NEW WORLDS
SCIENCE FICTION

No. 49 2/-

Arthur Sellings

London

Born in 1921 at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, and moved to London where one of his earliest impressions was of seeing both *Metropolis* and *The Girl In The Moon*—two early fantasy films now revered by old-timers. Sometime later another double event caught up with him—finding H. G. Wells' works *and* discovering an early American science fiction magazine with a cover painting by artist Paul.

Having been 'sold' on futuristic literature it was not until after the war that he began writing it—1953 to be exact. Since then his stories have sold with satisfying regularity, mainly in U.S.A. A place in the first eighteen winners in the Sunday *Observer* literary contest last year ultimately led to a collection of his short stories—*Time Transfer*—being published recently by Michael Joseph Ltd.

He has two pet aversions: (i) Critics who complain of a dearth of humour in science fiction and points to some of the best work of Kuttner, Brown, Sheckley, Wyndham, in refutation, and (ii) old-time fans who bewail "a lack of wonder" in to-day's fiction. He thinks the lack of wonder is in the jaded eye of the beholder. "Obviously," he says, "science fiction, like any other genuine literary form, must evolve. It was easier in the old days —easier to find ideas, to stop in the middle of everything for a dissertation on Jupiter's moons. The modern way, starting a story in the middle of a future- or other-world environment and taking it from there is a challenge to the writer. It isn't always easy, but it is fun."

When not at the typewriter he deals in antiquarian books.

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Greatest Short Stories—1955

Last month's editorial was devoted to a summary of some of the major books scheduled for appearance this year. This month I am going to dwell on the yearly aspect of the " best " short-story collections published in U.S.A.—and in particular one which has just been produced in New York.

For the past eight years there have been many fine anthologies of short stories compiled by a small number of expert editors in America —Groff Conklin, Anthony Boucher, Leo Margulies, Judith Merril, J. Francis McComas, and the erstwhile team of Bleiler and Dikty, being among the most prominent—individual collections from leading magazines and representative collections from all sources, but predominantly of American origin. A natural state of affairs suited to the American public's taste. The few stories by British authors were always those which had appeared in American publications. One never saw a British story in such collections—until recently.

Now that science fiction has taken on an international aspect some of our own stories are getting recognition in the highly competitive American market and it augurs well for many of our newer authors, who are not trying to compete on equal terms with the Americans in their own magazines, that their stories *are* being selected.

There are two possible reasons why such British material is suddenly finding a place in anthologies being published on the other side of the Atlantic—the quality of our stories has improved considerably (both in ideas and literary ability) or American anthologists are casting their nets wider to produce a representative ' world ' best as opposed to an ' American ' best. Or both. Certainly the greatly reduced magazine field in U.S.A. must make an anthologist's task more difficult and prompt him to look outside the boundaries of his own country.

Until this year the regular collections compiled by Bleiler and Dikty for Frederick Fell Inc., have held first place in the year's ' best ' choice of short stories, but with decreasing excellence owing to the inroads made upon available material by the many other collections published each year. With the 1955 collection the separate " novels " and " short stories " were amalgamated and may well be an indication that both were suffering from diminishing sales. Missing also is the name of co-editor Everett Bleiler, the complete edition being compiled solely by veteran Ted Dikty.

To challenge Fell's past supremacy and widen the international field comes *The Year's Greatest Science Fiction And Fantasy*, a collection

of eighteen short stories and novelettes edited by Judith Merril and published by Dell Books of New York in a 35 cent edition (there is a hard-cover edition for book collectors published by Gnome Press at $3.50). Planned as a yearly " best " the first edition which was published on May 22nd had an Introduction by Orson Welles. Such a first-class collection as Miss Merril has produced is obviously going to skim the cream from all available material in the future.

But Miss Merril's anthology brings something fresh to the field (apart from a woman's guiding hand for a change). As an established writer as well as an anthologist she has long been respected in the fantasy field for her discerning taste—that she now considers British stories are equally worthy makes me admire her more. The fact that the only British author represented in the final selection for 1955 was E. C. Tubb with his story " The Last Day Of Summer " from No. 12 of our companion magazine *Science Fantasy* is even more pleasing.

In a summation of her work in compiling the volume Miss Merril explains the various sources of material from which she selected the final stories. Apart from the usual American magazines she had this to say : " British magazines—there are four of these now regularly appearing. I liked the bi-monthly *Science Fantasy* the best, but all are surprisingly good, with a much higher *average* quality than is found in the American magazines." Such a statement will undoubtedly surprise most American readers but it will at least show them that there is a considerable amount of British material that is obviously worthwhile bringing to their attention. Not that Miss Merril was the first American anthologist to use original British material—both Groff Conklin and André Norton have presented some of our stories which would be entirely new to their readers.

The Year's Greatest necessitated reading over 1000 short stories of which 100 were left in the final choice and a list of Honourable Mentions is given at the back of the book. Of these 82, Britain claims 7 places—*New Worlds* two with John Christopher's " Manna " in March, and Brian Aldiss's " Our Kind Of Knowledge " in June (while "Artifact " by Chad Oliver in our April issue this year was placed for its U.S. publication last year); and *Science Fantasy* with three : Bertram Chandler's " Late " (No. 13), Martin Jordon's " Sheamus " (No. 14), and E. C. Tubb's " The Predators " (No. 15).

This has been an extremely encouraging start for British material by some of our newer writers and at Nova we are more than pleased that we have had a share in developing some of them to the high standard of a yearly " Best." It will be even more interesting to see the 1956 selection when it is published next year.

John Carnell.

THE UNTOUCHABLES

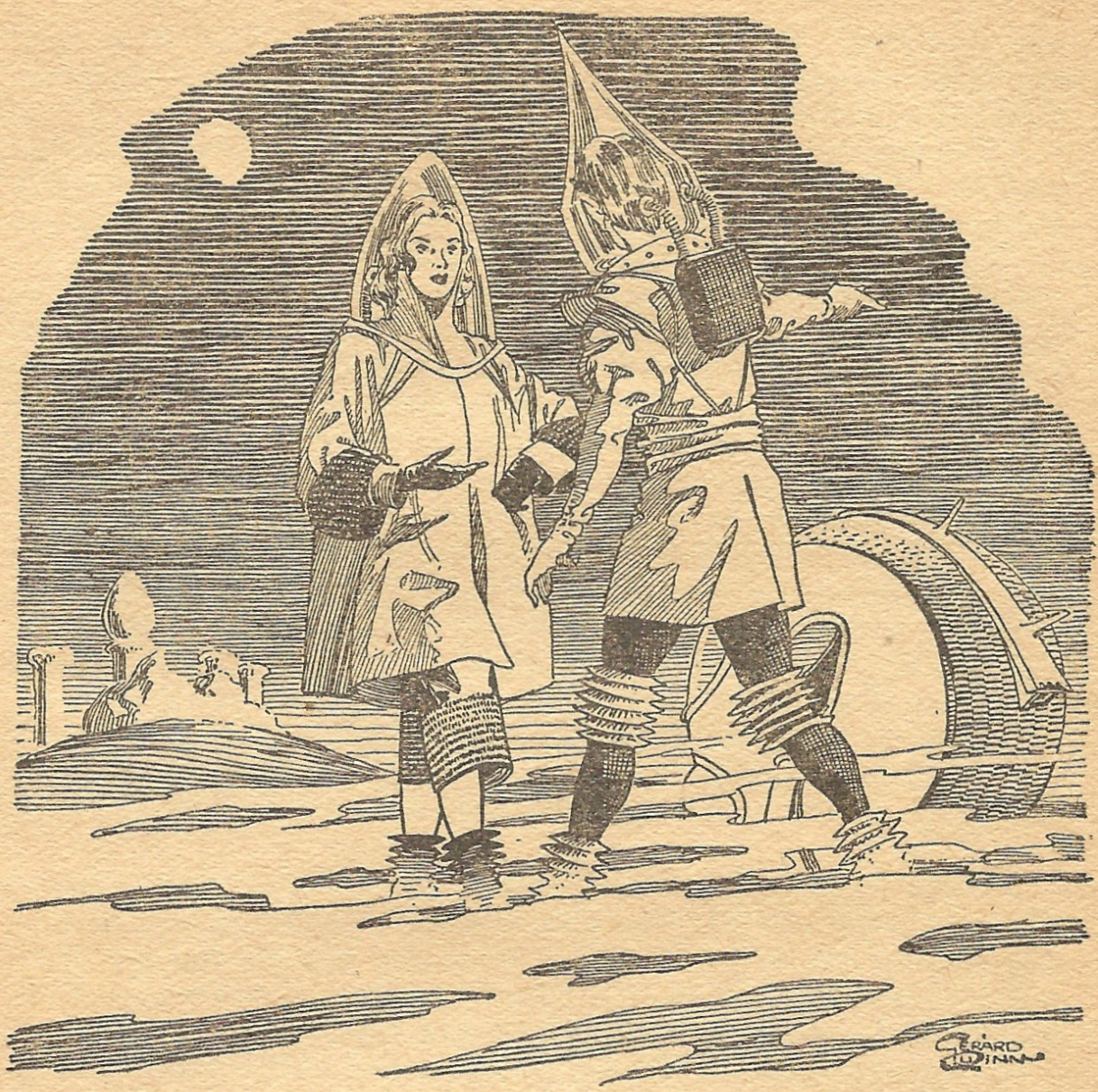
News stories covering ntional disasters usually high-light the human angle almost to the exclusion of everything else. But often there is a story behind the story. In the following story the disaster takes place on Mars — it also introduces the first British-published story of yet another wellknown American writer.

By Leslie Perri

Illustrated by QUINN

I ran a story the other day about the arrival on Earth of a Martian diplomat and his wife. And I okayed a picture of the lady presiding over a tea at the Martian embassy. I looked at the picture for quite a while. The lady in her costume, fresh from the Couture Syndicate in Rio, was a carbon copy of every other woman. What was different about her was no longer very different. It was sad, and it was frightening, too.

It took me back to the days when Deborah and I were pioneering in the gloomy bureau Universal News had set up in Marsport. I remember the biggest story we ever covered; it was the only one we never wrote. And I've been waiting for a time when I could break it because sooner or later you can take the lid off anything. It illustrates a point I try to make when I can.



In the early days we were frequently involved in Martian difficulties. It was partly through genuine concern for their welfare; we liked the Martians without question. But it was also, curiously, motivated by an almost adolescent eagerness to demonstrate efficiency and speed and worth to a people who remained friendly and grateful but aloof and paternally amused by our energies.

This story started as suddenly and simply as most disasters usually strike on Mars, or anywhere. A news flash was relayed in from an interior hill community, Faleeng, to our Marsport office. The news flash to Universal News came almost simultaneously with the official SOS.

Disaster had struck a small community of Martians in the Ul Mountains—a mining region, remote and inaccessible to the Martian

land machines. Power failure threatened the colony of 2,000 with extinction. Intense cold was slowly, inexorably moving in from the cheerless sandstone hills from which Ul had been carved.

It was top news as it stood, but there was an additional detail that made it a real 72-point type headline, a screamer. Ul was the seat of Martian diranium mining operations. And Mars ran on diranium ore and whatever it was that the Martians did with it.

We didn't know anything about diranium then and the Martians kept it that way. We had nothing like it and it drew the con boys like a magnet. But fruitlessly, Ambassador Ferne, a real level guy with the Martians, made sure nothing like diranium ever left in anyone's carpet bag. Our relations with the Martians were smooth, as a result. There was really nothing else we wanted from them.

Except maybe to see what their women looked like, and, oh yes, their children. No ancient system of purdah was ever stricter. They were inflexible on the subject. They had not only instituted elaborate precautions for keeping their women invisible, it was, also, distinctly a breach of good manners to mention them. We had been given a rough idea of the methods the Martians employed in rearing children, but while it excited a lot of psychologist chaps with its novelty, we were still frustrated and speculative about their female relations. Who must have been a pretty attractive and exotic lot, to judge by their men.

But you couldn't, if you were decent, do anything but defer to the Martians in the matter. They were wonderful people, honest, friendly and with no axe to grind. They invariably brought out your best without any seeming effort. They made you examine into your motives, and the darker nooks and crannies of your far-from-perfect-soul.

Consequently, the Ul disaster packed a real wallop for us.

When the Martian authorities got the news from Ul they appealed to Ferne for assistance. The U.F.S. Rocket Auxiliary was the fastest transportation available on Mars, faster than anything the Martians had. The Ambassador ordered the rocket fleet to assist in the immediate evacuation of stricken Ulans to Marsport medical stations.

In addition a team of Martian and Earth Federation technicians boarded the lead ship, *Electra*. Equipment, food and medical supplies were crowded into the remaining ships. And a large fleet of Martian land machines went into action. The land machines were like enormous onyx bowling balls, rolling heavily but smoothly on bands of gripper treads. They would go as far as they could into the hills, and the clumsy, short-hop Martian *wings* would make the rest of the trip to Ul.

Of course the monster maw of public interest on Earth devoured the first news like a cocktail sandwich and clamoured hungrily for more. In those days news from Mars took priority. The New York bureau of Universal News was explicit about wanting full coverage—and pictures.

And this was where Deborah Wayne first came into the picture—unfortunately. Deborah was a nice girl, a bright girl, and brilliant with her super-speed, super-sensitive cameras. But I think, now, that the psychologist who screened her for that career was drunk. She was supposed to be ready to cope with the rigors and exigencies of the frontier. But in the showdown she turned out to be a sentimental slob who all but got us kicked off Mars.

I didn't think about Debby when the news first broke. I might never have thought of her myself, but the New York bureau did. When their orders came in on the Spacetron, the message link between Earth and Marsport, I was alone in our office with Charley Ray of Galactic News. I read him the tape as it came off the machine.

QUOTE PROSTEVELASKER EXWILSON COLON UNPICKLE SELF AND SUBQUOTE TALENT UNSUBQUOTE FOR FULLEST DISASTER COVERAGE WITH PICTURES PERIOD OFFER WAYNE BONUS IF DANGEROUS PERIOD REQUIRE LEAD FOR BLUELINE CASTS AND FULLEST UL BACKGROUNDING END UNQUOTE

"And where do you suppose Debby is?" Charley said. "To think I could have forgotten her!"

"Debby!" I said. "Pictures!" I was thinking that the insatiable human glut for horror and tragedy was a pretty sad and unchanging constant in our Earth civilization.

"They want a real production," I said bitterly. "With a gallon count on the blood running in the streets."

"And you get paid for counting it accurately," Charley said. "We got an hour. Feel noble when we're comfortable. And on our way. With Debby. I won't go without her. Mad about the girl."

"Mad," I agreed. "You'd better call our office and then check with Ferne's office on which crate we get to ride in. While I try to locate that two-legged witch."

Kibby came in. He was relief man and almost always shrouded in an alcoholic fog from which the cleanest, clearest prose emerged. He nodded at us, noticed we were looking less bored than usual and picked up the tape for the answer. He groaned. "You mean I have to *work* this morning? With this head? Background on Ul! The rockpile of Mars."

"Yes," I told him. "SOS came in a couple of hours ago to the communications centre. Galactic and Universal got the flash from the stringer in Faleeng, the nearest point to Ul. Sounds real rough out there. And interesting. This is the closest we've ever come to their diranium. But first I have to find Debby."

As I talked I was looking over a list of stations.

"Ruin my day altogether," Kibby muttered. "Try the *Celestial.* She said she was doing a film on those historic ruins outside of Marsport. The *Celestial's* the only dump you can stay in out there."

I rang up the *Celestial.* She had left hours ago.

"Great," I groaned. "She could be anywhere."

Charley put a cigarette in his mouth. And in between the calls I made to different places on the list he told me the seats reserved for the press, us, were on the *Starfish.* We were going along with some crates of blankets and two mine experts, Sam Vechi and his assistant, Raeburn.

"But no pictures of the mines," Charley said. "Or the mining equipment. This order is backed up with RA zap guns. Dipple, over there, was very emphatic. If he didn't know much about anything else, he knew that. I'm surprised he managed to figure out how we were going to get to Ul."

Kibby was at the water cooler, his head pressed lovingly against the cold metal cylinders. "Why are they letting Vechi go along? He's no humanitarian. His interest on Mars is diranium, and they're giving him a chance to run through it barefoot."

"Pure conjecture," I said, cautiously but not convincingly. I had given up trying to locate Deborah. "It's a mine area and Vechi is an engineer. With all that education he should be some help."

Vechi was a hard guy to figure and pretty much on his own for a member of the small Earth Federation colony. He was more or less attached to the United Federated States Geological Research Expedition. But he was a free-lancer, too, and disappeared from Marsport for months at a time. It gave rise to rumours about his being an agent on the side for some big mine development syndicate on Earth. His comings and goings were mysterious but you couldn't pin a thing on him. Vechi was slippery, smooth and indefinably unpleasant. But smart.

I had just suggested we haul our equipment out of the locker when the door slid open. Deborah, her red hair half over her eyes as usual, came in—a blazing little fireball of energy. She was going full blast. I shrank within myself and wanted to crawl under a desk. If Charley thought this was enchanting and feminine, he could have it.

Although—she had the throatiest, most electrifying voice I had ever heard. It was a muted female foghorn with a lovely liquid cold. It turned my spine to wax even though I got angry the minute she opened her mouth and used it to say, witheringly, " What's the matter ? How many people have to die before you big shots get interested ? You two wouldn't dream of offering to help even if you aren't going after the story !"

" I've been trying to get hold of you," I said coldly.

She just looked her contempt. " I've been at rescue headquarters since 6.00 a.m. You might have tried there. Two thousand people face death, you know."

" And little Deborah has trundled out her armour and is in there pitching like mad," I said.

" You hardboiled newsmen," she said, and she was really upset. " You louses."

" Lice," I said. She had made me feel like a louse. I didn't want it to show, so I got sly and mean. " Don't you think this trip is too dangerous for you ?"

She had calmed down. She didn't look like Joan of Arc any more, just tired and troubled. " No," she said briefly.

" O.K.," I said cheerfully. I was only a little bit sorry to be so mean. " Then there's no bonus involved."

She buttoned a button on her sleek green workalls. " Louse, in the singular. Keep your lousy bonus."

Charley gave me a long disgusted look and left to get his gear.

From the air all of Marsport seemed enclosed in a shimmering transparent syntho-glass bag. And it was, as were all the other Martian cities, enclosed in some virtually indestructable sheeting that rose to heights of 20,000 feet—contracting and expanding in the extreme temperature changes of the planet. These breathing, nearly invisible *skins* sheltered the cities, and within them strange hybrid species of flora and fauna flourished. The Martians had evolved a way of life that was tranquil, visually beautiful and civilized—if artificial, by our standards.

Its very artificiality became, in fact, a new kind of reality. The reality of a dream that persists, or a fantasy which retains its unbelievable qualities but becomes actuality. And in this atmosphere we set up our machines and agencies and extensions of Earth—bursting with the conceits and importance of having conquered space. And oddly, we did not consider it strange that the Martians displayed no interest in returning our visit.

The spaceport lay outside Marsport, however. When we ventured beyond the protection of the city shelter we wore the pixie-like oxygen hoods and adjusted the thermal dials on our workalls. I never got over being surprised that our technicians on Earth could have been so clever at keeping us comfortable. You got used to nearly everything, as a matter of fact, except the psychological sense that freedom existed within the city shelter—and not in the great outdoors. You could get agoraphobia on Mars; it was rough outside.

When we arrived at the spaceport it seemed as though every citizen in the capital city had turned out. The slender Martian men in their colourful, oddly skirted costumes formed the bulk of the crowd. They had need of extra oxygen, too, and the tall, transparent cones within which they breathed glittered like a thousand needles in the early morning air. Martian women were missing from the crowd, as usual, and as usual you had a strangely wistful feeling about these withdrawn people—who were always friendly but never intimate. Who would not trust you any more than you would mischievous children with the treasures of their ancient and beautiful civilization.

We rode past the crowds in our vehicle, with an R.A. sergeant directing us to the *Starfish*.

It can be said for the Rocket Auxiliary that they worked like beavers leading the U.F.S. Rocket Fleet. The array of ships was impressive. The sleek, silver hulls mirrored the pastel, candy colours of a clear Martian morning. They lay quiescent like glittering feathers on the broad, red-earth field. Far in the distance, low, brown hills rolled out to meet the horizon. Small yellow clouds swirled over a section of the hills—a dust storm into which we would be heading presently.

Our sergeant hopped off the vehicle when we reached the *Starfish*. She was a real old dowager, the *Starfish*, with the broadest beam in the fleet : even slower, but more uncomfortable, than a ride on a three-legged Martian *ileh*, the only beast of burden on the planet.

When we had piled out of the vehicle the first thing I noticed was Deborah's gear, all neat and ready to be stowed. Then Sam Vechi, sitting on a fibreboard crate with his legs crossed at precise right angles. His face in the transparent visor was thin, darkly tanned and healthier looking than any of ours. And his workalls fitted as though they had had him in mind when they tailored the original design. When he got up at our approach I was surprised again by his height. You remembered him, somehow, as being a small man, which he wasn't.

The audio cup in my oxygen helmet buzzed a little when he began to talk, so I adjusted it and picked up the tail end of what he was saying: ". . . . terrible, this Ul thing, isn't it ?" I nodded.

Deborah kept fiddling with her audio adjuster, as though she couldn't

hear, so she wouldn't have to acknowledge Vechi's greeting. She wasn't good with people she didn't like and she didn't like Vechi.

Charley, who had a bright word for any slob, offered an apology for our offhandedness. "They have a hate on," he lied blithely. "They turned off audio so they couldn't hear my arguments for a reconciliation."

Deborah, who wouldn't let even a phony opportunity go by, said nastily, "I wouldn't give him two minutes or two words more than my contract calls for."

"And it's a good thing it isn't up for renewal," I said.

Vechi smiled and there was something agreeable about all those white teeth in that brown face.

I guess it made Deborah uncomfortable to have Vechi agreeable. "Excuse me," she said. "I want some shots of the mob scene." She looked at me. "Are you going to wave in a story to Kibby before takeoff? Lots of colour around."

It was a damnfool question. "I do news. You do pictures." I said it patiently.

"I was only thinking of correlating the two, you crab!" she snapped and stamped away.

"Real friendly type," Charley growled at me. "Quit riding her. She knows her job and she does it."

"She knows her job but not her place," I growled back. "She has to run every show."

"Boy, I bet your ancestors beat the spit out of their women when they went out after the vote."

"That was the turning point in history," I said. "We have been paying for it ever since."

Charley grinned. "It ain't such a big price, considering."

He looked around the field. "Well, I'll wave in my story on the takeoff stuff. There's nothing else for the noon leads."

I watched him leave. And then I looked for Debby—and watched her. From a distance she looked mighty nice, it was true. She had a funny way of moving, a little awkwardly like a young animal, but it had its appeal. And so did her red hair, which was short and curly and never in place. She was young all over except for her figure which was as grown up as it had to be. What no one could understand, though, was why the best looking girl in Marsport hadn't been trapped by any one guy as yet. And how anyone that good looking could also be good. So far from home it didn't usually work out that way. The girls did as they pleased and no one blamed them. It was one of the rewards for being a sucker and doing a stint on Mars.

It gradually dawned on me, as I watched her, that she wasn't doing much active picture-taking. Her usual intensity was curiously missing. She seemed to be thinking about something else as she aimed her camera up there on top of the *Starfish*. I made a mental note of this. I had learned that when Deborah appeared abstracted there was usually a damned interesting reason for it.

I fished out my communication gimmick and flicked a button. I got the control tower, or, more accurately, underground shelter, and the latest poop. Then I signalled Kibby and dictated a story to him. While I was talking privately into the 'com, Vechi watched me in a disinterested way. Raeburn, his assistant, arrived and they wandered off among the fibreboard crates for a private conversation.

"Paragraph, Kibby," I said into the mouthpiece. "'The vast rocket terminal at Marsport is soberly alive this morning with preparations for the giant rescue job awaiting the joint forces of the U.F.S. Rocket Auxiliary, and the Martian disaster crew . . .'"

Pundra Doh, the Martian premier, was in the lead ship, *Electra*. But there wasn't time for an interview. Thin, electric-blue spits of exhaust flickered all over the spaceport by the time I had finished dictating. The high, keening sound of the rockets revving up tore through my helmet and I shouted at Deborah who was still up there on top of the *Starfish*. My voice in her helmet must have blasted her eardrums.

"Damn you, Steve," she screamed back at me. Then she clicked another wide-angle shot of the field, sat down suddenly and slid down the polished tail of the *Starfish* on her fanny.

It's a wonder her camera survived the descent.

The *Starfish* shuddered as she lurched along, keeping up with the rest of the fleet. Her vibration was too heavy to be soporific but Deborah slept like a baby on a pile of things scratched together. Or at least she seemed to be asleep. Maybe because I was looking at her she figured it was a good idea to pretend. There was something wrong with her, something I couldn't put my finger on.

Charley took out a cigarette. He looked at me looking at her. "Why resist?" he grinned.

"You've got a one-track mind," I said. "What I'm wondering is what that little witch has up her sleeve. She's behaving like she's done something—it makes me uneasy."

Charley looked real angry. He flicked an ash meticulously. "You haven't got a damned thing to gripe about, have you? So, instead of relaxing, you're *imagining* enormities she could have committed! What a jerk. Why don't you admit it to yourself; she attracts you.

Like she does everyone else. Say something nice about her for a change—you don't impress me."

"She takes good pictures."

Charley laughed, derisively. "I guess you'd like it better if she went space-crazy, like every other dame does here. She ought to drink more, beef more, hell around. Maybe you could stand having her around if you knew she took the guys home with her who would run at the chance.

"You're just waiting for her to make a slip. So, you can write her off. But she won't. You might as well save time and admit what everybody figured a long time ago."

"You through?" I asked.

"Sure."

"I'd still like to know what she's been up to."

I bent forward and started checking my gear. I was so mad my hands shook. I took out a bottle of hooch and examined it while I calmed down; it was vintage stuff, not home brew. I put it away again. I didn't need a drink, really. Deborah! If it wasn't love it was something just as insidious. I could get real boiled up because of her.

Love, now there was a fancy word! I toyed with it for a minute and considered it in relation to Deborah. And all I came up with was a mental picture of her mouth—very soft, with the ingenuous, upward curve of an eager kid. It didn't solve a damned thing. I closed my gear pack and looked at the other passengers.

Vechi and his boy, Raeburn, were checking gear, too. They spent a little time admiring some scientific gadget Raeburn had fished out for Vechi's approval. Vechi pushed a pointer on a small black dial and sighted us through it; very cool. When they got through playing they leaned back comfortable-like and looked at us.

Since we were newsmen the conversation was bound to be a little formal.

Vechi must have known he had a doubtful reputation. I guess he figured we were curious about his berth on the *Starfish*; how come he was riding with the press?

Raeburn was a pudgy, balding civil service sycophant. He had little quick brown eyes, a loose wide mouth filled with an unpleasantly self-conscious smile—and practically no chin to balance the naked shine of his brow. He made bad jokes and thought he was quite the boy.

Since I was never at the head of the class for tact, I started the ball rolling down the centre alley. "What's your interest in this trip, Vechi?" I said.

I heard Charley sigh resignedly.

" I'm a civil engineer," Vechi said. " It seems they need technical people as well as reporters. Technical people to save as much as they can and newsmen to dramatize what hasn't been saved."

Score one, and not for us ! I grinned at him. "Got any ideas for the press on what caused the power failure ?"

Vechi smiled a gentle, patronizing smile. " Apparently, the Martians use diranium as a source of atomic power. But since no one knows the characteristics of diranium it would be difficult to imagine the type of power installation they employ. It seems evident to me, also, that we will know as little about diranium, later, as we do now—with the strong security measures taken to safeguard the secrets of diranium.

" Furthermore, the Martians, have evolved totally different scientific systems based on materials, limitations and planetary conditions which are alien to us. Entirely different engineering skills are required."

" Then what earthly good are our boys going to be ?" I asked.

Vechi stretched his legs. Raeburn listened and said nothing. " We have no way of knowing that Ul station did not sustain a physical catastrophe—in which case a knowledge of construction, how to salvage tunnels, buildings, bridges, heating systems and the like will probably prove useful. We know something of their building techniques from Marsport."

" Well, you certainly appear to be well qualified," I said as courteously as possible. But somewhere a dim instinct warned that this was eye-wash. Why wasn't this joker with the other engineering boys up front ?

" Thank you, Mr. Lasker," he said, equally courteous. End of interview.

I looked at Charley. He looked at me. Then he handed me his bottle. Trust Charley. " Have a slug, pal," he said cheerfully. " Stop working."

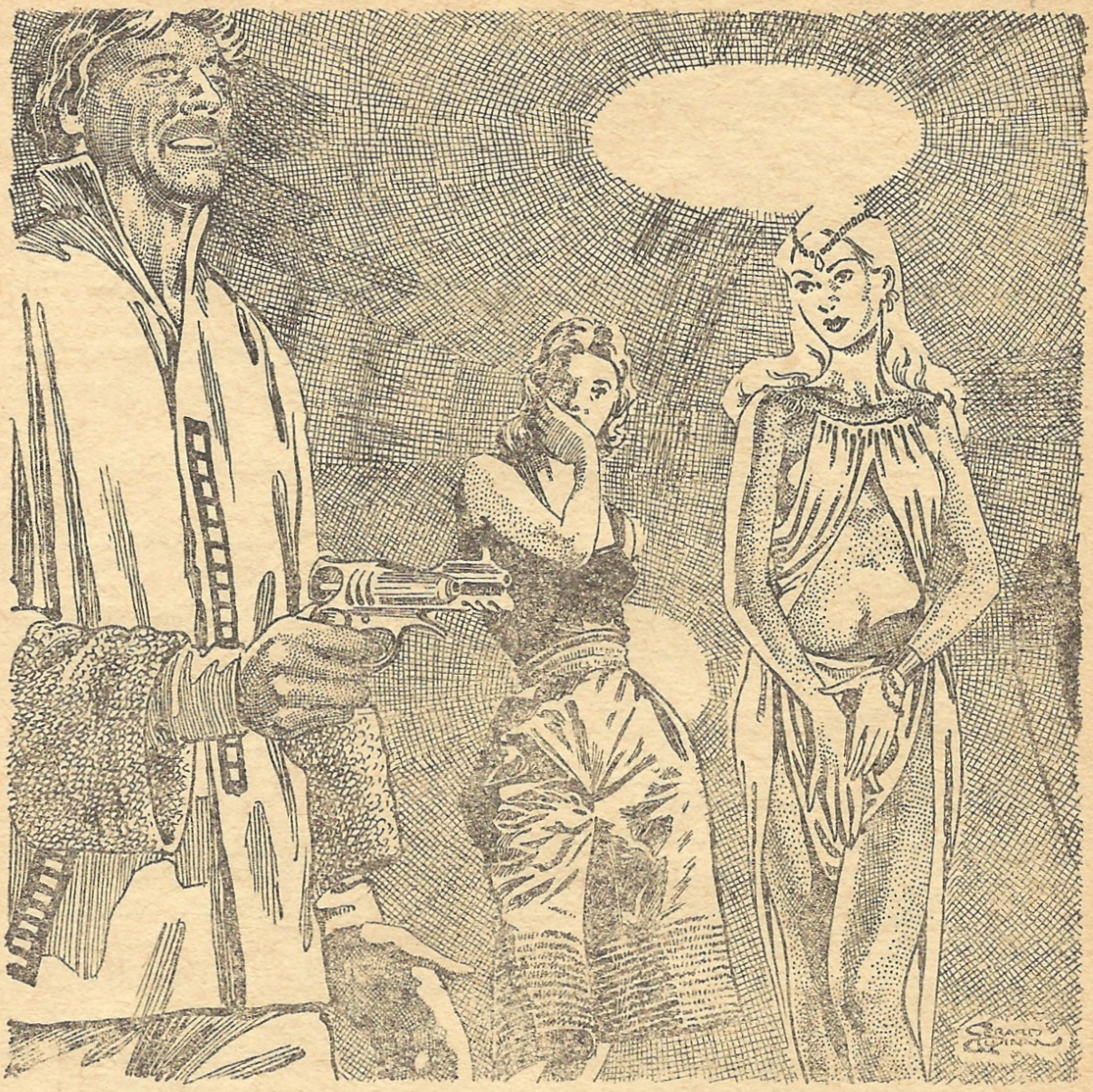
" I will, pal," I said. " Thanks."

