NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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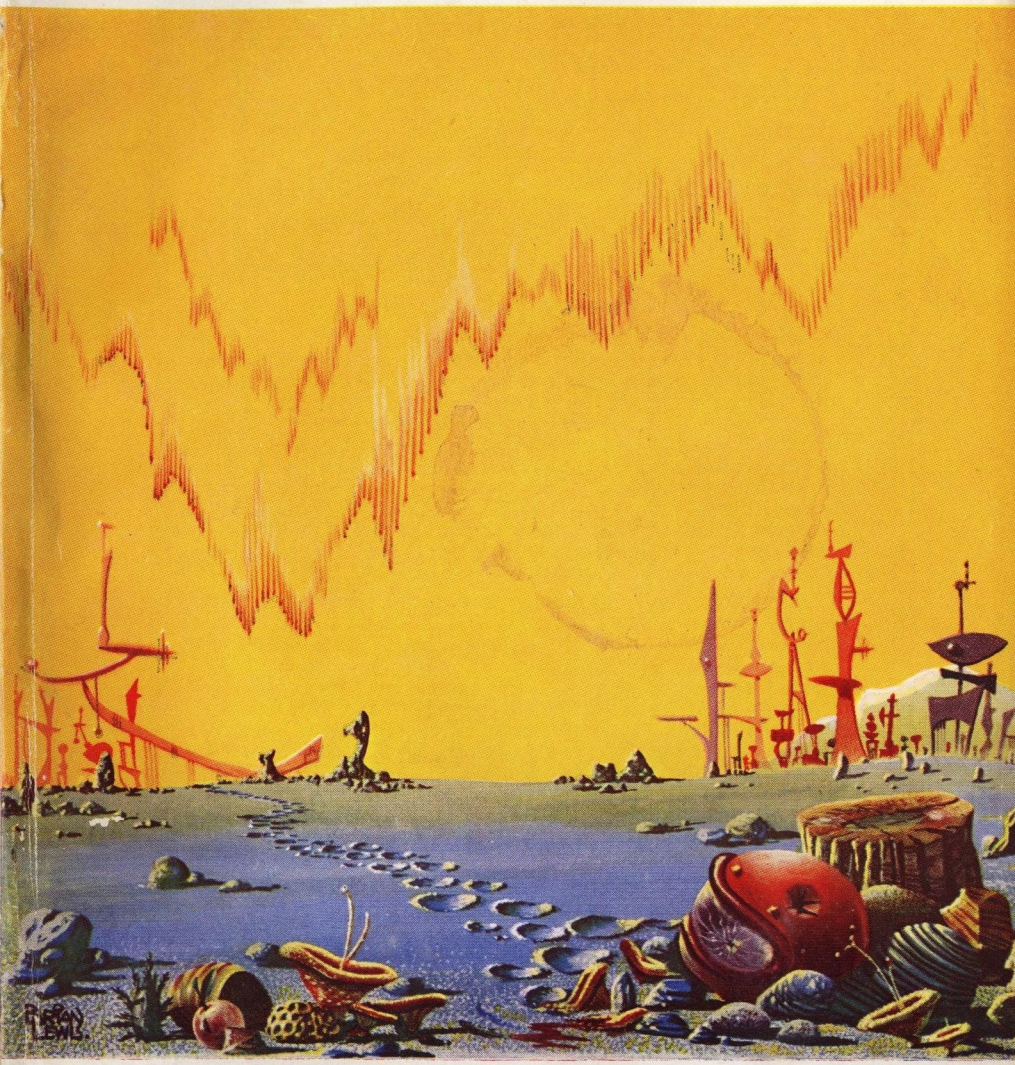

★ TABLEAU by JAMES WHITE ★

NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Bertram Chandler

New South Wales

Australia

It came as something of a surprise to realise that sailor "Jack" Chandler, one of our most regular contributors, with 16 published stories so far in *New Worlds* and 4 in *Science Fantasy*, had never appeared in a "Profile." Born in 1912 he went to sea at the age of sixteen and served in tramp steamers for eight years, then switched to liners and worked his way to Chief Officer before quitting and emigrating to Australia in 1955. "As Second Mate of a coaster," he writes, "I find that I have far more time for writing than I had on a cargo-passenger liner, although by the time this appears in print I shall be Chief again."

Like many of his contemporaries he was introduced to science fiction by discovering H. G. Wells' "The Time Machine," and later Jules Verne, and from their works to Gernsback's early magazines. It was not until the war years, however, that he became interested in writing s-f. "Shortly after Pearl Harbour," he says, "my ship visited New York and as a Faithful Reader I visited editor John W. Campbell, Jr., who rather amazed me by suggesting that I might care to write for his magazine. Next time in New York I presented him with "This Means War," a 3,000 word short which was accepted. Since then I have appeared in practically every American s-f and fantasy magazine and several of the slicks.

"At present the main snag is shortage of ideas. Should this deplorable state of affairs continue I may have to make an honest living writing crime or sea stories (I know that I have been accused of doing the latter for years !")

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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TWO SHILLINGS

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Coming Attractions

Some months ago author James White suggested that our monthly " Literary Line-Up " column should be extended to allow more scope for details of stories to come, and I agreed with him that the idea would be interesting. However, the " Line-Up " column always has to fit in at the end of a story and because of that doesn't give sufficient room for all the news I would like to pass on. It seems a good idea, therefore, to occasionally devote an editorial to forthcoming news—and this month there is plenty to stimulate your interest.

With the conclusion of " Wasp " in this issue (and I am looking forward to comments on Eric's story) we shall be having a rest from serials for a while as there are some fine long novelettes waiting to be published. There is the second of the Wyndham 'Troon' stories—" Idiot's Delight "—which has a rather special cover painting to go with it. For a long time I have been working over the possible effectiveness of a two-colour illustration on the front of the magazine ; it is an idea which has been tried several times in the past, notably on American magazines, without any degree of success. Getting together with Brian Lewis on this idea has produced an outstanding illustration although we have to see what the final result from the blockmaker will be.

Brian W. Aldiss has a long novelette, "Segregation," coming up containing one of the cleverest colonisation themes I have yet seen. He is also working on a two-part serial which we shall be publishing later in the year, but the details can wait. Meanwhile, he continues to notch up further successes. Most readers will remember his short novelette " Non-Stop " which appeared in *Science Fantasy* No. 17 in February 1956—this has been rewritten into a book-length novel being published this month by Faber and Faber Ltd., under the same title, and is one of the finest s-f novels I have read in a long time, despite the fact that I already knew of some of the twists to the plot. However, Brian has introduced a great deal more into this expanded version and I thoroughly recommend it to your attention.

James White has " The Ideal Captain " waiting to be placed in a suitable issue, a great idea concerning the colonisation of the Solar System by presentday international Powers. And to

the many readers who have requested more stories of his " Sector General " hospital (*New Worlds*, November 1957) there are more to come.

Those of you who enjoyed Lan Wright's serial " Who Speaks Of Conquest ?" back in 1956 (and we received scores of letters commending it ; one American bibliophile even rated it as the best story of that year) will be pleased to know that we have another serial of his on hand—" A Man Called Destiny " has the galactic setting which Wright handles so well.

Regarding our ' new look ' cover illustrations, I can only say at this early stage that the first two are receiving considerable acclaim (as well as the one on the current *Science Fantasy*), but the subject matter is so wide that it will be at least six months before the full effect of our experiment will be really appreciated.

Science Fantasy is also coming more into its own this year and I must commend to your notice a short novel by John Brunner which we shall be publishing in No. 29 early in May. " Earth Is But A Star " is one of the most delightful fantasies written in recent years and is easily the best piece of writing and plotting Brunner has yet achieved, although he will modestly deny this statement. I am quite convinced that if expanded into a full novel it would eventually enter the ' classic ' class, it being one of those rare stories with a true " feeling " of a remote future—the only other recent novel which truly captured this sense was Arthur Clarke's *The City And The Stars*.

This particular story is the subject of another clever cover painting by Brian Lewis, a symbolic interpretation part abstract and part modern interpretive.

Science Fantasy continues to pick up credit lines outside our own readership, too. Brian Aldiss's short story " Let's Be Frank " (No. 23, June 1957) has been chosen as one of the best twenty short stories of that year by Judith Merril for her yearly anthology *Best S-F* published by Dell in New York, while Robert Presslie's recent " Dial O For Operator " (No. 27, April 1958) has been chosen for scripting into a television play in this country.

John Carnell

TABLEAU

James White's last published story was the highly successful "Sector General" six months ago (incidentally, there will be another one with this hospital setting shortly). This time he presents yet another interesting and unusual idea—the story of an alien war memorial and how it came to be erected.

By James White

The War Memorial in the planetary capital of Orligia was unique, but it very definitely was not a nice object. A great many people—beings of sensitivity and intelligence—had tried vainly to describe their feelings of shock, horror and anger which the sight of it had caused them. For this was no aesthetic marble poem in which godlike figures gestured defiance; or lay dying nobly with limbs arranged to the best advantage. Instead it consisted of an Orligian and an Earthman surrounded by the shattered remnant of a control room belonging to a type of ship now long obsolete, the whole being encased in a cube of transparent plastic.

The Orligian was standing crouched slightly forward, with blood matting the fur on its chest and face. A few feet away lay the Earthman, very obviously dying. His uniform was in shreds, revealing the ghastly injuries he had sustained—certain organs in the abdominal region normally concealed by layers of skin and muscle being clearly visible. Yet this man, who had no business being alive much less being capable of movement, was struggling forward to reach the Orligian. It was the look on the Earthman's face which was the most distressing thing about the whole, horrible tableau.

Night had fallen, but the Memorial was lit erratically by the flashes which repeatedly outlined the buildings at the edges of its surrounding park. From all over the city came the sounds of sharp, thudding explosions, while rockets grew rapidly on slender stems of orange sparks to flower crashingly into clouds of falling stars. The city, indeed the whole planet, was in festive mood. With the Orligian love of doing things properly or not at all, this meant the letting off of a great many fireworks as well as the usual merry-making. Sleep was impossible, the populace was going wild.

It was, after all, a great occasion. Tomorrow the Orligians were getting another war memorial . . .

Like most single ship engagements it had proved to be a long-drawn out affair. Normally such a duel led to the defeat of the Orlig ship within a few hours, MacEwan thought with that small portion of his mind which was not engaged in throwing his ship about in violent evasive action. But there was nothing normal about this fight, he thought bitterly; the enemy had begun to learn things, to adopt Earth armament and tactics. They, too, had regressed to throwing rocks . . . !

" Closer ! *Closer* !" Reviora's voice squeaked suddenly through his phones. " We're too far away, dammit ! They'll get us in a minute . . ."

MacEwan did not have to be reminded of the necessity for sticking close to the enemy ship, and many another Captain would have told the Ordnance Officer so in no uncertain terms. But he had discovered long ago that young Reviora, whose voice had only recently changed and was prone to change back again at times of emotional stress, could exhibit all the outward signs of panic while continuing to use his weapons with incredible accuracy. MacEwan relegated the Ordnance Officer's jitterings into the realm of general background noise and continued to focus all his attention on the controls.

His idea in taking evasive action at extreme range—extreme for his ship, that was ; it was nearly ideal range for the enemy —was to lull the Orlig skipper into thinking that he intended breaking off the action. Such a thing was unheard of, simply because trying to run away from an Orlig ship meant certain destruction from their primary weapon, but there was always a first time. Maybe the enemy officer would think that his

ship was crippled, or out of ammunition, or that its Captain lacked sufficient intestinal fortitude to ram. Anyway, he would be puzzled and maybe just a little bit inattentive . . .

MacEwan said quietly, " Reviora, ready ?" He pulled the ship round in a tight turn, then with the Orlig ship centring his forward vision screen he pushed the thrust bar through the emergency gate and held it there. The target vessel grew slowly, then expanded so rapidly that the screen was suddenly too small to hold it. A dull, intermittent vibration told of Reviora, with the ship holding a steady course and the enemy dead ahead, using his forward turret to the best advantage. MacEwan thought he saw a spurt of fog from a hole freshly torn in the Orlig ship's hull, then the image flicked out of sight to reappear as a rapidly shrinking picture in the aft view-screen.

His hands were slippery and he had to blink sweat out of his eyes. *Check velocity* ! his racing brain yelled at his slow, fumbling fingers. *Move* ! *Jump around* ! *And above all, keep close . . .* !

So as to give Reviora a chance to get in a killing burst, MacEwan had made a fast but unswerving approach. He had held his ship steady for fully five seconds. That had been an insane risk to take, but he had gambled on the Orlig ship not using its primary weapon on him for fear of his hurtling ship smashing into it even after MacEwan's ship and crew were written off. Now however, he was fast receding from the enemy ship and evasive action was again indicated. Still on emergency thrust he began weaving and corkscrewing, at the same time trying desperately to kill the velocity away from the enemy he had built up during the attack.

Evasive action at a distance was much less effective than close up because the Orlig primary weapon had a certain amount of spread. Maximum safety lay in sticking close and moving fast. Or had done until now . . .

It had been estimated that the radiation, or force, or field of stress which was the Orligian Primary Weapon took roughly six to seven seconds to build up, but once caught in that field a ship and its occupants were a total loss. Yet strangely the ships affected appeared unharmed. Provided one was extremely careful they could even be entered. But just scratch the metal of one of those ships, or stick a needle in one of the crew-men, and the result resembled a small-

scale atomic explosion—but again, strangely, without any trace of immediate or residual radio-activity. Such ships were now left severely alone, their orbits not even being plotted as dangers to navigation because the first meteorite to puncture their hulls caused them to destroy themselves.

It was a super-weapon, only one of those which had forced Earth back, so far as tactics were concerned, to the bow-and-arrow level.

MacEwan only half noticed the shudderings of his ship as Reviora, using absurdly adolescent profanity, tried for a deflection shot with the remote-controlled waist turret, and the harsher, more erratic vibration of Orlig shots getting home. At the moment he was wishing desperately that there was some means by which he could simply cut and run—not, he hastened to assure himself, because he was overly interested in his own safety, but because this new development represented a change in Orlig strategy. It was a change which would have to be countered, and MacEwan hoped that the Brass back home would be able to find the answer—he couldn't see one himself.

If only Nyberg had never been born, MacEwan thought; or failing that, if only he had not grown up into a stubborn, courageous and idealistic Swede whose highmindedness had started an interstellar war. Such wishing was sheerest futility, he knew, but even in the middle of the hottest engagement he had yet experienced there was this weak, traitorous segment of his mind which tried to escape into the world of what might have been . . .

Five years ago the U.N. survey ship *Starfinder*—crew of fifty-eight plus seven civilian specialists, Captain Sigvard Nyberg in command—had, at very nearly the limit of its prodigious range, made contact with a ship of an alien culture for the first time. A tape left by the late Captain Nyberg told of the excitement of the occasion, and a day-by-day summary gave some indications of the difficulties experienced in widening that contact.

Strangely, the vessel of what were later to become known as the Orligians did not seem to want to maintain contact at first, though neither did they show signs of hostility. *Starfinder's* psychologist, admittedly working on little or no data, had suggested that such behaviour might be due either to a

high degree of conservatism in their culture or to a simple case of cold feet. He had added that cowardice was not a strong possibility, however, considering the fact that the alien ship was four times the size of their own. But Captain Nyberg had maintained contact—just how he had done so was not known in detail because he was a man who disliked talking about his own accomplishments—and widened it to the point where simple sequences of radio signals were replaced by exchanges of message capsules containing technical data which enabled the two ships to match communication channels.

It was shortly after sound-with-vision communications had been set up between the ships that something went wrong. The last words on Captain Nyberg's tape were to the effect that, far from being horrible monsters the aliens were nice, cuddly little creatures and that their atmosphere and gravity requirements seemed to be close enough to Earth-normal for the two races to co-exist on either of their home planets without artificial aids. A few words, mostly of self-identification, had already been exchanged. But the Captain intended going across to their ship next day, because he had a hunch that the Orligians were beginning to shy away again.

When the nine men in *Starfinder's* tender, who had been investigating a nearby solar system during these proceedings, returned they found that the mother ship had been the scene of a massacre. Not one of the ship's personnel had escaped, and the condition of the bodies seemed to indicate that they had been battered to death with the nearest available blunt instrument. The slaughter had been merciless, the humans being obviously taken by surprise because in only a few places was the deck stained with blood which matched no Earthly group, and there were no Orligian dead at all.

The nine-man crew of the tender somehow managed to bring their mother ship home. The situation was, of course, highly charged emotionally—much more so than normal because of the fact that *Starfinder's* crew had been mixed—so that Earth, which had known peace for three centuries, found itself at war with the culture of Orligia.

And the war, MacEwan was thinking as he frantically threw his ship all over the sky half a mile from the Orligian light cruiser, had been going on for far too long. The sense of immediacy, where the people back home were concerned, had

been lost—and with it the horror and righteous anger which had started it all. Defence spending was heavy and teddy-bears were no longer stocked in kiddy's toy stores, but otherwise there was very little to indicate outwardly that a state of war existed at all. But maximum effort was being, and would be, maintained simply through fear. Earth, had she chosen to, could have withdrawn her spacefleet at any time, could simply have left and called the whole thing off. Neither side knew the positions of each other's home planets. But that course would have left the situation unresolved and eventually whether in fifty years or five hundred, the Orligs were bound to discover Earth. The people of Earth were honest enough not to gain peace by dumping the problem in the laps of their many times great grandchildren.

But it was an untidy and very unsatisfactory sort of war. The 'front line' so to speak was in the general volume of space where the original contact had been made, and bases had been set up by both sides on planetary bodies in the region, and supplied by ships taking very great pains to conceal their point of origin. The distances involved made patrolling a joke and any battle a vast, disorganised series of dogfights. Except when raids were carried out on enemy bases it was nothing unusual for three weeks to go by without a single clash, and this at a time when both sides were prosecuting the war with maximum effort. Altogether it proved what had been known from the first, that the very idea of interstellar war was impractical and downright silly. But the chief reason for the feeling of dissatisfaction was the fact that, slowly but surely, the Earth was losing.

Superiority in offensive and defensive weapons belonged to the Orligs. They had a screen, probably originally intended for meteor protection, which englobed each of their ships at a radius of two miles and which melted anything approaching at a velocity likely to do harm—meteors, missiles, attacking ships, *anything*. This screen could be penetrated only by guiding the ship through it at what was practically a crawl. Once through, however, the missile's remote-control equipment immediately ceased to function and the missile drifted harmlessly past the target. On the one or two occasions when a nuclear warhead had accidently drifted into an Orlig ship, nothing at all had happened.

Earth science had been able to duplicate this screen, but it was no good to them because the Orligs scorned the use of such crude methods of attack as atomic missiles : they had The Weapon.

This the Earth scientists could not understand, much less duplicate. They only knew that it was some kind of beam or field of force which required several seconds to focus, and that its maximum range was about thirty miles. There was no answer to this weapon. A ship caught by it became a lifeless, undamaged but untouchable hulk which needed only sharp contact with a meteorite or piece of drifting wreckage to blast itself out of existence. The Weapon was also thought to be the reason why atomic warheads refused to function in the vicinity of Orlig ships, but this was just a guess.

There had been panic in high places, MacEwan remembered, when the most advanced offensive weapons of Earth had been proved useless. What was needed was some form of weapon which was too simple and uncomplicated for the Orlig nullification equipment to be effective, and a tactic which would bring such a weapon to bear. An answer of sorts had been found. To find it they had to go back, not quite so far as the bow-and-arrow era, but to the Final World War period and the armour-piercing cannon, and chemically powered rockets used in the aircraft of that period. The tactics which had been developed were the only ones possible with such weapons, but they tended to be wasteful of men.

" Sir ! Sir ! Can I have the ship ?"

It was Reviora, excited but no longer swearing. The tiny, wandering portion of MacEwan's mind came back to present time with a rush. He said, " Why ?"

" Ammunition's running out, but we've three Mark V's in the nose rocket launcher," Reviora babbled. " It's working now—I found the break in the firing circuit. They won't be expecting rockets at this stage. We can use that trick of Hoky's—" He bit the sentence off abruptly, then stammered, " I . . . I'm sorry, I mean Captain Hokasuri—"

" Skip it," said MacEwan. He ran his eye briefly over the control panel, then switched everything to the forward conning position. " Right, you have the ship."

Hoky had had lots of tricks. Hokasuri and MacEwan were the Old Firm, the unbeatable, invincible combination who invariably hunted together. But then every team was

invincible until one or the other failed to come back. MacEwan squirmed restively. His mind, temporarily freed of the responsibility for guiding the ship, flicked back over the opening minutes of the engagement. It could only have been through sheer bad luck that his partner had been Stopped, the mild-mannered little Japanese with the apologetic grin and the black button eyes was not the type to make mistakes . . .

Hokasuri and himself had been searching the nearby planet for signs of an enemy base when they had surprised an Orligian presumably engaged on the same chore. Distance had been about two hundred miles. They had immediately separated and attacked.

The Orligs used fairly large ships ; apparently the generators for The Weapon took up a lot of space. Earth craft were very small and fast, and hunted in pairs. Though not one hundred percent successful, this had proved to be the only effective means of coming to grips with the enemy. The Weapon had a range of thirty miles and took six or seven seconds to focus. Two ships, therefore, approaching from different directions, the while taking violent evasive action, discharging 'window' and performing various other acts designed to confuse enemy aim, could be expected to run the gauntlet of The Weapon until the screen which surrounded enemy ships at a distance of two miles was reached. But to penetrate this the attacking ships had to check velocity, and it was at this point that the the two attackers usually became one, the reason being that there was time for The Weapon to be focussed on one of them. The surviving attacker then closed with the enemy—its very nearness and extreme mobility protection against the slow-acting Weapon—and slowly battered the Orlig ship into a wreck with solid, armour-piercing shells and rockets.

Once begun such a battle had to be fought to the death, because the Earth ship would be a sitting target if it attempted to escape through the screen again.

MacEwan had not been worried about Hokasuri getting through the screen, they had done it so often before despite all the laws of probability and statistics. They were the invincible ones, the pilots with that little something extra which had enabled them to return together after eighteen successful kills. But he had seen Hokasuri Stopped, seen his ship diving

unwaveringly into the planet below them and watched it explode in the fringes of its atmosphere.

For the first time then MacEwan had experienced a sense of personal anger towards this Orlig ship. Indoctrination to the contrary, previous attacks had always seemed more like a big and very dangerous game to him. But then his anger had been pushed into the background by a sudden upsurge of fear that was close to panic. The Orlig ship, which should have been helpless now that he had closed in, was hitting back. What was worse, it was using the same type of archiac weapon for short-range defence that Earth ships had developed for attack, heavy calibre machine-guns of some sort. His ship was in nearly as bad a state as was that of the enemy . . .

Now he watched the Orlig ship spreading out in his forward view-screen again. The bow-launchers were fixed mount ; to line them up on the target Reviora had to aim with the whole ship, and the Ordnance Officer had to do it because MacEwan's fire control panel was dead.

Hokasuri's trick had been to open up the enemy ship with his guns, saving the rockets until he could place them right inside the target. It was a process which called for accuracy of a high order. Perhaps Reviora could match it.

For an agonising four seconds Reviora held the ship on a collision course with the enemy while the fire of two Orlig blister turrets gouged at its hull. Suddenly the rockets were away, streaking ahead and plunging unerringly into the long, dark rent already torn in the Orlig's hull plating by an earlier attack. Everything happened at once, then. Metal fountained spectacularly outwards and the ragged-edged hole in the Orlig's hull lengthened, widened and gaped horribly. Simultaneously there was a sharp cry from Reviora which faded out in peculiar fashion. MacEwan wondered about it for perhaps a fraction of a second, decided that the peculiar sound was due to the sudden loss of the air which carried Reviora's voice from his mouth to the suit mike, then he was reaching frantically for the control panel again.

Reviora was dead. They were still on a collision course !

Desperately MacEwan stabbed control keys—forward and rear opposed lateral steering jets to swing ship, and full emergency thrust on the main drive to get him out of there fast. The ship began turning, but that was all. Controls to the main

power pile were cut, probably by the recent Orlig gunnery, and the hyperdrive telltales were dead, too—the ship was a wreck. Now it was skidding in broadside-on and still closing rapidly with the other ship. MacEwan hit more keys, firing all lateral jets on that side in an attempt to check velocity. Uselessly, it was too little and too late. There was a close-spaced series of shocks as the ship ran through the metallic debris blown from the Orlig ship, climaxed by a tearing, grinding crash as the Earth vessel embedded itself exactly in the hole its rockets had blasted in the enemy hull.

The shock tore MacEwan, straps and all, sideways out of his chair and threw him onto the deck. His head hit something . . .

When he was in a condition to think straight again his first thought was for the spacesuit. Captains did not wear protective suits in action for the same reason that necessitated their safety webbing being thin, flexible and generally not worth a damn—too cumbersome, and besides, the control room was tucked away relatively safe in the centre of the ship. But now there was no longer any need for his hands to be unhampered and his body able to move freely ; his control board was dead. Two view-screens were still operating for some peculiar reason but that was all. There were no indications of a drop in air pressure, his ears felt normal and respiration ditto, but it was too much to expect that the crash had not opened seams even here. He was about to open the suit locker when his mind registered what his eyes were seeing in the two view-screens.

One was focussed inwards and showed where the lateral jets had practically fused the two ships together before cutting out ; some of the Orlig's bulkheads still glowed red hot. The other screen gave a view outwards and showed the planetary surface only a few hundred miles off. As MacEwan watched his ears detected a whispering, high-pitched rushing sound.

There are no sounds in space. The Orlig ship, crippled, a near wreck and carrying the remains of the small ship responsible for its present condition, was trying for a landing. It was already entering atmosphere. MacEwan abruptly forgot about spacesuits and dived instead for the acceleration chair.

He was still scrambling weightlessly above the chair when the first surge dropped him face downwards into it. He had

time to fasten just one safety strap, before suddenly mounting decelleration hammered him flat. Briefly, he thought that the Orlig ship must be in bad trouble to want to land in its present state. With the damage inflicted by the Earth ship the Orligian must be an aerodynamic mess, and that without taking into account the wreckage of the aforesaid ship jammed against it like some spacegoing Siamese twin. Then all thinking stopped as he strained every nerve and muscle to keep alive, to keep his creaking and popping rib cage from collapsing onto his straining heart and lungs and strangling the life out of him.

After what seemed an impossibly long time the decelleration let up somewhat, becoming steady, measured surges of one or two G's which he could take comfortably. Obviously the Orlig pilot had shed most of his velocity in the thin, upper air to minimise atmospheric heating, then was taking her down slow for the last few miles. Not too slow, though, or stratospheric winds might buffet her off vertical despite everything the gyros could do. This Orlig was *good*, MacEwan thought ; he deserved to make it. MacEwan also thought that he would like to buy the Orlig pilot a drink, supposing such a thing was possible and that Orligs drank.

The control room was vibrating and heaving in a manner unnerving both to mind and body, as if jerking and swaying in time to the mad cacaphony of shrieking air, bellowing engines and a banging, rattling percussion section as decelleration and air resistance tried to shake both ships to pieces. MacEwan was amazed that the wreckage of his ship had not torn itself free long ago.

