind. She didn't have to go to Muna. She could fight her battle here, with Ala and Miro—her friends.

"I'll tell you," she said, "if you show me the secret of teleport."

It was safe to say that, though they stared incredulously at her, because they still could never believe she was an Earth girl even if the thought occurred to them.

She hated herself as she stood there facing them, knowing her duty to Earth must be far greater than any duty she might fancy she had to them. If they told her, well and good. If they didn't, she could force it from them, now that she knew how. She had learned a lot in Medd.

"But you must know . . ." Ala thought.

"No. Remember, whatever I am, I am strange to you. I know things you don't. And there is one thing, at least, that you know but is a mystery to me."

Simply, trustingly, they told her. They still hardly believed she didn't know. They thought they were reminding her, no more, of the technique. When it was clear to her the tears welled from her eyes. She hadn't cried for years. She didn't know why she cried then, except that it might be from shame.

They frowned at her, puzzled, and she knew they were waiting, like children, to be told her secret in return. But they couldn't use her secret, the fact that a mind with an alien background was impenetrable while its secret was unknown, and she could use theirs. It had only had to be explained. Should she tell them, or should she leave them, like a thief who had lost interest, having stolen all there was to steal ? Worse than that, a thief who didn't have to steal, a spy ?

No, she couldn't go like that. She couldn't leave them merely puzzled. It would be cowardice to hide her treachery. Telling the truth wouldn't make the treachery any better, but at least it would show what had made her act as she did.

In an instant she swept aside the *ebru* pretence and opened her mind to them.

For long seconds they could not believe it. But they were seeing a whole mind, and they knew this was the truth. Janice's various tricks had been good, but none of them had the stamp of authenticity this had.

With a scream Ala threw herself wildly at Janice. In that moment Janice saw she had told them the truth for her gratification, not theirs. But as she realised it she leapt aside and hurled the ultimate power of her mind at Ala. The Noyan, her screens wide open in her anger, jerked in mid-air as if struck by a heavy bullet. Janice had done what the Meddo Persuaders had failed to do. Ala dropped in a crumpled heap. Janice reached out mentally, and her mind shrieked in voiceless horror as she found that Ala was dead. She had never intended that. But everything she had had gone into that beam, and a wide-open mind, Noyan or Terran, was never meant to withstand the whole power of another mind jabbing and twisting within it. Janice herself would shiver for days when she thought of it.

Ala was beyond shivering. Janice had only sent that beam, Ala had taken it. All of it.

Now Miro had to fight. Janice turned and saw the girl, still desperately afraid of her, fighting her fear and horror. Miro had to be more than herself, she had to be Ala too. She launched herself at Janice as Ala had done, and half-heartedly Janice sent a weak beam at her.

But Miro knew the error to avoid. Her mind half-open, she had seen exactly what had happened to Ala, and she didn't let it happen to her. Janice could do what she had done only to an open mind, and Miro's mind had never been more tightly shut. She had more to fight for now than she had had in the Meddo Judging Hall.

Avoiding her with difficulty, Janice tried almost the full beam on her. Miro wilted, but only for an instant. It wasn't a battle of minds, and Janice couldn't make it one. In telling Miro her origin she had diminished her strength. Anyway, she couldn't use it on Miro. She had known her only a few hours, but she couldn't kill her.

"Stop this, Miro," she thought strongly. "I don't want to harm you. Let me go. You go on to Muna."

"You killed Ala," Miro panted. She spoke, because to talk by thought she would have had to drop her screen. "I liked you, I . . . I feared you but still liked you. But you're a killer and the slave of the Strangers. You'll tell them——"

"I've no quarrel with you, Miro," said Janice quietly. "Go to Muna, to your own people, and let me go back to mine. You never fought in your life, nor did I, except in sport. Why should we turn ourselves into animals ?"

It was a waste of time. Janice realised it by putting herself in Miro's place. If she were Miro, she would fight too.

The girl came at her like a tigress. At first Janice was only trying to hold her off. But in that she failed completely. Miro was weak for a Noyan, but she was more than a match for Janice.

Miro didn't use her nails and didn't go for Janice's eyes. Apparently it never occurred to her. But otherwise she followed no kid-glove rules, and for a moment Janice reeled helpless after a blow in the pit of the stomach. In other circumstances she would have gone down and writhed in agony, but she could not allow herself to fall. Miro meant to kill her, she knew, and even with her eyes streaming, and unable to stand erect, she had to go on.

For a while Janice could only hit out wildly and try to keep the Noyan at arm's length. Then she saw that she could only overcome Miro with what she had learned of Earth fighting—with her nails and teeth if necessary.

Closing unexpectedly with Miro she tripped her neatly and dropped heavily on her. In a moment she had an armlock and turned the girl on her face. But with a wild heave of strength that Janice couldn't match, Miro threw her several feet away. Janice wasted no time. Before Miro was up she was on her, her hands grasping her hair. She knocked Miro's head on a flat stone, careful only to stun.

When Miro came round she was tied with strips from her own *siron*. She struggled, but Janice hadn't underrated her strength.

"You can't get free," Janice told her. "But you can get a beam through to Muna. Someone can come and free you."

"You'll have to kill me," Miro answered. "If you don't I'll send them after you."

"Try that if you like. I'll have four hours' start at least."

Miro's face worked desperately. "I'll warn the Meddos not to let you through."

Janice probed the thought. She meant it. The Noyans might fight among themselves, but against a common enemy they would be one race.

"You shouldn't have told me," she said soberly. "I'll blanket your thought."

"You can only do that when you're between me and Medd. When you enter the pass, I'll get through."

Janice squatted beside her. "I wonder if I can make you understand," she said. "Can't you see that we have common ground, Miro ? You liked me when my only pretence was that I was a Noyan. What is the difference uow?"

"You are ruled by males."

Janice shook her head. The gesture had the same meaning among the Noyans. "No. On Earth I sometimes did as I was told—by men and by women. But I am here as a free agent. More than that, I rank high among the soldiers of the Strangers. If their cavalcade on wheels came out, I could order it back, and the soldiers would obey me. They'd obey *me*, a woman, do you understand ? Would they do that if women were chattels among the Strangers as you believe ?"

But the task was hopeless, as she had known from the beginning. Miro had a grudging respect for her she would never have for a Terran male—simply because Janice was a woman. But that didn't entail any sort of sympathy with her.

Janice rose. "Goodbye, Miro," she said. "And remember, I only fought for my race, as you would have done for yours."

She left her bound, already hidden in the lengthening shadows. She was careful not to think until she was back at Suntown. There were some decisions she had to make—but the first thing was to get clear of the Noyans.

VI

She hadn't gone far when Miro sent the first questing thought directed at the Meddos. It didn't pass Janice, but she knew Miro was right. As soon as she entered the pass that contained the city of Medd she would swing out of line between Miro and the city, and Miro's thought would get through. She should certainly have killed Miro as she had killed Ala—for nothing would stop her thoughts but death.

It was already dark as she reached the end of the pass. That would help. But she and Ala and Miro had been caught in the dark before, and that was while the Meddos could not have been quite certain that there was anyone there. Now they would know they only had to stop one girl who must go through the valley.

But this time it would be more difficult to see her. Janice found a small pool and waded into it. When she was thoroughly wet she came out and plastered the grey rock dust over her—on her *siron*, her arms and legs, even in her hair. Most of the limitations of the Noyans arose from their failure even to think of what a member of another race would do. The Meddos would be looking for a girl picked out against the rock by a gleaming *siron*. It would never occur to them that she would be camouflaged so that they had to be almost on her before they would see her.

Janice knew, by this time, that her thought would not give her away. She could only be caught if she was seen. And guessing the Meddos would watch the walls, she set off down the centre of the pass. Her Terran eyes would help. Noya was never as dark as it could be with no moon on Earth. She should be able to see the Meddos before they could see her.

She could have known the exact instant at which Miro's thought got through to the Meddos, but if she had had a beam out they might be able to trace it. Instead, she was only dimly aware from a careless thought that reached her as she moved silently down the valley that now the Meddos were on her trail.

It was hopeless to run. She could not hurry without noise, and at best the Meddos could easily outpace her, as they had done before. So she continued to move slowly and silently. She looked up and judged when Hollus would set. Roughly two hours. Then Noya, lit only by Mabor, the small second moon, was darkest. But only for an hour. Then Crinu, last of the three moons, would come up, and Crinu was only a shade weaker than Hollus. She needed that hour of darkness to cross the plain beyond the hills.

She almost blundered into a party of Meddos, but her eyes, straining in the shadows, gave her warning just before they saw her. She stretched out on the ground, and as she had hoped, they failed to notice her even though they passed quite close. They were not looking for a woman whose skin and clothes were grey. They were looking for a flash of golden limbs and a white *siron.*

The light of Hollus was better for Janice's purpose than total darkness. For if the light was strong, it was treacherous. There were so many moving shadows thrown by the racing moon that she could be seen but appear to be less real than the shadows. And on the other hand, she could see. The light helped her more than it did the Meddos.

Presently she caught a thought she should never have been allowed to catch. The Meddos, far past her already down the valley, and knowing she must be between them and the higher end, were forming a chain across the valley and retracing their steps. They thought themselves certain to pick her up in the net.

Certainly they would have done if Janice hadn't had warning. She thought of racing for the rock wall, but they would search most carefully there. She scanned the ground about her unhurriedly, for the chain was still a long way off. Rocks were useless, for the Meddos would certainly hunt around, below and behind every rock. She could retreat, but if she went back the way she had come she would be caught between Munans and Meddos. And in any case, she would have this ground to cover again.

Presently she found what she was looking for. Down the centre of the valley ran a deep stream. It was choked with grass and soft weed, which suited her purpose. She found a place where she could lie hidden in fairly deep water with nothing but her mouth showing. The Meddos would wade through the shallows. But they couldn't wade there.

For an interminable time she waited. The water was refreshing, for she had been hot and sweating on her journey through the warm night. The water was not cold enough to chill, but it was pleasantly cool.

She could hear and see nothing, but she had a few wisps of thought out

to warn her of the Meddos' approach. It was dangerous, but she could not lie there for ever. She had to know when they had passed.

And then she knew they were almost at her. Her feet were bound firmly in the weeds well below the surface, holding her body down. Her hands at her sides grasped the strongest weed she could find, and now only her lips were above the water.

She was aware of a Meddo looking directly at her. Silently, carefully, she closed her mouth and pulled herself below the surface, breathing out first so that she wouldn't be too light. If the roots of the weeds gave, she would shoot to the surface, and would certainly be seen. But they held.

The Meddos seemed to wait for minutes at the spot. They were scanning every inch of the water, though they had no reason to suspect her presence here more than anywhere else. Janice's lungs screamed for air, but she knew she couldn't move without a ripple.

At last the Meddos moved on, and Janice let herself cautiously rise to the surface. The Meddos were still only a few yards away, but their search, to be effective, concentrated itself on one spot at a time. Janice sank back as she heard a splash. A little way ahead, one of the Meddos thought she saw something and had dived into the deeper water to investigate.

Then it was safe to move. Janice waded from the water and renewed the dust covering which the stream had washed from her.

For a time she thought that, having evaded the chain of searchers, she was through. But the random thoughts that a large number of people could not help releasing, even at a time like this, presently told her that there was still a big concentration ahead. The Meddos were not relying on one manoeuvre to catch. Moreover, they were identifying each other every few minutes to make sure that Janice had not slipped among them. Janice hadn't even thought of that.

She reached the mouth of the pass without further trouble, but there, she realised, the real test lay. The Meddos knew she had to pass that point. They were searching the rest of the valley, but if that failed, the guard at the mouth of the valley must not fail. Before her Janice sensed Noyans in such concentration that even if she could place them all she could never pass through them without being seen.

Hollus would set in only a few minutes, but the Meddos knew that too. They were carefully placed and silent. They were ready to detect any thought, sound or movement.

Janice paused, helpless. If there was a way through, she couldn't see it. She could try to climb the cliffs where they narrowed and became less precipitous, but the face was not only smooth, it might be loose in places. It would be impossible to climb it without dropping loose stones and betraying herself. It might be impossible to climb it anyway.

She thought of trying to simulate orders to the guards. But that was useless. Thought identified the sender far more certainly than a voice. One could hardly send any thought anywhere without putting a signature on it. She considered a mental attack, to try to beat down a guard or two as she had beaten Ala. But all these Meddos would have their shields fully down.

There was only one thing to try—something she had only just learned, something she had never used, something the Meddos knew far better than

she did.

She projected herself across the valley by teleport, not far from where she had approached the Meddo guard. She didn't blunder into them, she merely let herself be seen fleetingly. It didn't even give away her camouflage, for she didn't allow herself to be seen closely enough for that.

The Meddos weren't well trained as hunters. It was natural enough. Men were the hunters of a race, not women. The Meddos could hunt, but not well. They allowed themselves to be drawn out of position, they became excited and gave away their position by carelessly screened thoughts, and as Hollus sank below the hills Janice abandoned the teleport and darted through.

Using teleport once wasn't enough. The Meddos would soon realise what had happened and stream back to the points which had been left unguarded. Janice had to stop again and again and go back to keep the Meddos busy and in confusion. Presently they did realise what was happening, and re-formed themselves. But it was too late. They should never have allowed themselves to be beaten so easily, and in fact Janice saw they didn't believe that she was already through. That made it easier. Presently, well out in the plain, she knew she was safe. The Meddos on guard believed she had doubled back and would still have to make the attempt to get through.

It was still about three miles to Suntown. Only when she had cut it to one mile did Janice relax. The nearest Meddo was three miles back. Even if they streamed to Suntown at top speed they couldn't catch her.

She was through, and she had done her job. She wasn't proud of herself, but she had done what she had to do.

(*To be continued*)

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

J. T. M'Intosh's serial "The Esp Worlds" moves into high gear in the second instalment next issue, when the plot locale moves to the second No World of Nome. It would be a pity to say much about it here, mainly for the benefit of those who will read the story at one sitting.

Short stories prevail in the September issue, the longest of which is a delightful down-to-Earth story by Lan Wright, "Project—Peace !" Jack Chandler is with us again with "The Serpent," a laboratory story this time; E. R. James returns after a long absence with an interplanetary story "Emergency Working"; F. G. Rayer has another Magnis Mensas short entitled "The Peacemaker," and the issue is rounded off with a neat Time story "The Broken Record," by James MacGregor.

Final ratings on the March issue, which had a record number of votes, was as follows:

1.	Enchanted Village	A. E. van Vogt
2.	Third Party	E. C. Tubb
3.	The World that Changed ..	J. T. M'Intosh
4.	Asteroid City	E. R. James
5.	The Flame Gods	Sydney J. Bounds

That's the first time a lead story ever hit bottom !

MEN ONLY

By E. C. TUBB

Even when the Martian colony had settled its marital problems and life on the dusty planet was almost bearable, there was little hope for future generations. If there were any future generations.

Illustrated by QUINN

The metal whispered. Sang and quivered to distant vibration. A footstep. A closing door. The subdued murmur of engines.

"Fool" it whispered. "Blind, stupid fool. Fool ! Fool ! Fool !"

He groaned and restlessly moved his aching head.

Someone stood over him. A hand touched his fevered forehead. A cool hand.

"He's coming to, doctor."

Heavy footsteps. Hands not so gentle, not so cool. Yet holding the hope of humanity in their rough touch.

"How do you feel ?"

Somehow he knew the question was for him.

He tried to answer, but couldn't find his tongue. Tried to see, but his eyes wouldn't work. All he could do was to listen. Listen to the whisper of the metal.

"Fool ! Fool ! Fool !"

"No !" he cried in sudden fury. "No ! No ! No !"

Desperately he tried to stop his ears. His hands refused to move. Hopelessly he tried to bury his head in a non-existent pillow. In sheer frustration he tried to drown the mocking whisper with the sound of his own voice.

The metal caught the echoes of his screams. Amplified them. Sent them whispering back.

Rage flooded his body. His arms grew strong, strained against their confinement. Straps yielded, snapped. He lifted his arms in sudden triumph.

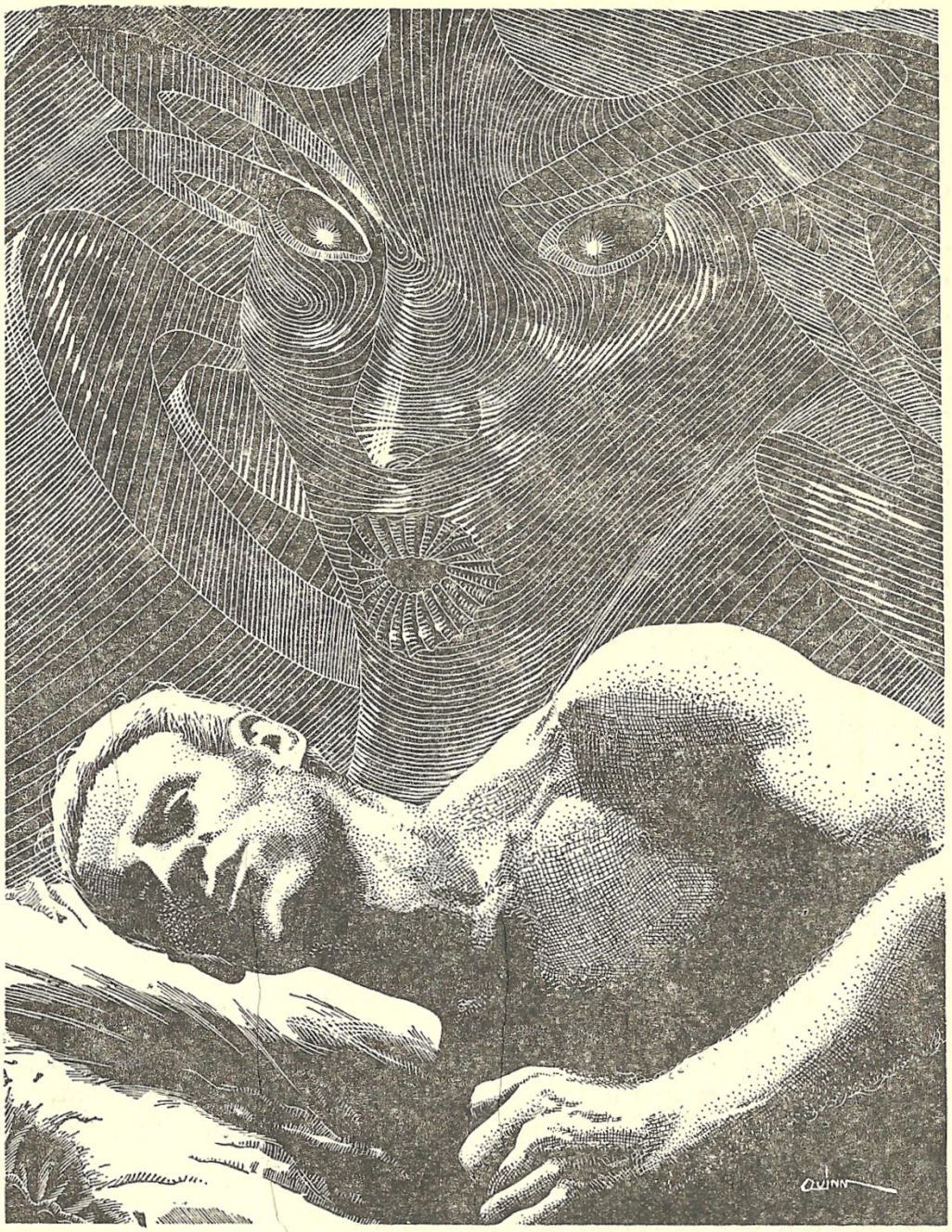
"Stop !" he screamed. "Stop I tell you. Stop !"

The metal whispered. Singing to the echo of his cries.

He beat it. Pounded the bulkhead until the blood poured from broken skin. Smashed his hands against the cold surface until it became warm and sticky with his own blood.

Something pricked his arm.

Strength flowed from him. Gasping he fell back on to the cot. He didn't feel pain. He didn't feel anything. Soft night crept into his vision. Wiping out the vari-coloured flashes of light.



He grew very calm. Even the whispering lost its power to hurt. It grew very soft. Very far away, but it still said the same thing.

"*Fool* ! *Fool* ! *Blind, stupid fool* !"

He slept.

Doctor Landry sighed, handed the hypodermic to the nurse, and looked at the man on the narrow cot with puzzled wonder.

"I can't understand it," he complained gently. "A man in his state shouldn't have such maniacal bursts of strength. His physique just doesn't allow it."

She took the hypodermic, cleaned it, dropped it into a steriliser.

"Is he often like this ?"

"Whenever he seems to be regaining consciousness." She bustled about, tidying the small sick bay. "This is the third time."

"Why didn't you call me ?"

"I didn't think it necessary." She avoided his angry gaze. "It is, after all, a simple case of fever and delirium. You were needed more elsewhere."

Landry took a deep breath, fighting the anger blooming within him. "You are one of the colonists, aren't you ?"

"I am." Pride echoed in the rather acid voice.

"Is he ?" Landry gestured towards the patient on the bed.

"Yes."

"You don't think much of him do you ?"

"He is weak. There is no room for weaklings in the colony."

Landry sighed. He had met fanaticism before.

"Regardless of your own personal convictions I should have been notified. This man's life is in danger." A thought struck him. "Are you married ?"

"Of course."

"Pregnant ?"

"Naturally."

"I see." She avoided his quizzical glance. "So you would inevitably regard my presence at the maternity wards as of prime importance. A clear case of selfish thinking."

He moved towards the door. "Collect your things. I will arrange for your transfer, perhaps to the maternity wards. You are unfit to nurse here."

"Yes, doctor," she snapped.

Red spots of anger burned in her sallow cheeks.

Outside the sun was setting, casting long shadows down the narrow streets of the settlement. Landry leaned against a wall. He felt suddenly tired.

A mining town must have looked like this, he thought. One of the old boom towns where men gathered to wrest wealth from the earth. A pioneer town. New born, without culture, tradition, or roots.

Which exactly what the colony was.

A truck moved slowly down the street, churning the dust beneath its tracks. From nozzles in the rear a fine spray of water jetted. Water piped over two hundred miles from the pole. It passed before him, wetting his boots. He grinned at the driver.

"Hello there, how's the baby ?"

The man waved in greeting. "Fine. Wife and all."

He moved away to complete his continuous circuit of the town.

A man walked by, an outside worker by the mask that hung loosely around his neck. He stopped as he saw the doctor.

"Hello, Doc, how's Devine ?"

"Who ?" Landry suddenly remembered his new patient. "Can't tell just yet. Not too good though."

The man shook his head. "I hope he pulls through. He's one of the best plant men we've got."

"Oh ?" Landry looked at him curiously. "What was he working on when he was taken sick ?"

"The usual thing. Irridation of seeds. Controlled radioactivity."

Landry smiled apologetically. "I'm not a colonist. Perhaps you could explain ?"

"One of the visiting team, eh ?" the man chuckled good-naturedly.

"Well, Devine was trying to mutate plant life. Trying to find something that would grow in the dust," he shrugged. "We're always trying."

"Any luck ?"

"No."

"I see." Landry nodded. "It's a pretty big problem. Important too."

"The most important problem we've got," said the man deliberately, then grinned. "But then I'm a plant man myself." He waved an arm. " 'By."

Landry absently returned his farewell. He shivered a little as the first warning chill of the night caught him. All over the settlement men were moving towards their homes. Low rough domes. Dun coloured. Made from the very dirt of Mars.

Windowless, of course; they had to be on a planet where, carried on infrequent winds, the dust acted like a sand blast. Cables snaked between them. Cables carrying the plentiful power from the atomic pile, safely based over twenty miles away.

He shivered again. In the heavens stars began gleaming, shining steadily, without the merry twinkle they had on earth.

A man walked by. Stopped. Glanced at him.

"Doctor Landry ?"

"Yes."

"I've been looking for you. The Commander would appreciate your company for dinner."

"Thanks," grunted Landry non-committally. "I'll be right there."

He took a last look at the heavens. Straightened. Turned towards one of the three metal buildings in the centre colony.

Commander Haslow was still fairly young. Young enough not to have lost all capacity for enthusiasm, yet old enough to have mature discretion. He rose as Landry entered.

"It's good of you to come, doctor. Settled down yet ?"