It felt good going down and for the first time I realized I had a hangover, from the night before. And the night before that. And then I saw that Deborah's green eyes were wide open and fixed on me.

I took another slug over and above Charley's little pained exclamation. I didn't like the look in those green eyes.

" Hey, Steve," Debby called in that indecent voice of hers. " I want to talk to you."

" You see, my friend," I said to the owner of the bottle, " she wants to talk to me."



"That makes you lucky," Charley said. He was very carefully putting the top back on the bottle.

"So, talk," I said to her.

"No, *you* come over here for a change."

Then I knew something was wrong. In some crazy way Deborah and I operated on the same frequency. I could always sense things about her—and, I knew, she could about me, too. I grunted. I moved reluctantly. But I went over to her and sat down.

Her face was propped up by an elbow and about six inches from mine after she had drawn my head down for a real private tete-a-tete.

"Steve, I've got to talk to you."

She was real, damned pretty that close up. But that wasn't the reason I got the breathless feeling in my stomach. I wondered how much

this was going to cost Universal. I was thinking in terms of money at that point.

"All right," I said. "I couldn't hit you even if I wanted to. What did you do this time?"

"Well. It's not awfully bad and it's not awfully good. It's a delicate situation. And I need your help."

My alarm grew. "Deborah!" I said warningly.

She drew a deep breath through a small, round red mouth. "I smuggled someone on board," she said very quietly.

Well, that was interesting. I patted her cheek; I wanted to wring her neck. "Fascinating," I said lightly. "Let me know how you make out with customs, or whatever."

I made like I was getting up. She grabbed my collar. "Steve!" she whispered, agonized about something.

"Mr. Lasker," I said briskly. "I'm your boss, not your friend. Take your problem to Charley; he's softheaded."

"I'll give Charley an exclusive," she whispered three inches from my face. "I could tie up the spacetron for the next two days with this story.

"This is Pundra Doh's wife!"

I sank back on my haunches and stared at her. "You've stowed a Martian *woman* on this tub?"

She nodded a small nod, once.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and I guess it wasn't gently.

"The holiest of all holy Martian women, the Premier's woman!"

"Yes, Mr. Lasker."

I was speechless and, I will admit, scared. This was real serious business. This no newsman on Mars would wade into without a clearance covered with red seals and blazing with blue ribbons. The Martians were *touchy* about their women, and they meant it.

And our doll, our Deborah had done this all by herself. But why? I asked the burning question even if it was crazy. "You didn't kidnap her, did you? Just for laughs or something?"

"Steve, please!"

She was scared. I loosened a button on my collar. "Okay, dear, give it to me. All of it. You realize this constitutes a breach of faith with the Martians. Not to mention an assault on U.F.S. policy. A lot of people are going to find their heads on the block if this gets out."

"Well, I don't know about that," Deborah said quietly. "I was asked to do this. To arrange this trip for Laapet, in exactly this way. And I gave it a lot of thought before I agreed to do it."

"Laapet? The lady's name?"

She nodded. She backed away a little, down on her elbow again. She had been upsetting that close; even with everything else charging through my brain, I noticed it. Had she ?

" I was at the *Celestial* when the first news from Ul broke," Deborah said. " I was about to go to bed, as a matter of fact, when the Martian innkeep hammered on my door and told me about the disaster. I packed my gear right away and got transportation for rescue headquarters. I figured the biggest picturewise things would be happening there. Besides, I wanted to help if I could.

" I hadn't gone very far from the *Celestial* when my vehicle was stopped by a Martian."

I listened to her story incredulously. It was eerie and unbelievable. There in the merciless cold of the white-lighted night desert Deborah had made the first crossing into the secret, private world of the Martians.

The man who had intercepted her appeared out of the night, without warning. Tall and slender in a cloak of soft furs, his feet in fine leather quilted boots, the tall glittering oxygen cone crested with the phoenix-like emblem of the ruling group—he was regal, and tragic with uncertainty. He had no taste for his mission but he was urgent.

He frightened Deborah with his intensity, but she trusted him. The way you always trusted the Martians. She left her chauffeur to wait for her and went with him in his machine. They drove into the desert for a long while, in silence. He did not tell her what to expect, but it was obviously important and secret. He was without attendants. He did not even have a driver but operated his own vehicle.

" I could not understand why I had been chosen," Deborah said. " But I had the feeling that I was very unimportant, in myself."

They came to the rendezvous spot where one of the larger and better land machines waited—like a black monument rising from the white sand. Inside, Laapet waited. He had taken her to his sister, Pundra Doh's wife.

The compartment was luxurious and dimly lit. Laapet sat behind semi-opaque hangings, shy, frightened and all but invisible. But desperate. Her two children were in Ul and she was beside herself with anxiety for them.

Deborah's face was very soft and saddened. I understood something, suddenly, something I had not come close to before. Laapet was not a stowaway to Deborah, or a diplomatic catastrophe, but a woman distraught with concern for her children. If Deborah had any motivation it was to help this other woman—even if she broke the iron rules of the Martian code. She was, in that instant, an entire woman, herself.

And what could you do about it? Forget you were a good guy, too, someplace in your cynical old fibres? And just berate her for getting you involved in an absolutely untenable situation—one that would presently have the Ambassador, himself, running for a bromo fizz?

"So, she wanted to go to Ul. And you were the only woman going and she trusted you to understand?" I said it as gently as I could. Maybe Deborah understood that I understood for once.

Deborah was thoughtful. "I don't understand all of it," she said slowly. "She was, naturally, not permitted to accompany the Premier. I'm sure she didn't even ask. If you know anything about the way they rear their children, here . . ." she said expectantly, and I nodded because I had read a report or two on the subject.

"Well, it seems she had been ill—not physically, but emotionally, I gather. She was unstable and the children were sent to Ul on a holiday, to escape her tensions. Since they had been sent to Ul because of her, she felt it was her fault they were in danger. And because she knew they would receive no better attention, or be found more quickly, under the Martian code, she decided to go herself to make sure they would survive."

"They will not honour her for it," I said. And I was doubtful that Madame Pundra's stability had returned.

"I am sure they won't," Deborah said bitterly. "But I can understand that her children are worth more to her than her honour. And maybe that's an instinct that's common to all mothers regardless of their origin."

I couldn't argue with her. I didn't say that maybe if Madame Pundra had been well, emotionally, according to Martian standards, she wouldn't have done it. What was the point?

The generators of the *Starfish* hammered through the silence that hung between us. I had never before been touched emotionally, myself, by anything Martian. And here, suddenly, I was a hapless party to a certain tragedy—all the more tragic because it was based on mores I did not understand entirely, or sympathize with.

"Maybe we can help her avoid dishonour?"

Deborah shrugged. "She will, in any event, confess to having petitioned us into helping her. The Martians do not dissemble. That will be enough to condemn her."

I shook myself out of a peculiar gloom. "There may be a way," I said, but I doubted it. "How did you ever get her on board? And where is she? And how did she ever hear about you?"

Deborah looked tired. "The plan was to smuggle her aboard in my portable developing unit; it worked out very smoothly. I don't know how she heard about me. I wish she hadn't."

"That makes two of us," I muttered. "Deborah?"

Her mouth shook a little. "Yes, Steve, I know." Her voice was a register lower and all but inaudible. "I'm glad I can count on you, you louse."

Something pretty incredible was happening to us. In spite of the way she phrased it she was suddenly not out there striding along manfully by herself, any more. Nor had she ever been. To have her suddenly lapse atavistically into a woman instead of a termagant was more than I could handle. I, who had all but resigned myself to the inevitable, eventual appeal of one of the moronic but less assertive ewes of our society! How had Deborah been flushed through the nets and traps and conditioners of our psychologists—to land, thus, a compound personality in my lap?

Here, I thought exultantly, is no glittering compatible equal with every brain impulse carefully measured and every muscle vibrating in harmony with the males on her level. But a thoroughly mixed-up female in the romantic tradition of the last century!

"You damned little fake," I said huskily.

"It took you the longest time to figure me out," Deborah sighed. "I hope you'll treat it as a confidential disclosure or they'll try to cure me and make me *normal*."

"Heaven forbid!" I let her voice crawl up and down my spine with a freedom I'd never allowed before. It made me feel pretty drunk.

I looked at her and her eyes were green and wide. "God, you're beautiful," I said with the unbidden frankness that comes with any kind of drunkenness.

"You make me feel that way," she said.

I touched her hand very briefly. "It'll turn out as good as I can manage."

"I needed you, Steve. I was so afraid you wouldn't be there. I couldn't be alone with this one. She's going to *kill* herself, Steve."

"Aren't any of her people interested in helping her? What about her brother?"

"Another potential suicide, I suppose," Deborah said bitterly. "He's with Pundra Doh in the lead ship. He will ostensibly take over when he reaches Ul."

"Well, heaven bless him."

I didn't have to go back and sit next to Charley, but I did. I had a couple of things to think about and if I'd stayed with Deborah I would have thought about only one of them.

Charley was half asleep. Raeburn seemed to be asleep. Vechi was reading. I leaned back and closed my eyes. And still I thought about only one thing. Deborah. Not thinking, really, feeling. I resented Pundra Doh's wife for crowding in on that feeling. And for the vague presentiment I had about Vechi. And Charley's eternally undisturbed equanimity.

Deborah ! I wished we were anywhere but where we were. With this new thing to explore and understand. I wanted to be near her, alone. But everything had its price; I had been conditioned successfully enough to accept that.

There was Laapet, Madame Pundra. And what if her brother did not materialize when we reached Ul ?

I opened my eyes and watched Charley. He was pouring a shot from his bottle. " Here, pal," he said, " have a medicinal."

I wondered if we would have to tell him about Laapet ? Not yet. " Wait," I told myself reassuringly, " her brother will take the whole thing off your hands." But I wasn't sure. I had the uneasy feeling that something would prevent it.

I glanced at Deborah. She was lying on her back, staring at the dome of the *Starfish*. She didn't look like she was thinking about us, only.

Charley was tuned in on the same vibration band. He gave me the answer. " You know," he said quietly, " I've been thinking about Vechi. I don't like his being on the *Starfish*."

" Go fight the R.A.," I said sarcastically.

" I don't like other things, too," he went on, ignoring me. " Why hasn't one of the pilots come out for a smoke, yet ? Or a drink—or for some bright chatter with us educated chaps ?"

" Things too dull for you, pal ?" I asked routinely. It hadn't penetrated, yet.

Charley had on his patient expression. " Listen, Brain. While you and Debby were having your big conference I went to the men's lounge to gargle my throat. It's a funny thing how cautious the R.A.'s getting; the door to the control room is locked. I tried it gently. If they didn't want to come out and talk to us—I thought I'd go talk to them."

My stomach froze into a hard knot. I looked at Charley and he said, " There's the barest possibility that Vechi is pulling a fast one. Figure that he wants a diranium sample. With a couple of pals driving this bus he could get into and out of Ul slick as anything."

" But we complicate things," I muttered hopefully.

" It's four to two if you don't count Debby for a muscle man. And with the element of surprise on their side, they think—what have they got to worry about ?"

"Vechi wouldn't dare—not with the whole R.A. out there to protect the mines!"

"I dunno," Charley said. "He's real cool."

"Well, well," I said. I was thinking about the additional complication of Madame Pundra. "And if you aren't just off on a pipe night how do we find out for sure? And then what, Charley?"

"I don't know, Master Brain. You think about it. No man of action, I!"

"Why would the control room be locked?" I mused.

"I don't know, Brain."

"Do you suppose Vechi thinks we've caught on?"

"No. He's a Superior Type; to him we're just alcoholic writer chaps."

"I'm glad you're a student of human nature, Charley, old pal. But how do we act effectively without a weapon of some sort?"

"Now, it's real hilarious," Charley said with a broad smile, "but say I had a vision, or planned a stick-up on the First National Bank of Ul. I have a popgun in my gear."

Well. Old Charley. You never could tell.

"Where is it?"

"It has taken the bottle down two inches but I've managed to get it out of the gear-bag and into my workalls."

"A real efficient type, Charley, old pal." I looked about me wondering if we weren't just imagining everything. And if the Ul disaster weren't enough reason for this trip. "How about Deborah?"

"If we had a game of stud king," Charley said, fishing out a token, "and Debby joined us, we could have a lot of conversation between hands."

"Heads," I said clearly.

"Son of a space cook," he said loudly. "You deal."

I glanced at Vechi casually, as though satisfying myself that he didn't want to be disturbed. He was looking at us over his book. He smiled, I thought, in a superior way.

"Want to lose some money?" I called to Deborah.

"I've got some change," she said, sitting up.

And so we commenced to play stud king on a cleared-off space on the floor. Between the laughs we got in a lot of conversation.

We figured we had time. The trip to Ul took four hours and we were only half-way there. If Vechi was up to something it would probably involve a "forced" landing somewhere just outside of Ul, away from the main rocket fleet. After all, what he wanted was in Ul.

If the pilots and Raeburn were in on the deal with him—and they had to be—we were badly outnumbered. Our only chance was not in waiting but in somehow getting control of the *Starfish* while it was still aloft. And of contacting the lead ship for help.

Deborah was scared. And I was glad she was scared. And I was glad she didn't turn up a single, bright idea for our salvation. Except that she would have to tell Madame Pundra about this development.

It was then that we told Charley about our stowaway. It was to his credit that his expression remained unchanged. And indicative of something that his only excitement was at the possibility of finally seeing a Martian woman.

It may have seemed very little to go on, our conviction that Vechi was masterminding a coup. But it's the little things that make you suspicious. The R.A. is made up of casual characters. They like to talk, gripe about no smoking in the control room, come back to sniff out a drink or a game of stud king, maybe an off-colour story. There seems to be a kind of conspiracy to get the rockets to fly themselves while the pilots visit aft—or so it seems to the passengers.

You get to expect informalities from the R.A.; they're usual. And it's the kind of detail a slick, factual guy like Vechi could overlook, or think you might overlook, if he were planning something. The longer the pilots stayed away—the more certain we were.

We were also sure that if Vechi and Raeburn were in the pay of an Earth syndicate to get hold of diranium ore they could have slugged the pilots of the *Starfish*, put in their own crew and trailed along with the rescue fleet. We didn't represent much of a threat; they could dump us anyplace. The *Starfish* was no beauty but she could make the trip back to Earth.

We did not want to think they were planning to do anything more serious than dump us. And Charley and I were determined that Vechi wasn't going to reduce us to a trio of dumb pawns. But I guess we couldn't help what happened, at that. There was another mighty powerful piece in this chess game we hadn't even thought about.

Deborah was hopeful almost to the end that we were just imagining the whole thing. "How can we be sure?" she wanted to know.

Then Charley had the inspiration. He remembered one of the pilots permanently assigned to the *Starfish*, Fats Berenson. The joke was that Fats was too big for the sleek speed-boats up ahead but better suited to this boxcar.

"If Fats were aboard," Charley said, looking over a new hand of stud king, "he would have been out here two hours ago and using every gimmick to stay out here. He's just naturally the laziest slob in the R.A. Besides, I owe him some money from an old bet. Knowing

from the passenger list that I was aboard he would have come up from hell, itself, to collect."

"But we're still not sure," Deborah insisted.

"Tell you what," Charley said quietly, raking in a pot, "I'm going to find out who the pilots are. I'll use the gun on the lock—and keep the boys at the controls orderly after that. Then I'll try to contact the lead ship for help. If the pilots aren't old friends."

"The hero type," I muttered. But I was grateful he had the gun. "Okay, Charley. I'll keep Vechi occupied and Deborah can take off to the ladies' lounge for safety, and to tell Madame Pundra what we plan to do."

"You got it, Bright Boy," Charley grinned. "Debby leaves first and then I stroll out real casual. It doesn't matter if Vechi and Raeburn catch wise once I've contacted the lead ship. They won't dare pull anything because the *Electra* could catch this tub with half its generators conked out."

"It's a comforting thought," I said. And then I looked at Deborah. "Go on," I told her, "get out of here and stay out of sight until I collect you. I've got my mark on you."

It caught Charley off balance. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "Where was I when this happened?"

"Lushing it up," I said. I watched Deborah get up and leave the compartment. Vechi watched her, too. His chest heaved up as though he were sighing wearily; he turned a page in his book and looked at Raeburn. His assistant lay flat on his back. His wide mouth hung open slack, ugly and resonant with a snore. Vechi went back to his book.

Then, with some elaborate stretching, Charley stood up and I watched him leave, too. Vechi watched him go, as well. He glanced at me, pleasantly.

"The bum," I said conversationally, "he took me for ten fish in stud king!"

"That so?" Vechi smiled agreeably. He folded his book. And then he very calmly reached into the pocket of his work-all and took out a gun. He held it very steadily and it was aimed at me.

"You can't win at everything," he said. "Some days aren't lucky." He had a nice sense of the ironic.

Raeburn, beside him, snored peacefully. And I sat there numb and helpless.

"What in the hell is that for?" I asked and my throat was full of gravel.

Vechi smiled as if I should know and I thought I did. But I was never more mistaken.

Then Vechi did a strange thing. He prodded Raeburn with his foot. It took a lot of prodding to wake him. When Raeburn's eyes opened he was looking straight down the blast channels of Vechi's weapon. It was a hell of a way to wake up. His Adam's apple froze half way through a convulsion of shock.

"Get up," Vechi said gently, "and get over there with our friend in the pressbox."

Raeburn was a little slow in comprehending and from the way Vechi urged him with the toe of his boot you could tell nobody loved Raeburn.

It didn't figure. The timing was off. Why the switch on Raeburn? Vechi was going to need help getting what he wanted in Ul. If there was going to be a double-cross, why now? Before Raeburn had been useful? Or was Raeburn in on it at all?

"Now, look, Vechi," I blustered, "this is a pretty dumb joke. What's it all about?"

He smiled. "It's no joke."

Raeburn, who was now sitting beside me, stared at his boss in amazement. "You're crazy," he bleated. "You can't pull this thing off by yourself!"

Vechi ignored him. "I'm afraid, Mr. Lasker, I can't wait any longer. You and your friends might discover certain irregularities about this flight. If you haven't already."

I had nothing to say.

He went on in quiet earnest, "I am about to put into action a plan of great personal importance to me and I must warn you against any opposition. I have no desire to injure you or your colleagues. But there must be no interference."

I listened to Vechi and I watched, fascinated. The man with the gun in his hands was a different personality. The superficial oiliness had washed off clean, revealing, surprisingly, a man I felt I could like. I was less and less sure of his objective. Raeburn was obviously thunderstruck by the turn of events.

Vechi's hard, tanned face was grim. He was a determined man. He got up lightly and his arm reached for a hand-grip on the side of the compartment. The gun covered us. "We are almost at Faleeng," he said to me. "There we part company."

I thought about that; I was agreeable. But I also thought about Charley and how he was making out, if at all. And about Deborah. And last, but not least, about Madame Pandra. Vechi was obviously planning to herd Deborah and Charley into the "press box" as they returned to the compartment.

"Why Faleeng?" I asked. "The diranium is at Ul."

He grinned in genuine amusement. "That is very true," he agreed. "But I am not interested in diranium."

Raeburn made a peculiar sound and Vechi looked at him with contempt. "Raeburn is, however. I'm afraid I'm going to be a great disappointment to him."

I began to feel something of Raeburn's incredulity. If Vechi wasn't going for diranium what in hell was he going for? I opened my mouth to say something like that when the door of the compartment slid back.

I jumped to my feet and would probably have tried something asinine if Vechi hadn't waved me back with his gun. "He's all right," he said.

Charley, our hero, was being carried in on the powerful shoulders of a Martian serf. The Martian, in an ill-fitting R.A. uniform, was one of the semi-slave groups, strong, brutish, and low on the Martian scale of evolution. He put Charley down very gently at Vechi's command.

I envied Charley his blissful oblivion but not the collision he mus have sustained with his ham-handed friend. I tried to spot the emblem on the Martian's wrist band; I could have learned which Martian house he belonged to. But no luck. I don't think I was even greatly surprised to discover we had Martians on board.

"All right, Vechi," I said. "What's your game?" The explanations were a little overdue.

What *were* Martians doing in the control room, Martians who obviously belonged to some powerful family? Why was Vechi hijacking an R.A. ship?

"This will become obvious shortly," Vechi said quietly. "I need the *Starfish* because I am about to make a long journey, a journey which no authority on Mars will permit in the orthodox fashion." He looked tired but oddly relaxed and deeply happy; it was a tantalizing combination.

"You can't get away with it," I said. And I didn't know what he was trying to get away with.

"I think it possible," Vechi looked at Raeburn. Then he looked back at me. I was staring at the Martian. Standing by the door, with folded arms, oblique black eyes and inscrutable features he made the scene more than unreal.

Vechi waited for me to return his glance. He shrugged at Raeburn. "This is the human garbage you can try, and sentence, and imprison. His crime is greed. He wants money. He will sell anything for money. He is a contact man for the Andean Research Society on Earth. And they are curious about diranium. They pay well. When Raeburn is

finished they will send someone else, and someone else. Their persistence is as great as their greed. They have no morality. Eventually, they will succeed, I have no doubt."

"You were in it with me!" Raeburn cried. "It was your plan to go to Ul!"

Vechi paid him no attention. "My crime is something else again," he said softly. "If it is a crime."

Vechi, clinging to the hand grip, was a strangely intense figure in the compartment. I felt that he directed no ill will towards me. That he was even appealing to me in some way.

"Presently, Lasker," he said to me, "you will be able to judge my crime for yourself. It is no easy judgment to make.

"But I have no desire to bare myself before this obscene caricature of man!"

"Rocz!" he said sharply. He inclined his head to Raeburn.

The powerful Martian moved across the compartment. In the pale blue light Raeburn's vast brow glittered with perspiration. His lips twisted back in the ugliness of terror.

It was over as suddenly as his cry. And infinitely less painful. The Martian went back to his position by the door and I discovered that my breathing was normal again; Raeburn was only unconscious.

Vechi slid his gun back in his pocket. What need had he of it? Then he went to the compartment door and slid it open.

I should have known it was coming, but I didn't. I said, later, that I had suspected it, but I hadn't.

She came in. She was gold and violet and seemed to float in a cloud of silk. She was tiny and slender and her oblique dark eyes looked first at Vechi, and then at me. There was in her manner the shyness of deer and the brightness of birds. This, then, was Vechi's treasure. I could blame him for nothing.

I had not noticed Deborah. I was stunned; she was too. She looked like a bewitched child in the presence of a fairy. Who was, of course, Laapet.

The powerful Martian, Rocz, had dropped to one knee at her entrance, shielded his face with one hand, and kept his eyes fixed on us. I marvelled at his restraint and the conditioning which kept him from staring with the rest of us. If I had kicked Charley into sensibility at that point our relations today might be better; he has never really forgiven me.

Laapet touched Deborah very gently—so that she came over to me. I rose to my feet and put my arm around Deborah; she was trembling.

"Oh, Steve," she whispered huskily.

Vechi took his eyes from Laapet and looked at us.

"There is something more valuable on Mars than diranium—to me," he said. "You have guessed, of course, at her identity. And you can understand, now, why we must make a long journey to be with each other."

I realized suddenly that we had been duped. That Laapet had used Deborah and me—and our faith in her honesty. It came as a greater shock than I imagined it would. The bubble had burst and these proud, untouchable people had become suspect and ugly with one lie. The disillusionment made me belligerent.

"She is Pundra Doh's wife," I said to Vechi.

"She is Pundra's concubine," Vechi said gently. "She will be my wife."

"And what of her poor children in Ul?"

"They are Pundra's children. Under the system she is a communal mother. They are with their true mother in Ul."

"She lied," I said obstinately. I had been deceived into sympathy. She had used a powerful and terrible weapon and I remembered the ancient proverb, "God deliver us from the lies of honest men."

But Vechi perceived my disillusionment and all of its meaning. "Yes," he said. "It is necessary for others to lie before they can live by our code."

"You can't blame her duplicity on us," I said.

"Only in so far as we are not acceptable to the people who live in truth. And those who would live with us must break into truth. As she has been forced to do—to protect our secret. It has not been easy for her."

"Steve, Steve, can't you see that it must have been terrible for her?" I looked at Deborah.

"Yes, I suppose it must have been. But—how could you have met?"

"It happened three years ago," Vechi told us. "There was an accident in the desert. Laapet's driver had been killed in an explosion in her machine. I came along quite by chance and I helped her. It was not difficult to fall in love with her."

I watched the man unbelievingly. For three years he, too, had practised deceit. He had deliberately permitted rumour to distort his purpose and character and reputation. And during those three years, his frequent and mysterious trips—were they to see Laapet? I asked him.

"No," he said. "I have been building a place of refuge for us. We could not stay here, and where could we be at ease on Earth?"

"And that is why you are taking the *Starfish*, to make the trip?"

" I am borrowing it," Vechi said. " Rocz and the pilot will return it once we have reached our destination."

Deborah moved within my arm. Her voice was deep with sympathy for them. " They are going to Venus, Steve. Vechi built them a place where they can live in peace. In exile."

So Laapet had confessed everything to Deborah, already. Deborah with her wide, green eyes, her childish faith in the romantic and her woman's voice. My hand ran tightly down the length of her arm and closed over her fingers.

Deborah said to me, " They wanted you to know the truth about them. So that if there are lies about them, someone will tell the truth."

" And what of Pundra Doh ?" I asked Vechi. " Do you think he'll permit this ? And what of the Earth colony ? Have you thought about the repercussions ?"

Laapet spoke directly to me, and for the first time. " There will be no repercussions," she said gently. " Pundra may say many things because he will speak what he feels. But he will not blame you who are blameless, only us. And for him I am dead. He will be grateful to me that I have left his house and his world. It would pain him to punish me because he is kind and good."

Vechi was not inclined to dwell on Pundra's virtues. " Lasker," he said, " as a newsman you can have a field day with this story. As a gentleman," he went on, " you can respect a trust."

" You have my word," I said. " But what's the good of telling me if you don't want the story told ?"

" Some day," he smiled, " it will occur to you that the time has come to tell this story, when people will not be at all interested in its implications. Though they should be."

I did not understand him, then. But I agreed. " And what will you do with us ?"

" Send you down in an ' egg.' The space-raft will hold the four of you. Once we are over Faleeng we'll release it."

" And just how will I explain the disappearance of the *Starfish* ?"

" I don't think there will be any trouble," Vechi smiled. " You can tell them you caught Vechi and Raeburn in a diranium conspiracy, that Vechi pulled a double-cross and got away. It will explain the pilots Raeburn slugged back in Marsport, too. It will do for popular consumption; they expect something like this of me anyway."

" You still don't mind being called a rat ?" I said.

Vechi drew Laapet closer to him. " No," he said.

" But why did you drag Raeburn in on this ?"

" He's my peace offering to the ambassador, and to Pundra. There's a complete file on Raeburn in my office in Marsport. The ambassador and Pundra will arrive at a diplomatic understanding about the rest, I'm sure. It won't get out that I left with Laapet."

A buzzer sounded in the *Starfish.* " That'll be Faleeng," Vechi said.

Rocz carried Raeburn and then Charley into the " egg." They were still unconscious.

Before we got in Deborah impulsively took Laapet's hands in hers.

" I hope you make out, Vechi," I said.

Some of the strain shucked off him. " Thanks, pal," he smiled and while I was shaking hands with him I realized I admired him tremendously. But I did not envy him.

When the door to the " egg " had screwed shut, I turned to Deborah. We were almost alone—Charley and Raeburn were beyond reach. I took her in my arms and I kissed her.

" I've caught it too," I said. " I don't want to live on Venus—but will you set up housekeeping with me someplace less strenuous ?"

" Oh, Steve," she whispered in that husky voice that belonged to me as of then, " what else would I rather do ?"

She took, some more pictures, though when we finally got to Ul, and I used them. But not the story about Vechi and Laapet. Not until now—now that the Martian diplomat has learned double talk, and his wife pours tea and smiles for the news cameras. They aren't untouchable any more.

Which is the point I like to make, whenever I can. Though Vechi is right—nobody is particularly interested. If anything, they're much more comfortable now that the Martians are—different.

More like us.

And it's *our* fault.

Leslie Perri.

PSYCLOPS

Mr. Aldiss still continues to produce ideas in his stories which do not conform to the general theme—and as such they make a distinctly refreshing change. Take the following story, for instance—communications over light-years to a 'being' unaware of its surroundings.

By Brian W. Aldiss

Mmmm. I.

First statement: I am I. I am everything. Everything, everywhere. Every, every, every mmmm.

The universe is constructed of me, I am the whole of it. Am I? What is that regular throbbing that is not of me? That must be me too; after a while I shall understand it. All now is dim. Dim mmmm.

Even I am dim. In all this great strangeness and darkness of me, in all this universe of me, I am shadow. A memory of me. Could I be a memory of . . . not—me? Paradox: if I am everything, could there be a not-me, a somebody else?

Why am I having thoughts? Why am I not, as I was before, just mmmm?

Wake up! *Wake up*! *It's urgent*!

No! Deny it! I am the universe. If you can speak to me you must be me, so I command you to be still. There must be only the soothing, sucking mmmm.

. . . *you are not the universe*! *Listen to me*!

Louder ?

For Heaven's sake, can you hear at last ?

Non-comprehension. I must be everything. Can there be a part of me, like the throbbing, which is . . . separate ?

Am I getting through ? Answer !

Who . . . who are you ?

Thank goodness you're receiving at last. Do not be frightened.

Are you another universe ?

I am not a universe. You are not a universe. You are in danger and I must help you.

I am . . . Danger. No; curl, suck, mmmm ! Only me in all the world. Disbelieve anything not me.

. . . must handle this carefully. Hell, what a task ! Hey, stay awake there.

Mmmm. Must be mmmm . . .

. . . If only there was a psychofoetalist within light years of here . . . Well, keep trying. Hey, wake up ! You must wake up to survive !

Who are you ?

I am your father.

Non-comprehension. Where are you ? Are you the throbbing which is not me ?

No. I am a long way from you. Light years away—oh hell ! How do you start explaining ?

Stop sending to me. You bring me feelings of . . . pain.