Suddenly there was a last, violent surge of decelleration, a smashing, jarring shock, then the grinding scream of tearing metal. They were down—but not still. There was a sickening, outward swaying motion and more harsh crepitation of ruptured metal. MacEwan's eyes flew to the view-screen. It showed a stony, desert-like planetary surface swooping up to meet him. One of the Orlig's landing legs must have buckled, they were toppling . . .

The noise was like a pick driven into his brain, and he saw the ship coming to pieces all around him. Bits of sky showed in surrealistic geometric shapes which changed constantly with the shifting of the wreckage. There was a sudden bright explosion, and MacEwan had time only to remember

their damaged midships launcher and the primed rocket still jammed in it, then flying, jagged-edged metal ripped all consciousness from him.

When MacEwan came to again there was surprisingly little pain ; his strongest impressions were those of numbness and extreme, clammy cold. This must be shock, he diagnosed briefly. But there was a warm wetness overlying the chill of his body that seemed to be localised in the area where he felt the dull, shock-numbed pains. He looked down at himself then, and realised how very lucky he was to be in a state of shock. He knew at once, of course, that he was dying.

The blast had left only a few shreds of his uniform, there was a great deal of blood, and his injuries . . .

A man should not have to look at himself in a state like this, MacEwan thought dully. If he had met an animal in this condition he would have shot it, and had it been a member of his own species he would have turned away and been violently sick. As it was he gazed at the frightful wounds with a strange objectivity until his brain, not quite as numb as the rest of him, re-opened communications with his one good arm. He fumbled open the emergency medical kit that still hung from his belt and used the coagulant spray freely, ending by swallowing rather more than the prescribed dose of antipain against the time when the shock would wear off. With most of the external bleeding checked. MacEwan tried to lie as motionless as possible. If he moved at all he felt that he would burst open along the seams like some great big football filled with red molasses.

It was while he was trying to look around him—and endeavouring to decide *why* he had given himself this inadequate first aid—that MacEwan saw the Orligian.

By what freak of circumstances it came to be there it was impossible to say, but not three yards from MacEwan lay one of the Enemy. It was not a very impressive object, he thought, this small being which resembled nothing so much as a teddy-bear that had been left out in the rain. But it was not rain which matted the fur on the creature's chest and head, nor was it water oozing from the raw ruin of its face. It was in much better shape than MacEwan, however, it was breathing steadily and making odd twitching movements which suggested returning consciousness. The broad belt to which was

attached MacEwan's holster and the pouch containing the medical kit was the only part of his uniform left intact. He carefully drew the little gun with its clip of thirty explosive bullets and waited for the Orlig to wake up.

While waiting he tried hating it a little.

MacEwan had always been an unemotional man—perhaps that was the secret of his success as a Captain, and the reason for his unusually long period of active duty. In his particular job MacEwan was convinced that emotion simply killed you off in jig time. A man making an attack approach with hate or any other emotion—whether directed towards the enemy, or something or somebody else—clogging his mind was leaving that much less of it for the vital business of evading The Weapon. In battle MacEwan felt no hatred for the enemy, no anger that his Ordnance Officer cursed and swore in a highly insubordinate fashion at him—Reviora was invariably full of apologies on their return to base—and none of the softer emotions that could leak over from the times when he was not in battle.

There had been a girl once, a tall, dark-eyed girl who had been attached to the base Plot Room. MacEwan had eaten with her a few times, seen how things were going, then avoided her. That had been the smart thing to do ; good survival. Now he was realising what an unhappy man he had been.

Hokasuri had treated the whole thing as a game, too. MacEwan had had one of his rare moments of anger when his brother Captain's Stopped ship had exploded in this planet's atmosphere, and when Reviora had died. But now he felt only a dull regret. He reminded himself that the Orlig lying over there was responsible—in part, at least—for those deaths, but still he could not actively hate the thing.

It was his duty to kill it, whether he hated the Orlig personally or not. Why, then, was he being so squeamish about not wanting to shoot it when it was unconscious, and trying to work up hatred for it ? Was his imminent demise making him go soft, had Iron Man MacEwan turned to putty at the end ? Phlegmatic, unsmiling and distant, Captain MacEwan was looked upon back at base as the embodiment of the soulless, killing machine. Now he felt as if he was thinking like a woman. Now he was thinking that, just this once, he would like to do something on a basis of emotion rather than for

cold, calculating, logical reasons. It would be the last chance he would have, he thought wryly.

But wasn't he fooling himself? Suppose he forgot logic for once, would he use the pistol to blow the Orlig into little pieces out of sheer hate or would he do something stupid? Yellow cowardice was a motivation as well as duty or hate, and MacEwan was coming near his end. He had never been a religious man, but nobody had been able to give him concrete data on what lay on the other side, though a great many believed firmly that they knew. Was he simply scared that doing a bad thing now would have serious consequences later, after he died—even though he did not really believe there was a later? MacEwan swore weakly, the first time he had done such a thing in years.

All right, then! MacEwan told himself savagely. This mind of mine, admittedly dopey from shock and antipain pills not to mention a generous measure of sheer blue funk, will for the first and most decidedly the last time reason on the purely thalamic level. He would not shoot the Orligian. Fear of the Hereafter was only part of the reason, there was the fact that this particular Orlig, or one of his crew-mates, had made a very fine crash landing.

MacEwan said, "Oh, go ahead and live, damn you!" and tossed the gun away from him.

Immediately the Orlig leapt crouching to its feet.

MacEwan only faintly heard the gun sliding down the inclined deck, falling between the ruptured seams of floor plating and clattering down through the wreckage below. He was watching the Orlig and realising that it had been playing possum, pretending unconsciousness and covertly keeping him under observation while he had the gun in his hand. A smart little teddybear, this Orlig, and now that he was unarmed . . .

He could not help remembering that the muscles under those soft-looking, furry arms were capable of tearing a man's head off, as the massacre on the *Starfinder* had shown.

"MacEwan," he told himself sickly, "you have done a very stupid thing."

At the sound the Orlig started back, then it began edging nearer again. One of its arms hung limp, MacEwan saw, and very obviously it was having to force itself to approach him.

Finally it got to within three feet and stood looking down. It growled and whined in an odd fashion at him and gestured with its good arm ; the noises did not sound threatening. Then the arm reached out, hesitated, and a stubby, four-fingered hand touched MacEwan briefly on the head and was withdrawn quickly. The Orlig growled again and retreated. It disappeared behind a nearby tangle of wreckage and he heard it clambering awkwardly through to the remains ot its own ship.

MacEwan let his head sink to the deck, no longer willing to exert the tremendous effort needed to hold it upright. The antipain was not working too well and his brain seemed to function in fits and starts, racing one minute and completely blank the next. All at once he was utterly, deathly tired, and it must have been at that point that he blacked out again. When he came to, MacEwan's first impression was of vibration striking up through his jaw from the deck plating. His second was that he had gone mad.

His eyes were closed yet he could see himself—all of himself, including the head lying on the deck with its eyes closed. And there was a constant gabbling in his mind which could only be delirium. MacEwan wanted to black out again but the delirium kept him awake. It was too loud, as if somebody were shouting in his head. But the words, though nonsense, were heard clearly :

. . . It is wrong to do this. My Family would be ashamed. But my Family is dead, all dead. Killed by the Family of this loathsome thing which is dying. It is wrong, yet here is a chance to obtain valuable data about them, and with my Family dead the displeasure of other Families cannot hurt me. Perhaps my efforts are useless and the creature is already dead, its wounds are frightful . . .

MacEwan shook his head weakly and opened his eyes. He blinked so as to focus on the odd mechanism which had appeared on the deck about a foot from his head. It was squat, heavy-looking and was dull grey except where clusters of fine, coppery rods stuck out at intervals. A thick power cable sprouted from its base and disappeared somewhere, and just behind the machine the Orlig sat on its haunches. The expression in its eyes, which were the only feature in that ruined face capable of registering any emotion, could only be described as intent.

In his present state it was hard for MacEwan to feel undue excitement or amazement. But he was not so far gone that he could not reason logically, so that he knew quite clearly what it was that he was experiencing.

The Orligs had telepathy.

In the instant of his reaching that conclusion the babble in his head ceased, but there was not silence. Instead there was a bubbling stew of half-thoughts, memory fragments and general confusion, the whole being overlaid by an extreme feeling of antagonism and instinctive loathing which the Orlig was trying unsuccessfully to control. But it *was* trying, MacEwan knew, and that was a good point in its favour. And the main reason for its confusion, he saw, was the fact that having opened communications with a species which was its deadly enemy, the Orlig was at a loss for words.

MacEwan thought that the right thing to do would be to mentally spit in its eye. But he had stopped doing the right things recently—he had gone all emotional. Instead he thought, *That was a very nice landing you pulled off. A very fine landing.*

With the rapport existing between them MacEwan now *knew* that this was the Orlig pilot.

Surprise and increased confusion greeted this, then ; *Thank you,* the creature's mind replied. *At the time I did not know I had a passenger to observe it.*

Maybe it was due to an accident of phrasing, but MacEwan thought that there was an undercurrent of surprisingly Human humour in the thought. But it was lost abruptly in an upsurge of the ever-present antagonism and revulsion, and the flood of sight, sound and pain impressions that, although shockingly clear in themselves, were roaring through the Orligian's brain at a speed too fast for words. The screaming hail of metal from the attacking Earth ship, searching out its Family one by one, ripping them into bloody ruin and continuing to churn horribly at what was left. As the most junior member of the Family with the fastest reflexes it had been in the pilot's position, and relatively safe. But it had felt and seen its brothers being cut to pieces, and when its father had left the control room to take over a firing position, the mentacom had sent him the feelings of its parent gasping frenziedly for air in a compartment which had suddenly been blasted open to space by MacEwan's guns . . .

You started this war, not us ! MacEwan broke in, suddenly angry because he shared identical feelings about Reviora and other acquaintances that he had been careful to avoid thinking of as friends. He was remembering the *Starfinder*.

The reply he got staggered him. It was his own race, not the Orligs, who were responsible for the war, and looking at it from the other's point of view he could see that it was so.

What a perfectly ghastly mess ! MacEwan thought. And Nyberg, poor, brave, ignorant Captain Nyberg. If only he had realised that a feeling of instinctive friendship towards these newly-discovered aliens—because they were so soft and furry and so reminescent of a child's first non-adult friend, a teddybear—did not necessarily have to be reciprocated. On the Orlig's home planet there was a species which resembled the Earthmen as closely as Orligs did teddybears. Its habits were dirty, it was vicious, cowardly and possessed just enough intelligence to be depraved. To the Orlig mentality that species was like fat, wet things under rocks, and things that itched and stank. One of their tricks was to play and cavort within sight of groups of Orlig cubs until one or more, intrigued and as yet not intelligent enough to know better, would wander off after them. The species was, of course, carnivorous . . .

And Captain Nyberg, impatient to broaden Earth's mental horizon by contact with an extra-terrestrial civilisation and puzzled by the alien's tendency to shy away, had crossed to the Orlig ship. He had been admitted by beings whose conditioning from earliest childhood towards things like him was diametrically opposed to his feelings for them. But that alone might not have led to war. If only Nyberg had not tried too hard to win friends and influence Orligs by the tactic so beloved of Earth politicians.

If only he had not tried to kiss babies.

The Orligs were a very emotional race and things had happened very quickly after that incident. There were not enough beings on the ship possessing the objectivity to realise that Nyberg's action might only have *appeared* threatening . . .

But why, MacEwan wondered, had not one of the mentacom gadgets been handy. Instead of halting words and actions, both of which were wide open to misunderstanding, there would have been full comprehension of the potentially explo-

sive differences in the backgrounds of both races. The *Starfinder* incident would never have happened, there would not have been a war and he, MacEwan, would not be dying. Even at this late date he wondered what the Earth authorities might do if the true situation was explained to them. They, too, like Captain Nyberg, had been at one time anxious for contact with an intelligent extra-terrestrial species.

But the flood of the Orlig's thinking was pouring over him again. The main torrent roared through his brain, but not so loudly that the small, revealing side streams went unnoticed. Things like the fact that large-scale war had been unknown on Orligia—though small ones, something like feuds, tended to be rugged—because the Family system made them impossible. There were no nations on the planet, just Families, which were small, close-knit groups of up to fifteen who submitted willingly to the near-Godlike authority of the male parent until they showed sufficient aptitude to form a family group of their own.

It was an intensely conservative type of culture with very complicated and inflexible codes of manners, and Nyberg's misadventure proved the severity of punishments for offences against this code. And the mentacom, it seemed, had been recently developed from existing instruments in use by Orligian psychologists. Apparently the noise of a space battle played hob with the delicately modulated whines and growls which were the Orlig spoken language so that they had been forced to develop a method of mechanical telepathy to solve the communications problem.

Just like that, MacEwan thought dryly, then he concentrated on the main stream of thought being radiated at him. It was so much easier to do that.

He was cold all over now, his mouth and tongue burned with a raging thirst and he could not believe that a human body could feel so utterly and completely weary and still remain awake. Had the conversation been in spoken words MacEwan knew that he could never have carried it on, he was too far gone. His brain felt funny, too, as if a cold, dark something was pushing at it around the edges. Fatigue, loss of blood and oxygen starvation were probably responsible for that effect, he thought, and wondered ironically what particular code he would break if he died on the Orlig in the middle of a conversation.

A sudden new urgency had come into the Orlig's thoughts. They were on the *Starfinder* incident again, and apparently there were those in that Orlig ship's crew who had felt themselves unduly constrained by their home planet's codes of behaviour and of thinking. In their opinion the planet was too hide-bound and conservative and contact with an alien culture was just what it needed if stasis and decadence were to be warded off. The Families in the Earth ship were, it was true, outwardly loathsome to an infinite degree, but perhaps the visual aspect, thought some, was not of primary importance . . .

MacEwan felt a sudden wild hope growing in him as he guessed the trend of the others' thinking. But an equally great despair followed it. What could *he* do, he was as good as dead ?

Do I understand, he thought as distinctly as he could, *that you would like peace* ?

The Orlig's thoughts fairly boiled out at him. Their centuries-old civilisation was being disrupted. Though warships were generally crewed by one or more complete Families, for technical reasons some Families had to be split up. The pain and tragedy of this process could only be appreciated by an Orligian. And hundreds of other Families, the very best Families who specialised in the various technologies, were being lost every year in the war. Most decidely the Orlig, and quite a few of his acquaintances, would like peace !

We, also, thought MacEwan fervently, *would like peace.* Then suddenly he cursed. A door had been opened, just the barest crack, and it was heavy with the inertia of past guilt and blood and misunderstanding. How could a dying man push it wide and cross the threshold ?

MacEwan felt that his mind as well as his body was packing up on him. It would be so nice and easy just to let everything stop. But he was Iron Man MacEwan, he reminded himself goadingly ; MacEwan the Indestructible, the big bodied and even bigger headed Superman, the perfect killing machine. Now he had something which was really worthwhile to strive for, and all he wanted to do was give up because he felt tired. *Think, damn you* ! he raged at himself. *Think, you stinking, lousy quitter . .* !

And he did think. Weakly, urgently he pleaded with the Orlig to relay his suggestions to the other's superiors. He thought in terms of an Armistice preparatory to peace talks, and explained how this might be brought about by using the Earth device of a flag of truce. A raid on an Earth base in which message containers only were dropped, followed by a single ship with a white flag painted prominently on the hull. The Earth forces would be suspicious, but MacEwan did not think they would blow the ship out of the sky . . .

At that point MacEwan blanked out. It was as if the peaks and hollows of his brain waves had suddenly evened themselves out, leaving him with the knowledge of being alive but with no other sensations at all. He didn't know how long it lasted but when he came round again the Orlig pilot was pleading with him desperately not to die, that medical help was on the way—together with a flotilla which was escorting the rescue ship—and that he must live until the other's superiors talked with him.

MacEwan was icy cold and sick and his thirst was a dry acid in his throat. The antipain was not working so well anymore, but he knew that he would never be able to keep a clear head—or even stay conscious—if he took another dose. He thought longingly of water ; he knew the Orligs used it.

But the Orlig sent him a firm, sorrowful negative. He did not know much of Earthmen's physiology, but he was very sure that food or drink would do further harm considering the seriousness and position of MacEwan's injuries. There was a queer, guilty undertone to the thought. MacEwan fastened on it, prised it open, and felt a sensation of hurt which had nothing to do with his wounds. As well as the reasons stated the Orlig had been trying to hide the fact that he did not want to have to touch the Earthman again at any price.

Tell me of yourself, the Orlig went on hastily, *of your world, your background, your friends and Family. I must know as much as possible in case* . . . It tried to stop the thought there, but only succeeded in accentuating it : there can be no tact in a meeting of minds . . . *In case you die before my superiors arrive.*

MacEwan fought pain and thirst and soft encroaching darkness as he tried to tell the Orlig about Earth, his friends and himself .He was pleading a case, and a successful de-

cision meant the end of the war. But he could not be eloquent, nor could he cover up the unpleasant aspects of certain things, because it was impossible to lie with the mind. Several times he slid into a kind of delirium wherein he fought out the last engagement which had killed Hoky and Reviora, right down to the crash, the explosion and the meeting with the Orlig pilot. He could do nothing to stop it, this recurrent nightmare which just might end on a note of hope.

The Orligian was horrified at MacEwan's personal score of kills, but at the same time he seemed to feel just a little sympathy for the loss of Hokasuri and Reviora. And there was a peculiar thought, which MacEwan did not catch properly because he was slipping into a delirius spell at the time, about the Weapon that was somehow tied in with the strange belief on the Orlig's part that no civilised being could attack knowing he had a fifty-fifty chance of being killed ; such bravery was incredible.

But what impressed the other most was the knowledge that the long-dead Captain Nyberg's actions had been motivated by *friendship* towards the Orligians. And that there were creatures on Earth closely resembling the Orligians which the Humans liked and treated as pets, whereas positions were completely reversed on Orligia. It meant that the unfortunate Captain had been slain unjustly, and if it could convince its superiors of that, the groundwork for understanding and eventual peace might be laid.

A severe mental struggle became apparent in the Orlig pilot's mind at that point, so intense that the other seemed deaf to MacEwans' thinking even though he was in one of his rare lucid periods. The being rose to his feet and padded up and down the clear deck area of the wrecked control room. Its mental distress was extreme. Finally it stopped, crouching above MacEwan, and began to bend forward. It was fighting hard, every inch of the way.

A stubby, hairy hand found MacEwan's, held it and actually squeezed it for all of two seconds before being hastily pulled away.

My name is Gruwlyaw-Ki, it said.

MacEwan could not think of a reply for several seconds because there was a funny tightness in his throat—which when he came to think of it was silly.

MacEwan.

Things were hazy after that. They talked a good deal through the mentacom, mostly about the war and regarding tactics and installations in a way which would have had the security officers of both sides tearing their hair. It came as a shock to see that the control room suddenly contained three more Orligs, who eyed him keenly and touched him in several places without any particularly strong signs of repugnance. Obviously Medics are used to horrible sights since the war. They withdrew and immediately afterwards he noticed a large section of the control room wall being cut away, revealing a blue sky, the slender pillar of the rescue ship and a barren stretch of desert. An intricate piece of electronic gadgetry was being assembled in the gap, with power lines running from it to the wrecked Orlig ship. MacEwan could not ask about it because the power cable to the mentacom had been taken out and plugged into this new mechanism.

The Orlig medics had cleaned Grulyaw-Ki up but had not been able to do much for his face, and the being had steadfastly refused to leave MacEwan and go to the rescue ship for proper treatment. It seemed that the Orlig felt deeply obligated to MacEwan because of the Captain's earlier decision not to kill it when he had had the gun and the Orlig was lying helpless on the deck. The Orlig had got the memory of that little item from MacEwan when he had been delirius, apparently. He wanted to stay with the Earthman until . . .

The mentacom had been disconnected at that point.

Officers of ever increasing seniority arrived and talked with Grulyaw-Ki. Some hurried away again and the others stayed and looked down at MacEwan from positions behind the electronic gadget—still apparently arguing with the Orlig pilot, who seemed to be refusing to move more than a few feet from MacEwan's side.

There was something going on here, MacEwan knew suddenly,something which was not consistent with the things he had expected from reading the Orlig's mind. For instance why, after pleading with him to stay alive until the arrival of Orligian higher-ups had the pilot allowed the mentacom to be disconnected immediately after the arrival of the medical officers? Why weren't they asking him questions over the mentacom instead of whining and growling urgently at the Orlig pilot from behind the now apparently complete mechanism a dozen feet away? What *was* the blasted thing anyway . . . ?

Tenuous as mist, with neither strength, directional properties or even clarity, an Orlig thought sequence seeped through his mind. The mentacom beside him was disconnected, but somewhere—at extreme range and probably on the rescue ship—there was another which was operating, and there was an Orligian near it who was thinking about him. There was an undercurrent of excitement in the thought, and hope, and the overall and everpresent problems of strategy and supply —the thought of a very important and responsible Orlig, obviously. MacEwan was a very brave entity, the thought went on, but even so it was better that the Earth-being should not be told what was to happen to him . . .

Rage exploded so violently in MacEwan that he forgot his wounds, and his anger was matched only by his utter self-loathing. He had been a blind, stupid fool ! He had talked too much, betrayed his friends, his race and his world. He had told *everything* to the Orlig pilot, and with knowledge of the spatial co-ordinates of Earth a planet-wrecker or a few bacteriological bombs would soon end the war. Of course the Orlig had given him equally vital information, but with the difference that MacEwan was hardly in a position to pass it on. Now apparently, they were too impatient even to wait for MacEwan to die, because the mechanism which had been set up and which was now focussed on his huddled, near-corpse was nothing less than The Weapon.

The sheer force of his emotions sent him crawling towards Grulyaw-Ki. Mounting waves of pain pounded and roared over the small, feeble core of purpose in his brain, and he dared not look down at his injuries. But the Orlig pilot was looking, and his companions behind The Weapon, and a ragged, tortured whine of sympathy and horror was dragged from their throats at the sight. They had feelings ; he had met one of them mind to mind and he knew. It didn't fit, what they were going to do to him—Grulyaw-Ki's mind had not even considered his being killed out of hand. Maybe that was why the pilot was electing to go with him, because he disapproved of the treachery of his brothers.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw certain coils within the complex mass of The Weapon glow brightly, and he hunched himself desperately forward. *We're not all bad*, his mind screamed, in a vain attempt to reach them without benefit of a mentacom. *Maybe you've tricked me, but there*

can be peace . . . peace . . . He tried to reach out and grasp the Orlig pilot's hand, to show them that he meant what he was thinking, but his stupid, senseless lump of an arm refused to move any more for him, and off to one side The Weapon was about ready to project its radiation, or force pattern, or field of stress . . .

. . . After two hundred and thirty-six years the Orligians were getting another War Memorial, were being forced to get another War Memorial. And the Orligians were a very emotional race.

It was after dawn when the noisy festivities died down and the crowd—silent now and strangely solemn—began to gather round the protective plastic of the old Memorial, the most gruesomely effective War Memorial ever known. They had remained far away from it during the night's celebrations, it would not have been proper to indulge in merrymaking in this place, but now they were gathering from all over the city. They came and stood silent and grave and still, moving only to let through the ground vehicles of off-planet dignitaries or the numerous other technicians and specialists who had business at the Memorial. Some of them cried a little.

At midday the Elected Father of Orligia rose to address them. He spoke of both the joy and solemnity of this occasion, and pointed with pride at the ages-frozen figure of the mighty Grulyaw-Ki, the Orligian who, despite the urgings of his friends and the orders of his superiors, had determined to discharge his obligation towards this great Earth-being MacEwan.

The time stasis field projector, once an Orligian weapon of war but now in use in hospitals on every planet of the Union, had made this possible. With great difficulty the Stopped bodies of MacEwan and Grulyaw-Ki had been sealed up and moved to Orligia, there to wait while the first shaky peace between Earth and Orligia ripened into friendship and medical science progressed to the point where it was sure of saving the terribly injured Earthman. Grulyaw-Ki had insisted on being Stopped with his friend so that he could see MacEwan cured for himself. And now the two greatest heroes of the war—heroes because they had ended it—were about to be brought out of Stasis. To them no time at all would have passed between that instant more than two hundred years ago

and now, and perhaps now for the first time the truly great of history would receive the reward they deserved from posterity. The technicians were ready, the medical men were standing by, the moment was *now* . . . !

The crowd in the immediate vicinity saw the figures come alive again, saw MacEwan twitching feebly and Grulyaw-Ki bending over him, saw the bustle as they were transferred into the waiting ambulance and—temporarily Stopped again until the hospital would be reached by a small and more refined projector—hurried away. The throng went wild then, so that the noise of the previous night would have been restful by comparison. Some of them stayed out of deference to the sculptor for the unveiling of the new memorial, a towering, beautiful thing of white stone that caught at the throat, but only a few thousand. And of these there were quite a few who, when the ceremony was over, went to look through the little peep holes set at intervals around its base.

Through them could be seen a tiny, three-dimensional picture in full detail and colour of the original war memorial, placed there to remind viewers that there was nothing great or noble or beautiful about war.

James White

Once again we introduce a new writer to our pages (not to be confused with the "John Ashton" who appeared in Science Fantasy *several years ago) with a delightful story of the galactic search for other signs of intelligent life. It would be worse than looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, but if found . . .*

COMPANION

By John W. Ashton

There was nothing on Halcyon IV either.

For the past sixty years we had been pushing outwards into space. First the neighbouring planets. Then, as astrotravel developed, beyond them into the galaxy. The first colonies had been set up on two of the inner planets that circled our sun, experimentally rather than as a lasting achievement.

The interstellar drive brought us what we had always been looking for : a means to explore the unknown reaches far beyond the confines of our own solar system, far beyond our own galaxy. From reports now filed away at international space HQ back home some 9423 stars and asteroids, 356 planets and innumerable moons and larger satellite bodies drifting through space on erratic orbits had been visited. Only six of the planets had been considered worthy of colonisation.

And now, with the stardrive, at speeds exceeding that of light, we had reached the farthest limit of our possibilities. Halcyon IV was the end of the line. Either we turned back here and could reach home, or we never returned any more.

Of course, we all knew what we were really looking for. As all those waiting so eagerly for our reports on our native planet we were filled with the same longing, the same impetuous but immortal curiosity that had raised us from the level of primitive but intelligent beings to conquerors of the last great unexplored area of our maps—the universe.

This was our great adventure. It was so simple, so ridiculously sentimental and romantic in essence that, half ashamed, none of us ever voiced the goal that called us on and on.

We were looking for life.

Life in any form, shape or manifestation so long as it could be considered intelligent. Whether higher or lower than our own was of no importance. What we had now been seeking, for over fifty years and since the first excitement had died down, was a race that might eventually become a companion in space. Even the fact that it might be hostile was of little importance. Hostility was a psychological expression that could be broken down and transformed by persuasion, diplomacy and understanding. What really counted would be the knowledge that we were not alone.

