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NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Donald Malcolm

Paisley, Scotland

A comparative newcomer to science fiction writing, Donald Malcolm came into the field through an interest in astronomy and later because writing science articles did not give him the freedom of expression he felt necessary. Similar to most of today's new writers, however, he has been reading science fiction for many years.

"My reading of science fiction," he states, "showed me that a high standard of accuracy was required when referring to anything like astronomy or space travel, so I took a course in astronomy. I am in various scientific societies: the BIS, of which I am Scottish secretary, the BAA, the Astronomical Society of Glasgow, and the Royal Astronomical Society.

"Science fiction appeals to me for many reasons, perhaps the most important being its entertainment and educational value. I've learned a great deal from science fiction and I hope to learn a great deal more. Through science fiction my interest has been aroused in many subjects and some of the knowledge has remained—and, by reading stories written by prominent writers in the field I am continually learning more about the craft of story composition itself."

Author Malcolm's main interests, naturally, are astronomy, space flight and science fiction, but he also has time for philately, archeology, art, and records (especially piano). His science articles appear quite frequently, cover seven journals so far, and are likely to be extended in the near future.

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1959...

Last month I looked back on the general events of 1958 in the science fiction field but there was insufficient space to more than mention that *New Worlds* in particular had produced some of the best British material in recent years. Unfortunately I am restricted on my editorial space this month and cannot go into story details as I would wish. Undoubtedly, however, 1958 will turn out to be one of our most important literary years—a keystone in our future publishing programme—in view of the number of new writers it produced and the improvement in technique of writers who had already begun to establish themselves.

Basing our expectations for 1959 upon the successes of last year we can expect another good literary year and we start off next month with the first instalment of Charles Eric Maine's spring novel " Count-Down," which Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., will publish in book form as soon as the serial concludes. It is another fast-paced thriller in the mood of Eric Frank Russell's " Wasp " which was so well liked—but set on Earth—and is undoubtedly the best novel to come from this versatile author in the five years he has been writing feature-length stories.

" Count-Down " is located on a Pacific island and relates the final 72-hour period before a new type of spaceship is due to take off, with somebody doing their utmost to sabotage the project—the " somebody " being the unknown factor throughout. In the same issue is a James White novelette, " Dogfight," which does not belong to his " Sector General " series. However, in response to many impatient readers he is now working on another such story.

Not scheduled as yet, but already in hand, is a new Kenneth Bulmer serial, " The Patient Dark," and Colin Kapp's second story " Survival Problem," a novelette right in the same groove as his debut-making story " Life Plan " back in November last. More Brian Aldiss stories are on hand and he will shortly be starting work on another " special " for *New Worlds*.

I can also predict further pleasant surprises for 1959 but the year is far too young as yet to reveal them.

John Carnell

When Man gets into space, and if—in the millenia ahead —he reaches the stars and meets other sentient entities, one of his most important assets will be an understanding of the other's point of view. It will be of little use insisting that Earthly mores are the only correct ones.

EARTHMAN'S BURDEN

By Robert Silverberg

The sun had gone down blood-red, and Colonel John Devall slept poorly because of it. The atmosphere on Markin was not normally conducive to blood-red sunsets, though they did happen occasionally on evenings when the blue of sunlight was scattered particularly well. The Marks connected red sunsets with approaching trouble. Colonel Devall, who headed the Terran cultural and military mission to Markin, was more cultural than military himself, and so was willing to accept the Markin belief that the sunset was a premonition of conflict.

He was tall, well-made and erect in bearing, with the sharp bright eyes and crisp manner of the military man. He successfully tried to project an appearance of authoritative officerhood, and his men respected and feared the image he showed them.

His degree was in anthropology. The military education was an afterthought, but a shrewd one ; it had brought him command of the Markin outpost. The Department of Extra-

terrestrial Affairs insisted that all missions to relatively primitive alien worlds be staffed and headed by military men—and, Devall reasoned, so long as I keep up the outward show, who's to know that I'm not the tough soldier they think I am? Markin was a peaceful enough world. The natives were intelligent, fairly highly advanced culturally if not technically, easily dealt with on a rational being-to-being basis.

Which explains why Devall slept badly the night of the red sun. Despite his elegant posture and comportment, he regarded himself essentially as a bookish, un-military man. He had some doubts as to his own possible behaviour in an unforeseen time of crisis. The false front of his officerhood might well crumble away under stress, and he knew it.

He dozed off, finally, toward morning, having kicked the covers to the floor and twisted the sheets into crumpled confusion. It was a warmish night—most of them were, on Markin—but he felt chilled.

He woke late, only a few minutes before officers' mess, and dressed hurriedly in order to get there on time. As commanding officer, of course, he had the privilege of sleeping as late as he pleased—but getting up with the others was part of the task Devall imposed on himself. He donned the light summer uniform, slapped depilator hastily on his tanned face, hooked on his formal blaster and belt, and signalled to his orderly that he was awake and ready.

The Terran enclave covered ten acres, half an hour's drive from one of the largest Markin villages. An idling jeep waited outside Devall's small private dome, and he climbed in, nodding curtly at the orderly.

"Morning, Harris."

"Good morning, sir. Sleep well?"

It was a ritual by now. "Very well," Devall responded automatically, as the jeep's turbos thrummed once and sent the little car humming across the compound to the mess hall. Clipped to the seat next to Devall was his daily morning programme-sheet, prepared for him by the staffman-of-the-day while he slept. This morning's sheet was signed by Dudley, a major of formidable efficiency—Space Service through and through, a Military Wing career man and nothing else. Devall scanned the assignments for the morning, neatly written out in Dudley's crabbed hand.

Kelly, Dorfman, Mellors, Steber on Linguistic Detail, as usual. Same assignment as yesterday, in town.

Haskell on medic duty. Blood samples ; urinalysis.
Matsuoko to maintenance staff (through Wednesday).
Jolli on zoo detail.
Leonards, Meyer, Rodriguez on assigned botanical field trip, two days. Extra jeep assigned for specimen collection.

Devall scanned the rest of the list, but, as expected, Dudley had done a perfect job of deploying the men where they would be most useful and most happy. Devall thought briefly about Leonards, on the botanical field trip. A two-day trip might take them through the dangerous rain-forest to the south ; Devall felt a faint flicker of worry. The boy was his nephew, his sister's son—a reasonably competent journeyman botanist with the gold bar still untarnished on his shoulder. This was the boy's first commission ; he had been assigned to Devall's unit at random, as a new man. Devall had concealed his relationship to Leonards from the other men, knowing it might make things awkward for the boy, but he still felt a protective urge.

Hell, the kid can take care of himself, Devall thought, and scribbled his initials at the bottom of the sheet and clipped it back in place ; it would be posted while the men were cleaning their quarters and the officers ate, and by 0900 everyone would be out on his day's assignment. There was so much to do, Devall thought, and so little time to do it. There were so many worlds—

He quitted the jeep and entered the mess hall. Officers' mess was a small well-lit alcove to the left of the main hall ; as Devall entered he saw seven men standing stiffly at attention, waiting for him.

He knew they hadn't been standing that way all morning ; they had snapped to attention only when their lookout—probably Second Lieutenant Leonards, the youngest—had warned them he was coming.

Well, he thought, it doesn't matter much. As long as appearance is preserved. The form.

" Good morning, gentlemen," he said crisply, and took his place at the head of the table.

For a while it looked as if it were going to turn out a pretty good day. The sun rose in a cloudless sky, and the thermometer tacked to the enclave flagstaff registered 93 degrees. When Markin got hot, it got *hot*. By noon, Devall knew by

now, they could expect something like 110 in the shade—and then, a slow, steady decline into the low eighties by midnight.

The botanical crew departed on time, rumbling out of camp in its two jeeps, and Devall stood for a moment on the mess hall steps watching them go, watching the other men head for their assigned posts. Stubble-faced Sergeant Jolli saluted him as he trotted across the compound to the zoo, where he would tend the little menagerie of Markin wildlife the expedition would bring back to Earth at termination. Wiry little Matsuoko passed by, dragging a carpenter's kit. The linguistic team climbed into its jeep and drove off toward town, where they would continue their studies in the Markin tongue.

They were all busy. The expedition had been on Markin just four months ; eight months was left of their time. Unless an extension of stay came through, they'd pack up and return to Earth for six months of furlough-cum-report-session, and then it would be on to some other world for another year of residence.

Devall was not looking forward to leaving Markin. It was a pleasant world, if a little on the hot side, and there was no way of knowing what the *next* world would be like. A frigid ball of frozen methane, perhaps, where they would spend their year bundled into Valdez breathing-suits and trying to make contact with some species of intelligent ammonia-breathing molluscs. Better the devil we know, Devall felt.

But he had to keep moving on. This was his eleventh world, and there would be more to come. Earth had barely enough qualified survey teams to cover ten thousand worlds half-adequately, and life abounded on ten *million.* He would retain whichever members of the current team satisfied him by their performance, replace those who didn't fit in, and go off to his next job eight months from now.

He turned on the office fan and took down the logbook ; unfastening the binder, he slipped the first blank sheet into the autotype. For once he avoided his standard blunder ; he cleared his throat *before* switching on the autotype, thereby sparing the machine its customary difficulties in finding a verbal equivalent for his *Brghhumph* !

The guidelight glowed a soft red. Devall said, " Fourth April, two-seven-zero-five. Colonel John F. Devall recording. One hundred nineteenth day of our stay on Markin, World 7 of System 1106-sub-a.