Catch hold of that idea of pain, son. Don't be afraid of it, but know there is much pain all about you. I am in constant pain.

Interest.

Good ! First things first: you are most important.

I know that. All this is not happening. Somehow I catch these echoes, these dreams. I am *creating*; really, there is only me, entirely alone.

Try to concentrate. You are only one of millions like you. You and I are of the same species: human beings. I am born, you are unborn.

Meaningless.

Listen ! Your 'universe' is inside another human being. Soon you will emerge into the real universe.

Still meaningless. Curious.

Keep alert. I will send you pictures to help you understand . . .

Uh . . . ? Distance ? Sight ? Colour ? Form ? Definitely do not like this. Frightened. Frightened of falling, insecure . . . Must immediately retreat to safe mmmm. Mmmm.

Poor little blighter. Better let him rest ! I'm half afraid of killing him. After all, he's only six months; at the Pre-natal Academies they

don't begin rousing and education till seven and a half months. And then they're trained to the job. If only I knew—mind my leg, you blue swine!

That picture . . .

Oh, you're still there. Well done! I'm really sorry to rouse you so early, but it's vital.

Praise for me, warm feeling. Good. Nice. Better than being alone in the universe.

That's a great step forward, son. Huh, I can almost realise how the Creator felt, when you say that.

Non-comprehension.

Sorry, my fault: let the thought slip by. Must be careful. You were going to ask me about the picture I sent you. Shall I send again?

Only a little at once. Curious. Very curious. Shape, colour, beauty. Is that the real universe?

That was just Earth I showed you, where I was born, where I hope you will be born.

Non-comprehension. Show again . . . shapes, tones, scents . . . Ah, this time not so strange. Different?

Yes, a different picture. Many pictures of Earth, look.

Ah . . . Better than my darkness . . . I know only my darkness, sweet and warm, yet I seem to remember those—trees.

That's a race memory, son. We're doing well. Your faculties are beginning to work now.

More beautiful pictures please.

We cannot waste too long on the pictures. I've got a lot to tell you before you get out of range. And—hello, what are we stopping for now? These blue devils—

Why do you cease sending so abruptly? Hello . . .? Nothing. Father? . . . Nothing. Was there ever anything, or have I been alone and dreaming?

Nothing in all my universe but the throbbing. Throbbing near me. Is someone here with me? Hello? No, no answer. I must ask the voice, if the voice comes back. Now I must mmmm. Am no longer content, as I was before. Strange feelings . . . I want more pictures; I want . . . to . . . be . . . alive. No, must mmmm.

Mmmm.

Dreaming myself to be a fish, fin-tailed, flickering through deep, still water. All is green and warm and without menace, and I swim forever with assurance . . . And then the water splits into lashing cords and plunges down, down, down a sunlit cliff. I fight to turn back, carried forward, fighting to return to the deep, sure dark—

—if you want to save yourself ! Wake if you want to save yourself ! I can't hold out much longer. Another few days across these damned mountains—

Go away ! Leave me to myself. I can have nothing to do with you.

My dear babe ! You must try and understand. I know it's agony for you, but you must stir yourself and take in what I say. It is imperative.

Nothing is imperative here. Yet it said ' race memories.' And now my mind seems to clear. Yes ! I exist in the darkness of my head where formerly there was nothing. Yes, there are imperatives; that I can recognise. Father ?

What are you trying to say ?

Confused. Understanding better, trying harder, but so confused. And there is always the throbbing by my side.

Do not worry about that. It is your twin sister. The Pollux One hospital diagnosed twins, one boy and one girl.

Always so many concepts I cannot grasp. I should despair, but for curiosity prodding me on. Explain first ' boy ' and ' girl ' and ' twin sister.'

At a time like this ! Well, we humans are divided into two sexes for purposes of continuing the race. These two sexes are called ' boys ' and ' girls,' and for convenience it has been decided that the small continuations —like you—should be carried inside the girls until they are strong enough to exist alone. Sometimes the little continuations are alone, sometimes they come in pairs, sometimes three or even more together.

And I'm one of a pair ?

There you have it. That is a little girl lying next to you; you can hear her heart beating. Your mother—

Stop, stop ! Too much to understand at once. Must think to myself about this. Will call you back.

Don't be long. Every minute takes you further from me . . .

Must keep a hold on myself. My brain reels. Everything so strange ! And my universe shrunken to a womb. Numb, just feel numb. Cannot manage to cope with any more. Numb. Mmmm.

Back into the deep dark, soothed and suckled. Now I am a fish, twinkling smoothly through the uncrumpled water. Everything here calm, but ahead—The brink ! I turn tail and flip back—too late, too late.

Hey, don't panic there. It's only me !

Danger, you said danger.

Keep calm and take it easy. There is something you must do for me—for us all. If you do that, there is no danger.

Tell me quickly.

As yet it is too difficult. In a few days you will be ready—if I can hang out that long.

Why is it difficult ?

Only because you are small.

Where are you ?

I am on a world rather like Earth which is ninety light-years from Earth and getting further from you even as we communicate together.

Why ? How ? Don't understand. So much is now beyond my understanding; before you came everything was peaceful and dim.

Lie quiet and don't fret, son. You're doing well: you take the points quickly, you'll reach Earth yet. You are travelling towards Earth in a spaceship which left Mirone, the planet where I am, sixteen days ago.

Send that picture of a spaceship again.

Coming up . . .

It is a kind of metal womb for us all. That idea I can more or less grasp, but you don't explain distances to me satisfactorily.

These are big distances, what we call light years. I can't picture them for you properly because a human mind never really grasps them.

Then they don't exist.

Unfortunately they exist all right. But they are only comprehensible as mathematical concepts. Ohhh ! My leg . . .

Why are you stopping ? I remember you suddenly stopped before. You send a horrible pain thought then you are gone. Answer.

Wait a minute.

I can hardly hear you. Now I am interested, why do you not continue ? Are you there ?

. . . this is all beyond me. We're all finished. Judy, my love, if only I could reach you . . .

Who are you talking to ? Answer me at once ! This is all so frustrating. You are so faint and your message so blurred.

Call you when I can . . .

Fear and pain. Only symbols from his mind to mine, yet they have an uncomfortable meaning of their own—something elusive. Perhaps another race memory.

My own memory is not good. Un-used. I must train it. Something he said eludes me; I must try and remember it. Yet why should I bother ? None of it really concerns me, I am safe here, safe for ever in this darkness.

That was it ! There is another here with me, a sister. Why does he not send to her ? Perhaps I could send to her; she is nearer to me than he is.

Sister ! Sister ! I am calling you. The throbbing comes from her but she does not answer.

This whole thing is imagination. I am talking to myself. Wait ! Like a distant itch I can feel his projections coming back again. Do not trouble to listen to his riddles.

Curious.

. . . gangrene, without doubt. Shall be dead before these blue devils get me to their village. So much Judy and I planned to do . . .

Are you listening, son ?

No, no.

Listen carefully while I give you some instructions.

Have something to ask you.

Please save it. The connection between us is growing attenuated : soon we will be out of mind range.

Indifferent.

My dear child, how could you be other than indifferent ! I am truly sorry to have broken so early into your foetal sleep.

An unnameable sensation, half-pleasant : gratitude, love ? No doubt a race memory.

It may be so. Try to remember me—later. Now, business. Your mother and I were on our way back to Earth when we stopped on this world Mirone, where I now am. It was an unnecessary luxury to break our journey. How bitterly now I wish we had never stopped.

Why did you ?

Well, it was chiefly to please Judy—your mother. This is a beautiful world, round the North Pole, anyhow. We had wandered some way from the ship when a group of natives burst out upon us.

Natives ?

People who live here. They are sub-human, blue-skinned and hairless —not pretty to look at.

Picture !

I think you'd be better without one. Judy and I ran like mad for the ship. We were nearly up to it when a rock caught me behind the knee— they were pitching rocks at us—and I went down. Judy never noticed until she was in the air lock, and then the savages were on me. My leg was hurt; I couldn't even put up a fight.

Please tell me no more of this. It makes me ill. I want mmmm.

Listen, son, don't cut off ! That's all the frightening part. I called to Judy to make off home, so she and you and your sister got safely away. The savages are taking me over the mountains to their village. I don't think they mean to harm me; I'm just a . . . curiosity to them.

Please let me mmmm.

You can go comatose as soon as I've explained how these little space craft work. Astrogating, the business of getting from one planet to another, is far too intricate a task for anyone but an expert to master. I'm not an

expert, I'm a geohistorian. So the whole thing is done by a robot pilot. You feed it details like payload, end gravities and destination, and it juggles them with the data in its memory banks and works out all the course for you—carries you home safely, in fact. Do you get all that?

This sounds a very complicated procedure.

Now you're talking like your mother, boy. She's never bothered, but actually it's all simple stuff: the complications take place under the steel panelling where you don't worry about them. The point I'm trying to make is that steering is all automatic once you've punched in a few co-ordinates.

I'm dead tired.

So am I. Fortunately, before we left the ship that last time, I had set up the figures for Earth. O.K.?

If you had not, she would not have been able to get home?

Exactly it. You have your father's brains, kid. Keep trying! She left Mirone safely and you are now all heading for Earth—but you'll never make it. When I set the figures up, they were right; but my not being aboard made them wrong. Every split second of thrust the ship makes is calculated for an extra eleven and a half stone that isn't there. It's here with me, being hauled along a mountain.

Is this bad? Except, I mean, for you. Does it mean we reach Earth travelling too fast?

No, son. IT MEANS YOU'LL NEVER REACH EARTH AT ALL. The ship moves in an hyperbole, and although my weight is only about one eight thousandth of total ship's mass, that tiny fraction of error will have multiplied itself into a couple of light years by the time you get adjacent to the solar system.

I'm trying, but this talk of distance means nothing to me. Explain it again.

Where you are there is neither light nor space; how do I make you feel what a light year is? No, you'll just have to take it from me that the crucial point is, you'll shoot right past the Earth.

Can't we go on till we hit another planet?

You will—if nothing is done about it. But landfall will be delayed some odd thousands of years.

You are growing fainter. Strain too much. Must mmmm.

The fish again, and the water deep about him. No peace in the pool now. Cool pool, cruel pool, pool . . . The waters whirl towards the brink.

I am the fish-foetus. Have I dreamed? Was there a voice talking to me? It seems unlikely. And if it spoke, did it speak truth? Something I had to ask it, one gigantic fact which made nonsense of every-

thing; something—Ah, cannot remember. Could refute everything if I could remember that.

Perhaps there was no voice. Perhaps in this darkness I have taken a wrong turning in my development: a wrong choice between sanity and non-sanity. Then my first thoughts may have been correct. I am everything and I am mad !

Help ! Speak to me, speak !

No reply. The throbbing only. *That* was the question—

. . . thank heavens for hot spring water . . .

Hello ! Father ?

How long will they let me lie here in this pool ? They must realise I'm not long for this world, or any other.

I'm awake and answering !

Just let me lie here. Son, it's man's first pleasure and his last to lie and swill in hot water. Wish I could live to know you . . . However. To work. Here's what you have to do to get out of this present jam.

Am powerless here. Unable to do anything.

Don't get frightened. There's something you already do very expertly: telemit.

Non-comprehension.

We talk to each other over this growing distance by what is called telepathy. It's part gift, part skill. It happens to be the only contact between distant planets, except spaceships. But whereas spaceships take time to get anywhere, thought is instantaneous.

Understood.

Good. Unfortunately, whereas spaceships get anywhere in time, thought has a definite limited range. Its span is as strictly governed as —well, as the size of a plant, for instance. When you are fifty light years from Mirone, contact between us will abruptly cease.

What stops thought ?

I don't know, any more than I could tell you what started it to begin with.

Other obvious question: how far apart are we now ?

At the most we have forty-eight hours more in contact.

Don't leave me. I shall be lonely !

I'll be lonely too—but not for long. But you, son, you are already half way to Earth, or as near as I can estimate it you are. As soon as contact between us ceases, you must call TRE.

Which means ?

Telepath Radial Earth. It's a general control and information centre, permanently beamed for any sort of emergency. You can raise them, I can't.

They won't know me.

I'll give you their call pattern. They'll soon know you when you telemit. You can give them my pattern for identification if you like. You must explain what is happening.

Doubtful.

You can explain, can't you ?—About your missing Earth altogether ?

Will they believe ?

Of course.

Are they real ?

Of course.

Hard to believe in more people than just us. I had a question—.

Just a minute, let's get this sorted out. Tell TRE what the trouble is; they'll send out a fast ship to pick Judy and you up before you are out of range.

Yes, now I have it. I want to ask you that question. Voice—

Wait a minute, son . . . You're going faint, or is that me ? . . . Can you smell the gangrene over all those light years ? . . . These blue horrors are lifting me out of the spring, and I'll probably pass out. Not much time . . .

Father, what is this 'time' that seems to mean so much to you ?

. . . time like an ever-rolling stream bears all her sons . . . aaah . . . Time, son, never enough time . . .

Pain. Pain and silence. Revulsion in me. Can universe be as horrible and confusing as he would have me think ? All like a dream.

Mmmm. Long silence and darkness. Voice gone. Strain. Try.

. . . distance . . .

Voice ! Father ! Louder !

. . . too feeble . . . Done all I could . . .

Tell me just one thing, father !

Quickly.

Was it difficult to rouse me at first ?

Yes. In the Pre-Natal Academies feotuses are not roused for training and indoctrination until they are seven and a half months old. But this was an emergency. I had to . . . oh, I'm too weary—

Then why did you rouse me and not communicate with my mother ?

The village ! We're nearly there. Just down into the valley and it's journey's end . . . Human race only developing telepathic powers gradually . . . Steady, you fellows !

The question, answer the question.

That is the answer. Easy down the slope, boys. Don't want to burst this great big leg, eh ? Er . . . I had the ability but Judy hadn't; I couldn't call her a yard away. But you got the ability. Easy, oh ! All the matter in the universe is in my leg . . .

But why—you sound so muddled—why— ?

Good old Mendelian theory . . . You and your sister, one sensitive, one not. Two eyes of the giant and only one can see properly . . . the path's too steep to—whoa, Cyclops, steady, boy, or you'll put out that other eye.

Cannot understand !

Understand ? My leg's a flaming torch—put out anyone's eye. Steady, steady ! Gently down the steep blue hill.

Father !

What's the matter ?

I can't understand. Are you talking of real things ?

Sorry boy. Steady now. Touch of delirium; it's the pain. You'll be O.K. if you get in contact with TRE. Remember ?

Yes, I remember. If only I could . . . I don't know. Mother is *real* then ?

Yes. You must look after her.

And is the giant real ?

The giant ? What giant ? You mean the giant hill. The people are climbing up the giant hill. Up to my giant leg. Goodbye, son. I've got to see a blue man about a . . . a leg . . . a leg . . .

Father !

. . . a leg of blue mutton . . .

Father, where are you going ? Wait, wait, look, see, I can move a little. I've just discovered I can *turn*. Father !

No answer now. Just a tiny stream of silence and the throbbing. And the throbbing. My silent sister. She can't think like I can. I have got to call TRE.

Plenty of time. Perhaps if I *turn* first . . . Easy. I'm only six months, he said. Maybe I could call more easily if I was outside, in the real universe. If I turn again.

Now if I *kick* . . .

Ah, easy now. Kick again. Wonder if my legs are blue.

Kick.

Good. Something yielding.

Kick . . .

Brian W. Aldiss.

If two races of sentient beings shared a planet, one primitive the other highly intelligent, and the latter knew that they were about to die—how could they ensure the primitives eventually discovering and using their technology? With or without the help of a third unknown factor? New author John Day answers the problem very neatly.

BIRTHRIGHT

By John R. Day

The Dome loomed dark against the evening sky as Yan emerged cautiously from the edge of the forest. To-night, as on every other night of the many that he had been here, the wide clearing that surrounded the Dome was empty. Of all the people of the forest, he was the only one who dared to venture near. The Dome itself was silent and featureless, huge, awe-inspiring, and infinitely withdrawn from the forest-world of Yan and his people.

The board which rose by the vast structure, facing the place where Yan stood, was another matter. On its surface shone lights grouped in strange patterns—lights which shone without heat or flame and were like nothing else on the fifth planet of Oman. They were indeed a source of fear to all except Yan, who has once approached the lights and not been burned.

Even he dared not approach too closely. On the one occasion that he had summoned his courage and gone near he had found himself thinking about the design of the lights as they ran in groups across the board. They seemed to follow a pattern, if only he knew what it was. That first row went o . . . oo . . . ooo . . . perhaps the next should be oooo . . . And the cold, impersonal lights had suddenly shone brighter as the pattern in his mind sprang to life on the silent board. It was too much for Yan. He ran for the trees.

Since then he had not crossed the clearing, but, as the artist as well as the thinker of the tribe, he had cleared a space at the edge of the trees and brought coloured sand and clay to make a model of the great board. Every night he left the village and came to look at his work and puzzle over the patterns that could change with thought.

He had realised that there were a number of horizontal patterns on the board with blanks at the end of the rows, even the first row, where the pattern that he had completed no longer glowed above all the others. The artist in Yan dreamed of finishing the other patterns too, but they were of strange shapes that meant nothing to him and had no counterpart on Oman V.

He settled down to watch the unchanging board and ponder its meaning. What were the strange forms that marched across the board to end in nothingness? Squatting by his model in the sand, his eyes on the Dome, he became one with the shadows.

Much later he was roused from his trance by a flicker of moving light at the edge of his eye. All his life the stars had swayed slowly across the sky from dusk to dawn. He accepted them as the little night lamps of the gods that the priests described. But the star he now saw was growing rapidly, hurling out a corona of flame. Afraid, he shrank back into the protection of the thick woods.

The spaceship *Terra*, of the Galactic Survey service, approached Oman V tail first, with the jets braking the rush of the ships through the upper atmosphere. The Captain watched the planet as it grew in the view-plates, and he smiled at the pilot.

"This one's got all the signs of life—human life at that. The lab's just sent up the results of the long-range probe tests."

"Good job something's doing," said the pilot, second in command of the *Terra*. "The other four were the dullest, dreariest planets we've seen on this trip so far. Are we going right down?"

The Captain gazed into the view-plate, not answering for a moment. Then he turned to the pilot. "Yes, we'll go down, but if there *is* human life there we're going to be faced by our biggest problem yet. The other life we've found in this sector of the Galaxy hasn't been anything like human and we've treated it circumspectly and politely. If the life here looks human, we shall be apt to accept it as being something equivalent to ourselves.

"If we do, we may be quite wrong. Their mental and even physical make-up may not be anything like ours. Even if it is, they may be far behind us, or in front of us, on the evolutionary ladder. We've got to be just as circumspect, and see that all the crew is as careful, as on any other planet we've met with on this trip."

The pilot nodded assent as he slowed the ship until she was poised, moving slowly downward, on the hot rush of gas from her stern. The section of the planet on the view-plates was covered in forest from edge to edge. Nowhere was there an open space where the *Terra* could land. True, she could have burned and crushed the foliage out of existence as she went down, but the pilot liked to see the surface he was landing on. From here, the instruments were not sensitive enough to show whether twenty feet of water or slime covered the solid surface which reflected back their probing beams.

He tilted the ship with her perimeter jets and suddenly there swam into view a perfectly circular, flat space, huge in extent. In its centre rose a great, grey dome. Captain and pilot studied it with the view-plate magnifiers. "This changes things," said the Captain. "We knew there were humans here, but this is the only building we've seen. Look at its size—it must be a mile across. No primitive people ever built a place like that."

"Probably built by another race," said the pilot, "perhaps a colony race, like ants. But, if so, why should there be just this one?"

"Might be built by a race from another planet altogether," the Captain surmised. "Might be a re-fuelling station, though there are no signs of ships having landed. Might be anything. We'd better go down and find out."

The *Terra* settled to the ground in the clearing, midway between the grey dome and the edge of the forest. Tests for oxygen in the atmosphere showed that, but for a slightly higher proportion of inert gases, the air was very similar to that of Earth. It was perfectly breathable. The gravity was a little less than on the *Terra's* home planet. Voices roared through the ship, the crew tumbled to defence stations and the locks crashed open.

Leaving the pilot in charge the Captain and a quartermaster ventured out towards the dome. They had no spacesuits, for these were unnecessary, but they carried explosive propulsion tube guns, in case of trouble, in pockets concealed in the sleeves of their uniforms.

"Not a sign of life," the Captain reported back to the pilot over his personal communication set. "The vegetation seems to be a sort of grass, as short and even as if it were mowed regularly. No footprints, no noises, nothing!"

The pair moved onward slowly, watched in the ship's view-plates by the other twenty or so members of the crew. They walked right up to the dome. "Seems to be some very hard material," called the Captain. "Grey like granite, but absolutely smooth and with a sort of half-polished surface, but no reflections."

Suddenly he gave a low whistle. " Hope the recorders are getting this. We can't actually touch the surface of this thing. Every time we try, our instruments stop about half-an-inch from the true surface. It must be protected by some form of inert shield. That means high-order science !"

" Any sign of a door ?" asked the pilot through his set.

" None."

" On the wide-view plate in the control cabin I can see a sort of big board about a quarter of the way round from you," warned the pilot.

" Which way ?"

" To your left as you face the dome."

The Captain explained briefly to the quartermaster, who nodded his comprehension, and they set off together round the edge of the dome. In a few minutes they could see the board, and in ten they were standing before it as it towered above them, its steady lights shining in their enigmatic patterns.

" What keeps those lights going, and what sort are they to last apparently without attention, and with no visible power source ?" asked the Captain, after he had recorded his description of the board. " There's no sign of a door anywhere near, and no sort of track that might lead to a door. Send out the land-truck, Pilot, and we'll drive all round it."

A few minutes later, a hatch opened in *Terra's* side and the land truck was gently lowered by a crane to the ground. One of the crewmen drove it round the dome to the board.

" Have a look at the puzzle pattern, Pilot," remarked the Captain, climbing onto the land truck and swinging the recording camera to face the board.

Crackling with excitement, the pilot's coice came back. " You've just said it, sir. That's just what it is—a puzzle board !"

" What do you mean ?"

" Well, sir, I did some work on twentieth-century intelligence tests in my post-graduate year, and I recognise the basis of this board, if not all the problems. For instance, the first line should have four lights at the end."

The Captain looked up at the board, grasped the pilot's meaning, and saw the four lights in his mind's eye. As they formed in his mind they sprang to life on the board, as once they had done for Yan, still lurking, fascinated through his fright, on the edge of the forest.

There was a whoop from the pilot. " See that, sir ! It responds to thought waves. Let's have a go at the second line."

The quartermaster looked at the Captain. "Seems to me it ought to be a diamond shape with the upper half blocked in," he said. Immediately the symbol sprang into being on the board.

The crew's appetite was whetted. Line after line jumped to completion as one or the other thought of the solution and called it over the intercom. Then, when they were half-way down the board, the solutions that had been found suddenly flicked out.

They were puzzled, particularly as they found they had only to formulate the answers in their minds to bring them back again. Experiment showed that the more solutions they found, the quicker those already worked out vanished from the board.

"There's only one reason for this," the Captain told the pilot. "Whoever fitted this gadget up wanted to allow plenty of time for the first solutions and progressively less for the others, and the solver has to be able to carry the earlier answers in his head. It certainly is an intelligence test, but for what?"

The visual problems became more difficult as they went on, and soon they were rebuilding the board after every new solution, but at last, with the Captain acting as co-ordinator, they got the whole of the board lighted at the same time. At once a section of the dome slid inwards and sideways and the door awaited them.

Beyond the door was a small chamber with grey metallic walls, a cowl-shaped projection coming from above to within five feet of the metal floor, and that was all.

The Captain and the quartermaster looked at the door, and the crew surrounded the view-plates in the ship. There was silence for a few minutes. Then the pilot, irrepressible, spoke up again. "Are you going in, sir?"

The Captain looked round towards the ship. "We don't know what there is inside. Whoever goes in may not come out. I'm not going in, and neither are you, Pilot. Neither are the engineer officers. If anyone likes to volunteer, they have my permission—but only one man! Ask the crew, Pilot."

The Captain and the quartermaster climbed back to the land truck and waited. The voice of the pilot reached them after an interval. "We have a volunteer, sir. Simmonds, Second Officer, Communications Team. He'll be coming out in a moment."

At a sign from the Captain the driver swept the land truck across the open space to the ship, slowing to a halt as Simmonds, a pleasant, gangling young man, appeared in his space-suit at the mouth of the air-lock.

Simmonds transferred the space-helmet, which he was carrying in his right hand, to his left and saluted the Captain. "Pilot thought I should wear the suit, sir. Insulation from whatever may be inside and protection if the air isn't normal."

"Well done," nodded the Captain, and the land truck carried them back to the open door.

At the threshold, Simmonds paused and put his helmet on. He made the usual ultra-short wave radio communications tests and then advanced slowly into the room. The watchers within and without the ship saw him stop and look round the chamber. "Nothing inside that can't be seen from outside," he reported.

"Take a look under that funnel thing," ordered the Captain. Simmonds bent stiffly in his suit and his head vanished under the rim of the metal work. As he stood upright the door in the dome closed quietly. The radio hum ceased as though the set had suddenly been turned off, and the glowing lights on the test board died away. Nor did any efforts on the crew's part do anything to bring them back to life. The pattern could not be recreated, and the door was sealed.

It was four hours, Earth time, in which every form of cutter in the ship had been tried in vain on the protected surface of the door, before the dome opened and Simmonds came slowly out. He no longer wore his space-suit, though it lay in full view on the floor of the chamber behind him.

He shook his head at the Captain's questions. "If you will allow me, sir, I'll tell you about it back in the ship. I feel rather dazed at the moment."

"Very well, Simmonds. Let's get back."

"When I put my head under the cowl affair," said Simmonds, sitting in the control room of the *Terra*, "I could see a sort of golden glow high up the funnel, which seemed to rise a very long way into a mist. I stood upright to get a better view and the glow deepened. Then the mist, with this golden tint, swirled around me and I felt a sense of well-being which I can't describe. Perhaps it was the bait in the trap, for just about then, as you saw, but unknown to me, the outer door must have closed.

"The glow faded, to be replaced by a deep red which ran swiftly through the spectrum up to violet and probably beyond. Then the sounds began—a high, thin squalling sound that dropped slowly until my whole body was shaken by the depth of the slow vibrations. There followed a sense of—I can't really describe it—a tingling in the skull. I know now, but I didn't realise it then, that all my physical and mental reactions were being tested to find out the sort of creature that I was.

It didn't occur to me to try to get away from this investigation. It may be that some sort of inhibition had been planted in my mind, but I stayed under the hood until the tumult died and the golden glow gave place to blackness.

" Then a voice that was not a voice spoke to me, out of the darkness. It seemed to speak in English, but it was flat and hesitant of words. It must have been my subconscious translation of something quite different. It told me that it was amazed at the high standard I had reached without having solved the secret of the door. It seemed surprised beyond reason, but I didn't find out why at once. It went on to tell me something of the history of the planet and the reason for the dome.

" At one time there were two races on Oman V. One was a tall, slim, intelligent race with an advanced culture, and the other a primitive race rather like the bush fishermen of Africa on Earth in the twentieth century. I saw pictures of the slim people and their cities, fantastic cities of spidery beauty. Everything about that race seems to have been slender. The people themselves, the bridges, the buildings, the vehicles . . . and the space-ships." The Captain stirred in his seat. " Yes, sir," smiled Simmonds, " they had space-ships then."

" When was all this ?"

" As far as I could measure, some four hundred thousand years ago. You saw," Simmonds went on, " as we all did, that there are no cities on this planet now—nothing at all except the dome. They were all destroyed, quite deliberately, when the dome was built. The reason is simple. The slim people, as I must call them, developed to a very high state of ability in all directions. As medicine advanced, fewer people died and as the centuries went on it came about that no-one at all died. To prevent overcrowding, the population was deliberately limited, and children were born only to replace those who died by accident. The population became static.

" At this point in time, a space exploration fleet which had left the planet some years before landed back on Oman V. The doors of the ships remained closed, and when they were opened from outside the crews were found to be dead. The ships had all landed on automatics. Examination showed that the crews had died only a short time before, probably as they entered the atmosphere of the planet and prepared for landing.

" It appeared that some disease from outside had been brought back with the ships and had remained dormant until something—possibly the effect of the planet's gravitation, triggered it off again. Then it had wiped out the crews of the ships with appalling speed,

and, once loosed, it proceeded to kill off most of the slim people. It had no effect on the primitives.

"The last of the slim people, only a few hundred by now, living in hastily built, sealed domes, decided that there was nothing else for it but to leave the tainted planet. They felt a responsibility, however, for their primitive brothers, and before they left they built this dome—a sort of library of the mind. They appear to have had no books, but to have relied on a form of mental communication. The idea was that when the primitives became intelligent enough to solve the puzzle outside the dome the secrets of the library would be at their command. Pretty powerful secrets they must be, too.

"When the dome had been completed the slim people went aboard their space-ships and flew low over the planet erasing every sign of their civilisation and, with them, the plague. Then, leaving to posterity the secrets of the dome, they turned their ships to some distant point in space. Where that point may be, they left no clue."

"And then?" asked the Captain.

"At last the influence of the hood died and I was able to take my head out again. The outer door was shut, but an inner door had opened. I took off my suit, which no longer seemed necessary, and went through the door. It led to a corridor. An apparently endless, curving corridor. You know the size of the dome and you will understand that I didn't walk all the way round. I believe, though, that it is a spiral corridor leading into the centre of the dome. Along its walls at regular intervals were machines with hoods. I put my head under the first and got some pictures of the cities and their internal arrangements. They showed signs of going on for hours so I took my head out and sampled some of the other machines further along. They also produced pictures in the mind, but there were gaps, and the further I went in, the more spasmodic and jerky the pictures became. I believe that either our mental make-up is not exactly the same as that of the slim people or else that it is essential to take the helmets in their proper order, because the later information pre-supposes knowledge of the earlier—perhaps both possibilities at once."

Simmonds stopped and looked at the attentive faces round him. The Captain stood up. "You know the dome sealed behind us as we came back to the ship," he said. "The board came back to life as well. That means that we can get in and out whenever we like. The primitive people—if they still exist, for we have seen nothing of them—can't get in. The secrets of the dome are safe therefore until someone else finds the secret or we come back. The first is improbable. We are the first to come here and solve the puzzle in, according to Simmonds, nearly half-a-million years.

" Our job is to get back to Earth as fast as we can and get a proper research team out here. If these primitives get all the secrets of this place before we do . . . well, nothing will hold them. Boatswain ! Sound ' Crew to Take-Off Stations '."

At the edge of the woods, Yan watched the *Terra* fading into the darkness of the night until its jets were indistinguishable among the stars. For the second time in his life he dared to approach the Dome closely. Where the men from the sky had been, he, too, could go.

He stopped as he came to the board, and he smiled. He had been right about the first line. He rebuilt it in his mind and the board flashed into life. Then, swiftly, he sketched in his mind, like the accomplished artist he was, the well-remembered picture of the board as it had been when the Dome had opened. Why these things should be so ordered he had no idea, but he remembered the intricate pattern perfectly. As he finished his mental sketch, the board, which had been following each mental pattern, was shining in full splendour. Beyond it, the door of the Dome opened once more.