So far, on all those worlds visited there had been nothing. Here and there a few crumbling ruins that bore witness to the long-gone presence of intelligence. Here and there also some plant life, certain highly developed forms but without creative or even active intelligence. No, we were alone in space and slowly but surely the dreams of a mighty star empire built with the help of other races, was fading. The stars were ours —and they didn't mean a thing any longer. Better to remain at home, amongst our own people, than to continue wandering about space with hope vanishing and loneliness becoming more pronounced with every world visited.

And so we had reached Halcyon IV. It was the last frontier we could make, even with the unique equipment of our ship.

Halcyon IV—a pinprick of light we had discovered about six months ago. Here we would turn back. We could not risk our homecoming by going beyond it. And if we found nothing our dreams about the stars were doomed. All would be futile, and none would go beyond the inner planets of our own system any more.

And now, at last, we had arrived. Halcyon IV was the third of nine planets orbiting around a sun much smaller than

our own. Coming in through the rtposhpere we found strong evidence of a developed flora on our instruments. There was air too, rich and a trifle heady, but perfectly breathable. There was water, for we passed over vast oceans on our way in. There were a few forests and what looked like fields, and huge black scarred surfaces, some of them strangely vitrified, others radioactive, and grey mountains. But not a trace of life showed up on our instruments.

We circled the planet five times before the Captain selected a landing site in the more temperate zone between the equator and the pole. There was not a sign, not even a ruin. Nothing ! This world was empty, deserted of life.

The final landing place was at the mouth of a narrow valley, protected by a range of mountains some twelve miles away. Climbing out of the ship, carefully, guns at the ready, we suddenly noticed one thing. The silence. A tangible, overpowering silence that clung to the landscape, bore down and gripped the heart with skeleton fingers, numbed the brain. A silence that could mean but one thing ; that Halcyon IV had been dead a long long time.

Although none said so we all, captain, twelve scientists and the twenty odd picked technicians that made up the crew, knew that this was the end of our ambitions. Nevertheless, more from a sense of routine than actual interest, we carried on with our operational instructions.

The two scouts we had aboard took to the air. Then we settled down to wait. Except for the botanist and the geologist there was nothing else we others could do. The two scientists moved disconsolately around the landing site and drifted back to the ship from time to time with a few samples of the flora and soil. You could tell their hearts weren't in the job.

By the time night fell—we already knew that a day on Halcyon IV was the equivalent of our twenty-four hours—the two scout vessels were still abroad. We sent out a linking beam over the radio and continued to wait, listening to the silence that seemed to crowd in on us. Only the scanners remained on the alert, probing the night around us, but the alarms remained silent.

All in all, we'd got used to it by now. When you've visited almost a hundred worlds, some inhabitable, most not, you get used to all kinds of silence and feelings of emptiness. You

just couldn't care less, in the end—and that's what we'd come to. The end ; the last milestone on the long journey looking for someone or something to share the frightening vastness you had conquered.

Somewhere around ten o'clock it happened.

Not much—not enough to set us wide awake. Up in the ship, radio had made contact with one of the scout boats. And the news that was coming in seemed sufficient for the Captain to take over. The others, scientists and crew, clustered together around the door to the radio cabin and down the passage.

" This is Charlie Two calling XB-7," the radio was muttering through a sudden windfall of static. " Can you hear me, XB-7 ? Over."

" We hear you, Charlie Two," the captain's strained voice rasped down the mike. " Come in Charlie Two !"

" Tran has seen something XB-7. It's a sort of light, reddish, like a beacon, on and off."

The captain was pale under his tan. All of us probably, hanging on to every word. Was this what we'd been looking for ? Our thoughts went out to the lonely little scout ship with its crew of three, circling over a pin-point of light somewhere in the darkness of that mountain range behind us.

" We're moving in to investigate," the tinny, impersonal voice continued in the loudspeaker. " We're putting the ship down three hundred feet from the light. Yes, it's red all right. We've taken pictures and are getting out sound and radiation equipment."

For about ten minutes—they looked like all eternity to me and probably to the others also—we waited again. The captain and Tcher, the physicist, were breathing heavily. The others just stood around, staring up at the loudspeaker.

Then the voice was back.

" Charlie Two to XB-7. Tren speaking, sir. The light is stationary, fixed to a small pylon about three feet high. Molecular structure of metal unidentified, strong radiation. But we can't get near enough to touch it. There seems to be a sort of force-field around the thing, two yards in diameter. And it's too dark to do much just now."

The Captain's voice cut in.

" Did you get any sound, Tren ?"

" Yes, sir. We've recorded some in the ultra-short. It looks like a signal to me, the same code repeating itself every thirty seconds, coinciding with the flash of the light."

" All right, Tren. Get a fix on it and come back !"

The other's voice hesitated. " We'd still like to—"

" Come back, I said," the Captain roared. " That's an order. We don't know what it is. We'll see what the instruments say. Back, Charlie Two !"

" Very well, sir," Tren replied.

The scout was back a quarter of an hour later. Tren and his two companions remained closeted with the Captain and the senior physicist until the early hours of the dawn. Finally they called me in, together with Ran, the sound analyst.

" Make anything of it," the Captain asked after he had played the recording three or four times.

" No," said Ran.

" Nothing at all," I said.

" You're a historian," the Captain pointed an accusing finger at me. " Look," and he slipped a three dimensional infrared negative into the viewer. " Look, the pylon is of some metal we don't know, but it's impervious to radiation. What type of culture would you assess such a thing to ?"

I stared at the picture for a second. " Highly developed mechanically," I said. " And there's something to the left of it, on the ground. A slab of something."

" I know," Tren put in. " I saw it on the spot. It looks like a trap-door, but I can't be sure. We didn't have any special equipment with us, not even video, remember ?"

" Well, we'll take the ship over in an hour or so," the Captain said. " We'll get through even if we have to blast a way to the pylon."

I looked again at that picture and turned on the recording, slowing it down. The sounds grew more spaced. A mad chatter of some kind, totally incomprehensible. And yet ! I looked at Tren and the Captain and saw them watching me. Yes, there could be no doubt about it. They felt it too ! There was something strange here, definitely strange.

A couple of hours later we were on the spot. The Captain set down the ship a bare fifty feet from the pylon. The strange object continued to emit its thirty-second red flash.

The first team with whom I went in, approaching the pylon gingerly, clad in radiation suits and protected by our own force screens, got no farther than Tren had.

" Turn on the ship's field and increase the power slowly," the physicist suggested.

The nose of the ship glowed faintly as the field formed and expanded. Once more our four research teams moved in. At the rim of the pylon's field we were again forced back.

" Step up the power !" the Captain shouted into his portable mike.

" Amazing !" the physicist said. " Extraordinarily high up the nucleonic level. If this goes on the ship's power won't even be enough to cancel out that effect."

" We'd better get in," someone said grimly.

And we got in. It took the combined power of the ship and of the portable force screens, crackling with blue flames, to pass through the barrier.

" We can keep up this power for one hour, no longer," one of the technicians warned.

" Then we'd better hurry," the Captain said.

While our metallurgical and chemical experts studied the pylon, trying, without success, to cut away a sample, the Captain, Tren, the senior physicist and I stood over the slab.

" It's only stone," Tren said.

" Yes, but fashioned by intelligence, without a doubt," the Captain replied. As though the existence of the pylon did not confirm the fact without any words. " All right, we'll pry it up."

" Just a moment, Captain," the physicist moved a radiation counter over the slab, then a detector—slowly, ever so carefully. Finally he straightened. " It's clean," he said.

A crowbar was passed on to us. We adjusted it to a small aperture we found at one end and Tren and I put our weight on it. Surprisingly enough, the slab came up without difficulty.

Underneath lay a flight of narrow steps, leading into darkness.

The Captain stepped forward, torch in one had, blaster in the other.

Again, I had that strange feeling.

" Wait, Captain, there may be danger—we'd better go together."

He smiled at me then.

" Very well, Rill," he said. " We'll go together since instead of studying, you may be making history. But I go first." And he disappeared cautiously down the steps.

I followed, perhaps a foot behind him.

We stood in a small chamber. Our torches cut rings of light on blank walls. The ground was level and firm. There appeared to be no other opening. I turned back to the stairs and called the others.

Our torches continued to play ahead of us, small pools of light cutting away the darkness. And then I heard the Captain's gasp. felt him stiffen. Following the beam of his torch I too held my breath. For there, slightly off centre, lay a long, narrow box.

We moved closer cautiously. Behind us we could hear Tren the physicist and several others moving down the steps. But our eyes remained glued to the box, or casket, or whatever it was.

The cover was of some strange transparent material. It looked very hard and very solid and encompassed the body of a creature such as I had never seen, or dreamt to see. There was something infinitely deadly about it, something dangerous, threatening in the narrow face. And also something ludicrously fragile about the four narrow stilts that protruded from its frame.

I moved closer and tried to touch the lid. I couldn't. My hand was suddenly, irresistibly, pushed back, my fingers were cold and growing colder. I leaped back a pace.

" Careful, Captain !" I shouted. But my voice, the others told me later, was no more than a husky, frightened whisper in the silence of that terrible room.

The Captain had sprung back also. Now he pressed the blue button on his gun, and the full power of its deadly energy battered at the object. Nothing happened. Whatever it was, the beam that could disintegrate anything was certainly absorbed and apparently rendered harmless. Not a scratch appeared on the polished surface of the lid.

Then the physicist had struck the weapon from the Captain's hand.

" Stop it— !" he shouted.

The Captain's eyes flashed red with anger.

"What the—"

"No use trying," the physicist said breathlessly. "The energy of this field is more powerful than anything our ship has. Nothing we know of can possibly cancel it out. And after all, why should we try?"

"Why?" the Captain's voice was raised in scornful astonishment.

"But it's a monster," I ventured.

"To you, to us, yes. Maybe. But what are we to it?"

I looked at the creature in the oblong casket again.

"If they know so much they may be dangerous," the Captain said. "And it's our duty to destroy them."

"Duty!" the physicist laughed. "They may be enemies—but they might just as well be friends. And with their science, who knows, their power of understanding and tolerance may be greater than ours. And this—monster—isn't dead. It's alive, asleep if you wish, in a state of suspended animation, but protected by all the scientific power of its race. What do you think they would say if ever they come here, and found it destroyed? Don't you think they will hunt us down to the limits of the universe? No—we can't, we may not attempt to destroy it."

The physicist stepped forward and stared down at the creature that slept beneath the transparent panel. "Who knows what happened to make it do this? And when will it awaken?" he murmured. "The only clue we have lies in the message. That must be on the wavelength they employed. And we must try to grasp its meaning—"

So we returned to the ship.

The hour was up and we couldn't keep the power without endangering our own possibilities of return. And we had to get back, now more than ever.

We had to return—to wait. And when we died our children would be there, on Halcyon IV, waiting, and their children after them.

Night and day, the sound analysis team worked on that recording. Light years away, back on the planet, the red light continued to send its message across space. Who would be listening? Who would hear it? Who would understand?

Until, one morning, it suddenly became comprehensible. The chaotic noise was subdued, tamed, slowed down until it beat upon our consciousness, a painful, sinister voice, repeating over and over again :

" I am the last—I am the last—s-a-v-e our souls—save our souls—I am the last . . ."

" An appeal for help, I think, before he went into deep sleep," the physicist said.

We all agreed.

And so it was that we found a companion.

We'll be back soon, on Halcyon IV, with others of our race. We'll wait, no matter how long, until the monster awakens or until others of his race hear his message and come for him.

But sometimes, in the night, I awaken. And I hear that unearthly, mind-shattering voice again, and I shudder, pressing the tips of my tentacles to my head, my antennae bending inwards as under a heavy gale. And I wonder what will happen when our races meet.

John W. Ashton

You may remember "Swap Shop" in the December 1957 issue. Here is another story of the crew of the Eupeptic Dragon *in their trading excursions round the galaxy. This time they are involved in a quiz story—with interesting if not profitable results.*

IN THE BOX

By Bertram Chandler

There was a time, and not so very long ago, when the principle of interstellar telegraphic communication was a closely guarded secret. It was inconvenient, perhaps, that the psionic radio should have been developed whilst the so-called Great Revival was in full swing—and yet, from the viewpoint of the telepaths, ever apprehensive that a mob of religious fanatics might take too seriously the Biblical injunction 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,' it was fortunate. It meant that there was a demand for their services in Deep Space and on the Outworlds, it meant that they came under the protection of the powerful Interstellar Transport Commission.

The Commission is powerful, yet there are times when it must act with a certain circumspection. The time of the Great Revival was one of them—there were too many Revivalists in important governmental positions. The public knew, of course, that it was possible to flash a message across a hundred light years with no more delay than there would be, say, between London and Sydney. It was assumed that the space warping principles of the Interstellar Drive had been, somehow, applied to the transmission of radio signals. If the public had known, as it knows now, that the only possible means of instantaneous communication is telepathic, and that the Com-

mission was making use of the hated telepaths, there might well have been a boycott of the Commission's ships and services which would have given the various Outworld shipping lines a golden opportunity to run us out of Deep Space.

Anyhow, the telepaths were recruited and trained—and the very nature of their talents made it possible for this recruiting to be carried out in absolute secrecy. The amplifiers—grown, as everybody knows now, from tissue cultures taken from the brains of dogs—were manufactured and installed in the ships and freighted to the Outworld spaceports. There was, at the same time, a certain weeding out of Revivalists from spacefaring personnel—many an officer who had assumed that he would live out his entire working life in Deep Space found himself brought ashore to take up an appointment as Berthing Master or Stevedore. It was all done quietly and without fuss. Those of us who remained in the ships knew what was happening, and why—and we knew what would happen to us if we divulged the merest hint of it to any outsider.

We got two of the new Communications Officers in *Epsilon Draconis*—known to her crew as the *Eupeptic Dragon*. The Astronautical Superintendent had told us to be nice to them. The Old Man had told us the same thing. It was rather hard at first. We were a rather closely knit family in the *Eupeptic Dragon* and inclined to resent the introduction of a pair of strangers into our midst—especially strangers who didn't look or act like spacemen, who looked as though they would never look or act like spacemen.

George Kemp was the senior of the two. He looked like what he had been in civil life—a schoolmaster. He looked like the sort of schoolmaster who takes almost too much interest in the welfare of his charges, concerning himself with Boy Scout activities and the like after hours. Somehow he managed to make the neat (but not on him) and simple shirt and shorts uniform of the Commission look the sort of thing that is worn by an absentminded and not especially dressy Scoutmaster—his shorts were far too short, revealing an amazing length of scraggly leg; one epaulette was always hanging awry.

Freda Hall was rated as Second Communications Officer. She had been on the stage—half of a mind reading act. She

looked as though she should have been one of those undressed blondes who stand around looking ornamental to distract the attention of the audience from what the conjuror is doing. Still, she filled her uniform better than George Kemp did.

These, then, were our new shipmates. We were fully prepared not to like them. We suspected them. We got the cold shivers whenever we thought of that overgrown dog's brain in its vat in the communications office. We found ourselves not daring to think whenever George or Freda was in the vicinity—and it was hard not to think censorable thoughts when that blonde was around.

And yet, after the first week out from Earth, we found ourselves accepting them. Freda explained it to me some time later. "We don't eavesdrop," she told me. "We regard that as being unethical. But look at it this way. *You* meet somebody—and he shouts, '*I hate your guts*!' You can't help hearing it, can you? In the same way, George and myself couldn't help knowing what all of you were thinking about us. It was so *loud*. So we did something about it. George took pains to make sure that his uniform stockings were pulled up properly and that his shoulder tabs were properly made fast to his shirt. I took pains to make my uniform look more like a uniform and less like a chorus girl's stage costume. I also went easier on the cosmetics. After all, we have the gift, and we'd be fools not to use it to make things easier for everybody."

So we accepted them, and they became members of the family. And the Eupeptic Dragon continued on her rounds, flitting from planetary system to planetary system as demanded by the exigencies of trade, picking up a few tons of cargo here, a couple or three passengers there, rarely visiting a major colony and almost never staying in any one port for more than six hours. She was a tramp, as are all of the Epsilon Class, but we liked her and we liked the life.

It was on New Dunedin that we had an unusually long stay. The Dunedinites are descended from colonists who came originally from New Zealand, and who brought with them from their mother country strong views as to the sanctity of the weekend. No—and I mean *no*—work is done on the Sabbath. The only work done on a Saturday is work connected with essential services and entertainment.

It was on a Friday evening that we berthed at the New Dunedin spaceport. We had an unusually large shipment of cargo to discharge —deep freeze kippers and haddock from Atlantia, casks of whiskey from Nova Caledonia—so much so that it was impossible to complete work on Friday night. Those of us not on duty would have gone ashore that evening, but it was raining heavily. And a ship is a spaceman's home—more of a home, perhaps, than the house of any planet dweller. Those of us off duty were reluctant to leave the warmth and the comfort of familiar things, of familiar faces and voices. Even George and Freda, who had been in Space a mere Dog Watch, felt as we did—being telepaths they had, I suppose, no option.

We were all sitting in the cosy little Smoking Room. We had drinks. Bill Taylor, the Mate was playing chess with Sue Perkins, the Catering Officer. Kendall, the Reaction Engineer, was enjoying one of his interminable arguments with Kennedy, the Mannschen Drive Engineer. I was helping George and Freda to solve an especially complicated three dimensional crossword puzzle. Dick Travers, the Radio Officer, was tinkering with the big TV set in the corner.

" At least there's something I can still do," he grumbled good naturedly. " Nobody's come up with psionic TV yet. . ."

" They will," said Freda. " Just stick around, Dick, and and you'll see it yet. . ."

" Let's hope that they find some decent programmes to use it for," I said. " Leave the set alone, Dick—these hick planets usually have even worse shows than the civilised worlds."

" I don't know about that," he said. " Sometimes there's something quite amusing from these small stations. . ."

The swirling colours in the tank suddenly coalesced, solidified, became the figures of men and women. We looked away from our puzzles, our games, interested for a few moments, at least, in what the local station had to offer. It was, we saw, some sort of Quiz show. But it wasn't the Quiz part of it that was interesting—the questions asked of the various contestants were absurdly easy—it was the diabolical follow-up. As a study in psychology it was fascinating, but the admission that we found it fascinating was an admission of sadism.

The whole thing was simultaneously simple and ingenious. Each contestant had to answer three questions, and whether

or not he answered them correctly he received a small prize —a package of the goods manufactured by the sponsor, a firm rejoicing in the name of Miracle Suds. When, and if, all three questions had been correctly answered the real fun started. On the stage were twenty-four numbered boxes, each containing a card upon which was printed the name of a prize. Some of the prizes were really big—the best was a Spurling four seater runabout—and some were absurdly small, such as, for example, a packet of pins. The audience was shown what was in the boxes ; the contestant, of course, wasn't. He was offered his choice of the two dozen boxes.

Then the Quizmaster really enjoyed himself. First of all he would try to make the contestant change his mind. Then, when the victim had decided at last in favour of one particular number, the Quizmaster would bid for the box, increasing his offer to as high, at times, as a thousand credits. The big laugh came at the end, when it would be found that the contestant had decided to take the box, turning down a bid, say, of a thousand credits, only to find that his prize was a packet of pins, or when the contestant had accepted money, losing one of the really worthwhile prizes by so doing.

" I should just hate to be on that stage," said the Mate at last. " I should just hate to weaken at the bid of three hundred credits, only to find that I'd thrown away the Spurling, the same as that silly clot did just now . . ."

" We could do with a Spurling here," said Kendall. " It'd be very handy in these small parts . . The wings can be modified, you know, so that they can be folded. We could just get the brute into my spare storeroom . . ."

" I wonder . . ." murmured Sue Perkins. " Is this show on tomorrow night too ?"

" You thinking of entering, Sue ?" asked Taylor.

" No, Bill. But we have somebody here who could enter. . ."

" I'm sorry," said George Kemp. " It wouldn't be ethical. You people may not know it—but we telepaths are all members of our own Association, and one of our rules is that no member shall use his gift for purposes of private gain."

" But it wouldn't be *private* gain, George," explained Sue sweetly. " It'd be for the good of the ship, of your shipmates."

" There's another point, too," said Bill Taylor, " you'd be performing a public service in taking the silly grins off the

faces of that sadistic Quizmaster and his moronic studio audience . . ."

"But we don't know that the show's on tomorrow night," objected Freda. "We don't know that we could get on, in any case."

"You're the Purser, Peter," said Taylor to me. "Do something for your living for a change. Find out if the show *is* on."

There was a shore telephone in the corner of the Smoking Room. I went to the instrument, dialled the number of our local Agent. His face, when it appeared on the little screen, was rather puzzled.

"Yes, Mr. Wilkins?" he asked. "Is anything wrong at the ship?"

"No, Mr. Bradley. I just called you to ask a question."

"Well, what is it?"

"We're watching that Quiz programme—*Take A Box*. Is it on tomorrow night too?"

"Yes. It's always on Friday and Saturday night. Why?"

"Well, we were thinking that the ship could do with that Spurling. It'd be a very handy thing to have. We were wondering if you could get one of us entered as a contestant tomorrow . . ."

The Agent laughed.

"Yes," he said, "I could—although I must warn you that it's contrary to the Commission's policy for its officers to make a laughing stock of themselves. Anyhow, I know Maclaren, the Managing Director of Miracle Suds. I'll get on to him right now if you like. Which of you is entering?"

"Mr. Kemp," I said.

I was afraid that the Agent would ask just what and who Mr. Kemp was. I didn't think that anybody but those directly concerned with the running of ships or with communications knew anything about the employment of telepaths, but I wasn't sure.

"All right, then. Mr. Kemp it is. I'll tell Maclaren that the officers of your ship have watched and enjoyed the Take-A-Box programme and that one of them would like to enter for tomorrow night's competition. I'll ring back."

"Well," I said to the others, "that's fixed."

"I'm still not happy about it," said George Kemp.

"I know," said Freda. "You're radiating unhappiness like mad. Stop it, please—you're making me miserable. Look at it this way, George. The promoters of this sadistic show *deserve* to have somebody win the big prize—and that somebody might as well be us. That Spurling will be of more use to the company of this ship than it will be to anybody on this planet. And it will belong to all of us. It's a plain case of the greatest good for the greatest number. Don't you all agree?"

We said that we did.

George Kemp still looked miserable.

"All right," he said, "assuming that the Agent manages to get me entered for the show, what's the drill?"

"I don't suppose that we shall be allowed to be members of the studio audience," I said. "You've all seen how when the contestant is faced with the choice, the money or the box, the audience will yell 'Take it!' or 'Take the money!' and so on. Their advice is sometimes right and sometimes wrong—but it'll be pretty obvious to whoever's in charge that we'd give you the right advice. No—we all stay here and watch it on the TV. Freda will be in contact with you by telepathy. The first part should be easy enough—the bunch of us, between us, should be able to think of the right answers to any questions the Quizmaster asks, and Freda will pass them on to you . . ."

"Why shouldn't George get the answers directly from the Quizmaster's mind?" asked Taylor.

"Because I can't!" snapped Kemp. "Dammitall, Freda and I have been members of this ship's company for *months* now, and yet none of you has a glimmering as to how telepathy really works. Oh, we can receive you all right—but it's not a clear reception. It's like . . . like . . . How shall I put it? It's like listening to a song, and being able to distinguish the tune and not the words. We can pick up emotions and make a pretty shrewd guess as to what's behind them—but for clarity you *must* have two telepaths, one to send and the other to receive."

"Sorry," said the Mate. "Anyhow, I know now."

The telephone bell rang. I went to the instrument. The Agent's face was beaming at me from the little screen.

"I've fixed it up," he said. "A ground car will be calling for your Mr. Kemp at nineteen hundred hours tomorrow evening. But I'm afraid that none of the rest of you will be allowed into the studio."

" That's all right," I said. " And thanks a lot."

I hung up.

" I'm looking forward to my first flight in that Spurling," said Freda.

" Aren't we all ?" said Sue.

" It's in the bag," said Freda.

" In the box," I corrected. " In the box."

The next evening George, hostile to all the world because of the break in his routine, had an early dinner and was waiting at the airlock when the car from the studio drew up alongside. We wished him—and ourselves—well as he boarded the vehicle,waved to him as he was borne swiftly from our sight. We went back on board then to enjoy our own dinner. The Old Man had been told about our scheme by the Agent and, of course, knew, as the Agent didn't, that success was certain. He commended our astuteness. After all, he pointed out, there probably wasn't another telepath on the whole of New Dunedin, and it was highly improbable that those responsible for the show would even guess what was happening.

" In any case," he said, " there's nothing *wrong* with what you are doing. You and George have a gift, Freda, and there's no reason why you shouldn't use it—especially when it's being used for the good of all of us."

" That's what I've been telling George ever since last night," she said. " I think that I've got him convinced at last, Captain."

After dinner we went into the Smoking Room, waited for Dick Travers to tune in the TV to the right channel. We watched a dozen amateurish dancers galumphing across the stage like a herd of baby elephants. We watched a third-rate conjuror. We watched a newsreel that was nothing but a succesion of local celebrities doing boring things.

Then *Take-a-Box* came on.

There was the same Quizmaster. There were the same—or they looked the same—contestants ; rather desperate, rather frightened people, driven into the brief glare of publicity by. . . greed. I felt, rather uneasily, that it had been our greed that had driven George to make one of their number.

There was the usual warming up and explanatory session during which the Quizmaster tried hard to convince us what a witty, cultured—yet not lacking the common touch — and

urbane fellow he was. We endured this in stony silence, and each of us made a resolution never, on any account, to buy any of his sponsor's products. Then while an impersonal female voice described them, we were shown the prizes.

Briefly the numbers flashed in the tank, behind each one, in the three dimensional screen, glowed a picture of each prize. Number One—a bottle of Nova Caledonian whiskey. Number Two—a bar of soap. Number Three—a gleaming Washmaster . . .

The voice died, the pictures faded.

" Damn !" yelled the Mate. " *Do* something, somebody !"

" It's not this set," replied Dick Travers, fiddling desperately with the controls. " It must be that bloody ancient transmitter of theirs !"

Colours swirled and coalesced in the tank. A picture formed. The numeral 6 it was, and behind it gleamed the Spurling, sleek and trim with swept-back wings and needle prow, climbing vertically against a black, star spangled backdrop. Then suddenly, it was gone.

" It doesn't matter," said the Mate to Dick. " We've seen all we want to see. Start sending that six right away. Freda,"

" We want to see George win the thing," I pointed out.

And—" I'm trying," said Freda. " I'm trying, but it's hard to get through. Just to make things worse, he's got stage fright. I should have gone, Bill . . ."

" It's too late to think of that now," said Taylor.

" Anyhow," I said, " there's no hurry. There are six contestants and George comes on last. Somebody else might have won the Spurling before then."

" Don't be so bloody cheerful," snapped Kendall.

" Tell me, Freda," asked Sue Perkins, " in a case like this do you sort of say the number to yourself, or do you visualise it ? The reason I'm asking is that I thought we might all help, all concentrate at the same time as you."

" I visualise it," said Freda. " I just think of the numeral six, fat and white against a black ground You can all help . . ."

" Shut up !" snarled Dick Travers. " Keep quiet, can't you ?"