" Temperature, 93 at 0900 ; wind gentle, southerly—"

He went on at considerable length, as he did each morning. Finishing off the required details, he gathered up the sheaf of speciality-reports that had been left at his door the night before, and began to read abstracts into the log ; the autotype clattered merrily, and a machine somewhere in the basement of the towering E-T Affairs Building in Rio de Janeiro was reproducing his words as the sub-radio hookup transmitted them.

It was dull work. Devall often wondered whether he might have been ultimately happier doing simple anthropological field work, as he had once done, instead of taking on the onerous burden of routine that an administrative post entailed. *But someone has to shoulder the burden*, he thought.

Earthman's burden. We're the most advanced race ; we help the others. But no one twists our arms to come out to these worlds and share what we have. Call it an inner compulsion.

He intended to work until noon ; in the afternoon a Markin high priest was coming to the enclave to see him, and the interview would probably take almost till sundown. But about 1100 he was interrupted suddenly by the sound of jeeps unexpectedly entering the compound, and he heard the clamour of voices—both Terran voices and alien ones.

A fearful argument seemed to be in progress, but the group was too far away and Devall's knowledge of Markin too uncertain for him to be able to tell what was causing the rumpus. In some annoyance he snapped off the autotype, rose from his chair, and peered through the window into the yard.

Two jeeps had drawn up—the botanical crew, gone less than two hours. Four natives surrounded the three Earthmen. Two of the natives clutched barbed spears ; a third was a woman, the fourth an old man. They were all protesting hotly over something.

Devall scowled ; from the pale, tense, unhappy faces of the men in the jeep, he could tell something was very wrong. That blood-red sunset had foretold accurately, he thought, as he dashed down the steps from his study.

Seven pairs of eyes focussed on him as he strode toward the group : eight glittering alien eyes, warmly golden, and six shifting, uneasy Terran eyes.

" What's going on out here ?" Devall demanded.

The aliens set up an immediate babble of noise, chattering away like a quartet of squirrels. Devall had never seen any of them behaving this way before.

" *Quiet* !" he roared.

In the silence that followed he said very softly, " Lieutenant Leonards, can you tell me exactly what all this fuss is about ?"

The boy looked very frightened ; his jaws were stiffly clenched, his lips bloodless. "Y-yes, sir," he said stammeringly. " Begging your pardon, sir. I seem to have killed an alien."

In the relative privacy of his office, Devall faced them all again—Leonards, sitting very quietly staring at his gleaming boots ; Meyer and Rodriguez, who had accompanied him on the ill-starred botanizing journey. The aliens were outside ; there would be time to calm them down later.

" Okay," Devall said. " Leonards, I want you to repeat the story, exactly as you just told it to me, and I'll get it down on the autotype. Start talking when I point to you."

He switched on the autotype and said, " Testimony of Second Lieutenant Paul Leonards, Botanist, delivered in presence of commanding officer on 4 April 2705." He jabbed a forefinger at Leonards.

The boy's face looked waxy, beads of sweat dotted his pale vein-traced forehead, and his blonde hair was tangled and twisted. He clamped his lips together in an agonized grimace, scratched the back of one hand, and finally said, " Well, we left the enclave about 0900 this morning, bound south and westerly on a tour of the outlying regions. Our purpose was to collect botanical specimens. I—was in charge of the group, which also included Sergeants Meyer and Rodriguez."

He paused. " We—we accomplished little in the first half-hour ; this immediate area had already been thoroughly covered by us anyway. But about 0945 Meyer noticed a heavily wooded area not far to the left of the main road, and called it to my attention. I suggested we stop and investigate. It was impossible to penetrate the wooded area in our jeeps, so we proceeded on foot. I left Rodriguez to keep watch over our gear while we were gone.

" We made our way through a close-packed stand of deciduous angiosperm trees of a species we had already studied, and found ourselves in a secluded area of natural growth, including several species which we could see were previously uncatalogued. We found one in particular—a shrub consisting of a single thick succulent green stalk perhaps four feet high, topped by a huge gold and green composite flower head. We filmed it in detail, took scent samples, pollen prints, and removed several leaves."

Devall broke in suddenly. "You didn't pick the flower itself? Devall speaking."

"Of course not. It was the only specimen in the vicinity, and it's not our practice to destroy single specimens for the sake of collecting. But I did remove several leaves from the stalk. And the moment I did that, a native sprang at me from behind a thick clump of ferns.

"He was armed with one of those notched spears. Meyer saw him first and yelled, and I jumped back just as the alien came charging forward with his spear. I managed to deflect the spear with the outside of my arm and was not hurt. The alien fell back a few feet and shouted something at me in his language which I don't understand too well as yet. Then he raised his spear and menaced me with it. I was carrying the standard-issue radial blaster. I drew it and ordered him in his own language to lower his spear, that we meant no harm. He ignored me and charged a second time. I fired in self-defence, trying to destroy the spear or at worse wound his arm, but he spun round to take the full force of the charge, and died instantly." Leonards shrugged. "That's about it, sir. We came back here instantly."

"Umm. Devall speaking. Sergeant Meyer, would you say this account is substantially true?"

Meyer was a thin-faced dark-haired man who was usually smiling, but he wasn't smiling now. "This is Sergeant Meyer. I'd say that Lieutenant Leonards told the story substantially as it occurred. Except that the alien didn't seem overly fierce despite his actions, in my opinion. I myself thought he was bluffing both times he charged, and I was a little surprised when Lieutenant Leonards shot him. That's all, sir."

Frowning, the colonel said, "Devall speaking. This has been testimony in the matter of the alien killed today by Lieutenant Leonards." He snapped off the autotype, stood up, and leaned forward across the desk, staring sternly at the trio of young botanists facing him. *These next few days are going to be my test*, he thought tensely.

"Sergeant Rodriguez, since you weren't present at the actual incident I'll consider you relieved of all responsibility in this matter, and your testimony won't be required. Report to Major Dudley for re-assignment for the remainder of the week."

"Thank you, sir." Rodriguez saluted, grinned gratefully and was gone.

"As for you two, though," Devall said heavily, "you'll both have to be confined to base pending the outcome of the affair. I don't need to tell you how serious this can be, whether the killing was in self-defence or not. Plenty of peoples don't understand the concept of self-defence." He moistened his suddenly dry lips. "I don't anticipate too many complications growing out of this. But these are alien people on an alien world, and their behaviour is never certain."

He glanced at Leonards. "Lieutenant, I'll have to ask for your own safety that you remain in your quarters until further notice."

"Yes, sir. Is this to be considered arrest?"

"Not yet," Devall said. "Meyer, attach yourself to the maintenance platoon for the remainder of the day. We'll probably need your testimony again before this business is finished. Dismissed, both of you."

When they were gone, Devall sank back limply in his web-foam chair and stared at his fingertips. His hands were quivering as if they had a life of their own.

John F. Devall. Ph.D. Anthropology Columbia '82, *commissioned Space Service Military Wing* '87, *and now you're in trouble for the first time.*

How are you going to handle it, Jack? he asked himself. *Can you prove that that silver eagle really belongs on your shoulder*?

He was sweating. He felt very tired. He shut his eyes for a moment, opened them, and said into the intercom, "Send in the Marks."

Five of them entered, made ceremonial bows, and ranged themselves nervously along the far wall as if they were firing-squad candidates. Accompanying them came Steber of the linguistics team, hastily recalled from town to serve as an interpreter for Devall. The colonel's knowledge of Markin was adequate but sketchy; he wanted Steber around in case any fine points had to be dealt with in detail.

The Marks were humanoid in structure, simian in ancestry, which should have made them close kin to the Terrans in general physiological structure. They weren't. Their skin was a rough, coarse, pebble-grained affair, dark-toned, running to muddy browns and occasional deep purples. Their jaws had

somehow acquired a reptilian hinge in the course of evolution, which left them practically chinless, in huge lumps that would strangle an Earthman. Their eyes, liquid gold in colour, were set wide on their heads, allowing enormous peripheral vision; their noses were flat buttons, in some cases barely perceptible.

Devall saw two younger men, obviously warriors ; they had left their weapons outside, but their jaws jutted belligerently and the darker of the pair had virtually dislocated his jaw in rage. The woman looked like all the Mark women, shapeless and weary behind her shabby cloak of furs. The remaining pair were priests, one old, one *very* old. It was this ancient to whom Devall addressed his first remarks.

" I'm sorry that our meeting this afternoon has to be one of sorrow. I had been looking forward to a pleasant talk. But it's not always possible to predict what lies ahead."

" Death lay ahead for him who was killed," the old priest said in the dry, high-pitched tone of voice that Devall knew implied anger and scorn.

The woman let out a sudden wild ululation, half a dozen wailing words jammed together so rapidly Devall could not translate them. " What did she say ?" he asked Steber.

The interpreter flattened his palms together thoughtfully. " She's the woman of the man who was killed. She was—demanding revenge," he said in English.

Apparently the two young warriors were friends of the dead man. Devall's eyes scanned the five hostile alien faces. "This is a highly regrettable incident," he said in Markin. " But I trust it won't affect the warm relationship between Earthman and Markin that has prevailed so far. This misunderstanding."

" Blood must be atoned," said the smaller and less impressively garbed of the two priests. He was probably the local priest, Devall thought, and he was probably happy to have his superior on hand to back him up.

The colonel flicked sweat from his forehead. " The young man who committed the act will certainly be disciplined. Of course you realise that a killing in self-defence cannot be regarded as murder, but I admit the young man did act unwisely and will suffer the consequences." It didn't sound too satisfying to Devall, and, indeed, the aliens hardly seemed impressed.

The high priest uttered two short, sharp syllables. They were not words in Devall's vocabulary, and he looked over at Steber in appeal.

" He said Leonards was trepassing on sacred ground. He said the crime they're angry about is not murder but blasphemy."