With unhurried step, Yan the artist, the unmechanical, the primitive, entered into the inheritance and birthright of his race.

John R. Day.

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Jim McIntosh has the lead novelette next issue and a very fine one it is too. In fact, we are of the opinion that " Empath " is his best story to date, perhaps because it is written in a totally different literary style to anything he has done previously. A far different type of story is " Thing In Common," the concluding adventure in Alan Barclay's ' Jacko ' series and it is here that the previous mysteries concerning the invaders from outer space are cleared up.

Arthur Sellings, Dan Morgan and Francis G. Rayer are all included with short stories, plus the usual features, and artist Terry has another of his planned Martian cover paintings to catch the eye.

Story ratings for No. 46 were :—

1. Who Speaks Of Conquest ? Part I. - - Lan Wright
2. Artifact - - - - - - - - - Chad Oliver
3. Consolidation Area - - - - - - Francis G. Rayer
4. The Clinic - - - - - - - Theodore Sturgeon
5. Wunkle - - - - - - - - - Dan Morgan
6. Sunk - - - - - - - - - Kenneth Bulmer

With the apparently successful culmination of greater and more frightening atomic bomb tests most people seem to have lost sight of the frantic race to perfect guided missiles and their defensive counterparts. The Bomb is no longer of importance—the method of delivering it is

GUIDED MISSILES

By Kenneth Johns

The guided missile race began way back in 1944 when the first V2 rocket smashed down on an unsuspecting London.

For years military and aircraft experts had talked learnedly on the subject of rockets replacing artillery: but the sheer inertia of civil and military governments prevented any democratic country developing the idea. Until Germany, her back to the wall, threw rockets at England in a last desperate attempt at survival or revenge.

The V2 was an inefficient weapon with a short range—two hundred miles *is* short for a rocket—and was shockingly inaccurate. Over half exploded, either on take-off or as they slammed back through the atmosphere, to give a poor overall efficiency figure.

In spite of all this, military experts realised at once that here was the weapon of the future. (Germany seems to have a habit of fighting wars with weapons of the future whilst Britain seems to prefer those of the past). Germany staked all on the gamble that missiles such as V1 and V2 would turn the balance of the war in her favour. These weapons failed solely because they were too late.

Modern nations are not making the same mistake. Fantastic sums are being budgeted for research and production of guided missiles. Britain has spent £150 million on research with only a single small missile going into production. The United States has spent an estimated £2,000 million, much of it investments by private industry in factories for the manufacture of missiles, instruments and fuels. The Glen L. Martin Company alone, builder of the Viking rockets, is spending nearly £2 million on a single factory to be put up near Denver for the production of missiles.

But progress in the first five years, in spite of the use of captured V2s and German rocket personnel, was terribly slow. Rocket motors exploded on test-benches, rockets crashed on take-off and new missiles refused to be controlled. The main problems—of power and control—were befogged by hundreds of side issues. Experts could not even agree among themselves just what performances were required from guided missiles.

Far-seeing tacticians wanted inter-continental missiles with ranges of at least 5,000 miles capable of carrying nuclear weapons. After the Pacific H-bomb tests they revised their demands and called for missiles to carry the new light-weight H-bombs in a curve reaching 800 miles above the Earth.

Other planners thought it better to have supersonic ram-jets, after the style of V1, flying *through* the atmosphere and capable of taking evasive action before they crashed their H-bomb load. Anti-aircraft experts saw the guided missile as ruler of the skies, able to destroy the most modern air fleets. German A.A. rockets had been the most effective answer to Allied mass daylight raids. Aircraft designers, for their part, wanted tiny air-to-air rockets to track and destroy targets automatically, eliminating the need for heavy machine cannon mountings. Both the aircraft and anti-aircraft experts were working in a vacuum—the days of piloted aircraft for operational delivery of heavy bomb loads are over.

The Navy visualised the massive barrages that could blast any opposing fleet out of the water and range far inland to enemy cities. Submarine designers, already habitually thinking in terms of the future with their atomic engines, saw the possibility of firing rockets from the sea bed. And the Army wanted missiles that could be transhipped by aircraft, foolproof enough to be fired from any part of the Earth's surface by unskilled troops.

Everyone saw that a combination of guided missiles and nuclear weapons was the vital link that could lead to practical push-button warfare. But, after twelve years work, the only practical aspect of push-button warfare was the push buttons. They worked—nothing else did.

The trouble was that guided missile design and manufacture called for a completely new technology. A whole new science had to be created. Starting from scratch. Men had to be trained to think and design in terms of reaction motors that were not even on the drawing boards. Fantastically complex, tiny electronic gadgets and controls were needed at a time when even the necessary production methods could not be visualised.

Rocket motor engineers could at first only be trained in theoretical subjects. Soon new laboratories, workshops and testing rigs were built in the out-of-the-way places of the American deserts and mountains. A new type of technician—the missileman—came into being.

New fuels were called for. Fuels such as boron hydrides that had only been synthesized previously in single gramme quantities; fuels that were so viciously corrosive and poisonous that men working near them had to wear plastic protective suits. New metals and their alloys, new ceramics, ceramic and metal combinations—all these and everything else had to be designed specially for the job, to get the 'birds' flying.

And around all this activity a leak-proof security system had to be built up. For this was a race for life—although in a peaceful world it would have been a race towards space. Always in the minds of the missilemen was the fear that the *enemy* would beat them to it: that the *enemy* would run their own H-bomb test in the Pacific, using a 5,000 mile distant base and a missile capable of reaching any part of the globe with its hellish cargo.

Much of this security had unwelcome results. Twenty-five guided missile projects in the U.S.A. were divided up among fifty research groups, resulting in wasteful and frustrating duplication of work. But whilst rocket engines were exploding on test benches for unknown reasons and official red-tape restricted at every turn, the instruments and techniques were designed and developed.

Impossibly small gyros and mechanical components were built in factories pressurised against the outside atmosphere. Even dust-creating pencil-erasers were forbidden. The brand-new techniques of printed circuits and transistorised units were thrust straight from the research laboratory into the world of mass production. The equivalent of four television sets can now be crammed into the space of a four pound jam-jar—that bald statement covers effort and imaginative genius less than adequately.

Radar, infrared detectors and automatic telescopes that track the stars were combined to create navigation systems. Electronic computers were redesigned to become the robot brains behind the muscle of the missiles.

Yet, by 1950, most of the flying missiles were still only experimental models. Then K. T. Keller was put in charge of the missile programme

and emphasis swung over to practicability. Out of the dust of inter-departmental conflict there came the new weapons. They are crude by to-day's standards.

The Nike, named after the Greek goddess of victory, was one of the first. A nitric acid and paraffin liquid fuel A.A. guided missile, it was punched off the ground by a solid fuel booster and guided to its target by radar. The beam-riders, of which Nike is typical, are so-called because they are ground-controlled, and, as most of the equipment is on the ground, are among the simplest types. The Nike control unit is a radar-beam system tied in with an electronic computer —a simple room-full of complex equipment. Nike is a last-ditch defence; but most United States' cities are protected by them and many will soon be shipped to NATO countries including England.

The Swiss Oerlikon A.A. guided missiles are of a similar type but are much smaller with a maximum controlled altitude of nine and a half miles.

Beam-riders are limited in operation to line-of-sight control and can be jammed. The ultimate weapon must be completely reliable—which means that the controls for the controls must be built into it. So far the nearest approach to this ideal is the Falcon air-to-air missile.

Only six inches in diameter and weighing 100 lbs., the Falcon is small enough to fit into the wing of a fighter. When the fighter's radar locks onto a target the missile is altered. Reflected radar pulses set its own radar alive and this in turn locks onto the target. As its eye tracks the victim, Falcon automatically fires itself, follows and crashes into the target, detonating inside it.

It is so accurate that, approaching a jet aircraft from the rear, it will fly up the tailpipe.

Other U.S. A.A. missiles include the Bomarc, a long-distance supersonic ram-jet carrying a large enough warhead to destroy several aircraft in a formation. The Terrier is a small solid-fuel rocket designed to operate from ships—two U.S. missile cruisers are operating with the fleet—but is soon to be replaced by the Talos, a more powerful missile using both rockets and a ram-jet.

At the same time a number of fairly short-range missiles were developed. The Corporal was produced for the Korean war; but is unreliable. With a range of seventy-five miles it is still in use and there are ten self-propelled launchers in Europe. Honest John and its successor Little John are unguided missiles capable of carrying atomic warheads; they are, however, relatively crude weapons.

The Redstone is the largest American guided missile now in production. It can carry one of the latest H-bombs for a range of under 1,500 miles. A direct descendant of the V2, the Redstone was developed by a team of German rocket experts headed by Dr. Von Braun.

Using booster rockets to get it into the air, many have been tested at Cape Canaveral, Florida, from whence the first artificial satellite will be launched next year.

Most of these missiles are being replaced by new models still on the secret list, the Snark, Rascal, Petrel and Sparrow, which is a Navy air-to-air missile with a range of up to eight miles. But the long-term projects were held up by this programme of immediate practicability. The intercontinental missile contract with Convair was cancelled although Convair still continued with some research work on it.

Where stands Britain in this missile race ?

With a multi-million pound guided-missile base at Woomera, Australia, and various other establishments round her coast, Britain has only just begun to manufacture the Fireflash. Similar to the U.S. Falcon, it is a small, solid-fuel air-to-air radar-controlled rocket built by Fairey Aviation.

An experimental ground-to-ground missile with a range of 800 miles and an atomic warhead does exist but is not in production. In fact, Britain is buying target missiles from the French to give missile schools practice at firing—until now they have had to rely on models and lectures. The French have now solved the problem of controlling two missiles with one radar beam. Britain has also bought a considerable number of Corporals from the U.S.

The British Army has a guided missile school at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain and another at Manorbier Camp, Pembroke. The Royal Navy has just opened a guided missile school at Portsmouth on Whale Island —HMS *Excellent*—and the first missile ship, the *Girdle Ness*, 8,580 tons, has been commissioned. This ship has been specifically built to study the sea launching of missiles and can simulate operating conditions.

The Ministry of Supply has its testing ground at Aberporth in Wales, from where over 1000 experimental rockets have been fired. But all released photographs show only models that are obsolete in comparison with American work.

A Nike-like A.A. missile *may* be ready by 1958—and will certainly be out-of-date by then. And, at last, Britain has decided to build an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile. Of course, the motors have yet to be built, the static test area earmarked for the project is an 8,000 acre plot at Spode Adam Waste in Cumberland—and it's still a waste.

The R.A.F. and the Army have a guided missile training range on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides.

And this at a time when the U.S. is extending its main test range from Florida 4,000 miles out to Ascension Island.

There have been, however, vague reports that Britain is developing a chain of defence which is completely automatic in operation and far more ambitious than American projects such as Nike. As Nike is already obsolete, this probably refers to later models. Britain is behind the U.S.S.R. when it comes to missiles just as they are behind the United States.

These are the weapons of to-day. But what of to-morrow?

The name Navaho conceals one of the weirdest and most efficient of to-morrow's weapons. Using rockets only to boost it off the ground and give it cruising speed, it is a slim, winged thing of alien beauty. It could model for the cover painting of the most futuristic magazine and would not look out of place cruising into the Andromeda Galaxy. Powered by air-breathing ram-jet engines, it is an Earthbound instrument of destruction guiding itself by the stars, even during the daytime.

The pet project of North American Aviation Inc., it is intended to fly at 2,000 m.p.h. at an altitude of 50 miles with a range of 5,000 miles. The rocket boosters alone were a headache—they were so big they had to be designed and tested by North American in a special test area in the mountains northwest of Los Angeles. Able to carry the largest of the alphabet weapons, Navaho will be able to destroy not a city but a province.

The Navaho is matched only by the Atlas, the pure rocket missile widely advertised as the 'ultimate weapon.' Not likely to be in production before 1962, the Atlas—also known as the ICBM, the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile—will probably weigh about 100 tons at take-off. It will reach a top speed of 16,000 m.p.h. after twelve minutes burning time and attain a height of 800 miles above the Earth.

North American Aviation is designing and building the 120,000 lbs. thrust rocket engines whilst Convair is in charge of the whole contract. The Atlas nose and warhead will separate from the main rockets well out in space. It will use inertial guidance—where an extremely accurate instrument measures all the changes of speed and direction of a rocket and integrates them to give absolute figures of position and future path and necessary corrections. It must be positioned, using jets and gyroscopes, so it does not re-enter the atmosphere broadside on.

And that is the main problem still to be solved. The Atlas will arc down from its maximum height of 800 miles to plunge into the atmosphere between 70 and 80 miles above sea level, the region where most meteors are destroyed. Its own speed of 16,000 m.p.h. will be enough to vapourise its skin in a deceleration jolt of twenty gravities.

You can't use grazing ellipses with guided missiles.

Two alternatives for preventing re-entry destruction exist. Either rocket deceleration must be used to slow the missile to safe limits, or the design of the skin must be such that it can withstand enormous temperature and shocks for a short period.

The latter method is considered to be the most promising of the two. Possibly provision will be made for a whole false skin to be sloughed, white hot, as the missile drives through the atmosphere. Radically new designs for the nose section will be tested. One is being built by Corvair and another by Glen Martin.

Whether the existence of such super-weapons will continue the present stalemate, or whether the apparent good-will intentions of world statesmen is an indication that they now realise the impossibility of winning a large-scale war and are prepared to seek a lasting peace by arbitration, remains to be seen. But the knowledge of the existence of such weapons can be a danger in itself, for radar can tell very little difference between a largish meteor and a guided missile.

Under conditions of intense world tension it would only need one spark of vapourising metal high in the sky—whether it be of terrestrial or extra-terrestrial origin—to set the missiles of the world flying.

Kenneth Johns.

5th Australian S-F Convention

This year's major Australian Convention will be held at Melbourne on December 8th and 9th at the Richmond Town Hall and coincides with the Olympic Games in that country. A wide variety of interesting items have been planned for visitors to the two-day gathering and Australians wishing to obtain further information should write to the Convention Secretary, R. J. McCubbin, Esq., 90 Lilydale Grove, Hawthorn East, Victoria.

Europeans who wish to take out Convention membership and obtain reports and a souvenir programme should send 7/6 to Mr. McCubbin—residents in North America should send $1.00.

THE MASTERS

Most of Britain's leading science fiction writers have appeared in the pages of New Worlds *at various times, but Arthur Sellings is one writer we have long missed—most of his steady quota of material has always been sold in USA. It is with great pleasure therefore that we present a new story by him this month.*

By Arthur Sellings

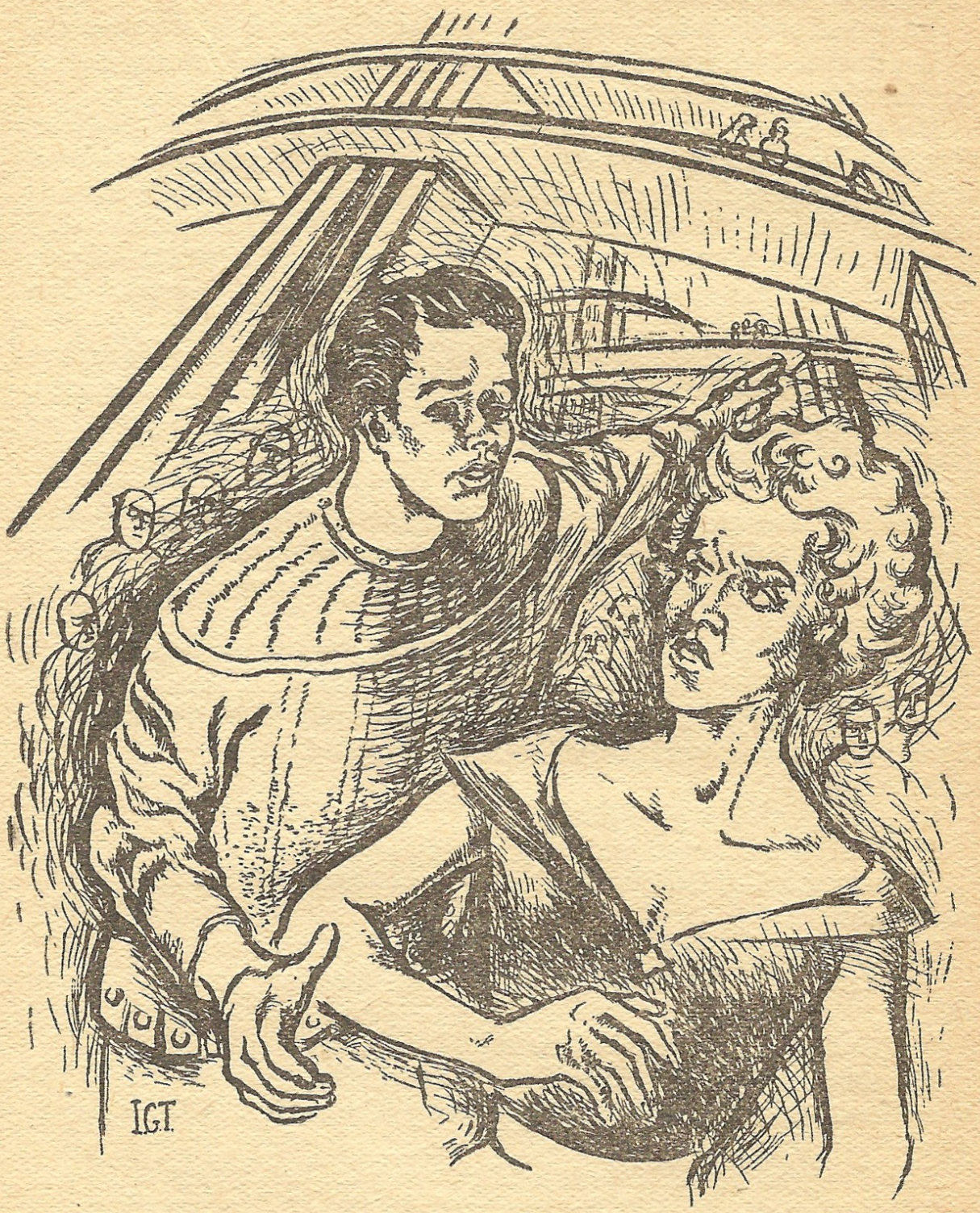
Illustrated by TAYLOR

I.

She fought hysterically, but Hedley got her into the lifeboat at last. She went suddenly limp in his arms. Her struggles must have exhausted her, he thought, as he laid her down gently on an acceleration couch.

He crossed quickly to the control panel and moved levers. *Odd about Elsa.* She usually took crises so calmly. Even when he had told her that he could stand their life on the station on Fahn II no longer, that they were returning to Earth, she had taken it without making the scene he had dreaded she would. Her grey eyes had flashed icily, a look of contempt flickered across her perfect features, but that had been all.

He felt the pluck of acceleration as the boat jetted away from the wrecked ship. Hedley trembled, feeling the reaction now after the emergency, the sudden alarming self-destruction of the inter-transit field generator. There had been no time to trace the fault. Flipping



back-wrenchingly into normal space, the ship had been a sitting duck for the stresses it had itself set up. The I-T field, the means by which a ship warped itself into inter-space, was normally collapsed gradually, the energy absorbed into Newman matrices that converted it quietly

into matter. But with the generator gone, the matrices had started to overload hair-raisingly.

They had made it in time—just. He saw in the viewplate now the ship crumple like paper, glow for an instant through cherry-red to brilliant blue-white, then vanish utterly.

He studied the rescue computer—the heart of the tiny lifeboat. Throughout a parent ship's entire voyage it laid a course to the nearest star, successively clearing it and building up the next as the ship hurtled on, ready to act the moment it was needed. It had acted; the ship was already on a course to—the data sprang up on a screen—L341. Yellow. Distance 7.4 light years. Transit time 95.5 hours. One planet.

Hedley swore softly. Only one planet. That stacked the odds against them. And a star with only a serial number—that meant its system hadn't been explored yet, for all stars were named or re-named on first official contact. He jabbed at the button marked FURTHER INFORMATION.

The screen came up with a lot of figures about the star—its age, mass, surface temperature—in strings of terse, highly technical symbols that Hedley could make very little of. He was a mining engineer, not an astrophysicist.

There was only one detail about the planet, its approximate distance from the primary. Hedley did a quick calculation. The temperature should be bearable, anyway. But whether it was humanly habitable depended on one vital factor—the density and constitution of the atmosphere.

The screen didn't give that.

He cleared the screen and turned back to Elsa.

She was stirring, her eyes open uncomprehendingly. Hedley moved to her side.

"Everything's going to be all right, Else. We made it."

She sat up. Understanding crept back into her eyes—and hatred with it.

"*You did it. You wrecked the ship.*"

He stared at her for a horrified moment, then grabbed her by the shoulders. "Elsa, you don't know what you're saying. It's the shock, you—"

She shrugged herself free and tidied her hair, her clothes.

"But why should I?" he persisted wildly. "I was taking you away. We were going to make a fresh start, weren't we?"

"Were we?"

"Elsa, so help me, I—" He raised his hands and dropped them helplessly. "How do two people get this way, so they don't even

make sense to each other any more ? How can you think I'd do anything so suicidal as deliberately wreck our only means of getting back to Earth ?"

" To save your pride. That was what was precious to you, wasn't it ? Not me."

He was suddenly angry. " If you can believe that, you—"

" Who did you bribe to find out ? That worm Gibb at the space field ?"

His anger tangled in perplexity. " Find out *what* ?"

She shrugged. " You knew very well George was following me back to Earth."

Things suddenly went blurred round him. He groped to the other couch and slumped onto it. Now he understood. It fell into place. Why she had taken their returning so calmly. Why she had struggled so wildly when the crack-up had come. God, how she must hate him to think that he had engineered it ! No, that wasn't half an index—*how she must hate him to have sought death rather than escape.*

She was suddenly laughing. " That's funny, I really think you didn't know."

He raised his eyes hopefully. " Don't think about it any more. I—I only wanted to make you happy. I just had to get you away from that awful station. It was such a primitive life. There wasn't much fun for you—" He faltered, the word *fun* mocking as salt on his lips.

" I didn't ask any favours, did I ?" she said.

" Only one. The one that it's asking too much of any husband to give." He bit his lip. He went back to her couch. " *Please*, let's stop quarrelling. We're in a jam. We've got to live together now for —well, God knows how long. Let's not make it any harder for ourselves."

" You can send a call, can't you ?" she said, unmoved.

He shook his head. "I put the ship's set on SOS directly it happened. But the odds are millions to one against anybody picking the signal up. It only lasted a few seconds."

" The boat set, I mean."

" There isn't one. These boats have got all they can carry with propulsion gear."

" You're lying," she said coldly.

He sighed. Perhaps it wasn't easy to grasp the fact that it was simpler in some ways to send a ship across interspace than a message. A ship was compact, a missile—a message was diffuse, requiring a

tremendous amount of power and gear. But he resented the immediacy of her disbelief.

"All right, so I'm lying." He got up and rummaged in a locker. He threw her a rolled-up blueprint. "Here's a plan of the boat. Say you find where the signal gear's hidden." He accented the last word sarcastically.

She tossed the plan to one side, looking at him hatefully. Then suddenly her lower lip trembled. Her head fell forward into her hands, her flaxen hair over her eyes. She shook with quiet sobs.

He moved to her side, kneeling, taking her hands in his. "We'll make out. There's one planet. We'll be on our own again—just the two of us. I'll look after you, do anything you want. Just tell me. Tell me how to get your love back." He babbled on, encouraged by her show of frailty. "Nothing's final, surely. We can get back to the way we used to be, can't we?"

She raised her head slowly. "You'll never know, Frank, will you?"

"Know what?" he blurted.

She seemed to find that funny.

"God, Elsa, what is it? *Tell me.* How can I understand if you don't even tell me? Tell me and I'll do whatever you want."

"*Tell* you, Frank?"

Then, looking in her eyes, he knew what she meant. The image of George Manders rose between them. George Manders, stupid, coarse—not even handsome. But he had that aplomb, that self-confidence that didn't recognize its owner's shortcomings—so that other people didn't, either . . . or if they did, didn't count them. Because George Manders made his own standards. People who didn't fit his standards didn't fit into his world. He was the type women found fascinating. George Manders didn't need telling. George Manders didn't ask . . .

He turned away. *I'll show her*, he swore, *I'll show her if I have to tear this planet apart to do it.*

And the doubt about its atmosphere dissolved utterly in the red cloud of his anger . . .

II.

The atmosphere was all right. The computer turned up with that information almost as soon as they came out of interspace four days later.

It had been four days of smouldering truce. Hedley swung into the pilot's seat gratefully. For the next twelve hours or more he'd be in control of the jets—doing something.

He didn't feel so grateful when the blue disc ahead became a universe of cloud beneath them as the lifeboat hit the planet's outer layers.

The computer, linked to a spectroscope, had been able to read off a chemical analysis of the atmosphere, but not this—that it was like a raging sea.

Hedley wrestled with the controls, striving to ease the vessel down in a steady descent. He soon knew that it was beyond him. The storms that beat against the sides of the tiny craft shifted and veered too quickly for any human brain and hand to counter their massive buffeting. The boat jerked and spun madly.

A strange exultation welled up in Hedley. He'd sworn he would tear this planet apart if necessary. It looked now if it might tear him apart first—before he ever reached its surface. And he laughed wildly to find that he didn't care. Either way, he'd show Elsa.

Over and over the craft turned, its hull howling back at the screaming winds, its interior filled with thunder. A low moan came from the couch where Elsa lay strapped. Hedley grinned sadistically, then shuddered as nausea ran through him, too. His hands flew frantically, uselessly, over the firing studs.

Then, abruptly, the fury stopped. The boat still whirled crazily, but the thunder died. There was only the high thin scream of the air against its sides. They had broken through, Hedley realized. He fought to gain control.

But they were dangerously near the surface now. A landscape tilted tipsily below, above him. Then beneath him again, and all around—and exploded brightly in his face . . .

He came back to reality. He screwed his head round painfully, saw Elsa already struggling free from her straps. He plucked at his own with trembling fingers. Then one fact registered. The hull of the little lifeboat was cracked open like an eggshell. A pearly daylight shone into its interior.

He flung his straps from him and scrambled up the tilted deck. "Elsa, *we made it.*" He gulped in a deep breath of air. "Get that! The native product. The computer was right—" He broke off at sight of a trickle of blood oozing from somewhere under her blonde hair. "You're injured."

"It's all right," she said shakily. She took out a handkerchief and wiped the blood away. Hedley could see that it wasn't serious. He felt himself now. He ached all over, but seemed to be unhurt. He looked around ruefully at the shattered boat, marvelling that flesh and blood should so have outstayed metal and plastic.

"Come on," he said. "Let's see what it's like out there." He reached out a hand and helped her down.

They stepped out into a blue plain. It stretched vacantly to the horizon where it met an equally blank grey sky. The sky gave no hint of the hell that raged above it. In one spot the grey was stained with yellow as if some bleary eye were trying to peer through.

And that hint of sun was the only feature in the entire scene. There wasn't a tree, not even a blade of grass. Although it was warm enough, Hedley repressed a shiver. "Well, at least there's no hostile wild life," he said, trying to sound cheerful, but sounding only pedantic.

Elsa laughed abruptly, but there was a note of hysteria in it. "Just the two of us, you said! That's just about what we have got. At least it looks as if you won't have any competition to worry about."

"There must be life somewhere," he said, ignoring the taunt. "There are plenty of tracts on Earth as barren as this."

She didn't answer. He went back into the wreck, gathered food, a pack. When he came out Elsa was peering into the distance. He followed her gaze and saw a blue cloud of dust on the horizon. After a moment he could make out some kind of beast. No, a *vehicle*. And figures seated in it under a transparent dome. They, whatever they were, were approaching at a brisk rate.

"What did I tell you?" he said. He closed up to Elsa and put his arm protectively about her. She stiffened slightly, shivering, but did not resist. With the other hand he drew out the H-E gun that he had kept strapped next his skin since the ill-fated trip out of Fahn II had started. He hadn't left it around with Elsa in her dangerous mood.

The dust cloud came nearer, died down as the vehicle came on to a harder tract. Hedley stared at what he saw. The occupants looked humanoid, but . . . for a moment he thought they were in space suits, then realized what they were . . . *robots*.

Earth hadn't turned that dream into reality yet, being still balked in the search for a cell one hundredth as efficient or compact as a human brain cell. But here were half-a-dozen real robots, shining metallically blue. Hedley's grip tightened on his gun.

The vehicle drew up fifty yards away. The six creatures dismounted —they were bipedal—and ranged out in a half-circle. For a moment Hedley had the chilling thought that they were drawing up in battle array. Then the robots . . . *knelt*.

The tenseness of the situation exploded on Hedley's lips in a stifled laugh. It sounded like a bark on the silent air.

The robots seemed to take it as a form of greeting or dispensation. They rose as smoothly as they had knelt and came forward. They halted a dozen paces away.

Hedley was suddenly conscious of the fact that both his hands were engaged. He started to take his arm from Elsa's waist, then realized

that the gun in his hand must look pretty hostile to creatures who at least seemed peaceable. He holstered it and raised that free hand in what he hoped they would recognize as a gesture of goodwill.

They seemed to. They bowed and gestured to the vehicle. Hedley felt Elsa recoil. " It'll be all right," he whispered in her ear. " What can we lose, anyway ?"

She did not resist as Hedley urged her forward. The robots drew back respectfully and, when both humans were seated in the vehicle, climbed in themselves. The car set off smoothly and silently.

" They're taking us to their masters," Hedley whispered, then chuckled. " Why am I whispering ? They can't understand a word."

Elsa turned to him. " Their masters ought to be pretty advanced, oughtn't they ?"

" I guess so. Why ?"

" Perhaps they've got space ships."

" Oh," he murmured, feeling annoyed. She was no sooner safe than she was thinking of getting back to Earth, *to Manders*. Well, didn't he want to get back to Earth, too ? He wasn't sure. Had her jibe about his pride been justified then ? No, it wasn't that, it—

He was conscious of her eyes on him. " It's doubtful," he said, more curtly than he intended. " Nobody's found a race yet that had them. Not interstellar ones, anyway."

The blue plain stretched on and on. Then on the horizon appeared a city. Hedley drew in his breath at sight of it. It came up out of the horizon, tier on tier, the crowns of its towers shining in the pearly light.

He felt Elsa tense, and knew what she was thinking. That a race which could build like that and which had robots might well have space ships. He found the thought disquieting. He had pictured himself on a wide, alien world, carving out a refuge and salvation for them both, winning Elsa's respect back the hard way. The picture was beginning to dim.

" No sign of aircraft," he told her. . .

" Glad ?" she asked tartly.

As the city loomed high above them Hedley noticed something else. " No sign of people, either," he said.

The car entered a lighted tunnel and emerged into the city. They were in a broad avenue, flanked by sidewalks and by buildings whose storeys receded as they soared skywards. At regular intervals strange bushes with purple and red and white flowers sprang from metal sconces. And there were more robots. And not all humanoid. One they passed, tending the ornamental shubbery looked like a walking

gardening kit. Instead of a head it had a fearsome array of clippers and nozzles, and from its middle sprouted a spatulate third arm.

They turned a bend into a great square—crammed full of robots. There must have been thousands of them, drawn up in close ranks. They seemed to topple as the car appeared, and Hedley realised that they were kneeling.