Landry shook the proferred hand, unzipped his outer coverall, and gratefully slumped into the thrust-forward chair.

"It's a little early yet. I've only been here two days, but I think I'll fit in."

"I hope so." Haslow leaned forward intently. "I make no apologies for talking shop at dinner. We always talk shop," he grinned. "As we have literally no other subjects to talk about, you can see it's unavoidable."

Landry stirred restlessly. "I understand," he said hastily. "I'm quite interested in learning all I can before we leave. As you know the visiting party is only here for a couple of weeks."

"That's what I wanted to talk about." Haslow was grimly determined not to be put off. "As you know we are without a doctor. I can't tell you how grateful we are that you have agreed to help out. I think that you can guess what I want to say."

"I can, and the answer is no." Landry was very firm. "I sympathise with you. I'm perfectly willing to do all I can. But I cannot stay here. Sorry."

Haslow smiled unabashedly. "I understand, Doc, but you can't blame me for trying." He glanced at the table. "Shall we eat ?"

The meal consisted of the usual yeast products. Disguised. Flavoured. But still yeast. Landry decided that it might just be possible to get used

to it. He couldn't conceive of anyone ever getting to like it.

For drink they had an aerated water, and something that was surprisingly potent. Haslow grinned at his look of amazement.

"Trust the boys to distil something. Officially I have to discourage it, misuse of material you know, but hell, we need a little comfort."

Sipping his drink Landry couldn't agree more.

He mentioned the matter of the nurse. Haslow frowned.

"I know what you mean, but it's a delicate problem."

"How so ?"

"It's the women. We haven't had them out here long. Three years to be exact, and frankly they've been a source of trouble ever since they landed. Feminists most of them. Swollen-headed fanatics," he sighed. "Sometimes I wonder whether or not the old days weren't the best."

"I don't think I understand," Landry frowned. "Wasn't the whole idea to make the colony a permanent, self-sufficient unit ?"

"Certainly. And women were essential to reach that end. But the trouble is that most of them think that they're heroines. They want to be looked up to, given way to. In short they want to run the whole show."

Haslow grunted with disgust and reached for the bottle. "Everything's got to be their way. We had to import metal to build the new maternity wards. We had to build crèches. I've even had to reframe the marriage laws to suit them. Believe me, if a man wants a wife he has to watch his step. A man can't divorce a woman. A woman can divorce a man for no other reason than because she wants to. Women take entire responsibility in their children. They even want the kids to take their maiden names."

Landry nodded interestedly. "A matriarchy. Inevitable when you come to think of it. Until the proportion of women equalises with that of the men, they always will have the deciding voice."

Voices sounded outside the door. Loud. Demanding. A man burst into the room.

"What is it ?" Haslow snapped angrily.

"The doctor ? Where is he ?" the man gasped.

"Here," said Landry quietly. "I am the doctor."

"My wife. Maternity ward," choked the man. "Will you come ? I think she's dying."

Silently Landry reached for his coverall.

He knew it was useless when he saw her. A small frail woman. Large eyes stared pleadingly at him from a face awful in its ghastly coloration. Dumb eyes. Trusting eyes. He was unpleasantly reminded of a deer he had once shot.

He tried to be cheerful.

With difficulty he persuaded the husband to leave the room. He was aided by the nurses. They clustered around him, getting in each other's way. Finally he lost his temper.

"Which of you are trained ?"

Three of them stepped forward. He recognised the one he'd had transferred.

"You stay here. The rest outside. Quick now."

They obeyed the bark in his voice. Heads craning in morbid curiosity

as they milled out of the door. He turned to the nurse.

"How long ?"

"Forty-five hours, doctor," she spoke respectfully.

"Too long."

Leaning over the patient he gently lifted an eyelid, probed gently at the glands of throat and neck. Silently the nurse handed him a stethoscope. With the skill of long practice he counted her pulse, listened to her heart. When he stood upright he was frowning.

"Adrenaline. Five cc's. Better tell them to prepare the theatre. It'll have to be a caesarian."

He smiled at the woman. "Don't worry, my dear. We'll soon have you well again."

She opened her lips. Tried to speak. Gestured towards the water glass. He held her head as she greedily sipped the fluid.

"What was it ?"

He had to lean very close to catch her whispered answer. "Save my baby. Save my baby first."

"Of course," he reassured in his best professional manner. "Just don't worry about a single thing." He turned eagerly as the nurse returned.

"I'm sorry, doctor, but we have no more adrenaline."

"What ?"

"We expected some on the rocket, but I suppose it wasn't ordered."

"Damn !" He bit his lip with vexation. "Is the theatre ready ?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Good. Take her in. We'll have to hurry."

He remembered to smile as they carried the woman out.

The gown didn't fit, and the instruments weren't what he was used to, but he did a good job. A perfect job, he thought grimly—only the patient unfortunately died.

On Earth he might have saved her. Here, even with the weak gravitation helping, her heart couldn't hold out. Adrenaline might have made all the difference. Might have given her that little extra. Might have let her take the anaesthetic, and live. But they had no adrenaline.

He hadn't even tried to save the baby.

Mars was radioactive as he knew. Not dangerously so. Not enough to burn, blind, wither. But enough to mutate. The baby had been a monster.

Idly he wondered just how many babies would be monsters. How many had been ? Suddenly he felt curious about his predecessor. He felt a hand pulling at his sleeve.

"How is she, doctor ?"

It was the woman's husband. A pale-faced, nervous-looking young man. Not tall. No one was tall on Mars. The colonists were picked for easy transportation, which meant the lighter the better.

Landry gently shook his head.

"And the baby ?"

"Both gone." He tried a little lying comfort. "The baby would have died anyway. Would have been stillborn. Your wife died under the anaesthetic. It was quite painless."

The hand fell from his sleeve.

"We knew each other on Earth," he whispered. "She followed me out

here. Now she's gone." He turned blindly away. "I've lost my wife," he murmured. "I've lost my wife. I've lost my wife !"

Suddenly Landry understood.

Irreverently he wanted to laugh.

Haslow was waiting for him, still sitting at the table, re-reading months' old mail. He glanced at Landry's tired expression. Nodded towards the bottle.

"Too late ?"

"Yes. How did you guess ?"

Haslow shrugged. "They wouldn't have sent for you otherwise." He sighed. "Another woman gone. We've got to get replacements."

"Is it so important ?"

"Getting women here is the second most important problem facing the colony. We've got to find a solution to both of them, or we may as well give up now."

"The most important I take it is the need of plant life."

"Yes." Haslow looked hopeful. "How did you know ?"

"One of your plant men told me."

"Oh !" Haslow's face fell. "For a moment I thought that you were getting interested in the colony."

"I am interested."

"I meant personally interested in your future home," Haslow grinned. "I warn you. I'm going to keep trying."

"Forewarned is forearmed," smiled Landry. "Incidentally, what happened to your doctor ?"

"He died."

"How ?"

"I'm not sure," said Haslow frowningly. "We couldn't have a post-mortem. Just died, I suppose."

"Who was he ?"

"Do you know I can't remember his name. It's in the records of course but we always called him plain Doc. Just that. Doc. Everyone knew him."

"He was here a long time, wasn't he ?"

"Yes," said Haslow quietly. "A very long time."

He sat brooding, staring into the past. "He must have been one of the first settlers. It was he who insisted on piping water to lay the dust. The first colonists all suffered from silicosis, you know. That's why the outfield workers all wear masks. He was here when the first batch of women arrived. He built the centrifuge. I'll show it to you before you go. He spent his life here, knowing that he could never go back. We miss him."

Landry stirred in his uncomfortable seat. He wondered if anyone would ever speak of him as Haslow did the old doctor. There was a naked sincerity in the commander's voice that could never be assumed.

"He was a hero," he said quietly.

"No. We don't believe anyone is a hero. We have only men who do their work. But he was a great man."

"I see." Landry sat silent. Thinking. "What happens when a man loses his wife ?"

"Eh ?" Haslow looked up, bewildered by the change of subject. "He

goes back into bachelor quarters."

"Can't he marry again ?"

"If he can find a woman who'll take him," he laughed. "I see what you mean. It's a pretty involved subject. As all the woman are married anyway, to remarry, he must persuade a woman to divorce her husband. That makes him an enemy. It also makes him extremely unpopular."

"And that is bad ?"

"Where you have few men working in close contact, it can be very bad. There were two murders over women just after they landed."

"Did you ever find out who did it ?"

"Certainly. They were sent to the polar pump station."

"Not executed ?"

"Why should they be ? The women were mostly to blame. They refused to make up their minds, kept the men on a string. That was before I insisted that all women must be married within one week after landing."

"And are they ?"

"They are," said Haslow grimly. "If they can't make up their minds, I do it for them." He noticed Landry's expression. "It doesn't hurt them. Remember they can get a divorce whenever they want one."

"So loss of a wife means loss of social prestige ?"

"More than that. If you have a wife, an exchange can be arranged with another couple. Double divorce. Double remarriage. If you haven't a wife, it may mean waiting years until your turn comes for priority of new arrivals."

"An explosive situation," summed up Landry.

"Very," gritted Haslow. "And getting worse with the loss of each woman," he sighed. "I can't figure it out. We're losing more women in childbirth now than we ever did. It doesn't seem natural. Second births should be easier, not more difficult. It doesn't make sense."

Landry kept silent. It seemed quite probable that the second births were difficult. It was to be expected if the babies of such births weren't—human.

The metal whispered. Sang. Quivered to distant vibration. Rustled. Murmured. Formed tinny words.

"Fool," it whined. "Stupid, blind fool. *Fool* !"

He stared into the darkness, wide-eyed, lathered in a sweat of fear.

Relentlessly the metal whispered. Mockingly. Hatefully. Maddeningly. He gritted his teeth. Clenched his hands. Tried not to listen.

"Fool ! Fool ! Fool !"

It didn't stop. It never stopped. It hated him. Derided him. Hovering in half-delirium he could imagine some faceless metallic beast squatting within the walls. A tinny beast with a whispering voice.

He tried to raise himself, swing his legs to the floor. He tried to lift his arms, batter at the wall. He couldn't move. He was strapped. Tied and helpless. Easy prey for the whispering beast.

Fear bit into him with poisoned jaws.

He could hear the beating of his heart. Feel the blood rushing through his veins. Every inch of skin became sensitive and aware.

He tried desperately not to scream.

Haslow paused by a door, waiting for Landry to catch up to him. "I promised to show you our centrifuge. Here," he opened the door.

A short curving flight of steps led sharply downwards. People lined its entire length. Some looked eager. Some resigned. Mostly they looked just bored.

From the top of the steps, a narrow catwalk swept around what appeared to be an open cylinder. A rail guarded the edge of the path. Haslow led Landry along the catwalk.

"The principle is very simple. We merely spin a wide cylinder, and everything within is thrown to the walls by centrifugal force. An old idea. The Doc remembered it, and it answers one of our problems perfectly."

"Which one is that ?"

"Working in low gravity for any length of time tends to atrophy the muscles. It is impossible to exercise them all. Certainly it is impossible to exercise the internal ones. So we built the centrifuge. For a half-hour once a week everyone is expected to use it. More often if they wish. We can get the equivalent of just over one normal Earth gravity. More is unnecessary."

"How about the visual effect ?"

"Blindfolds. It proved the simplest and best way. The illusion is perfect. Watch."

A door had opened in the base of the cylinder. People trooped in, arranged themselves against the wall. Over their heads they pulled bags of some porous material. The door slammed shut.

Slowly at first, then faster as it rapidly gained speed, the cylinder commenced to spin. Faster. Faster. The edge became a blur.

Landry could imagine what it felt like to be inside. A sense of pressure against the wall. Increasing, then as a critical stage was reached and passed, the wall would become the floor. The base of the cylinder a wall. He noticed a guard rail protecting the open end of the cylinder.

Within the people had commenced to crawl about the wall. Some did hand lifts. Some just walked about. Others just lay motionless.

"We made the cylinder as wide as possible so that they could walk about," Haslow yelled above the noise of the machine. "The artificial gravity drops rapidly the nearer you get to the centre."

Landry nodded. He wondered what powered motor was needed to spin the cylinder. How many revs. a minute. He could clearly feel the vibration as the machine spun on its bearings.

Haslow leaned towards him to yell a question. A grin on his face.

Suddenly the grin vanished. Landry started. They both heard it. A scream torn from the throat of a man mad with fear.

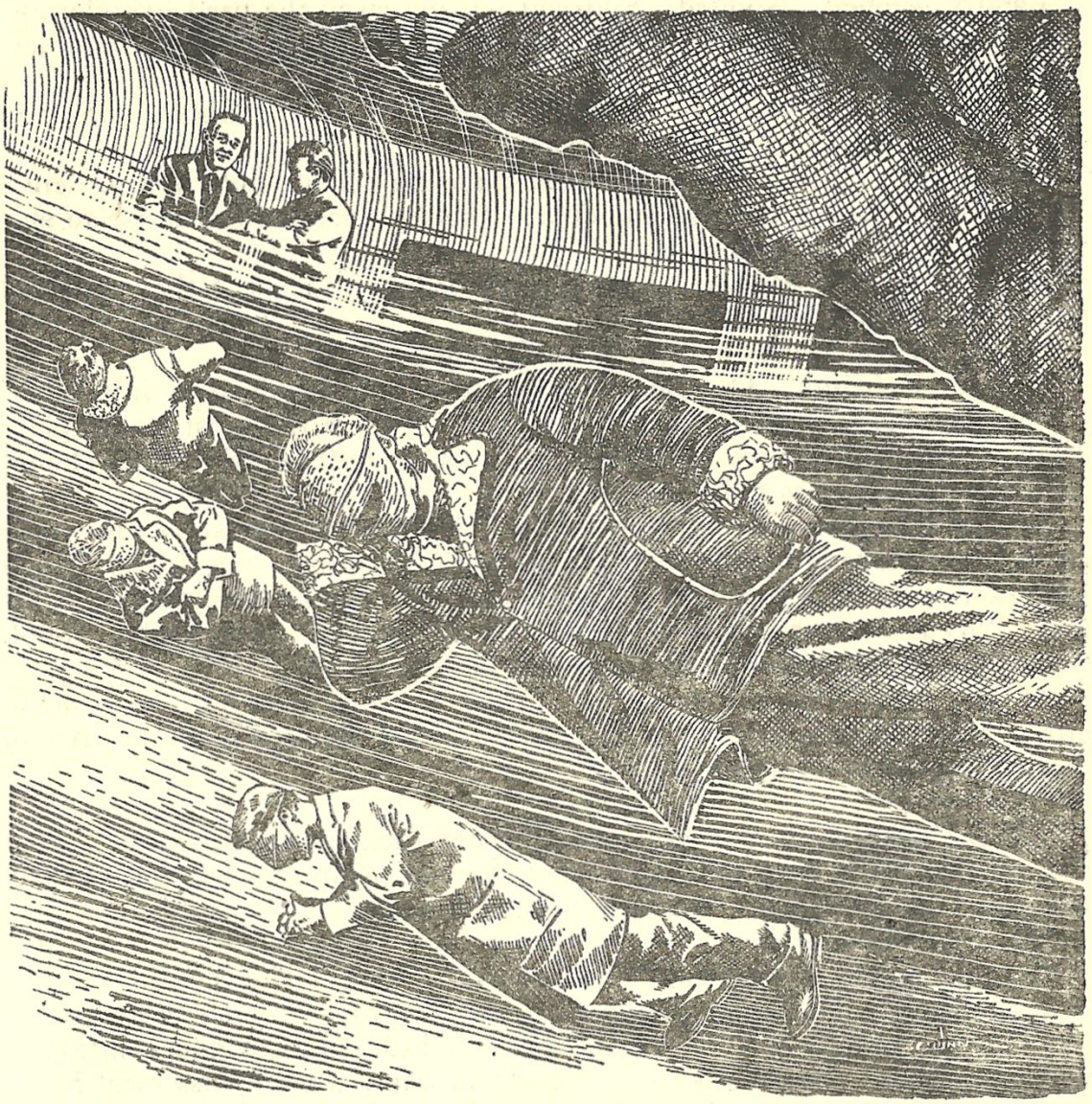
"The sick bay," yelled Haslow, and almost knocked Landry down in his efforts to reach the door. Together they raced through the building, clattered down steps. Landry was the first to reach the little room.

Unceremoniously he burst open the door. Switched on the lights, bent over the shrieking man.

"Devine ! What is it man ?"

"Stop it. Stop it. For God's sake stop it !"

"Stop what ? Answer me, Devine. Stop what ?"



"The walls. They're talking to me. 'Fool,' they say. 'Fool. Blind, stupid fool. Fool ! Fool ! Fool !' " His voice dissolved into formless screams.

Haslow looked at Landry enquiringly. Gesturing towards his temple. Irritably Landry shook his head. He had no patience with the layman's opinion that insanity explained everything. With sudden intuition he bent his head against the metal wall. Listened. Gestured for Haslow to join him.

"Hear it ?" he whispered.

"Yes. What is it ?"

"Vibration. I'll bet it's from the centrifuge. Turn it off and we'll see."

Haslow hurried away. Landry bent over the writhing man.

"Can you hear me, Devine ? Can you answer me ?"

Eyes stared blankly. Lips twitched, forming unheard words. Landry bent his head, placing his ear close to the writhing mouth.

"Fool," he heard. "Stupid fool."

He shrugged. Reached into the medical kit for drugs. Loaded a hypodermic. Injected its contents with easy skill.

Haslow came hurrying through the door. "I've turned it off. Was it the cause ?"

Landry listened. Nodded. Finished putting away the used hypodermic. "Yes," he looked at Devine. "Can we move him ? Preferably to somewhere not made of metal ?"

"There's the old sick bay. The one they used before this building was erected. I'll see about getting it ready."

"No hurry. Just so long as the centrifuge isn't used while he's in here." He followed Haslow through the door. "Better arrange for a nurse to stay with him. I'll look at him later."

He waited while Haslow phoned quick orders. Together they returned to the main office.

"What do you think is wrong with Devine ?"

"Fever. Delirium. The cause I don't know, but it can't be an infection."

"Not on Mars it can't," agreed Haslow. "This is the most sterile place I know. Any germs here we brought with us." He frowned. "Why should he think the wall was talking to him ?"

Landry shrugged, stretching his legs. "Why not ? We know the metal carried vibrations from the centrifuge motor. To a man in a delirium such vibration could be made to mean anything." He looked thoughtfully at his feet. "What interests me is the words he thought the metal spoke. 'Fool. Stupid fool.' Why should Devine think he was a fool ?"

"That's easy," Haslow grinned. "There's not a man here, or woman either, if the truth were known, who hasn't called themselves a fool. A fool for coming here. A stupid fool."

"Have you ?"

"Often," admitted the commander. "When the glamour wears off. When the thrill of being on a new world and the realisation of what you've done hits you," he shrugged. "We are fools. All of us."

"And yet you stay ?"

"I could return, I suppose. The rest can't. They're here until they rot. They know it." He began pacing the floor. "That's why it's so important to solve our problems. To try and bring a little softness and comfort in this bleak hell." He laughed shortly. "You know what I miss most ? Ice cream. Laugh if you like but I'd give my hope of heaven for a quart of ice cream. Silly, isn't it ?"

"No," Landry looked at him steadily. "And yet, feeling the way you do, you ask me to stay here ?"

"Yes. I'm that selfish."

Haslow looked suddenly old.

Devine looked up with a smile as Landry entered the room. He was pale, thin, but his cheeks had lost their touch of fever, and his eyes were clear.

"Hello, Doc," he called. "Thanks for saving my life."

"Not really," said Landry. "You'd have pulled through. Just a mild fever. How do you feel now ?"

"Wonderful !" He stretched his arms. "Not a nightmare for days."

"I want to talk to you about that. Mind if I sit on the bed ?"

"Help yourself."

Landry seated himself. Timed the pulse. Listened to the heart. Glanced at the coloration of the eyes.

"When can I be back at work, Doc ?"

"A few days," answered Landry absently. "Why do you call yourself a fool ?"

"A what ?"

"A fool. A stupid fool to be exact."

"Do I ?"

"You do," assured Landry. "Enough to almost drive yourself crazy over it."

Devine rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Now you come to mention it, I do remember a weird sort of dream I had. The walls were talking to me."

"No—you were translating vibrations from the walls. Twisting them into words. Actually you were talking to yourself."

"And I called myself a fool ?"

"You did." Landry settled himself more comfortably in the bed. "Let's get at it this way. What were you doing when you were taken sick ?"

"My usual work. Trying to mutate a plant life form capable of living in the dust."

"Having any success ?"

"No. But I'm on a line I feel sure will prove to be the right one." Enthusiasm tinged the voice. "I've got a strain of cacti, one that is remarkable for its powers of water storage. If I can just mutate it a little . . ."

"And yet your subconscious called you a fool," reminded Landry. "What caused your sickness ?"

Devine shrugged. "Overwork I suppose you could call it. I can't think of any other reason."

"I see," mused the doctor. "You were taken sick at the time you had a most pressing and urgent problem. You felt sure of success. Outwardly, that is. Yet somewhere within yourself you felt that you were on the wrong track."

"How do you make that out, Doc ?" Devine frowned. "Surely I'd know if I was right or wrong ?"

"Not necessarily. You might be the victim of muddled thinking. Because a thing works in one environment, doesn't mean that it will work in a totally different one." He stood up. "For instance, I know nothing about your line of work, but even I can see the fallacy."

"And that is ?" Devine smiled, confident in his own knowledge.

"Of what earthly use is a plant designed to store water in an environment where there isn't any ? How can a cactus store what isn't there ?"

"I see !" breathed Devine. "Of course ! The answer lies in the spore plants. The fungi. The lichens. Sorry, Doc, I thought that you were a fool."

"You were the fool," reminded Landry gently.

He was smiling as he left the building.

The reports were voluminous, enlightening and fantastically interesting. They dated from the first days of the colony. Age, the dry air and rough packing had rendered them brittle. One day someone would copy them, print and bind them, and have a best-seller.

Leafing through them Landry almost forgot the other members of the visiting party. One he knew had gone to the polar pumping station to study ice formation. One had borrowed a tractor to search for archeological remains along the banks of one of the "canals."

Others had gone to examine the giant refinery. A mammoth plant far out in the desert. Bulldozers scooped tons of dust into great hoppers. There it was washed. Chemicals added. Heavy elements separated. The final result was tiny bricks of a pure, easily fissionable element. Waste was carted away to serve as the basis for the colonies garden—if they ever found a suitable life form.

The early reports told him nothing. He hadn't expected them to. The later ones, those dealing with birth and death, he studied carefully.

They seemed to follow a pattern. Most of the women bore their first child within a year of landing, their second within three. Assuming that they became pregnant shortly after arrival, and again as soon as they were physically capable, the delay in second births needed explaining.

A healthy woman, and all those on Mars were chosen because they were healthy, should have had children at yearly intervals at least. He was interested to find that not one woman in the colony had yet mothered three children.

He decided to investigate.

Like all the colonist women Mrs. Marvin was broad, deep-bosomed, and not over five feet tall. She was a qualified accountant, which didn't mean very much, but she was expert with her needle, which did. She smiled as the doctor explained what he was looking for.

"I married within the first three days. I've kept to Marvin, he's a good man. We started our first baby right away."

"Normal birth ?"

"Yes. We timed it almost to the day. The old doctor was alive then. Getting weak of course, but I had no trouble."

"And then ?" Landry hesitated seeking the right words.

"I know what you mean," she smiled. "I knew my duty. Anyway I wanted another as soon as possible." She frowned. "I couldn't understand it. We just couldn't start another. Not for a long time."

"How long ?" asked Landry eagerly. This was the information he was looking for.

"Not for almost nine months."

"Normal birth ?"

"No ! I began to get worried. Especially as the old doctor had died by then. I carried for over a year."

"And——"

"The baby was born dead." She turned away dabbing at her eyes.

"I see," Landry nodded sympathetically. "Do you mind if I examine you Mrs. Marvin ?"

The examination was brief.

"How old are you ?"

"Thirty, doctor. I had my birthday last week."

"Thank you. Would you ask the next lady to enter, please ?"

She smiled as she left the room.

They were all the same. In every case the first pregnancy was uneventful. Then a long period of sterility, followed by an unnaturally long period of gestation.

Every woman he had examined was sterile.