Despite the heat, Devall felt a sudden chill. *Not . . . murder ? This is going to be complicated*, he realised gloomily.

To the priest he said, " Does this change the essential nature of the case ? He'll still be punished by us for his action, which can't be condoned."

" You may punish him for murder, if you so choose," the high priest said, speaking very slowly, so Devall would understand each word. The widow emitted some highly terrestrial-sounding sobs ; the young men glowered stolidly. " Murder is not our concern," the high priest went on. " He has taken life ; life belongs to Them, and They withdraw it whenever They see fit, by whatever means They care to employ. But he has also desecrated a sacred flower on sacred ground. These are serious crimes, to us. Added to this he has shed the blood of a Guardian, on sacred ground. We ask you to turn him over to us for trial by a priestly court on this double charge of blasphemy. Afterward, perhaps, you may try him by your own laws, for whichever one of them he has broken."

For an instant all Devall saw was the old priest's implacable leathery face ; then he turned and caught the expression of white-faced astonishment and dismay Steber displayed.

It took several seconds for the high priest's words to sink in, and several more before Devall came to stunned realisation of the implications. *They want to try an Earthman*, he thought numbly. *By their own law. In their own court. And mete out their own punishment.*

This had abruptly ceased being a mere local incident, an affair to clean up, note in the log, and forget. It was no longer a matter of simple reparations for the accidental killing of an alien.

Now, thought Devall dully, it was a matter of galactic importance. And he was the man who had to make all the decisions.

He visited Leonards that evening, after the meal. By that time everyone in the camp knew what had happened, though Devall had ordered Steber to keep quiet about the alien demand to try Leonards themselves.

The boy looked up as Devall entered his room, and managed a soggy salute.

" At ease, Lieutenant," Devall sat on the edge of Leonards' bed and squinted up at him. " Son, you're in very hot water now."

" Sir, I—"

" I know. You didn't mean to pluck leaves off the sacred bramble-bush, and you couldn't help shooting down the native who attacked you. And if this business were as simple as all that, I'd reprimand you for hotheadedness and let it go at that. But—"

" But what, sir ?"

Devall scowled and forced himself to face the boy squarely. " But the aliens want to try you themselves. They aren't so much concerned with the murder as they are with your double act of blasphemy. That withered old high priest wants to take you before an ecclesiastical court."

" You won't allow *that*, of course, will you, Colonel ?" Leonards seemed confident that such an unthinkable thing could never happen.

" I'm not so sure, Paul," Devall said quietly, deliberately using the boy's first name.

" *What*, sir ?"

" This is evidently something very serious you've committed. That high priest is calling a priestly convocation to deal with you. They'll be back here to get you tomorrow at noon, he said."

" But you wouldn't turn me over to them, sir ! After all, I was on duty ; I had no knowledge of the offence I was committing. Why, it's none of their business !"

" Make *them* see that," Devall said flatly. " They're aliens. They don't understand Terran legal codes. They don't *want* to hear about our laws ; by theirs, you've blasphemed, and blasphemers must be punished. This is a law-abiding race on Markin. They're an ethically advanced society, regardless of the fact that they're not technologically advanced. Ethically they're on the same plane as we are."

Leonards looked terribly pale. " You'll turn me over to them ?"

Devall shrugged. " I didn't say that. But look at it from my position. I'm leader of a cultural and military mission. Our purpose is to live among these people, learn their ways, guide them as much as we can in our limited time here. We at least *try* to make a pretence of respecting their rights as individuals and as a species, you know.

" Well, now it's squarely on the line. Are we friends living among them and helping them, or are we overlords grinding them under our thumbs ?"

" Sir, I'd say that was an over-simplification," Leonards remarked hesitantly.

" Maybe so. But the issue's clear enough. If we turn them down, it means we're setting up a gulf of superiority between Earth and these aliens, despite the big show we made about being brothers. And word will spread to other planets. We try to sound like friends, but our actions in the celebrated Leonards case reveal our true colours. We're arrogant, imperialistic, patronising, and—well, do you see ?"

" So you're going to turn me over to them for trial, then," the boy said quietly.

Devall shook his head. He felt old, very old, at fifty. " I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet. If I turn you over, it'll certainly set a dangerous precedent. And if I don't —I'm not sure what will happen." He shrugged. " I'm going to refer the case back to Earth. It isn't my decision to make."

But it *was* his decision to make, he thought, as he left the boy's quarters and headed stiff-legged toward the communications shack. He was on the spot, and only he could judge the complex of factors that controlled the case. Earth would almost certainly pass the buck back to him.

He was grateful for one thing, though : at least Leonards hadn't made an appeal to him on family grounds. That was cause for pride, and some relief. The fact that the boy was his nephew was something he'd have to blot rigorously from his mind until all this was over.

The signalman was busy in the back of the shack, bent over a crowded worktable. Devall waited a moment, cleared his throat gently, and said, " Mr. Rory ?"

Rory turned. " Yes, Colonel ?"

" Put through a subradio solido to Earth for me, immediately. To Director Thornton at the E-T Department. And yell for me when you've made contact."

It took twenty minutes for the subspace impulse to leap out across the light-years and find a receiver on Earth, ten minutes more for it to pass through the relay point and on to Rio. Devall returned to the shack to find the lambent green solido field in tune and waiting for him. He stepped through and discovered himself standing a few feet before the desk

of the E-T Department's head. Thornton's image was sharp, but the desk seemed to waver at the edges. Solid non-organic objects always came through poorly.

Quickly Devall reviewed the situation. Thornton sat patiently, unmoving, till the end of it ; hands knotted rigidly, lean face set, he might have been a statue. Finally he commented, " Unpleasant business."

" Quite."

" The alien is returning tomorrow, you say ? I'm afraid that doesn't give us much time to hold a staff meeting and explore the problem, Colonel Devall."

" I could probably delay him a few days."

Thornton's thin lips formed a tight bloodless line. After an instant he said, " No. Take whatever action you deem necessary, Colonel. If the psychological pattern of the race is such that unfortunate consequences would result if you refused to allow them to try your man, then you must certainly turn him over. If the step can be avoided, of course, avoid it. The man must be punished in any case."

The director smiled bleakly. " You're one of our best men, Colonel. I'm confident you'll arrive at an ultimately satisfactory resolution to this incident."

" Thank you, sir," Devall said, in a dry, uncertain voice. He nodded and stepped back out of field range. Thornton's image seemed to flicker ; Devall caught one last dismissing sentence, " Report back to me when the matter is settled," and then the field died.

He stood alone in the shabby communications shack, blinking out the sudden darkness that rolled in over him after the solidophone's intense light, and after a moment began to pick his way over the heaps of equipment and out into the compound.

It was as he had expected. Thornton was a good man, but he was a civilian appointee, subject to government control. He disliked making top-level decisions—particularly when a colonel a few hundred light-years away could be pitchforked into making them for him.

Well, he thought, *at least I notified Earth. The rest of the affair is in my hands.*

Significantly, there was a red sunset again that night.

He called a meeting of his top staff men for 0915 the following morning. Work at the base had all but suspended ;

the linguistics team was confined to the area, and Devall had ordered guards posted at all exits. Violence could rise unexpectedly among even the most placid of alien peoples; it was impossible to predict the moment when a racial circuit-breaker would cease to function and fierce hatred burst forth.

They listened in silence to the tapes of Leonards' statements, Meyer's comments, and the brief interview Devall had had with the five aliens. Devall punched the cut-off stud and glanced rapidly round the table at his men: two majors, a captain, and a quartet of lieutenants comprised his high staff, and one of the lieutenants was confined to quarters..

" That's the picture. The old high priest is showing up here about noon for my answer. I thought I'd toss the thing open for staff discussion first."

Major Dudley asked for the floor.

He was a short, stocky man with dark flashing eyes, and on several occasions in the past had been known to disagree violently with Devall on matters of procedure. Devall had picked him for four successive trips, despite this; the colonel believed in diversity of opinion and Dudley was a tremendously efficient organiser as well.

" Major ?"

" Sir, it doesn't seem to me that there's any question of what action to take. It's impossible to hand Leonards over to them for trial. It's—un-Earthlike !"

Devall frowned. " Would you elaborate, Major ?"

" Simple enough. We're the race who developed the space-drive—therefore, we're the galaxy's most advanced race. I think that goes without saying."

" It does not," Devall commented. " But go ahead."

Scowling, Dudley said, " Regardless of your opinion, *sir*—the aliens we've encountered so far have all regarded us as their obvious superiors. I don't think that can be denied—and I think it can only be attributed to the fact that we *are* their superiors. Well, if we give up Leonards for trial, it cheapens our position. It makes us look weak, suspicious. We—"

" You're suggesting, then," Devall broke in, " that we hold the position of overlords in the galaxy—and by yielding to our serfs, we may lose all control over them. Is this your belief, Major ?" Devall glared at him.

Dudley met the colonel's angry gaze calmly. " Basically, yes. Dammit, sir, I've tried to make you see this ever since

the Hegath expedition. We're not out here in the stars to collect butterflies and squirrels ! We—"

" Out of order," Devall snapped coldly. " This is a cultural mission as well as a military, Major—and so long as I'm in command it remains primarily cultural." He felt on the verge of losing his temper. He glanced away from Dudley and said, " Major Grey, could I hear from you ?"

Grey was the ship's astrogator ; on land his functions were to supervise stockade-construction and mapmaking. He was a wiry, unsmiling little man with razor-like cheekbones and ruddy skin. " I feel we have to be cautious, sir. Handing Leonards over would result in a tremendous loss of Terran prestige."