The car drew up at a stone dais. Their attendants alighted and knelt in two lines of three, the last pair at the foot of the dais.

The intention was obvious. Hedley took Elsa by the arm and led her onto the platform. The six robots who had fetched them followed on up and stood deferentially behind them.

Hedley turned and faced the robot audience, looking down on a sea of upturned metal faces. For a moment he had a wild thought—that these weren't artificial at all, but some fantastic form of natural life. But he put the thought down. They were too perfect. They bore the unmistakable print of the made, the *assembled*, thing. Somewhere, he thought, deep in the bowels of this city, there must be workshops turning them out, and men—well, some highly intelligent creatures—directing operations. Or were they self-perpetuating? Possibly . . . but even so there must be flesh and blood somewhere here. This city couldn't have been built for robots.

He turned back to the robots on the dais. "*Masters*—where are your masters?" He pointed to himself, then spread his hands enquiringly.

One robot stepped forward a pace and spoke. The language sounded abrupt and uninflected. But wouldn't that be only natural for a robot? thought Hedley.

He raised one hand. The robot stopped immediately. Hedley repeated his pantomime. The robot spread its own metal hands.

"But where are they?" Hedley persisted, before realizing that it was futile.

The robot who had spoken stretched out a hand toward the metal multitude beneath them. Hedley nodded, turned and addressed them.

"Thank you for making us welcome. Take that message to your masters." He felt stupid, but it seemed the required thing to do.

The robots uttered one monosyllable and rose. Hedley was reminded of a church congregation making a response. He stepped back.

The robots on the dais clustered together and conferred in low voices for a moment. Then they ushered the two humans to a door at the rear of the dais. They passed into a huge room, with a table stretching down it. The table was decked with flowers and set with what were obviously eating implements.

Hedley sighed with relief. This was final proof. Robots wouldn't need such ceremony, surely? Nor food, come to that! That meant that there must be flesh-and-blood creatures here—somewhere. But even now none appeared.

But the role expected of themselves was plain. Hedley grinned and seated Elsa and himself with becoming formality. He clapped his hands. A dozen robot waiters stepped forward. The banquet began.

Only one thing was lacking, thought Hedley as he sat back, sated, and that was cigars. But he had cigarettes. He lit one.

"That settles it," he observed to Elsa. "Their masters must be human, or as near as makes no odds. The shape of the robots is one index. But the food's the clincher." Only a couple of the dishes had been unpalatable and therefore rejected, but there had been dozens of others to choose from. And the wine, though it had obviously and not unnaturally never seen a grape, had a delicate bouquet and flavour.

"Maybe we're on probation," he said on a sudden thought. "Maybe the masters won't show themselves until we've passed muster. So for heavens sake don't do anything out of line."

Elsa shrugged. "Such as what?"

"I don't know. There's no knowing what their system of etiquette might be. But the impression we make might be important. So don't let's have any scenes. I mean—" he felt suddenly conciliatory—"can't we forget our differences, just for the time being?"

She looked at him with mild incredulity. "You mean—just to please a lot of—" She gestured with a scornful hand. Then a look of pained understanding came into her eyes. "Any excuse, eh? You make me *sick*."

He turned miserably away from her contempt, knowing that she was right, that she knew him too damn well. He pushed his chair back roughly and got up. "There's a lot to do," he said curtly.

There was one thing in particular—to learn the language. And quickly. This unreal situation had got to be resolved—the secret of the robots' masters, he and Elsa, everything.

But he didn't start on the language until the next morning. Because the robots politely insisted on showing him to a bath. He was glad of one, anyway. One robot worked a control panel that added delicately perfumed lotions to the water, turned on a final tingling shower and a hot air drier. Another of the creatures, grave and expressionless as a perfect Earth valet, brought him a yellow robe and sandals. He wondered whether they were undress or normal wear here, but he

accepted them gratefully. There hadn't been time in those frantic moments of shipwreck to worry about such items as a change of clothes.

He felt relaxed now, sleepy. He was shown into a palatial bedroom. He stretched out on the low bed, feeling the unreality of everything. Only a few hours ago he had been facing a violent death; then a blue wilderness; and now—he took in the pastel walls of the room, the drapes the comfort of the bed that cradled him.

He wondered dreamily where Elsa was. She had probably been given the same ministrations as he had. She was probably in a next door room. But he wasn't anxious to find out. Better to be careful, be . . .

He yawned, his eyes closed.

III.

Next morning a robot laid out a suit of clothes for him—a jerkin and calf-length pants that, notwithstanding their delicate shade of mauve, had a certain *panache* of cut that gave an effect which was tolerably masculine. He dressed and followed the robot.

He came into a much smaller eating-room than the scene of the banquet of the night before. A robot was serving him breakfast when Elsa entered. She was wearing a smooth creation of lime-green silky stuff. Her blonde hair was piled up in an elegant coiffure. Elsa—or a robot—had obviously been busy.

Elsa raised her eyebrows at his own get-up, then laughed. "Mmm, quite the dandy."

Hedley grinned and felt heartened. Immediately after breakfast he got down to the business of learning the language.

But the robot that went with him to a private room had different ideas. The robot was going to learn English—and it took Hedley only a few moments to recognize that that would be by far the easier way. The robot's mind was one hundred percent efficient. Every fact registered—and *held*. It built up a vocabulary at a rate that no human could have matched.

It took twelve hours. Twelve hours during which Hedley had periodically to suppress the questions he was bursting to ask. One question in particular. He wanted there to be no doubt of his understanding the answer. But after twelve hours he was ready. He asked it.

"Where are your makers?"

The robot faltered. Hedley felt a sudden disquiet. Up to now the robot's mind had been lightning quick. Then it answered.

"They went away, master."

"But where?"

"Away—away up in the sky."

"In a space ship, you mean?"

The robot's glowing eyes were steady on him. "Yes, master, in a space ship."

"But not all of them, surely."

"Yes, all of them."

"But—" Hedley felt dazed. *Why should they have left a paradise like this?* "All at once?"

"No, over the years. Many years."

"And—" Hedley's lips felt suddenly dry. "When did the last one leave?"

"Two thousand five hundred years ago."

"*What!*" He hadn't found out yet, he realized, how this world's day and year compared with Earth's, but anyway, the interval must have been many centuries at least. And all that time, until his and Elsa's coming, these robots had tended this great city and—how many others besides? He put the question to the robot.

"There is only this one, master. Our makers concentrated all their numbers in this one city, shortly after they built the first of our kind."

"But *why* did they go?"

The robot spread its hands in a gesture oddly human. "It is not our function to question the impulses of our makers."

"But you had to, surely, in order to serve them."

"To obey—yes. And to try to understand. But there was much that we did not understand of them."

"Were they men—like me?"

"Yes, master—very much like."

Hedley wondered fleetingly what might have happened if the robots' masters *hadn't* been humanoid. Dedicated, as they obviously were, to serve masters of one shape, they might have reacted hostilely to visitors of another, regarding them as a threat.

That brought him abruptly to another thought. *Had* there been a threat to the makers? There must have been. Yet there was no sign of damage to this great city. But perhaps it hadn't been a physical menace—or perhaps the robots had repaired the damage. But he had to know. He asked the robot.

"Threat?" the robot repeated.

"Yes—earthquake, enemy creatures, anything like that?"

"None, master. They just left."

A sudden idea came to Hedley. "Records—they must have left records?"

"Indeed. All records are stored in the memory bank, in the form of impulse tapes. We refer to them by inserting them in our direct scanning mechanisms—" the robot pointed to its middle with a metallic finger—"here."

"But how did your makers refer to them?"

"They never referred to them."

"But—"

"They never had need. We attended to everything. Also, the tapes were not directly intelligible to them. They had to be played back by one of us, to be translated."

"I see." That seemed natural, being parallel to the way Earth computers worked. But it meant that it wouldn't be easy to get any closer to an answer. The robot said that the answer wasn't in the memory bank—wherever that was—and how would he be able to check?

He felt annoyed, frustrated. He had thought that communication would have brought the answer. But everything was still unanswered, unresolved. The same as his relations with Elsa. *Elsa.* That reminded him—there was one other important question to ask. If he didn't, *she* would.

"Are there any space ships left?"

The robot seemed to falter again before it answered, "No, master."

"But you have plans? You could build one for us?"

Again that odd faltering. Hedley got a distinct impression that the robot was covering up. *Could a robot do that?* Surely not, unless—*it was doing it under instructions.*

"I am sorry," the robot said. "But there are no plans."

Hedley grabbed it by the wrist. "Look! You robots built them, didn't you?"

The robot seemed oddly agitated. Its metal fingers threshed.

"The robots that built them were taken away by the masters. To—to operate the ships."

Hedley loosed his hold disgustedly. There wasn't going to be an answer to this question, either. He beckoned to the robot. "Come and tell that to my wife. She wouldn't believe *me.*"

She didn't believe the robot, either. She began to storm at it, seemed to realize the futility of that, and wheeled on Hedley. "You taught it English. What else did you teach it?"

Hedley sighed. "I didn't teach it anything. That's the same story it told me."

"Well, neither you nor ten thousand robots are going to make me believe it." She turned back on the robot. "Where are the records stored?"

"In the lower levels. I will be happy to bring up any that are required."

"You would?" Elsa jeered. "But I want to see them for myself."

"They would need to be read to you by one of our kind," the robot answered.

"It's no use arguing with it," Hedley murmured. "Perhaps it's lying, I don't know. But if it is, how are you going to find the truth?"

A gleam came into Elsa's eye. "The boat!" She addressed the robot imperiously. "Have our boat brought here—intact. You'll repair it. You must have plant that you can use for that."

Before the robot could answer, Hedley said, "A lifeboat would never get us back to Earth."

"Then let them build a bigger version. You can supervise them, can't you?"

The robot interrupted them. "The machine is no longer there."

"You mean—you've already brought it in?"

"Yes, but—" The robot hesitated.

"But *what*?"

"It has already gone to the scrap furnaces."

A look of incredulous fury exploded on Elsa's face. "*Scrap furnaces*! You idiots! Why? *Why*?"

"Our makers could not endure a machine that failed them. If ever one did, it had to be removed instantly and destroyed. We saw that your ship had failed you, so—"

Hedley was no longer listening. He couldn't if he had wanted to. He was laughing wildly, helplessly . . .

IV.

A feeling that began to assume the proportions of a mania took hold of Hedley in the next few days as he roamed the city. That its builders were still here, that their life went on in the patterns of its own normality—except in the sphere bounded by his own sight and hearing. A sphere that was deliberately maintained about him. He clutched at the hope that no race could be that perfect; that just once they would make a mistake; that he would round a corner and find a square thronged with them. Or open a door, and two eyes—real ones—would look up, startled, into his.

But he turned many corners, opened many doors—and found only robots, anonymous, impersonal. He tried breaking into a sudden sprint, tried getting himself driven at breakneck speed through the streets of the city—but neither worked. Nor did dismissing the inevitably attendant robot.

So, desperately, he set about learning the ways of those who had built and ostensibly departed. The robots gave him every assistance. He had recurring doubts about the creatures' true motives. But they dissolved each time in face of some new aspect of their attention to details.

Like the way that, almost overnight, every one of them seemed able to speak English. Like, too, the conducted tours round the musuems. At least, that was the nearest word for them. But these were like museums, fairgrounds, amusement arcades, rolled into one. Cinemas, too. It was here that Hedley saw what the masters had looked like—and behaved like.

They had been as near human as made no difference. A slightly smaller head than human average, topped with light woolly hair. Their behaviour had been just as similar.

But the films that Hedley saw soon palled. These had been pleasure-loving people. Drama, significance, seemed to have been unheard-of qualities. Sensuality, music, dancing . . . dancing, music, sensuality, seemed to be the theme of every film.

And the machines in the museums were dedicated almost entirely to entertainment. It would have been a teen-ager's paradise—the machines didn't even need a coin to operate them.

But the places—everything he saw—yielded a bafflingly scanty picture of the builders' philosophy; of what had made them build in the first place. And nothing at all in the way of an answer to what had made them leave it all—if they *had* left it.

After days of fruitless searching, he took a hold on himself. He'd have to accept it. And Elsa would have to accept it—and him. He had been trying to work it out on his own. He had avoided Elsa since his laughter that evening when the bombshell about the boat had been exploded. She hadn't taken his attempt at an explanation—that it had been like a slap in the face to him; that he would have been eager to supervise the building of an escape craft.

She hadn't believed him. He had only half believed himself. True, he would have welcomed the building—if only to prove himself—but not the corollary, the flight back to Earth, *to Manders*. The thought that he ought to be grateful for the removal of that dilemma failed to make up for the fact that he would never have the chance to prove himself now.

But it couldn't go on like this. She would have to face up to the situation sooner or later.

But what if she did accept him back? The thought came that it wouldn't be much of a compliment in the circumstances. He thrust the thought away, and made up his mind.

He went back to their apartment, determined for a showdown. He didn't know how he would play it—whether he'd be conciliatory or domineering. But he knew one thing—he wouldn't plead or whine. God, he'd pray that he wouldn't.

He went in to Elsa's room. She was sitting at a dressing table. It was littered with bottles of creams, lotions. A closet door was open, showing row on row of dresses. Hedley smiled to himself. Elsa had evidently been busy in her own way. Somehow the sight gave him hope. She seemed to be acclimatizing herself to the city. Surely it was only a step to acclimatizing herself to him again ?

" Elsa, I want to talk to you," he began.

She turned. " Yes ? "

" We've got to settle everything," he said. " Even if you hate me, we've still got to live in the same city."

She laughed briefly. " It's a big enough place."

" *Please*, let's be serious. It *is* a big place—and it's all ours. This whole city, all these robots, to serve our needs, to give us anything we ask for. They *want* to serve. That's their only purpose. It's a queer set-up—but *can't* we be happy ? You can't go on hating me for ever. What did I *do*, anyway ? If Manders hadn't come between us, you—"

He stopped and bit his lip, conscious of the old weary note of self-pity creeping back into his voice. He went on, striving to control his tone :

" We'll just have to come to terms. While there's a barrier between us, we can't help adding to it. We've got to pull it down, Elsa, and start again. Can't you see ? There's every luxury you could ask for here."

She grimaced.

He faltered, sensing what the grimace meant. That luxury was sterile, useless, without the contrast of other people not having it, the flattery of other people's admiring glances. But he rallied. " Anyway, that isn't the important thing. What is important is that we can start this city going again. Serving its original purpose, I mean. Organize it, people it again."

He came to a halt as Elsa laughed, loudly, contemptuously. He was trying too hard again, clutching at excuses. He realized it with a bitterness that choked him and made everything misty round him. All he could see was his wife's lips, red and mocking. All he could hear was her harsh laughter.

It suddenly stopped.

He looked from his hand to her face, the print of his fingers red on her cheek. He suddenly felt abject, contemptible. So he slapped her

again. Her lip trembled. He raised his hand again. It stopped in mid-air as a single word broke from her lips.

"*George—*"

The word urged him to the brink of blind fury. That her instinctive cry for help should be to *him* ! Then he realized that her wide eyes were looking past him. He wheeled.

Through the open door stepped—*George Manders.* His thick lips smiling. A startlingly normal blue business suit on. He came calmly toward them.

Then everything—even the answer to the fantastic fact of Manders being here at all—finally dissolved in Hedley's mind in an all-corroding rage. He lunged forward and aimed a savage blow at Mander's chin. Manders staggered. Hedley grabbed at his lapels, hurled blow after blow into that smiling face.

Hedley laughed crazily, exultantly. At last he was resolving things —in the only way they ever could be resolved.

At length he hurled the other from him. Manders cannoned against the wall and collapsed on the floor.

The red mist of Hedley's fury cleared. He looked down—and the truth impinged. The figure was sprawled in an odd, inhuman way—*and it was still smiling.* And Hedley could hear a sound now . . . a rasping, rhythmic sound . . . like a mechanism out of order, a broken gear, a wheel out of true . . .

Hedley turned incredulously to Elsa. He was trembling with humiliation. A part of his consciousness registered the fact that other robots came through th door and dragged the dummy out. He laughed raggedly.

"They're taking it off to the scrap furnaces."

"Then I'll have them convert another."

"I'll wreck that one, too."

Her lip curled. "Brave, aren't you ? Pity they can't build a self-defence mechanism in one. I asked them."

"I'll go into that," he said savagely. "I'd get more satisfaction out of wrecking it."

"Why not ? You've got the time. So have I. So have they. Every one you wreck I'll have them build another." Her voice rose hysterically. "I'll build a whole army of them. I'll teach them to act like George Manders, talk like George Manders. And that's your answer to whatever you were trying to say."

Hedley was suddenly laughing. "My God, this is rich ! I think I'm settling things with Manders—and it's only a robot . . . a robot that can't even resist. And you—you've been busy building an image

of Manders. Manders who was masterful, arrogant. But don't you see?

"You can't build those qualities into a robot, any more than you can build self-defence. You'd only build a whole army of pathetic creatures who'll say *Yes* and *Please* and *What can I do?* just like the husband that you despise."

Elsa made no answer. But she suddenly looked old, weary.

"Who's the joke on now?" Hedley gibed. Then he shrugged. "No, not on you. Or me. Oh, we've got the point of it by now, heaven knows! But the real joke, the big joke, the joke that's so big it's tragic, is on the ones who built this place . . . this wonderful city with these good, these perfect servants.

"Perhaps it was just as well we were at odds when we came here. Because at least that saved us from being disillusioned. Because even if we hadn't been, how long do you think we'd have lasted that way? This place is hollow, though there's everything here. Except a way out. There's everything—so nobody here can be any use to anybody else. In the end there can only be emptiness and contempt."

He came to a halt. Elsa was staring into the mirror over the dressing-table. She turned slowly as he reached in his jerkin, but she made no protest. Her face was utterly expressionless as he pulled the trigger. She slid slowly to the floor.

Hedley looked down at the H-E gun. A shimmer of heat rose from the barrel, and died. A memory stirred . . . of himself and Elsa, so very few years ago, roaming the woods of a far-away Earth . . . of the sun making the air shimmer just like that . . .

The memory died, too. He felt very calm now. There was no other way. There never had been another way. He realized that at last. Not for him and Elsa, nor for those who had built this city.

They had seen it in time, left their stupendous creation before it had been too late—but leaving it a plush-lined trap for whomever should find it in future centuries. Strange, though, that men had never come across their descendants anywhere. He hadn't heard of a planet being explored that had races as humanoid as this one's had been.

He shrugged. Men hadn't explored this world, either. There were many worlds yet to be discovered. For a moment he had a feeling of responsibility for any who might come after. A thought that he ought to find means of destroying this place. But *how*? If he gave the robots the order for destruction would they carry it out? Were they *that* loyal to the wishes of men? Or would a larger loyalty prevail?

For an instant he had a glimpse of the difficulties that must attend being a robot—serving creatures whose motives it could hardly grasp.

But he was in no mood for reflection. There was no time now to think of those who might come after. He was tired. Tired and resigned. One thought did come in the moment that he lifted the H-E gun to his own head. And that was—

Why, if the original masters had seen the dangers of a robot-cosseted existence—why had they taken robots along with them when they fled, as that one had told him they had ?

But what good now would it be to know the answer ? Knowing the answer would not solve anything. Only one thing could do that.

He pulled the trigger with a lover's gentleness.

The two robots descended the stairs with a deliberate tread, fitting to the occasion, to the burdens they bore.

The first robot looked at the urn he carried in front of him.

" Perhaps we were wrong," it said, " to have told them that our makers went away in space ships. I was the one who had to explain —to think of something. I had never heard of space ships until the master taught me the word. I blame myself now."

" But why ?" answered the other. " How could we have told them the truth ? The truth would have made them unhappy. It is our mission to make all masters happy."

" True. But we did not make them happy. We never made any masters happy. Not finally happy. Why did our makers make us such weak and unworthy instruments ?"

" Hush," the other robot said. " Criticism of our masters is the worst of all sins. We did our best."

" But it was not enough. Next time we must try even harder. We must convene meetings every day and discuss ways of making our next visitors really happy. So happy that they will make others of their noble kind, so that the city will be filled with true life again."

" May the day come quickly," the other answered.

They came to the end of their downward journey. A space on the shelves was waiting.

The two robots placed the two urns reverently in the space—two more added to the three hundred and seventy nine million, five hundred and twenty thousand, eight hundred and sixty seven already there . . .

Arthur Sellings

FIRST LESSON

The human race has always assumed (and probably always will) that when and if extra-terrestrial relationship is made by another race contacting this planet, they will be the beings the aliens will communicate with. It could well be otherwise.

By Sydney J. Bounds

The three ships of space were observed even before they reached Pluto. They came swinging through a long arc and travelled at great speed. They came down between the outer planets towards Earth.

It was the sensation of the century—visitors from outer space, from another star system ! There was a feeling of wonder and fear amongst the peoples of Earth.

There were those who said that we must strike first, aim the rockets with their atomic warheads and press the firing button. The alien science was greater than ours and therefore to be feared. And there were those who held back, saying, this was a wonderful chance to gain new knowledge, to communicate with a race from far off. There was tension as the three ships circled Earth.

Crystal-shaped and enormous, their many facets reflecting brilliantly the light of the sun—how many *other* suns had they similarly reflected ?—the ships of space showed no visible sign of propulsion as they floated like iridescent bubbles in the atmosphere of Earth. They circled the planet, passing over cities and plains and seas, giving no indication of either friendly or hostile intent. The peoples of Earth began to feel ignored.

Then, with a suddenness that brought a long sigh from millions of televiewers, the three ships plummeted down and disappeared beneath the waters of the Atlantic.

Warships sped to the area and cordoned it off. The whole world waited. At this point in the ocean, the bottom lay at seven hundred and fifty fathoms; and some said that the aliens came from a world of liquid under high pressure, that they could not survive on the land masses of our planet. Rumour ran high for three days and still the alien ships did not surface.

On the third day, the Secretary-General of the United Nations decided that an attempt must be made to contact the aliens, and so an urgent message was sent to Herman Wolfe who, at that moment, was standing by with his bathysphere.

Wolfe strutted the high poop of his diving ship, the *Mary Bell*, alternately cursing the navy ships ringing the area and glaring down at the tiny launch speeding towards him. He was a skinny man with a paunch and egg-stains on his jutting, unkempt beard. His voice was like the bark of a small dog.

" Mister Mate, prepare to receive our visitors !"

The launch swung in under the bow of the *Mary Bell* and a retinue of top brass followed the Secretary-General onto her deck.

" You're late, Mister Secretary," Wolfe said sternly.

Berenson, the Secretary-General, had been warned of Wolfe's eccentric manner and so he smiled politely and agreed that he was, indeed, late.

" This is a private vessel and I am both owner and captain," said Herman Wolfe, glaring fiercely at the assembly of admirals, " and I don't stand any red-tape aboard my ship. Think yourselves lucky that I am allowing Mister Secretary to come below with me. That's all. Stand easy !"

He turned, leant back on the worn heels of his sea-boots, and shouted :

" Prepare for diving, Mister Mate !"

Berenson, broadly built and dressed in a well-cut lounge suit, felt out of place. It was such a messy little ship, with ropes coiled across

the deck and the tang of oil everywhere. Unshaven men in greasy dungarees pushed passed him as if he did not exist, inviting comparison with the deference accorded him in his palatial New York headquarters.

Above, swaying gently on its derrick, hung the massive steel and quartz sphere in which he was to make the trip; below, in the shadow of the bathysphere, stood the winch with its bulging coils of nylon cable. It was a little alarming, Berenson found, to contemplate being lowered into the depths in *that* . . .

Wolfe addressed him once more.

" Have you been below before, Mister Secretary ?"

" No," Berenson said. " But I'm looking forward—"

Wolfe lit a cheroot, took three long draws at it, then, with a flamboyant flourish, threw it over the side of the *Mary Bell.*

" No smoking below," he said curtly. " Fouls the air."

His boots clattered noisily on the steel ladder as he ran up and vanished inside the bathysphere.

" Come aboard, Mister Secretary !"

Berenson climbed the ladder and inserted himself through the opening at the top. Inside, a mass of instruments and tanks and fittings left little space in which to move.

" Batten down, Mister Mate," Wolfe called impatiently. " Let's be having some speed, now."

Berenson knew a moment of claustrophobia as the metal port was screwed in place. He felt cut off. His world was bounded by the limits of this tiny sphere, his only companion an eccentric.

Wolfe spoke into a microphone. " Swing her out, Mister Mate, and lower away !"

Berenson held a stanchion as the bathysphere rocked gently. Through thick quartz, he saw the *Mary Bell's* deck falling away, the blue and green swell of the ocean rising to engulf him. Then the waters closed over his head.

Wolfe rubbed his hands in nervous excitement.

" Good, good ! Underway at last—I always feel better when I've broken through."

There were no lights in the cabin and the darkness beyond was a smothering blanket. As Berenson's eyes adapted to the new condition he realised that light penetrated the surface and suffused the water with a yellowish-green tint. Slowly, as the sphere sank deeper, the colour became a rich dark green changing through a myriad hues to an intense blue. Small fish fluttered like butterflies in a liquid sky so beautiful that he thought of a cathedral with each tiny panel of stained glass vibrating in rhythm.

" A new experience for you, Mister Secretary."

At the sound of Wolfe's voice, Berenson turned to face him.

" Yes," he said, " I envy you, Mr. Wolfe—I envy you the opportunity to come down here whenever the fancy takes you. The marine world is indeed worthy of prolonged study."

Wolfe threw his head back and laughed.

" True enough, though your words are a considerable understatement of the facts. We are limited, you understand—we can only observe. Imagine what it must be like to *live* here, the remarkable qualities our senses would assume simply through contact with a new medium. Water has many qualities; fluidity, resistance, salinity—what new perceptions might not be born within us ? Our sense of taste, for example, would be infinitely richer if we had the taste-buds of fish ! Even to attempt to understand this world of water, you must imaginatively transpose your own feelings of life on land . . . and then fail !"

Berenson was startled.

" That is true, I suppose," he said, and went back to watching the deeps.

The sea was a blue-black twilight alive with darting fireflies, the trails of weirdly-luminous creatures with reptilian heads and ropelike bodies.

" Two hundred fathoms," Wolfe said abruptly, and made a routine check with the *Mary Bell.*

It jolted Berenson out of his reverie. He thought of the alien spaceships somewhere far below. Why had they descended into the ocean, he wondered. Why ?

" How long before we reach the sea-bed ?" he asked.

" Roughly, ninety minutes," Wolfe told him.

" It's a long way down."

The slow descent continued. Outside the bathysphere was a blackness more intense than the void of space, a solid wall of darkness. Wolfe stood watching the sonar screen.

" Queer," he said. " There's something under us, shifting in a definite pattern."

" A shoal of fish ?" Berenson suggested.

" If so, it must be the largest shoal ever recorded—as if all the fish in the Atlantic had gathered in one place !"

Berenson made one of his rare attempts at humour. " Interviewing our visitors, perhaps ?"

Wolfe looked hard at him.

" Perhaps," he said slowly. " Perhaps . . ."

There was a soft radiance below, permeating the water and pulsing at regular intervals.

" Seven hundred fathoms," Wolfe said quietly. " We're almost there."

Berenson experienced no sense of movement as the bathysphere sank. He tried not to think what his fate would be if the cable linking them to the *Mary Bell* parted . . . the light was plainly coming from the spaceships. How did it feel to be an alien and buried under thousands of tons of water ? Perhaps something had gone wrong and they needed help.

He pressed his face to the quartz and exclaimed: " I can see them now !"

A little later, Wolfe spoke into the microphone.

" Stop lowering."

The bathysphere hung motionless at the end of a mile-long cable. Immediately below was the sea-bed, the three spaceships forming the points of a vast equilateral triangle, translucent and glowing with light —and fish. Incredible deep sea creatures swimming about in the triangle of light.

" The fish," Wolfe said, a strange quality in his voice. " The fish, Mister Secretary—watch *them* !"

There were more fish than Berenson could have imagined before this moment. They were drawn up in ranks about the spaceships, row upon row, sweeping up and out of sight, like a crowd at some gigantic sports stadium. Others weaved in and out between the alien ships, making intricate patterns in the blue-green water with all the precision of soldiers at a military tattoo. The light from the ships was steady.

Then the fish swimming in the triangular arena joined the close packed ranks of those in the hemisphere beyond. There was the bright cold gleam of deep-sea eyes, the flash of silver and orange on scaly bodies. And the light from the spaceships began to pulse to a quickening rhythm, varying from moment to moment.

When it ended, the fish returned and performed new and exciting movements that required an immediate grasp of the third dimension to appreciate. Berenson thought of a fresh analogy; not soldiers, but dancers . . .

" It's curious," he said, " how they react to light."

Wolfe grunted.

" Look again, Mister Secretary, and look hard. They're doing more than react. When you watch a ballet, the dancers are communicating something."

Berenson licked his lips which had become suddenly, nervously, dry. "I can't believe that . . . it's impossible."

The fantastic scene continued against a backdrop of orange-brown rock and drifting weed. The fish made their precise designs and the aliens replied with pulsating radiance; each time the patterns were changed and the bathysphere was completely ignored.

"It would require *intelligence*," Brenson said, "intelligence—"

He did not finish. Wolfe chewed on the butt of an unlit cheroot.

"Any diver will tell you, Mister Secretary, that fish are intelligent."

Berenson shivered, despite the oily heat of the cabin. For a further hour he watched the undersea ballet; and the feeling within him that fish and alien were communicating grew to a certainty. He felt humbled by his own lack of comprehension.

Wolfe spoke to the *Mary Bell* again.

"Haul us up !"

Berenson protested. "No, not yet. We may learn something—"

"I doubt it," Wolfe said drily. "They could talk for weeks, months perhaps. They've a lot to talk about . . . and our air won't last that long."

Slowly, the scene on the sea-bed faded until it was a dim radiance far below and Berenson saw only the shifting patterns on the sonar screen.

"What are we going to say ?" he asked in a troubled voice. "For centuries, the human race has accepted the idea that it is the highest form of life on this planet. Must we shatter that illusion ? Do we have to tell the peoples of earth that the aliens ignored us in preference to *fish* ?"

Wolfe was silent a long time.

"Tell them," he said finally, "that we have had our first lesson in interstellar relations, that only false pride can now hold us back from a clearer understanding of our place in the universe. Tell them that, Mister Secretary !"

The bathysphere broke surface and Berenson saw the blue sky of a world that would never be the same again.

Sydney J. Bounds.

With the entire might of the Rihnan battle-fleets now positioned in the Galaxy to trap the approaching Earth armada only Captain Brady and his few henchmen can save the situation —but they are on the wrong side of the Rihnans. Brady and Murphy decide that there is only one desperate chance they can take . . . .

WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST ?

By Lan Wright

Illustrated by QUINN

Conclusion

FOREWORD

By AD 2200 interplanetary travel within the Solar System has been achieved; Venus, Mars and Earth being the Three-Planet governing body for expansion and colonisation, with central control vested in Hugo Bannerman, President of the World Senate on Earth. The first interstellar expedition, led by Commander Stephen Brady of the United Terran Space Fleet, returns from the region of Sirius to inform the President that not only is there intelligent life there but that the Galaxy abounds in life forms governed by an advanced technological race of people called Rihnans.