The set was working again, both sound and vision. We watched the elimination of the first contestant, who had failed

to answer correctly the first question, the name of the capital city of the Federation. We all sneered, thinking how incredible it was that even on this hick planet a man should not be familiar with the name of London. We saw him retire, crestfallen, from the stage, clutching to his bosom a Jumbo Super Economy Size packet of Miracle Suds Shampoo and hoped tha this wife had more hair than he had.

The second contestant, a middle-aged woman, was made of sterner stuff. She answered the three questions without hesitation, naming the dominant life form of Deneb VII—which is one of the three planets upon which non-organic life is known to exist—the name of the Captain of the first interstellar ship, the Capital of the Shaara Empire. She made her choice of boxes ; much to our relief it was Number Fourteen. She stuck to her guns at first, refusing to change her mind. She let the bidding get as high as nine hundred and fifty credits before she weakened. She said that nine hundred and fifty credits was, after all, a lot of money and that she'd take it. We were all of us pleased to discover that the prize in box Number Fourteen would have been a loaf of bread.

The third contestant was not so lucky. He was determined to stick to his box and, having turned down a final offer of five hundred credits, received a silk necktie as a reward for his stubbornness.

The fourth and the fifth contestants were both sadly deficient in general knowledge.

Then it was George's turn. He shambled on to the stage, looking extremely miserable. He shook hands with the Quizmaster. He was introduced to the audience as a spaceman, all the way from Earth, who had heard of New Dunedin's great game of skill and chance—sponsored by Miracle Suds—and who was determined to show the Galaxy that Imperial Earth was still the leader in all things. It was all very funny to the studio audience.

" And now, Mr. Kemp," said the Quizmaster, " I'm going to ask you three simple questions. Yes—*simple* questions. Questions that any New Dunedin schoolboy could answer in his sleep. I don't believe in being too hard on visitors . . ."

" Thank you," mumbled George.

" Then here's the first one. What was the name of the team that won last year's McAllister Cup ?"

" I was expecting this !" laughed Bill Taylor. " While the rest of you were snoring your heads off this afternoon I went ashore and laid in a stock of local reference books !" He was leafing rapidly through the slim volume on his knee. " Stand by to transmit, Freda !"

" Come, come, Mr. Kemp," the Quizmaster was saying. " Surely you're a sportsman. I thought that every Earthman was a sportsman."

" We are," said George bravely.

" Think of that beautiful Spurling !" chuckled the Quizmaster. " Just the thing for weekend leaves in port !"

" I am thinking of it," said George, playing for time.

" Ten seconds, Mr. Kemp. I'm afraid that that's all that I can allow you. Ten seconds, starting from now. One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

" Women's basket ball !" shouted Taylor. " The team was *Pride of the Glen* !"

" Seven . . . Eight . . ."

" Pride of the Glen," said George firmly.

The Quizmaster's face fell.

" You're right," he admitted. " But then, you're a spaceman, with a girl on every planet. You should have known that one."

" Why," asked George, genuinely puzzled.

" Never mind. *I'm* asking the questions. Stand by for Number Two. What New Dunedin athlete ran a mile in three minutes fifty-eight point two seconds ?"

" Hollis, on Earth, did it in three minutes, fifty seven point nine seconds," said George.

" We're not concerned with Earth, Mr. Kemp. Earth is a long way from here. We're concerned with New Dunedin."

This time Taylor was faster.

" Hannah," he yelped. " Charles Hannah !"

" Charles Hannah . . ." repeated Freda.

" Come, Mr. Kemp, we haven't got all evening," said the Quizmaster. " I always thought that you people travelled faster than light, but *you* are very slow."

" Charles Hannah," said George.

" Hannah it is," admitted the Quizmaster. Then, trying to rattle George, " but it took you a long time to think of it."

" My memory," said George hastily, " isn't what it was."

" No ? Let's try it out on this one, then. Who is the goalkeeper of the Dunedin Wanderers ?"

" What do they play ?" asked George.

" Football, of course."

" Yes but what kind ? There are so many varieties."

" There is only *one* game of football," said the Quizmaster sternly. " Association Football."

" They have at least seven on Altairia," said George. " Association, Rugby League, Rugby Union, Australian Rules, American Rules, Vegan Union, Altairian League. . ."

" Fascinating, Mr. Kemp. But please answer my question."

" Cook !" snapped Taylor.

" Cook . . ." repeated Freda.

" Cook . . ." we all whispered, concentrating hard.

" Cook," said George calmly.

" Cook," almost snarled the Quizmaster. " You're in the game now, the real game, the big game. Look at all those boxes. In one of them is the piece of paper that will entitle you to the Spurling—turret drive, four seats, pressurised cabin. Which box do you want ?"

" Six !" we all screamed. " *Six* ! *Six* !"

" Shut up !" snapped Freda. " Let *me* concentrate."

" Six," said George.

" Six ?" asked the Quizmaster. " And why do you want six ? Is it your lucky number ? What about seven, or eight, or nine ?"

" Six," said George firmly.

" So you won't change your mind ? So you're quite determined to have Number Six ?"

" I am," said George.

" Would a hundred credits make you change your mind ?"

" It would not."

" Two hundred ?"

" No."

" I like a man who knows his own mind—but an intelligent man will change his mind if there's sufficient inducement. Six isn't the only number, you know,"

" I know," said George.

" Five hundred credits—the money or the box. Five hundred credits. You can have quite a party on that."

" I want Number Six," said George firmly.

There was a pause in the proceedings as another man walked on to the stage. He looked like a technician. He whispered something to the Quizmaster. The Quizmaster nodded, then made a gesture of dismissal.

" This is my last offer," he said to George. " A thousand credits . . . One, zero, zero, zero, credits . . ."

" I want the box," said George.

We watched George's face fall as the box was opened. Our own faces fell as we read the lettering on the magnified image of the card that was taken from it. A year's supply of free tickets, for two persons, to the Dunedin City Sports Stadium would have been considered a prize worth having by a local, but it was valueless to us.

" Get on the phone to the station," snarled the Mate. " The game's crook.!"

" And now," said the Quizmaster, " I must apologise to those of our viewers who were expecting to see our friend win the big prize. During the temporary breakdown the numeral nine—I repeat nine—was televised upside down. It was box Number Nine that held the Spurling." He seemed to be looking straight at us as he continued, " Neither the breakdown nor the presentation of the upside down image made any difference, of course, to the fairness of the contest . . ."

" I wish you could do teleportation as well as telepathy," growled the Mate to Freda as he hurled a beer bottle at the screen.

I thought how useful that thousand credits would have been—apart from anything else it would have bought us the new TV set which, as and from that moment, we needed.

Bertram Chandler

THE SUNSPOT CYCLE

Despite the Sun being the nearest star to us we know very little about its functional mechanism. Or conversely, we know a lot about it but insufficient to be really certain how its life cycle is propagated. In this following article Kenneth Johns explores the knowledge we have gained from studying sunspots.

By Kenneth Johns

There is a variable star just eight minutes away from Earth. It is only of medium size, as stars go, and its brightness is nothing out of the ordinary.

But it is the most important star in the Universe to us. Whether you call it the Sun, or Old Sol, or symbolise it as the Father of Light in the Sky, it called life into being and is still the one force that stands between the human race and total extinction.

The Sun's vital statistics may not appear exciting : diameter 865,000 miles, density 1.4 times that of water, gravity 28 times what we are used to at home, and average distance 92,948,000 miles, give or take 10,000 miles. Yet, only eight minutes away at the speed of light, lies a thermonuclear furnace with a mass measured in billions of tons where matter exists in a strange fluid state. At that short distance exists a furnace that is an almost perfect sphere of white hot gas converting 600 million

tons of hydrogen into 596 million tons of helium and 4 million tons of light *every second.* Of those 4 million tons of pure radiation, only 4lbs actually reach Earth—4lbs of light to keep the chill of space at bay.

Physicists would be happy if they could cheaply produce one ounce of radiation a second—enough to generate all the power we will want for some time to come.

Despite its relative nearness, 270,000 times closer than Alpha Centauri the next nearest star, the Sun is almost as much a mystery today as it was three hundred and fifty years ago. Admitted that we've weighed it, measured it, analysed its surface, photographed it bit by bit and broken its spectrum down into many thousands of lines. We've even had a good guess at the mechanism by which it was created and the means by which four million tons of energy are created every second. But begin to ask for detailed explanations of some of the Sun's phenomena and astrophysicists are the first to admit that we just don't know.

Probably the most curious of the Sun's large-scale features are sunspots. You probably saw with your naked eyes the great group of sunspots that marred the surface in 1947. Yet there is more to them than just an appearance of a few black specks floating across the disc. In different ways they are bound up with the Sun's internal structure, its magnetic field and its size and rotation.

In 1843, just 232 years after Galileo turned his new telescope on the Sun, and announced that the spots rotate with the Sun, it was realised that sunspots come and go tn eleven year cycles. A nice, simple, solid fact. Or is it ?

The *average* period between sunspot maxima, when there may be thirty spots over the surface is 11.1. years. Yet it has been seven and seventeen years. There were no sunspots at all between 1640 and 1716, and very few between 1798 and 1833. Why ? We don't know.

The activity of sunspots increases on the average for 4.5 years and decreases for 6.5 years, making 11 years. But magnetic measurements, and sunspots are the centres of intense magnetic fields, show a twenty-two year cycle on which are superimposed smaller variations to give an apparent eleven year cycle. Other calculations suggest either a complex add-

ition of four cycles or a simpler one of 11.25 years superimposed on a 450 year cycle.

At least, we know from geological strata that an approximately eleven year cycle can be traced back as far as sedimentary deposits on Earth go. And we were confident enough of our prediction to pick 1958 as the International Geophysical Year because this year contains the current maximum in the present sunspot cycle.

But why twenty two or eleven years ? We don't know.

There have been sixteen thousand groups of sunspots seen since 1874,twenty seven of them with areas of over 3,000 million square miles. Yet twenty-three of these twenty-seven large groups were formed on the further side of the Sun from Earth. Statistically, that is pretty unlikely—to put it mildly. As for a reason, your guess is as good as the next.

Sunspot groups come in all sizes. The largest of the 1947 cycle covered 1% of the Sun's disc, a 6,200 million square mile area into which the Earth's surface would fit half a dozen times and still leave room for Mars and Mercury. At the other end of the scale, sunspots can be a mere thousand miles across. To be seen without a telescope, a spot must grow until it is 25,000 miles in diameter.

If you look at the sun through a telescope—making sure you use a suitable smoked glass filter—you see a bright disc, the photosphere. Look more carefully and you observe that it has a grain-like structure, superficially resembling a bowl of rice. Each grain is about nine hundred miles across.

These grains stand out because they are 200 to 300 degrees Centigrade hotter than the rest of the surface, which itself is at 5,400 degrees Centigrade. The grains cover thirty-five percent of the surface and are thought to be columns of hot gas rising and spreading, consequently cooling and then descending. A similiar heat structure can be seen, on a smaller scale, in a crucible of molten metal.

A sunspot is not just a dark dot on the surface, like an ink blot, which whirls round with the Sun's rotation and then vanishes. The formation, life history and death of a sunspot is a complex, baffling, tremendously interesting and but little understood facet of nature. Astrophycisists are well aware that if we knew more about the spots themselves we would be fur-

ther along the road to understanding their effects and thus directly benefitting radio, radar and weather conditions for people on Earth.

One or two days before a sunspot appears, filaments of bright gas are seen above the surface. Then the grains—the tops of the columns of hot gas—disappear and a small black spot takes their place. This is a pore, a miniature sunspot.

Two nearby pores grow into large sunspots with a linking chain of smaller spots between ; but then the smaller spots disappear. Both remaining spots rotate with the Sun ; the first is conveniently labelled the leader and the second the follower. The leader speeds up, leaving the follower lagging behind, before slowing down to equal the Sun's rotational speed.

In time the follower dissolves, and the leader becomes circular after about ten days. Then it regresses, contracting and breaking up to create pores which may vanish or be rebuilt to form a new set of sunspots.

The complete cycle of birth and death may take days or months.

The physical features of the spots add a little more to our knowledge. The spots have a dark central area about 1,000 degrees Centrigrade below the surface temperature and a brighter penumbra, still below the surface temperature. The bright grains seem to be more numerous near spots. As a spot moves around the edge of the Sun to the currently invisible side, most of them can be seen to be pits in the surface—said to be hundreds of miles deep.

Swirling gas clouds often found near sunspots show a highly typical vortex structure, as though they are being sucked into the spot or twisted by intense magnetic forces. Further evidence that they may be treated as solar cyclones comes from the information that the vortices are right-handed in the southern hemisphere and left-handed in the northern—the same way in which terrestrial weather cyclones spin.

Intense magnetic fields of up to five thousand gauss—the Earth's magnetic field is under one gauss—are associated with sunspots, and astrophysicists are divided as to whether the magnetic fields create spots or whether the rotation of gases in sunspots create the magnetic fields.

Sunspots usually appear as pairs with opposite south and north magnetic poles. But in any eleven-year cycle most of the

leader spots have the same polarity. Then, in the next cycle, the polarity of the leaders is reversed, so that there is a twenty-two year cycle in magnetic fields in spots. Magnetic fields are measured by the direction and intensity with which they split single spectroscopic lines into doublets or triplets.

Another cycle within a cycle occurs in the birth places of the spots. At the beginning of an eleven year cycle, sunspots are born near the poles and move parallel to the equator. As the cycle advances, so new spots are born nearer and nearer the equator, until at the end of the cycle spots are disappearing near the equator whilst fresh spots of the new cycle about to begin are being formed near the poles.

Although several theories purport to explain the occurrence and structure of sunspots, not one of them is satisfactory.

Emden suggested that the surface of the Sun is made up of strata moving at different speeds. Then the spots would be merely like terrestrial cyclones, atmospheric disturbances due to the movement of gas over the surface coupled with the spin of the globe.

Another idea was that if the axis of symmetry of the Sun does not coincide with the axis of rotation, then the interior fluid would attempt to shift and eliminate the difference. Time lags due to frictional forces could then create a series of disturbances each lasting eleven years.

Bjerknes explained sunspots as cyclones sucking gas from the interior, the gas expanding and cooling.

He went on to postulate a single vortex ring, like a smoke ring, around the Sun. Only where the ring cut down into the surface and then reappeared would we see it—in cross-section as two sunspots. This at least has the advantage of explaining why spots usually occur in pairs. The gradual movement of the ring towards the equator is explained by the hypothesis that hot fluids rose at the poles and slowly flowed towards the equator, carrying the vortex ring with them. Near the equator the ring goes deep beneath the surface before later on emerging again near the poles.

Another astronomer suggested that each pair of sunspots is a small U-shaped vortex ; whilst Alfven, the expert on stellar magnetism, put forward the idea that a ' magneto-hydrodynamic-wave ' generated near the Sun's core moves

toward the surface at about one yard a second. Reaching the surface after travelling for forty years, the wavefront ripples towards the equator, creating spots in its path.

The whole mechanism, the rhythm and pattern of the Sun and the phenomena with which it is associated are at present very imperfectly understood by scientists. There is a great deal to be done and much work to be undertaken. Sunspots are only one aspect of this scientific mystery and of the work being done to understand its inner meanings. Other aspects of the Sun deserve an equally intense scrutiny.

Sunspots may turn out to be nothing more than an odd surface phenomenon ; but it is far more likely that they are the visible signs of deep-seated changes within the Sun, changes at which we can as yet only guess. But one day these strange manifestations of the machinery of the Sun will be truly understood by men—perhaps to open the way to the manipulation of stars as scientists now juggle with atoms.

Kenneth Johns

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

John Wyndham's second ' Troon ' story, " Idiot's Delight," is the lead novelette next month and centres on the Moon in the year 2044 when several leading nations have research stations there—and the hair-trigger cold war is still being played back on Earth. Michael Troon, son of the ' Ticker ' in " For All The Night " (April issue) is faced with a vital decision to make—one way leads outward to the planets, the other to another Dark Age for mankind.

Dan Morgan will also have a powerful supporting novelette in " The Star Game," an unusual story whose action all takes place in hyper-space.

Story ratings for No. 67 were :

1. Next Stop The Moon - - - Peter Phillips
2. Threshold Of Eternity (Part II) John Brunner
3. The Pit My Parish - - - - Brian W. Aldiss
4. Never Trust A Robot - - - Kenneth Bulmer
5. The Long Ellipse - - - - Donald Malcolm

ROUTINE OBSERVATIONS

Mr. James presents a tough puzzle in this story—to find a small group of people hidden on a deserted planet as large as the Earth. The task appears almost impossible but by means of a few stray clues and the assistance of a trained ecologist on the search ship the problem becomes manageable.

By E. R. James

A flush reddened the crab's back and David Hickory glanced at his watch.

The crab's flat body lifted. Armoured legs rattling on the pebbles, it scuttled sideways towards the grille at the lowest point of its dried-out aquarium.

There it rested. Bubbles made a little froth around its mouth. Claws slowly opened and closed. Little stalk eyes seemed to look back at hazel human ones as though demanding something of them.

Vague sounds filtered back from the nose of the Guardship into the amidships cabin, touched the awareness of the human —and perhaps also of the crustacean—and were forgotten. A smile lifted the corners of David's firm mouth. " Okay, Caesar," he said, and turned on the water flow.

Bits of fish from the Guardship's refrigerator came in with the water and the crab caught at them. " Good lad," said David. " Sorry there's no live food for my artificial tide to bring in for you, but your species isn't above a bit of scavenging, is it ?"

He added a note to the record sheet hanging at the side of the aquarium. " Have altered behaviour pattern. Experiment successful. Bringing artificial ' tide ' one minute earlier each period has accustomed crab to expect food to be brought up its small ' shore ' in what now adds up to a total of 27 minutes earlier than must be happening back on the beach from which I took it."

With another brief smile, he turned to the next aquarium. Of the four sea anemones inhabiting it, only one showed movement, its fringe of tiny arms mostly still curled but just beginning to fan the water.

" Oh, oh, Number One, your clock's gaining—almost as much as I've made Caesar's—and all on its own in only two weeks." David wagged his head reproachfully.

He sat down to wait, a man so big and muscular he was much more like an all-in wrestler between bouts than a scientific observer of minor life forms. This was his first journey out of the planetary system of the star Alpha Centauri. He was in his early twenties and could easily remember his excitement when he had won a scholarship for training as an Interstellar Ecologist. The exams had just slipped behind him when he had been given the exciting chance of getting field experience as assistant to an Ecologist on a planet which had been opened up to colonists only a few years before.

Accepting eagerly, he had, however, dreamed of the time when he would have a planet of his own to go with his newly earned badge. A sun shaped above a flower between a magnified soil bacterium and a fertilising honeybee, this badge symbolised the study of the interaction between all the contents of the universe.

More ship noises momentarily disturbing him served to focus his memories on events leading directly to his present surroundings. Ecologists were so much in demand as advisers to colonial leaders on the strange planets of other suns than Sol, that they rated high enough in a scientific way to be taken as passengers by patrolling guardships such as this one.

It had picked him up off his own planet and, while changing officers had let him loose for a brief spell on the alien world from which his forebears had come. Earth had fascinated him. Being on it amongst its swarming species had given him the

opportunity to set up a little selection of basic experiments about which he had previously only been able to read.

The crewman—who was continuing his service with the little ship—had seemed to enjoy making the minor adaptations necessary to the part of the ship allotted to the Ecologist. But the Lieutenant who had come to take command had glared, scowled and tugged at his large and well-trained moustache. " Hang it all, man ! You can't turn a Guardship into a travelling zoo. Space Rules and Regulations Part 7, Section 704E, paragraph 10 : All possible precautions shall be taken against the introduction of a living organism native to one planet on to any other planet until such change has been authorised by a qualified and responsible Ecologist."

"I am an Ecologist," said David, omitting to state the length of time he had been one.

He grinned at the memory, and his thoughts drifted on until he noticied that the anemones had all unfurled the flagella which circled the opening on top of each soft body. Bits already suspended in the water were being drawn by currents set up by these tiny " arms " into the anemones' mouths—but such bits, left-overs from other times were not edible and were speedily ejected. " Hungry, my pretties ?" said David, leaning over the tank like a giant observing Lilliputians. " Animals... but like flowers of the sea," he mused. " Beautiful but carnivorous—although the animals they can eat are tiny."

He reached out and ladled infusoria, from a breeding jar under a sunlamp, up into the aquarium. Although these animalculae were too small for him to see, the increased activity of the anemones soon demonstrated their edible presence.

He began to add to the previous notes on his case history of these anemones.

" For two weeks now, these odd little animals of Earth's seas have remembered that the tide reached the pools in which they lived at regular intervals. What wonderful mechanism for the calculation of time can exist in such lowly creatures and continue to function here on this ship, parsecs away from the Solar System, in an aquarium where the only movement of water is that which they make themselves ?"

David lifted his head. A fresh sequence of sounds vibrating through the ship made him knit his brows. The workings of the ship were of no interest to him by comparison with his

experiments, but something had been happening during the past eight hours that was not the usual routine. Lieutenant Commander Trunion had kept bundling him off into his own quarters as soon as meals and other community events were over. The ship was on patrol, and it was beginning to seem that something was going on which the civvy scientist was not supposed to know about.

Did danger threaten ? By Space standards this scout was a tiny ship, needing only the minimum complement of one crewman and one officer, but she could provide all the needs of her human creators, and take every bit as much care of them as a far bigger ship.

David shrugged. The marvel of interstellar travel did not interest him much. Any police action that might be going on was only likely to be a delay keeping him from his destination.

He turned towards the port side of the cabin. Behind a screen, partly of glass and partly of fine wire mesh, stood one of the conventional hives of the domesticated Earth insects called honey bees.

It was part of the reputation of this regimented species of insect—etched on to his badge before he had had a chance to see its members—which had suggested the idea for this experiment.

From the slotted openings in the hive's tiered front two bees were crawling. Others came afterwards. A single bee rose into the air. Wings hummed loudly as its fellows followed this example. The sound made a strange song in the ears of David Hickory who had been born into the light of Alpha Centauri Major on a planet where no attempt had been made to introduce such crop fertilising insects because of indigenous life which served the same purpose.

The bee cloud divided into sortie parties. These ignored the dead flower heads remaining on the seeding plants within their insectarium, and converged, with a kind of buzzing expectancy on brightly coloured objects like mushrooms which were placed at intervals along the centre of the floor.

These all clicked open automatically in response to the timing device set by David twenty-four hours before. The bees settled on to the dishes of glucose thus revealed and began to work gathering it.

David nodded to himself and unhooked the record card from beside the hive, making his entry of the " day."

" Luna, the moon of Earth, controls the main tides of the planet's seas, so that it may be said that my crab and anemones —which are affected by the tides—have set their mysterious internal clocks by the moon. Bees, however, appear to work strictly to the twenty-four hour period which is based on the revolution of Earth in the light of Sol. Bees, it seems certain —just as the text books state—can only be taught to come at any regular hour of this period. They seem quite unable to adapt to other time periods, and cannot be made to work to the moon's shorter appearance times. (I wish it were possible to show how this rule can be changed by accustoming these interesting insects to a new routine over *several* generations.)"

From the front of the Guardship a voice reached him. Distorted by S.H.F. static and muffled by the closed door of his quarters, its unintelligibility made him pause to listen.

Footfalls sounded outside the cabin door. Fidgeting sounds came through the thin partition to David. He reached out and pulled the door wide.

Crewman Nicky Bronze looked around with a start. " Uh —sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Hickory."

He was, like many of the technicians responsible for the working of spaceships and other gigantic and complex machines of his era, quite a small man, so retiring as hardly to be noticeable at first sight, yet apt to leave a most definite impression of efficiency within his chosen sphere.

Judging from his worried expression, however, and the fact that he had been staring at the door of Lt. Comdr. Trunion, he was out of that sphere.

David, some twelve inches taller and some fifty pounds of bone and muscle heavier, looked down on Nicky, and in spite of the technician's greater age and experience, thought he might be of help. " Wondering whether to knock up the O.C. ?"

" Uh—yes."

" He won't like it if it's not something important," said David. " He's been a training college instructor at your base on Earth for the past five years. He's used to getting eight hours sleep in twenty-four, since it's four a.m. by his Earth time he will be in the deepest slumber of his ' night.' I hope you don't mind me pointing this out to you, but you have been trained to the routine recommended by your Technicians'

Union of four hours in twelve. If I wasn't an ecologist it wouldn't occur to me, since, over the generations of space-bred colonists on Centauri, we have become quite accustomed to uneven sleeping so that we are able to follow any schedule out of the four in use on the three inhabited planets and one inhabited moon of the binary star system in which I was brought up."

"Well, I hadn't thought of it like that," said Nicky. He glanced at his watch. "But I have been giving him as long as I could." He banged on the door.

It opened suddenly.

A handlebar moustache bristled in the doorway. Grey eyes glared. Lt. Trunion, until recently of base service, glowered at David Hickory; then failed to stifle a yawn that stretched and waggled the magnificent moustache and squeezed the grey eyes shut.

He recovered, blinking. "What is it, Bronze?"

"The reply to your signal, sir." Nicky held out a message form.

Trunion took it, frowned over it, compressed his lips, and looked up at David. "Have you any idea what this might be about?"

"None."

"Too busy with your piscatorial pets, eh?" Trunion's slender white hand guided David towards a porthole. "Take a look at a larger view of this situation."

David's eyes widened. Beyond the porthole, a planet's cresent disc glowered a beautiful greeny blue. Something was shutting out the stars along the top of his limited field of vision. Light from the planet's sun was shining on this something and David realised belately that it was the hull of another spaceship.

"We are on patrol, you know," said Trunion. "About twenty-four hours ago we went into a routine orbit around this planet while we checked on its state. It is supposed to be a planet still awaiting colonisation. But we found that ship in a parabolic orbit around it, so that it would seem it may no longer be awaiting colonisation."

He paused. With every sentence, his voice and manner had showed his increasing dislike of giving out information

to a passenger. His eyes glinted and he began to smooth the set of his uniform—he had quite obviously been sleeping in it.

" And so," said David, " it looks as though you will have one less planet to inspect in future ?"

" No ! Not at all !" rapped Trunion. " Space Rules and Regulations Part 7, Section 19B, paragraph 1 ; Persons claiming colonisation rights under interstellar law shall be limited to civilian members of the galaxy who have (a) estabilished themselves on the planet they desire to colonise (b) not been convicted of any major crime and (c) not landed on the said planet while serving in any official capacity or otherwise being employed by the Central Galactic Government or any other lesser governing body already in existence upon any other planetary body."

" And so," said David, " you have found that this ship is part of an attempt by some government to make a little empire within the empire. And that, according to the Rule you've just quoted, is forbidden. Very good ecology too. An empire cannot stand still. It must grow or get less . . . except when its members are all free to leave it, but remain within it of their own free will because of family ties and various advantages—"

" No," said Trunion. " I am refering to the second condition. This ship, when we found it, was empty. It was, moreover in an unstable orbit and would have crashed before now if Crewman Bronze had not made necessary alterations. I assumed that it had been fired up from the planet below, because our approach had been detected. Such a large ship would have been easily spotted by a patrol ship's instruments, and the occupants preferred to cause it to crash and explode in some other part of the planet—as it most certainly would have done but for Crewman Bronze's efficient working of it into a more permanent orbit."