He hadn't bothered to check on the later arrivals. The pattern was too

plain. A woman could bear one child normally. A second with a high percentage of probability of stillbirth, or mutated freak. Then complete sterility.

But why just the women ?

The men were still fertile. He had made tests, and anyway many of them had been on Mars years before the women came. He sat resting his elbows on the desk, frowning down at his notes.

What was it that was so peculiar to women ?

What was lacking in diet, environment, atmosphere ?

What was the something special in the radioactivity with which Mars was saturated ?

He jerked in sudden fear.

Radioactivity !

And they were shipping the pure element to Earth !

He lay behind one of the low buildings. A pitiful huddled little shape. In the region of his throat the dust was stained an ugly red. He still gripped the sliver of metal with which he had slashed his jugular.

Haslow stared down at him sombrely.

"Who found him ?"

"I did, commander." The driver of the water-spraying truck stepped forward. "I noticed him on my first round."

"That would be at dawn. Anyone see him before that ?"

The little group stirred.

"I saw him last night," volunteered one of them. "Just before I turned in. Say about midnight."

"Anyone else ?"

They stood silent. Haslow grunted. Looked up as Landry joined them.

"Hello, doctor." He nodded towards the body. "What do you make of this ?"

Gently Landry turned the man over. Studied the wound. Examined the sharp sliver of metal. Slowly he rose to his feet.

"Suicide. He didn't die immediately. Even with his throat cut that way he could have made it to the nearest building. There are no other signs of injury." He stared down at the bloodless face.

"This is the husband of the woman I operated on. The one that died."

"That explains it," Haslow snorted. "He couldn't face life here without his wife." He spat in contempt. "Clear it up," he ordered. "You know what to do."

Taking Landry's arm he led him towards the administration building. "I want to talk to you, doctor. Will you join me at breakfast ?"

"Thanks," said Landry drily. "More yeast I suppose ?"

"What else ? You'd get used to it after a while. The chemists are working on new flavourings. We hope to have the exact equivalent of bacon and eggs soon."

Over the meal he became serious.

"That wasn't the first suicide we've had, doctor. I'm getting worried. Things like that can be contagious. Others, poorly adjusted, will either take the easy way out like Johnson did, or start a panic to return home."

"Wouldn't do them much good if they did, would it ?"

"No—but think of the effect on morale it would have." He scratched at his plate. "All of us have deep within him, the knowledge that we're here for good. We ignore it. Force it to the rear of our minds. Just don't think about it. Can you imagine what would happen if we didn't ?"

Landry nodded. "I can guess. Panic, of course. General disruption of routine. Perhaps even rioting when the rockets land."

"Exactly," Haslow sighed. "It takes the full-time efforts of every one of us to keep the colony alive. The more personnel we get, then the more labour we need in the yeast plant, the water distiller," he gestured. "The balance is slightly in our favour, of course. If it weren't, we couldn't support the refinery. But it's a delicate balance."

"I see. Any large-scale disruption would be serious."

"It would mean starvation," Haslow said bluntly.

Landry stared down at the unsavoury mess before him. Irritably he pushed away the plate. "I can sympathise with you, commander. But what can I do about it ?"

"Send us more women."

"What ?"

"You have influence at home. I know it." Haslow sounded desperate. "The Department of Extra Planetary Affairs wouldn't have chosen you for the visiting party if you hadn't. We must have a woman for each man. More if possible. To take care of wastage. Once a man has a family—a wife —children of his own, he will never want to leave."

"You really believe that more women will solve the problem ?"

"I do."

Landry grunted non-committally.

Deliberately he began to pace the floor, Haslow watching his every movement. He wished that he could smoke. He hadn't been conditioned against it, but the example would have been unfair to the others. Anyway he had no tobacco.

"Why do you think women come here, Haslow ?"

"To be heroines. Or perhaps . . .?" He shrugged helplessly. "Why does anyone come here ?"

"They come here because they want children. They want a husband. But they want children most of all. To get them, they are prepared to leave Earth forever," he sighed. "In a way, they really are heroines.

"They come to us from the factories, offices, remote villages, large towns. Not beautiful, no longer young. They have been passed over in the matrimonial stakes. They are desperate at losing what they crave more than life itself. Respectable motherhood. There aren't too many of them."

"But surely more than what you've sent," protested Haslow.

"Yes. But now what can we offer them ?"

Landry paused in his pacing. "I was chosen for the visiting team, not because I have influence, but because I am an expert on radiant poisoning."

"I didn't know," apologised the commander. "I'm sorry."

"I treated a case once. A freak case. Workers were sprayed with radiation from the cracked shielding of a pile. Men and women. The men were unharmed. The women—died. Not at once. At first they seemed normal, then sterile. The last stages were mercifully quick. I thought it was

coincidence that the men had escaped, had not been contaminated. I was wrong."

"Interesting," commented Haslow. "But what has it to do with us?"

"All of your women who have been here three years are sterile," stated Landry flatly.

"But that's impossible," protested Haslow. "The men have been here longer than that. They aren't sterile."

"I know. It's that which is so puzzling. There's something here. Something peculiar to either the environment, or the diet, which only affects women." Landry slumped into a chair. "I think that it's due to the radioactivity."

"What?" Haslow jerked in his seat. "That means . . ."

"I know," Landry smiled tiredly. "I thought of that. Then I remembered that the pure element goes to the Moon. As yet there is no danger."

"Good," said Haslow dully. "But where does that leave us?"

"If what I fear is true, and I hope that it isn't, all your women will be dead within a few more years."

"I see!" Hope flared in his eyes. "Couldn't we get replacements?"

"How? What can you offer? Come to Mars. Bear one normal child. Another probably stillborn. Then die. What woman, no matter how desperate, would accept such an offer?"

Landry bit his lip. "There's so much we do not know. So much still to find out. Why should a certain radiation affect only women? We don't know. But we'll find out."

"If you don't the colony's ended. Finished." Haslow sounded very tired. "Fifteen years we've tried to establish it. More men, money, sweat and heartbreak have been poured out trying to keep this idea going than on any other. And for what? For some unthought-of radiation to kill our women."

He dropped his head into his hands. "We'll keep going I suppose. The refinery will take care of that. But you know what will happen? There'll be a signboard around this planet a thousand miles high. You know what it will read?"

Landry nodded sympathetically. "We'll take it down," he assured. "It may take five years, ten, more, but it will come down. I'll have livestock sent here. Mice in radiation-proof containers. In time we'll isolate the trouble, cure it." He grinned at Haslow's startled look. "Didn't you want me to stay?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"No buts. You've got yourself a doctor." He chuckled, running a hand through thinning grey hair. "Maybe we can get some other misogynists wanting to come."

Haslow didn't laugh.

THE END

THE TEMPORAL RIFT

By GEORGE LONGDON

The Time capsule had been buried for thousands of years—yet the date inscribed upon it was still in the future. It was quite a minor problem compared with the space-abberator set up for Mankind.

Illustrated by HUNTER

Sam Sperry splashed along the muddy path, where rain made deep pools in the excavation site bottom. Drizzle shone in the searchlight beams, and moisture dripped from his hat to the collar of his waterproof. He regretted leaving the comfort of his warm office.

"I hope there's some truth in what you say !" he declared.

The man leading him among the piles of excavated rock looked back.

"It's just as I said, Mr. Sperry. The gang is leaving it until you've seen it."

Sam grunted. "We'll see," he said. Ernie Jones was sensible, though a bit simple.

They followed a wall of clay marked by the ripping teeth of the excavating machines. Ahead, two workmen stood near a silent conveyor-bucket chain. Ernie Jones pointed triumphantly.

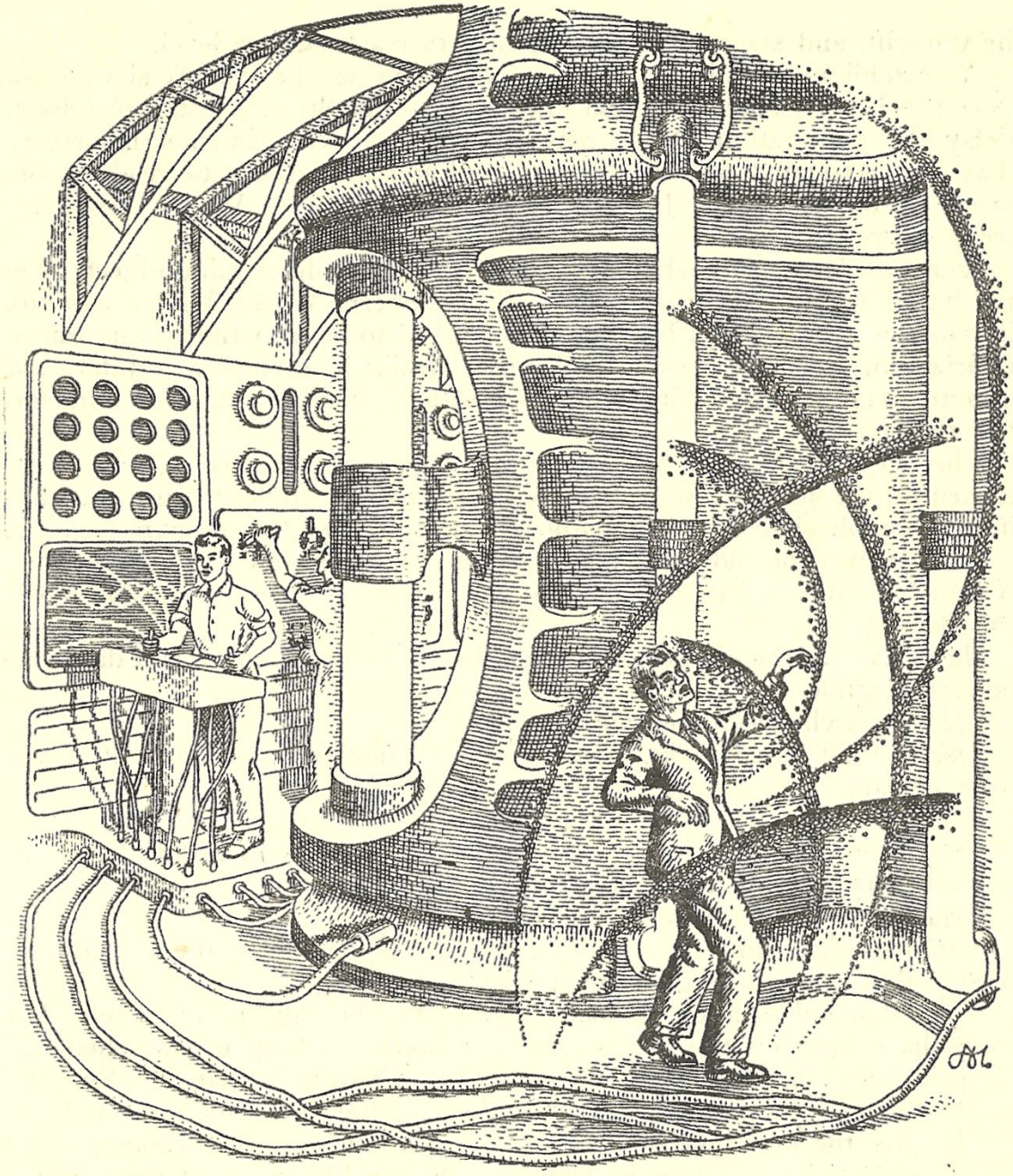
"There ! I've never seen the like of it !"

A blunt metal object projected from the clay. Sam examined it under the brilliant light. It was as large as a man could span, and blue metal showed where the clay had been scraped off.

"Beats me how it got there," Jones said.

Sam eyed it with curiosity. A hundred feet of stone and earth, undisturbed for a million years, lay above.

"It was uncovered by the excavating ?"



"Yes, Mr. Sperry. The men have been working round it. We thought it a mass of fused ore, at first."

Sam nodded. "It's obviously artificial." He tapped it, causing a hollow, dull ringing. "Get it out and hoisted to surface level," he decided. "Evacuate other gangs from the site meanwhile. Go yourself, if you like."

Jones looked uneasy. "You think it's explosive ?"

Sam shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. It's best to be careful, that's all."

He began to dig with two volunteers. The object's appearance of newness amazed him. A sling was fitted under the long cylinder as it emerged, and a hawser taken to a derrick above. In an hour the object was free. Sam wiped his forehead as the derrick began to wind and the torpedo rose slowly under the brilliant lamps. It was rounded at each end, and about ten feet long. He scowled, watching it rise. It should never have been there at all,

he thought, and stamped to the lift-cage to reach surface level.

A searchlight illuminated the torpedo shape as the derrick slewed and began to lower. Sam hoped no unexpected difficulty was going to arise to delay the preparation of the new, subterranean experimental laboratory. The contract stated that the site and building shell would be ready in one year—on the day after, January 1st, 1960, the Sperry Works technicians would move in.

Rain ran down his neck, and he frowned at the descending object. The tall buildings away to his left were still the Sperry Works, but he was boss in name only. His work had suddenly proved to be of national importance. Officialdom had taken over, had made available unlimited capital—and unobtrusively removed him from his position. Now, a Board of Directors had the last say . . .

The torpedo touched down and the sling was removed. A hose was turned on the sticky clay, and the object lifted to a trolley. Sam examined it. Its outside shell appeared without feature, except for an engraving.

"Get it into the old workshop and see if you can open it," he ordered. A thin line encircled its middle. "It may unscrew. Don't use force if you can avoid it."

He rubbed at the surface with his palm. The engraving was a date, and perfectly legible.

"22nd March, 1979," it said.

This is 1959, he thought. He stood as motionless as if shot. 1979 was twenty years in the future !

Sam sat in his office, his feet on the desk. Ernie Jones dropped into the opposite chair, his coat dripping rain to the floor.

"Maybe it's a hoax, boss," he said.

Sam regarded him with kindly eyes. Jones had been there when the Sperry Works was a single corrugated-iron building.

"Who'd spend a packet on that, Ernie ? And how did it get there ? The gangs have been on the full twenty-four hours, to keep up to schedule."

Ernie Jones scratched his grey head. "There's truth in that, Mr. Sperry."

"And sense," Sam said. "It's a problem for the Directors, not me."

This was the first time he was glad he was not boss, Sam thought. But when he turned in to sleep he knew that he would not forget the object—its presence was too paradoxical.

He slept uneasily, and went to his office early, determined to form no opinion yet. His phone rang. Ernie Jones sounded excited.

"It unscrews," he said, "but such a thread I've never seen ! It's neither left nor right-hand—that's what held us up."

He paused as if expecting comment. Sam compressed his lips; he would suspend judgment on all this until it made sense.

"A thread that doesn't unscrew either way," he said, gaining time to quieten his shock, "yes, that all ?"

"There's lots more." Jones sounded disappointed. "The thing's full of junk."

"Junk !" Sam could not hide his surprise.

"Everything imaginable. Clothes, cosmetics, books, micro-films, everything you can think of small enough to go in."

Sam stared at the phone, an idea forming slowly. Why would such things be stored in an unbreakable metal cylinder ? Because they had become *relics* . . .?

"And the strange thing is, it's all so ordinary, boss," Jones was saying. "Except for the films, you could pick up junk like this anywhere."

"You're sure ?" Sam asked.

"Yes, boss. Ordinary stuff like you see every day."

Sam gnawed his lip; that was what he had suddenly feared. Ordinary stuff, such as you might see any day, stored in a sealed capsule . . .

"I'm coming round," he said.

The night's rain had left the concrete wet, and a fresh wind flapped his coat. Sam remembered when he had first tried the space-abberator, as he had called it, and how he had demonstrated to an unbelieving official. The man had gone away bewildered; two days later the tests were repeated before a dozen men whose names no one mentioned. A week afterwards the Sperry Works had been taken over, the development to be continued under official guidance, for reasons of national security, Sam was told.

He had made an impenetrable shield—a distortion of space through which nothing passed. Bullets did not ricochet, or shatter the target behind. They ceased to exist. The officials had talked of protecting whole cities from aerial attack; within hours of the second tests the place had swarmed with police and technicians, and an electrified fence was being erected. In a new building the largest space-abberator yet made was finished. The one to follow would be in vaults in the newly excavated site to reduce random radiation.

Ernie Jones was in the old workshop and the torpedo-shaped object lay in two halves. Sam looked at the thread, a mass of closely-set projections like turbine blades.

"It needed a semi-rotary movement to unscrew," Jones said. "Rather tricky."

Sam believed him. The contents were on a disused bench. As Jones had said, the stuff was absolutely ordinary and mostly of their own period. Books and newspapers were numerous, with other objects beyond counting.

Relics, Sam thought again, preserved for a future age.

Some of the papers were tied into bundles, but none was dated later than ten years on. Sam looked at them in curiosity; they had not yet come from the presses.

"The films ?" he asked.

"They show people, places and things, so far as I can tell, yet, Mr. Sperry. Some show us as we are to-day. Some are of a few years ahead, as far as I can judge."

Ernie Jones made a gesture showing that he was baffled. It would take time to sift through the material, especially the papers and films, Sam thought. The obvious plan was to see if the latter made sense or gave an explanation.

"You've reported your find ?" he asked suddenly.

Jones pulled a face. "Yes, boss. It's gone through the usual channels, as they put it. I was told everything must be left exactly as I had found it until they decide what to do."

"Has anyone been here to look ?"

Jones shook his head. "Not yet."

Sam put some of the papers under his coat and buttoned it. "I don't feel like—waiting," he said.

Back in his office, he opened the papers on his desk. A long search through obviously unimportant matter brought him to a paragraph stating that the Sperry Works area was wholly closed to the public, and no information was available. He sat back, frowning, not liking the word *area*, then turned to later issues. One said the neighbourhood of the Sperry Works had been evacuated, but that no further trouble was expected. The paper was the last he had, and written near in the margin were the words "This is the *beginning*."

He sat frowning until the phone rang. A clipped voice asked for him.

"Here," Sam said.

"We understand you have examined the materials found in the object discovered," the clipped voice said, and Sam's neck bristled. "This should have been avoided."

So Ernie had talked, Sam thought. Trouble was beginning, though Jones had meant no harm.

"So what ?" he said thinly.

"We must insist that you go no further in this matter until the Board has decided what, if anything, shall be done. We cannot permit evidence to be destroyed, through carelessness, or allow individuals to take upon themselves the responsibility of examining such data——"

Sam hung up, feeling in no mood for official ballyhoo. He sighed, and went out. The workshop where the capsule had been taken was locked and silent.

"Locked out of my own sheds !" he growled.

He went to the new buildings. The effectiveness of his discovery had already been proved; now, technicians sought for a better explanation of what actually happened. They had not got far, and Sam felt a perverse joy in their failure.

The space-abberator occupied the middle of a huge workshop and Sam went in. A glass roof was supported on girders and daylight streamed in. The apparatus drew power from underground conductors. The control panels filled one wall and two men stood near them. One was elderly, the senior technician and a man Sam did not resent, because of his kindliness and knowledge. The second was younger, perhaps forty-five, and a man Ernie Jones termed a "queer cove."

"We were going to run a test," Manning, the elder, said.

Sam nodded. "What on ?"

"To see if the random radiation is less."

"It won't be !" the younger man declared. He looked nervous—always did, Sam thought. Now, his face twitched. "You'll never reduce the radiation !" he stated. "It's inherent in the effect."

Sam eyed him curiously. "Why say that ?"

"Because everything which reduces radiation also reduces the efficiency of the effect," Etterick stated firmly. "Even the sunken chamber on the new site won't help, when it's finished. You might as well try to stop time ! You can stop a clock—but that doesn't stop time !"

Sam sucked in his lips, feeling oddly uneasy, his eyes on Etterick's intense face. It was a thin face, lined beyond the man's years, and the eyes were never still. "You've seen the capsule ?" he asked.

Etterick looked blank. "What capsule ?"

"Nothing—it was only a question suggested by your remark about stopping time . . ."

He left it at that, wondering if he could explain, or only land himself in a deeper morass of incomprehensibles. Manning had looked from one to the other as they spoke.

"Etterick has—certain doubts which he can't put into words," he said. "Briefly, he feels we're meddling with something we don't understand."

"Nor do we !" Etterick stated.

"Perhaps not—but we shall find out."

Manning examined the instruments, moving with a quiet efficiency which dropped years from his age. Sam walked round the apparatus in the centre of the floor. Sunshine slanting through the roof played on it, brilliantly picking out its shining components. Large as a house, it represented what Sam considered a shocking amount of capital expense. The new abberator, to be built in the subterranean chamber, would be ten times as huge, and would be the forerunner of many such units. A minor atomic explosion directed against the field had been snuffed out. Geiger counters behind failed to detect radiation . . . Such fields over key cities would form a powerful defence, authorities said . . .

He moved along behind the apparatus, slowly growing conscious of a tingling throughout his whole body. If it was radiation, it was harmless, in moderate dosage. He would watch the test, he decided . . .

The sun was visible through the roof, and was moving—fast . . . *backwards.* It sank into the eastern sky, the heavens grew dark, the room black as ink . . .

Sam stared, unable to move.

The screen was on, he thought. He was *inside.* Manning supposed he had gone out.

Refusing to think, he reached carefully forwards with one hand. He had felt the screen before—it was a warm ebb and flow which could be touched, almost like velvet. It was not there. He gained the workshop door and opened it. Stars shone above, and the night was still. Dazed, he went to his room and sat on the bed. He felt unable to think clearly or go outside. The shock he had experienced was akin to lasting terror. To his surprise he slept a little, and when dawn came went slowly to his office. Everything looked normal. The morning shift was going to the excavation site. He sat at his desk, thinking, and put his legs upon it. His phone rang. Jones sounded excited.

"It unscrews," he said, "but such a thread I've never seen ! It's neither left nor right-hand—that's what held us up."

He paused as if expecting comment. Sam compressed his lips; he would suspend judgment on all this until it made sense.

"A thread that doesn't unscrew either way," he said, gaining time to quieten his shock, "yes, that all ?"

I've lived all this before, his mind screamed. Something was wrong—*wrong* . . .

"There's lots more." Jones sounded disappointed. "The thing's full of junk."

Sam lived through the morning in an agony of mental amazement approaching insanity. It was desperately, unbelievably *wrong*. Like seeing a film round the second time—and knowing what was coming . . . He dragged through the hours, real, yet a nightmare. *Things should happen exactly how they did before*, he thought. They did, but he *knew*. That first time, he had not known. He groaned silently. Everything else in the world was happening as it had before, in unfathomable repetition. Or he himself was back and seeing it again . . . It was impossible to decide which. At last he found himself in the workshop, talking to the two, and experienced fear such as he had never known before. If it happened again, he thought, he would be in a strange, never-ending circle of time, eternally reliving those hours, and *knowing* . . .

" . . . Briefly, he feels we're meddling with something we don't understand," Manning said.

"Nor do we !" Etterick stated.

"Perhaps not—but we shall find out."

Manning examined the instruments, moving with a quiet efficiency which dropped years from his age. Sam walked round the apparatus in the centre of the floor. Sunshine slanted through the glass roof . . .

No ! he thought. No. No !

He drew back, trembling, and found Manning adjusting the dials. "Hullo, thought you'd gone out," Manning said.

Sam licked his lips, dry as paper. "You're going to run a test ?"

"Yes."

The circle was broken, Sam thought. The relief of it made him feel weak. He had made a *loop* in time, but was free. He stood near the panel, gazing at the apparatus, hating it beyond all words to express.

"The—tests must stop . . ." he said suddenly, and his voice scarcely seemed his own.

Manning's eyes flicked up in surprise. "Only this morning the Board urged we press on more quickly——"

"Then they're fools !" Sam said. "Madmen ! They don't know what they're doing !"

He turned on his heel and went out. The wind was cool on his face, and he breathed deeply, his agitation subsiding. Then, his lips set in a tight, thin line, he stamped towards the administrational buildings.

"I'm going to stay here and see the Directors if I have to wait until doomsday," Sam stated.

The young woman behind the reception desk opened a notepad. "You could leave a message, Mr. Sperry——"

"And grow old waiting ? Ring them again !"

She did. Sam skirted the desk and had a hand on the knob of the second door before she could move.

"But you haven't an appointment, Mr. Sperry !"

Sam opened the door. "That's my worry !"

He went in, closing it at his back. Eight men sat at a polished table.

Every face reflected surprise and censure.