The Centaurans whom Brady contacted explained that the Rihnans kept the balance of power by the strength of their weapons which they

gave freely to lesser races, none of whom had ever managed to solve the mysteries of the Rihnan science, so complex was it. The Terrans are expected to join the Rihnan Galactic Federation as vassal allies, but Bannerman decides to make a fight of it and when the Rihnan ambassador arrives to discuss the terms one of his escort craft is captured and hidden in Siberia for the Terran scientists to examine.

Professor Hartmann, in charge of the investigation, solves a number of the Rihnan secrets and Bannerman gives the order for a huge Terran fleet to be built. Three years later, their patience exhausted, the Rihnans send the Centauran battle fleet to teach the Terrans a sharp lesson, but the fleet falls into a well-laid trap and is completely annihilated, their flagship being captured and taken to a base on the Moon. Some weeks later Brady, now promoted to Captain, and a picked crew land the captured flagship at Meron, capital city of the Centauran system, and demand their unconditional co-operation in the Terran drive for a Galactic Empire. With no choice in the matter the Centaurans agree and part of the Terran fleet is deployed throughout the Centauran system as a protective measure. Brady reports to Admiral Sherman in charge of the Terran fleet and requests permission to take a converted Centauran cruiser and scout along the area of Rihnan control.

Permission being granted he takes his close friend Lieutenant Wilson along as second-in-command and they eventually discover a Lyran freighter plying between systems. Brady and four Centaurans visit the freighter, leaving Murphy in charge of the cruiser. Not long after Brady and his party have boarded the Lyran ship radio contact is abruptly lost between them and Murphy is staggered to find that the Lyran ship has completely disappeared. No trace of it can be found despite intensive searching—one moment the ship was in full view, the next space was empty. Murphy eventually returns to Admiral Sherman and reports the failure of the mission and Brady's disappearance. Sherman sends an urgent request to Earth to put Professor Hartmann on the job of unravelling the mystery.

Meanwhile, in the middle of listening to the Lyrans talking with the Centaurans, Brady suddenly sees the stars disappear and the ship is enclosed by a black void—at the same time he finds that he is confronted by a Rihnan. The trap has been sprung and Brady has been caught in it. To his dismay he finds that the Rihnan is a telepath and there seems little chance of being able to conceal his knowledge of the Terran secrets.

The Lyran ship returns to its base and Brady is subjected to intensive mental interrogation—at first he manages to block these probes but as the pressure mounts he finds his thoughts acting strangely. Suddenly there is a blinding mental explosion as his mind collapses under the strain. When he recovers the Rihnan interrogators are unconscious at his feet.


GERARD QUINN

Back at Admiral Sherman's H.Q. on Meron, Professor Hartmann's assistant Ben Wilson discovers the secret of the Rihnan disappearing trick with the Lyran freighter—a hidden control on all ships which allows them to be warped out of the normal space continuum. He thinks that he can improve on the Rihnan design and while he gets to work Murphy proposes to Admiral Sherman that he be allowed to make a commando raid on the suspected Rihnan H.Q. on the planet Tekron, where it is assumed Brady will have been taken. After deliberating whether Brady would still be alive or not, Sherman agrees.

Brady recovers consciousness to find that he has acquired the ability to understand other peoples' thoughts and with practice can shield his own even from the Rihnans. Closely guarded on Tekron he discovers that no other Galactic race except the Rihnans and now himself are telepathic. He is eventually allowed outside the building under escort for exercise and one day notices a humanoid stranger taking interest in him—he is suddenly astonished to find that he can reach the man's mind, but before he can do anything about it the man shields his thoughts and disappears into the crowd. Brady thinks the man is probably an agent from Earth in disguise and hopes that he might be rescued.

Shortly after this episode he is interviewed by the President of Tekron and the Rihnan Council, who subject him to intensive mental questioning. He manages to feign ignorance of most important matters and when the Rihnans are apparently satisfied he learns of their plans to trap the Earth fleet when it enters their area of space.

Meanwhile, Murphy's commando party nears Tekron and they prepare for the raid. Sweeping in on the Rihnan H.Q. at night they capture the spacefield and attack the main building, but their search fails to find Brady and they are forced to retreat to the spacefield and escape, taking a number of prisoners with them.

Brady effects his escape from Tekron by taking over mental control of his two guards while out for exercise, walking to the spacefield and getting aboard a small but fast spaceship. Before he is out of the Tekrir system, however, he finds a Rihnan cruiser on his tail and is forced to land on one of the uninhabited outer planets. Hiding in the foothills he watches the Rihnans destroy his ship, cutting him off from escape without food or water. After several days he has about decided to surrender when the Rihnans are attacked by a strange spaceship and destroyed. To Brady's surprise the attacker turns out to be Murphy and his commando group.

Murphy's vessel has been damaged in the encounter and after taking Brady on board they hide out on the planet's only satellite while repairs are effected. Murphy tells Brady of their raid on the Rihnan H.Q. and

how they had only missed him by a few hours—this information being gleaned from the prisoners they had taken.

The delay for repairs means that Admiral Sherman's Grand Fleet will already have left Meron and their only hope is to try and intercept the fleet before the Rihnan's encircle them. They leave the Tekrir system safely and head into outer space.

XVIII.

Murphy pushed the ship hard all through the first four days of the trip. He ordered maximum velocity all the time and from Brady and himself downwards everyone on board prayed that the generators would stand the strain.

Brady and he estimated that if they could do the trip in just over five days they would meet up with Sherman's combined fleets some thirty flying hours before its contact with the combined Rihnan fleets in the central sector. It would be a tight margin, but if Sherman could have only that much warning of the trap for which he was headed it would be enough. The thing which worried them most of all was the chance they had of crashing through the Rihnan fleet, for they would have no time to make the detour that would be necessary to bypass the enemy completely.

It was just over ninety hours after they left the satellite that they stood together in the control room searching for signs of activity ahead of them.

"Our only hope is to hit them from the rear and rely on speed to carry us through before they can get organised," remarked Murphy for the twentieth time.

"You can be pretty sure they'll be lying up under cover of their invisibility shield," replied Brady.

"Yes, sir, but I'll lay odds they have ships scouting from the forward stellar groups. If they get warning to the main fleets that we're going through we'll run into trouble before long." Brady said nothing, they'd been over it so many times before.

He looked at the star map above the control board. On it was shown in red, the approximate line he thought would mark the back line of the Rihnan fleets. That line was barely an hour's flight ahead of them, and if his calculations were only slightly out in the wrong direction then they might already be on the verge of the danger area.

The whole ship was closed up to action stations, and the protective screens were ready for instant erection at the first sign of trouble. Murphy did not want to strain the power resources of the ship too

much by putting the screens up before it was necessary, especially as they were working on a shoestring with their generators as it was.

Murphy flicked the intercom switch and called the engine room.

" Chief, every mile a second you can give us will be valuable." And if his tone was bantering as he said it, Brady could define the strain behind it.

" We'll do our best," was the laconic reply.

Murphy flicked off the switch and turned to look at Brady, his face white and tense. " I almost wish something would happen right now," he said.

Brady grinned faintly, " If it comes at all in the next three hours it'll be too soon," he answered.

" You think it'll take three hours, sir ?"

" Certainly not longer. They won't have their fleets spread out much more, and I should not think the central sector of the Galaxy could be better defended than by a line from Cassiopeia and Perseus towards Taurus and Orion."

" It's a big area."

Brady nodded. " Yes, but a definite one. If Sherman has got enough reinforcements from Earth he can break that line easily, and turn the other two fleets as well. But he can only do that if he has warning that the Rihnans are out in strength to stop him. If he walks into a trap he may lose a third of his ships before he knows what's hit him."

" Surely the screens will hold better than that ?" objected Murphy.

Brady bared his teeth. " Don't fool yourself, Murphy. This is the pay-off as far as the Rihnans are concerned. They're putting everything into this one punch, and with the odds in their favour they can afford to lose ten ships to our one and still hold the superiority of numbers. It's my guess they'll use suicide tactics if necessary, and if they do then a couple of ships hurling themselves baldheaded from two sides would soon make a mess of a first line cruiser, her screens would never stand up to the shock."

Murphy gaped at him in horror, for this was the first time that Brady had ever voiced such opinions. " Surely they'd never do that?"

Brady nodded soberly, his sudden burst of anger passed now. " They would do it all right. Remember, the whole of their great empire rests on this battle, if they lose it then they lose a million years of development, and they become just another race in a Galaxy which will have Man as its master. Put yourself in their shoes, Murphy, you'd try it or die in the attempt."

" But you say yourself that the ships will be manned by other races, they won't particularly want to die for the Rihnans."

" I think there will be at least one Rihnan in every ship," replied Brady, " Possibly more, and I also think that every Rihnan will have one objective, to take an Earth ship with him when his own is destroyed" He drew a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh before he continued, " I feel almost sorry for the Rihnans."

" Sorry ?" Murphy's voice was shocked as he repeated the word in a scandalised yelp.

" That surprises you ? How would you feel if history had at last caught up with you ?"

Murphy was silent, but his face showed plainly that the trend of Brady's conversation was lost on him.

" Ever since their recorded history began the Rihnans have been the top dogs, they overcame calamities that would have smashed another and weaker race. They acted for the good of every race in the Galaxy, even though they themselves skimmed the cream off the milk, so to speak, and now, if they lose one battle, they're finished. In less than a day they can lose the accumulated wealth and experience of a million years, and they will lose it because of their own mistakes."

" Mistakes ?"

Brady nodded. " I don't think they ever really believed that any race would evolve who would be cleverer than they, and they did not prepare against the day when such an unlikely event came to be. They thought that any new race which was discovered could be subdued before it became dangerously powerful, and they got into the habit of seeing new races cut down and brought to heel before they could do anything which might be even remotely dangerous to the Rihnan empire. That was their first mistake. Their second was a direct result of the first. They failed to realise that the impossible was actually happening, and that a race had appeared which was capable of harming them, and not only that, but was capable of taking it away from them. If they had acted as soon as the Centaurans had been over-run they might have conquered the threat before it became dangerous, but they didn't. They had no previous experience to fall back on, and they had nothing ready to deal with the threat. Thus they sat back and waited to see what would happen, and they waited too long."

There was a moment's silence as Brady stopped speaking, then Murphy said fervently, " I hope they have waited too long."

" Why ?" smiled Brady, " Do you think we shall make good rulers for the Galaxy ?"

" I don't know," Murphy shook his head vehemently. " I don't know about that. I only know it's where man should be, on the top.

The human race would never survive as the lackey of another race. I believe we were created to rule."

"So do I," said Brady softly. "But whether we shall do it well, that is another matter."

The intercom buzzed its warning note and stated briefly and laconically, "Unidentifiable craft bearing red, six five."

"Here it comes," said Murphy, and then to the intercom, "Pass all reports for general ship information."

"Detection now bearing red six three, distance ten million."

Murphy flicked two switches on the control board, "All screens," he ordered briefly, and then the golden aura of the ships defences spread out around the speeding hull.

"Detection now shows three vessels bearing red, five nine, distance eight million," said the intercom, and without a pause another voice went on, "Add two more bearing green eight two, distance twelve million."

Murphy's face was grim and he flashed a glance at Brady. "Any orders, sir?"

Brady knew he was only offering the senior officer his privilege and he shook his head formally and replied, "Fight your ship as you please, Mister Murphy."

"Thank you, sir."

Less formally Brady said, "Good luck, Murphy, but ask if you want to, I won't mind."

Murphy smiled briefly at him and said, "I'll probably have to do that before we're through."

Now that it was upon them Brady could feel the tension relax all around him. It was as if exhilaration came when death was standing at a man's shoulder. As he looked round at the faces of the control room staff he could see only the glint of excitement and the tight muscles of keen apprehension where he would have expected fear. No, not where he would have expected fear, for he did not feel it himself at such moments, he felt instead a quickening of the blood and a tenseness of the muscles which was eagerness for action and not the tautness of fright.

"Bearing red, five oh, four million," said the speaker, and again, "Green, six seven, nine million," reported the second voice.

"With luck," said Murphy, "we'll only have to fight them one at a time."

"Strategical error," commented Brady.

"Luckily." Murphy's hand flicked the intercom switch. "All batteries prepare for action against red attackers. Repeat, red attackers first."

Brady noted the fact that he was turning the ship slightly off her course and in the direction of the nearer group on the port side. Murphy was using good tactics in trying to get to grips with the nearest group before the others could hit them from the opposite side. If he could dispose of the three to port first of all, then he would not have to slow down or take evasive action against the two from the starboard side.

" Red attackers, now bearing four nine, two million."

In a few seconds now they could expect the first blasts to be thrown at them and Brady automatically braced himself for the roll which would be certain to come.

Murphy ordered quietly, " Port batteries fire at will when in range. Repeat, fire at will when in range."

Brady recognised the sense in Murphy's order, for he could not direct the fire control and keep the ship on a reasonably straight course at the same time. To operate the fire control effectively he would have to manoeuvre the ship according to the movements of the attackers, and that would almost certainly take her well off course and out of the way. He had to keep going in practically the same direction and as fast as possible if he was going to get home as soon as possible. Home being Sherman's combined fleets.

The intercom said, " Red attackers bearing four seven, one million."

" Any minute now," remarked Murphy, and hardly were the words out of his mouth when space around them whitened and the ship rolled gently as the attacking blasts hit her screens. She righted herself almost instantly and then rolled again as her own armament returned the fire. Three rapid salvoes were delivered in as many seconds after the first attack and the last one had barely died away when the hull rolled again, more violently, as another and heavier attack was made.

" No damage, screens holding," came the report over the speaker. " One down, two to go."

Murphy's eyes glinted and his teeth showed white as he turned to look at Brady. " A nice return for our investment," he remarked.

" I hope it continues."

The ship rolled again as her armament struck back, and still Murphy held her to her course, although by now she was taking a heavy pounding from the two remaining ships. Possibly the lack of any tactical manoeuvring puzzled the attackers, and they did not press in as closely as Brady would have expected, but even so there was a possibility that they would damage their prey if they were allowed to attack too heavily.

Another blast from the port batteries rolled the hull slightly, and bare seconds afterwards the intercom reported, " Two down, one to go."

Murphy straightened the ship up and kept all power possible fed to the drive. If they could dispose of the five ships attacking them they might get clear away before another force was despatched to deal with them.

Brady's thoughts were much on the same lines, but he reached the conclusion that there would be other ships ahead waiting for them if they managed to crash this first line.

The firing was almost continuous from both sides now as the starboard batteries opened up on the two ships coming in from the opposite direction, and to Murphy's consternation some damage was reported from the port after compartments as a blast from the single ship on that side caused a momentary lapse on the screens, fortunately it was not serious and the speed of the vessel was not impeded. Less than a minute later the port batteries took revenge for the damage done by destroying the remaining vessel on that side, and bare seconds later the starboard batteries marked up their first success. The remaining attacker turned and fled.

Murphy eased the ship back on her course, and let out a long thankful breath.

" Obstacle number one," he remarked with forced casualness.

Brady smiled and relaxed. He was at ease now that the first encounter was over and he felt a confidence about their future engagements with the enemy which he was quick to repress.

They sped on through the starlit depths as the drive ate up the distance between them and the Terran fleets. Two hours later they ran into another ambush.

This time they counted upwards of fifty ships stretched dead across their path in four close-packed lines one behind the other at slightly different levels. There were grim faces on the bridge as the message of the detectors was read and they knew that the Rihnans were going to take all possible steps to prevent them joining up with Sherman.

" They've tied us up with the ship they thought had got away," Brady said soberly.

" That's what I think," agreed Murphy grimly. " And they're out to stop us."

As they approached, the four ranks of enemy ships moved into an arrow head formation with the greatest concentration of strength based in a round and blunted tip. They were moving away from them at a much lower speed but on the same course.

Murphy looked at Brady significantly as the news was relayed to them.

" Smart boys," was Brady's reply to his unspoken question.

" We've got to go through," Murphy flicked the intercom switches before him. "All batteries. Independent fire as you bear. We're going through on our present course."

Brady heard one of the bridge crew say, " This is going to be rough," in a voice as calm as if it were on an ocean crossing. He smiled at the humour in the remark.

The speaker buzzed and announced, " Enemy ahead, two million and dropping."

" All batteries—prepare for action," Murphy's voice was as calm as the crew member's a second earlier.

Six leaping blasts of force hit them at once from the near end of the enemy lines and the ship leaped and bucked like a live thing as she rode the blast and plunged on with hardly a pause. They were within range, and hardly had the ship steadied than her own armament thundered in reply, a long rolling burst in answer as each battery took its range and fired at will.

" Two down," came the laconic report from the observation control.

" No hits, no damage," reported damage control in the same breath.

For five minutes they ran a gauntlet of fire and flame such as Brady would not have believed they could receive and still live as an active fighting unit. The blasts of the massed ranks of attacking cruisers licked over the glowing screens and rocked the hull that they protected, and the ship hit back. With batteries flaming their defiant answer, and the observation control calling the roll at intervals, in a voice that was as calm as if it was reporting a football game, she drove along the Lane of Death as it was afterwards christened.

Murphy made no attempt to alter course by so much as one degree, and he and Brady stood as if part of the bridge fittings, as space around them whitened and dissolved into flaming holocausts of destruction.

" Two down to port and one burning," stated observation.

" Port after screen unit damaged, switching to emergency," stated damage control.

" Three down," said observation, " and add two collided."

" Drive generator overheating," called the engine room, " request permission to shed load."

Murphy bared his teeth in an ugly snarl as he heard the last report.

" Permission refused," he shouted into the intercom above the inferno and the noise of the battle. " Hold it for five minutes, chief, and we'll be clear."

" You hope," muttered Brady under his breath.

Ahead of them lay the blunt arrowhead, opening out slightly as the speeding craft caught up with it, and as he watched it, funnel-like before them, Murphy knew fear for one dreadful moment, and then it was gone. He switched the steering controls slightly and turned the vessel upwards in a roaring drive towards the uppermost wall of attacking ships. It hurtled at them, murderous in its intensions, a leaping mass of energy that would destroy anything within its path, and a dozen attackers saw death leaping at them in the long slim line of the ship they had been ordered to stop. For an instant they hung together, while in the control room of the leaping ship Brady's heart turned over as he saw through Murphy's sudden wild scheme. Behind him Barton's breath came out in a low, sibilant hiss, as the line of ships rushed towards them, and then—they scattered. The sudden change in the course which Murphy had made broke the nerve of them that watched it, and Brady could imagine the frantic orders in a dozen alien control rooms as they pushed to get out of the way of the hurtling demon that swung on them like a striking cobra.

And then it was over. Behind them lay a shattered battle line of cruisers, a third of them destroyed, lost in the flaming might of the Terran armament, and six others destroyed by collision with their allies. Behind them a futile chase began as a handful of the attackers rushed in pursuit, but they were too late, for the flying speck that had been their prey was far ahead and increasing the distance with every second that passed.

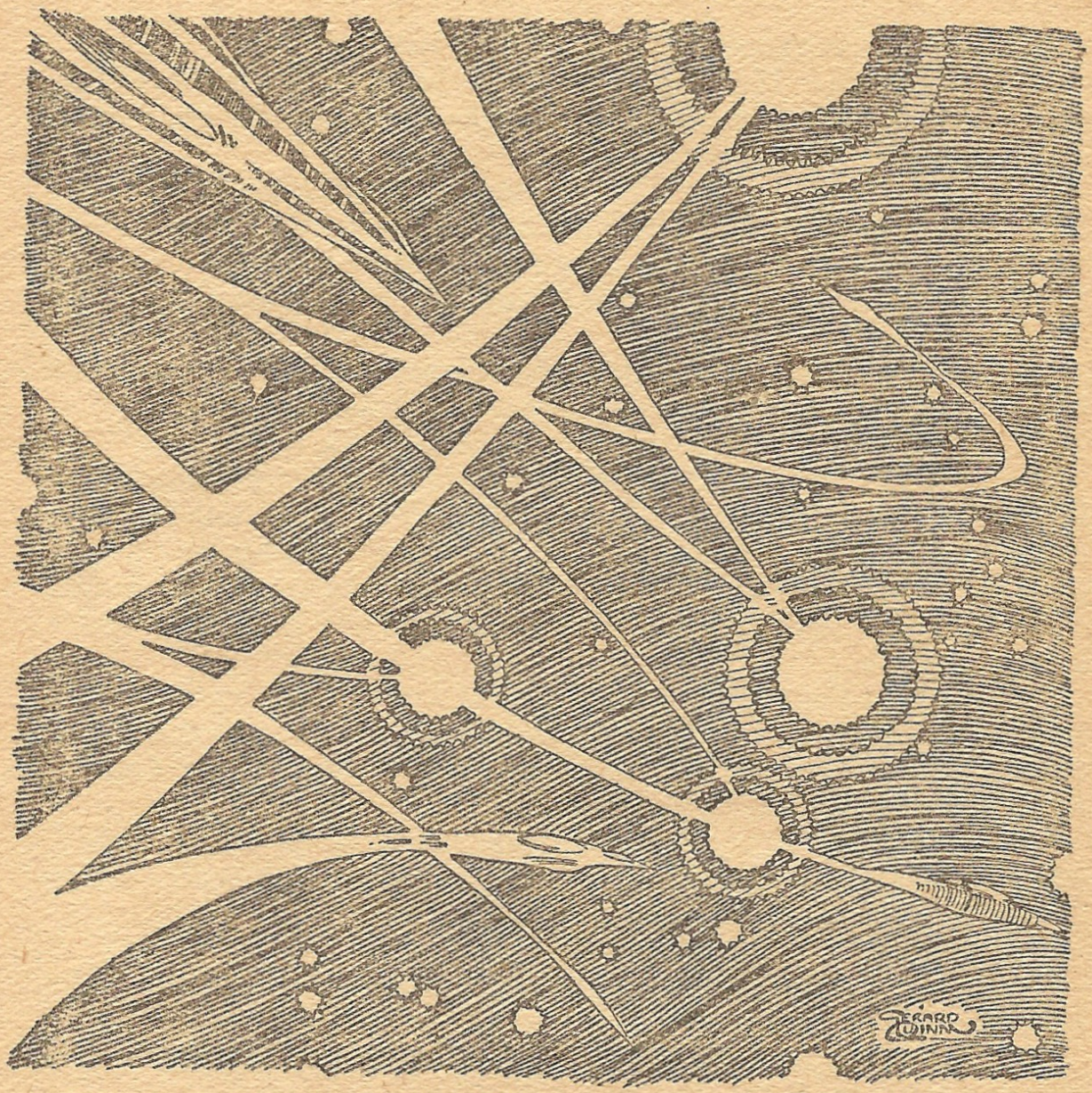
There was dead silence on the bridge for several long seconds, and Murphy eased the vessel gently back on her course, conscious though unbelieving, of the peace that reigned around them.

"Through the Valley of Death rode the six hundred," Brady broke the silence softly with his quotation. "Brilliant manoeuvre, Mister Murphy," he went on. "Shouldn't wonder if it doesn't get into the Space Manual."

Murphy flushed with pleasure, his hands were trembling slightly with reaction now that the fight was over and he had to stifle it by gripping hard at the handrail before him.

"I lost my nerve," he replied stonily, but Brady merely laughed. He appreciated the lightning instinct which had caused Murphy to throw the vessel about so unexpectedly, for it was the subconscious reaction which marked a first class space commander. Few men had it but those few treasured it beyond wealth and made their names in the Terran Space Fleets. He said no more, anxious not to cause Murphy any embarrassment.

The Commander called the engine room, "You can cut your load now, chief, we're through," he said.



" I think that may be their last try," Brady remarked speculatively, " What do you think ?"

Murphy considered for a second and then nodded, " Yes, it could be. The way those others tried to chase us would indicate that they knew there was nothing else to stop us."

" That's my view. I think it will be plain sailing now. How long before we come up with the fleet ?"

" About twenty-four hours, sir."

XIX.

Actually, it was twenty-three hours and forty minutes.

Both Brady and Murphy slept for several hours after their run through the Rihnan fleets, but a strict lookout was kept for any further signs of attack. None came.

Murphy was called to the control room at the first sign that contact had been made with Sherman's fleets, and he got there to find one single, unobtrusive dot on the long range detection screen.

"The lead scout, I reckon, sir," said Barton who was the watch officer.

Murphy nodded. "I shouldn't be surprised. We'll be up with her in fifteen minutes. You'd better call Captain Brady."

"Aye, aye, sir." Barton sent a crew man on the errand.

Murphy watched the dot carefully for the next few minutes. Not by so much as a fraction of a degree did it alter course, but kept to a steady, low speed. Under other circumstances Murphy would have dismissed it as a cruising trader or passenger ship, but he knew that such could not be the case at the present time and in that particular corner of space.

Brady reached the control room to find that the dot on the screen had grown larger and that it had been joined by five other dots, all farther out and spread in a long line with a considerable distance between each ship and its neighbour.

"Sherman is running the main fleet under cover of the field," Murphy told him. "Those ships must be the section scouts acting as guides and lookouts for the fleets in the field."

"Any recognition signals yet?" asked Brady.

"Yes, sir, they're being passed now. Sherman will know we're around in a few minutes."

"Good, get a message off to him asking for an immediate and urgent conference."

"I've already done so, sir," smiled Murphy.

Sherman's eagerness to see Brady was obvious by the summons he sent to join him aboard the flagship at once, and he even went so far as to bring his ship out of the field to facilitate the meeting.

He was waiting in his cabin with half a dozen staff officers when Brady reached his ship, and his pleasure at seeing Brady was obvious as he rose, beaming to shake hands with the returned captive.

"I never thought Murphy would pull it off," were his first clear remarks.

Brady grinned, "Very nearly didn't, sir."

Sherman nodded. " I'll have to hear the whole story some time, but now, what is so urgent ?"

Brady fell in with his mood and said, with appropriate seriousness, " I picked up some information on Tekron, sir, which made it imperative that I reached you first."

Sherman said nothing but the lines on his forehead deepened as he saw how serious Brady was and he listened without a murmur while Brady repeated his story. When it was finished Brady sat back and waited for the reactions. All eyes were on Sherman as he sat, deep in thought, for several long minutes.

" How long before we shall be within detection range of the Rihnan fleets, basing their position on Captain Brady's estimate ?" he snapped the question at the lean, black-haired staff captain in charge of fleet detection who sat on his left.

" I'd say—around twenty hours, allowing for a safety margin," was the reply.

" Right." Sherman sat back stiffly in his chair with the palms of his hands laying flat on the table before him. " Gentlemen, I will outline my plan of action, in the light of Captain Brady's information, by telling you what I want you to do. From that it should be self evident. I shall issue immediate orders for the fleets to stop and pull in the scout ships."

There was blank, amazed silence. Sherman rose and moved across to the star map which loomed against one wall of the cabin.

" If Brady is right then the Rihnan fleets are concentrated in this area here," he touched a series of buttons at the base of the map and a red glow covered a large rough cube in the top right hand segment of the map. " I intend to detach the seventh, tenth, seventeenth and twentieth cruiser squadrons together with their attending light destroyers, under the command of Rear Admiral Thornton, and to send them, under cover of the field, but with one leading scout, along a route to the Galactic north of the Pleiades, and back north of Capella so that they can come down to the rear of the Rihnan lines. The remainder of the fleet will lie here for a sufficient time to allow the squadrons to get into position, and will then proceed to meet the Rihnans, but not under cover of the field."

The final remark brought a buzz of surprised and angry comment from the assembled officers. Brady sat with tight lips. Sherman was no fool, and he must have a good reason for his actions.

Sherman waited until the noise had died down and then he went on. " I realise your objections, gentlemen, and I appreciate them, but I have good reason for what I propose. The Rihnans do not

know that we have broken the secret of their field, and they believe that they will take us completely by surprise when we reach the lines which Brady has shown us. Well, we will let them think that. They will expect to meet a fleet sailing openly and in perfect formation, through space towards them," he smiled grimly. "And we won't disappoint them. They will have to come from behind their field to fight us and they will do so as soon as we are nicely in the trap, but there will be two things that they will not bargain for. One, every ship in the fleet will be waiting for them the moment they come out of that field, and they will meet such a blast of fire as they never dreamed existed. Then, just as they realise their mistake the main fleet will vanish behind a screen of their own making. I think that should create sufficient confusion for the detached squadron to hit them in the rear just when and where they least expect it."

Sherman leaned back with a satisfied smile on his face. "Any questions?"

Tension relaxed as he stopped speaking and there was a rustling of bodies as the others shifted in their seats and considered the plan Sherman had put to them.

Gerard, the communications officer for the fleets lifted his hand, and asked, "What about the other two fleets, sir?"

"They will be called upon, that's obvious," agreed Sherman. "But they will not come expecting to deal with anything but an already half defeated foe. If we can wipe out the central portion of the combined Rihnan fleets without serious loss to ourselves then I think we shall have a considerable moral pull when we meet the rest. In any case, the detached squadrons will resume their patrol under cover of the field and independent of us so that we can call them in as a surprise diversion against the other fleets."

"Suppose we can't handle the first fleet?" asked Grierson, the fleet armaments officer.

Sherman's eyes were hard and his lips thin as he answered, "We've got to."

There were no more questions and ten minutes later the staff left to carry out Sherman's orders, leaving Brady alone with the Admiral. He accepted a drink that Sherman offered him and sipped it appreciatively. "First one for a long time, sir."

Sherman smiled. "Did you have too bad a time of it?"

"No, not really. No ill treatment anyway, though I got a good look at some of our future subjects." Brady grinned reminiscently. "Some very unprepossessing specimens among them too." He went on to tell Sherman about his outings under guard, and about the various races which he saw on Tekron. He told him about the Rihnans

and about their ability to read minds and use telepathy as a means of communication. It was on the tip of his tongue to mention his own new powers, but he decided that it was a quite inopportune time to do so. Later, when all this was over, would be time enough.

Sherman glanced at his wrist watch, he was obviously anxious to go on listening to Brady's tale but he was equally aware of the responsibilities to which he had to attend.

"Perhaps you'll have dinner with me tonight, Brady," he said. "I'll have Murphy come over and join us, then I can hear all about your imprisonment and how he rescued you in one piece, without having to wait for the next instalment. I always hated serials, even when I was a kid."

Brady smiled and tactfully took his leave. He wandered along to the wardroom and found the Executive Officer from whom he requested a cabin. In ten minutes he was stretched lazily in a large and very comfortable chair, puzzling over the enigmas with which he had been presented.

Chief among them was the problem of his new mental accomplishments. The more he thought about them the more he felt that he had been saddled with a Frankensteinian monster which would destroy him if he was not very careful. While he had been among the Rihnans he had found it necessary to set aside the normal means of communication to which he was accustomed, and he had not found anything particularly strange or alien about the way in which he could delve into the mental processes of his captors. He had taken a great deal of pleasure from the knowledge that he could read their smallest thoughts, and he knew now that he had felt intolerably superior to them as a result of the advantage which he had gained. It was, he realised now, that feeling of superiority which had enabled him to stand up so well under the long weeks of his captivity.

Now that he was back among his own race there seemed to be something obscene in the facility with which he could see into other men's minds. There lay in that faculty a power which horrified him when he came to think about it seriously and he knew that he would never be able to bring himself to use it to gain his own ends.