Trunion held up the message form, reading from it. " 'Your suspicions prove correct. Freighter registered K1B724Bk (LT) was attacked and seized 7 ES months ago while in the act of landing supplies on penal planet. 52 prisoners escaped in it. You will use all means within your power to locate their present whereabouts on the planet below you and take them into protective custody before they can disperse. Pictures of probable ringleaders being radioed over SHF for identification purposes.' "

Bronze cleared his throat. " The pix will be ready now, I expect. Shall I get them ?"

"Yes." Trunion eyed David. "You realise, by now,that my best chance of finding a mere fifty-two men who are in hiding somewhere on a world the size of Earth is to use your co-operation." He said reluctantly, grudgingly.

David nodded. " What is there in this empty spaceship ?"

" Quite a lot of life, I'd say. When Bronze and I went through it looking for humans we both heard animal noises. One of the holds was half full of water. Another foot deep and it would have wet the gangway we used to go aft. When we were coming back to the connecting tube between the noses of the ships something whipped tentacles out of the water at us."

David eyes shone with excitement. " It must be full of a kind of cross section of the living things—and their environment—which we'll find where the ship rested."

" Exactly. It's my guess that the escaped prisoners used it as living quarters for a while. Then, realising that it was a conspicuous marker of their whereabouts, they tried to topple it into a nearby lake, or sea—hence the water."

" Very likely," said David with approval. " You would have made a good ecologist, I'd say that."

" No doubt," admitted Trunion looking down his nose, " but I'd never have been able to stick at a soft job like keeping animals and insects for pets and fiddling about with microscopes and such things."

David's eyes narrowed but he ignored the jibe.

Bronze came hurrying back from the control room, handing the radioed photographs to Trunion.

" An unsavoury trio," said Trunion and passed them to David.

One showed a tall man, prison uniform draped over his thin, pot-bellied frame. Sharp-featured, with hooded eyes and scrawny neck, his aspect was distinctly and repellantly like that of a reptile.

Another was of a man so thick-set and long armed, so thick-lipped and low-browed that he might easily have been taken for a gorilla but for his pallid face and the inevitable uniform.

The third was a woman. She was beautiful enough by comparison with the others, but her eyes pictured the hardness

of the life she had led and the smear on her lips seemed to cry out that she had no respect for authority, and no single tendency towards love of her fellows.

David drew in a deep breath, released it. He handed back the three pictures. " Can I get a better view of the planet ?"

" Yes, from the control room."

David followed Trunion without comment or expression. Being an ecologist was not always a soft job as the base wallah lieutenant might soon find out now that he was out in Space to see . . . or was Trunion still bad tempered because of disturbed sleep ?

Coming up into the control room, David noticed a small gibbous moon which seemed to be over the gleaming snow of the northern pole of the planet.

" What do you know of that moon ?"

Trunion looked at Bronze.

Bronze answered with the certainty of one who has prepared such information in case it was wanted. " It circles the planet every eight hours or so. It passed over both polar regions and is always roughly at right angles to the light of the sun at this time of the planet's year. It probably raises higher tides than does Earth's moon. Although it is much smaller than Luna, it is much nearer the planet."

" And how often does the planet revolve about its own axis ?"

" Every forty-eight hours, Earthtime, near as matters."

" So the days are twice as long as those on Earth . . ." murmured David, then again addressed Bronze. " Did anything about the ship or its orbit give *you* any idea of its probable launching site ?"

" Nothing. It was set to fire its rocket tubes on such a complex pattern that without a long investigation of the density and depth of the atmosphere— "

" No time for that," interrupted Trunion. " We must drop right on them before they take fright and scatter."

David nodded. " Can I go into the other ship now ?"

" Yes." Trunion sounded as though he had begun to think David would never make the request to board ; as though he thought David would have been too frightened to do such a potentially dangerous thing.

The connecting tube was a little bent. David gasped as they passed the dizzy point of no-gravity between the two artificial gravity fields of the ships. But Trunion, wordless, dragged him though the momentary feeling of nowhere, and he felt everything become rational again.

" Sir," said Bronze.

Trunion paused. In the silence David heard the unmistakable chatter of a radiation counter. Bronze was looking at the instrument attached to his belt.

" Sir, the pile of this ship seems to be doubling up towards getting out of control."

" Dammit !" said Trunion. " How long have we got ?"

" Not many minutes, sir. I'll try to get it under control again. But I'll blow the hooter warning of our ship when you'll have to get out, if I fail."

" Right."

Trunion's black moustache stood out vividly against his pale face. He motioned to David. " If you'd rather go back, I'll try to get you whatever you tell me you need."

" Lead on," said David between clenched teeth. " I don't feel I could trust you to do what I want."

Trunion shot him a resentful glare. They went in the opposite direction to Bronze, towards the rear of the ship. Several times they heard scuffling sounds. Once a rabbity creature hopped out some way ahead of them, then fled to disappear down an intersecting corridor.

David felt sweat begin to bead out over his skin. The ship's atmosphere struck chill against the dampness of his shirt.

Wings whirred menacingly and some large insect blundered past Trunion, bounced off David's larger bulk, and went buzzing with an angry whine back the way they had come.

David swallowed. He had grabbed at the thing, now felt ashamed under Trunion's ironical gaze in the knowledge that he was glad he had not caught hold of it. That thing was big enough to bite quite a chunk out of his hand, or might have some stinging mechanism in the striped tail.

" I'm sorry," said Trunion, " that you won't have time to go back to make a collection of kit from your luggage. I don't know how we can get you specimens, unless they're tiny things— "

" What's the climate like down on the planet?" David interrupted him.

" Near enough to Earth's."

Trunion's face was beaded with sweat just as much as David's. David felt a grudging admiration for the officer's cool voice and studied calm.

Trunion pursed his lips, half smiled. " Shall we go on, Mr. Hickory, or have you had enough?"

David jerked his arm and pushed past Trunion, suddenly finding his irritation vanish as he saw a sun lizard. Such a creature, used as it was to basking in the sunshine, might give them the approximate times for sunrise and sunset of the place where it had lived on the planet.

It wriggled away, splayed legs vanishing with speed, brightly decked tail wriggling, and was gone, under a pile of heavy crane machinery.

David stubbed his fingers trying to catch it just as it went. " Blast !"

" Come on," said Trunion, openly amused. " The hold is just through this door. Watch out for those tentacles."

At the doorway he paused the moment necessary for David to catch him up. David passed him. Trunion took the pistol from his belt and followed.

The gangway was covered with partially dried slime. The sides of the hold showed the high water mark of the tidal waters in which the ship must have stood for some time. David halted, knelt and peered into the murky water. " This has come from a tidal estuary. It's still full of silt carried down from mountains . . . I'd say that the water is probably from melting snow. That suggests spring."

" Steady," said Trunion in a choking voice. " There's that tentacled thing in there."

" No sign of it yet," said David.

Rising, he began to walk along the gangway. Trunion, behind him, said : " Spring is coming in the northern hemisphere." His voice had changed around somehow, showing an interest that was no longer grudging.

David did not notice. " It's daytime, too . . . judging from the rabbit, the lizard and the insect."

Trunion moved cautiously along in his wake, but they reached the far end and entered the emergency control room against

the partition shutting off the atomic powered motors, and paused there somehow disappointed.

Trunion said : " I think I saw the thing in the water. Just a dark shape."

" Let's go back and look," said David.

Trunion opened his mouth to protest, but finally said nothing.

David stared at the dark shape beneath the surface of the water, ripples distorting its outline, and even making it appear to move.

" I think it followed us," said Trunion.

David felt in his pockets, found a pocket knife and opened the blade. He flung it at the water as he had flung such knives at boyish targets years ago.

Ripples danced away over the dark shape. It seemed to be swimming lazily—but . . . In reality it must have moved swiftly because the knife blade missed it quite plainly as it flashed down into the murky depths.

" Come away," said Trunion.

David, frowning, allowed himself to be drawn reluctantly along the gangway.

The shape seemed to be following them. His brows drew down. If it could see them why did it not attack ? Trunion said that it had sent up whip arms at him and Bronze last time.

David halted over a support for the gangway. Weed made rings down the support into the unseen depths below. Rings . . . Each one down seemed to mark an increasing density in the weed. The present level of the water in the hold was neither low nor high water but something in between . . .

Bubbles sparkled in the water. The surface foamed as though reaching a boiling point just below him. Whip ends tightened cruelly around his ankles.

" Hey !" It was almost a scream from his throat.

Kr-raz-pft !

That was Trunion's pistol and the splash of its projectile hitting the water.

David's legs slid from under him as though the gangway was oiled and suddenly tilted. Luke warm water closed over his ankles, his calves, knees.

His arm was being lugged out of its socket. Someone was yelling.

Somewhere in the background of it all a hooter was sounding its strident warning.

He recovered from the shock of being so suddenly attacked and grabbed at the bar of the railing. It had been going over his head . . . His fingers closed around its reassuring solidity.

He attempted to drag himself out of the grasp of the monster in the water . . . and found himself coming up on to the gangway with nothing at all trying to stop him. For a moment he had to sit on it, while he brought his arms down to thrust himself up to his feet. Then he was upright.

Trunion was raving at him. " The alarm, man !" He was again dragging at his arm. " Run you blasted science johnny ! Run ! "

David stumbled after him. He had had a narrow escape. Trunion had apparently saved his life and he felt confused.

Darkness closed in with disconcerting suddenness.

" Hellfire !" swore Trunion, without stopping his onrush or letting go of David.

A light glared out of the black at them. " This way, sir !"

The tunnel opening shone like a beacon. Bronze, torch in hand was backing down it ahead of them, silhouetted by the light of the Patrol ship.

" My specimens !" yelled David, stopping.

They were in the space behind the patrol ship's control cabin. Trunion, panting like mad, eyes glaring, slammed the door of the tunnel shut. Bronze was disappearing into the control.

The tiny jolt of departure—of what was actually the violent separation of the ships but which was cancelled so swiftly by the force screen as to seem almost nothing—both filled David with relief at having escaped the danger of the atomic radiation of an exploding engine and regret at having been cut off from a problem.

He and Trunion exchanged glances. He turned his back on the officer, and hurried to his quarters.

Shutting the door behind him, he started to take off his wet trousers. He had one leg free, the other lifted so that he could free that, when he suddenly grinned.

In his shirt tails, he fetched a test tube from the experimental bench which he had set up. Forgetful of his bare knees he squeezed muddy water into the tube. He put a smear

of this on a microscope slide. The chill of the chair did not touch his awareness as he seated himself excitedly.

A myriad types of microscopic life passed before his eyes as he turned the adjuster which moved the slide by slow motion.

Back he went to his trousers, wringing out all the water he could. Quickly he set up an apparatus circulating the water through a little system which included a double slide from which a magnified picture of the bacteria and mud was taken and projected on to a screen.

He was watching this screen when the door opened.

Trunion paused in the opening. "Well, that's that, I suppose. The freighter exploded twenty seconds after I shut the airlock. The explosion pushed us out further from the planet, but we've established a new orbit while we decide—"

"Come and watch this screen. As soon as you see any significant decrease of activity take a note of the exact time, and call me."

"What?" Trunion, thus peremptorily addressed, stood with moustaches drooping over his open mouth as David rushed out of the cabin.

In the control room, Bronze, bent over the clicking mechanism of the orbit computor, looked around.

David fired questions at him.

"Do you remember the time when you entered the freighter for the first time?"

"Not exactly. Be about eight hours ago, I'd say."

"That fits in. How about the time when we all came out of it just now?"

"Oh, I know that. I was clockwatching, trying to give you as long in there as I could. Ten thirty-five hours ship time."

"Grand . . ." David walked to the window and pointed at the moon which, in its faster than Luna orbit, had already moved an appreciable amount. "I want you to compute that moon's position over the planet's surface for the past few days."

"You do?" Bronze blinked. The reason for such work was outside his sphere.

David grinned, explaining excitedly. "I know that the high tide won't pinpoint a single location. But I've got enough bacteria out of the water in that ship for us to have a good

chance of being able to find out when the sun sets at the place we're looking for. As soon as we know the interval between the lunar time of high tide and the solar time of nightfall, we ought to be very close to the original launching site."

Bronze's face seemed to light up. "Yes," he said.

Nine hours later, after many changes in the wearisome business of keeping watch on the bacteria, David was taking a turn, when the tiny organisms' movements began to slow.

"This is it." They leaned forward excitedly. Trunion's lips were parted in a grin of triumph, anticipating promotion as a result of the success of this first active service operation under his control. Bronze was half frowning, lost in concentration, his quick mind—refreshed by a routine four hours of sleep between other jobs—obviously following mental arithmetic which led to the marking of an imaginary cross upon the photographs which he had been taking to map the planetary surface below.

Before the long night neared its end, Trunion and David landed in a little flier and approached the hidden enemy without being detected. As the new day of the planet dawned, the patrol ship came hurtling down out of the sky, to hover over the lush valley in which the escaped convicts had established themselves.

Sunlight flashed on the entire armament of the ship's fixed weapons, Bronze operating them with a dexterity suggesting it was manned by at least twenty men. The sight was enough to put all thought of escape out of the minds of any cluster of unarmed men and women. When Trunion stood up on the low hill where he and David had been waiting, and addressed his prisoners from this commanding position, his amplified voice seemed to stun them completely, as though they had thought themselves safely lost for a while at least on the millions of square miles of the planet's surface.

"You are under arrest in the name of the Empire. Be sensible and send your leaders to me to surrender."

David watched them confer briefly. Trunion was counting half under his breath. ". . . only forty-eight. Four missing, Ecologist Hickory. What do you think of that?"

"Interesting," nodded David.

Three figures detached themselves from the main group and came up the hill between the camouflaged bivouacs in which they had been living.

" Where are the others ?" Trunion demanded of them.

They did not answer at once. David, as he stared at them with increasing interest, reached for his notebook and pencil. One was a tall man, sharp-featured and naked to the waist and bronzed like an Earthly south sea islander. His trousers seemed too big for him around the waist, for they sagged emptily in front, below his tight leathern belt.

The other was thick-lipped, low-browed and long-armed and the deep colour of his hairy torso and face increased his simian appearance.

The last was a woman. She looked like a goddess of the open air, and David thought that she was with child. She looked both frightened and resentful . . . as though she felt that they had won this world for themselves, and did not deserve to have it taken away from them.

The tall man moistened his lips. His eyes, narrowed with anger below their hooded lids, warned that he would fight for his freedom if he thought there was the slightest hope. "They have died here." He pointed over the green and pleasant valley towards the shore of a great lake which nestled amongst the lower slopes of a great snow-capped mountain chain. " One was killed by a poisonous reptile. Another was crushed by a tree which fell in a direction we did not expect, and we had no medicine or skill to save him. Another was dragged into the lake by some kind of big fish thing which attacks land creatures as they drink at high water . . . the lake has a tidal effect owing to the small moon. The fourth one recently committed suicide when we detected your arrival. But the rest of us like living."

" I'm glad," said Trunion.

He broke off as David put a piece of paper into his hands. " What's this ?"

" Look at it and see."

Trunion stared down, moustaches slanting upwards as his face darkened with fury. He looked up at David. Then he read aloud from the paper. " Under Space Rules and Regulations Part 7—sections and paragraph you'll have to fill in for me, I'm afraid—I claim my rights on this planet. I am

established here, I have no criminal record whatsoever, and neither official capacity, since I have not signed the actual agreement with the planetary ecologist I was going to join, nor any connection with any governing body whatsoever. Having claimed my rights I must request you to leave since I have just formulated my first rule—that there is no extradition from this planet."

He looked up at David. "Have you gone absolutely stark raving mad?"

"Not to my mind," said David. "Is this claim of mine quite legal?"

"I can't see why it shouldn't be," admitted Trunion. His moustache waggled in disapproval. "Providing of course you are willing to stay here. Are you?"

"Willing?" David chuckled. He squared his big shoulders. He looked down like a father at the three bewildered faces, all older in years than his own, on the slope just below him. "I'm eager! Not many ecologists get a chance at a planet of their own as quickly as this. I can be useful to these people as they come up against difficulties in adapting to this new environment—and in return for my specialised knowledge and training, they will provide me with field experience which may eventually be useful to the Governments of the Galaxy as they frame their penal laws."

"Humph," said Trunion. He compressed his lips. "I remember I've quoted two parts of the Space Rules and Regulations at you since I found you aboard. You've quoted one back at me. I've just thought of the other. An ecologist is presumably a living organism; I wonder who ought to authorise his introduction on to any planet."

E. R. James

WASP

James Mowry, Terran "wasp," has successfully stirred up the proverbial "hornet's nest" on the Sirian planet of Jaimec in his attempts at sabotage. Now the tide is running out and he can no longer control events and is forced into the open where his sting can be effectively withdrawn.

By Eric Frank Russell

Conclusion

FOREWORD

Terra, at war with the Sirian Empire, compensates for the foe's twelve-to-one superiority in manpower by adopting various tricks and devices including the wasp system. James Mowry is a wasp who has been secretly placed on Jaimec, one of the Sirian Empire's outer planets. By plastic surgery and purple colouration Mowry is disguised as a Sirian and has no great difficulty in masquerading as one because he speaks the native language fluently, having been born in Masham, capital city of Diracta, the Sirian home planet.

Holing up in Pertane, capital of Jaimec, Mowry begins by creating a mock opposition to the government in the form of

Dirac Angestun Gesept, *the Sirian Freedom Party. He plasters Pertane and the important town of Radine with threatening notices all attributed to* Dirac Angestun Gesept. *He kills Major Sallana, an officer of the Kaitempi, the much dreaded Sirian Secret Police, and notifies the authorities that this was a D.A.G. execution.*

Seeking someone to do the dirtiest work for him, Mowry makes contact with three confirmed criminals, Butin Arhava and the brothers Gurd and Skriva, and buys their services. Gurd and Skriva make a satisfactory start by murdering Colonel Hage-Ridarta, a Kaitempi brasshat, for the sum of twenty thousand Sirian guilders. Mowry promptly tells the authorities that this is another D.A.G. execution.

Meanwhile, the government has become convinced of the actual existence of a widespread and well-organised subversive movement but still does not suspect Terran activity upon the planet. In an effort to combat this treachery the powers-that-be order the immediate registration of all organisations and also brings in a dangerous technique known as the snap-search. This consists of blocking streets without warning while police and Kaitempi search all persons caught within the trap. Mowry has a couple of narrow escapes when he is bearing false papers and carrying large sums of counterfeit money.

Having revealed himself as a weak character who might talk to the Kaitempi, Butin Arhava is named by Mowry as the next victim. Gurd and Skriva accordingly slaughter him while Mowry is in Radine fixing mock telephone-taps to wires used by officialdom. Having paid them for this job, Mowry bribes them to fix more telephone-taps in Pertane. He then notifies authority that Butin Arhava was executed by D.A.G.

Mowry's luggage explodes with great violence in a Radine hotel when the Kaitempi find it and try to open it. Infuriated, they lay a trap for him. He escapes but is forced to return to his cave in the forest. There, he alters his appearance and, with the aid of false papers, assumes the identity of Colonel Halopti of Military Intelligence.

In this guise he meets a Kaitempi agent named Sagramatholou, kills him and credits D.A.G. with another official execution. Next, Skriva tells him that Gurd has been caught and is lying in jail awaiting interrogation by the Kaitempi. They plan to rescue Gurd and two prisoners sharing his cell.

IX

The next day's work was the easiest to date though not devoid of danger. All he had to do was gossip to anyone willing to listen. This was in accordance with the step-by-step technique taught him by the college.

" First of all you must establish the existence of an internal opposition. Doesn't matter whether it is real or imaginery so long as the enemy becomes convinced of its actuality."

He had done that much.

" Secondly, you must create fear of that opposition and provoke the enemy into striking back at it as best he can."

He'd done that too.

" Thirdly, you must answer the enemy's blows with enough defiance to force him into the open, to bring his reaction to public attention and to create the general impression that the opposition has confidence in its own power."

That also had been achieved.

" The fourth move is ours and not yours. We'll take enough military action to make hay of the enemy's claims of invincibility. After that the morale of the public should be shaky."

One bomb on Shugruma had done the shaking.

" You then take the fifth step by sowing rumours. Listeners will be ripe to absorb them and whisper them around—and the stories will lose nothing in the telling. A good rumour well planted and throughly disseminated can spread alarm and despondency over a wide area. But be careful in your choice of victims. If you pick on a fanatical patriot it may be the end of you !"

In any city in any part of the cosmos the public park is a natural haunt of idlers and gossips. That is where Mowry went in the morning. The benches were occupied almost entirely by elderly people. Young folk tended to keep clear of such places lest inquisitive cops ask why they were not at work.

Selecting a seat next to a gloomy looking oldster with a perpetual sniff, Mowry contemplated a bed of tattered flowers until the other turned toward him and said conversationally, " Two more gardeners have gone."

" So ? Gone where ?"

" Into the armed forces. If they draft the rest of them I don't know what will happen to this park. It needs someone to look after it."

" There's a lot of work involved," agreed Mowry. " But I suppose the war comes first."

" Yar. Always the war comes first." Sniffy said it with cautious disapproval. " It should have been over by now. But it drags on and drags on. Sometimes I wonder when it will end."

" That's the big question," responded Mowry, making himself a fellow spirit.

" Things can't be going as well as they're said to be," continued Sniffy, morbidly. " Else the war would be over. It wouldn't drag on the way it does."

" Personally, I think things are darned bad." Mowry hesitated, went on confidingly, " In fact I know they are."

" You do ? Why ?"

" Maybe I oughtn't to tell you—but it's bound to come out sooner or later."

" What is ?" insisted Sniffy, consumed with curosity.

" The terrible state of affairs at Shugruma. My brother came home this morning and told me."

" Go on—what did he say ?"

" He tried to go there for business reasons but couldn't get to the place. A ring of troops turned him back forty *den* from the town. Nobody except the military, or salvage and medical services, is being allowed to enter the area."

" That so ?" said Sniffy.

" My brother says he met a fellow who'd escaped the disaster with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. This fellow told him that Shugruma was practically wiped off the map. Not one stone left upon another. Three hundred thousand dead. The stench of bodies would turn your stomach. He said the scene is so awful that the news-sheets daren't describe it, in fact they refuse to mention it."

Staring straight ahead, Sniffy said nothing but looked appalled.

Mowry added a few more lurid touches, brooded with him for a short time, took his departure. All that he'd said would be repeated, he could be sure of that. Bad news travels fast. A little later and a half a mile away he had another on the hook,

a beady-eyed, mean-faced character only too willing to hear the worst.

" Even the papers dare not talk about it," Mowry ended.

Beady-eyes swallowed hard. " If a Spakum ship can dive in and drop a big one so can a dozen others."

" Yar, that's right."

" In fact they could have dropped more than one while they were at it. Why didn't they ?"

" Maybe they were making a test-run. Now they know how easy it is they'll come along with a *real* load. If that happens there won't be much left of Pertane." He pulled his right ear and made a *tzzk* ! sound between his teeth, that being the Sirian equivalent of showing thumbs down.

" Somebody ought to do something about it," declared Beady, unnerved.

" I'm going to do something myself," informed Mowry. " I'm going to dig me a deep hole way out in the fields."

He left the other half-paralysed with fright, took a short walk, picked on a cadaverous individual who looked like a mortician on vacation.

" Close friend of mine—he's a fleet leader in the space-navy —told me confidentially that a Spakum onslaught has made Gooma completely uninhabitable. He thinks the only reason why they've not given Jaimec the same treatment is because they're planning to grab the place and naturally don't want to rob themselves of the fruits of victory."

" Do you believe all that ?" demanded the Embalmer.

" One doesn't know what to believe when the government tells you one thing and grim experience tells you another. It's only his personal opinion anyway. But he's in the space-navy and knows a few things that we don't."

" It has been stated authoritatively that the Spakum fleets have been destroyed."

" Yar, they were still saying so when that bomb fell on Shugruma," Mowry reminded.

" True, true—I felt it land. In my own house two windows collapsed and a bottle of *zith* jumped off the table."

By mid-afternoon thirty people had been fed the tale of the Shugruma and Gooma disasters, plus allegedly first-hand warnings of bacteriological warfare and worse horrors to come. They could no more keep it to themselves than a man can keep a tornado to himself. By early evening a thousand would have the depressing news. At midnight ten thousand

would be passing it around. In the morning a hundred thousand—and so on until the whole city was discussing it.

At the arranged time he called Skriva. " What luck ?"

" I've got the form. Have you got the money ?"

" Yar."

" It's to be paid before tomorrow. Shall we meet same place as last ?"

" No," said Mowry. " It's not wise to create a habit. Let's make it someplace else."

" Where ?"

" There's a certain bridge where you collected once before. How about the fifth marker past it going south ?"

" That's as good as anywhere. Can you go there at once ?"

" I've got to pick up my car. It'll take a little time. You be there at the seven-time hour."

He reached the marker on time, found Skriva already waiting. Handing over the money, he took the requistion-form and examined it carefully. One good look told him that the thing was well-nigh impossible for him to copy. It was an ornate document as lavishly engraved as a banknote of high denomination. They could cope with it on Terra but it was beyond his ability to duplicate even with the help of various instruments of forgery lying in the cave.

The form was a used one dated three weeks ago and obviously had been purloined from the jail's filing system. It called for the release to the Kaitempi of one prisoner named Mabin Garud but had enough blank spaces for ten names. The date, the prisoner's name and number had been typed. The authorising signature was in ink.

" Now we've got it," prompted Skriva, " what are we going to do with it ?"

" We can't imitate it," Mowry informed. " The job is too tough and will take too long."

" You mean it's no use to us ?" He registered angry disappointment.

" I wouldn't say that."

" Well, what do you say? Am I to give this stinker his twenty thousand or do I cram the form down his gullet?"

" You can pay him." Mowry studied the form again. " I think that if I work on it tonight I can erase the date, name and number. The signature can be left intact."

" That's risky. It's easy to spot erasures."

" Not the way I do them. I know how to gloss the surface afterward. The really difficult task will be that of restoring the broken lines of engraving." He pondered a moment, went on, " But that may not be necessary. There's a good chance the new typing will fill in the blanks. It's hardly likely that they'll put the form under a microscope."

" If they were that suspicious they'd grab us first," Skriva pointed out.

" I need a typewriter. I'll have to buy one in the morning."

" I can get you a typewriter for tonight," offered Skriva'

" You can? How soon ?"

" By the eight-time hour."

" Is it in good condition ?"

" Yar, it's practically new."

Skriva pushed off. When he'd gone from sight Mowry followed into the city. He had a feed, drove back to the marker. Soon afterward Skriva reappeared, gave him the typewriter.

Mowry said, " I want Gurd's full name and those of his two companions. Somehow or other you'll have to discover their prison numbers too. Can you do that ?"

" I've got them already." Taking a slip of paper from his pocket, Skriva read them out while the other made a note of them.

" Did you also learn at what times the Kaitempi make their calls to collect ?"

" Yar. Always between the three and four-time hours. Never earlier, rarely later."