"We were in session, Mr. Sperry," the chairman said.

He was tall, thin, with a face like carved brown wood and military erectness, though in light grey civilian clothes. Sam met his eyes levelly.

"The space-abberator must be stopped ! No more tests must be made until we know what happens."

Eyebrows were raised. "An unexpected and strongly termed request, Mr. Sperry," the chairman said. "What prompts it ?"

Sam's face twitched. "The fact that we don't know *what happens* ! We put up this screen—this force-field—and it shields everything behind so effectively that *nothing* gets through. Light, hertzian waves, radiated particles, and physical bodies—all fail to penetrate. They are not merely halted, or reflected back. They cease to exist—as far as we know."

A man leaned forwards with elbows on the table, looking at Sam.

"Our ignorance need not distress you," he said evenly. "Electricity was used before anyone knew what it was. Science often employs forces about which it knows little. The results are more important than the means. Certain procedures produce certain results; if those results are useful, we employ them. The shielding effect of the apparatus you originated is useful; therefore we shall develop and extend it."

"I am not alone in my doubts," Sam pointed out, compressing his lips.

"You mean Etterick ? We know. He can formulate no logical explanation. He merely *suspects*. In view of the importance of the work, we cannot stop it because of mere suspicions, Mr. Sperry."

Sam wondered what they would say if told that he had relived several hours of the past. They would think him mad, and dismiss his demands.

"Have you had the capsule found in the excavation site examined ?" he asked. "It is connected with this."

They whispered together. "It has not been looked into—officially," the chairman said. Sam noticed the emphasis—they were aware of his visit to the workshop. "We feel it of no great urgency, and cannot see that it relates to our work."

"It relates," Sam said. "Tell me this—what happens to the things we shy against the screen ?"

He knew that a few minutes more would see him at the swearing stage. The Board was officialdom at its worst. No one would take a risk. Everything moved with painful slowness through official channels.

"We do not know." The man who had spoken before shook his head. "But we shall find out."

"When it's too late !" Sam snapped. "It may be too late already !" He scowled at them. "The capsule contains papers with future dates, recording an unknown disturbance arising here !"

"You have examined the contents ?" the chairman interposed.

"I have."

"Then you have committed an act we must censure, Mr. Sperry——"

"Censure it, then !" Sam swore roundly. "But don't play with things you don't understand ! Such long-winded, roundabout methods I've never before seen !"

The chairman flushed. "We shall be forced to record your attitude in our

reports, Mr. Sperry . . ."

Sam swore again. "To hell with your reports and censures ! *Act*, instead of breathing hot air !" He glared at them. "If these works were mine I'd close this moment, and never touch the abberator until we knew what it was doing, even if it meant personal ruin ! As originator of the process, and past owner of the works, that's my considered opinion. Close down. Stop the apparatus. Investigate what's happening. Put that on your records !"

They whispered again. "We cannot agree. If you have any proof, of course——"

Sam swore, and the banging of the door behind him punctuated his words. The panels rang; the girl at the desk jumped, looking up quickly.

"Proof !" Sam said. "On their heads be it !"

He stamped out. There was no proof. Only in one direction would the wheels of officialdom gain a sudden momentum—to expel him from the Sperry Works !

"They're madmen !" he said to himself, outside. His hot anger was subsiding. He should have expected nothing else, he thought. Reams of reports in triplicate would have to be passed by the Board before any possible stopping of the plant.

He found Etterick alone in one corner of a workshop long disused, and contemplating a large ring of metal set up in a lathe. He looked round, startled.

"You're off duty ?" Sam asked.

"Yes, Mr. Sperry."

"Then I'd like you to tell me exactly what you feel about the apparatus back there !"

Sam jerked his head towards the space-abberator building, watching Etterick keenly. He had a strong respect for the other's intellect. Forty-five, he looked more, and was already slightly bald. His ears were large, his chin unexpectedly square.

"That's—difficult," Etterick said.

"I suspect—something." Sam sat down on one of the stools near the bench. "That may help. Don't feel I'm going to ridicule you."

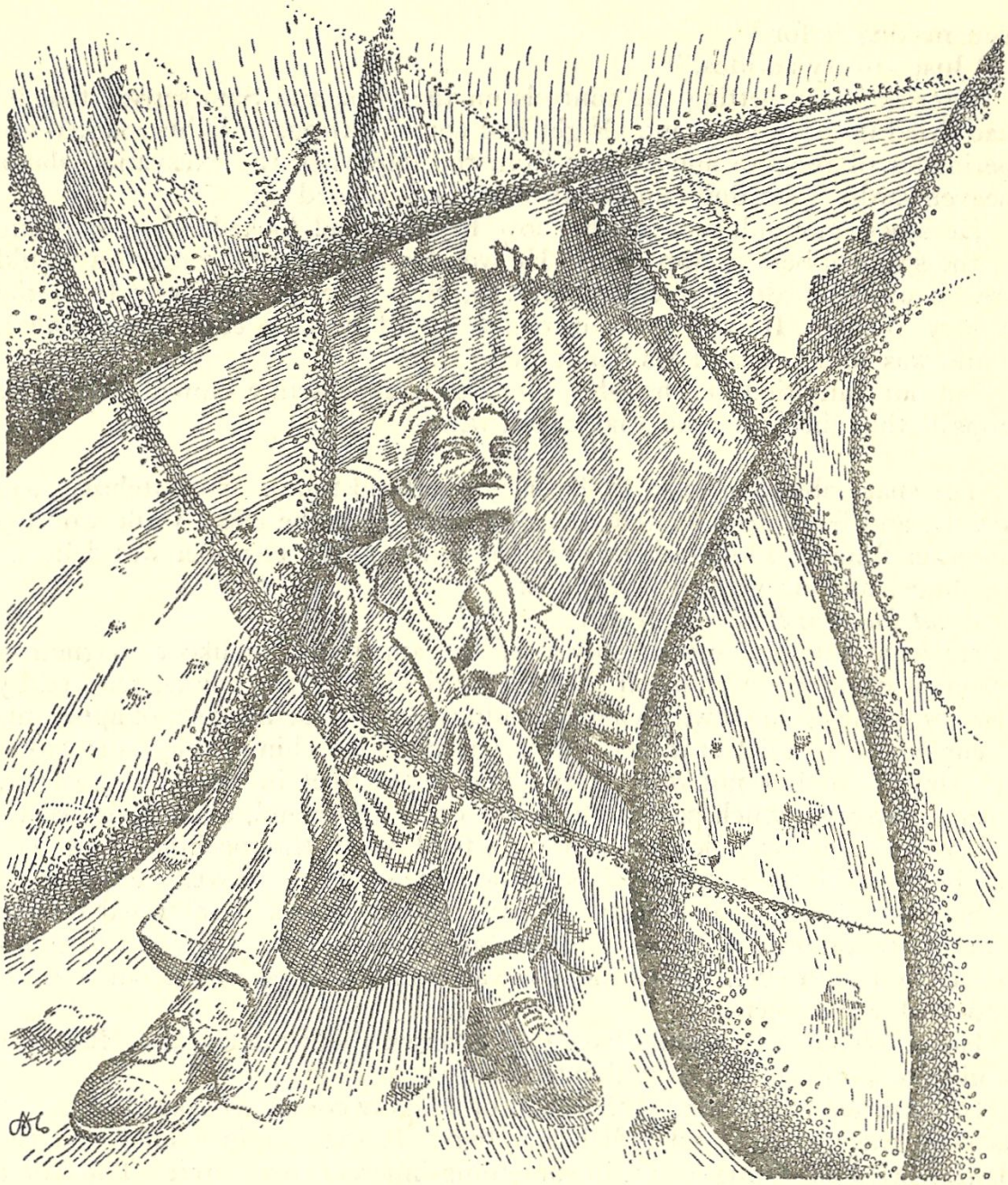
They were silent and Etterick twirled the ring upon the lathe, his brows drawn together. The ring itself was odd, indented with serrations which must have required a great deal of hand-work.

"I scarcely know how to put it," he said at last. "To begin with, we don't know what's happening. Everything directed against the screen vanishes. That scares me. Matter cannot be annihilated—nor can radiations. They can be reflected back, but not simply cease to exist. We're building bigger units. Instead, we should find out what happens when an object reaches the screen produced by the existing apparatus."

Sam felt disappointed, half-expecting some revelation. "That's how I feel," he said. "Anything else."

"Nothing—concrete."

That was the trouble, Sam thought. They *suspected*, but could not *prove*. Their suspicions were difficult to put into words, though Etterick's face showed his emotion. His cheeks were drawn tight; his eyes were tired. Sam looked from him to the ring, and a chill feeling sprang into being within



him. The apparently random serrations were somehow familiar . . . He licked his lips.

"What are you making ?"

Etterick's gaze flickered to the ring, then back to him.

"A—model. An idea I had. It's for a special thread—one which can't shake loose——"

Sam felt the blood drain from his cheeks, and the ice in his heart grow colder. "A thread which screws both ways ?"

Etterick nodded. "How did you know ?"

He seemed disappointed. Sam bit a lip, wondering if this meant nothing, really. After all, Etterick's thread could be adopted into engineering practice . . . Perhaps Etterick himself had not made the thread on the capsule back there in the locked workshop.

He felt an explanation of his unease would seem foolish. "What were

you making it for ?"

"Just—to try an idea."

Etterick began setting the controls on the lathe and Sam sensed that he had dried up. He went out. Night had come. Strings of lights marked the perimeter of the site and a glow from the depths of the excavation shone heavenwards. The dull rumble of machinery echoed up.

He stood motionless, recalling how Etterick had looked when speaking of the space-abberator apparatus. He wondered whether the morrow would see an official order requesting that he, Sam Sperry, withdraw from the Sperry Works. If that order came, it would be enforced. He scowled. Time was so short, and his hands tied.

But not quite tied, he thought. Not tied against acting immediately as he himself thought fit ! And that meant *now*.

The space-abberator was dimly lit by overhead tubes. No watchman was visible, and Sam went in. He had first discovered the effect while working on other things. The mechanism in the centre of the chamber was delicate, yet huge, and its value incalculable.

What happens ? he wondered.

He went into the centre hollow of the apparatus, so like a magnetron resonant chamber, with small chambers radially at eight points, reached by narrow passages down which a man could walk. An identical set of apparatus occupied each radial chamber. Sam scratched his chin. They knew what the thing did, but not *how*. Generated pulses met in the central cavity, forming a surge which passed out at the open upper end, to be deflected by an inverted conical reflector, forming a field round the machine. One day, the bosses said, the field would be made large enough to cover a city.

Sam wondered what whisper of international unease had urged on the work, so that more men poured in, with more equipment. The new abberator would be begun even before the site was ready, and lowered down as walls and roof were erected.

He wondered if he should have told Etterick about the capsule. But they could not gain access to it without official permission.

He returned to the central chamber, of a highly conductive polished metal, as were the passages and radial chambers. It was not in a fault that the danger lay, Sam thought, but in something inherent in the unit. The whole procedure was—*wrong*. Work should be stopped, not pressed on with increasing speed.

The central cavity was warm. He felt the walls. They were warm, too, and he frowned. The initial heating of the cathodes embedded in the junction of the radial passages had begun, and must proceed for a full half-hour before the critical operating temperature was reached. That meant it would be wise to go, he thought, as apparently a night test was to be run. He would look into one of the radial chambers to see if the cathodes there were also heating, he decided. If not, some fault was arising.

The cathodes in the first chamber were cherry-red. The others would be the same—they always were. No major breakdown had ever arisen.

He returned to the central cavity, lowering his feet for the ladder below the exit manhole. Abruptly, as under a blow, the surrounding walls shuddered. The ladder ceased to exist; he felt himself falling . . . but such

a distance as meant not only to the floor below . . . He struck earth with bone-shattering concussion, driven to hands and knees. His head met something unyielding, and consciousness went.

He slowly grew aware of smooth rock, and sat up, rubbing himself. The night sky was above, and wind chill upon his face.

Wind, Sam thought.

He struggled to his feet, swaying, and saw he was in a saucer-shaped depression whose rim formed a serrated horizon half a mile away.

This time, it was too late . . . He reached the rim of the depression and began to climb. The rock was scooped out smooth as by a great machine.

Darkness stretched ahead beyond the edge. No lights indicated busy cities or vehicles.

He went slowly round the circumference of the pit, looking for a sign of human habitation. The distant view was dark and still. Often he listened, but the silence was broken only by the thin wind over the craggy rocks.

He judged that he was half-way round the perimeter when the slow, rhythmic tapping of a metal tool on rock reached his ears. Ahead was a single light.

He hurried, stumbling, not daring to think. An old man was working with a pick. He looked up, and leant upon it.

"Seldom I see anyone out here," he said.

His voice was familiar. Sam halted, swaying.

"What are you—doing ?" he asked weakly.

"Trying to find out what happened."

Sam felt his strength ebbing. Some things were difficult to comprehend—and this was one ! His mind curled, seeking an explanation, but the situation was too complex. He wondered whether he was mad . . .

"You look done in," the man said. "Come to my hut."

They walked over the stony ground. A shed of unpainted boards occupied a dip and the man hung his lantern on a nail.

"Funds are low," he said apologetically.

Sam examined him. Bald, the heavy beard growing from chin to ears lent his host a prophetic appearance. A bunk occupied one corner of the hut. Nearby was a table and a single chair. A cupboard was nailed to one wall. Under it lay a muddle of oddments, and Sam's eyes opened wide.

"Junk," Ernie Jones would have called it. "Loads of it—just everything."

Sam felt the strain and conflict in his mind creeping over him, and knew that he was going to faint.

"You're—Etterick," he said. "Etterick, with his odd thread, who put the stuff in the capsule . . ."

Sam felt better after he had slept. Etterick sat on the bed.

"It's thirty years since I began the capsule," he said. He got up slowly and put the cup away. "I've stayed, determined to know what happened. I've felt like giving up—but never have. Some day I may prove what I suspect, or show I am wrong. I want to be wrong."

"I'd like to see the capsule," Sam said. It was the last proof.

They went out. From its rim Sam looked down at the circular depression.

"Buildings—everything, went," Etterick said. "A large area is permanently evacuated. We're probably the only people within thirty miles. The depres-

sion slowly grows in diameter. The effect was not confined to the time of its initiation. Things we thought the shield stopped were simply jerked into another time—as we found when the first missile appeared from nowhere and knocked a hole in the opposite wall. The delay was not predictable."

"But this—hole," Sam said, baffled.

"The machine had already created it in a future period. When that instant was reached, buildings and all vanished. It was self-destruction—with a time-lag. It was not there. I'd cracked up, trying to get them to stop the apparatus."

Sam turned from the depression, made on through time. "You mentioned a secondary manifestation," he said.

Etterick nodded, leading the way along a path. "The secondary effect I deduce may lie at a much greater depth, and occupy an increased area. I have never seen it. I imagine it as a ring separated by time, as well as space, and possibly arising at a further point in the future. There may be a series of rings, each larger, each arising farther in the future. If I am right, the appearance of a second would prove that to be so."

Larger, Sam thought. Encompassing continents, the whole planet . . .

"The capsule is in a cave," Etterick said. "It was foolish, perhaps, trying to preserve a few poor relics of life on this Earth."

He indicated a cleft where steps had been cut. Sam imagined him toiling below, building the capsule. One thing was clear—Etterick had never known that the capsule had been found in the past. That information had never percolated through official channels.

Sam descended alone, the lantern in his hand. "I'm getting too stiff for the steps," Etterick had said.

It was complicated, Sam thought. But it all fitted.

Ahead was the workshop where Etterick had laboured alone, uselessly. "The capsule is ten yards on, at the end of the cave," Etterick had said.

Sam went on. There was no capsule and no wall. Only a gap in the rock, extending indefinitely on either hand, smooth, like a giant tunnel, its curvature so slight, the circumference must have been many miles. It was increasing slowly in size, the lip creeping towards his feet.

Etterick doesn't know this, he thought.

Sweat was on his brow when he regained the surface and put out the lantern.

"The capsule's all right," he said thinly.

Etterick smiled, an old man. "I've put half a lifetime into it. It's indestructible . . ."

But not safe against random shuttling through time, Sam thought. He thought, too, of the terrible rift, and its slow growing. The secondary ring, proving others would arise. Etterick was old, and could do nothing . . . It was a pity to destroy an old man's dream of helping . . . Now, no one could help, ever. It was too late.

He listened to the wind, the memory of the terrible rift numbing him. It would *always* grow; could never be stopped . . .

The earth under his feet seemed to wobble, as if the planet had faltered about its axis.

Etterick looked at him. "Feel all right?" he asked.

Sam nodded. "It was nothing . . ."

THE END

In Retrospect . . .

With three years publishing experience behind us, it is time to do a little mental stocktaking of *New Worlds*. Against the increasing tempo of science-fiction interest in this country, let us see where we stand in the scheme of things.

Looking at the credit side first, we have weathered some rough storms on the production side, having had to cope with rising printing and paper costs, a falling buying market owing to the drop in consumer purchasing power, plus increased competition from other publishers entering the field. The fact that we managed to go bi-monthly and hit a regular schedule is proof that these troubles were met more than halfway and overcome.

On the literary side, Nova has, in its thirteen issues (including this one), published 65 stories, of which fifteen have been bought for anthologies either in Britain or America, and six stories subsequently bought by American magazines. This doesn't seem to be a bad average for an "ailing child." Apart from the known authors who were already writing science-fiction before we entered the field, we have found (or been found by !) and developed over twenty new British writers, most of whom look like maintaining the standard required by ourselves. We have also been able to develop four artists whose names are beginning to mean something to the connoisseurs of fantasy art. Two of them—Quinn and Clothier—have both taken various art commissions for book publishers recently.

On the debit side we have lost Arthur C. Clarke from our ranks (no longer writing short stories), and William F. Temple, who has been editing a boys' annual for Hulton Press and more recently has taken on the position of Technical Adviser for the film to be made of his book *The Four-sided Triangle*. Several of our top authors have not been writing short material for one reason or another, or because of commitments in U.S.A. have not been able to offer us British Rights to their stories. We have also made mistakes in judgment, either on art or stories, usually through experimentation, but these will turn out to be profitable mistakes in the long run.

Taken by and large the credit side far outweighs the debit, and as of now, the future of *New Worlds* looks pretty good. There are some fine stories on hand for the rest of this year—and the magazine is circulating virtually to a world-wide audience. Apart from the Commonwealth and North America (as far as the Yukon), we hear from readers in Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, India, Hong-Kong, and at least one correspondent from behind the Iron Curtain ! The general consensus of opinion is that we are still improving.

New Worlds is still a long way from the ideal I have in mind, but we are more than halfway along the trail, and providing more new authors can be developed—and there is plenty of talent in this country—the next year or so should see us really getting somewhere.

Our greatest asset, however, is the vast bulk of unknown readers who regularly buy the magazine, and from whom we so seldom hear. To each one of you our sincere thanks for your interest—you won't be disappointed in future issues either.

JOHN CARNELL

MAN'S QUESTING ENDED

By F. G. RAYER

Given a near-Utopian world, will Man be content to rest upon his laurels, or will some enquiring minds still want to attain the impossible?

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

The city of the New Men shone under the rose-tinted sun. High buildings pointed at the sky, where summer clouds drifted. Slender vehicles sped along the busy streets, and flitted into momentary view on the long bridges spanning from block to block. A murmuring pulsation of activity rose, coming more and more faintly to the higher and higher balconies rising tier upon tier to the sky. Nick Riordan turned his back on the scene, went along the 20th level corridor, and stepped into the shaft of the anti-gravity lift. As he floated down he examined his companion closely. The young man, clad in sparkling plastic, was brown, lean, and noble-featured.

"All this means—absolute security," Nick said.

Timberley nodded, his eyes alive. "Absolute security," he agreed. "Yet man's every invention has arisen because men were *not* secure and satisfied! Only because of want arose new techniques, or improvements to old."

Their descent slowed, giving a sudden feeling of weight, and they alighted at the foot of the shaft. Nick led the way out into the sparkling street.

"You mean that absolute content causes stagnation, and that out of stagnation comes—death," he said. "If growth and progress cease, decay must set in."

"Exactly."

They entered one of the sleek vehicles which followed a route to the city centre. It started automatically, and illuminated tunnel-ways and rosy sky with streets below alternated as they flashed along the raised ways. Nick wondered exactly what his wife Niora thought of it all.

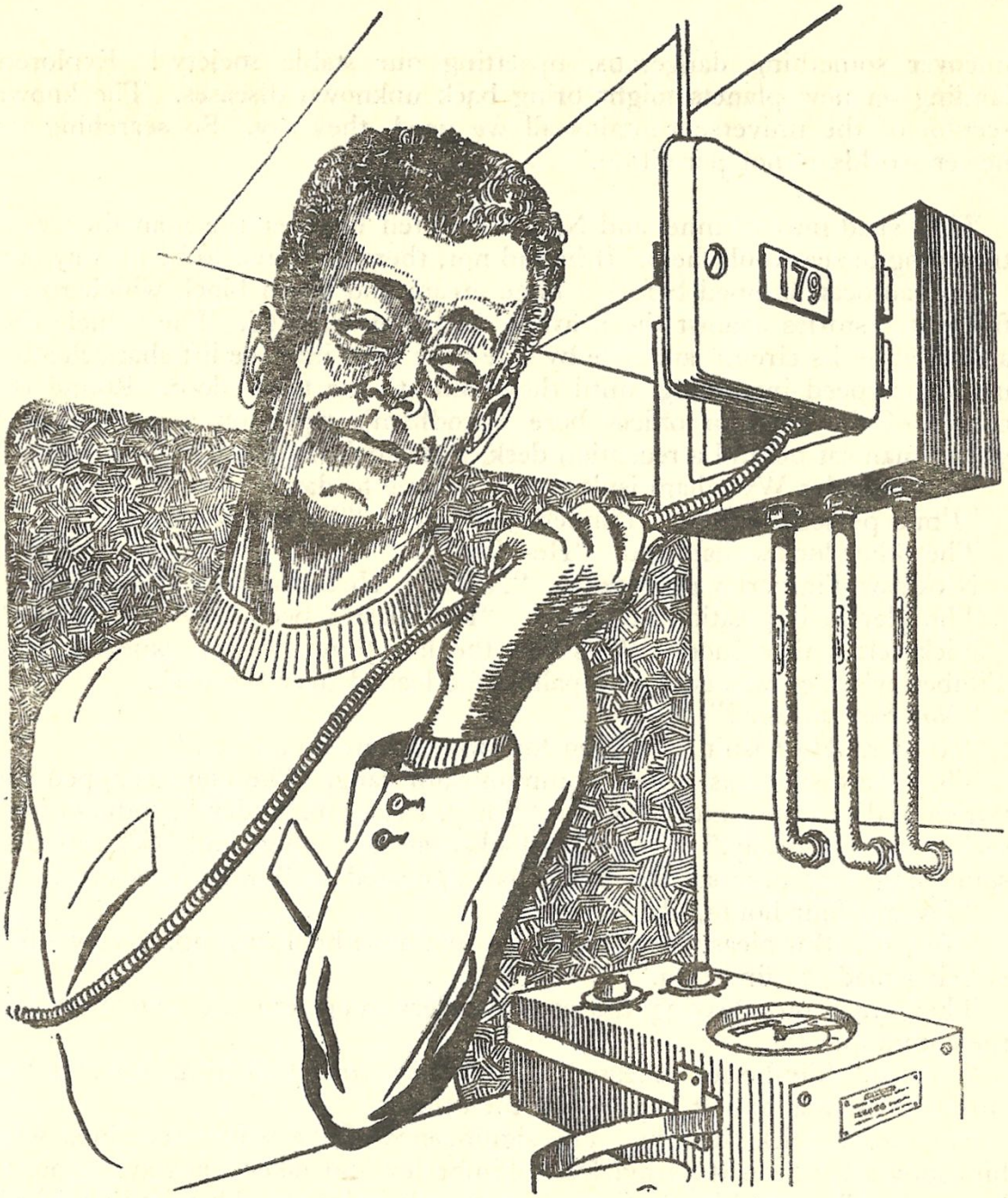
"But suppose the content and quiescence comes because the ultimate level of progress has been reached?" he asked. "*That* might be different."