" *Loss* ?" Dudley burst in. " It would cripple us ! We'd never be able to hold our heads up honestly in the galaxy again if—"

Calmly Devall said, " Major Dudley, you've been ruled out of order. Leave this meeting, Major. I'll discuss a downward revision of your status with you later." Turning back to Grey without a further glance at Dudley, he said, " You don't believe, Major, that such an action would have a corresponding *favourable* effect on our prestige in the eyes of those worlds inclined to regard Earth uneasily ?"

" That's an extremely difficult thing to determine, sir."

" Very well, then." Devall rose. " Pursuant to regulations, I've brought this matter to the attention of authorities on Earth, and have also offered it for open discussion among my officers. Thanks for your time, gentlemen."

Captain Marechal said uncertainly, " Sir, won't there be any vote on our intended course of action ?"

Devall grinned coldly. " As commanding officer of this base, I'll take the sole responsibility upon myself for the decision in this particular matter. It may make things easier for all of us in the consequent event of a courtmartial inquiry."

It was the only way, he thought, as he waited tensely in his office for the high priest to arrive. The officers seemed firmly set against any conciliatory action, in the name of Terra's prestige. It was hardly fair for him to make them take responsibility for a decision that might be repugnant to them.

Too bad about Dudley, Devall mused. But insubordination of that sort was insufferable ; Dudley would have to be dropped

from the unit on their next trip out. If there is any next trip out for me, he added.

The intercom glowed gently. "Yes?"

"Alien delegation is here, sir," said the orderly.

"Don't send them in until I signal."

He strode to the window and looked out. The compound at first glance, seemed full of aliens. Actually there were only a dozen, he realised, but they were clad in full panoply, bright red and harsh green robes, carrying spears and ornamental swords. Half a dozen enlisted men were watching them nervously from a distance, their hands ready to fly to blasters instantly if necessary.

He weighed the choices one last time.

If he handed Leonards over the temporary anger of the aliens would be appeased—but perhaps at a long-range cost to Earth's prestige. Devall had long regarded himself as an essentially weak man with a superb instinct for camouflage—but would his yielding to the aliens imply to the universe that all Earth was weak?

On the other hand, he thought, suppose he refused to release Leonards to the aliens. Then he would be, in essence, bringing down the overlord's thumb, letting the universe know that Earthmen were responsible only to themselves and not to the peoples of the worlds they visited.

Either way, he realised, the standing of Earth in the galaxy's estimation would suffer. One way, they would look like appeasing weaklings; the other, like tyrants. He remembered a definition he had once read: *melodrama is the conflict of right and wrong, tragedy the conflict of right and right.* Both sides were right here. Whichever way he turned, there would be difficulties.

And there was an additional factor: the boy. What if they executed him? Family considerations seemed absurdly picayune at this moment, but still, to hand his own nephew over for possible execution by an alien people—

He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, sharpened the hard gaze of his eyes. A glance at the mirror over the bookcase told him he looked every inch the commanding officer; not a hint of the inner conflict showed through.

He depressed the intercom stud. "Send in the high priest. Let the rest of them wait outside."

The Priest looked impossibly tiny and wrinkled, a gnome of a man whose skin was fantastically gullied and mazed by extreme age. He wore a green turban over his hairless head —a mark of deep mourning, Devall knew.

The little alien bowed low, extending his pipestem arms behind his back at a sharp angle, indicating respect. When he straightened, his head craned back sharply, his small round eyes peering directly into Devall's.

" The jury has been selected ; the trial is ready to begin. Where is the boy ?"

Devall wished fleetingly he could have had the services of an interpreter for this last interview. But that was impossible; this was something he had to face alone, without help.

" The accused man is in his quarters," Devall said slowly. " First I want to ask some questions, old one."

" Ask."

" If I give you the boy to try, will there be any chance of his receiving the death penalty ?"

" It is conceivable."

Devall scowled. " Can't you be a little more definite than that ?"

" How can we know the verdict before the trial takes place?"

" Let that pass," Devall said, seeing he would get no concrete reply. " Where would you try him ?"

" Not far from here."

" Could I be present at the trial ?"

" No."

Devall had learned enough of Markin grammar by now to realise that the form of the negative the priest had employed meant literally, I-say-*no*-and-mean-what-I-say. Moistening his lips, he said, " Suppose I should refuse to turn Lieutenant Leonards over to you for trial ? How could I expect your people to react ?"

There was a long silence. Finally the old priest said, " Would you do such a thing ?"

" I'm speaking hypothetically." (Literally, the form was I-speak-on-a-cloud).

" It would be very bad. We would be unable to purify the sacred garden for many months. Also—" he added a sentence of unfamiliar words. Devall puzzled unsuccessfully over their meaning for nearly a minute.

" What does that mean ?" he asked at length. " Phrase it in different words."

" It is the name of a ritual. *I* would have to stand trial in the Earthman's place—and I would die," the priest said simply. " Then my successor would ask you all to go away."

The office seemed very quiet ; the only sounds Devall heard were the harsh breathing of the old priest and the off-key chirruping of the cricketlike insects that infested the grass-plot outside the window.

Appeasement, he wondered ? *Or the overlord's thumb* ?

Suddenly there seemed no doubt at all in his mind of what he should do, and he wondered how he could have hesitated.

" I hear and respect your wishes, old one," he said, in a ritual formula of renunciation Steber had taught him. " The boy is yours. But can I ask a favour ?"

" Ask."

" He didn't know he was offending your laws. He meant well ; he's sincerely sorry for what he did. He's in your hands, now—but I want to ask mercy on his behalf. He had no way of knowing he was offending."

" This will be seen at the trial," the old priest said coldly. " If there is to be mercy, mercy will be shown him. I make no promises."

"Very well," Devall said. He reached for a pad and scrawled an order remanding Lieutenant Paul Leonards to the aliens for trial, and signed it with his full name and title. " Here. Give this to the Earthman who let you in. He'll see to it that the boy is turned over to you."

" You are wise," the priest said. He bowed elaborately and made for the door.

" Just one moment," Devall said desperately, as the alien opened the door. " Another question."

" Ask," the priest said.

" You told me you'd take his place if I refused to let you have him. Well, how about another substitute ? Suppose—"

" *You* are not acceptable to us," the priest said as if reading Devall's mind, and left.

Five minutes later the colonel glanced out his window and saw the solemn procession of aliens passing through the exit-posts and out of the compound. In their midst, unprotesting, was Leonards. He didn't look back, and Devall was glad of it.

The Colonel stared at the row of books a long time, the frayed spools that had followed him around from world to

world, from grey Danelon to stormy Lurrin to bone-dry Korvel, and on to Hegarth and M'Qualt and the others, and now to warm blue-skied Markin. Shaking his head, he turned away and dropped heavily into the foam cradle behind his desk.

He snapped on the autotype with a savage gesture and dictated a full account of his actions, from the very start until his climatic decision, and smiled bitterly. There would be a certain time-lag, but before long the autotype facsimile machine in the E-T Department's basement would start clacking, there in Rio, and Thornton would know what Devall had done.

And Thornton would be stuck with it as Department policy henceforth.

Devall switched on the intercom and said, " I'm not to be disturbed under any circumstances. If there's anything urgent, have it sent to Major Grey ; he's acting head of the base until I countermand. And if any messages come from Earth let Grey have them too."

He wondered if they'd relieve him of his command immediately, or wait until he got back to Earth. The latter, more likely ; Thornton had some subtlety, if not much. But there was certain to be an inquiry, and a head would roll.

Devall shrugged and stretched back. *I did what was right,* he told himself firmly. *That's the one thing I can be sure of.*

But I hope I don't ever have to face my sister again.

He dozed, after a while, eyes half-open and slipping rapidly closed. Sleep came to him, and he welcomed it, for he was terribly tired.

He was awakened suddenly, by a loud outcry. A jubilant shout from a dozen throats at once, splitting the afternoon calm. Devall felt a moment's disorientation ; then, awakening rapidly, sprang to the window and peered out.

A figure—alone and on foot—was coming through the open gateway. He wore regulation uniform, but it was dripping wet, and torn in several places. His blonde hair was plastered to his scalp as if he had been swimming ; he looked fatigued.

Leonards !

The colonel was nearly halfway out the front door before he realized that his uniform was in improper order. He forced himself back, tidied his clothing, and with steely dignity strode out the door a second time.

Leonards stood surrounded by a smiling knot of men, enlisted men and officers alike. The boy was grinning wearily.

" Attention !" Devall barked, and immediately the area fell silent. He stepped forward.

Leonards raised one arm in an exhausted salute. There were some ugly bruises on him.

" I'm back, Colonel."

" I'm aware of that. You understand that I'll have to return you to the Marks for trial anyway, despite your no doubt daring escape ?"

The boy smiled and shook his head. " No, sir. You don't follow, sir. The trial's over. I've been tried and acquitted."

" What's that ?"

" It was trial by ordeal, Colonel. They prayed for half an hour or so, and then they dumped me in the lake down the road. The dead man's two brothers came after me and tried to drown me, but I outswam them and came up safely on the other side."

He shook his hair like a drenched cat, scattering a spray of water several feet in the air. " They nearly had me, once. But as soon as I got across the lake alive and undrowned, it proved to them I couldn't have meant any harm. So they declared me innocent, apologized, and turned me loose. They were still praying when I left them."

There seemed to be no bitterness in Leonards' attitude ; apparently, Devall thought, he had understood the reason for the decision to hand him over, and would not hold it against him now. That was gratifying.

" You'd better get to your quarters and dry off, Lieutenant. And then come to my office. I'd like to talk to you there."

" Yes, sir."

Devall spun sharply and headed back across the clearing to his office. He slammed the door behind him and switched on the autotype. The report to Earth would have to be amended now.