" Can you find out about noon tomorrow whether Gurd and the others are still in the jail ? We've got to know that—we'll get ourselves in a fix if we arrive and demand prisoners who were taken away this afternoon."

" I can check on it tomorrow," Skriva assured. Then his face tautened. " Are you planning to get them away *tomorrow* ? "

" We've got to do it sometime or not at all. The longer we leave it the bigger the risk of the Kaitempi beating us to the draw. What's wrong with tomorrow, *hi* ?"

" Nothing except that I wasn't counting on it being so soon."

" Why ? "

" I thought it'd take longer to work things out."

" There's little to work out," declared Mowry. " We've swiped a requisition-form. We alter it and use it to demand release of three prisoners. Either we get away with it or we don't. If we do, well and good. If we don't, we shoot first and run fast."

" You make it sound too easy," Skriva objected. " All we've got is this form. If it isn't enough— "

" It won't be enough, I can tell you that now. Chances are ten to one they'll expect familiar faces and be surprised by strange ones. We'll have to compensate for that somehow."

" How ?"

" Don't worry, we'll cope. Can you dig up a couple more helpers ? All they need do is sit in the cars, keep their traps shut and look tough. I'll pay them five thousand apiece just for that."

" Five thousand each ? I could recruit a regiment for that money. Yar, I can find two. But I don't know how good they'd be in a fight."

" Doesn't matter so long as they can look like pluguglies. By that I don't mean the Cafe Susun kind of roughneck, see ? They've got to resemble Kaitempi agents." He gave the other an imperative nudge. " The same applies to you. When it's time to start the job I want to see all three of you clean and tidy, with well-pressed suits and neatly knotted neck-scarves. I want to see you looking as if about to attend a wedding. If you let me down in that respect the deal is off so far as I'm concerned. You can count me out and go pull the stunt on your own. I don't intend to try to kid some hard-faced, gimlet-eyed warden with the aid of three scruffy looking bums."

" Maybe you'd like us decked out in fashionable jewellery," suggested Skriva sarcastically.

" A diamond on the hand is better than a smear of dirt." Mowry retorted, " I'd rather you overdid the dolling-up than mooched along like hoboes. You'd gel away with a splurge because some of these agents are flashy types." He waited for comment but the other said nothing, so he continued, " What's more, these two helpers had better be characters you can trust not to talk afterward—else they may take my five thousand and then get another five from the Kaitempi for betraying you."

Skriva was on firm ground here. He gave an ugly grin and promised, " One thing I can guarantee is that neither of them will say a word."

This assurance and the way it was made bore a sinister meaning but Mowry let it pass and said, " Lastly, we'll need a couple of dynos. We can't use our own unless we change the plates. Any ideas on that ?"

" Pinching a pair of dynos is as easy as taking a mug of *zith*. The trouble is keeping them for any length of time. The longer we use them the bigger the chance of being picked up by some lousy patrol with nothing better to do."

" We'll have to cut the use of the them to minimum," Mowry told him. " Take them as late as you can. We'll park our own cars on that lot the other side of the Asako Bridge. When we leave the jail we'll beat it straight there and switch over to them."

" Yar, that is best," Skriva agreed.

" All right. I'll be waiting outside the east gate of the municipal park at the two-time hour tomorrow. You come along with two cars and two helpers and pick me up."

At that point Skriva became strangely restless and showed suspicion. He fidgeted around, opened his mouth, shut it.

Watching him curiously, Mowry invited, " Well, what's the matter ? You want to call the whole thing off ?"

Skriva mustered his thoughts and burst out with, " Look, Gurd means nothing to you. The others mean even less. But you're paying good money and taking a big risk to get them out of clink. It doesn't make sense."

" A lot of things don't make sense. This war doesn't make sense—but we're in it up to the neck."

" Curses on the war. That is nothing to do with the matter."

" It has everything to do with the matter," Mowry contradicted. " I don't like it. A lot of people don't like it. If we kick the government in the rumps often enough and hard enough, they won't like it either."

" Oh, so that's what you're up to ?" Skriva stared at him in frank surprise, thoughts of purely political reasons never having entered his mind. " You're chivvying the authorities ?"

" Any objections ?"

"I couldn't care less," informed Skriva, and added virtuously " Politics is a dirty game. Anyone who plays around in it is crazy. All it gets him in the end is a free burial."

" It'll be my burial, not yours."

" Yar, that's why I don't care." Obviously relieved at having got to the bottom of the other's motives, Skriva finished, " Meet you at the park tomorrow."

" On time. If you're late I won't be there."

As before, he waited until the other had gone from sight before driving to town. It was a good thing, he thought, that Skriva had a criminal mentality. The fellow just wasn't interested in politics, ethics, patriotism or anything similar except insofar as it provided opportunity to snatch easy money. It was highly probable that he viewed his recent activities as profitably illegal but not as treacherous. It simply wouldn't occur to him that there are criminals and there are traitors.

Any one of Skriva's bunch would surrender his own mother to the Kaitempi, not as a duty to the nation but solely for five thousand guilders. Similarly, they'd hand Mowry over and pocket the cash with a hearty laugh. All that prevented them from selling him body and soul was the fact they'd freely admitted, namely, that one does not flood one's goldmine.

Providing the cars and helpers could be obtained Skriva would be there on time tomorrow. He felt sure of that.

Exactly at the two-time hour a big, black dyno paused at the east gate, picked up Mowry and whined onward. Another dyno, older and slightly battered, followed a short distance behind.

Sitting four-square at the wheel of the first car, Skriva looked neater and more respectable than he had done for years. He exuded a faint smell of scented lotion and seemed self-conscious about it. With his gaze fixed firmly ahead, he jerked a manicured thumb over his shoulder to indicate a similarly washed and scented character lounging beetle-browed in the back seat.

" Meet Lithar. He's the sharpest *wert* on Jaimec."

Mowry twisted his head round and gave a polite nod. Lithar rewarded him with a blank stare. Returning attention to the windshield, Mowry wondered what on earth a *wert* might be. He'd never heard the word before and dared not ask its meaning. It might be more than an item of local jargon, perhaps a slang word added to the Sirian language during the years he had been away. It wouldn't be wise to admit ignorance of it.

" The fellow in the other car is Brank," informed Skriva. " He's a red-hot *wert* too. Lithar's right-hand man. That so, Lithar ?"

The sharpest *wert* on Jaimec responded with a grunt. To give him his due, he fitted the part of an agent of the typically surly type. In that respect Skriva had chosen well.

Threading their way through a series of side-streets they reached a main road, found themselves held up by a long, noisy convoy of half-tracked vehicles crammed with troops. Perforce they stopped and waited, The convoy rolled on and on like a never ending stream. Skriva began to curse under his breath.

" They're gaping around like newcomers," observed Mowry, watching the passing soldiery. " Must have just arrived from somewhere."

" Yar, from Diracta," Skriva told him. " Six shiploads landed this morning. There's a story going the rounds that ten set out but only six got here."

" That so ? It doesn't look so good if they're rushing additional forces to Jaimec despite heavy losses en route."

" Nothing looks good except a stack of guilders twice my height," opined Skriva. He scowled at the rumbling half-tracks. " If they delay us long enough we'll still be here when a couple of boobs start bawling about their missing cars. The cops will find us just waiting to be grabbed."

" So what ?" said Mowry. " Your conscience is clear, isn't it ?"

Skriva answered that with a look of disgust. At last the procession of military vehicles came to an end. The car jolted forward as he rushed it impatiently into the road and built up speed.

" Take it easy," Mowry advised. " We don't want to be nailed for ignoring some petty regulation."

At a point a short distance from the jail Skriva pulled in to the kerb and parked. The other dyno stopped close behind. He turned toward Mowry.

" Before we go any farther let's have a look at that form."

Extracting it from a pocket, Mowry gave it to him. He pored over it, seemed satisfied, handed it to Lithar.

" Looks all right to me. What d'you think ?"

Lithar eyed it impassively, gave it back. " It's good enough or it isn't. You'll find out pretty soon."

Sensing something sinister in this remark, Skriva became afflicted with new doubts. He said to Mowry, " The idea is that a couple of us walk in, present this form and wait for them to fetch us the prisoners, *hi* ?"

" Correct."

" What if this form isn't enough and they ask for proof of our identities ?"

" I can prove mine."

" Yar ? What sort of proof ?"

" Who cares so long as it convinces them ?" Mowry evaded. " As for you, fix this inside your jacket and flash it if necessary." He gave the other Sagramatholou's badge.

Fingering it in open surprise, Skriva demanded, "Where'd you get this ?"

" An agent gave it me. I've influence, see ?"

" You expect me to believe that ? No Kaitempi *soko* would dream of— "

" It so happened that he had expired," Mowry put in. " Dead agents are very co-operative, as perhaps you've noticed."

" You killed him ?"

" Don't be nosey."

" Yar, what's it to us ?" interjected Lithar from the back seat. " You're wasting time. Put a move on and let's get the whole thing over—or let's throw it up and go back home."

Thus urged Skriva started up and drove forward. Now that he was rapidly coming to the point of committing himself his edginess was obvious. He knew that if the rescue failed and he was caught he'd certainly pay for the attempt with bulging eyes and protruding tongue. If it succeeded there would follow a hue and cry that would make all of them cower in their rat-holes for a month and all he'd have gained would be three henchmen who, for the time being, would be more nuisance than asset.

It was too late to retreat. The jail was now in sight, its great steel doors set in high stone walls. Rolling toward the doors, the two cars stopped. Mowry got out. Skriva followed suit, thin-lipped and resigned.

Mowry thumbed the bell-button set in the wall. A small door which formed a section of the bigger one emitted metallic clankings and opened. Through it an armed guard eyed them questioningly.

" Kaitempi call for three prisoners," announced Mowry with becoming arrogance.

With a brief glance at the waiting cars and their *wert* occupants the guard motioned the two inside, closed the door, slid home its locking-bar. " You're a little early today."

" Yar, we've got a lot to do. We're in a hurry."

" This way."

They tramped after the guard in single file, Skriva last with a hand in a pocket. Taking them into the administration building, along a corridor and past a heavily barred sliding gate. The guard led them into a small room in which a burly, grim-faced Sirian was sitting behind a desk. Upon the desk stood a small plaque reading : *Commandant Tornik.*

" Three prisoners are required for immediate interrogation," said Mowry officiously. " Here is the requisition-form, Commandant. We are pressed for time and would be obliged if you'd produce them as quickly as possible."

Tornik frowned over the form but did not examine it closely. Dialling an intercom phone he ordered somebody to bring the three to his office. Then he lay back in his chair and regarded the visitors with complete lack of expression.

" You are new to me."

" Of course, Commandant. There is a reason."

" Indeed ? What reason ?"

" It is believed that these prisoners may be more than ordinary criminals. We have reason to suspect them of being members of a revolutionary army, namely, *Dirac Angestun Gesept.* Therefore they are to be questioned by military Intelligence as well as by the Kaitempi. I am the M.I. representative."

" Is that so ?" said Tornik, still blank-faced. " We have never had the M.I. here before. May I have evidence of your identity ?"

Producing his documents, Mowry handed them over. This wasn't going so swiftly and smoothly as hoped for. Mentally he prayed for the prisoners to appear and put a quick end to the matter. It was obvious that Tornik was the type to fill in time so long as everyone was kept waiting.

After a brief scrutiny Tornik returned the papers and commented, " Colonel Halopti, this is somewhat irregular. The requisition-form is quite in order but I am supposed to hand prisoners over only to a Kaitempi escort. That is a very strict rule that cannot be disobeyed even for some other branch of the security forces."

" The escort is of the Kaitempi," answered Mowry. He threw an expectant look at Skriva who was standing like one in a dream. Skriva came awake, opened his jacket and displayed the badge. Mowry added, " They provided me with three agents saying that their attendance was necessary."

" Yar, that is correct." Pulling open a drawer in his desk, Tornik produced a receipt-form, filled it in by copying details from the requisition. When he had finished he studied it doubtfully, complained, " I'm afraid I cannot accept your signature, Colonel. Only a Kaitempi official may sign a receipt for prisoners."

" I'll sign it," offered Skriva, sweating over the delay.

" But you have a badge and not a plastic card," Tornik objected. " You are only an agent and not an officer."

Mentally abusing this infernal insistence upon rigmarole, Mowry interjected, " He is of the Kaitempi and temporarily under my command. I am an officer although not of the Kaitempi."

" That is so, but—"

" A receipt for prisoners must be given by the Kaitempi and by an officer. Therefore the proper conditions will be fulfilled if both of us sign."

Tornik considered this, decided that it agreed with the letter of the law. " Yar, the regulations must be observed. You will both sign."

Just then the door opened, Gurd and his companions shuffled in with a rattle of wrist-chains. A guard followed, produced a key, unlocked the manacles and took them away. Gurd, now worn and haggard, kept his gaze on the floor and maintained a surly expression. One of the others, a competent actor, glowered at Tornik, Mowry and Skriva in turn. The third, who was subject to attacks of delight, beamed around in happy surprise until Skriva bared his teeth at him. The smile then vanished. Luckily neither Tornik nor the attendant guard noticed this by-play.

Mowry signed the receipt with a confident flourish ; Skriva appended his hurried scrawl beneath. The three prisoners silently stood by, Gurd still moping, the second scowling, the third wearing the grossly exaggerated expression of one in mourning for a rich aunt. Number three, Mowry decided, was definitely a dope who'd ham his way to an early grave.

" Thank you, Commandant." Mowry turned toward the door. " Let's go."

In shocked tones Tornik exclaimed, " What, without wrist-chains, Colonel ? Have you brought no manacles with you ?"

Gurd stiffened, number two bunched his fists, number three made ready to faint. Skriva stuck his hand back in his pocket and kept full attention on the guard.

Glancing back at the other, Mowry said, " We have steel anklets fixed to the floors of the cars. That is the M.I. way, Commandant." He smiled with the air of one who knows. " A prisoner runs with his feet and not with his hands."

" Yar, that is true," Tornik conceded.

They went out, led by the guard who had brought them there. The prisoners followed with Skriva and Mowry bringing up in the rear. Through the corridor, past the barred gate, out the main door and across the yard. Armed guards patrolling the wall-top sauntered along and eyed them indifferently. Five pairs of ears strained for a yell of fury and a rush of feet from the administration building, five bodies were tensed in readiness to slug the guide and make a dash for the exit door.

Reaching the wall, the guard grasped the locking-bar in the small door and just then the bell was rung from outside. This sudden, unexpected sound jolted their nerves. Skriva's gun came halfway out of his pocket. Gurd took a step toward the guard, his expression vicious. The actor jumped as if stung. Dopey opened his mouth to emit a yelp of fright, converted it into a gargle as Mowry rammed a heel on his foot.

Only the guard remained undisturbed. With his back to the others and therefore unable to see their reactions he lugged the locking-bar to one side, turned the handle, opened the door. Beyond stood four sour-faced characters in plain clothes.

One of them said curtly, " Kaitempi call for one prisoner."

For some reason best known to himself the guard found nothing extraordinary about two collecting parties turning up

in close succession. He motioned the four inside, held the door open while the first arrivals went out. The newcomers did not head straight across the yard toward the administration block. They took a few steps in that direction, stopped as if by common consent, stared at Mowry and the others as they passed into the road. It was the dishevelled look of the prisoners and the chronic alarm on the face of Dopey that attracted their attention.

Just as the door shut Mowry, who was last out, heard an agent rasp at the guard, " Who are those, *hi* ?"

The reply wasn't audible but the question was more then enough.

" Jump to it !" he urged. " *Run* !"

They sprinted to the cars, spurred on by expectation of immediate trouble. A third machine now stood behind their own two, a big ugly dyno with nobody at the wheel. Lithar and Brank watched them anxiously, opened the doors in readiness.

Scrambling into the leading dyno, Skriva started its motor while Gurd went through the back door and practically flung himself into Lithar's lap. Behind, the other two piled into the rear of Brank's car.

Mowry gasped at Skriva, "Wait a moment while I see if I can grab theirs—it'll delay the chase."

So saying he raced to the third car, frantically tugged at its handle. It refused to budge. Just then the jail's door opened and somebody roared, " Halt ! Halt or we— " Brank promptly stuck an arm out his open window, flicked four quick shots toward the door-gap and missed each time. But it was sufficient to make the shouter dive for cover. Mowry pelted back to the leading dyno and fell in beside Skriva.

" The cursed thing is locked. Let's get out of here."

The car surged forward, tore down the road. Brank accelerated after them. Watching through the rear window, Mowry saw several figures bolt out the jail and waste precious moments fumbling by their dyno before they got in.

" They're after us," he told Skriva. " And they'll be bawling their heads off over the radio."

" Yar, but they haven't got us yet."

X

Gurd said, " Did nobody think to bring a spare gun ?"

" Take mine," responded Lithar, handing it over.

Cuddling it in an eager fist, Gurd grinned at him unpleasantly. " Don't want to be caught with it on you, *hi* ? Rather it was me than you, *hi* ? Typical *wert*, aren't you ?"

" Shut up !" snarled Lithar.

" Look who's telling me to shut up," Gurd invited. He was talking thickly, as if something had gone wrong with his palate. " He's making a stack of money out of me else he wouldn't be here at all. He'd be safe at home checking his stocks of illegal *zith* while the Kaitempi belted me over the gullet. And he tells me to shut up." Leaning forward, he tapped Mowry on the shoulder with the barrel of the gun. " How much is he making out of this, Mashambigab ? How much are you giving— "

He swayed wildly and clutched for a hold as the car rocked around a corner, raced down a narrower road, turned sharp right and then sharp left. Brank's car took the same corner at the same speed, made the right turn but not the left one. It rushed straight on and vanished from sight. They turned again into a one-way alley, cut through to the next road. There was now no sign of pursuit.

" We've lost Brank," Mowry told Skriva ." Looks like we've dropped the Kaitempi too."

" It's a safe bet they're chasing Brank. They were closer to him and they had to follow someone when we split up. Suits us, doesn't it ?"

Mowry said nothing.

" A lousy *wert* tells *me* to shut up," mumbled Gurd.

Swiftly they zig-zagged through a dozen side-streets, still without encountering a radio alarmed patrol-car. As they squealed around the last corner near to where their own cars were parked there sounded a sharp, hard crack in the rear. Mowry looked back expecting to find a loaded cruiser closing up on them. There was no car behind. Lithar was lying on his side apparently asleep. He had a neat hole above his right ear. A thin trickle of purplish blood was seeping out of it.

Gurd smirked at Mowry and said, " I've shut *him* up, for keeps."

" Now we're carrying a corpse," complained Mowry. " As if we haven't trouble enough. Where's the sense— "

Skriva interrupted with, " Crack shots, the Kaitempi. Pity they got Lithar—he was just the sweetest *wert* on Jaimec."

He braked hard, jumped out, ran across the lot and clambered into his own dyno. Gurd followed, the gun openly in his hand and not caring who noticed it. Mowry stopped by the window as the machine started up.

" What about Brank ?"

" What about him ?" echoed Skriva.

" If we both beat it he'll get here and find no chance to switch over."

" What, in a city crammed with dynos ?" He let the car edge forward. " Brank's not here. That's his woe. Let him cope with his own troubles. We're beating it someplace safe while the going is good. You follow us."

With that he drove off. Mowry gave him a four hundred yards lead, droned along behind while the distance between them slowly increased. Should he let Skriva lead him to a hideout or not ? There seemed little point in following to yet another rat-hole. The jail job had been done and he'd achieved his purpose of stirring up a greater ruckus. There were no *werts* to pay off ; Brank had got himself lost and Lithar was dead. If he wanted to regain contact with Gurd and Skriva he could use that telephone number or if, as was likely, it was no longer valid he could employ their secret post-office under the marker.

Other considerations also decided him to drop the brothers for the time being. For one, the Colonel Halopti identity wouldn't be worth a hoot after they'd wasted a few hours checking through official channels to establish its falsity. That would be by nightfall at latest. Once again Pertane was becoming too hot to hold him. He'd better get out before it was too late.

For another, he was overdue to beam a report and his conscience was pricking him about his refusal to do so last time. If he didn't send one soon he might never be able to transmit one at all. And Terra was entitled to be kept informed.

By this time the other car had shrunk with distance. Turning off to the right, he circled back into the city. At once he

noticed a great change of atmosphere. There were far more police on the streets and now their number had been augmented by fully armed troops. Patrol-cars swarmed like flies though none saw fit to stop and question him. On the pavements were less pedestrians than usual and these hurried along looking furtive, fearful, grim or bewildered.

Stopping by the kerb outside a business block he lolled in his seat as if waiting for someone while he watched what was taking place on the street. The police, some uniformed and some in plain clothes, were all in pairs. The troops were in groups of six. Their sole occupation appeared to be that of staring accusatively at everyone who passed by, holding up any individual whose looks they didn't like, questioning and searching him. They also took particular note of cars, studying the occupants and eyeing the plate-numbers.

So he moved off, driving carefully to avoid the attention of numerous cruisers. Something had broken loose, no doubt of that. It was written on the moody faces of the public. He wondered whether the government had been driven to admit a series of reverses in the space-war. Or perhaps the rumours he'd spread about Shugruma had come close enough to the truth to make authority concede the facts. Or maybe a couple of exceedingly important bureaucrats had tried to open mailed packages and splattered themselves over the ceiling, thus creating a tremendous wave of panic among the powers-that-be. One thing was certain : the recent jailbreak could not be solely responsible for the present state of affairs though possibly it may have triggered it into existence.

Slowly he made his way into the crummy quarter where his room was located, determined to pick up his belongings and clear out as quickly as possible. The car nosed its way into his street. As always, a bunch of idlers loafed upon the corner and stared at him as he went by. There was something not quite right about them. Their ill-kept clothes and careless postures gave them the superficial appearance of lazy bums but they were a little too well-fed, their gaze a little too haughty.

With hairs itching on the back of his neck and a peculiar thrill down his spine, he kept going, trying to look as if this street were only part of a tiresome drive and meant nothing to him whatsoever. Against a lamp-post leaned two brawny

specimens without jackets or scarves. Nearby four more were shoring a wall. Six were gossiping around an ancient, decrepit truck parked right opposite the house in which his room was at top. Three more were in the doorway of the house. Everyone of these gave him the long, hard look as he rolled by with an air of total indifference.

The entire street was staked, though it didn't look as if they had a detailed description of him. He could be wrong in this belief, perhaps fooled by an over-active imagination. But his instinct told him that the street was covered from end to end, that his only chance of escape lay in driving on non-stop and displaying absolute lack of interest. He did not dare look at his house for evidence of a Radine-type explosion. Just that small touch of curiosity might have been enough to bring the whole lot into action.

When nearing the city's outskirts a patrol-car waved him down. For a couple of seconds he debated whether to obey or try to outrace it. He decided in favour of the former. Bluff had worked before, might do so again. Besides, to run for it would be a complete giveaway and every cruiser in the area would take up the chase. So he braked and hoped for the best.

The car drew alongside, the co-driver dropped his window. " Where are you heading for ?"

" Palmare," answered Mowry, naming a village twenty *den* south of Pertane.

" That's what you think. Don't you listen to the news ?"

" I haven't heard it since early this morning. Been too busy even to get a square meal. What's happened ?"

" All exits barred. Nobody allowed out of the city except with a permit from the military. You'd better go back and get yourself informed. Or buy an evening paper."

He stooged around in the car until he found a newstand carrying the latest editions still damp from the press. Then he parked a few minutes while he scanned the headlines. They were big enough and likely to give the readership a few unpleasant jolts.

PERTANE UNDER MARTIAL LAW.
TRAVEL BAN—MAYOR DECLARES POPULATION WILL STAND FIRM.

DRASTIC ACTION AGAINST DIRAC ANGESTUN GESEPT.
POLICE ON TRAIL OF MAIL BOMBERS.
TWO KILLED, TWO CAPTURED IN DARING JAILBREAK.

Rapidly he read the brief report under the last heading. Lithar's body had been found and the Kaitempi had grabbed the credit for the kill. That made Skriva something of a prophet. Dopey had been shot to death, Brank and the other had been taken alive. These two survivors already had confessed to membership of a revolutionary force. There was no mention of any others having got away and not a single word about the mock Colonel Halopti.

Probably authority had clamped down on some items in the hope of giving the escapees a sense of false security. Well, he'd better not fall into that trap ; from now on he must not show his documents to any cop or Kaitempi agent. Neither could he substitute any other papers. The only ones near to hand were locked in his case and surrounded by a horde of agents. The only others were in the forest cave with a ring of troops between here and there.

A ring of troops ? Yes, that could be the weak point that he might break through if he put a move on. It was highly likely that the numerically strong armed forces were not yet as well-primed as were the police and Kaitempi. And the average trooper is not inclined to argue with a colonel, even one in plain clothes. The chance of being cross-examined and bullied came only from an individual of equal or higher rank. He could not imagine any colonels or major-generals manning the road-blocks. Anyone outranking a junior lieutenant was more likely to be warming an office chair or boozing and boasting in the nearest *zith*-parlour.

At once he decided that here lay his best opportunity to break out of the net. It wasn't a decision difficult to reach. He'd little choice about the matter. He must find freedom in the open country or remain in the city until caught.

About sixty routes radiated from the perimeter of Pertane. The main ones—such as the wide, well-used roads to Shugruma and Radine—were likely to be more heavily guarded than the secondary roads or potholed lanes leading to villages or isolated factories. It was also possible that the biggest, most

important road-blocks would have a few police or agents in company with the troops.

Many of the lesser and sneakier outlets were quite unknown to him ; a random choice might take him out of the frying-pan and into the fire. But not far away lay a little-used sideroad to Palmare with which he was familiar. It twisted and wound in a direction more or less parallel with the big main road but it got there just the same. Once on it he could not get off it for another forty *den*. He'd have to continue all the way to Palmare, turn there onto a rutted cross-country lane that would take him to the Valapan road. At that point he'd be about half an hour's drive from where he usually entered the forest.

Cutting through the suburbs he headed outward toward this lesser road. Houses gradually thinned away and ceased. As he drove through a market-gardening area a police cruiser whined toward him, passed without pause. He let go a sigh of relief as it disappeared. Presumably it had been in too great a hurry to bother with him or perhaps its occupants had taken it for granted that he possessed a military permit.

Five minutes later he rounded a blind corner and found a road-block awaiting him two hundred yards beyond. A couple of army trucks stood side-on across the road in such a position that a car could pass provided it slowed to less than walking pace. In front of the trucks a dozen soldiers stood in line, coddling their automatic weapons and looking bored. There was no cop or agent anywhere in sight.

Mowry slowed, stopped, but kept his dynomotor rotating. The soldiers eyed him with bovine curiosity. From behind the nearest truck a broad, squat sergeant appeared, marched up to the car.

" Have you got an exit permit ?"

" Don't need one," responded Mowry, speaking with the authority of a four-star general. Opening his wallet, he displayed his identity-card and prayed to God that the sight of it would not produce a howl of triumph.

It didn't. The sergeant looked at it, stiffened, saluted. Noticing this, the nearby troops straightened themselves and assumed expressions of military alertness.