"No." The young man shook his head, staring moodily out from the autocar's windows. "Mankind can never reach the ultimate point of progress. Every discovery suggests others; every invention opens new fields for exploration. It is a sequence without end."

Nick understood the bitterness in the words and voice. Timberley was one of those who always looked further ahead, no matter how far he went, and always saw that the end to progress had not been reached. "Progress is a stairway that tops infinity," he had once said. Nick agreed. And Timberley had tried to step too far—and been halted with an unpleasant jerk . . .

"You think Wyndham will help?" Nick asked.

Timberley's gaze remained on the streets. "He may. I hope he will.



His ideas are not stagnant. He does not regard stagnation as safety, but as the beginning of rot and disaster. He has always been progressive."

They emerged on a long, curving viaduct which spanned a break in the city. The autocar's wheels hissed on the rails, and Nick gazed outwards from the buildings. Far in the distance beyond the town stretched the huge spaceport which was always a source of wonder to him. Huge vessels, tiny with distance, rose from it with apparent silence. They glinted in the sun, then were gone, speeding through the scattered clouds, which rolled turbulently like smoke in their wake. The buildings at the spaceport edge, huge as the ships themselves, looked like toy bricks dropped upon a creamy carpet, and the men who moved around them were minute dots.

"And all those ships go on closely scheduled journeys," Timberley said with feeling. "Not during my lifetime has an exploratory trip been made. Authorities say we know all that we need to know—that exploration may

uncover something dangerous, upsetting our stable society ! Explorers landing on new planets might bring back unknown diseases. The known section of the universe contains all we need, they say. So searching for newer worlds is not permitted."

They sped into a tunnel and Nick wondered whether the man they were travelling to see would help. If he did not, there appeared to be no way out.

The autocar stopped before a huge cream and green block which rose a full thirty stories against the heavens, and they alighted. The vehicle disappeared on its circuit, and side by side they went into the lift shaft, floating up, their speed increasing, until they came to the tenth floor. Round the corner of the corridor offices bore Wyndham's name on every door. A young man sat behind a reception desk, but shook his head.

"Commander Wyndham isn't seeing anyone to-day."

"I'm a personal friend," Timberley pressed. "This is important."

The other looked harassed. "He—isn't in."

Nick saw Timberley grow tense. "Not in ! He's always in at this hour !"

The clerk's opposition collapsed. "He—hasn't been here to-day, sir."

Nick felt a tiny shock. This was the last thing he had expected, and Timberley's face was suddenly pale as he leaned over the desk.

"*Not here to-day* ?"

"No, sir. He hasn't been seen for twenty-four hours . . ."

They were silent as a desk communicator rang. The clerk snapped the switch and repeated mechanically, "Sorry, sir, Commander Wyndham isn't seeing anyone to-day." Then they looked at each other, and Nick saw that something very near sudden panic had appeared in Timberley's eyes.

"Twenty-four hours," he breathed.

"Yes, sir. But please don't repeat it. We hope he'll turn up. Every effort is being made to find him."

They went out, leaving the anxious clerk repeating his statement into the communicator.

"Not in," Timberley repeated. "And they *won't* find him. Of that I'm sure ! That was how it began with the others."

The others, Nick thought. The significance of the words remained with him long after he had parted from Timberley and taken his way, alone, to his suite. There had been others, he remembered now. They had vanished. Undramatically, silently, yet absolutely. A few had been ordinary people, and scarcely made news. Others had been better known, but their disappearance had not aroused wide interest. Reviewing the details, Nick thought that perhaps someone behind the scenes had arranged that there was no stir in public interest . . . Wyndham, the city civil commander, would make headlines, however . . . unless that same someone behind the scenes hushed it up. Nick frowned. There had been quite a dozen disappearances in all, so far as he knew. Others, about which he did not know, could have taken place.

Niora was sitting on the foam window-seat and her golden eyes greeted him. Nick hesitated as he closed the door.

"Something's happened," he said abruptly.

Niora's beautiful face wore an expression he could not define. She nodded.

"Marsh Wallace has been here."

"Which means——?"

"That everything isn't quite what it seems, Nick. He wonders why people have vanished. In a perfectly balanced community there should be no misfits who want to drop out. Then again, why can't the missing people be found? That's what Marsh Wallace wants to know. He's been looking long enough, and found exactly nothing."

Nick felt amazed that these words echoed so nearly his own thoughts. But the unease on Niora's face worried him. "It's a question many other newsmen must have put to themselves," he said easily. "Is that all?"

"Not quite, Nick. He wanted you to go to see him."

Nick's interest quickened. Wallace was a busy man, and had soon won an important place in a busy concern—the Planogram Syndicate, which dealt with all the news of two hemispheres. Wallace would not want to see him unless it was something important . . .

"When?" Nick asked.

"Soon as you can go round."

That was Wallace, too, Nick thought. Get moving. Hunt your facts down. Don't waste time. He wondered why Niora looked uneasy; why there was a thin vertical line between her pencilled brows and a shadow in her eyes.

"You're—happy?" he asked.

"Of course. Who wouldn't be? Everyone has everything they want or need."

She did not meet his eyes. Her words meant exactly nothing, Nick thought, as he went down and took an autocar speeding on an unending circuit which included Marsh Wallace's office block. Niora was hiding something. And granting that to be so, two new questions arose. What was she hiding, and why?

Marsh Wallace appeared to have been waiting. He dismissed an assistant and leaned back in his chair, his wide, brown face expressing welcome. A quiet hum from the adjoining offices, and the levels above and below, filtered in.

"Glad you've come, Riordan." His voice was clipped, his eyes keen under bushy brows. "Didn't expect you'd be out when I called."

"I'd gone to look up Commander Wyndham."

The keen eyes flashed a question.

"He was gone," Nick said flatly. "Been missing twenty-four hours."

Marsh Wallace's expelled breath hissed in the sudden quiet of the room. "Now he!" He walked jerkily round the desk. "You know he's not the only one?"

"I've heard rumours——"

"They're more than rumours: they're fact!" Marsh Wallace made an expressive gesture. He sat on the edge of the desk. "Listen. No news reaches the public until it's been through the Syndicate offices. We're big. So big even I, after working here a year, only have a hazy idea just *how* big. News comes in through a myriad channels, and goes out through thousands more. There are so many bosses no one knows who controls what—or if a few know, they don't talk . . . Three times I drew up copy and passed it on to my next department, and three times that's been the last I've seen or

heard of it ! Those facts never became news. And their removal was arranged in such a way that no one knows at which stage the copy vanished."

Nick considered carefully. "Someone in the Syndicate buildings is suppressing facts they want soft-pedalled."

Marsh Wallace nodded, but not wholly in agreement. His tufty brows drew close.

"You over-simplify." He gestured at the machine set on one end of his desk. "My news, views and copy are recorded. They go by land-line to the editing section. I worked here six months before I found where that section was. It's among ten thousand others, half a mile from here. The land-line signals come off a teletyper as a script the staff can snip and handle." He paused, and from the look in his eyes Nick knew the crux was coming. Wallace got off the desk and began pacing. "Yesterday something arose which only happens once in a lifetime in an up-to-date office like this. A complete power breakdown lasting half an hour. I took time off and went round to the office where my copy goes. The teletyper there was still working."

Nick experienced a shock. "*Working* !"

"Yes—while the sender mechanism, on my desk here, was out of action because of the power failure !"

Wallace gestured at the complex machine and Nick realised how intent he had been on every word, and frowned.

"The land-line has been cut and teletyper impulses fed in from elsewhere——"

Wallace shook his head. "It hasn't ! The cables are coded and have been checked. The engineers can have no cause to lie. A second man, who didn't know the circuit had already been gone over, gave the same report."

Nick expelled his breath. "And—why do you want to see me ?"

"Because you understand these things ! Check those cables ! I'll wangle you a technician's pass. Set about it as you like, but remember these two points. First, to help you, I shall send no copy from my machine for an hour, from eight this evening." His eyes went to the wall clock. "That gives you time to collect your gear."

He returned to his chair. Nick got up stiffly from the mushroom stool, but stopped with his hand on the door.

"You said there were *two* points . . ."

Wallace nodded jerkily. "There are. The second may mean as much—or as little !—to you as it does to me. It's this—a paragraph I wrote saying progress was hindered by no one being permitted to make any further exploration, development or invention, was among those never published."

He paused, his eyes on Nick. "So was a paragraph on Barratt-Maxim . . ."

Outside, Nick's head whirled. He felt he was required to remember too many things, each important, too quickly. The teletyper which worked with no signal; the land-line that was not tapped, yet acted as if it were; the disappearances; the curtailment of the inventive faculties of mankind. And, last but most shocking, the cryptic words about Barratt-Maxim, venerable, respected and universally admired civil leader of the city. Nick felt dazed, as if a complex puzzle had been thrown down before him, with no hint of the rules upon which it was to be reassembled into a comprehensible whole.

The clocks along the corridor stood at a few minutes to eight. Nick walked

slowly towards the door behind which the teletyper operated from Marsh Wallace's office snapped at high speed. His feeling of tension grew. He had familiarised himself with the run of the cables to Wallace's machine, and had spent an hour examining them without result.

The machine in the office hesitated, was momentarily silent, then the rapid clicking recommenced. Nick's eyes went to the nearest clock. The second hand had just passed the hour. His lips compressed and a feeling of unease drew taut his nerves. He pushed open the office door.

A wide strip of paper was unrolling slowly from the teletyper. A guillotine edge cut across rhythmically, and the sheets were passed to a curved desk where two men sat with shades to their eyes. One looked up, hand poised over a page.

"Well ?"

"Sorry—wrong room."

Nick withdrew. The machine was operating; it only remained to find where the motivating signals arose. He opened his kit and took out a meter which would show the strength of the currents anywhere in the line.

They were strong in the annex adjoining the office, where the cable issued through a conduit. Strong, too, at the next junction point, and the next. Conscious that time was passing too quickly, Nick went to an observation junction near Wallace's office, hoping to get the other side the point where the current was injected, and work back. The signals were strong there, too. He frowned, took two more readings, and saw that three-quarters of an hour had passed. No observation junction remained between the point of his last test and Wallace's machine.

It was a long way round and when he reached Marsh Wallace's office Wallace was talking into the machine. Nick's eyes flew to the clock. The hand was just on the hour.

"So you didn't stop ?" he asked quickly.

Wallace looked up. "I've just started ! An important item. I gave you an hour."

Nick withdrew, puzzled. In the corridor, he reconsidered the blue-print of the land-line circuits, engraved on his memory. From the office to the first junction the line ran through a conduit built into the walls of the block. It would be a major engineering job to tap them. It was odd, he thought. Very odd. If the impulses had not been coming from Wallace's machine all the time—*from where* ? It did not make sense.

Puzzled, he slowly left the corridor, settled to street level, and went from the building. Outside, he stood in thought, momentarily letting the stream of people flow round him.

The city was modern, bright and pleasant, he thought; the people happy, with useful work and ample and interesting leisure. No one lacked anything. Medicine had reached a high level. Diseases were few, and there was ample opportunity for a full and happy life. Very different from Old Earth, he thought, where there had been want, disease, failure and misery. Here was plenty, health, success in whatever branch of work and play each individual chose, and universal content. Sometimes he felt a little out of place, as if too strongly rooted in the past. Perhaps he looked at things differently from the people passing around him, he thought. Perhaps Wallace did, too.

He realised that it was growing late, and mounted a raised way to board an autocar for home. Still in thought, he stopped on the narrow platform. A man was just boarding a vehicle which had slid to a standstill. The man was elderly, with mobile features. His white beard, smooth as silk, made him conspicuous. Tall and slender, he stepped easily into the car, moving to one of the seats in its deserted interior. The door was closing, the vehicle Nick should take already hissing to a standstill on the other side of the platform. But Nick's eyes were on the solitary passenger. *Barratt-Maxim.*

His feet carried him through the door just as the autocar started forward. He sat down, wondering whether his impulsive action would prove pointless.

Barratt-Maxim sat three seats ahead, facing the way they travelled. He had not looked round. Unmoving, his eyes were directed straight ahead, and Nick felt an inexplicable unease. The rows of double seats stood empty. An illuminated disc showed Nick he was on the Q71 route, one but little used, and which would carry him away from his suite. Lights twinkled through the windows, and the city sped past, below, around and above them.

"So was a paragraph on Barratt-Maxim," Marsh Wallace had said.

Those words had keyed the impulse bringing Nick into the car, and he wondered if he had come on a fool's errand. He began to calculate how long it would take him to get home, and wished he had not come.

They passed between huge buildings, through a tunnel, and over a long bridge. Below were boulevards where floodlights had snapped on, illuminating fountains sparkling in ruby, green, blue and yellow. The hues shone on the silken head of the man in front. Nick looked away from him, directing his gaze downwards. He never failed to marvel at the beauty of the city, and no smoke clouded the starlit sky.

They swished over a second bridge, and high buildings showed ahead, penetrated by a tunnel through which they must pass. A shock ran through Nick from head to toe, seeming to twist every cell in his body. His nerves jumped, his muscles knotted, and he lurched forwards in his seat. Then the tension eased . . . Breathing heavily, he sat upright, cramp still twisting his limbs, and gaped—— Barratt-Maxim was gone. No silken head showed above the back of the seat. The Q71 route vehicle, just flashing from the tunnel, was empty except for himself.

He got up, stumbling drunkenly along the autocar. Every seat was empty. No one slumped in the place the old man had occupied. Nick walked to the front of the vehicle, looked through the curved nose at the rail streaming above, and went back to the tail, where bridges and buildings receded rapidly. Nowhere in all the vehicle was there space for even a child to hide.

When the autocar stopped he alighted shakily, his head spinning, and watched it speed away. Barratt-Maxim had vanished during that fraction of a second when the strange feeling of shock to nerve, mind and flesh had come, he was sure.

Evening air stirred through the city and Nick felt it on his brow, cooling the perspiration standing there. He slowly sought a platform serving the route which would take him home. *He had had enough*, he thought. *Plenty, for one day* !

For an hour Nick watched the flickering reflections of street lights upon the ceiling, and searched for a meaning to what had happened. It was after

midnight when he knew that he must go out again. Niora awoke as he finished dressing.

"You're not going out, Nick ! What for ?"

"To ride the Q71 route !"

He left her frowning as if she thought him mad, and reached the platform where he had seen Barratt-Maxim. Few people were about. Minutes passed, then a vehicle sped from the opposite tunnel and halted. Nick slipped in. He had expected the seats to be empty, and they were. The autocar moved away, gaining speed, and he sat down, the feeling of tension strong upon him.

Arched tunnel-entrances sped up and shot behind; streets stretched far below. Tense on the edge of his seat, Nick strove to remember every feature of the route. The boulevards swept below, still floodlit, and the vehicle sped on to a bridge. High buildings loomed ahead, their windows dark, and Nick half-rose. He had not expected it so quickly: between those buildings, for a second, his eyes had strayed from Barratt-Maxim. During that second he had disappeared.

The autocar swept through with a murmuring echo. Nick relaxed, looking back. He had not known if something would happen.

He alighted at the first halt. The position of the high buildings was clear, now. He took a short trip on an adjacent route, then walked, choosing a footway level with the Q71 lines.

The buildings appeared to be deserted offices. That fact alone seemed odd, he thought. Such central premises should be in demand. The footway ran close under one row of windows. Near the end, in the shadow of girders flanking the Q71 track, he pushed in a pane of glass and entered, thankful that fire regulations made non-breakable windows illegal.

Office furniture stood under dust-sheets and he passed through unused offices. Beyond the last a short corridor led to the rooms adjacent to the wall beyond which the Q71 route lay, and his feeling of excitement mounted. This, he thought, was the testing point.

The end door gave access to a single long room. It was empty, but Nick's first feeling of disappointment vanished quickly. The emptiness was *odd*. The room might once have been a store, situated where the sound of passing vehicles would not matter. But it had no air of disuse. The floor was polished; so were walls and ceiling. Nick examined them and knew why the feeling of strangeness had come. All were coated with a hard, brilliantly smooth, brown substance which could have been a high-frequency insulator. There were no windows, and the only break was at the door, through which reflected light made all the room glow.

Nick shivered. The room seemed to be *a cavity*. No other word could be applied. Oddly enough, whoever had adapted it for the unknown purpose which it fulfilled seemed to have always intended that it should be empty: its function lay in emptiness . . .

When Nick left he knew that he had never felt so puzzled, or so uneasy without being able to give a reason, before. Why should a room be prepared with such elaborate care ? For what purpose did someone desire that vehicles on the Q71 route should pass near that strange insulated cavity hidden in the building ? It was inexplicable.

Two days passed. Nick returned home to find Niora awaiting him. She raised a finger to her lips and indicated the closed door of the inner room. Nick thought her expression was troubled.

"Two men to see you, Nick," she whispered. "They're waiting. I don't wholly like the look of them."

He closed the outer door. "Who ?"

"Never seen them before. The didn't seem anxious to give names, but wanted to wait."

"I see." Nick did not move to the inner room. He wondered what this could mean.

"They're an odd pair, Nick," Niora said. "The one is a cripple—quite dwarfed——"

"A cripple !" Nick almost forgot to speak quietly. "Surely not ! These days, with manipulative and surgical treatment at the level it is !"

"*He is*," Niora persisted. She moved towards the door. "The other is a huge man—and I don't like his manner."

Nick passed in and closed the door. A huge man with jet hair, a large face and eyes that seemed to dart everywhere at once, rose heavily. In a second chair was the cripple, his feet not touching the carpet. Though tiny, Nick saw he was quite old, perhaps almost sixty. One shoulder was raised; his arms were thin as sticks and his hands tiny. Nick felt pity for him, followed by revulsion as he saw the face. It was mean; the eyes were black and pin-pointed, the lips thin with cruelty. Nick stopped, his back to the closed door.

"This is unexpected, gentlemen."

The big man put out a hand. His grip was hard. It, too, could be cruel, Nick decided, though apparently the big man intended it to be friendly.

"My name's Wells," he stated. "We want to talk private business. This is Kern Millay—you'll have heard of him."

He indicated the dwarf, and Nick's interest quickened. The name was familiar, though momentarily he could not place it. Both were watching him, evaluating him by some personal standard, and he did not like it.

"I have little time——" he said.

"You'll have time when you hear what we've come for," Wells stated. He sat down and the chair sank beneath his huge weight. "Kern Millay has money—bags of money—and he's willing to spend it. That's why we've come."

Nick got himself a drink from the side cupboard, gaining time to think. The two waved his offer away. "Why to me ?" he asked.

"Because you don't take things for granted. We've heard you look into things for yourself, and form your own judgments. And that you're well up in electronics."

Nick nodded. "Maybe." He did not point out that money had a limited value when no one lacked any necessity or reasonable pleasure. His eyes strayed to the dwarf, who was watching him with an expression only describable as avid, and he remembered why Kern Millay's name was familiar. Millay had often spent fortunes on matters that interested him, and that had made news. The little man strove to speak.

"Sometimes he's half-dumb," Wells stated with frank brutality. "It's part of his deformity. But his mind is one many could envy."

A look passed between the two and Nick strove to decipher it and their relationship. Kern Millay seemed to hate Wells, yet respect his strength. Wells could be a paid bodyguard, or have a more equal status.

"Even now occasional throw-backs to a more primitive physical state arise," Wells said, examining Nick closely. "Sometimes all our surgical and medical science can do nothing. Mr. Millay is such a case."

Kern Millay squirmed on his chair. His lips quivered.

"T-tell—him—" he said.

Wells raised a big hand. "I'm coming to it." He scowled, looked at the carpet, then at Nick. "We can rely on your silence ?"

Nick thought perhaps Kern Millay was master, after all.

"Of course."

"Good." Wells breathed as if in relief, and Millay's eyes settled on Nick watchfully. Wells began to search for words with obvious care. "Mr. Millay will pay, if you can do what he requires—will meet any figure within reason most generously, I may say." He gestured. "The matter is secret. Mr. Millay would remain anonymous and I would be intermediary. We should take a very poor view indeed of any—*betrayal of trust* on your part."

The eyes met his, and Nick knew that the big man was no fool. A keen intellect lay behind those eyes. Nick shrugged, ignoring the threat.

"If I take on a job I abide by its terms."

"Good." Wells appeared satisfied. "You may recall a certain process, never perfected, which was denied further development by the Board. Mr. Millay wishes you to continue investigations in that subject. His payment will amply compensate for any danger of discovery. Secrecy will be to your own advantage, as the Board severely disciplines those who disregard its orders."

So that was it, Nick thought. It all came back to what Timberley had said: stagnation could be irksome.

"What process ?" he asked tensely.

"That of transmens-substitution."

Nick felt as if the big man had struck him. He recalled the enormous advances in surgical and allied subjects made by the New Men. They could copy a person's mental activity patterns—had done so, in the past. But this was more: was momentarily terrifying.

"The T.S. process," he breathed.

"You have read of it ?" Wells did not wait for the nod. "Then you realise the need for secrecy—and can gain some idea of the size of your reward !"

Nick felt Kern Millay's eyes hungrily, avidly, upon him, and wondered exactly what the set-up was. He nodded slowly, thinking of Barratt-Maxim, though he did not know why.

"I'll consider it." He knew as he spoke that he would take the task on—not because of the money, but because it seemed to lead towards the clues he sought. "I'll let you know to-morrow."

Beyond that he refused to go. Wells helped Millay to his feet. When they were gone Nick mopped his face, and decided not to tell Niora of the offer: if she did not know, she could not worry. There might arise other reasons, too, why it was best she should not know . . .

Next morning he went through the teeming city to Timberley's suite.

Timberley worked three days each week, and the tiny busts of translucent plastic dotting his rooms showed how he spent much of his leisure.

"Commander Wyndham, now Barratt-Maxim gone," he said flatly. "The news has just broken."

Nick nodded. "Any details ?"

"None—just that he hasn't been seen. The exact hour when he vanished seems unknown."

Not to me ! Nick thought. He wondered where they went. But that was a question an increasing number of people would give a lot to answer.

"I want you to tell me the background of the T.S. process," he said quietly.

The other started. His eyes clouded, filling with strong curiosity. "The transmens-substitution process ! You're not . . .?"

"I am," Nic said. He sat down. "I'd rather get the background from you than enquire elsewhere. People talk."

"Very well." Timberley went to the window, gazing down on the sunny streets, not looking at Nick.

"It's one of the few things I agree was *rightly* stopped," he said. "T.S. could upset our whole society. Once again money would count—if one had sufficient. Where money failed, crime might try to accomplish. If there is one thing which could turn men again into beasts, it could be that. It developed from the simple copying of thought-patterns. Briefly, the brain is drained clear of all memory, then the memory and personality patterns of another person poured in. There you have it !"

Nick shivered. He had seen the copying of thought-patterns. Micro-probes scarcely a molecule in thickness penetrated through the skull and the minute fluctuations of the brain-waves drained away into the complex apparatus.

"With T.S. a person's whole consciousness could be removed to another brain," he murmured.

Timberley looked bleak. "That's it ! And the dangers of the abuse of that power cannot be exaggerated. A rich man whose years were numbered might buy a young man's consent. The rich man's consciousness—his *being* —would be transferred to the other body, while the young man's mind would find lodging in the old man's body. Think what that could mean to a man of fabulous wealth who was near death ! A cripple might covet a sound body, a criminal find security as a helpless victim——"

"A cripple !" Nick breathed. Abruptly the look in Kern Millay's eyes seemed to have new significance. It would be necessary to be careful, very careful indeed, he decided, and nodded. "As I thought. It opens up endless possibilities. It was refused permission ?"

"In strong terms. Some experiments were made, however. When the results became news, bedlam resulted—panic, from some, and frantic efforts, half-underground, by a few money-magnates who wanted new lives. I recall Millay the crank, as they called him, trying to get the process legalised. He said if a man could afford to buy a new body, then let him have it !"

Nick felt sickened. The idea of thus transplanting a person's memories, thoughts and consciousness itself into another's body repulsed him.

"There were some rumours that Millay has tried to get the subject reopened," Timberley said.

Nick saw that he had learned all the other knew. It was as he had suspected. There *could* be subjects in which man could quest too far, and this was one. Only with the most careful control could such a technique be permissible. It was, alas, a technique which came so near to fulfilling a dream that abuse could not be eliminated. A rich man might obtain a new period of life: might almost aspire to immortality. With such a prize, anything might happen.