A moment or two after he had finished, the intercom glowed. He turned it on and heard Steber's voice saying, "Sir, the old priest is here. He wants to apologize to you for everything. He's wearing clothing of celebration, and he brought a peace-offering for us."

" Tell him I'll be right out," Devall said. " And call all the men together. Including Dudley. *Especially* Dudley. I want him to see this."

He slipped off his sweat-stained jacket and took a new one out. Surveying himself in the mirror, he nodded approvingly.

Well, well, he thought. *So the boy came through it safely. That's good.*

But he knew that the fate of Paul Leonards had been irrelevant all along, except on the sheerly personal level. It was the larger issue that counted.

For the first time, Earth had made a concrete demonstration of the equality-of-intelligent-life doctrine it had been preaching so long. He had shown that he respected the Markin laws in terms of what they were *to the Marks*, and he had won the affection of a race as a result. Having the boy return unharmed was a bonus.

But the precedent had been set. And the next time, perhaps, on some other world, the outcome might not be so pleasant. Some cultures had pretty nasty ways of putting criminals to death.

He realized that the burden the Earth exploration teams carried now had become many times heavier—that now, Earthmen would be subject to the laws of the planets who hosted them, and no more unwitting botanical excursions into sacred gardens could be tolerated. But it was for the ultimate good, he thought. We've shown them that we're not overlords, and that most of us don't want to be overlords. And now the thumb comes down on *us*.

He opened the door and stepped out. The men had gathered, and the old priest knelt abjectly at the foot of the steps, bearing some sort of enamelled box as his offering. Devall smiled and returned the bow, and lifted the old alien gently to his feet.

We'll have to be on our best behaviour from now on, he thought. *We'll really have to watch our steps. But it'll be worth it.*

Robert Silverberg

Survey

Thank you for your overwhelming response to our December and January 'Survey' questionnaires, final statistics of which will be published as soon as possible. And—there will be plenty of surprises !

THE TOWERS OF SAN AMPA

By Brian W. Aldiss

If we are to believe American science fiction writers the exploration of the galaxy will be conducted by hard-bitten technologically-minded Americans to the exclusion of any other race on Earth. Introducing a 'cold war' factor into his story, Brian Aldiss shows how they might never get into galactic space at all—or any other nation either.

The hero was back from Venus and his rabbit shooting. The last two hundred miles of the twenty million mile return journey were the worst. The train from Los Angeles arrived at San Ampa five hours late. And then Clay Marshall had to walk the last two miles to the Town; the old atomic bus running between San Ampa and the Town had discontinued since Clay was last home, five years ago. The bus station had been taken over by the People's Police.

It was raining. Clay squelched along in mud, the big pack on his back standing up like a cliff-face down which water cascaded onto his head. He was thirty-two, but long years of under nourishment and his recent illness made him look older. His long face was lined, his hair clung moss-like to his skull. Inside the skull was only one clear thought: I've got to get home—and see Cath.

The Town had once been San Ampa, long before the adjoining valve works had come along and unsurped the name.

As the works grew and grew, the Town deteriorated. When Clay plodded into it, a river of mud ran down the main street; several buildings had collapsed from untended age ; the belfry on the church sagged dangerously. It looked like a medieval Japanese village, instead of an American town in nineteen ninety-nine.

Clay knocked at his father's door and went in. He shucked off some of his wet things, coughing almost automatically, and padded into the living room. As he had expected, his father, Old Marshall, Mayor of the Town, lay on the sofa in his stockinged feet, just letting time pass.

" Clay, boy ! Well, if the government haven't sent you back to us all in one piece, Heaven be praised !" he exclaimed, getting up, hobbling forward, and embracing his son. "Throw that floor rug round your shoulders, and come and sit down and tell me what you've been doing on Venus. I'll put the oven on for a bit of heat. Your Mother and me wasn't expecting you home for a few months yet."

" I should have sent you a cable from L.A. to warn you I was coming," Clay said, " but I figured it would cost a half month's pay."

" Sure would have—only they cut the cabling services a couple of years back," Old Marshall said. " It released over a million girls to go to armaments. Well, what you been doing ?"

" Well, father," Clay said cautiously, looking at his boots, " I never completed my six years' Venusian tour because—I guess I'll have to tell you some time—I've been . . . ill."

The old man sat down, massaging his bad hand with his good one.

" Not . . . you've not got Venusian T.B. ?" he asked.

" I had just a touch of it," Clay said guardedly. " I wasn't too bad, father—the doctors said they caught it in time, or it would have been a whole lot worse. They gave me proper treatment and everything."

" That's bad, my boy." As he looked at Clay, Old's eye caught the battered old clockwork alarm clock on the shelf. " Just a minute, it's time for a news bulletin. You must tell me more in a minute. Must just catch the news. That's very bad about you . . ."

He switched on a TV set by the side of the sofa, fidgetting while it warmed. The picture that formed was small and faint

"Tube blew last spring. Unfortunately, we are not insured," Marshall said, twiddling. A voice responded, emanating cheer, the oleomargarined voice of a station announcer.

". . . According to Moscow," it said, " where Soviet architects have just announced the completion of their two kilometre high skyscraper on Red Square. This is now the highest building in the world. A spokesman in New York said today that he doubted whether the building was safe or even habitable. Western architects agree that this in no way proves that Soviet construction methods are in any way superior to ours. In fact, at a special meeting in Washington this afternoon—and this will be welcome news to all our listeners—it has been decided to build a mile and a half high building. This will be considerably higher than the Russian structure ; work on the foundations should be started before the New Century.

" In the third round of the Mechanised Sports—"

" Good for us !" Marshall declared, cutting the announcer off. " Can't let these Russians get ahead of us—America would never live it down. They're terrible braggers, you know."

" We ran up against some of them on Venus," Clay said. " They don't seem such bad fellers. They got drunk like the rest of us."

" They may be okay individually," Old Marshall admitted in a low voice, " but you don't want to go saying things like that round here, or you'll find yourself in trouble. The People's Police can run a man in for dangerous chatter."

Silence fell between them. It seemed funny that after five years neither of them should have anything to say. He wanted to ask his father about Cath, but wariness prevented him. All the drab years on Venus, he had thought of Cath, and the way they had planned to marry when he saved enough money to buy himself out of the poverty of the Town. Now that he was back, he realised she would be like a stranger to him.

" Has mother still got her job ?" Clay asked at last.

" Yes, down on Parson's farm. She'll be in soon. She'll be glad to see you," Old said. " It'll be a surprise . . ."

Clay stood looking out of the dirty window. The rain was tapering off with evening. Distantly, beyond the sagging roofs of the Town, he could see the towers of San Ampa, where lights already burned. It was a walled city. More, it was a feudal society. It existed merely for valves. Modern civiliza-

tion—or the technological sparring match between the Powers which was still called civilization—demanded valves, not only on Earth, but on the struggling outposts of the other planets : a myriad valves for air pumps, hydrazine pumps, water pumps, valves for this and valves for that . . . if you lived anywhere near San Ampa, you could not but think that valves were the key to civilization.

" I have saved my eight hundred dollars, father," Clay said suddenly.

" You did ? You managed it ?" Old Marshall exclaimed. He stood up. For the first time, real pleasure filled his voice. He patted Clay's shoulder with his one sound hand ; the other had been crushed in a reaper when he was a boy.

" When you told me you'd had V.T.B., I thought you'd have had to waste your savings on sanatoria and the like. I was wondering how we was going to keep you. There's only farming doing in the Town now, and precious little of that—and you don't know any farming. But you'll be okay if you've got the money. You can get into San Ampa now."

" I managed to pinch and scrape, and I've just got the eight hundred," Clay said proudly, without revealing how desperate the pinching and scraping had been.

" Well, that's fine, son ! I always hoped to see you buy your way into San Ampa. You'll be set for life there. And they say their valves are *twice* as good as anything the Russians can do."

They looked into each other's eyes until Clay turned away. Somehow he couldn't face his old man any longer ; it was terrible to find him so shrunken in body and mind. At the moment you first find your father is only an old bore, you really begin to hate yourself.

Sure, Clay could now buy his way into San Ampa. That was what they had planned, all the while he was on Venus. For eight hundred dollars, you could purchase basic training in the valve plant. From then on, you hadn't a worry. The firm cared for you ; it housed, clothed and fed you. It was more than a firm—it was a society. It doctored you, it married you, it delivered your babies. In time, it buried you.

When small firms were amalgamating with big, during the hard times of the sixties, the social amenities for workers' movement was already well under way. Then the rivalry with the Russians had begun in real earnest ; as the internal economy of the country was cut to the bone, the only way of securing a decent livelihood was by joining one of the big

combines. The competition to do so was becoming tougher all the time. Nowadays, you had to pay through the nose to get a job.

Suke, Clay's mother, arrived tired from her labours at Parson's farm, but threw her arms enthusiastically round her son. She had not aged as much as her husband ; outdoor work kept her young.

" It's grand to see you again, Clay !" she exclaimed. " If we'd known you were coming, we could have got in some food. Still, there's big potatoes ; I can bake them up, and I've a pat of butter and some cheese to serve them with—a bit of surplus over and above what the government demand from the farm. For this special occasion, we must have ourselves a spread. How did you eat on Venus ?"

He could not remember his mother ever talking of much but food. Her whole life was dedicated to scraping together enough to eat for the next meal. Clay walked about talking to her, as she busied herself at the oven. Old Marshall, dangling the broken hand that had barred him from a job at San Ampa, laid the table and listened, padding round spiritlessly in his socks.