But was it something which he could share with the whole Human Race ? The way in which he had acquired it could not easily be duplicated, for it had come to him as a matter of overwhelming necessity at a time when the ordinary resources of the mind and body could not alone defend him. Such circumstances could not be synthesized, though he did not doubt that mankind's native curiosity would eventually unlock the secret.

Brady did not underestimate the skill of the Terran scientists and psychologists (it was to the latter that he looked for explanation of his powers) for he had sufficient confidence in the Human Race to know that if something existed and they knew about it then, somehow, Terran scientists would duplicate it. In the right hands it could be a boon to all mankind, but in the wrong hands ! He had enough vision to see what might happen, and it was not pleasant.

Sherman gave the detached squadrons thirty-six hours to reach the point in space to which he had directed them. That point had been based on the information which Brady and Murphy had produced about the approximate position of the Rihnan fleets, and although it was only based on observation, Sherman hoped that it would remain more or less static despite the perceptibly fluid movements that could be expected when a force as large as the Rihnan fleets were spread over such a wide area.

The order to switch from the invisibility field was given only a minute or so before the order for the Terran fleets to proceed on their long interrupted journey, and Brady was on the bridge of the flagship with Sherman and the other staff officers when the orders were given. It was a sight he knew he would remember as long as he lived, for at one second space around them was empty, save for themselves and a dozen other vessels. They seemed to be alone in the star-strewn depths of space a few insignificant dots lost in the immensity of the Universe, then, in a moment, the whole scene was changed, and where there had been only the blackness of deep space there lay line upon line of twinkling dots in regular formation above, below and to the rear of the flagship. In countless hundreds they swept across the field of vision, produced it seemed by a magician who worked only on a cosmic scale.

As he looked Brady realised that here, before his eyes, lay the whole might of one tiny planet revolving around an insignificant star in an unfrequented corner of space. In the row upon row of ships lay the destiny of a race who had barely existed at a time when their enemies were masters of the Galaxy they were seeking to conquer. His mind reeled at the vistas that were opened before him, and he felt a sudden fear that they might fail, and then he felt another fear, that they might succeed and be found wanting in the tasks that would lie ahead of them.

Brady saw with terrible clarity, what victory would mean to the Human Race, he saw what defeat would mean also and he wondered which would be worse. Defeat would mean the extinction of everything, the slate would be wiped clean so that the Galaxy in general, and the Rihnans in particular, would never be threatened again.

Victory—he wondered if, in a few hundred years it would be called victory—would mean complete dedication to the task of ruling the Galaxy, and it might be that such a task for so young a race would prove an impossibility. Mankind might bend under the strain and collapse under the weight of the responsibility, and with the Rihnans gone who would take their place ? The coming battle might mean the end of the Galaxy as a sentient entity, the spark of genius might go from it never to return.

Brady shivered suddenly. The sound of Sherman's voice ordering the fleets under weigh broke the unpleasantness of his thoughts, and he gave himself to the contemplation that went with watching the marching squadrons as they moved across the backcloth of the heavens.

He slept uneasily for some hours, along with thousands of others in hundreds of ships, for now that Sherman knew almost exactly when and where the trouble would begin he could afford to rest his crews to the limit, where before he had been forced to keep maximum lookouts on duty.

Three hours before they reached the position which Brady and Murphy had estimated as the front line of the Rihnan fleets the entire crews on all the vessels were alerted and every possible weapon, both offensive and defensive, was manned. Despite the power lag involved all protective screens were erected and every possible precaution was taken that maximum readiness was attained.

They stayed at action stations for nearly five hours, but from the flagship's bridge Brady did not tire of watching the massed ranks of ships as they marched in formation across the heavens. Sherman had done a good job of arranging the formations. He had formed them into two giant boxes one within the other, so that maximum firepower and maximum defensive ability could be achieved with the minimum loss of tactical distribution. It was unorthodox, but it fitted the emergency.

Everyone from Sherman downwards knew, that when it came, the onslaught would be sudden, vicious, and possibly overwhelming. Even so, the complete unexpectedness of it stunned and dazed the entire fleet for almost five seconds, and in those five seconds it was found afterwards, seventy three ships vanished under the raging holocaust of fire which hit the fleet. The heavens were empty and serene, just as they has been for hours past, and all the peace in the Universe seemed to lie over the Terran fleet. Then, in an instant, the heavens around them erupted in a mighty spasm of fire and flame as line upon line, squadron upon squadron, the attackers appeared around the

twin boxes that were the Terran fleets and for vital seconds poured unreturned fire into the ambushed ships.

But Sherman's strategy worked despite those vital five seconds. The time lag might have been six times as long had Brady not brought him warning, and the losses he would have sustained would have been crippling. And then the fire was returned, first one ship, quicker off the mark than the others, and then in less than a flicker of the eyelids the entire fleet followed suit. The Rihnans staggered under the viciousness of a blow they had not expected and saw their massed ranks crumbling around them with bewildering rapidity under the lightning reaction of their prey.

Sherman gave them just two minutes of fire, but in those two minutes their losses were enormous. As one cruiser captain said after it was like shooting clay pigeons, and the Rihnans reaction was just as Brady predicted, suicide tactics. They crashed their ships wildly against the defensive screens of the Terran ships and took their opponents with them in brilliant displays of fire and flame, as the overloaded generators disintegrated under the sudden colossal strains to which they were subjected.

Sherman's reactions were instantaneous as he flashed out the timing for the fleet to seek cover behind the invisibility field. As the flagship sought the peace of the unplumbed blackness behind the field Sherman turned a grim face to Brady who was beside him.

"We've had heavy losses, I hope we can sustain them."

"The Rihnans are heavier, sir, and I bet our disappearance has played havoc with them. Let's hope Thornton can follow up the advantage we've given him," replied Brady.

Sherman consulted the wall clock, "I'm giving him ten minutes. With the element of surprise in his favour he should be able to accomplish more in that time than we could."

"I'd give a lot to have been around the Rihnans when we vanished," remarked Brady with a grin. "It must have been quite a shock for them."

"And not the last they'll get I hope."

The minutes ticked slowly by, and tension mounted on the bridge as the time drew near for them to slip back from beneath the field. The quickness of the first spell of action had whetted the appetites of the entire fleet, and the prospect of further encounters mixed anticipation with the apprehension which Brady found within him. The nerves of his stomach fluttered uncomfortably, and he moistened his lips as he watched the wall clock move slowly towards the mark which

Sherman had set. Around him he could sense the tension in the officers and men on the bridge, while Sherman walked a few paces up and down in front of the control boards, his hands clasped firmly behind his back to camouflage his own desire for action.

The steady buzz of conversation had an eagerness about it which denoted the state of mind among the officers, and even the ratings manning the technical equipment found relief in low-toned speculation about what was going on outside the field. Brady could hear snatches of conversation, and he concentrated on them in an effort to take his mind off the slowly moving hands of the clock, but before he had time to make a coherent picture out of them, he heard Sherman's barked announcement, " Twenty seconds. Stand by the field control."

There was an instant silence as all eyes turned to the clock and unwinking attention was given to the small, inanimate measure that pointed towards the future. The hand flicked over the zero mark at the top of the dial and instantly the field control cut the power to the field circuit. Brady heard someone mutter, " Here we go," and then they flickered back into the reality of the Universe.

It was like emerging from an oasis of peace to the violence of the Pit itself, for all space around them was a blasted, fiery cataclysm of chaos. That Thornton's squadrons had done their job, and done it well, there could be no doubt, and from the turmoil that greeted them Brady could picture the scene as the Rihnans had been hit from the back by a fleet which they did not know existed, and hit while they were still boggling at the astounding disappearance of an apparently crippled enemy. Of Thornton's fleet there was no sign, it had gone under the shelter of the field bare seconds before, and the timing of the whole operation was a tribute to the co-ordination that Sherman's staff had arranged.

And with Thornton's going he had left behind not a fleet, not even a semblance of a fleet, but a shattered remnant of battered ships whose crews were too dazed by the calamity which had hit them to offer even a token resistance to the re-emerged fleets of Sherman's force. Individuals fired their weapons in blind instinct and not on the orders of their superiors, for the fire control had broken down in all but a handful of ships, and the very fact of their ineffective independent power sealed their fate, for every ship that fired was destroyed by the Terran vessels. The Rihnans were caught in their own trap for the crews they commanded were not Rihnan, and could not even begin to understand the forces in which they were entangled. From experience they had thought that Rihnan technology was invincible, and when it failed them they had nowhere to turn for support. As they saw their sister ships vanish in appalling blasts of fire and fury their dis-

cipline collapsed, and dozens of ships were destroyed simply because their crews had lost the very basis of their existence, their belief in the almightiness of Rihnan culture.

In half an hour it was over. The dead were never counted, and even the number of Rihnan ships destroyed remained a matter of conjecture for ever afterwards, although it was established that well over three thousand ships were lost in the battle while the Terran losses were one hundred and sixteen vessels destroyed and forty-three damaged. It was the first and the last great space battle in the history of the Galaxy. The other two Rihnan fleets, coming up fast in answer to the call of their colleagues, found only the blazing remnants of the once mighty machine that was their third arm, and from the few pitiful survivors they heard stories which far outstripped the real horror of the scene. They heard tales of phantom fleets, of invincible and terrible weapons which destroyed everything in their path, and of a devilish race whose powers were beyond description, and whose fleets were even now manoeuvring to attack the two remaining fleets.

Such was, in effect, the case, for Sherman had drawn off his main force under cover of the field, and was regrouping to fall upon the new attackers as soon as possible. Thornton's squadrons, whose losses had been negligible, had also drawn off in the opposite direction to await the order to attack from the rear when the pace became too hot for Sherman's forces.

Twelve hours after the first encounter Sherman moved rapidly to the attack. With three scouts out ahead of his main force to give warning when they were approaching the Rihnan fleets he moved in fast to catch them with damaging blows while they were still reeling under the shock of the massacre of their main fleet. The Terrans came out of the field with almost mechanical precision well within firing range of their prey, and in three sudden thrusts the first line of cruisers split the Rihnan fleet into four separate sections ready for the heavier vessels coming up behind. The first attack did little damage, it was intended only as a softening up process, but it was enough.

The Rihnans broke and fled before Sherman could come to close grips with them, and Thornton's vessels did not fire one shot at them or indeed see anything to fire at. In two hours the whole project was over and the victory was one such as Brady had never dreamed possible. What Rihnan ships had not fled had been captured, and their alien crews were eager to protest their unwillingness to serve their erstwhile masters further. It was the Centaurans all over again, and it showed all too clearly how completely unprepared the Rihnans had been for even the mildest threat to their great empire.

Sherman acted rapidly upon witnessing the completeness of the Terran victory. He despatched task forces of twenty vessels each to take control of the surrounding systems and thus enlarge the Terran orbit of influence. The effect of his action was to make his headquarters on Ortan quite impregnable, and to ensure that the home system, Sol, had a solid foundation from which the ultimate conquest of the Galaxy would be a mere matter of ships and men. The Rihnan defeat was complete, and absolute, there was little chance of their being able to integrate sufficient force to threaten the Terran position, even supposing they were resilient enough to attempt such an action.

The remainder of the fleet was split into two parts, the first, under Thornton, was based upon Tekron so that it would be well placed to deal with any trouble that might arise in that sector of the Galaxy without the need for action from Ortan, the second part, still under Sherman, returned to Ortan.

XX.

The Grand Action, as it became known, had been over nearly four weeks, and on Ortan the main portion of the Terran fleet had already begun to slip into the easy ways of peace. When an enemy is as totally defeated as the Rihnans had been, awareness of their former strength becomes a legend which men talk about but do not believe.

Even the scars which still decorated a few of the cruisers did not impress those who saw them. Familiarity had really bred contempt, and mankind was too busy assuming the mantle of Ruler of the Galaxy to ponder overmuch on how that position had been attained.

Murphy was in the officers' mess reading the latest news from Earth with avid interest when Brady came slowly into the room and wandered across to sit down opposite him. His face, and indeed his whole demeanour, was thoughtful to a degree, and Murphy, after offering a casual greeting might have ignored him had not his obvious preoccupation prevented him from answering.

Murphy put down the paper and eyed him thoughtfully for a second. Brady was certainly bothered.

" Anything wrong, sir ?"

Brady looked up with sudden surprise, " Wrong ? No-no, there's nothing wrong. I just saw a couple of those antennaed people outside the spaceport. First I've seen since Tekron, I started wondering about them."

Murphy grinned, " I expect the Centaurans will tell you all you want to know."

" Yes, I'll make some enquiries when I get time."

"Have you seen the news, sir?" Murphy offered him a paper. "Came in from Earth yesterday."

"Yes," Brady twisted his face in disgust. "All blathering about the Grand Action and crowing over our victory against 'those alien monsters, the Rihnans'." He shook his head. "I just wish some of those editors had been there and seen it, they might have changed their ideas if they'd seen a few hundred ships going up in fire and smoke at the same instant."

Murphy nodded in silence. He had had those feelings too over the past week or so, for now that the fine flush of battle had gone, a reaction was setting in. Even Sherman had felt it judging by his irascible conduct recently.

"I feel almost sorry for the Rihnans now," Murphy said slowly after a minute.

"You're stealing my line," replied Brady with a slight smile.

"Yes, sir, I know, but it took that battle to make me realise just what it must have meant to them. I thought about it a lot during the trip home and I tried to see the human race in the same position. I tried to picture us as a race who had ruled the Galaxy in undisputed might for a million years, and then another people come along, an upstart crew who have only just discovered how to cross space. One fight lasting less than a day and a million years of effort and striving is ended and we become just another race who has reached the end of the line. Well, I couldn't do it, but I think I know how they must be feeling."

Brady nodded soberly, and Murphy went on, "I couldn't help thinking too, sir, how easy everything has been for us right from the start. Ever since that first contact with the Rihans on Sirius Five every move we've made has come off with some degree of success. It almost seems, when you think about it, as if they were never meant to win, or perhaps it just seems that after nearly half a million years of complete stagnation they were not capable of reacting to a serious threat when it comes along. Perhaps that was their weakness, they just never met up with anyone like us before and when they did, well—it was more than they could handle, they could not adapt."

But Brady was not listening, suddenly he was no longer there, and only the swinging door showed where he had departed. Murphy gaped at it in amazement for a second, and then returned to his paper with a shrug, he had known Brady far too long to be disturbed overmuch at any eccentric action which his superior took.

Brady made straight for Sherman's office, and was passed inside by the Admiral's secretary. Sherman looked up in surprise as Brady entered.

" Hallo, Captain, I was just about to send for you. You've saved a messenger a trip, anyway. Sit down." He waved Brady to a chair at the side of his desk. " Now, what can I do for you ?"

Brady settled himself comfortably and marshalled his thoughts for a second before replying, then he asked, " You remember I told you that I thought efforts were being made to get me off Tekron, sir ?"

Sherman frowned for a second. " Oh, yes. That night at dinner you mentioned a being with antennae sprouting from his forehead. You thought he was an Earthman. Yes, I remember, what about it ?"

" I've just seen a couple of them outside the spacefield, sir, and I'm just a little bit curious about them."

" Oh, why ?"

" Have any passenger vessels landed here recently ?"

Sherman shook his head. " No, we restricted the planet nearly two months ago, and there has been no interstellar craft apart from fleet vessels for nearly four months."

Brady nodded. " That means they must have been here before that. If I might ask a favour, sir, I'd like to question a Centauran and find out more about them."

Sherman looked at him shrewdly, not a little puzzled. He had a great deal of faith and respect in Brady's ability, and he was not prepared to refuse him such a simple request without even the barest examination.

" Are you worried about them ?"

" No, not worried, just curious."

" I'll get a couple of Centauran officials in and we'll ask them about it." Sherman pressed a buzzer on his desk and gave the necessary orders.

Five minutes later two Centaurans entered and with the aid of a small translator Sherman questioned them about the race with the antennae growing from their foreheads. While he did so Brady sat and listened attentively to the answers.

It appeared that the race was known as the Alkora, and they inhabited a small planet revolving around a little known star on the edge of the Galaxy, at a considerable distance from Ortan, the Centauran sun. They were a small race, numbering only a few hundred millions, and although they were frequently seen in ones and twos on most inhabited planets in the Galaxy, very few of them travelled to any great extent. Those that did were mainly on small missions of trade and commerce.

When they mentioned trade and commerce the Centaurans attitude was plainly one of contempt, and further questions from Sherman elicited the fact that the Alkora were one of the poorest races in the

Galaxy. They had no mineral deposits of any importance, and any form of technology was quite beyond them. They relied on exchanging the simple products of their agricultural economy for small articles and tools of metal, which helped to improve their lot at home. They lived in small, scattered communities spread across their planet, and such was their poverty that they were quite unable to come within the great technological orbit which encompassed all the other sentient races of the Galaxy.

And that was all the Centaurans knew. No, neither of them had been to Alkor, though they knew of people who had. Yes, they could point out the star on the map, and one of them proceeded to do so. Further questions failed to produce any more details, and from the way in which they began to answer the Centaurans could not have cared less about the subject. They were, quite plainly, surprised that their Terran overlords should show so much interest in so minor a race. At last Sherman dismissed them.

As the door closed behind their departing figures he leaned back in his chair and looked at Brady who was sitting thoughtfully beside him.

"Well, does that answer all your questions, Captain?"

Brady stirred and shook his head slowly. "Not really, sir. I know more about them, but I'm still puzzled."

"Oh, why?"

There Brady was stumped. He could not give all his reasons to Sherman without arousing doubts about his own sanity. He shrugged and replied lamely, "Just a hunch, I guess."

Sherman smiled. "I think what you need is a trip back to Earth."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Sherman laughed loudly. "I thought that would interest you. I'm sending a confidential report to the President, and I'm not trusting it to code and radio. It's not extremely urgent or I might, but I felt that Bannerman would pay more attention to it if you took it to him in person."

Brady's problem faded suddenly as Bannerman's name was mentioned. It was the answer which had been staring him in the face all along and he had missed it. The only person to whom he could safely tell his story and demonstrate his powers was the President. Bannerman was a person whose insight and evaluation were rare even in that enlightened age, and from his past contacts with the President Brady had unqualified faith in his judgment. That, plus the fact that he would be going home, lifted the cloud from his mind for the first time in weeks. For a moment he felt elated, and then his mind turned

back to the Alkora. If he went home and told the President everything, there was little chance that he would have any further opportunity of returning to space for some considerable time if at all, and he badly wanted to look further into this race which had aroused his interest to such an extent.

Sherman noted with some surprise the first flush of pleasure which was followed so quickly by a frowning reluctance, the two emotions did not seem to go together under the circumstances, but he said nothing, and waited quietly for Brady to refuse the trip home. Sherman knew that he would.

" I want to get back to Earth, sir, naturally, but—" Brady stirred uneasily, obviously uncertain how Sherman was going to react.

" But you want to visit Alkor."

Brady blinked in surprise. " Yes, sir, I do, but—"

" I'm a bit of a psychologist as well as an Admiral." Sherman rose and walked across to the window to look out across the vast stretch of the spaceport. " You've got something on your mind, Brady, that's quite clear. I don't know what it is, but if you think it's important then I feel justified in backing you. What do you want to do ?"

He turned to look at his junior who had risen and was looking quietly and seriously at him. " I do think there's something wrong, sir, but what it is I just cannot guess. What I require is a ship to take me to Alkor and have a look around for myself." He shrugged helplessly, " There may be nothing, but—"

" On the other hand there may be something," Sherman nodded, understandingly. " All right, What ship do you want ?"

" Something small and fast but well armed."

Sherman walked back to his desk and scrutinised a list which lay to one side of it, " Let's see—I can spare a CX light cruiser. Will that do ?"

" A hundred crew," Brady nodded. " Yes, sir, and—"

" Yes," broke in Sherman, " Murphy can be your number two."

Brady flushed with some embarrassment. " Thank you, sir." He was quite well aware that his oft-repeated partnership with Murphy was something of a joke through the fleet, but he was prepared to put up with it for the sake of their friendship.

" When do you want to start ?"

" I think forty-eight hours will be enough, sir. I want to get my old crew together as far as possible."

Sherman nodded his agreement and said, " I'll issue the necessary orders at once and you can go ahead as you wish. I'll get someone else for the trip to Earth."

"There'll be no lack of volunteers, sir."

"I'd like to volunteer myself," replied the Admiral with some feeling.

Brady smiled, he appreciated Sherman's outlook. "I'll go and start preparations, sir."

Sherman came round and shook hands with him, "Good luck, and," with a smile, "don't worry if it comes to nothing."

"Thank you, sir."

As he left the office Brady wondered what Murphy would say when he found that he had turned down a trip to Earth to go chasing across the Galaxy on a wild goose errand. He decided not to tell him.

XXI.

Alkora's star was a yellow disc, tiny and almost without diameter in the centre of the forward view port.

Through the glass it showed as a great glowing orb floating majestically in the deep black of space. On the screens the lone planet showed to one side of it, nearer to the ship than the star itself, though not yet close enough to be discernible with the naked eye.

As he watched their destination drawing slowly nearer Brady felt the tension within him rising. It was a tension which had been with him for the whole of the twenty-day trip across the Galaxy and when he awoke that morning he had hoped that it would leave him now that his journey was almost over. It had not, instead it had grown stronger, making him prowl even more restlessly around the main control room, and complain loudly when a minor incident occurred. Murphy, used to these moods of old, kept out of his way, though he himself was experiencing, to a lesser degree, something of Brady's emotions.

When he had first heard of their trip he had grumbled resentfully at being pulled from the officers' mess in which he was so comfortably installed, and that bitterness had lasted right up until the takeoff. On further speculation though, he realised that Brady would not undertake such a trip unless he had something pretty important on his mind, and Sherman would never have sanctioned it unless he, too, felt reasonably sure of Brady's intentions.

All through that forenoon watch they saw the planet grow nearer. From a dot on the detector screens it grew to a spot that had dimension and from a spot it became a blob that could be made out with the naked eye through the viewport, and the star, too, took on added grandeur as the distance decreased and the Universe shrank once more from the vastness of Galactic distance to the finity of a planetary orbit. It was like entering a small room after hours in the open country.

Brady had timed the flight so that they would be able to land on the planet's one spaceport during the early part of the Alkoran day, and he spent nearly half an hour anxiously checking the chronometer against the information he had regarding the planet's rotation and the position of the single space-landing field. By the time he had finished Alkor loomed before them, a bare fifty thousand miles off, floating like a giant, nebulous, blue ball against the backcloth of stars. They could see the night line clearly from that altitude and Brady moved the ship slowly in towards that point over which the field should have just passed from night to day.

They came lower and their speed dropped accordingly, and soon they could make out details of the land below through drifting masses of silver cloud. Through the distance glass Brady searched eagerly for signs of the field, but he did not see anything until the cloud was just below them and their height was a bare forty thousand feet.

" There it is, Mister Murphy," his voice was excited and his finger jabbed eagerly in the direction of his glasses.

Murphy turned a bearing glass on the faint brown square that Brady had pointed out and read out the figures.

" That's it right enough, sir," he announced as he finished the check. " The co-ordinates agree exactly."

Brady nodded. " Take her down, Mister Murphy."

The field opened up before them as they came in for landing. It showed as a great, brown gash in the unbroken green of the surrounding country, and nowhere that he looked could Brady see anything that faintly resembled a city or even a large town. Through his glasses he saw small groups of buildings beside the field, and farther away too, there were signs of habitation. The whole vista of the planet that could be seen was one of agricultural regularity, save here and there where large, wooded tracts broke the conformity. Occasionally a thin ribbon of brown marked a rough road and others, blue and silver in the early morning light of the star, showed where the twisting lines of rivers and streams ran through the land and down to the seas.

Brady left the landing to Murphy and the second-in-command carried it out with a slick perfection born of long practice. There was scarcely a tremor as the giant hull came easily to rest in the geometric centre of the field. Murphy lifted her slightly and eased her slowly to one side, leaving the main length of the field ahead of them in case there was need for a quick takeoff.

Brady smiled as he noted the move. " Ready for trouble, Murphy?"

" I don't trust it," replied the second officer. " It's too quiet, sir, anything could happen."

Brady had spotted a small group of single-storied buildings to one side as they landed and he turned the glasses on them seeking signs that they were inhabited; he did not have to search very long. From the shelter of one of them emerged a single being and even at that distance, with the aid of the glasses Brady could make out the twin stems of the familiar antennae rising from his forehead. He grunted, " Well, it's the right place anyhow. Have the starboard hatch opened, Mister Murphy, we'll go out and take a look."

Murphy issued the orders and turned back to look at the being who was crossing the space field towards them. The first things that caught his eye were the twin antennae that Brady had told him about, but the rest of the Alkoran's appearance was decidedly human, just as Brady had told him. Murphy realised with a shock that he had not expected to see anything or anyone that was not completely alien, despite Brady's assurances that without the antennae these people could pass as homo sapiens.

" Certainly looks human enough, sir."

" Uh huh ! Well, let's go down and meet him."

" I've arranged a portable translator."

Brady was on the point of asking why when he realised that, to Murphy, telepathic communication was confined exclusively to the Rihnans.

" Good idea," he replied.

Together they left the control room and made their way aft to the starboard landing hatch. They reached the top of the ramp to find the Alkoran waiting for them on the ground below. Three crew men formed the rest of the landing party and one of them carried the small, black, plastic box which contained the cerebro-translator. Brady led the way down to the ground. As he walked the last few feet he wondered idly, " How does one greet such a being in these circumstances ? Shake hands maybe ? If he knows the gesture which I doubt."

Then he was standing looking into the light, green-flecked eyes of the Alkoran. At close quarters the human-like qualities of his appearance were even more apparent. They stood looking at each other for a long moment—each, as obviously as the other, revelling in the strangeness of a new experience, then, slowly, the Alkoran lifted his arm and held his right hand out towards Brady. Automatically he reached and clasped it, his mind a whirl of speculation and surprise while behind him he could hear the gasps of excited comment from his companions.

He thought, " How did he know about that ?" and there came the strong, clearcut reply in his brain. " It is written in your mind, Earthman."

Brady stood quite still, he did not know quite what to do. It seemed as if all the implications of everything that had happened to him from the moment of that first clash of contact back on Tekron had caught up with him.

The others were silent behind him, waiting for him to give them a lead. The small incident of the handshake had fallen behind them, lost in the greater importance of their mission, and they were anxious to get on with it.

"You have a translator which we can use," the thought sprang in Brady's mind. "I see from your thoughts that your comrades do not know of our ability to converse otherwise. It would be as well if they did not find out."

"As you wish," Brady gave the answer automatically.

The Alkoran turned and gestured towards the buildings at the edge of the field, then he walked off ahead of them to lead the way. Brady and Murphy fell in behind him, and the remaining three trailed along in the rear.

The buildings for which they headed were a peculiar mixture of the primitive and the ultra-modern. They were built of wood and had thatched roofs, the windows were glassless and had thin raffia blinds which could be pulled down to keep out the sun or the rain, but the whole construction was so beautifully simple and plain that even Murphy was forced to remark about the neat compilation of the work.

"They look as if they could stand for a century or two," he said wonderingly. "Yet I'd take a bet that the first gale would blow them all clear across the planet."

"I would venture a guess that such weather is unknown here," replied Brady. "The very construction of the buildings and the clothes of our guide show that." He gestured to the back of the light, short, toga-like garment worn by their guide.

They were taken to the largest of the eight buildings which made up the group, and through its doorless entrance they passed into the cool, shaded interior. The furnishings were scanty, sufficient, and of a craftsmanship which Brady had never seen before in the whole of his travels. Murphy whistled as he took in the details of a large, carved, wooden table standing in the centre of the entrance hall. There was workmanship on it which would have made it almost priceless back on Earth.

"If they allow souvenirs I'll take that," he grinned.

The guide took them through into a large inner room that was more thickly and more remarkably furnished than the hall. Gasps of

surprise and admiration came from all of them as they saw the simple but fantastically elaborate way in which carvings and fabrics had been blended to form a panorama which would have made the name of any interior landscape artist on Earth if he could have duplicated it. Yet even while he took in the wonderful fragility of the scene Brady was puzzled, for there was no evidence of machine work anywhere to be seen, everything was clearly created by hand. But the Centaurans had told him that this was a poor race with little or no technology, and what race in those circumstances could remain poor if they could produce beauty such as this ?

His eyes, sweeping the room, came to rest upon the figure of another Alkoran who had risen from an elaborately carved seat to greet them. As he looked Brady could see that he was old; he was as old as the hills of Earth were old. He was not aged as Earthmen, for his face was not wrinkled and his form was not bent, but his hair was white and his eyes were bright with a sagacity that only extreme age can give. He had about him an aura of frailty that did not betoken ill health, and it was, Brady realised, as much a mental application of age as a physical one. He felt a tight knot of anticipation curl uncomfortably inside his stomach and he sent a probing thought stream towards the being—and met with an unshakable barrier which defied him entrance.

One of the crewmen had erected the translator on the floor in front of them and he broke Brady's concentration by handing him the microphone he needed to speak into.

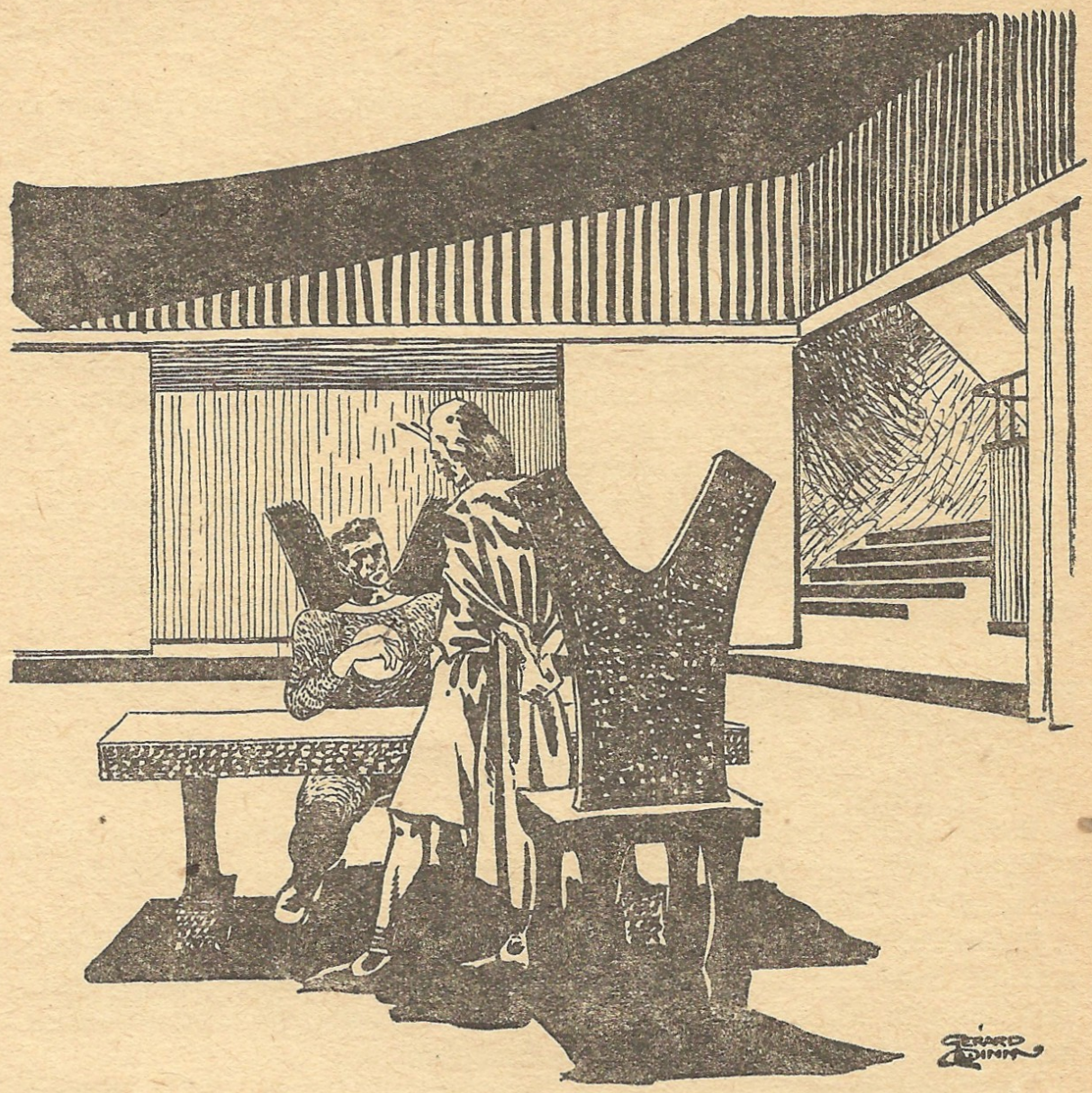
Brady took it, slightly annoyed that he had to use such an unnecessary instrument when, had he been alone, he could have accomplished a great deal more without the aid of mechanical contrivances such as this.