Nick began work as Wells directed, and his instructions were simple. He was to study T.S. technique until he could build the necessary apparatus. A simple order, but not so easy to execute, Nick thought. Secrecy hid the methods employed, and only piece by piece, in the most laborious manner, could an overall picture be formed. Nick decided that the apparatus which he had once seen would form a good starting point. In a simpler community, it could have offered the perfect disguise, but the recording of electroencephalograph patterns as identity checks had ended its unlawful utilisation in that way.

In a week he had a good overall picture of the T.S. procedure; in two, an idea of apparatus which might achieve the desired result. He began to build, eager now, as he always was when developing something new in his chosen field of scientific investigation. Often he worked long hours, urged on partly by Wells, but largely by his own intense curiosity. There were snags to clear. Unanticipated difficulties arose. He worried at them until a solution was found. The hours he spent away from the workshops Kern Millay had lavishly provided grew daily more few. Often he was so tired when he arrived home that he scarcely answered Niora's questions. As he realised success was in sight, and definitely attainable, his excitement mounted, preventing rest.

Timberley met him one evening on his way home—a meeting that might have been contrived, Nick thought. Excitement made vivid his youthful face.

"I've seen Wyndham !" he said.

Nick felt shaken. "*Seen* ! You mean *found* ? Where ?"

"I don't mean found," Timberley declared, and fell into step besides him as they crossed a raised way. "It hasn't made news, and won't, because there's no proof." He frowned. "It's odd—strange. You know why I went to see him originally ?"

Nick nodded. "They stopped your experiments into absolute zero temperatures."

"They did. Snap, like that. No reason given. I fail to see how my experiments were illegitimate. The authorities denied permission for further work. I wanted Wyndham to get the decision reversed. When we went to see him he was gone. I've seen him since—once. *In my apparatus* !"

Nick halted; a chill ran through him, coalesced on his spine, then dispersed along his limbs. "In your apparatus ?" he echoed.

"In my sub-zero chamber ! I went there to look up some data—at least they can't prevent me *thinking* of it. I opened the door—and there was Wyndham standing in the chamber."

Timberley halted, an odd pallor to his cheeks. He licked his lips.

"I could see straight through him," he said.

Nick could think of no remark. A glance at his companion told him one thing: Timberley was speaking the truth. He would never make a mistake like that.

"You've no explanation," he said at last.

"None."

They gained the upper level and Timberley gripped his arm. "My workrooms aren't far. Will you look ?"

Timberley *wanted* him to look, Nick thought. Desperately wanted him to—his tone revealed that. Even though no explanation would be forthcoming, he still wanted Nick to look. Nick nodded.

"Let's walk," Timberley said.

They went along the raised way above the streets. A diffused murmur of people and traffic drifted up, only occasionally lost as a railcar sped by at a higher level, its hissing wheels over-riding the background of muted sound from below. They went along a slender bridge and through a tunnelled building. At the exit, they turned right and Timberley unlocked a door. They passed through a small office and a workshop littered with equipment.

"The zero chamber is next," Timberley said. "It was there I saw him. I simply opened the door——"

He turned locking levers and swung open a door of ponderous weight. The walls were feet thick; the chamber beyond perhaps six feet square. A shock ran through Nick; his throat grew dry.

Standing motionless in the chamber, still as a figure cast from glass, was a man of upright, severe yet kindly bearing. The light from behind them, passing through the door, shone on him, burnishing his outline to sparkling fire.

"Again . . ." Timberley breathed.

The figure turned with infinite slowness as if time did not exist for it, and the kindly eyes regarded them across the empty floor. Nick raised a hand to speak . . . Then there was nothing. The chamber was empty, and Timberley staring at him.

"You saw it ?" he pressed.

His voice shook and Nick nodded. "I saw—it."

"*He looked at us.*"

Nick did not answer. He knew that if he returned home his mind would dwell upon this development, seeking an explanation.

"I'd like to stay here—to watch," he said.

When he was alone he examined the chamber. Its walls were heavily insulated, reminding him of the *cavity* in the building beside the Q17 railtrack. He waited outside, but nothing reappeared. Two hours passed slowly, and he felt valuable time was being wasted. Lights shone on the buildings opposite, and moved in the streets below. At last he took a final look into the sub-zero chamber, closed its door, and went out. Wells was leaning against the corridor wall. He pushed himself upright, filling the passage.

"The boss don't like divided interests," he said.

Nick felt anger. He balanced on the balls of his feet, eyeing the large man with distaste.

"What I do with my free time is my business."

"You're kiddin'." Wells laughed. The sound echoed along the empty passage. "When Millay pays a man everything he does is his business. Remember that if you want to stay happy."

Nick swore. "There are two opinions about that !"

Wells eyed him, his face ugly and his lips set close. "Remember there are things it's best not to look into," he said, and his gaze strayed momentarily past Nick. "There are others, too, who you might not like hurt . . ."

He scowled and Nick knew what he meant. Niora. She could be a weak link. He glared at Wells, not speaking. It would be best not to show his thoughts too much.

"Millay feels it's about time we had some real demonstration," Wells said. He moved to one side of the corridor. "He pays well—but expects value."

"He shall have it," Nick snapped.

He pushed past and went out. He did not look back to see if Wells followed, or whether he went into the offices. *I'm in it up to my neck now*, he thought. He knew there would be no going back: it was too late.

The silence of his rooms laid a cold hand upon his heart. He looked for a message, knowing he would find none, then stood in the lounge, face frowning immobility, and eyes cold as blue ice. The rooms were quiet, silent—lonely. He wondered where Niora was. There were no signs of a struggle, but that could mean nothing. The buzzer on the communicator in the outer room sounded.

"Riordan there ?" a voice asked. It was Wells.

"Yes." Nick's voice was thin as plucked wire.

"Remember I said we wanted results ? Millay expects them to-morrow. I advise you plan something."

The instrument went dead. Nick swore. This could mean Wells had acted at once; the words could be a threat . . . Nick wondered how long Niora had been gone, and fancied her perfume still lingered. He sat down, pondering. She had been strange, somehow tense, the last few weeks. He remembered it, now, and cursed himself for not noticing before. He frowned and got a drink. If he followed that line, it meant Wells's threat did not mean what he had first supposed it must . . .

At last he went to sleep, dog-tired, and knowing attempts to find Niora that night would be useless. The city was big; ten thousand hiding places could exist among its teeming millions. Worse, hasty action might endanger Niora. His last thought before sleeping was of the teletyper which functioned when it should not, and he wondered if Marsh Wallace lied, and had been sending all the time.

Nick decided it wise to see Millay and Wells early. They sat in his basement workroom, sometimes watching him, and sometimes looking at the equipment. Kern Millay followed every word with close attention. The little face, slightly twisted by the same sport of nature, was a creamy white under the ceiling radiance; the eyes glinted, and tiny droplets shone on the forehead. Only once did he speak:

"Y-you believe it—completed, Riordan ?"

"I do," Nick stated. "I have not needed to develop a new apparatus, but

only copy an old. The T.S. process is not greatly different from that used in recording a person's thoughts. The dissimilarity lies in *withdrawing* the brain-waves and leaving the memory-banks vacant to receive the new impulses which will be fed into them." He felt chilled—a feeling which always came when he remembered the power of the apparatus he had made. There was something terrible in this ability to drain a body of memories and personality.

"You can do it?" Wells pressed, his face set.

Nick nodded. "As far as can be ascertained, yes. Everything is completed—but no actual test has been made, of course."

Kern Millay rose with the aid of his stick and limped slowly to the apparatus. Two complex chairs stood side by side. Above them, suspended on counter-weighted arms, were enormous headpieces containing the micro-probes which penetrated bone and tissue to the brain itself. Behind, connected by heavy cables, was the mass of units which stored and transferred the brain-waves. Nick had explained it all, and he wondered whether the moment had now come when he should mention Niora. His part of the bargain seemed to have been fulfilled.

Wells got up, his hands loosely in his pockets. He was twice Millay's size and a foot taller. The expression on their faces halted Nick's question. Wells was *purposeful*; Millay was eager—yet afraid. Nick's tensed muscles released themselves instantly and he sprang to the door, jerking at the handle.

It would not open. He remembered, too late, that Wells had come in last. He turned, ready to fight. Wells had withdrawn one hand and it held a paralyser.

"You've made a mistake, Riordan," Wells murmured.

Nick saw the anticipation in Millay's eyes, and felt horror. He knew, now, that he would not have come so unprepared, and alone, had he not been worrying about Niora. The thought came, and knowledge of his danger, and he sprang towards Wells, his arms reaching out to grasp the paralyser and tear it away . . .

A faint blue radiance played round the weapon and Nick felt his limbs crumble. Use went from arms and legs and he fell like a dummy. Consciousness did not go. That, perhaps, made it worse.

Wells put the weapon away. "Mr. Millay always expects—good value for money," he said.

He dropped Nick into one of the complex chairs, expertly snapped the metal retaining clips over his arms and legs, and dragged back his head, securing it with a band across the temples. Triumph was added to the fear and anticipation on Kern Millay's face. He mounted the second chair, squirming into place.

Nick felt sickened. *Good value*, he thought. The real meaning of those words was apparent. The body that had always been Nick Riordan was strong, and whole; Kern Millay's was twisted, dwarfed and ineffectual . . .

He felt the enormous headpiece sinking on its levers to enclose his skull, and his thoughts became incoherent. Dimly he realised that Wells was manipulating the controls on the apparatus, working with an expert efficiency which proved he was no stranger to such equipment. As in a daze he realised that Kern Millay was motionless and half-hidden by the second headpiece.

No sensation came as the micro-probes sank through bone and tissue, but his thoughts no longer remained under his own control; instead, running with fantastic speed through strange sequences. Memories bubbled up like water in a vacuum, until he was nauseated. Slowly all feeling went. He was no longer aware of sitting in the chair, or of the cruel constriction of the clips Wells had dragged around his limbs. Memory seemed to dwindle, and sensation . . . he did not even realise he could not remember, now, and his last coherent thought was one of gladness that Niora was missing . . . better thus, *now* . . .

Consciousness came back slowly, and with it a sensation of strangeness which for a long time Nick could not place. His limbs seemed shrunken, his blood to flow more slowly, and his strength to be changed to palsied weakness. For a long time he sat with eyes closed, his brain curling, as he recalled how he had come down into the basement, and how he had been trapped.

His eyes flicked open. The workroom was empty, as was the chair besides him. He felt momentary surprise that he had been moved from one chair to the other. Then complete awareness returned. *He had not been moved.* He now occupied the chair where Millay had sat . . .

He swore, trembling. His feet did not touch the floor. One shoulder was permanently drawn up. His hands were white and thin, not the strong and capable hands he had owned.

He got up awkwardly, almost falling. Accidently or through a cruel jest Millay's stick was against the wall near the door. It took him many minutes to reach it. He stood crookedly, breathing heavily, his face agonised and his thoughts gaining coherence. Kern Millay had had good value, he thought bitterly.

He hobbled to the basement lift-shaft, rose to street level, and went out. Already he felt exhausted, and realised why Millay and kept Wells in close attendance. At last he gained a seat on the boulevard and almost collapsed into it. As he rested he searched his pockets. One bulged, and he extracted a thick roll of currency: the exact amount Millay had promised. When he had counted it Nick laughed without mirth. The commission had had terms of which he had not been aware !

At last he went on, painfully boarded an autocar, and alighted near Timberley's rooms. Exhausted, he leaned against the corridor wall, a finger on the push. Finally the door opened, and Timberley's brows rose.

"Mr. Millay !"

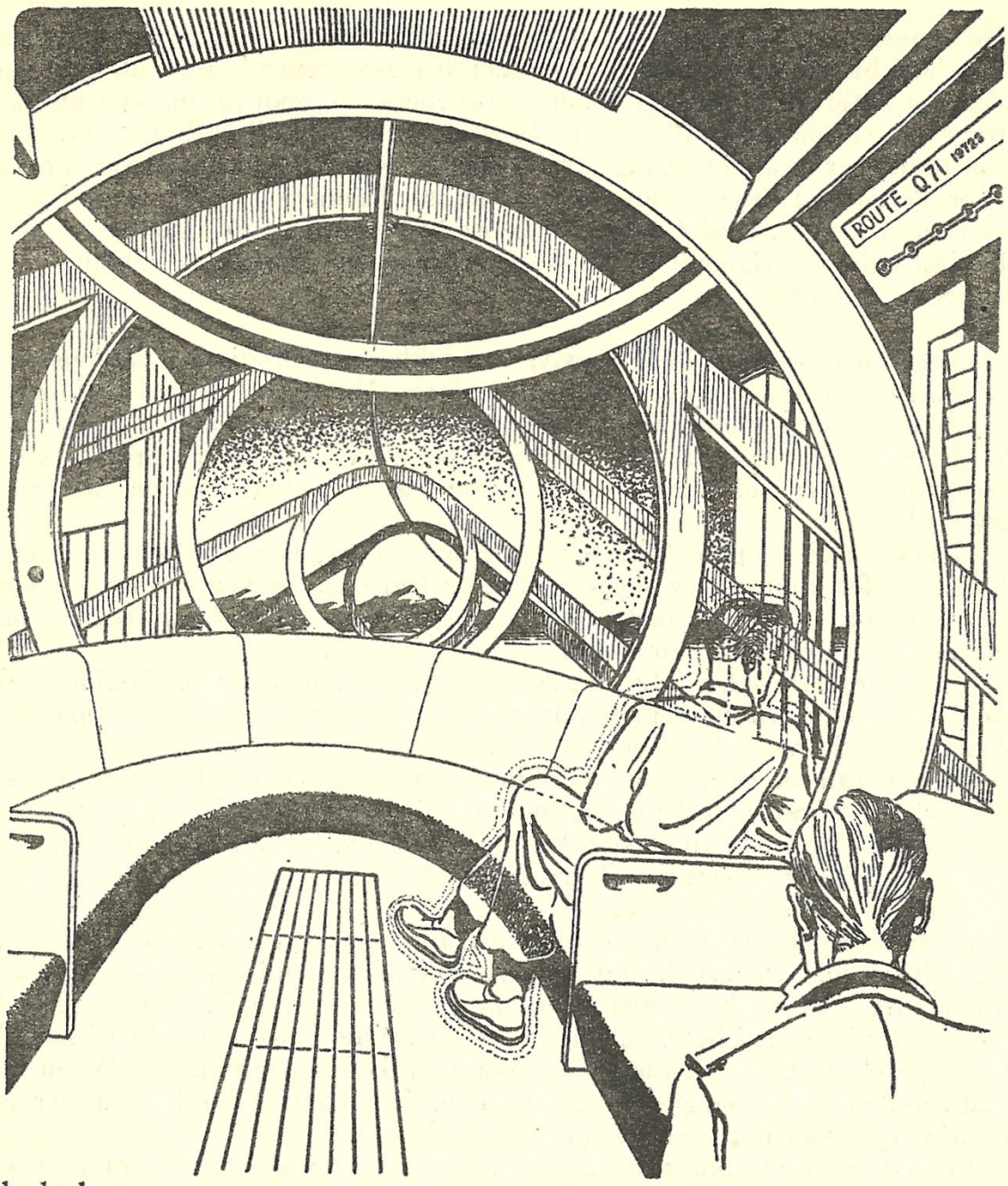
Nick forced himself upright, and staggered through the door. "I'm—Nick Riordan," he grated.

Disbelief, amazement, and comprehension passed through Timberley's eyes. He closed the door.

"The T.S. process——?"

Nick nodded, sinking into a chair, his breathing uneven. "T-tricked me," he said. Words came with difficulty, but he found speech not impossible, and was glad. Perhaps Millay's impediment had been partly of the mind . . . "Millay—is—me," he said. "Must find him—make him change back."

He read the emotion on Timberley's face. How could they find a man in all the great city, when that man had every reason for hiding ? Timberley



looked grave.

"Thought I saw you half an hour ago. That would be——"

"Kern Millay," Nick said thinly.

Timberley frowned. "Yes. I wondered why you didn't reply."

Nick expelled his breath. "Where was he ?" He leaned forwards, feeling everything depended on the answer.

"Boarding a vehicle on the Q71 route."

A sensation of hopelessness swept over Nick, almost overwhelming. Barratt-Maxim had ridden the Q71 route, passing by that strange cavity of unknown purpose. Millay would not go that way from mere chance.

"He might have ridden up anywhere along the east side of the city," Timberley said pensively. "Or gone on the looped circuit south."

"I think—*neither* !" Nick wondered just how far Millay's planning had extended. He considered. The shock of knowing that Millay was *gone*—

gone as completely as the others—shook him. To plan an effective countermove seemed impossible. He sat unmoving, his chin on his chest, conscious that Timberley was standing helpless by the window. Then he looked up.

"Get me Marsh Wallace !"

"He'll be busy——"

"Get him. Tell him enough. He'll come."

Alone, Nick tried to integrate the isolated pieces of knowledge which must surely form one whole. It was difficult. So many sections of the puzzle still remained unknown.

Marsh Wallace leaned back in his chair and regarded Nick under heavy brows. His eyes held pity. "If you never find Millay you're finished. And he'll not let himself be found ! He's been planning this a long time."

Nick licked dry lips. "How do you know ?"

"Rumours circulating through Planogram say he's sold out all his stock and property. Big people are news, so we watch them. Millay was big. He was ready to clear out."

"And has gone," Timberley added thinly.

Nick felt his dismay sharpen. He had hoped that by some miracle Marsh Wallace could formulate a plan. Wallace was one of the few men he could rely on.

"I feel we've missed up on something we should realise," Wallace mused. "As Timberley said, the trouble seemed to begin because mankind's questing after further knowledge had been forcibly ended. If that's so, we shan't find a solution in the mechanisations of mere individuals, even if as powerful as Millay."

Man's questing ended—*by order*, Nick thought. If that happened, what would man do ? Go elsewhere.

He took up his stick. "I've an idea. It may come to nothing." He rose with difficulty, supporting himself crookedly, and paused at the door. "If Niora is found—tell her about me."

Wallace halted him. "I'm in this too, Nick ! You'll need help." His gaze went over the deformed, weakly body.

Nick shook his head. "No one else is in on this. I wouldn't ask them."

He went alone from the building, and painfully through the city. It needed an hour for him to reach the point where the Q71 route passed by the cavity, and his exhaustion was extreme. Unshakably determined, he went slowly through the offices, still empty, and into the insulated chamber. There, he closed the door and sat down to wait and think.

Apparently Kern Millay had cashed in on something bigger than himself, taking the chance afforded. The others who had ridden the Q71 route—and vanished—were men of very different character to Millay. Wyndham, the civic commander, was kindly, generous and honest; Barratt-Maxim was justly a respected leader. Millay did not fit with them, Nick decided.

He listened, but no wheels whined on the Q71 route rail. He would not need to wait long, he decided. The route was not busy, but its vehicles kept their regular schedule, even if empty.

He wished he could have copies of the material coming from Marsh Wallace's teletyper during the intervals when the signals apparently did not originate from Wallace's machine. They might repay study. A secret

coded message in the public press would never be suspected. Millions of words poured hourly from the Planogram Syndicate buildings, and only those who knew where to look would look in the correct place.

Wheels swished outside, and Nick tensed, nerves tight as strained wire. The swish passed . . . only a vehicle on the level above.

He expelled his inheld breath. What Timberley had said, repeating his own words, was true. Man's questing could never be ended. Men would refuse to be contained. Mankind must always expand. The thought was exciting; gripped by it, he scarcely heard the first sound of wheels on the Q71 route. Then the noise swept near and he knew the moment had come. Simultaneously a ringing began, coming from nowhere. Beginning very low in the register, it mounted up and up to a humming like a deep gong; became a continuously ringing bell, a shriek, a whine, and was gone above audibility. Came the sound of the autovehicle sweeping through the tunnel. Lights jumped from nowhere and curled and bobbed in the chamber; a man stood besides him, miraculously come through the wall from the Q71 track, then chamber and man vanished. Nick felt he was falling headlong through space. Consciousness went; the sound continued in a high-pitched *ping*, then that, too, ended. He seemed to be falling into real darkness, and staggered to his knees, clutching at his stick.

Turf was beneath his feet, a gentle wind in his face, and stars above. He turned slowly, striving to orient himself, and failed. Lights twinkled a long way off, but he did not recognise them. He looked at the heavens again, and froze. The constellations were unfamiliar. Many times he had looked at the night sky, enjoying the stillness, and comparing the vista of stars with the view seen from Old Earth. The hemisphere above was neither. Unfamiliar stars stood in unfamiliar groupings. Two tiny moons were chasing towards the horizon, and the air was subtly different. The gravity, too, was reduced, and made movement easier. But the galaxies above were unrecognisable—unknown to him, or, if known, now seen from a totally unfamiliar viewpoint.

He went slowly towards the lights. The buildings from which they shone were few, and quite different from any other buildings he had previously seen. One was topped by a lattice tower, where a complex array of radiating antennae pointed at the heavens, pivoted about both vertical and horizontal axes so that the planetary rotation could be cancelled and power always be directed at the same point in space. A second building resembled a giant inverted staple, and others were obviously power-houses. He limped nearer, eyes and ears alert, and passed between two buildings. Ahead, the narrow alleyway opened into a wider road. A faint humming came from it and drummed between the high, sheer walls above his head. He slowly approached the alley end, looked out into the lit street beyond, and found himself face to face with an elderly man of upright bearing. The features were kindly, but alive with surprise.

"Kern Millay !" the man breathed.

Nick felt dismay, and the shock of recognition. "Wyndham !"—the man who, in shadowy, unreal outline, had stood in the activity chamber of Timberley's sub-zero apparatus.

The kindly face grew bleak. A hand surprisingly strong settled on Nick's

arm, preventing his retreat. Nick struggled and almost fell, but knew he could not escape. As Nick Riordan—yes; but not as Kern Millay, whose body was softened from inactivity and handicapped physically.

"We'd heard rumours that you were *interested*, Millay." No friendliness eased the tone. "Our plan is too big for us to permit that mere individuals jeopardise it."

Nick writhed with the pain of the other's grip. "I'm—not—Millay !" he stated, panting.

Wyndham frowned. His gaze passed over Nick with contempt. He shrugged.

"A likely story."

Nick protested, was silent, then asked: "Where are we ?"

Wyndham laughed shortly. "Why pretend you don't know, Millay ? It won't pass."

The street was deserted. They skirted the high building whence came the humming, and approached offices near the living quarters. Nick tried to drag himself free, but failed.

"You'll find a very different set of ruling principles apply here, Millay," Wyndham declared. He rapped sharply on a door. "Money means nothing; nor does personal prestige, unless backed up by ability. More: the old standards of non-progress mean—nothing."

The door opened. A man Nick did not recognise sat at the end of a desk. Beyond him, in a swivel chair, leaned a second man who drew Nick's eyes and he remembered the time he had slipped impulsively into the Q71 route coach. Barratt-Maxim examined Nick sternly.

"He was near the east side," Wyndham stated. "He's an individual unlikely to have an aim other than personal profit."

The man at the end of the desk leaned forwards, consulting notes. "A disturbance in the A2 cavity field was reported," he said. "The presence of an unanticipated object in the cavity could be responsible. There was a high momentary overload." His gaze flickered to Nick. "Where did you arrive ?"

"Just beyond the city——"

The man nodded. "It could happen. Your presence caused just enough displacement of the field to throw us that much out."

"But I'm not Millay," Nick objected in the silence that followed. "We were—exchanged."

Three pairs of eyes examined him critically. "Could be a lie," Wyndham said.

Barratt-Maxim nodded. "Have we the means of checking ?"

The other shook his head. "Nothing short of the brain-wave pattern check would prove or disprove his words. We haven't the means to do that test, here—or the records of Millay's patterns. They'll be back in the civic archives."

They fell silent. Nick saw how it was. These men had heard of the T.S. process; were, indeed, ready to believe him if they had proof. But without proof they would not believe—dared not, because Kern Millay himself would have personal aims which did not tie up with their own. They were wholly just, but could not take chances.

"Put him with the other," Barratt-Maxim ordered abruptly.

Two men conducted him from the office and to the next building, apparently serving as a prison. Lights showed in a few windows, and Nick supposed it to be unused. He was pushed into a room and the door closed. A lock clicked.

"This is unexpected—*Millay*," a voice declared.