" We had quite a bit of meat on Venus," he said. " Neorabbit meat, of course . . . Nothing else but !"

He told them of all the clever things man had been doing on Venus, but not of how he had suffered. Venus had been hell for him ; Clay's had been the humblest, wretchedest of jobs—neorabbit exterminating in Venus's desolate, mountainous outback.

In the technological race between the two great powers, Venus had soon been reached. That had been in the late sixties. The neorabbit trouble had come soon after.

" *There* was an example of scientific ingenuity," Clay said, without admiration in his voice. " Several batches of rabbits were mutated in different ways, and set in outdoor runs to see which batch was best adapted to exist in the hard conditions of Venus. Batch One was so well adapted it got out of the run in the night and beat it. With no natural enemies about, they were multiplying over the face of the planet in no time. You just can't stop rabbits."

" But the Venusian military bases were required to be self-supporting," Old Marshall objected, recalling something he had heard in a newscast. " If the rabbits—these neorabbits—

were wanted for meat supplies, surely this multiplication was just what was needed ?"

" They were meant to be kept under control," Clay said. " If they were a success, sheep were to be introduced next. But the neorabbits were eating up all the grass the sheep needed. And they had enough sense not to stay near us. In ten years, they were a menace. Within twenty, they nearly caused the evacuation of the planet—but of course while the Russians hung on to their bases, *we* hung on. Nobody on Earth was told how bad things were.

" The strain of fox they introduced did a lot to cope with the problem, till the foxes grew fat and lazy on an easy diet. So next step was, the authorities spread a disease called myxomatosis, which the British had used to cope with their rabbit problems, earlier on in the century. The neorabbits died by the thousand, blind and sick. That didn't leave anything for the foxes to eat. When the foxes were starving, they came down in packs like wolves, and killed the sheep. That brought another crisis.

" Later, the surviving neorabbits bred immune to myxomatosis, and increased with new rapidity. So Venusian T.B. —V.T.B.—was developed to cope with both rabbits and foxes. The virus was so successful, it mutated. Men started going down with it too. Emergency hospitals were packed. Nothing daunted, our scientists found a serum to beat the virus ; it's efficient with most people—at least it prevented a wholesale plague."

" It all sounds terrible !" Suke said, pulling the baked potatoes deftly from the oven.

" The rabbits survive even V.T.B.," Clay said. " So I was on the mountain patrols, shooting them down. Sometimes I'd get two hundred a day. They were all eaten—after being irradiated."

" Talk no more about meat," Old Marshall growled, " or we'll not enjoy our spuds. Still, it does go to show how we've got enough ingenuity to get over any problem. It's a wonderful age, no doubt . . ."

Over the humble meal, as they talked in desultory fashion, Clay told his mother how he had saved enough money to buy his entry to San Ampa.

" I'm glad, Clay ; I didn't dare ask," Suke said. " It means you'll be able to live in comfort, as far as anyone does. Outside

the combines, on the land, in the old towns, things are bad. worse than when you went away. I know we've got to keep up with the Soviet ; of course we have, but meanwhile your father and I haven't enough money to buy him the new boots he needs. Not that any new boots are available if we had the dough. Still, it'll be better when you're provided for, Clay—and now you'll be able to marry Cath."

" If she'll still have me," Clay said embarrassedly ; he did not like to think others were taking his proposed marriage to Cath for granted.

" Of *course* she'll have you," Suke said warmly. " What sensible girl wouldn't, with a chance to live inside San Ampa and have a fairly full stomach all her days ?"

" Maybe," Clay said. He did not say he wanted Cath to see more than a meal ticket in him. Love was out of fashion these days ; there was a cold war on, and the watchword was Expediency. All the same . . . Clay was still thinking of Cath when she came in after the meal.

" Somebody told me they saw you coming down the street," she said. " I wouldn't believe till I saw you myself, and here you are !"

They held hands, not kissing with the elder folk present. She had run out of lipstick ; she wore woollen stockings and a peasant scarf over her head. ' She *is* a peasant,' thought Clay —' just as I am.' Who was he to complain that she was pale, tired, not as pretty as she had been ? The last five years had done him little good either.

Suddenly something like a revolution was swelling in his breast. He hated time, necessity, cold, weariness—everything in life that printed that look on Cath's face. By the strength of his hatred, he knew he still loved. He burst into angry coughing.

Next day, Clay Marshall tramped up to San Ampa and filed his application for a job.

It was a different world from the Town. Around the square acres of factory, with their high atomic ' chimneys ' and towers, flower beds had been laid out. Beyond the beds lay the shopping centres, the church, the cinemas, the rows and rows of houses and bungalows where the workers lived, with proper facilities inside them and proper roads between them. Yet it was no utopia. The flower beds bore only weeds, the buildings

needed paint, one of the cinemas was closed, the shops offered little but junk.

And the guards were everywhere, plant guards and members of the People's Police in their neat, black uniforms.

" There's a trade recession at present," the clerk at the little window told Clay. " We're laying people off. We'll write you when we want you."

" How long'll that be ?"

" Can't tell with this present war scare on."

" There's always a war scare on."

" I tell you we'll write you, bud," the clerk said, turning away.

Things were bad : they wouldn't even take his money. There was nothing to do but go back to the Town.

" Don't worry, Clay," Cath said next day, and the day after, and the day after that. She had taken possession of him, and in his new-found aimlessness, Clay let her have her way. She had a job one day a week on Parson's farm, where Suke also worked, checking the pullets' eggs into the deep-freeze containers. A government lorry with an armed guard drove up every Thursday and collected the containers, checking to see that Parson was keeping above the statutory minimum of productivity. Clay wandered down to watch the operation, giving the girl a hand to load the containers after the check-up was carried through.

At last the lorry's steel doors were secured. They watched it drive off with its load.

" We might as well be living in Russia," Cath said wearily.

He seized her arm, regarding her with anger.

" Don't say a thing like that, even to me," he said. " For one thing, it ain't true, and for another, it's a dangerous thing to say. Conditions aren't too bad. They could always be worse. Didn't you hear the news this morning about the new Project Zero on Pluto ? Why Cath, your eggs may be going right out out there to feed those boys !"

" That makes you proud ?" she asked. " It just makes me hungry."

Cath was difficult to understand ; maybe it was because her health was low. Clay found her difficult to deal with—she was headstrong, he was unsure of himself. There would be time to sort all that out later, when Clay had got her into San Ampa. The rule there was that if an employee married after he had been taken on the establishment, he was given allowances for

wife, forthcoming children, etc. If they were careful, there would be enough over to send out food to their parents occasionally. Everything would be alright, Clay told himself, trying not to think ahead. Two days later, Cath went down with V.T.B.

They fixed her up on a couch as best they could. Giam Maccara, the horse doctor, came to see her, took a slide of her blood and compared it with a little picture in his big book. Clay and Mora, Cath's mother, stood apprehensively by the girl's bedside, waiting.

" Well," Clay said at last. " Say something, man."

" Sure, it's venusian tuberculosis, okay and no mistake," the old man said, looking up and screwing his eyes at Cath. " Where you pick this up, my girl ?"

" It's obvious *where*," Clay answered bitterly. " She's got it from me, of course. I'm a carrier. God, I could shoot myself !"

" No good you to carry on," Maccara said. " Trouble with this girl, she's not got enough vitamin in her to make her resist. I tell you nothing has no goodness in today—milk, eggs, meat, vegetable, whatever. With present government policy nothing is put back in the land. Soon we all starve."

" But what can we do for Cath ?" Mora asked.

" Maybe I'll be better if I rest up a while, mother," Cath said. She looked pale and wan, lying on the parlour couch, yet paradoxically something of her good looks had come back to her.

" Resting up is good enough only if you got also the good diet," the horse doctor said bluntly. " Here you don't have that."

Silence fell while they digested his remark. They did not look at each other. They stared at the senseless things in the room, the poor furniture, the peeling walls, the floor, at anything which could endure without sensation.

" There is a serum . . ." Clay said hoarsely. " 925, they call it."

" 952," corrected Maccara. " Sure. Half a dozen shots of 952 will cure Cath."

Again silence, in which Cath whimpered once. They all knew the rest of the tale, but they had to hear it. It was like acting parts they knew by heart, but hated to perform.

" You can get this stuff to inject into Cath ?" Mora asked reluctantly.

" They got it in San Ampa," Maccara said. " Which ain't the same to say *I* can get it."

" You mean it costs money," Clay stated.

The horse doctor slowly nodded his head.

" How much money ?" Clay whispered.

Maccara spread his thin hands.

" To buy enough to be enough, three hundred dollars," he said.

Mora was not the weeping kind. Her face just went mottled like the wall behind her. "We've not got that kind of money, Giam," she told the old man ; " That's a terrible pile of money in the Town." And fight against it though she did, her gaze slewed round to Clay and she looked imploringly at him. Licking his lips, Clay pretended not to notice.

" Maybe—maybe Parson'll allow us a few eggs off quota, or something," he said. " Help Cath get well . . ."

They all stood there like frozen. Blast them, thought Clay, they know about my eight hundred dollars ; the whole Town'll know . . .

Old Maccara finally broke the tableau by taking up his bag and moving towards the door.

" Keep the girl in bed resting, anyway, Mora," he said heavily, buttoning up his jacket. " Tomorrow I come and see her again, maybe bring her some stew if I can get. You, Cath, girl, don't worry and we all say a prayer for you tomorrow in church."

He went out. Now that Clay wanted the women to look at him, they would not.

" He could be wrong, old Giam," Cath said, attempting cheerfulness. " I've heard Mrs. Parson say he's best on pigs."