In apologetic tones the sergeant said, " I regret that I must ask you to wait a moment, Colonel. My orders are to report to the officer in charge if anyone claims the right to go through without a permit."

" Even the Military Intelligence ?"

" It has been emphasised that this order covers everyone without exception, sir. I have no choice but to obey."

" Of course, Sergeant," agreed Mowry, condescendingly. " I will wait."

Saluting again, the sergeant went at the double behind the trucks. Meanwhile the twelve troopers posed with the rigid self-consciousness of those aware of a brasshat in the vicinity. In short time the sergeant came back bringing with him a very young and worried looking lieutenant.

This officer marched precisely up to the car, saluted, opened his mouth just as Mowry beat him to the draw by saying, " You may stand easy, Lieutenant."

The other gulped, let his legs relax, fumbled for words, finally got out, " The sergeant tells me you have no exit permit—Colonel."

" That's right. Have *you* got one ?"

Taken aback, the lieutenant floundered a bit, said, " No, sir."

" Why not ?"

" We are on duty outside the city."

" So am I," informed Mowry.

" Yes, sir." The lieutenant pulled himself together. He seemed unhappy about something. " Will you be good enough to let me see your identity-card, sir ? It is just a formality. I'm sure that everything will be all right."

" I know that everything will be all right," said Mowry, as though giving fatherly warning to the young and inexperienced. Again he displayed the card.

The lieutenant gave it no more than a hurried glance. " Thank you, Colonel. Orders are orders, as you will appreciate." Then he curried favour by demonstrating his efficiency. He took one step backward and gave a classy salute which Mowry acknowledged with a vague wave. Jerking himself round like an automaton, the lieutenant brought his right foot down with a hard thump and screamed at the top of his voice, " Pass one !"

Opening out, the troops obediently passed one. Mowry crawled through the block, curving around the tail of the first truck, twisting the opposite way round the second. Once through he hit up maximum speed.

He shot through small and sleepy Palmare half expecting to be fired upon by local vigilantes. Nothing happened except that a few faces glanced out of windows as he went by. Nobody saw him turn off the road a little beyond the village and take to the crude track that led to the Pertane-Valapan artery.

Now he was compelled to slow down whether he liked it or not. Over the terrible surface the car bumped and rolled at quarter speed. If anything came the other way he'd be in a jam because there was no room to pull aside or turn. Two jetplanes moaned through the gathering dusk but carried straight on, indifferent to what was taking place below. Soon afterward a 'coptor came low over the horizon, followed it a short distance, dropped back and disappeared. Its course showed that it was circling around Pertane, possibly checking the completeness of military positions.

Eventually he reached the Pertane-Valapan route without having encountered anything on the track. Accelerating, he made for the forest entry-point. A number of army vehicles trundled heavily along but there was no civilian traffic to or from distant Pertane. Those inside the city could not get out, those outside did not want to go in lest they be detained there for weeks.

At the moment he reached the identifying tree and tombstone the road was clear in both directions. Taking full advantage of the opportunity he drove straight over the verge and into the forest as far as the car could go. Jumping out, he went back and repeated his former performance of carefully eliminating all tyre tracks where they entered the forest and checking that the car was invisible from the road.

The dark of night was now halfway across the sky. That meant he had to face another badly slowed-down traipse to the cave. Alternatively he could sleep overnight in the car and start his journey with the dawn. The latter was preferable; even a wasp needs rest and slumber. On the other hand the cave was more peaceful, more comfortable and a good deal safer than the car. There he could enjoy a real Terran breakfast, after which he could lie full length and snooze like a child instead of rolled up with one ear and one eye open. He started for the cave at once, trying to make the most use of the fading light while it lasted.

With the first streaks of morning he came wearily and red-eyed through the last of the trees. His finger-ring had been tingling for fifteen minutes so that he made his approach with confidence. Clumping along the pebble beach he went into the cave, fixed himself a hearty meal. Then he crawled into a sleeping-bag and surrendered consciousness. The transmission of his report could wait. It would have to wait: communication might bring instructions impossible to carry out before he'd had a good spell of slumber.

He must have needed it because he lay without stirring through the entire day. Dusk again was creeping in when he awoke.

Dragging out Container-5 he set it up, wound it into action and let it run. For two and a half hours it operated silently.

Whirrup—dzzt-pam ! *Whirrup-dzzt-pam* !

" Jaimec calling ! Jaimec calling !"

Contact was established when the gravelly voice said, " Come in. Ready to tape."

Mowry responded, " JM on Jaimec," then babbled on as fast as he could go and to considerable length. He finished, " Pertane isn't tenable until things quieten down and I don't know how long that will take. Personally, I think the panic will spread to other towns. When they can't find what they're seeking in one place they'll start raking systematically through all the others."

There was a long silence before the faraway voice came back with, " We don't want things to quieten down. We want them to spread. Get working at once on phase nine."

" Nine ?" he ejaculated. " I'm only on four. What about five, six, seven and eight ?"

" Forget them. Time is running short. There's a ship getting near to you with another wasp on board. We sent him to tend to phase nine thinking you'd been nabbed. Anyway, we'll beam instructions that he's to stay on the ship while we pick him another planet. Meanwhile you get busy."

" But phase nine is strictly a pre-invasion tactic."

" That's right," said the voice, drily. " I just told you time is running short."

It cut off. Communication had ended. Mowry stacked the cylinder back in the cave. Then he went outside and gazed at the stars.

Phase nine was designed to bring about a further dispersal of the enemy's overstretched resources and to place yet another great strain upon his creaking war-machine. It was, so to speak, one of several possible last straws.

The idea was to make panic truly planet-wide by spreading it from land to water. Jaimec was peculiarly susceptible to this kind of blow. On a colonial world populated by only one race of only one species there had been no national or international rivalries, no local wars, no development of navies. The nearest that Jaimec could produce to a sea-going force consisted of a number of fast motor-boats, lightly armed and used solely for coastal patrol work.

Even the merchant fleet was small by Terran standards. Jaimec was under-developed and no more than six hundred ships sailed the planet's seas on about twenty well-defined routes. There wasn't a vessel larger than fifteen thousand tons. Nevertheless the local war effort was critically dependent upon the unhampered coming and going of these ships. To delay their journeys or ruin their schedules or bottle them up in port would play considerable hob with the entire Jaimecan economy.

This sudden switch from phase four to nine meant that the oncoming Terran spaceship must be carrying a load of periboobs which it would scatter in the world's oceans before making a quick getaway. Almost certainly the dropping would be done by night and along the known sea-lanes.

At college Mowry had been given full instruction about this tactic and the part he was expected to play. The stunt had a lot in common with his previous activities, being designed to make a thoroughly aggravated foe hit out left and right at what wasn't there.

He'd been shown a sectionalised periboob. This deceitful contraption resembled an ordinary oil-drum with a twenty-foot tube projecting from its top. At the uppermost end of the tube was fixed a flared nozzle. The drum portion held a simple magneto-sensitive mechanism. The whole thing could be mass produced at low cost.

When in the sea a periboob floated so that its nozzle and four to six feet of tube stood above the surface. If a mass of steel or iron approached to within four hundred yards of it, the mechanism operated and the whole gadget sank from sight. If the metal mass receded, the periboob promptly arose until again its tube poked above the waves.

To function efficiently this gadget needed a prepared stage and a spotlight. The former had been arranged at the outbreak of war by permitting the enemy to get hold of top secret plans of a three-man midget submarine small enough and light enough for an entire flotilla to be transported in one spaceship. Mowry now had to provide the spotlight by causing a couple of merchant vessels to sink at sea after a convincing bang.

Jaimecans were as capable as anyone else of adding two and nothing together and making it four. If everything went as planned the mere sight of a periboob would cause any ship to race for safety while filling the ether with yells for help. Other ships, hearing the alarm, would make wide, time-wasting detours or tie up in port. The dockyards would frantically switch from the building and repair of cargo vessels to the construction of useless destroyers. Numberless jetplanes, copters and even space-scouts would take over the futile task of patrolling the oceans and bombing periboobs wherever they might be found.

The chief beauty of this form of naughtiness was that it did not matter in the least if the enemy discovered he was being kidded. He could trawl a periboob from the depths, take it apart, demonstrate how it worked to every ship's master on the planet and it would make no difference. If two ships had been sunk, two hundred more might go down. A periscope is a periscope, there's no swift way of telling the false from the real and no captain in his right mind will invite a torpedo while trying to find out.

Alapertane (little Pertane) was the biggest and nearest port on Jaimec. It lay forty *den* west of the capital, seventy *den* north-west of the cave. Population a quarter million. It was highly likely that Alapertane had escaped most of the official hysteria pervading elsewhere, that its police and Kaitempi were less suspicious, less active. Mowry had never visited the place and therefore neither had *Dirac Angestun Gesept.* So far as Alapertane was concerned he had little grief to inherit.

Opening a container, Mowry took out a thick wad of documents, thumbed through them and carefully considered the thirty identities available. All of them had been devised to suit specific tasks. There were half a dozen that established

his right to roam around the docks and peer at shipping. He chose a set of papers that depicted him as a minor official of the Planetary Board of Maritime Affairs.

Next he made himself up for the part. It took him more than an hour. In the end he was an elderly, bookish bureaucrat peering through steel-rimmed spectacles. That done, he amused himself blinking at his image in a metal mirror and talking nonsense in characteristically querulous tones.

Finally he found himself another case, inserted its plastic key and opened it. Despite all the risks he had taken and might again take this was the action he detested most. He could never get rid of the notion that explosive luggage was highly temperamental, that many a wasp had been blown to the nether regions with a phantom key in his hand and that Terran authorities had kept silent about it.

From yet another container he took three limpet mines, two for use and one as a spare. These were hemispherical objects with a heavy magnetic ring projecting from the flat side, a timing-switch on the opposite, curved side. They weighed eleven pounds apiece and together made a load he'd rather have been without. Putting these in the case, he stuffed a pocket with new money, checked his gun.

Switching Container-22 he set forth, again through the dark.

He reached the car in broad daylight, thankfully dumped the case on the back seat, checked the road for passing vehicles. The coast was clear. Racing back to the car he got it out fast, parked it while he scuffed tyre-tracks from the verge. Then he headed for Alapertane, choosing a route that kept him as far as possible from the angry capital.

Fifteen minutes later he was compelled to pull up. The road was filled with a convoy of army vehicles that were bucking and rocking as they reversed one by one into a treeless space. Troops who had dismounted were filtering in ragged lines between the trees on both sides of the road. A dozen glum civilians were sitting in one truck with four soldiers to guard them.

As Mowry sat watching a captain came alongside the car and asked, " Where're you from ?"

" Valapan."

" Where d'you live ?"

" Kiestra, just outside Valapan."

" Where're you going ?"

" Alapertane."

This seemed to satisfy the other. He made to move off.

Mowry called, " What's happening here, Captain ?"

" A round up. We're collecting the windy and taking them back where they belong."

" The windy ?" Mowry looked baffled.

" Yar. The night before last a lot of yellow-bellied *sokos* bolted out of Pertane and took to the woods. They were worried about their skins, see ? More followed early yesterday morning. By now half the city would be gone if we hadn't pinned them in. Civilians make me sick."

" What got them on the run ?"

" Talk." He gave a sniff of contempt. " Just a lot of talk."

" Well, there's no rush from Valapan," offered Mowry.

" Not yet," the captain gave back. He walked away, bawled out a slow-moving squad.

The last trucks got off the road and Mowry forged ahead. Evidently the jailbreak had coincided with strong governmental action against a jittery populace as well as against subversive forces. The city would have been ringed in any event, whether Gurd had been wangled out the jug or not.

Shortly before noon he reached the centre of Alapertane and asked a pedestrian the way to the docks. Though hungry once more he did not take time off for a meal. Alapertane was not surrounded, no snap-searches were taking place, no patrol-car had halted and quizzed him. He felt it wise to cash in on a favourable situation that might soon change for the worse. So without bothering about a feed he made straight for the waterfront.

Planting the dyno in the private car-park of a shipping company, he approached the gates of the first dock on foot, blinked through his spectacles at the policeman standing by the entrance and asked, " Which way to the harbour-master's office ?"

The cop pointed. " Right opposite the third set of gates."

Going there, Mowry entered the office, tapped on the counter with the impatience of an oldster in a hurry. A junior pen-pusher responded.

" You wish ?"

Showing him his papers, Mowry said, "I wish to know which ships will depart before dawn tomorrow and from which docks they will leave."

Obediently the other dug out a long, narrow book and sought through its pages. It did not occur to him to question the reason for this request. A piece of paper headed *Planetary Board of Maritime Affairs* was more than enough to satisfy him and, as any fool knew, neither Alapertane nor its ships were menaced by the Spakum forces.

"Destinations as well?" asked the youth.

"No, those don't matter. I wish only the names, the times of departure and the dock numbers." Mowry produced a stub of pencil, a sheet of paper and peered fussily over his glasses.

"There are four," informed the other. "The *Kitsi* at eight-time, dock three. The *Anthus* at eight-time, dock one. The *Su-cattra* at nineteen-time, dock seven. The *Su-limane* at nineteen-time, also dock seven." He flipped a page, added informatively, "The *Melami* was due to leave at nineteen-time but is held up with some kind of trouble in the engine-room. It is likely to be delayed several days."

"That one doesn't matter."

Leaving, he returned to the car, got out the case and went to dock seven. The policeman on duty took one look at his documents and let him through the gates without argument. Once inside he walked quickly toward the long shed behind which towered a line of cranes and a couple of funnels. Rounding the end of the shed he found himself facing the stern of the *Su-cattra*.

One glance told him that at the present time he had not the slightest hope of fixing a limpet-mine unseen. The vessel lay against the dockside, its hatches battened down, its winches silent, but many workers were hand-loading late cargo by lugging it up the gangways from waiting trucks and a small mob of officials stood around watching. Across the basin lay the *Su-limane* also taking cargo aboard.

For a short time he debated within himself whether to go after the *Anthus* and *Kitsi*. There was the disadvantage that they were in different docks a fair distance apart. Here, he had two suitable ships within easy reach of each other. And it was probable that the other vessels also were loading, thus being no easier to victimise.

It seemed that in his haste he had arrived too early. The best thing for him to do would be to go away and come back later after workers and officials had gone home. But if the cop on the gate or a waterfront patrol became nosey it would be hard to explain his need to enter the deserted dock area after all work had ceased. A hundred excuses could turn into a hundred self-betrayals.

"I have a personal message for the captain of the *Sucattra*."

"Yar? What is his name?"

Or, "I have a corrected cargo manifest to deliver to the *Su-limane*."

"Yar? Let me see it. What's the matter—can't you find it? How can you deliver it if you haven't got it? If it's not in your pockets it may be in that bag. Why don't you look in the bag? You afraid to open it, *hi*?"

Leaving the dockside he walked past the end of the huge shed which stretched the entire length of the dock. Its sliding doors stood three feet ajar. He went through without hesitation. The side farthest from the dock was stacked roof-high with packing cases of every conceivable shape and size. The opposite side was part full. Near the main quayside-doors halfway up the shed stood an array of cardboard cartons and bulging sacks which workers were taking out to the *Su-cattra*.

Seeing the name *Melami* stencilled all over the nearest stack of cargo, Mowry looked swiftly toward the distant loaders, assured himself that he had not been observed, dodged behind a big crate. Though no longer visible from inside the shed he could easily be seen by anyone passing the sliding doors through which he had entered. Holding his case endwise ahead of him, he inched through the narrow gap between two more crates, climbed over a big coffin-shaped box, squirmed into a dark alcove between the stack and the shed's outer wall.

He stayed there for what seemed a full day. The time came when whistles blew and sounds of outside activity ceased. Through the shed's wall sounded a muffled tramp of many feet as workers left for home. Nobody had bothered to close the shed's doors and he couldn't make up his mind whether that was a good thing or not. Locked doors would suggest an abandoned dockside guarded by none save the cop on the gate. Open doors implied the arrival of a night-shift or perhaps the protection of roving patrols.

Edging out of the alcove he sat on a crate and rubbed his aching knee-caps. He waited two more hours to let overtime workers and other eager beavers get clear. When his patience ran out he walked through the deserted shed, stopped behind its quayside doors that were directly opposite the middle of the *Su-cattra.*

From the case he took a limpet-mine, set its timing-switch to give a twenty-hour delay, threaded a length of thin cord through the holding loop. He peeped out the door. There was not a soul on the dockside but a few sailors were busy on the ship's top deck.

Boldly he stepped out of the shed, crossed the intervening ten yards and dropped the mine into the narrow stretch of water between ship and dockside. It hit with a dull plop and a slight splash, sank rapidly to the limit of its cord. It was now about eight feet below the surface and did not immediately take hold. He waggled the cord to turn the magnetic face toward the ship. The mine promptly attached itself with a clang loud enough to resound all over the big vessel. Quickly he let go one end of the cord, pulled on the other and reeled it in through the holding-loop.

High above him a sailor came to the deckrail, leaned on it and looked down. By that time Mowry had his back toward him and was strolling casually toward the shed. The sailor watched him go inside, glanced at the stars, spat in the water and went back to his chore.

Soon afterward he repeated the performance with the *Su-limane*, sticking the mine amidships and eight feet down. That one also had a twenty-hour delay. Again the clang aroused careless attention, bringing three curious sailors to the side. But they took their time about it, saw nobody, shrugged it off and forgot it.

Mowry now made for the exit gates. On the way he passed two officers returning to their ship. Engrossed in conversation, they did not so much as glance at him. If only they'd known of the long swim in store, he thought, they'd willingly have beaten out his brains.

A different policeman was on duty by the gates as he went through.

" Live long !"

"Live long!" echoed the cop, and turned his attention elsewhere.

Trudging a long way down the road and rounding the corner near to the gates of dock three, Mowry saw the car-park and came to a halt. A hundred yards away his car was standing exactly where he had left it but had become the subject of unwelcome interest. Its hood was raised and a couple of uniformed police were prying around the exposed dynomotor.

They must have unlocked the car with a master-key in order to operate the hood's release-catch. To go to that length meant they were not amusing themselves by being officious. They were on a definite trail.

Retreating behind the corner, Mowry gave swift thought to the matter. Obviously those cops were looking for the dynomotor's serial number. In another minute one of them would be crawling under the car to check the chassis number. This suggested that at last authority had realised that Sagramatholou's car had changed its plates. So the order had gone out to inspect all cars of that particular date and type.

Right in front of him, hidden from the car-park, stood the unoccupied cruiser belonging to those nosey-pokes. They must have left it there intending to edge it forward a few feet and use it as a watching-post if necessary. Once they'd satisfied themselves that the suspected dyno was indeed a hot one, they'd come back on the run to set a stakeout.

Cautiously he took a peep around the corner. One was talking excitedly while the other scribbled in a notebook. It would be another minute before they returned because they would close the hood and relock the dyno in order to bait the trap.

Certain that no passer-by would question something done with casual confidence, he tried the cruiser's door-handle. It was locked. He had no key with which to open it, no time to pick it, and that put an end to any thought of taking one car in lieu of the other.

Opening his case, he took out the spare limpet-mine, set it for a one-hour delay. He lay in the road, rapidly inched himself under the cruiser and stuck the bomb to the centre of its steel framework. Wriggling out, he brushed himself down with his hands. Seven people had seen him go under and emerge. Not one viewed his actions as extraordinary.

He snatched up his case and departed at pace that was little short of a shambling run. At the next corner he looked back. One cop was now sitting in the cruiser and using its short-wave radio. The other was out of sight, presumably concealed where he could watch the dyno. Evidently they were transmitting the news that the missing car had been found and were summoning help to surround it.

Yet again adverse circumstances were chivvying him into a tight corner. He had lost the car on which he had relied so much and which had stood him in such good stead. All that he now possessed were his gun, a set of false documents, a large wad of counterfeit money and a case that was empty save for what was wired to its lock.

The case he got rid of by placing it in the entrance to the main post-office. That action would not help to cool things down. Discovery of his dyno had warned Alapertane that Sagramatholou's killer was somewhere within its bounds. While they were squatting around it in readiness to snare him a police cruiser would shower itself all over the scene. Then somebody would dutifully take a lost case to the nearest precinct station, a cop would try to key it open and make an awful mess of the place.

Alapertane already was half-awake. Two big bangs were going to bring it fully awake and on its toes. Somehow he'd have to get out before they copied the Pertane tactic and ringed the town with troops.

XI

This was a time when he regretted the destruction of Pig-face's card in that explosion at Radine. He could do with it now. Equally he was sorry that he'd given Sagramatholou's badge to Skriva. Despite looking as much like a Kaitempi agent as a purple porcupine, either the card or badge would have enabled him to commandeer any civilian car in town simply by ordering its driver to take him wherever he wished to go, shut up and do as you're told.

He had one advantage : the hunters had no real description of Sagramatholou's killer. Possibly they were shooting in the dark by seeking the elusive Colonel Halopti. Or perhaps they were chasing a purely imaginary description which the Kaitempi had tormented out of its captives. It wasn't likely

that they'd be eagerly sniffing around for an elderly, slightly befuddled civilian who wore glasses and was too daft to know one end of a gun from the other.

All the same, they would quiz anyone they caught leaving town in a hurry at this particular time, even if he looked the soul of innocence. They might take it further by searching every outward traveller in which event he'd be damned by possession of a gun and a large sum of money. They might also hold any and every suspect pending a thorough check of identities. That also would get the noose round his neck. The Board of Maritime Affairs had never heard of him.

Therefore escape by train was out of the question. The same applied to long-distance buses. They'd all be watched. Ten to one the entire police network was ready to take up the relentless pursuit of any car reported stolen ; they would assume that the culprit might have dumped one dyno intending to steal another. It was too late in the day to acquire another car by buying it outright. But . . . hah, he could do what he'd done before. He could rent one.

It took him quite a while to find a hire-and-drive agency. The evening was drawing in, many businesses already had shut for the night, others were near their closing time. In one way that might be a help : maybe the lateness of the hour would cover his haste and get him prompt service.

" I wish to rent that bullnozed sportster for four days. Is it available at once ?"

" Yar."

" How much ?"

" Thirty guilders a day. That's one-twenty."

" I'll take it."

" You want it right away ?"

" Yar, I do."

" I'll have it made ready for you and get you the bill. Take a seat. Won't keep you more than a few minutes." The salesman went into a small office at back. The door swung slowly and had not quite closed when his voice penetrated the gap, saying, " A renter in a hurry, Siskra. He looks all right to me. But you'd better call and tell them."

Mowry was out the front, down the street and around two corners before the unseen Siskra had time to finish dialling. He'd been out-thought. The hunt was a move ahead of him. All renting agencies had been warned to report every applicant

for a car. Only a narrow door-gap had saved him. If it had closed and silenced the voice he'd still have been sitting there when a carload of agents burst in.

" Why d'you want this dyno, *hi*? Where d'you plan to go with it? Where d'you live? Who are you, anyway? Hold your arms up while we have a look at your pockets."

His back was sticky with sweat as he put plenty of distance between him and the dyno-dump. He threw away his glasses and was mighty glad to be rid of them. A bus came along bearing the sign : *Airport.* Now he remembered that he'd passed an airport on the road coming in. Wasn't likely that Alapertane had more than one of them. Undoubtedly the port itself would be staked right, left and centre, but he did not intend to ride that far. This bus would take him to the outer suburbs and in the direction he wanted to go. Without hesitation he jumped aboard.

Although his knowledge of the town was small his inward journey had given him a shrewd idea of how far he could go without reaching the fringes. A police check was likeliest immediately outside the town where the road left the built-up area and took to the country. At that point all those abroad could be regarded as leaving Alapertane and therefore fit subjects for questioning. He must get off the bus before then.

Dismounting in good time, he continued walking outward in the hope that on foot he could avoid the checking-post by sneaking past unobserved, say by taking to the fields. Day was almost done ; the sun was half under the horizon and light was dimming fast.

He slowed his pace, decided that he'd stand a better chance of getting through in darkness. But he dared not draw attention to himself by mooching up and down the road or sitting on the kerb until nightfall. It was essential that he should look like a local citizen homeward bound. Turning off the main road he detoured at set pace through a long series of side-roads, circled back, regained the main one when the sky was black.

Continuing outward, he concentrated attention straight ahead. After a while the road-lights ended. the shine from many house windows ceased and in the distance he could see

the sky-glow of the airport. It would be anytime now. He had a strong urge to walk through the darkness on tiptoe.

A bus overtook him, hummed into the heavy gloom, stopped with a brief blaze of braking lights. Cautiously Mowry advanced, got to within twenty yards of the bus. It was fully loaded with passengers and luggage. Three policemen were on board, two of them checking faces and documents while the third blocked the exit door.

On the verge and right alongside Mowry stood a cruiser, its doors wide open and its lights extinguished. But for the present hold-up he might have sneaked to within grabbing distance before seeing it ; they'd have sat in silence, listening to the faint scuffle of his feet, and jumped him as he came abreast of them.

Calmly he got into the cruiser, sat behind its wheel, closed the doors and started the dynomotor. On the bus an irate cop was yelling at a frightened passenger while his two fellows looked on with cynical amusement. The click of door-locks and the low whine of a motor went unheard during this stream of abuse.

Rolling the cruiser off the verge and onto the road, Mowry switched on the powerful headlights. Twin beams pierced the night, bathed a long stretch of road in shining amber, filled the bus with their glare. He accelerated past the bus, saw the three cops and a dozen passengers staring out at him.

He bulleted ahead feeling that the fates had been kind and compensated for recent ill fortune. It was going to be some time before the alarm went out and the pursuit commenced. By the looks on the faces of those police they had not realised that it was their own car shooting past. Perhaps they thought he was a motorist who'd taken advantage of their preoccupation to slip by unquestioned.

But it was likely they'd take action to prevent a repetition. Two of them would continue to browbeat the bus passengers while the third went out to catch any more sneakers. In that event the third could hardly fail to notice the absence of the cruiser.

That's when the fun would start. He'd give a lot to see their faces. No cruiser meant no radio either. They'd have to rush the bus to the far-off airport, or stir their lazy legs and run like mad to the nearest house with a telephone. Better still, they'd have to make a humiliating confession over the line and take a verbal beating-up from the other end.

This mental reminder that in seizing the car he had also acquired a police radio caused Mowry to switch it on. At once it came to life.

" Car Ten. Suspect claims he was examining parked cars because he's completely forgotten where he's left his own. He is unsteady, his speech is slurred and he smells of *zith*—but he may be putting on an act."

" Bring him in, Car Ten," ordered Alapertane H.Q.

Soon afterward Car Nineteen asked for help in ringing a waterfront warehouse, reason not stated. Three cars were ordered to rush there at once.

Mowry turned the two-way switch to get the other channel. It was silent a long time before it said, " K-car. Waltagan calling. A seventh has now entered house."

A voice rasped back, " You'd better wait. The other two may turn up yet."

That sounded as if some unfortunate household was going to suffer a late-night raid by the Kaitempi. The motive was anyone's guess but it did not necessarily have anything to do with the finding of Sagramatholou's dyno. The Kaitempi could and would snatch anyone for reasons known only to themselves ; they could draft any citizen into the ranks of D.A.G. merely by declaring him in. The Kaitempi could do anything they pleased—except smack down a wasp, push away a Spakum space-fleet or win a war.