Nick turned awkwardly and gazed up into the rugged, browned face which had been his. The eyes that were his regarded him with contempt. Nick's blood ran hot; a red mist of fury came and his lips twitched.

"I'll—get—you," he breathed.

Kern Millay did not move from near the barred window. "Don't try anything—or you'll get a beating."

Nick met the eyes, and saw that they had an expression he had never had, and which the soft diffused lighting could not hide.

"You'd—kill me ?" he said.

Millay nodded. "I am considering it. As a precaution."

Nick bit his lips. Millay intended the *exchange* to be for always. That provided ample reason why he should fulfil his threat.

"Then why not—in the basement ?" Nick said unevenly.

"Who can say ? Perhaps because some of the joke would have lost its savour."

Millay shrugged, and turned back to the window. The action showed his confidence, and Nick knew it justified.

"You're captive too," he pointed out at last.

Millay did not look round. "Only temporarily. My coming caused a disturbance in the field, which was noticed, and I was caught. But they're checking my records. Nick Riordan was trustworthy and progressive." He laughed briefly. "I expect to be freed at any moment. They even think I will be useful here. My imprisonment is merely token."

"They'll find out you know nothing of the subjects I covered !" Nick grated.

"Unlikely." Millay regarded him momentarily. "My plans are too well arranged."

They were silent and Nick felt the hopelessness of his position. Kern Millay had planned every action and considered every development. Nick himself was unprepared.

"You didn't ride on the Q71 route by chance," he said.

"Obviously not. I do not operate according to rules of chance, but by pre-arranged plan. I pay many men to watch many things. One saw discrepancies in certain Planogram Syndicate items. From there to discovering what those discrepancies meant was easy. I pay men whose job it is to find out such things. So I came here, where there will be no brain-wave records to prove your claim . . ."

The lock clicked and the door opened. A man beckoned to Millay.

"We're satisfied, Riordan. Commander Wyndham would like to ask you a few more questions—but nothing important."

"Good." Millay's eyes were triumphant. At the door he looked back. "I understand there have been *three* displacements of the field . . ."

They went out; the door closed and the lock clicked. Nick stared at it, Millay's final words echoing in his mind. *Three*. That meant three people

had come. Millay, himself, and ——? He did not know. He wondered whether it could be Niora, and hoped it was not. He supposed that whoever purposefully rode the Q71 route would sit first in the vehicle. Niora had often liked to sit at the front. But that could mean nothing, and he could think of no reason why she should traverse the route at all.

He looked from the window. Too small to permit escape, it gave a limited view of lit windows opposite. He gazed out for a long time, until the pain in his legs forced him to sit down. The couch was a fixture and the room bare. He lay full length, closing his eyes to think, but no plan formulated itself. At last, after a long time, his fatigue asserted itself and he slept.

Nick awoke knowing something had disturbed him, and saw that the door was open so that a thin streak of light penetrated from the corridor. He rose slowly, wondering if this meant danger, and edged along near the wall to peer through the crack.

The corrdior seemed empty. He opened the door with infinite care and looked out. No one was in sight, and he listened. This chance of escape seemed too lucky, he thought. It *could* mean danger, or be a plan formulated by Millay to secure his disposal . . .

No sound came. He edged through and moved slowly along against the wall until he reached a corner, beyond which was a second door. His scalp prickled as he went through. The next room was empty. A window was open and he waited by it a long time, listening. If Millay *had* planned this, perhaps he was waiting until the fugitive came through the window . . .

Ten minutes passed in complete silence. Abruptly Nick swung himself awkwardly over the sill and dropped to the ground in shadows. No shout came, and no weapon burned through the gloom. He went quickly along the wall, round the building, and into a narrow alley. There, he leaned against the building, to rest and listen. His unease did not pass, and at last he went down the alley and round several corners, often stopping to listen and look back. No steps came in pursuit.

His idle flight must become purposive, he decided. A low humming sounded in the distance, and he followed it until a high building blacked out the stars, then went in shadows to the back, seeking a way in. Ahead, the antennae array stood, a glow surrounding it showing that it radiated power to some point in the heavens. Nick wondered what incalculable distance lay between him and the shining city where he had worked.

The building was not guarded; locked doors seemed superfluous. Nor was any door inside secured against his passage, and he crept from corridor to corridor and room to room, always ready to hide, and often pausing to listen. The night was quiet and he saw no one. As he moved he examined the apparatus around him; his retentive memory noted the details and he strove to deduce what purpose the many units had. The picture was incomplete, but he realised that here were new developments not seen back in the shining city. *Not seen there*, he thought, *because they had been suppressed* ! But inventive man would not be suppressed, and had taken himself elsewhere to continue his endless search for yet further knowledge.

Low voices came from behind a door. He opened it so slowly no watcher would have seen movement, and listened. He might lack strength, now, he thought bitterly, but he still had stealth and wit.

One voice sounded oddly like his own, and Kern Millay stood with his

back towards Nick and near a panel of meters and dials. Wells sat on a mushroom stool, his heavy face in profile against the reflected light.

"It'll be easy with the best men gone," he said.

Millay grunted in assent. "We'll not be over-confident. That could be dangerous. You believe it will work ?"

"So far as I can decide—yes. There must always be an element of doubt until a thing is actually tried. Practical tests back up theory. Apparently when one object equals another absolutely the two no longer remain different. One *is* the other. They co-exist. That is how the transmit apparatus works. Each cavity exists simultaneously in two widely spaced localities. Each is the *same* cavity. So what is in one must obviously be in the other. Hence our apparent instantaneous transit across millennia of light-years of space. Actually, we scarcely move. Short-range projection places the individual into the cavity. The cavity exists both here and there. With a further short-range projection out of the cavity here, the apparent transit is completed."

Millay waved a hand around. "That's how all this apparatus was transported ?"

"Undoubtedly," Wells said, and Nick felt increased respect for the big man's intellect. "They may have mined useful ores since. But undoubtedly the early stages of the scheme consisted in transporting here necessities for setting up and developing this terminal of the transit apparatus. The personnel is following. As a foolproof method of informing those in the know their method of using the public press was nearly foolproof. I have located the interferer apparatus—it's in the next chamber. It induces teletyper signals directly into the cables in the Planogram Syndicate building. It could be used during quiet periods, or even over-ride the local impulses."

He had expected something like that, Nick thought. He was glad to clear away the suspicion that Marsh Wallace was playing his own game, and had lied. Nick wondered what he should do. New and amazing developments had obviously been made in many branches of technology, and Barratt-Maxim, Commander Wyndham, and all those disappeared leaders whom he had felt most honest, wise and reliable, were willing parties to the trick.

"You're sure the transit can arise both ways ?" Millay asked, unease in his voice.

Wells nodded heavily, almost with contempt. "I deduce it must ! There is no real movement. The cavity exists both here and there—is co-existent. Through it, we can return as readily as we came. That the procedure works in one direction proves it can work in both."

He was silent, and Nick saw why Wells had so long held his position as personal bodyguard to Kern Millay. His knowledge was immense—would have indeed seemed more suitable in a thin, wizened scientist. Wells's brains matched his brawn. Neither must be underestimated.

Wells swung himself off the stool. "Plans to enter the building by the Q71 route are completed ?" he asked.

"Yes. It cost a great deal. The heavy machinery is also ready, stored only a few blocks away."

Nick wondered what was planned. Something for the personal benefit of the pair, he supposed. Millay did not spend money on projects to benefit others, insisting always on value for self. *Value for self*, Nick thought, and

a hot rage came and went abruptly. Millay did not care how *others* fared in his deals . . .

They were approaching the door and Nick withdrew, limped down a side-corridor, and slipped into a room near its end. He listened for them to pass, but heard nothing. Abruptly, from nowhere, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Looking for trouble ?" a cool voice asked.

Nick spun on his best leg. Dark eyes under bushy brows looked at him quizzically. A smile played over Wallace's face.

"It comes often enough, without looking—Nick," he said.

Nick felt relief. "You—opened the door ?" he asked.

"No." Wallace apparently did not understand. "I'm simply searching for copy. Personalities are news. News is my business."

His voice was grim and Nick wondered how much Wallace knew or guessed. There would be copy here—but such as Wallace could never use ! Nick felt his elation passing.

"Kern Millay and Wells have known what's happening for a long time, and planned to profit from it," he said slowly. "What the real situation is—as planned by Wyndham and the others—I don't know. It must be something *big* for men of their calibre."

Wallace listened at the door. "I can help you to understand at least a little," he said. "Deduction again. Whatever it *is*, it's bringing all the best men out. Millay may plan to slip back, take advantage of their absence, and prevent their return."

Nick experienced a shock. This tied up with what he had been thinking. "Take advantage . . .?" he repeated.

"To gain personal power." Wallace gestured. "He's smarted under his physical handicap until it's twisted him. He aims to get even with society, and with all those who feared him, because of his power, yet pitied him, for his deformity. He smarted under contempt, hating it. He planned the whole thing simultaneously on several levels—including the T.S."

Nick looked down at his thin limbs, crooked-jointed, and his body, small as a child's. Yes, he thought, Kern Millay's mind would work that way. He had hated everyone who was whole of body with a burning, overwhelming hate. It fitted.

"The twelve leaders of the Civic Council disappeared before I came," Marsh Wallace murmured.

Nick started. The quiet words meant the climax of the plan envisaged by Barratt-Maxim and the others was near. With it would come the time for Millay to act !

"I passed a report on for wholesale distribution," Wallace murmured. "It should have reached the public before I came away, but did not."

Nick thought of the teletyper controlled across all the vastness of space so that its leaders could slip silently from the shining city.

Doors were opening and closing and footfalls echoed suddenly down the corridors. Nick abruptly felt that there was strong danger—they had no knowledge of the hour when the operatives would return to the building, or whether warning systems existed. He saw that Wallace was uneasy too; his face was lined, his eyes mere slits as he listened.

"We're not safe here," he whispered.

Doors round the chamber opened simultaneously. Men stood in each, paralysers in their hands, their faces stern. Nick wished he could fight or run. He hoped Wallace would leave him, not jeopardising his own safety by trying to help. An officer came warily across the floor.

"Don't move. Orders are to take you both, preferably alive."

The tension went out of Marsh Wallace's figure. "It's no use," he said.

Nick knew he had realised that from the beginning. They were trapped, outnumbered, and defenceless.

"Better to be taken—alive," Wallace added.

The men marched them away, others following closely behind, weapons ready.

"Apparently they've orders to take no chances," Wallace breathed. "There will be no escape this time, but guards, warned to extra vigilance . . ."

Inside the council room Barratt-Maxim was flanked by men of severe countenance. Every eye was closely upon them as they entered, and Nick instantly realised that here was every leader from the whole of the shining city—men renowned for their logic, fair judgment, and wisdom. Some he recognised as familiar to every newscast viewer. Marsh Wallace nudged him, his brows high.

"What this lot decides—that will be done !" he whispered.

A lean man with eyes of blue steel silenced him with a look; a whisper passed round, and Wyndham leaned back in his chair.

"We cannot permit individuals to meddle with our plans," he stated. "The latter are too important to ourselves *and to all mankind.* Your presence alone is annoying as you are not upon our list. We cannot tolerate interference."

He dropped silent, brows bent heavily upon them. Nick wondered what it was these important men planned. Marsh Wallace expelled a deep breath and indicated Nick.

"He is not Kern Millay !" he stated. "You've heard of the T.S. procedure ?"

One of the men nodded. "It was rightly outlawed."

"But rumours suggest that Kern Millay spent a great sum on privately developing it," a second added.

"He has—here is the result !" Wallace pointed at Nick, his eyes alight. "The procedure *was used*—Millay is free, *as this man*, Nick Riordan, who himself redeveloped the T.S. technique !"

Silence came, broken for the first time by Barratt-Maxim. "Then he has earned the death penalty by using the process."

Nick felt chilled. "I deny your right to set limits to the fields I explore !" he said thinly. "I intended no unlawful purpose—would not have permitted it to be so used."

The circle conferred. Nick moved uneasily. "Millay and Wells plan to make your Q71 terminal useless," he said at last.

The eyes returned to him and Wyndham leaned forwards. "How ?"

"That I don't know ! They plan to go back and move in machinery which will somehow render the chamber useless, then take the opportunity afforded by your absence."

The whispering recommenced and Nick tried to catch its significance across the ten paces of floor.

"We accept your explanation," Barratt-Maxim stated at last. "You should know several things. We are rebels, believing no limit should be set to man's knowledge. It is not the knowledge itself that comes into error, but the way that knowledge is used. Almost every process can further killing, war, or crime, if perverted. To deny power to mankind is weakness; instead, men must be taught to use that power wisely." He leaned forward, a flush suffusing his face. "We say there should be no end to man's questing for knowledge ! We say a target at infinity is not one too distant for men ! Therefore we have begun again—here ! Those who stay behind in our shining city will follow their old ways, and travel to their known worlds. We seek new and unknown worlds. We set no limits. The universe is illimitable, and so is mankind. We do not wish to stagnate, fearing to search beyond known limits." His voice rang like a gong. "We see no end to man's invention, or to his expansion ! We are adventurous, because sometimes to adventure is to win. We are pioneers, and name ourselves the best of men and truly brave . . .!"

Nick felt the blood flow fast in his veins. These noble men were building for a new humanity never to be confined within prescribed limits of safety !

"One of us invented the instantaneous-transportaion technique," Barratt-Maxim continued. "It was suppressed. The lawmakers thought it would give the adventurous power to go anywhere within the cosmos. It will. So they suppressed it. But we have used it—and shall use it more, until no world remains unexplored and no corner of space unvisited by man. It has brought us here, and will take us to new planets under strange suns. Here is no place for the timorous or the weakling. We wish ill to none; have planned so as to harm none——"

"But those back home *will* be harmed by Millay and Wells !" Nick interjected. "They intend to make use of your disappearance !"

Wyndham nodded. "It is true," he agreed.

A shudder quivered through the ground, shook the room, and grumbled away in a low undercurrent of heavy pulsations. Nick started as a communicator on the desk buzzed. Commander Wyndham leaned towards it.

"Yes. Committee here."

"Something odd has happened, sir !" Excitement trembled in the relayed voice. "We cannot maintain the hyperspatial cavity !"

Barratt-Maxim paled. "*Not maintain the cavity* ?"

"No, sir ! The energy drain has leapt to an enormous level, yet the cavity has failed ! Commander Taylor, scheduled to arrive through it several minutes ago, has not appeared."

Chairs scraped back and Nick found himself and Marsh Wallace among those hastening through the corridors. Outside, his gaze flew to the high antennae, and he halted. Electronic fire played round the radiating elements, now glowing golden and red in the heavens. Burning insulation and scorched metal tainted the night air, and his mind flew over the data he had accumulated, integrating it with sudden clarity. The pieces fitted: he understood, and felt the knowledge filling him with authority. A technician from the conference table brushed past him.

"How was the cavity maintained ?" Nick demanded.

The man hesitated. "By co-ordinating the motions of every molecule in the distant cavity with those in the cavity here. When they became identical the cavities were wholly equal, and co-existed."

Nick knew this fitted. "As I thought. Millay and Wells have moved heavy machinery—lumps of matter so dense enormous power is being dissipated trying to control the orbits of their atoms—into the Q71 cavity ! While they are there we can never maintain the identity of the cavities !"

Their gaze switched to the aerials, surrounded by lightning and continuous thunder. The technician was white in the reflected light. Abruptly he disappeared, running for the great power-house. The static surrounding the aerials vanished.

"They've cut off power," Wallace said thinly.

Nick went slowly towards the building. "Which means any possibility of instantaneous transmission from here has ceased ! We're isolated—can never reach the Q71 cavity while it's occupied by so much heavy equipment, which is what Millay intended. With the city leaders gone, his plan to gain personal power may well succeed !"

Millay's scheme would doubtless be sound in its conception, and flawless. Millay did not make mistakes, Nick thought bitterly. As he limped on, leaning heavily on his stick, he felt he had a personal and very particular quarrel with Millay.

Wyndham was standing silently in the building. "The interspatial cavity cannot be restored," he said helplessly.

The power was again on and indicators stood past maximum. In the insulated room beyond, huge shapes of apparently transparent machinery glowed and shimmered. A perspiring technician knocked off the power.

"We shall damage our equipment ! Identity of the cavities cannot be regained—a dissimilarity too great to overcome has been introduced into the remove cavity."

Silence followed. "You once had a fault in the alignment of the projection beam, when Commander Wyndham was in the cavity," Nick said. "Can you duplicate it ?"

"Perhaps, but——"

"Then do !" Nick snapped. "It won't harm your equipment."

The man shook his head. "No." His gaze went to Barratt-Maxim, who nodded.

"Do as he suggests," he ordered.

Adjustments were made and Nick knew he was playing with death. When he stepped into the chamber he would be in its remote extension—and the first rule of physics could cause his annihilation. The same space could not be simultaneously occupied by two pieces of matter. If he tried to materialise in space already occupied by buildings or machinery—it would be too bad. The pointers slowly reached their operational marks and Marsh Wallace's hand came on his shoulder.

"Don't try, Nick. It's dangerous."

"*Don't*, Nick !"

He turned at the voice. Niora was at the door, one arm outstretched to

halt him. He hesitated, confused.

"*I was one of those chosen, Nick,*" she said. "We were sworn to secrecy. I had to come—for mankind. I hoped you'd be brought in later. I didn't want to come without you——"

Nick looked down at himself—at his fragile, twisted limbs, and his face twitched. "I'm better gone, like *this* !"

"No, Nick !" She clutched his arm. "It's *you*—how you act, your character—that counts."

He drew himself away. "I'm not prepared to stay like this. Better—failure . . ."

He grasped his stick and limped between the silent watchers through the chamber door. Every cell of his body quivered. He went spinning down through immeasurable distances. Suns flamed in sweeping cones of light; receded, and were gone. He felt something must be wrong . . . coming had not been like this . . . then stumbled to his knees, fingers clutching at an insulated floor.

He rose slowly and limped to the door, wondering whether Timberley usually locked it on the *outside.* But it opened at his pressure. He was glad the Q71 track was not far away.

It was a full hour later, and dark, when he heard footsteps along the raised way and knew his waiting had not been in vain. Wells came first, followed by Millay. They were going to assure nothing had arisen to upset their plan, and that the Q71 cavity continued to be useless, Nick guessed. He permitted himself no regret as he felled both, unexpectedly and from cover, with his paralyser. They deserved to be dealt with according to their own code, he thought. He painfully dragged Millay towards the outside footway, now deserted. Timberley was coming up the steps.

"I got your note," he said.

Millay moved as he was strapped into the T.S. chair. Nick clipped him on the jaw, and felt savage triumph. His own last thought before Timberley hesitantly began to manipulate the apparatus was one wondering if identity with the cavity in the sub-zero chamber could be maintained long enough. He hoped so . . .

When he rose from the second chair he rubbed his jaw where the blow still stung. "This is not goodbye, Timberley," he said. "You deserve to come too. You're one of those who set no limit to man's expansion."

They entered the sub-zero cavity together. Hyperspatial stresses shook them; suns waxed and waned. At last, through greyness, they stepped out almost into the arms of Barratt-Maxim and Marsh Wallace. Nick looked back through the door. Like figures of glass, Kern Millay and Wells were materialising. Each held weapons.

"They're quick workers," Nick said. "Cut off the power."

A scream came through the door, seeming to recede through vast distances, and end in abrupt silence. The shapes had gone, and Nick shivered. The void between the stars was vast, and frigid.

THE END

MAN'S QUESTING ENDED

FINISHING TOUCH

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

The psychologists carefully chose the two-man crew for the first trip to Mars. Theoretically they should have worked in perfect harmony—it was surprising the points that were overlooked.

Illustrated by HUNTER

Benson, strapped into his chair at the navigator's desk, looked at the bulkhead clock and then stared, with bloodshot eyes, through the port and waited for the satellite to appear. It floated into sight, as it always did, on the precise half-second—a small body, rotating slowly on its longitudinal axis, of a shape that was at once irregular and symmetrical.

It had once been a man.

For long seconds it hung in the field of Benson's vision, moving with a ghastly parody of life. As it turned so that the light of the distant sun shone on its face Benson could see the darkness around eyes and nose and mouth that was crystallised, frozen blood, could not see, but could imagine, the burst eyeballs and ruptured eardrums. When, at last, it vanished, drifting sternwards, Benson knew that it would return in precisely thirteen minutes, twenty-four point three six seconds. He had found, he remembered, a certain grim amusement in calculating the elements of its orbit. Amusement had long since been replaced by horror.

He thought, as he had thought so many times before, of disturbing the delicate balance of this tiny primary and satellite system by a brief application of the Drive. He considered, and not for the first time, the probable consumption of propellant for the landing on Mars, the eventual take-off and the return to Lunar Base. He knew that the Pile itself could take him clear to Alpha Centauri and back—but that the tanks containing the precious propellant, water, without which the Pile was no more than a generator of useless heat and radiation, contained, unless he were unlucky enough to meet with an unforeseen emergency, barely enough reaction mass for the round voyage.

"Of course," he whispered aloud, "if there's water on Mars . . ."

But he wasn't sure. Even with their instruments mounted on the airless Moon, with perfect seeing conditions, the astronomers couldn't be sure. There was only one way to find out—to go there. He, Benson, would find out—but Hughes, the other member of the two-man crew of *Ad Astra*, the first Mars rocket, would never know.

Or would he ? wondered Benson. Did he, perhaps, know everything now ? Or . . . nothing ?

Rotating slowly on his longitudinal axis Hughes drifted into sight again and Benson, strapped in his padded chair, cursed the dead man.

This was one of the occasions upon which the psychologists had blundered. There were two of them attached to Lunar Base, ever on the watch for any signs of mental instability among the inhabitants of that extra-Terran goldfish bowl. But they had had no time to make a really detailed study of Benson and Hughes, who had been ferried up from Earth just prior to the blasting off of *Ad Astra* on her long, monotonous voyage. And the psychologists of the Interplanetary Commission, back on Earth, had blandly assumed that their colleagues on the Moon would be able to make the necessary decisions. So it was that Benson and Hughes had been put through merely a few routine tests for compatability—both were, in addition to their other qualifications, experienced rocket pilots—given a far more thorough physical checking over, and then sent roaring Marsward with the blessings and good wishes of all concerned.

Eight months is a long time. Eight months of free fall, of weightlessness, of tasteless food, of stale air and of flat, constantly used and reused water. Eight months in a steel coffin, with nothing outside but the hard vacuum of Space and the bright, too bright, unwinking stars. Eight months to remember, and to long for, clouded skies and the beating of rain on windows, food properly cooked and served and without the taint of tin, water sparkling and alive, not flat from the distiller.

However, the psychologist may be excused, perhaps. Both men were chess addicts, both men were fond of what is, probably, the only possible card game for two persons—cribbage. They shared enthusiasm for music, good music, and the ship was well stocked with recordings of the operas and symphonies for which they had both expressed a liking. And there were books and more books, specially printed on light-weight paper and with almost weightless, yet amazingly strong, bindings. The inclusion of a small pinao in the equipment had actually been considered—but at this stage the ghost that haunts all rocketeers, Mass Ratio, had raised its ugly head and it was pointed out by the designers of *Ad Astra* that her primary function was to get two men to Mars and back, that unless a halt were called, and that speedily, the ship would never be anything more than a rather cramped recreation room moored for ever to the surface of the Moon by her own weight.

Both Benson and Hughes would have liked the piano—but agreed that essentially a proportionally greater weight of reaction mass—the water that, having passed through the Pile, would be exhausted as incandescent steam—was of greater importance. They were neither of them prepared to sacrifice recordings or books so that the piano might be carried—neither of them was a sufficiently skilled pianist to make such a renunciation worth while. Which

was, perhaps, rather a pity. As well as being a musical instrument a piano is a fine safety valve for the letting off of emotional steam.

So, with her Pile functioning sweetly, with her stocks of food and water, with her little hydroponics garden that was to be both a source of vitamins and an air-conditioning plant, with her books and games and musical recordings, with her two-man crew that was the biggest "X" in the equation, *Ad Astra* blew a neat, miniature, slightly radio-active crater in the fine pumice dust of the Moon's surface, hung for long seconds, apparently motionless, balanced on the incandescence of her drive, then lifted, faster and faster, to vanish among the stars.