The tension within him was more than Clay could stand. With a muttered word of farewell, he ran into the street. Giam Maccara was making his way slowly along, picking the driest bits of the road ; Clay soon caught him up.

" Hey, Mr. Maccara, come on round to my place," he said. " I'll give you that three hundred dollars to buy the injections. I've got it—you've got to make Cath right again."

The old man peered up at him from under his brows, a searching look.

"Is that part of the money you was hoping to get into San Ampa with it?" he asked.

"Never mind about that. I've got it, that's what counts. I want you to take it right now, before I change my mind. Come on!"

Clay did not want to think. He knew this would finish him. He had saved only the bare eight hundred, and it had taken a crooked card game to make up that amount. With only five hundred dollars, the combine would not look at him. Still, they were apparently not interested in him with eight hundred. And since he did not doubt he had passed on his old infection to Cath, it was up to him to right the wrong if he could.

Taking the old doctor's arm, Clay hustled him along to his father's house. Suke met them at the door, her face flushed with excitement.

"Did you see the motor bike, Clay?" she asked. "A messenger's just been from San Ampa. You've got to go and see them. They have a new government contract and will require more men shortly. If you go now and buy your entry you will be taken for basic training in four weeks' time."

She stopped and stared at him. Clay's face turned yellow as mud. He looked blankly from her to Maccara. When she shook his arm, he still could not find his voice.

"Well, now this does not change the fact about your girl being sick in any way," Maccara said, not without a hint of hardness in his voice.

"Of course not," Clay said. "Wait here; I'll get the money."

"What's all this about money?" Suke cried. But Clay pushed past her and went upstairs to fetch his savings, leaving Maccara to explain the situation.

Pulling the green canvas body-belt out from under his old flock mattress, Clay unbuttoned it and counted out three hundred dollars. Taking it downstairs made him almost physically sick. He was giving his future away; there was no sort of a living to be made in the Town; he could not face another five years on Venus—one more mouthful of neorabbit would make him vomit. At the bottom of the stairs he had an idea.

"Mr. Maccara!" he called, hurrying over to the old man, who was now talking voluably to Suke and Old. "If I join the San Ampa combine in four weeks' time, two weeks later I could marry Cath. Then she could have treatment—proper treat-

ment in their hospital—straight away. It would be all right, wouldn't it, for her just to hang on for six weeks ?"

" It all depends what you want to marry, a live girl or a corpse," the horse doctor said. " I tell you, Cathy has a frail constitution. Why we all ain't dead on the lousy food I can't imagine ! She needs the first shot of 952 right now !"

If only I was sure whether I really loved her or not, Clay thought, or whether she really loved me ; she's a stranger to me. But he had to go through with it now. He would be too ashamed not to.

" In that case—" he began.

" Don't give him the money, Clay !" Cath called. She came running down the street, her hair wild, Mora in pursuit, shouting to her daughter to come back. Cath had guessed what was in Clay's mind, jumping from her bed to come to him. Now, as she flung herself into his arms, she nearly bowled him over. She clung to him, gasping and coughing.

" Don't give him the money, darling !" she panted. " It's not worth it. I'm not worth it. You're throwing your life away ! I'll get better, you'll see. And even if I don't, I can't let you do this ! I love you so much . . . I'd rather die . . ."

At the unexpected excitement, several people had gathered, having nothing better to do than listen. A dozen people were there to hear what Cath said. For Clay, they all vanished as he looked down into her eyes—there he unmistakeably read the truth, and for a moment it left him stone cold alone in the universe.

Cath was acting !

She had come because she was not sure of him. She was afraid he would change his mind and not pay out for her. She did not want to die. By making this selfless show of heroism in public, she virtually guaranteed he would give Maccara the money.

God, but she had fixed him neatly !

Clay looked round at the waiting faces, his mother, his father, Cath's mother, the people who lived hopelessly in the Town. Every gullible face bore the same message : ' You can't let her down, Clay ; she's a great little woman !'

When he thrust the money wordlessly out at Maccara, the simple ragged crowd gave him a cheer.

The next day was Sunday. Clay sat by Cath's couch. Everyone else was down at the church. The people of the

Town did a lot of praying in adversity ; if times had been better, they would have been out mowing the lawn now. Before the service, Maccara had called to give the girl her first injection of 952. She was feeling better now, and talkative.

" We can leave this dump when I'm better, Clay," she said. " After all you've still got five hundred dollars . . . Maybe we'd do better in L.A. or 'Frisco. A hobo was telling me a little while ago they're building a new polymer combine at 'Frisco. They might take you on there for five hundred, as it's new and they'd be wanting men badly. For gosh sakes, half a grand should be enough to satisfy anyone, shouldn't it ?"

It's all you care for about me, you little bitch, he thought. You've no real love for me. Aloud he said, " I shouldn't mind getting away from here. Every day I look over the fields and see the towers of Ampa, and I hate it. The bigger that place grows, the worse the Town gets. This dump was prosperous before the valve combine moved in ; now it is just going down and down. San Ampa is our enemy."

" Yet you want to get there !" she said. " That's silly talk."

" If you can't lick 'em, join 'em," he replied bitterly.

" The real enemy isn't San Ampa," Cath said, after a pause. It was as if she had made up her mind to tell him something.

" I know. It's the Russians," he said. " But that doesn't stop me disliking San Ampa."

" I didn't mean the Russians, Clay," she said, a little breathlessly. " Just think what the world's like now. The Russians have done nothing against us. Yet Nevada's a strontium desert—because one of our experiments went wrong. There isn't a fish alive in the Pacific, thanks to the British tests of cobalt missiles. Amsterdam, one of Europe's great capitals, is a ruin after their remote-controlled nuclear submarine castrophe. Think of the thousands of lives lost in the eighties when the freak meteor showers penetrated the domes of Luna City. Look at the awful business you've told me about on Venus ! Isn't that symbolic of the hopeless muddle going on everywhere ? Soon we'll have the whole solar system in ruins."

Clay was staring at her pale face almost in excitement now. Outside, he could hear, the people were returning from church, but he took no notice.

" You may be right in a way, Cath," he said. " But we've got to keep up with the Russians."

" Everyone says that !" she exclaimed disgustedly. " *Why* have we got to keep up with them ? Why can't they bust their economy wide open on their own ? Wouldn't it be a better way of ' keeping up with them,' as you call it, to concentrate on agriculture instead of space ships, to feed the people ?"

She broke off, lapsing into a fit of coughing, almost as if to emphasise the point.

Clay stood up, knotting his hands behind his back. He loathed and feared all her cleverness—yet his pity for her suddenly rose in a tide, almost drowning him.

" You shouldn't be talking this way, Cath," he managed to say. " I warned you before. It's treason these days to speak out against the government, which I presume you're doing."

She glanced at him contemptuously.

" You *presume* !" she exclaimed. "Of course I'm speaking against the government—someone's got to, and everybody seems so stupid. America's being turned into one vast Skid Row, a Tobacco Road. Even in the combines, it's far from a paradise—it only seems to be so from this mudflat. Surely to God you can see it's crazy ? Where's it going to end ? I'd shoot every single congressman in the country, if I had my—"

The door burst open, and Cath fell abruptly silent. Judging by the unease on her face, she thought she had gone too far.

But the people who came surging into the room had nothing but love on their countenances. There were ten of them ; eagerly, they flocked round the couch on which Cath lay and Clay now sat, clumsy excitement in their movements. All of them were familiar : all had been present at Cath's little performance the day before, Suke, Old, Giam, Maccara, Mora, and the others.

Suke, as the most forceful character present, pressed herself to the front and began to speak.

" We've come here with a little surprise for you two young folk," she said. " It's kind of difficult to put this to you—I'm more of a cooking woman than a speaking one—but we were all powerful moved by the uh, demonstration of love you couple gave off yesterday. We can't think to see you two hanging round the Town like the rest of us, doing no good. We'd like to see you lovebirds up in San Ampa like you intended. Accordingly, us ten have been round to the Local Office."

She paused, perhaps for dramatic effect, perhaps to draw breath.

" We'd like to know," she continued, " that though it goes against our religion, us ten have taken advantage of the government offer, and sworn our bodies to the State after death, to be pounded up to make phosphates and chemicals and suchlike. In consideration of which, each of us was paid thirty dollars in advance of demise. Lumped together, that makes three hundred dollars, which we now give you with our love, so's you can still get into the combine, and live your days with full bellies."

Cath gave a small shriek, putting her hand over her mouth. Clay just sat there. At last he stood up, legs wobbling.

" It's wonderful, mother and neighbours all," he said, his voice little more than a whisper, " wonderful of you, everyone, but the sacrifice won't be necessary. I can't marry a girl like Cath—she's a traitor to the country. She talks sedition. There's been a member of the People's Police here listening to what she was just saying . . ."

He pointed. They turned to see the man in the black uniform step from the adjoining room. By the strangled gasp which went up, he might have been a ghost.

" The girl Cath is charged with treason," he said, producing handcuffs, " in that she spread revolutionary ideas and tried to talk her fiance into shooting members of the government."

They watched dumbly, jostling like sheep, as he thrust his way through them. He pushed Clay, the man who had fetched him secretly from San Ampa, to one side, and hauled Cath off the couch. He led her to the door, out of it, away, out of sight. Nobody said a word. Cath's screams and protests still rang in their ears.

At last Old Marshall moved like a lead man. Padding in his socks over to his son, he patted him on the back.

" You could never have married a woman like that, Clay," he said. " I'll say you've done a very brave and patriotic act!"

And at that, Clay broke down and cried.

Brian W. Aldiss

Here is another variation of the faithful servant theme (humanoid version) and once again the intriguing question of just where the dividing line between organic and inorganic chemistry falls.