He switched back to the police channel because over that would come the howl of fury about a missing cruiser. The radio continued to mutter about suspects, fugitives, this, that or the other car, go here, go there and so forth. Mowry ignored the gab while he gave his full attention to driving at the best speed he could make.

When twenty-five *den* from Alapertane the radio yelped as the big long-range transmitter in Pertane itself let go with a powerful bellow.

" General call. Car Four stolen from Alapertane Police. Last seen racing south on main road to Valapan. May now be passing through area P6-P7."

Replies came promptly from all cruisers within or near the designated area. There were eleven. The Pertane transmitter started moving them around like pieces on a chess-

board, using coded map-references that meant nothing to the listener.

One thing seemed certain : if he kept to the main Valapan road it wouldn't be long before a cruiser spotted him and caused every car within range to converge upon him. To take to minor roads and tracks wouldn't help any ; they'd expect a trick like that and perhaps even now were taking steps to counter it.

He could dump the car on the other side of a field, all its lights out, and take to foot—in which case they would not find it before daylight tomorrow. But unless he could grab another car he'd be faced with a walk that would last all night and all next day, perhaps longer if he was forced to take cover frequently.

Listening to the calls still coming over the air, and irritated by the mysterious map-references, it struck him that this systematic concentration of the search was based on the supposition that if a suspect flees in a given direction at a given average speed he must be within a given area at a given time. This area had a radius plenty large enough to allow for turn-offs and detours. All they needed to do was bottle all the exits and then run along every road within the trap.

Suppose they did just that and found nothing? Ten to one they'd jump to a couple of alternative conclusions : the fugitive had never entered the area because he had reversed direction and now was racing northward, or else he had made far better speed than expected, had got right through the district before the trap closed and now was southward of it. Either way they'd remove the local pressure, switch the chase nearer to Valapan or northward of Alapertane.

He whizzed past a sideroad before he saw it, braked, reversed, went forward into it. A faint glow strengthened above a rise farther along the road he'd just left. Tearing along the badly rutted sideroad while the distant glow sharpened in brilliance, he waited until the last moment before stopping and switching off his own lights.

In total darkness he sat there while a pair of blazing headlamps came over the hill. Automatically his hand opened the door and he made ready to bolt if the lamps should slow down and enter his own road.

The oncomer approached the junction, stopped.

Mowry got out, stood by his car with gun held ready and legs tensed. The next moment the other car surged forward along its own road, dimmed into the distance and was gone. There was no way of telling whether it had been a hesitant civilian or a police patrol on the rampage. If the latter, they must have looked up the gloom-wrapped sideroad and seen nothing to tempt them into it. They'd get round to that in due time. Finding nothing on the major roads they'd eventually take to the minor ones.

Breathing heavily, Mowry got back behind the wheel, switched on his lights, made good pace onward. Before long he reached a farm, paused to look it over. Its yard and outbuildings adjoined the farmhouse in which thin gleams of light showed the occupants to be still awake. Leaving the place, he pushed on.

He checked two more farms before finding one suitable for his purpose. The house stood in complete darkness and its barn was some distance from it. With dimmed lights, moving slowly and quietly, he drove through the muddy yard, along a narrow lane, stopped under the open end of the barn. Leaving the car he climbed atop the hay and lay there.

Over the next four hours the shine of distant headlights swept repeatedly all around. Twice a car rocked and plunged along the sideroad, passed the farm without stopping. Both times he sat up in the hay, took out his gun. Evidently it did not occur to the hunters that he might park within the trap. On Jaimec fugitives from the police or Kaitempi did not behave like that—given a headstart they kept running good and hard.

Gradually surrounding activity died down and ceased. Mowry got back into the cruiser, resumed his run. It was now three hours to dawn. If all went well he'd make it to the rim of the forest before daybreak.

The Pertane transmitter was still broadcasting orders made incomprehensible by use of symbols but responses from various cruisers now came through with much less strength. He couldn't decide whether or not this fading of radio signals was an encouraging sign. It was certain that the transmitting cars were a good distance away but there was no knowing how many might be nearer and maintaining silence. Knowing full well that he was able to listen-in to their calls, the enemy was crafty enough to let some cars play possum.

Whether or not some cruisers were hanging around and saying nothing, he managed to get undetected to within nine *den* of his destination before the car gave up. It was tearing through a cutting that led to the last, dangerous stretch of main road when the green telltale light amid the instruments faded and went out. At the same time the headlamps extinguished and the radio died. The car rolled a short distance under its own momentum and stopped.

Examining the switch, he could find nothing wrong with it. The emergency switch on the floorboard didn't work either. After a good deal of fumbling in the dark he managed to detach one of the intake leads and tried shorting it to the earth terminal. This should have produced a thin thread of blue light. It didn't.

It signified only one thing : the power-broadcast from the capital had been cut off. Every car within considerable radius of Pertane had been halted, police and Kaitempi cruisers included. Only vehicles within potency-range of other, far-away power transmitters could continue running—unless those also had ceased to radiate.

Leaving the car, he started to trudge the rest of the way. He reached the main road, moved along it at fast pace while keeping his eyes skinned for armed figures waiting ahead to challenge any walker in the night.

After half an hour a string of lights bloomed far behind him and to his ears came the muffled whine of many motors. Scrambling off the road, he fell into an unseen ditch, climbed out of it, sought refuge amid a bunch of low but thick bushes. The lights came nearer, shot past.

It was a military scout-patrol, twelve in number, mounted on dynocycles independently powered by long-term batteries. In his plastic suit, with night-goggles and duralumin helmet, each rider looked more like a deep-sea diver than a soldier. Across the back of every trooper hung a riot-gun with a big pan-shaped magazine.

Those in authority, he decided, must be more than aggravated to stall all cars and let the army take over the hunt for the missing patrol-car and its occupant. Still, from their viewpoint they had good reason to go to such lengths. *Dirac Angestun Gesept* had claimed the execution of Sagramatholou and whoever had collared the agent's machine must be a real,

genuine member of D.A.G. They wanted a real member in their hands at any cost.

He speeded up, running short stretches, reverting to a fast walk, running again. Once he lay flat on his face in tall, fish-scented stuff that passed for grass on Jaimec. A patrol of six went by. Later he got behind a tree to avoid four more. To one side the sky had turned from black to grey and visibility was improving every minute.

The last lap to the forest was the worst. In ten minutes he leaped for cover ten times, each time uncertain whether he had been seen because now it was possible to observe movement over a considerable distance. This sudden increase in local activity suggested that at last the Alapertane patrol-car had been found. If so, they'd soon start seeking a fugitive doing it the hard way, namely, on his feet.

Chances were good that they would not concentrate on the immediate neighbourhood. Having no means of telling how long the car had been abandoned they'd credit him with being four hours ahead of where he really was and probably they'd look for him farther afield.

Thankfully he entered the forest, made good time in growing daylight. Tired and hungry, he was compelled to rest ten minutes in every hour but got along as fast as he could between times. By mid-day, when about an hour from the cave he had to lie down awhile in a leafy glade and snatch a short sleep. Up to that point he had walked a total of thirty-seven Earth-miles helped by desperation, a sense of urgency and Jaimec's lesser gravitation.

Little refreshed, he resumed his journey and had reduced pace to a listless mooch when he reached the point where his finger-ring invariably began to tingle. This time it gave no response. He halted at once, looked all around, studied the branches of big trees ahead. The forest was a maze of light and shadow. A silent, motionless sentinel could remain high up in a tree for hours and not be seen by anyone approaching.

What he'd been told at college echoed in his mind. " The ring is a warning, a reliable alarm. Heed it !"

All very well them saying that. It's one thing to give advice, something else again to take it. The choice was not the simple one of going ahead or going back ; it was that of finding shelter, food, comfort and necessary equipment or abandoning

everything that enabled him to operate as a wasp. It was the choice between continuing as a solitary fighter or becoming a useless bum. He hesitated, sorely tempted to sneak near enough at least to get a good, long look at the cave.

Finally he compromised by moving cautiously forward, edging from tree to tree and taking full advantage of all available cover. In this way he advanced another hundred yards. Still no response from the ring. Removing it from his finger he examined its sensitive crystal, cleaned the back of it, put it on again. Not an itch, not a twitch.

Half-hidden behind an enormous tree-root, he again considered the position. Had there really been intruders in the cave and, if so, were they in ambush around it? Or had Container-22 ceased to function because of some internal defect?

While he stood there in agony of indecision a sound came from twenty yards ahead. Low and faint, he would never have heard it had his senses not been primed by peril. It was like a suppressed sneeze or a muffled cough. That was enough for him. *Someone* was hanging around and striving to keep quiet about it. The cave and its contents had been discovered and the finders were lying in wait for the owner to come along.

Trying to keep full attention on the trees, he backed away almost at a crawl. After that it took him an hour to make a mile, he moved so slowly and warily. Considering himself now at a safe distance he broke into a steady walk, not knowing where to go or what to do.

Though speculation was futile he could not help wondering how the cache had been found. Low flying scout-planes fitted with super-sensitive metal detectors could have pinpointed its exact location if they'd had reason to suspect its existence in that area. But they'd had no such cause so far as he was aware.

Most likely the cave had been stumbled upon by some of those who'd fled from Pertane and taken to the woods—they'd certainly curry favour with authority by excitedly reporting the find. Or perhaps the likely-looking hideout had been probed by an army patrol trying to round up refugees.

Anyway, it no longer mattered a hoot. He had lost the cache as well as further contact with Terra. All that he pos-

sessed were the clothes in which he stood, a gun and twenty thousand guilders. He was a rich man who owned nothing but his life and that not worth much.

It was obvious that he must keep going away from the cave for as long as he retained strength to move. Realising that they had found a Terran war-dump the powers-that-be wouldn't long rest content with a mere ambush around it. Just as soon as they could collect the troops they'd convert a large section of the forest into a gigantic trap. That process would start most anytime.

So with stumbling legs and empty guts he kept going, steering himself by sun and shadow, maintaining his direction steadily south-east. By dusk he'd had as much as he could take. Flopping into a patch of reeds, he closed his eyes and slept.

It was still dark when he awoke. He lay there until sunrise, dozing and waking at intervals. Then he started out with stronger legs, a fresher mind but weaker insides. His belly kept appealing to his gullet but there was nothing he could do about it yet.

Air activity was endless that day. Scout-planes and 'copters zoomed around within hearing distance all the time. The reason for all this display was a mystery since they'd little hope of spotting one man in that immense forest. Perhaps the presence and size of the cache had misled them into thinking that a Spakum task-force had landed.

It was easy to imagine the state of wild alarm in the capital, with brasshats running to and fro while messages flashed back and forth between Jaimec and Diracta. The two lamsters Wolf had talked about had accomplished nothing like this. They'd tied up twenty-seven thousands for fourteen hours. By the looks of it he would preoccupy the entire planet for the next fourteen weeks.

At nightfall all that his belly had received was water and his sleep was made restless with hunger. In the morning he continued, still through thick forest that stretched all the way to the equator.

After five hours he struck a narrow lane, followed it to a clearing in which were a small sawmill and a dozen cottages. Before the mill stood two big, powerful trucks. From the shelter of the trees he regarded them enviously. Nobody was

near them at the moment, he could jump into either of them and tear away with no trouble at all. But the news of the theft would get the entire hunt on his tail. Right now they'd no idea of where he'd got to or where he was heading. It was better to let their ignorance remain his bliss.

Snooping carefully between the trees, he bided his time, bolted into a nearby garden, hurriedly filled his pockets with vegetables, his arms with fruit. Back among the trees he ate the fruit as he went along. Later, as twilight fell, he risked a small fire, baked the vegetables, ate half of them and saved the rest for the morrow.

Next day he saw not a living soul, had no food except that reserved from yesterday. The day after was worse : just trees, trees and still more trees with not an edible nut or berry among the lot, no sign of habitation, nothing at all to eat. From far to the north still came the faint humming of aircraft and that was the only thing to suggest the presence of life on the planet.

Four days afterward he reached the sideroad to Elvera, a village south of Valapan. Still keeping to the trees he followed it until houses came in sight. The amount of traffic on the road wasn't abnormal and there were no signs of a special watch being kept.

By now he was in a bad way, haggard with lack of food, his clothing dirty and rumpled. It was fortunate, he thought, that he had darkened his complexion, that depilatory treatment had long abolished the need to shave, and that his last haircut had been the Halopti crop followed by imitation balding. Otherwise he'd now look like nothing this side of Aldebaran.

He spent some time brushing his clothes with his hands and tidying himself as best he could. That done, he walked boldly into the village. If the price of a feed was a noose around the neck he was willing to pay it—providing the meal was a good one and that he was given time to lug out his gun.

There were a dozen shops in the village including a cafe-bar of the kind favoured by truckers. Entering, he went straight through to the washroom, had a wash and saw himself in a mirror for the first time in many days. He looked sufficiently harassed to make a nosey cop give him the long, hard stare but at least wasn't an obvious hobo.

Continued on Page 120

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Returning to the front, he sat at the counter, found it difficult to stop his mouth from drooling. The only other customers in the place were two ancient Sirians guzzling at one table and too intent to bother with the newcomer. A burly character in a white coat appeared behind the counter and eyed Mowry with faint curiosity.

" You wish ?"

Mowry told him, got it, almost dribbled on it when it arrived. He set to, forcing himself to eat slowly because the other was watching. Finishing, he ordered the next item and disposed of it in the same bored manner. This play-acting was sheer hell ; he could have bolted two more complete servings and asked the fellow to wrap up another six for him to take out.

As he shoved across the final drink, the burly one said, " Come far ?"

" Only from Valapan."

" Walk it, *hi* ?"

" Nar, the dyno stalled two *den* back. I'll fix it after."

The other stared at him. " You came in a dyno ? How'd you get out of Valapan ?"

" What d'you mean ?" countered Mowry, not liking the trend of conversation.

" No cars allowed into or out of Valapan today. A cop told me so himself."

" When was this ?"

" Around the nine-time hour."

" I was away before seven," Mowry said. " I'd a lot of calls to make and got out early. Good thing I did, *hi* ?"

" Yar," agreed the other, doubtfully. " But how're you going to get in again ?"

" I don't know. They've got to lift the ban sometime. They can't maintain it for ever." He paid the bill, made for the door. " Live long."

He sensed that he'd got out of there in good time. The burly one was vaguely suspicious but not sufficiently so to bawl for help, being the type who'd hesitate lest he make a fool of himself.

The next call was at a nearby grocery store. He bought enough of the most concentrated foods to make a package not too heavy to carry for miles. Here he was served without especial interest and the conversation was brief.

" Bad about Valapan, isn't it ?"

" Yar," said Mowry, yearning to hear the news.

" Hope they nab every stinking Spakum in the place."

" Yar," Mowry repeated.

" Damn the Spakums !" the other finished. " That will be sixteen and six-tenths."

Going out with the package, he glanced along the road. The fellow at the cafe-bar was standing by his door looking at him. Mowry nodded familiarly, ambled from the village, shot another glance back as he passed the last house. Nosey-poke was still standing there watching him.

With careful rationing the food lasted him ten days as he continued through the forest and saw nobody other than occasional lumberjacks whom he avoided. His direction was now a westward circle that should bring him not far south of Radine. Despite any risks entailed, he was keeping to that part of Jaimec of which he had some knowledge.

He'd made up his mind that when he got near to Radine he was going to use his gun to acquire another car and a set of genuine documents at the cost of burying a corpse in the woods. After that he'd check the lie of the land and if things weren't too hot in Radine maybe he could hole-up there. Something drastic had to be done because he could not roam the forests for ever. If he'd acquired the status of a lone outlaw he might as well become enough of a thug to prosper.

He did not know it but bigger and wider events were overtaking him and he was no longer a pawn in the cosmic game or the master of his destiny.

Two hours after sunset on his last day of wandering he reached the main Radine-Khamasta road, paralleled it through the forest as he continued toward Radine. At precisely the eleven-time hour a tremendous flash of light yellowed the sky in the direction of the stronghold of Khamasta. Beneath his feet the ground gave a distinct quiver. The trees creaked while their tops swayed. A bit later a prolonged, faraway growl came over the horizon.

Traffic on the road swiftly thinned out and finally ceased altogether. A thousand crimson serpents hissed up from darkened Radine and hungrily bored into the night sky. Came another great flash from the region of Khamasta. Something

long, black and noisy bulleted low over the forest, momentarily blanking out the stars and sending down a blast of heat.

In the distance sounded faint, muffled rumblings, cracklings, thumps and thuds plus a vague, indefinable babble like the shoutings of a multitude. Mowry went into the empty road and stared up at the sky. The stars vanished wholesale as the thrice-wrecked and ten times decimated Terran fleets thundered overhead four thousand strong.

Below, Mowry danced like a maniac in the middle of the road. He shouted at the sky. He yelled and screamed and bawled tuneless songs with meaningless words. He waved his arms around, tossed twenty thousand guilders into the air so that it floated around like confetti.

As the black, snouty warships roared above a veritable torrent of stuff sailed down, seeking ground with the pale, lemon-coloured legs of antigrav beams. He stood fascinated while not far away a huge, cumbersome shape with enormous caterpillar tracks fell featherlike atop twenty columnar rays, landed with squeaks of protest from big springs.

Heart pounding, he tore southward along the road, on and on until he bolted full-tilt into a waiting group of forty figures. They were looking his way, ready for him, having been alerted by the frantic clomping of his feet. The entire bunch topped him by head and shoulders, wore dark green uniforms and were holding things that gleamed in the starlight.

" Take it easy, Blowfly," advised a Terran voice.

Mowry panted for breath. He did not resent this rude counterthrust to the Spakum tag. Every Sirian was a blowfly by virtue of his purple backside.

He pawed at the speaker's sleeve. " My name is James Mowry. I'm not what I seem—I'm a Terran."

The other, a big, lean-faced and cynical sergeant said, " My name's Napoleon. I'm not what I seem—I'm an emperor." He gestured with a hand holding a whop-gun that looked like a cannon. " Take him to the cage, Rogan."

" But I *am* a Terran," yelped Mowry, flapping his hands.

" Yeah, you look it," said the sergeant.

" I'm *speaking* Terran, aren't I ?"

" Sure are. A hundred thousand Blowflies can speak it. They think it gives them a certain something." He waved the cannon again. " The cage, Rogan."

Rogan took him.

For twelve days he mooched around the prisoner-of-war compound. The dump was very big, very full and swiftly became fuller. Prisoners were fed regularly, guarded constantly and that was all.

Of his fellows behind the wire at least fifty sly-eyed specimens boasted of their confidence in the future when the sheep would be sorted from the goats and justice would be done. The reason, they asserted, was that for a long time they'd been secret leaders of *Dirac Angestun Gesept* and undoubtedly would be raised to power when Terran conquerors got round to it. Then, they warned, friends would be rewarded as surely as foes would be punished. This bragging ceased only when three of them somehow got strangled in their sleep.

At least a dozen times Mowry seized the chance to attract the attention of a patrolling sentry when no Sirian happened to be nearby. " Psst ! My name's Mowry—I'm a Terran."

Ten times he received confessions of faith such as, " You look it !" or " Is zat so ?"

A lanky character said, " Don't give me that !"

" It's true—I swear it !"

" You really are a Terran—*hi* ?"

" Yar," said Mowry, forgetting himself.

" Yar to you, too."

Once he spelled it so there'd be no possibility of misunderstanding. " See here, Buster, I'm a T-E-R-R-A-N."

To which the sentry replied, " Says Y-O-U " and hefted his gun and continued his patrol.

Came the day when prisoners were paraded in serried ranks, a captain stood on a crate, held a loud-hailer before his mouth and roared all over the camp, " Anyone here named James Mowry ?"

Mowry galloped eagerly forward, bow-legged from force of habit. " I am." He scratched himself, a performance that the captain viewed with unconcealed disfavour.

Glowering at him, the captain demanded, " Why the heck haven't you said so before now ? We've been searching all Jaimec for you. Let me tell you, Mister, we've got better things to do. You struck dumb or something ?"

" I— "

" Shut up ! Military Intelligence wants you. Follow me."

So saying, he led the other through heavily guarded gates, along a path toward a prefab hut.

Mowry ventured, " Captain, again and again I tried to tell the sentries that—"

" Prisoners are forbidden to talk to sentries," the captain snapped.

" But I wasn't a prisoner."

" Then what the blazes were you doing in there ?" Without waiting for a reply he pushed open the door of the prefab hut and introduced him with, " This is the crummy bum."

The Intelligence officer glanced up from a wad of papers. " So you're Mowry, James Mowry ?"

" Correct."

" Well now," said the officer, " we've been primed by beam-radio and we know all about you."

" Do you really ?" responded Mowry, pleased and gratified. He braced himself for the coming citation, the paean of praise, the ceremonial stroking of a hero's hair.

" Another mug like you was on Artishan, their tenth planet," the officer went on. " Feller named Kingsley. They say he hasn't sent a signal for quite a piece. Looks like he's got himself nabbed. Chances are he's been stepped on and squashed flat."

Mowry said suspiciously, " What's this to me ?"

" We're dropping you in his place. You leave tomorrow."

" *Hi* ? Tomorrow ?"

" Sure thing. We want you to become a wasp. Nothing wrong with you, is there ?"

" No," said Mowry, very feebly. " Only my head."

Eric Frank Russell

To be published in book form by Dennis Dobson Ltd. later this year.

In Memorium

Science fiction literature suffered a severe blow this year in the sudden death of leading American writer, Henry Kuttner.

Henry Kuttner, still in his early 40's, had a sudden heart attack and passed away at the beginning of February at his home in California. Author of countless novels and short stories, his marriage some years ago to fantasy writer Catherine L. Moore, had produced one of the most brilliant writing teams of our times.

Warra,
Queensland.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

A note of comment on recent issues of *New Worlds*— " Sector General " by James White in No. 65 is the most rewarding novelette I have read in a long time. I haven't read *all* the magazines issued, of course, but the idea seems to me to be a completely new one, of which there seems to be a scarcity in science fiction these days. I was surprised that there was no opening left for continuation into a series. I for one would be pleased to read more about this universal hospital.

Incidentally, I would much rather read one episode of a series every couple of issues than try to follow a long serial such as " The Uninhibited." I didn't think much of Ballard's " Manhole 69," but *did* like the other shorts, and " To Percy."

The Heinlein yarn in No. 64 was something of a scoop, wasn't it? Although you didn't say so this seems to be no part of his ' Future History ' series. Chandler's " Sense Of Wonder " in the same issue was rather weak, which surprised me as I usually enjoy his yarns. Perhaps he should stick to his more familiar ' seamen ' type of characters. " Mate In One " was good but spoiled for me as I had previously read the very similar " Among Thieves " by Poul Anderson in the October BRE *Astounding*.

From No. 63, " Mission One Hundred " was just a bomber pilot World War II yarn transplanted into the future. You should resist this tendency. " Made On Mars " and " Sisters Under The Skin " I liked, but too much of the issue was taken up by that serial. On the whole I think your magazine rates with the US *Astounding* these days and is definitely the best of the British mags.

A. H. Weaver.

Clacton-on-sea,
Essex.

Dear John,

Looking at the latest issue of *New Worlds* (No. 70) I note with interest a letter from Laurence Sandfield and I'm afraid I must disagree with him on several points.

First, he mentions that 'just when science fiction needs a new cheap-priced pulp to drag in another generation of readers, you are turning out yet another digest-sized magazine at 2/-. If you turned out a magazine like Laurence suggests without even edges, interior art work and other appearance makers, how on Earth are you going to get people to contribute to it? Who wants his name associated with an extra-cheap pulp? If you did decide to turn out a cheap pulp it would be the biggest flop ever.

Science Fiction Adventures sounds cheap enough as it is, although the stories were a pleasant surprise as I was preparing myself for pseudo-scientific space-opera. However, it would appear that the point Laurence really wanted to make was this: he wanted this cheap pulp solely as the basis for a thriving letter column, and I entirely agree with his sentiments. I definitely don't think however, that a cheap pulp magazine is the place for them. Why not try and open up a letter column in *SFA*—or better still, why not start a fan column in it?

One more thing about letter columns—I like the way you have developed yours and I hope you keep it on a nice even basis about s-f in general, bringing up points of topical interest which will prove controversial. Sandfield's letter is a good example of what I mean. I never had the slightest intention of writing to you about s-f or *New Worlds* until I read his letter.

About removing interior art work from *New Worlds* I know it has been a long time since it was cancelled but I am one of the minority who was sorry to see it go, especially Quinn, but I applaud your decision. Whilst on art, I have enjoyed Brian Lewis's latest two covers. The single colour effect is quite startling, especially the latest yellow one—Lewis is good with abstract but rather inadequate when it comes to human beings.

Barry P. Hall.

Hope Villa,
Bury St. Edmunds.

Dear Sir,

I like your idea of leaving out illustrations because I feel it promotes individual mental images of the characters in the stories. Each person develops a mental image of the individual characters as they would like them and illustrations which incorporate different ideas, spoil the idea.

I consider John Brunner your best author and I particularly like the way he set out his last story *Threshold of Eternity*. His method of intertwining the different peoples into different ages was very good.

Your present serial " Wasp " promises to continue the fine tradition of your previous serials with its very unusual story, and its skilful presentation by author Eric Frank Russell.

I hope to see many more issues of *New Worlds Science Fiction* in the future.

John Brennan.

P.S. Live long !

Continued on Page 128

Easthampstead,
Berks.

Dear Sir :

Your *Threshold Of Eternity* was very good ; a point which I and three others agree. The three others (friends of mine) and myself share the issue each month, which is then passed on to the Forces. So it gets around. (*Oh, those lost sales !—Ed*).

Here's to your maintaining your high standard in the future.

D. J. Masters.

Paisley,
Renfrewshire.

Dear John,

I'm pleased to see " Postmortem " re-introduced—I like to hear other reader's comments as I feel that they go a long way towards shaping the kind of magazine we want.

The new abstract covers are *terrific* ! I much prefer this type of art work ; it's more definite, better in composition and colour (the self-coloured background is very effective) and it makes the reader think more. Please keep them up as they enhance the magazine and will help to win over the swithering fringe group of readers. Some of the previous artwork caused even me—a hardened fan—to hide the front covers !

No. 70 is a high standard issue. I can't comment on the serial as I save them up and read them like novels. However, John Wyndham's story shows the smooth professional touch many lesser writers want to attain. Bob Silverberg's tale I enjoyed. J. G. Ballard's story was good, too, but I feel that it could have been made longer. It's good to see a new writer showing up in the article section. D. J. Francis used just the right amount of gravity (!) to put over an interesting topic in an interesting manner. Before I leave the magazine, I found the editorial revealing—although I mention it last, I always read it first.

In the April issue of *Astounding* I see that in " The First Inch " Arthur C. Clarke has a planet named after him. Are we seeing the building of a legend round one of the most brilliant writers in the field ? His name was given to the ferry rockets' orbital rendezvous, ' Clarke's Corner ' in " The Long Ellipse " (*New Worlds* No. 67), and he also popped up in " A Touch of E Flat " in *Galaxy* No. 52.

Donald Malcolm.