The astronomers kept her in sight for a million miles, the radar experts for another two hundred and fifty thousand or so. Then she was gone, and after the excitement caused by the reception of her first few signals had died out Lunar Base settled down once more to its routine of observation, exploration and the first beginnings of exploitation.

And on the rare occasions that anybody thought about *Ad Astra* and her crew it was with a certain envy.

Yes, they were to be envied. Theirs would not be the achievement of Amundsen or Peary, of Lindbergh, of Ross and Wahlgren, the first men in the Moon. But their names would bulk big in the annals of astronautics —the first men on Mars. Although it is doubtful if this aspect of the matter occurred to them—to be the first, that was enough, and if those who followed cared to make any sort of fuss about it that was only incidental.

There was a sense of dedication, which both of them felt, when they strapped themselves into their deeply padded chairs for the blasting off. Hughes, as pilot, let his thick, hairy fingers rest lightly on the banked controls. Benson, the navigator, looked once out of the ports to the harsh black and white of the Moon's surface, to the low dome of Lunar Base, to the great green and gold globe that was Earth riding low in the black sky over the jagged range to the southward. A half-smile softened the severe angularity of his face as he looked down to his nested chronometer. Hughes, his heavy face impassive, waited for Benson to give the word.

The second hand crawled around the dial.

"Now !" said Benson.

The acceleration forced him deep into his chair, the thunder of the drive, even muffled as it was by the layers of insulation essential with any atomic power unit, deafened him. Dimly, faint as distant church bells pealing during a thunderstorm, he heard the almost musical jangling of some loose bulkhead fitting. He forced up his head against the weight of the acceleration, stared through the ports. The mountainous Lunar horizon had gone and there were only the blackness of Space and the stars.

He looked down once more to his chronometer, waited until seconds and minutes had crawled into the past and then gave Hughes the word to cut the drive. Unsnapping the buckles, he released himself from his chair. The economy and grace of his movements showed that he was no stranger to conditions of free fall. Taking his sextant from its rack he made his observations; his keen mind, slide rule and nimble fingers converted them

into terms of acceleration and azimuth, vector and orbit. Auxiliary jets flared briefly, for a few minutes the two men experienced weight again—but weight of the uneasy, stomach-twisting kind enjoyed by those who patronise the more violent and uncomfortable rides at a Luna Park.

Then, with *Ad Astra* falling free down the long, curved path that would, at the end of eight months, intersect that of the planet Mars. Hughes got up from his chair, went to check the water remaining in the tanks, the meters on his control panel having shown a consumption slightly higher than had been anticipated. Benson busied himself with the first log entries of the voyage. He was still writing when Hughes returned. He felt the other's arm across his back, heard him say, "Well, Bill, we're on our way !"

His flesh flinched from the contact. He said: "You know I don't like Christian names. And—keep your paws to yourself, please."

Hurt, and a little bewildered, Hughes replied: "If that's the way you want it, Benson . . ."

"Yes. That's the way I want it."

Yes, that was the way he wanted it.

Once, during a visit to an Italian cathedral, he had expressed disgust with the paintings displayed on the walls, the pictures in which the artists, obedient to the canons of their school and time, had filled the foreground with an intimate huddle of men, women, children and dogs. He had said then, to his slightly amused and slightly shocked wife—they were on their honeymoon—that he far preferred the clean, empty spaces between the stars. She was to remember this little incident later when he objected, violently, to being mauled in play by their first and only son. When she left him for another, a warmly human man, the severest blow suffered by Benson was to his pride.

He was an idealist in his way, this Benson. And under normal conditions he could maintain his standards of the inviolability of his person easily; avoid, without fuss and bother, the little physical contacts that are taken as a matter of course in any society of gregarious beings. He had, it is true, piloted rockets on the Lunar Ferry service—but there, as captain, he had succeeded in keeping himself very much to himself. Besides—those ships, compared with *Ad Astra*, were like a circus Big Top set alongside a bell tent.

There was, in fact, only one major difference—if one does not consider the materials used for construction—between the Mars ship's living quarters and a bell tent. In a bell tent you can pull the flap aside and go out into the woods and fields and get away, if that is your desire, from the person with whom you are sharing it. But shape and size were similar—although the peak of the tent was cut off from the rest to form the little, instrument-packed control room.

In the living quarters themselves much space was taken up by the personal effects of the two men and by the material provided for their recreation and comfort. Physical contact was unavoidable—their magnetic-soled shoes were a poor substitute for gravity and at times they floundered around like a pair of singularly clumsy goldfish in a tiny bowl. After a lapse of only three days—measured by his chronometer—Benson found himself spending more and more time in the control room, taking entirely unnecessary observations, or down in the storeroom, checking and restacking the already thoroughly

checked stores. And then Hughes, like a huge, clumsy and over-affectionate dog, would join him and insist on helping him.

Benson hated dogs.

Two weeks out, and the strain of the voyage was beginning to tell on Hughes. When the other winced from some accidental contact he would growl: "All right, don't panic, I had a shower a couple of hours ago." Three weeks out he would say nothing, but would snarl wordlessly. Five weeks —and it was obvious to Benson that his companion had worked out for himself his philosophy of living, and that in this philosophy there was no consideration for the rights and feelings of William Benson. Hughes would call him "Bill" or "Will" or even "Willie" as the mood took him, would go out of his way to lay a friendly, infuriating arm across the other's shoulders, would contrive, when they were playing chess or cards together, that their hands should meet and touch unnecessarily. It was a macabre courtship, with nothing sexual about it—unless, perhaps, the streak of sadism that had revealed itself in Hughes's nature be regarded as such.

At last, over one of their savourless, unsatisfying meals, Benson forced himself to speak. He said: "This can't go on, Hughes."

"You should know, Willy," the other replied, deliberately misunderstanding. "You're the navigator. We're bound to hit Mars some time. Or have you made a balls of it and set the orbit for Pluto or Alpha Centauri ?"

"You know what I mean," flared Benson. "You're going out of your way to make this trip a misery to me. Can't you see, man, that this is all far too important to be jeopardised by your crude sense of humour ?"

"Or," sneered Hughes, "by your old-maid prissiness ! God ! If I ever make this run again I'm going to ask for a big fat blonde—and to hell with the mass ratio !—instead of a spinster schoolmarm who's climbed into a pair of trousers by mistake !"

"A *blonde ?*" Benson laughed without humour. "Whatever makes you think that any women would put up with you for this long ? You haven't shaved for all of a week, and you *smell* !"

"So I smell, do I, you little rat ! Isn't that just too bad ? I'll soon fix *that* !"

He released himself from the flimsy chair, floated over the light folding table like some grotesque carnival balloon. His fork and spoon and drinking bottle drifted after him, flotsam bobbing in the wake of leviathan. Benson yelled, in rage and terror, and fumbled with his own belt fastenings. Then the other was on him. He had no weight—but he had mass. Benson's chair splintered under him as he was forced to the deck. He kicked out wildly, and then both men were floating and struggling in mid-air among the wreckage of their meal. Hughes laughed, caught with one of his big hands a gob of the nourishing, vitamin-rich paste that they had been eating, smeared it over Benson's face, began, carefully, to work it up his nostrils.

Benson went mad then. The indignity of it all, the close physical contact, the acrid smell of the other's perspiration, were too much. He had a hazy memory, later, of snatching one of the drifting forks and stabbing with it at the sneering, unshaven face so close, too close, to his own. Hughes let go of him as he snatched the weapon, and then Benson's hands were around Hughes's thick throat. For all his old maidliness he was no weakling. When

the red haze cleared from his brain he found that he was still squeezing the neck of a lifeless body.

Shuddering, he let go. He pushed the body from him, the reaction sending him drifting to one of the walls. His magnetic soles took hold of the metal surface and he stood there, ludicrously at right angles to the longitudinal axis of the ship, looking at the wreckage that he and Hughes had made of the cabin. Coiling and uncoiling, a queer aerial snake, a tape recording drifted around the dead man's head. The videophone, Benson saw, was smashed beyond repair, its screen splintered, its cabinet kicked in. Playing cards and chessmen made a weird, surrealistic snowstorm.

"Heart failure . . ." whispered Benson, rehearsing aloud the entry that he was going to make in his log. Then—"I can do it myself. It will be better. They should never have sent more than one man on this expedition."

Laughing a little wildly he went to the locker where the two spacesuits were stored. He got his own out, struggled into the clumsy garment. He put on the helmet and then, after having made all secure, pulled and snapped on the thick gloves. A carefully controlled leap brought him to the floating body, which he threw from him to the deck. Even through his gloves—asbestos, rubberised fabric and metal mesh—he could feel the flesh of the other, gulped with a spasm of nausea. "Not for much longer . . ." he muttered. He kicked off from the deckhead, landed a foot or so from the body of Hughes. Grimacing with distaste he stood the dead man up so that his shoes anchored him to the deck, then opened the little hatch leading to the airlock. He pulled the body into the small compartment after him, shut the hatch.

His hands clumsy in their gloves, he fumbled with the controls of the door. He must, he knew, open it fast so that the puff of air exploding into emptiness would blow Hughes out and clear, his body to wander forever around the Sun in its own orbit or, possibly, in the fullness of time to flash, a briefly incandescent meteorite, through the atmosphere of some planet—perhaps even Earth herself. Once rid of Hughes, however, Benson would take no more than a purely academic interest in the ultimate fate of his remains.

The controls of the door were stiff, it had not been used since the two men made their inspection of the hull shortly after their departure from Lunar Base. Wrestling with the reluctant wheels and levers, goaded to desperate exasperation by the mule-like stubbornness of simple machinery, Benson forgot about the advantageous positioning of the corpse, about his own safety. When the door at last opened the soft explosion of air tore the magnetic soles of his boots from the deck and only his desperate grip on a handwheel saved him from being blown, literally, into infinity. Something caught him a heavy blow on the back—the body of Hughes. Benson screamed, the wild idea flashing through his mind that the dead man would take him with him. He struggled madly to clear the lifeless body from his own, madly and with much waste effort. He was drenched with sweat as, at last, he stood and watched the corpse drift out and out, spinning slowly, one side brightly illumined by the Sun, the other in deep shadow.

He went back inside the ship. Removing only his gloves and his helmet he got out one of the two emergency bottles of brandy and gulped down a

good third of the contents. He remembered to replace the cork. Then, still in his spacesuit, he drifted into a state that was part drunkenness, part collapse and part sleep.

When, some six hours later, he awoke, unrefreshed, and went to the control room he discovered that the body of Hughes had not been given escape velocity relative to the ship but, following a synergic curve, had become a satellite.

Madman or murderer, call him what you will, Benson had his virtues—and not least among them was a rigid devotion to duty. Another man would have squandered reaction mass to escape from the mute, horrible evidence of his crime, would have told himself that having reduced the mass of the ship by at least two hundred pounds he could afford to use an ounce or so of precious propellant. But not Benson. In his mind the death, and jettison, of his companion increased the chances of the success of the expedition. The use of fuel for his own private ends would militate against success. Even if Hughes—a counterpart of the Ancient Mariner's albatross—were to follow him all the way to Mars he would not use a spoonful of water to rid himself of him. In any case, there were other, more economical ways.

He considered these.

The most simple would be to go outside, to leap from the hull of the ship to make contact with the body of Hughes. He could then throw Hughes from him so that the reaction would drive him, Benson, back to the safety of *Ad Astra.* It would be a risky operation—but to a cool, experienced man little more risky than crossing a normally busy street. It would involve, however, grappling with the corpse—and, even though he would be wearing his spacesuit, Benson's flesh crawled at the thought.

Another way would be to go outside armed with a line and grapnel. Hughes could be hooked, brought in and then thrown out. There was, however, the same drawback as before. He would have to touch Hughes. He would have to *touch* Hughes. *For the last time,* he thought. Then—*but why should I? Why* should *I?* His pencil doodled idly on the scratch pad on the chart table. He thought, *If this goes on, I shall be shooting myself . . . Shoot . . . That's it!"*

For a few minutes he sat at the desk, considering ways and means. Unnoticed, the body of Hughes drifted into view, drifted out of sight. Benson unsnapped the buckles of his belt, made his way clumsily but swiftly from the control room, through the cabin to the storeroom. He found one of the two revolvers that the ship carried—it was barely possible that dangerous life forms might exist on Mars. He broke open a carton of ammunition, loaded all the chambers of the weapon. *But why,* he asked himself, *waste five good rounds? It is conceivable that they might make all the difference between success and failure once I have made my landing . . .* He broke the revolver, unloaded it, reloaded with only one cartridge. He found the coil of one-inch nylon with the grapnel that was standard equipment whenever a party of men was working outside a ship in space. There was, of course, a similar coil of line already fast to his suit—the end of this he would bend to one of the eyebolts on the hull placed there for that purpose. He found a length of light, strong twine.

All this equipment he put into the airlock, then went back into the cabin to put on his spacesuit. He clambered back into the airlock and, this time,

used the valves to exhaust the air from the little compartment before opening the door. Stepping cautiously, careful to maintain the contact of his magnetic soles with the metal skin of the ship, he went outside. He looked around him, awed but not frightened, savouring the cleanness, the emptiness, the loneliness of it all. His trained, navigator's eye picked out the Earth, and Mars, both of them mere stars among the stars. For a time he forgot why he had come outside. It was a brief eclipse of the Sun by *Ad Astra's* macabre satellite that reminded him.

He unhooked the coil of line from his belt, then snapped the catch on the free end fast to a convenient ringbolt. He stood with the other coil, that with the grapnel attached, in his gloved hands, waited for Hughes's orbit to bring him into a convenient position. He threw the grapnel, watched the spidery, whirling arms of it gleaming silvery in the sunlight. The first time he missed, had to wait for the body to come round again. The second time he missed. The third time the grapnel caught in Hughes's clothing, and the tug of the line pulled Benson away and clear from the ship's hull. Holding the one-inch nylon with one hand, he gave his own safety line a tug with the other, drifted back to his little, man-made world. The body of Hughes followed him.

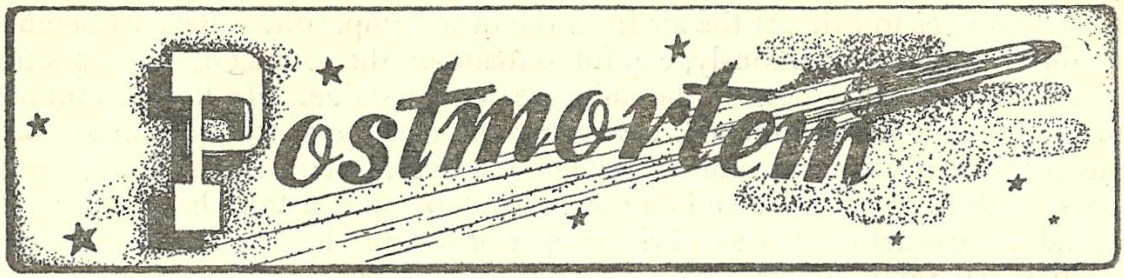
Benson tried not to look at the dead man's face, stood him, held by his magnetic soles to the hull, so that his back was towards him. Avoiding contact with the rigid form as much as possible he pushed the pistol through Hughes's belt, pointing it so that the slug would pass clear of the ship. There was little chance that the soft, leaden projectile would penetrate the shell plating—but it was a possibility.

Using some of the twine, he tried to lash the revolver more securely to the belt but found that this, with his hands clumsy in their thick gloves, was impossible. Besides, all his attempts involved further hateful physical contact with the corpse. He abandoned the idea with a sigh of relief, contrived to throw a clumsy but secure clove hitch around the trigger of the pistol. He stepped back, muttering—"And that's the last time that I have to touch *you* . . . And now," he giggled, "for the finishing touch !"

He threw the end of the twine over the dead man's shoulder and then, walking carefully, made his way around him until he was facing him. He tried not to notice the dark, crystalline blood around mouth and nose and ears, the burst eyeballs. He caught the end of the twine and tugged. Nothing happened. The lead could have been better or, perhaps, the trigger of the revolver might have been caught by a fold of cloth. Impatient to get it all over, reluctant to waste time in examining the cause of the failure, he tugged again, harder. And again.

He did not, of course, hear the explosion of the cartridge. He saw Hughes's body fly off from the hull like a miniature rocket ship. And then, suddenly, horribly, he was drawn after him, was bound to him by the coils of his own safety line that, severed by the single shot—his efforts to fire the revolver had pulled its muzzle away from the carefully arranged setting—had fouled the dead man's foot and, as the body rotated slowly, was drawing the two enemies together for the last time.

By the time that Benson, weeping and gibbering crazily, had cleared himself of the tangle *Ad Astra* was lost among the stars, and he had only one hour's air left. THE END



● Sydney A. Beach, of Aberystwyth, after commenting upon articles in general, states: "One other feature I'm not at all happy about, is the readers' letter section. Letters from readers are, of course, urgently needed by the Editor if he is to shape his future policy, but there their function ends, in my opinion. Once you have read them, in fact, and noted certain salient points such as likes and dislikes, suggestions, etc., they have served their purpose.

"If a report has to be made in the magazine, why not publish the trends of opinion *re* stories, artwork and articles? May I, however, register a strong vote that you do not print the letters themselves? The horrible arch, nauseatingly juvenile, slang-ridden letters [*sic*], that one sees in American stf magazines are sober warnings of the dangers of having such a department as *Post Mortem*, in its present form."

(Post Mortem *doesn't purport to publish letters in their entirety, but only the salient points which will be of general interest to everybody. Broken down into statistics, such as in* The Literary Line-up, *they would not be of much interest to the reader.*—Ed.)

● W. R. Long, of Lisburn, Co. Antrim, says: "Regarding the May *New Worlds*. I am glad to see that you have been able to maintain the quality of recent issues, and indeed improve on them. I think perhaps the most significant thing about your magazine is the standard of maturity which it is now reaching. Your artists, particularly Quinn, are really illustrating the magazine, not merely drawing pictures. All your new writers are developing confidence and polish, which is good to see."

● Eric Bentcliffe, of Stockport, comments: "At the last meeting of the Northwest Science Fiction Club, *New Worlds* was discussed at length and here are a few of the main conclusions. Clothier gets the most praise as an artist. John K. Aiken's trilogy the most popular stories. Ted Tubb was dubbed the best new author you have discovered.

"Main moans were that to subscribe to *New Worlds* costs more than buying it on the bookstalls, and that most of the stories are too short to develop the themes used. Any possibility of fewer but longer stories?"

(*It is an unwritten rule in the publishing trade that subscribers must pay the postal costs on books or magazines ordered direct from publishers. The precedent goes back to World War I days, and cannot lightly be broken.*—Ed.)

● P. W. Cutler, of Portsmouth, taking up the gauntlet flung down in the last issue by Dave Gardner, says: "I have no wish to begin a controversy, but just for the record would like to take acception to Dave Gardner's remarks in connection with the van Vogt story. I cannot

agree that it is unfair to other authors to publish a van Vogt story alongside, shall we say, Tubb or M'Intosh. It is true that in van Vogt we have a master of science-fiction, but perhaps in a few years, one or more of the regular contributors to *New Worlds* will also be hailed as a 'master of science-fiction.'

"After all, Ray Bradbury, who first began writing for *Weird Tales*, had to compete with such established names as Derleth and Seabury Quinn, yet he seems to have made the grade. If it is at all possible, let us have some more material by top-flight American authors. It will have the effect of spurring our own contributors on to better things, although in my opinion E. C. Tubb isn't doing so badly—'Home is the Hero' is, apart from anything else, a fine piece of descriptive story telling."

(*I'm rather inclined to agree with your reasoning, Mr. Cutler—the difficulty, however, is in getting material by top-flight American authors!*—ED.)

● Meanwhile, Dave Gardner comes in with his usual report on behalf of the Liverpool Science Fiction Club, and comments: "The latest cover was good, better than any previous issues of *New Worlds*, and one that would not look out of place on *Astounding* or *Galaxy*. We would like to see more covers by Quinn in the future, but if you have to use Clothier, keep him on the futuristic buildings type and tell him to steer clear of the human form.

"The general rating on the issue as a whole was: a controversial issue, in general better than any previous one, but there were no really outstanding yarns and no really poor ones. Once again Quinn took all the honours for the art work—he is really an excellent artist, but how about a bit of science-fiction in his work for a change? Not that that really matters, as Finlay, the master, does not include many science-fiction concepts in his work."

(*We continually seem to hit the old adage "One man's meat is another's poison."*—ED.)

● H. P. Sanderson, of Manchester, after listing his story preference on the last issue, comments: "Quinn's abstract cover was extremely good. It took me quite a while to realise that the background was the palm of a hand, but once I'd seen it, it was very obvious. Quinn still rates first in the interiors, but for the first time, Hunter, whom I don't really like, is better than Clothier. Please give Bob more scope to see if he can get back to form.

"The article was quite interesting, and your editorial even more so, on account of the news *re* serials. I am glad to see the return of *Post Mortem* and think that three pages are just right, no more, no less. I must object to Dave Gardner's opinions on the covers—Clothier's light covers are superior to the other three mentioned. The best of Clothier's was the Winter 1951 cover. (I must confess, however, that Quinn's present cover beats all others.)"

(*There's a connection between the current cover and that Winter* 1951 *cover if you look hard enough. Both are from F. G. Rayer stories which are connected—hence the illustrated tie-up.*—ED.)

● Just to prove that even the last cover can come under fire, here's L. Sandfield, of London, W.13; "I won't say much about the art work this time, except that the cover disappointed. When I saw the original at the *White Horse Tavern* recently, I was quite impressed, but the

reproduction is rather repellent. That great flayed hand and the terror-stricken figure make a *mélange* quite unpleasant. Don't let's have another like it."

(*Until we can use four-colour covers, the reproductions will always suffer, although the lighter toned paintings come out fairly well. There's a magnificent Quinn painting on hand which will probably reproduce poorly.* —ED.)

● David Wood, of Lancaster, a newcomer to our family circle, says: "Having been an avid reader of *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* for the past two years, I have at last come round to writing you a letter of congratulations. I think, personally, that *New Worlds* ranks in the top three of science-fiction, sharing first place with *Galaxy ! Science Fantasy* I place fourth in my list of favourites, so you can see that, for me, Britain is well up in the s-f field.

"Your covers are invariably excellent, exceptions being Nos. 5, 7, 8 and 14. The best cover to date is undoubtedly the latest Quinn epic. It is the best cover I have met on any s-f mag. in the past two years. Top place to Quinn for interior art —he's terrific ! Britain's best artist, if not the best s-f artist ! Having seen his latest work I think Hunter is coming up in leaps and bounds. Why not give him a chance on the cover ? Your leading author of the moment is E. C. Tubb (I notice he has the record run of six stories in succession for your mags, and all are wonderful)."

(*I don't know what John Campbell of* Astounding *and Horace Gold of* Galaxy *will say to these continual cross references ! Better send them some cigars at Christmas, I suppose. And we'll have to do something about Tubb, he's getting swollen-headed already.*—ED.)

● Kenneth Potter, of Marsh, Lancaster, adds more fuel to some of the controversial fires now under way: "I feel I must congratulate you on No. 15. The lead story 'Performance Test' was undoubtedly worth the build-up—it was superb—yet I cannot conceive why you did not give such a boost to 'Home is the Hero' which I thought slightly better. The other stories were of the high standard I have come to expect of you, but their brilliance was dimmed by the above two. This is undoubtedly your best issue to date.

"If I had not known I would have said that 'Third Party' (in No. 14) was by van Vogt and 'Enchanted Village' by Tubb. Many of van Vogt's yarns are spoiled by over-complication, as was Tubb's, and 'Enchanted Village' was exactly the type of story I expect from Tubb (whom I consider to tie with Eric F. Russell for position of top British author, and with several others for position of second best in the world. He is beaten only by Bradbury).

"You seem to take the view that you are not as good as *Galaxy* or *Astounding*. I think you are as good as, if not better than, the former, and better than the latter—except, of course, when you print stories like 'The Flame Gods'—but please do not start bragging !"

(*You have a point there over 'The Flame Gods.' Look where it landed in* The Literary Line-up ! *Meanwhile, I don't compare* New Worlds *with any of the American magazines because we are not modelled on any of them and we are catering predominantly for a British audience. The cleavage is quite pronounced now, and the gap will go on widening—but, thanks for the compliments.*—ED.)