He explained briefly the workings of the translator and then handed a second microphone to the Alkoran who received it with a slight bow and a smile.

" We are pleased to welcome our visitors from the stars," he said quietly and ceremoniously. " There will be many interesting things for us to talk about in the time which is to come."

" We have many things to ask you," broke in Brady sharply, he was angry at the byplay being forced on him, and he wished with all his heart that he could have left Murphy and the other three behind. To do so, however, would have been to arouse alarm and possibly some suspicion.

" We have a custom in our race," began the Alkoran in his light silvery voice, " that when men of different groups or races meet, they



meet as one man with another, and they talk as one man to another, and there are no listeners to their most secret conversation."

As he heard the words Brady almost burst out laughting at the irony of them, for it was clear to him that the Alkoran had read his mind and knew that he was anxious to get rid of Murphy and the others. He was being presented with a cast iron alibi for doing so.

However, he frowned and considered the point carefully for Murphy's benefit. "You mean," he asked, "your custom is that you and I should speak alone? That my comrades are not wanted here?"

The Alkoran bowed. "Such is our way and we are unhappy if it is otherwise."

Brady pursed his lips and drew a deep breath as if considering what to do, then he turned to Murphy and said, "If that's the way they want it you'd better go back aboard and wait for me."

"Like hell I will," rejoined Murphy angrily. "What happens to you if it's a trap?"

"I doubt very much if it is, Mister Murphy," said Brady mildly. "And even if it is I should imagine you would have enough power at your disposal on board to reap ample revenge."

Murphy eyed his superior angrily. "Remember that Rihnan ship, sir? That was easy too, and look at the trouble you got into."

"I do not anticipate any this time," Brady insisted. "You will take it as an order that you await my return on board the ship. If I am not back in three hours you have my permission to take any steps which you think necessary."

Murphy snorted angrily, but he saluted and replied, "Aye, aye, sir," with surly abruptness which showed his disapproval.

A minute later Brady was alone with the Alkoran and the now useless translator.

"Sit down, Stephen Brady," the thought sprang strongly to his mind, and he felt again the mental power that had first aroused his curiosity on Tekron.

"You have come a long way to reach the truth of things. May your curiosity be satisfied."

Brady seated himself opposite the being and responded quickly, "There are many puzzles I wish to solve and many questions that I must ask to solve them."

"Gently, Brady, gently." The thoughts were mild and slightly amused but they had a strength which gave Brady the impression that, despite his own superiority to the Rihnans, he was an infant beside the mental capacity of this frail Alkoran.

"I have first to tell you a story," went on the being. "It is a story which will answer most of your questions before you can ask them, and it is one you will have to know before you leave here."

"But—"

"Your questions will keep," came the firm insistence, and reluctantly he subsided to hear what the Alkoran had to tell him.

"There is much that you will wish to know, but it must be told from the very beginning in order that you may understand the people with whom you are dealing. You must know first that many millions of years ago, long before the birth of homo sapiens, there was a planet which was very new and it revolved around a star which was very young. The planet was the only offspring of the star and it was much the same

as a million other planets throughout the Galaxy except for one vital fact. It had few mineral deposits."

Brady stirred but before he could formulate a thought the Alkoran had gone on smoothly and the momentary pause was lost for ever.

" The planet produced a race in due course that was like any other race which had ever evolved on any other planet, except for two vital factors. One was that it could not develop along physical lines of progression because the planet could not provide it with the minerals and implements necessary for such development. It reached a point where it could either go forward along a certain path, or it could retrogress and perish through sheer inertia. Every race that has ever existed has progressed because there were heights which challenged that existence and because of an innate curiosity without which any form of civilisation is impossible. All races exist and progress until they reach a height which they are unable to scale, then they die.

" This race of which I tell—"

" The Alkora," broke in Brady grimly.

There was a hint of amusement at the back of his mind, and the being responded, " If you will, then, the Alkora reached that height against which they could have perished, and the realm of physical things closed to them. There entered the second factor. The Alkora discovered the rarest gift in the Universe, the gift that decides who shall live and who shall perish, for they discovered how to use their minds. It was a long time in developing, and came during that long period when they were trying to find other answers to their physical limitations. At first they did not realise exactly how important it was, but when they did their mental control was complete.

" Can you imagine the handicap under which any race must labour which evolves upon a planet that can offer the flowers and fruits of the field, but not the metals or the elements which are the basis of technical science ? It is not an easy thing to overcome such handicaps. But it was done, and at last there lived upon this planet a race whose physical and mechanical achievements were a source of scorn throughout the Galaxy and yet whose mental mastery was complete."

" Including teleportation," put in Brady, aware as he did so that his thoughts were tinged with irony.

He felt the flicker of surprise within the Alkoran's mind. " We did not realise that you were aware of that ?"

" That is because of your lack of experience of the physical world," replied Brady. " I spotted your two representatives on Ortan."

The other nodded.

" But they shouldn't have been on Ortan."

" I do not understand ?"

" The planet had been under strict security regulations for weeks, no passenger vessels from anywhere in the Galaxy except Earth were allowed within a light year of the place. There was no way your two friends could have got to Ortan unless they had come from Earth, where the security arrangements are equally severe. That left only one other possibility—teleportation."

" And what else do you think ?" the question was thoughtful and almost rhetorical.

" You sent them there to get me to come here."

Brady's mind was ice-cold now, and he knew for the first time with any degree of certainty that he had been right in his suspicions all along. The very silence of the being opposite him proved it.

" And do you know why we wanted you to come here ?"

" No, that is something I have not been able to decide."

" Then listen to the rest of the story," the thought-stream was mild and untroubled once again. " As you say, we developed, among other things, teleportation. Since we had no metals to build ships or aircraft we had to find other and simpler methods of transport than domesticated animals, and we found them within our minds. From that point we solved not only our local transportation difficulties but another which, under the technical limitations would have been denied to us for eternity. We reached the stars.

" You will know, as we did, the thrill and triumph of that achievement, for the means by which it is reached cannot take away the thrill that goes with it. The triumph did not last long for we found on one planet in another system a dying race whom we could not help, and on another a race that was on the way up from the slime but which would slide back into it despite all our efforts to prevent it. For more than a million years we roamed the Galaxy watching races rise and fall, reaching the stars and failing to get them, failing because there was no one to help them. We could not, for we had no technology and they had not the mind that could develop as we had done. We sought the answer in a thousand star systems and on a million planets, and everywhere it was the same, a race evolved and grew to maturity, reached the final height it could not clear, and then sank back to die in its own ashes."

The thought-stream paused and Brady had an impression of infinite sadness. Through his own brain there flowed the story of the Alkora and at the back of the story a wild suspicion he dared not let loose

for fear that his sanity might fall beneath the shattering blow which would be handed to it if once he allowed the fantastic to become the reality.

" Over a million years ago we visited the system which is known to you as Fomalhaut, and there, on one of the hundred planets in the group we found a race on the brink of space travel just as so many races had been before it, but for them there was a difference. There the problem was solved. The stars were within reach because for once the technical problems had been solved by mechanical methods rather than the mental powers which we had used so many thousands of years before. This race you have found, and you know them as the Rihnans.

" In them we found what we had been looking for, a race with a mental power that was capable of developing as we had done and of combining that development with the technical efficiency to help all others races who, alone, would perish. We showed them the way to Galactic conquest, and we guided them in the path they should walk, and we felt that our task was ended, for here was a race that could do what we could not, a race who could both think and act.

" It was a long time before we found out our mistake, before we realised that the Rihnans had gone as far as they would ever go. They had reached the limit of their own mental progression, and without our help they would have perished as had all the others. We were forced into the position of ruling the Galaxy by proxy, we had to use our own thoughts impressed upon the Rihnan minds to guide them along the way they had to go; but they never suspected for an instant that their continued progress was by any other process than their own efforts, and in that factor lay our greatest danger. We dare not let them suspect.

" The greatest threat to our plans came when their home planet was destroyed by a natural phenomenon—ah, I see from your thoughts that you aware of it. When that happened the Rihnans nearly died, for as a race they lost the will to carry on, they lost the urge to rule and the instinct to survive, and without us they would have vanished from the scene. We could have let them go, but who would take their place ? Without them and without us prodding them, the Galaxy would have reverted to its former savagery, for there would have been no guiding force to keep it on the path. It would have run down and gone back to the time when there were only dying races upon dying planets who failed to reach their goals, and in time the Universe would have been a dead thing, and perhaps we should have been alone."

There was a long pause during which no coherent thoughts came to Brady's mind, instead there was a strong impression of thankfulness tinged with sadness which puzzled Brady. There was nothing concrete he could pin down, there was no explanation for the mingled emotions of which he was aware. He sat quiet and made no attempt to force the pace.

At last the Alkoran stirred. "You know how the Rihnans recovered? Yes, I see that you do, and perhaps you can guess how it was accomplished? All the ingenuity they displayed was implanted by us. We had to do their thinking for them in order that they, and the rest of the Galaxy might survive. We had to give them that confidence without which their race would have perished, and for half a million years we have watched over them and guided them. In all that time we have sought a race who could take their place and hold the Galaxy without any aid from us, and until now all our efforts have been in vain. We cultivated within the Rihnan mind the pattern whereby new races could be tested and tried in the hope that one of them would be able to overcome the difficulties which we, through the Rihnans, placed in their path."

The Alkoran paused again in his recital, and his deep, wise eyes looked solemnly across at Brady who stirred uneasily as there grew within him an idea and a conviction that made his brain reel at the vistas opened before him. There was a certainty in his mind that he would have given his life to deny, but as yet there was no concrete proof that it was so. He did not think the proof would be long in coming.

He closed his eyes. "Go on." He felt the phrase slip from him, drably dull and insufficient in its direction.

"I see in your mind that you already guess the answer, Earthman, and yet you do not believe it. Through the Rihnans we encouraged the system whereby races of seeming promise were helped over the barrier which threatened their development and their very life. In most cases the barrier was that of space travel, either they had no satellite to encourage them, or they were not capable of the technology which leads inevitably to its discovery and development. We hoped that by giving them the secret of the space-drive which the Rihnans had discovered, they would be able to take up the task the Rihnans had begun. None of them ever did. There were mysteries they were incapable of solving, and they had to be led. Once having been led they were no longer able to find their own way further."

"You mean that you gave the secret of space travel to every race that had developed far enough to understand it?" put in Brady.

"That is so, we gave secretly that which we learned from the Rihnan scientists, and none realised that it was a gift. We hoped that they would be able to prove their fitness to rule by forcing their way into the Galaxy, and by defeating everything which we, through the Rihnans, could put against them. On every occasion they failed, they were defeated and became passive members of the Empire we had created."

There was another pause as Brady's spinning brain tried to assimilate the information. It explained so much, it explained why every single race had produced the space drive in exactly the same way despite vast differences of physical and cultural development, it explained so many things and answered so many questions which had not been asked, for the information had come before the questions could be formulated. The implications shocked him immeasurably, they hinted at things his mind refused to accept, yet which he knew within his heart must be so. He responded flatly, "You gave us the secret of space flight?"

"No, not you. We thought you would not be ready for another millenium at least. We judged from the reports our travellers brought about the release of atomic power on several of your continents hundreds of years ago, that you would move rapidly along the path of self destruction, as so many others have done before you. We thought that you would not recover from that calamity for a thousand years at least. When we heard that you had broken free from your own system we could not believe it; we knew of every move that you made against the Centaurans, and through the Rihnans we countered it to the best of our ability." There was a hint of mild amusement in the alien thought stream. "No doubt you thought some of the tactics used were ridiculous, but you must remember we had no experience and neither had the Rihnans.

"The entry of that first ship into the Centauran system was not known to us until too late, and when we heard of it we estimated that your next move would be an all out attack by force of arms against the Centaurans. When we heard that your fleets had taken complete control of the Centauran system without the slightest opposition we knew that what we had hoped for so long had come to pass, and that another race had entered the Galaxy which was young and strong and eager and willing to take up the task which, without our help, the Rihnans would have laid down long ago."

There was an impression of great thankfulness in Brady's mind, an impression which rose even above the raging tumult of his own thoughts

The Alkoran went on, "Now we can relax our watch, for your people are keen and eager to follow where the Rihnans have led, and

they have the mind and will to rise to heights which the Rihnans could not even conceive."

"Then we shall be ruling the Galaxy because you allow us to?" asked Brady. He did not wait for an answer, but went straight on, "My race is a proud one, and one that will not appreciate the true nature of things as you have told them to me. They are hot-headed, and they will not like to think that they are in control on those terms. Can you guess their reaction when I tell them all this?"

He waited quietly knowing that the Alkoran would see the picture in his mind far better than his own senses could convey it, and he felt the alien prickle of the probing thoughts as they searched his mind for the picture he wished to transmit.

"Yes, I see it," replied the Alkoran. "In their rage they would come here and destroy this planet and my race, and they would seek us out wherever we sought refuge and destroy us. Yes, I see the picture you are drawing, but I do not think that it will come to be. There is another factor of which you have not thought, and one which we could not anticipate, although we could counter it when we knew of it."

Brady felt an uneasiness stirring beneath the anger he felt, for there was an easy confidence in the alien thought-stream which worried him. He knew in his heart that the anger he felt was unjustified, but it was an emotion which would effect the rest of his race if it was given full reign.

The Alkoran went on. "We heard that an Earthman had been captured and taken by the Rihnans to Tekron, and since we were anxious to see what action they would take we sent one of our people to watch over the scene. When he arrived he found you. Also he found, to his great astonishment, that you had somehow developed mental faculties which could be harmful to your people if they were let loose among them before they were ready to receive such advanced knowledge. By probing your brain from a distance he found out how it had been accomplished and he returned to report the phenomenon. We were faced with a factor which had not and could not be anticipated.

"You will realise that all knowledge which is not gained at the proper time without outside aid can be negative in its contribution towards the development of a race, it will harm more than it will help. Such was the case with you, for we realised that, once on the track, your scientists would be able to duplicate artificially the means by which you gained access to your inner mind. Our long experience has shown us the harm that would result.

"Our representative returned with instructions how to handle you, and his first task was to arouse your curiosity about us. That he did by

allowing you a flash of his mental capabilities. Next we arranged by simple mental control that you would be afraid to tell any but certain high officials about your new mental stature, and lastly we had to lure you to this planet so that the whole story could be told to you and steps taken to offset the unfortunate occurance on Tekron."

Brady realised a sudden panic within him, and he realised that all this was true. The two Alkorans on Ortan had been sent to give him the suspicions he had about their method of travel. He had been guided all along by fixed, carefully laid clues in order that his mental processes would think of them as accidental. He raised his head and looked at the Alkoran from angry eyes.

" Yes," came the gentle answer, " all that is as you surmise. The only bit of proof that there was about our real position in the Universe lay within your brain, and that proof would never have been found if we had not planted it there for the express intention of bringing you here, to Alkora. We had to take a risk but the results have justified it."

Brady clenched his fists in sudden emotion, " And you thought that by meeting me face to face and explaining all this to me that you could stop me from telling what I know and from using the new powers I have gained, is that it ?"

" No. If we did that we should be failing in our duty to the rest of the Galaxy, for some time in the future something would happen to make you reveal your powers to others of your race, and it might well prove to be disastrous if such a danger was allowed to continue.

" We called you for two reasons, one is as you have guessed, to tell you a story. The other was to remove from you the means by which you might endanger the Galaxy."

Brady shot to his feet like an uncoiled spring, his hand moving with angry swiftness to the regulation pistol which hung at his hip.

" If you think you're going to operate on me—" he snarled out loud in his emotion.

" Gently, Brady, gently," came the easy, peaceful reply. " We will do you no harm—we have done you no harm."

" Done ?" Brady seized on the word with horrified quickness.

The other nodded gently. " While we conversed I have taken such measures as are necessary to re-establish the mental blocks which are the normal part of your makeup. There is now no proof of anything that has happened to you, and I do not think you will find a way back towards that former state."

" But I can still see into your mind ?"

" So you could into the first Rihnans that you met, but it was because the power was on their side. Now it is on mine, but unless

I wish it you cannot see within my mind any more that you will be able to see within the minds of the Rihnans in the future."

Brady sat very still in his chair as the horror of the situation took hold of him. It was as the Alkoran had said, no one on Earth would believe his story without proof and the proof which had rested within his mind had been taken from him. Even if some credence were given to his story it would only need a little mental pressure in the right places to make sure that the idea was ridiculed before it could become embarassing.

Brady felt tired suddenly, and lost. The trip which he had made was useless, for all the knowledge he had could not be used and he knew that it would haunt him for the rest of his days. The thought that his race was ruling the Galaxy by the grace of a few million carpenters and farmers was more than he could bear. He began to laugh weakly and rather hysterically as the reaction set in.

The alien thought-stream came gently to him as he sat hunched and shattered in his seat. " This feeling will pass in time, Brady. If I could have eased the burden I would have done so. You must take heart from the fact that, alone of all your race, you know these things that I have told you. In that knowledge lies power, for in due time you will become one of the great men of your race, and then you will have need of help from us. Through us you will be able to lead your people to greater heights than ever we could take them without their knowledge, for you will know just what will be acceptable to them. You will be able to ask our help freely, and freely will it be given, not without your knowledge as it was with the Rihnans, but with a spirit of co-operation and friendliness.

" When this moment has mellowed with time you will see that we have been right to act as we have done in removing such a burden of responsibility from you, for your race is not yet ready for the power you were capable of giving them. Perhaps, then, you will come back and we can talk in peace of more pleasant things, and there will be no bitterness in your heart.

" We are passing on a task which we have been ill suited to perform, and we are passing it to a race who, without help, can become the greatest force the Universe has ever known. When that moment comes, as come it will, we shall see the justification of all our efforts and all our follies. Go now, Brady, but return in peace when you so desire."

Brady hardly heard the last thin thoughts as he rose, shaken, from his seat, and walked unseeingly towards the door. As he reached the outer entrance to the building the blinding rays of the alien sun struck

his face, and he screwed up his eyes in their sockets against the glare. At the back of his mind there echoed, " Farewell, Brady, until we meet again," but it was like a whisper that loses itself in the wind, and afterwards he could not be certain that he had really felt it.

He leaned against the side of the door, and gradually, through the brilliance, he made out the bulk of the ship waiting for him, its glinting, grey hull a sharp reminder of the realities which lay before him.

He knew without any doubt in his mind that what the Alkoran had told him was true, and he knew, also, that the hardest part of Man's destiny lay before him, and not behind him, as so many had thought after the Grand Action. He felt a choking lump in his throat, and was aware with sudden horror, that there were tears on his cheeks. He brushed them angrily aside, and as he did so, he could see the figure of Murphy, alone, at the top of the landing ramp. As he looked it started to descend and come towards him, slowly at first, and then running hard. He had been seen.

He walked slowly across the field towards the hurrying figure, and his shadow preceded him across the brown earth.

He did not feel like the conqueror of the Galaxy.

Lan Wright.

Recently I mentioned Arthur Sellings now being among the top three British writers of short science fiction stories. I imagine that the nominations for the first two places were unanimous—Arthur C. Clarke and Eric Frank Russell. Clarke is often brilliant, but Russell is consistently good (and in his novels, too) as his regular appearances in *Astounding* since the 1930's have shown, and is at his best when handling the unconventional situations of man meeting monster (or man-the-monster meeting likeable alien). In his first collection, **Deep Space** (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 12/6d) Russell handles nine typically inventive plots with a sardonic sense of humour (which only occasionally gets a trifle bludgeoning). A delightful assortment of extra-terrestrials include the *fahning* dwarves at " Rainbow's End," the touching Maeth of " The Witness," and the fantastic crew of the space-ship in " The Undecided." These three stories, the warmly emotional " Timid Tiger " and the suspenseful " Last Blast," have in common the theme of alien-human contact. Mostly the Terrans triumph, but the ' Pot of Gold ' characters (with equal chicanery) and Maeth work—in Russell parlance—the old switcheroo. Then in " First Person Singular," a long novelette, and " Second Genesis," he rings ingenious changes on the familiar theme of humanity's beginning, the latter being particularly impressive. In " A Little Oil " he solves the problem of neuroses-prone interstellar space-ship crews—a clown masquerading as a psychologist (what better ?) to ease the temperamental friction. Finally, " Homo Saps," a straight joke, working off a reasonable complex about the supercilious camel, here hitting it off nicely, thank you, with the Martians. Especially recommended to those who have interred the space story as being unfit for science fiction consumption.

Another author, this time American, who can transform a stale, familiar idea into vigorous realism by virtue of writing skill and reasoned thinking through of plot and character development, is C. M. Kornbluth. Noted for his socio-political satires of the imminent future, he plays on his countrymen's phobia of Communistic overrule with the

gravity of arousing public realisation in a powerful new novel, **Christmas Eve** (Michael Joseph, 10/6d). Originally titled *Not This August*, he paints a grim picture of America in 1965 defeated by the armies of the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic. The inexorable economic pressure, the brutal terrorism—meted out to defiant vanquished and backsliding victor alike, the impact on the life of ordinary citizens, and the underground resistance movement which involves the central character Billy Justin, all add up to a novel of considerable stature. The struggle to use America's secret weapon achieves the eventual defeat of the Communist invaders, but Kornbluth strikes a suitably sombre final note, and the ending, to me, was surprisingly right. Much as I long to read for a change a comparable Russian novel about the invasion and destruction of Asia by the warmongering, capitalist Americans, one must share Mr. Kornbluth's lack of illusions concerning present global madness, whatever the viewpoint, and be impressed by this shockingly convincing study.

In a new English novel **Escape To Venus** (Rich & Cowan, 10/6d) author S. Makepeace Lott, a newcomer to the science fiction field (I presume), creditably attempts to answer the problems of a future world. Sixty years after the final A-war of 1980 Earth is compartmented into three political divisions, the Independent Democracy of the Americas (" trying to reconcile the interests of the individual with the needs of the masses !"), the Asian Communist State and the combined Commonwealth and Federated Union. These hierarchies have resulted in a stagnant, non-communicative, way of living (but comfortably padded by scientific achievement) leading to a gradual disappearance of individual freedom. Citizens have Ability Level numbers and " Gamma nervous ratings," and the sole adventurous outlet is the one-way trip to Venus to increase the colonisation of that planet which has been underway for several decades.

The story concerns the illicit attempt by a reformist, John Abercrombie, to sample the supposed freedom on Venus, and to bring the message back to Earth. I fear this most inadequately outlines this exceedingly complex and thoughtful novel, which deals cleverly and in fascinating detail the flight to Venus, the method of colonisation strictly under the control of the autocratic Secretariat, and the exciting possibilities of Abercrombie's intervention by virtue of his new position as Co-Ordinator of Labour Police. Much of the background to his otherwise excellent characterisation is extremely vague, and indeed the purpose of Abercrombie's motivations often difficult to follow; moreover the story thread is continually slowed by extensive socio-historical expounding, and the smoothness of style marred by an irritating

sentence construction of which the following is a random example—"You find the same bureaucracy as on Earth? Robert could not accept this, would not, he demanded reassurance." Nevertheless I was compelled to finish this unusual book, curiosity being stronger than instinct. It suggests another unsuccessful example of mainstreaming the science fiction novel by a competent writer whose approach to this medium is over-sophisticated (is that the clue, perhaps?) and smacks too strongly of the dust-wrapper's protestation that "S. Makepeace Lott scorns the claptrap of the comic-strip and delves into questions that are real . . ."

The promise shown by American author Philip K. Dick in his recent meteoric progress as an unusually gifted short story writer (his collection *A Handful of Darkness* appeared last year) is handsomely fulfilled in his first novel **World Of Chance** (Rich & Cowan, 9/6d). Its highly original theme and exciting action won wide acclaim in the U.S.A. when first published there in 1955 as one half of an "Ace Double" pocketbook under the title of *Solar Lottery*. The new version is severely edited—some Americanisms are pruned and the more meaty passages cleaned up, but the secondary theme (of the Preston Society expedition) is considerably revised even to the extent of two new characters, one an obnoxious type with my surname (for the first time in science fiction I believe!).

However apart from these attempts to make the somewhat taut and complex story palatable for the British market—although to the uninitiated (i.e. non-readers of the regular magazines) I fear it will be rather incomprehensible—it is basically the same extrapolation of the Theory of Games, in particular the random strategy of the "minimax" principle (authentic) used as a method of government and for the social structure of the inhabited solar system in the 23rd Century. The gradual disintegration of our present-day social and economic system was achieved (says the author) by overproduction in the Western world and a grim extension of the Quiz game for dispensing unsaleable merchandise leading to less material but more powerful prizes—privilege and position culminating in the supreme authority, the Quiz Master, backed by telepathic police, and unopposed administrator of the whole nine-planet structure complete with its autocratic industrial combines, Quizzes and lotteries for the people, classified serfdom, and the Challenge Convention which allows the venal sport of assassination of the reigning Quizmaster on the "No despots, no crackpots" principle of protection. Yet another credible and frightening future, an ingenious but corrupting system to explode into a welter of intrigue

Continued on Page 128

ALFRED BESTER'S new novel

TIGER! TIGER!

This is an inferno of a novel! Its scope is bold, its pace irresistible. Mr. Bester's Twenty-Fifth Century is a complex and real world where spiritual values have gone to the wall and only the toughest characters survive. One of the toughest is Gully Foyle, who burns through the book like a meteor. Ranged against him are a series of people terrifying in power but delightful in eccentricity: Presteign of Presteign, King of a commercial dynasty; Saul Dagenham, radioactive and remorseless; Y'ang-Yeovil, captain of interplanetary police; Olivia Presteign, who sees only in the infra-red; Harley Baker, who owns a freak factory; Sigurd Magman, the seventy-year-old baby, Mars' sole full telepath; the man with the goldfish in his artificial glass leg; the killer who longs to be a python.

The tremendous vitality of TIGER! TIGER! lies not only in its host of strange personalities. Its inventions have a wild logic, its scenes are gaudy and lit with magic, changing rapidly from the Sargasso Asteroid, to Presteign's palace, to the weird subterranean hospital of Gouffre Martel, to Rome—but the fertility of Alfred Bester's imagination cannot adequately be described. He has composed an entire new mythology of the future, complete with original sins!

Undoubtedly, this is one of the great books of science fiction. Its surrealist gusto places it beyond this narrow category, yet the sf lover will find it contains a sense of suspense, a flamboyance of creation and a taste for the bizarre often aimed at but never so triumphantly blended as here.

Final warning: this novel is strong meat. The author of the acclaimed 'Demolished Man' has here excelled himself: hypnotic and unforgettable are the only words for TIGER! TIGER!

Just published by Sidgwick and Jackson. (Price 12/6). From all booksellers, or ask for it at your local library.

★

Another Sidgwick and Jackson publication is a must for sf collectors—

JULES VERNE

—master of Science Fiction

BY I. O. EVANS

Everybody has read '20,000 Leagues Under the Sea' and 'Round the World in Eighty Days' but Jules Verne wrote fifty or more novels, and Mr. Evans has performed a real service to the reader both old and new with this rich little omnibus which contains synopses and extracts from sixteen of Verne's works as well as a long critical introduction. 12/6.

★S★F★B★C★

For over three years the Science Fiction Book Club has been building a representative library of sf writing. Membership grows steadily — the many letters from members are proof that the Club satifies a real desire. Write for details to the Organising Secretary, 1 Tavistock Chambers, Bloomsbury Way, London, W.C.1.

and action involving the deposed Quizmaster, Verrick, and his successor Cartwright; apparently chosen at random. Against this background, a biochemist, Ted Benteley, becomes an unwilling participant in the struggle to attain a solution for mankind's cynical retrogression.

This is science fiction of a high order which can be enjoyed both for its exciting Van Vogtian plot (the attempted destruction of Cartwright by a multi-mind-controlled synthetic assassin is superbly done), and for its thoroughly thought-provoking ideas.

Finally an anthology by August Derleth, **The Other Side Of The Moon** (Grayson & Grayson, 10/6d) which, being a (much reduced) version of the original American edition published in 1949, offers a considerable change of atmosphere to other recent (and more chronologically correct) collections. Derleth endeavoured in this, and its companion volume *Strange Ports Of Call*, to present a well-rounded aspect of the development of modern science fiction up to that date. When it is remembered that the short-story cream had been skimmed in previous years by Conklin and Healy, Derleth, always with an eye for literary precocity, did very well. In the present volume there remain ten stories, plus the cameo play by John D. Beresford, " The Appearance of Man," which opens the book and neatly disposes of the insignificance of Man against the backdrop of the universe. It really isn't fair to expect any science fiction author to follow this gem, but three do remarkably well. Ray Bradbury's " Pillar of Fire " (from his early humble days in *Planet Stories*) shows that his ideas and style have not improved so much in the last eight years as is implied by his " recognition " by the literary cognoscenti. In my opinion his earlier works, although lacking a certain polish, were easily his best (vide *Dark Carnival*). Then there is Sturgeon's memorable " Memorial," an unexpected and disturbing picture of the futility of an idealistic attempt to scare the world into peace by creating a living reminder of atomic devastation ; Van Vogt's " Resurrection," a skilful example of his insouciant mastery of the use of pseudo-science ; and Eric Frank Russell's " Spiro " the Martian Mimic Spy. Two effective word-pictures from the early thirties are Clark Ashton Smith's " City of the Singing Flame " and Lovecraft's " Beyond the Wall of Sleep." In addition there are three lightweight pieces from Murray Leinster, S. Fowler Wright, Donald Wandrei and Will F. (" Murray Leinster ") Jenkins. Neither distinguished nor mediocre, but a reasonable addition to your bookshelf for future browsing.

Leslie Flood.