FRIDAY

By John Kippax

Half reclining in the padded cradles, Bailey and Kromm watched the dials as the scoutship descended the last few feet onto the rocky surface of the red-brown plateau on Krodos seven. Tense, grim-faced, they watched and waited, knowing that they could still be killed if the ship didn't make contact correctly. And they had had enough scares to last them any number of periods.

There was a jolt, and four lights changed colour ; Bailey, the senior by a few months, cut a row of switches with anxious flicks of his longer fingers ; he lay back with a gasp of relief, and the shine of sweat was upon his thin, ascetic features.

Kromm, thickset and not by any means so ready to show his feelings, turned his head and favoured his companion with a slow grin. " We made it."

Bailey did not smile. " Just. And when I get back to the *Oppie* someone is going to pay for this. Dearly !"

Kromm shuffled round in his cradle, and dug in his pockets for a cigarette ; on Bailey's refusal of the pack, Kromm lit one for himself with remarkably steady fingers. " You think it was simply a case of lack of fuel ?"

Bailey looked angry. " What else ? We come into manoeuvre four, going behind first down to the surface, and I have to cut in reserve to get us down. And then we nearly run out of what's left in the reserve ! There's an engineer

officer named Ramirez who's going to be for the high jump the very minute we get back !" Bailey got up, his face still set, and took one stride which brought him to a port. " It looks a nice world," he said. " Earth, fifty million years ago." He turned to where Kromm lay puffing his cigarette. " Come on, Kurt. Get on the radio and let 'em know what happened to us."

Kromm rolled off the cradle and into the radio chair. He switched on, and a crackle of static came from the little speaker on the top of the compact kit. Everything, with the possible exception of Kromm himself, was compact. This two-man vessel was one of four from the great *Oppenheimer*, now exploring the Krodos system.

Bailey waited, drumming, irritable. Kromm knew that Bailey's professional pride had been hurt by the mishap. The taller man muttered, " Nothing yet. Why ?"

Kromm said, " I don't know."

" Your call sign going out ?"

" Listen." Kromm pressed a small switch, and from it came the recorded call sign, being repeated over and over.

" But is it going out ?"

Kromm sighed patiently. " All right, I'll call 'em direct, with my own sweet voice." He unclipped a mike arm and lowered it to his mouth. " X-2 calling *Oppenheimer*, X-2 calling *Oppenheimer*. Five three seven, six two one, four seven eight. Krodos seven, stranded Krodos seven—" he went through it again, and then listened. Only the puttering static in the speaker answered him. His round face was serious. He did it again, and waited.

" Nothing," said Bailey. He stared at the little speaker, still chattering star talk. " This gear in working order ?"

" Yes," said Kromm, a shade sharply. " No artificer sees to this. I'm responsible for it. You want me to strip it down ?"

Bailey was staring out of the port again. " Let's eat," he said, " and then I'll give you a hand with it."

Three hours later, they knew that there was nothing wrong with the radio. Kromm left the call-sign going out, and joined Bailey as he looked over the air and humidity tests.

Bailey said, " It's exactly as per almanac. As near Earth as you'd find. The chief ought to be pleased."

" Will he ever get the chance ?" asked Kromm. " Nobody knows we're here. Within a week, we shall have to be out in

that green and pleasant valley below us, catching our own food. Once I was supposed to be interested in the preliminary survey of Krodos seven ; now I'm just a guy who wants to know where his twenty-second meal is coming from. Give me that almanac."

Bailey passed the bulky volume to him, and the other thumbed through it. " Now," he murmured, " let's see if I can remember what half these signs are—"

" Green star," Bailey reminded him, " means that the information is five hundred years old."

Kromm stared. " That's right ; so it does. Some of those early men came a long way out, didn't they ?" He consulted the almanac again, flipping back and forth as he consulted the list of signs. " Twenty-five hour day—negligible axial tilt—two moons—" he ran a stubby thumb to the end of the double line of symbols. " Four letter I's. Underlined." His face changed. " Lord ! Wallace was saying something about—" He found what the symbol meant. He lowered the book and looked blankly at Bailey.

" What's the matter ?" asked Bailey.

" That's the ionosphere rating," said Kromm, hollowly.

" Well ?"

" It's very high ; in fact, that's why we can't get through to the *Oppie*. The ionosphere of this planet is so thick that radio signals—from our gear at any rate—can't get through."

Bailey said, " Then we're stranded."

It was little compensation that their immediate surroundings on Krodos seven were pleasant. A warm yellow sun shone down upon the brown rock of the plateau ; on either side of the ridge were valleys covered with familiar-looking vegetation; there was the sound of streams, and at the bottom of the gentlest slope down from the plateau was a small lake with a broad, sandy beach.

They walked along the beach to where a stream ran into the lake through a gurgling channel. They wore light coveralls and each had a pistol at his hip. Bailey didn't talk much, and Kromm thought that it was because the tall man was blaming his companion for their plight ; though, even if he had seen that note about the thick ionosphere beforehand, what could he have done about it ? Installed a more powerful radio ? Impossible ; scoutships such as theirs were cram-full.

Kromm sat down on a brown rock and watched the stream; then he raised his eyes to where the ship stood, useless. " It's almost like home," he said.

" Uh," said Bailey.

" Still thinking of what you'll do to the tiffies when you get back ?"

" Yes."

" *If* you get back."

Bailey said, " They'll come looking for us."

" Sure they will ; question is, how soon ? We might be the last planet of five they come down to."

" Uh."

" Still it could have been a lot worse ; we could have been stuck on an ice world, in pressure suits." He frowned at a small lizard with spatulate feet ; the creature's jewel eye stared him out. " Shall we start with a sample of the water ?"

Bailey nodded. Kromm took a flask of it. Then they walked the length of the beach. When it began to curve away from the rocky base of the plateau, they walked through sparse undergrowth.

Bailey stopped by the side of a second stream. " Look," he said quietly. " Look at the sides of this, as it comes down the slope."

Kromm saw what he meant. " The almanac said, ' no humanoid inhabitants.' "

" What made that channel as straight as that ?"

" Right." Kromm unsnapped the flap of his holster. Then he went upstream, where the water rushed and spun in its rapid descent through its channel. Bailey came up with him. Kromm said, " It's very fast ; it might just be possible that it's natural." He looked up the rocky slope. " There's almost a waterfall near the top. Shall we go up, or would you sooner wait and see what creatures come to drink ?"

" Let's go up," said Bailey.

They started upslope, the brown rocks affording plenty of footholds. They kept close to the rushing stream, but saw no more evidence of human or humanoid handiwork.

Kromm grunted as he heaved himself up, " Even if that almanac isn't accurate, it's still probably right about ' no humanoids.' Hello, what's this ?"

' This ' was a narrow shelf which ran along the face of the slope, invisible from below and now revealed as a pathway upon which a man could walk easily.

Bailey helped Kromm up ; then he said, " Don't move. Just look at this shelf. Look at the scratches and marks on the rock."

" Yes !" breathed Kromm. " Something has ; something pretty big." He took out his pistol. " Looks as though there might be a few rugged animals in these parts." He made as though to take a step forward, but Bailey stopped him.

" Just a minute. Look at the marks, the way they go. Long scratch, and then a shorter scratch about a yard in front and two feet to the left of the first one. Then it's repeated, almost without variation." He trod noiselessly forward, to where the shelf began to turn.

Kromm followed Bailey around the bend. " Don't know what to make of it," he muttered. " It's an animal, but what—"

He bumped into Bailey's back. Bailey said, in a low voice, " Whatever sort of animal it is, there's its lair."

The cave mouth was about eight feet by six, and roughly oval. They stood close, watching. Bailey's voice was a shade triumphant. " What sort of an animal do you know," he asked, " that bothers to shape up the sides of its dwelling so that they look like that ? That leaves tool marks that you can see from here ?"

Kromm tightened his lips and shook his head. He prodded Bailey in the back. " Go on," he said, " I'm right behind you."

They made no sound as they crept along the ledge to the entrance of the cave. They could see the marks of tools on the weathered side of the entrance ; the interior was dark.

Kromm picked up a chip of rock, and tossed it inside ; they both had pistols ready. The chip made a tiny clatter, and then all was silent again.

Bailey switched on his torch ; Kromm followed suit. Bailey jerked his head, and they went in, matching their steps, swinging their torches slowly.

They saw it at the same moment. A small steel table was on the floor of the cave, and there was also a bed, with the tattered remnants of bedding. The two men hardly noticed the other pieces of furniture ; their attention was rivetted upon the table, and its chair, for slumped over the table was a human skeleton.

Coming close, they examined the remains. Human, certainly, and old, because the bones where white and clean.

"Who was he?" whispered Kromm. He swung his torch slowly round the walls, noting the bits of steel furniture, the filing cabinets, the remains of what might have been a pressure suit. "Doesn't look too cheerful for us," Kromm said.

"We've all got to die, some time," said Bailey. "Here, what's this?" He took what seemed to be a book from the top of a cabinet. He blew the dust from it with care, and read the faded lettering. "Log of the *Thunderer*, January December, 2827."

"*What* date?"

"Twenty eight twenty seven—nearly three hundred years ago."

Kromm came close; he sounded deeply impressed. "Open it."

Bailey lifted the cover very cautiously, but to no avail; the paper beneath showed that it was not paper any longer—it was dust, dust that rustled away and s. illed at his feet.

Kromm swore. "There goes any chance we might have had of finding out about the *Thunderer*."

"Or who *he* was, or why he landed, what his cargo was. So we shall just have to nose around on our own." Bailey was about to pitch the cover away, when Kromm stopped him. "Look, there's writing on the cover."

They took it to the entrance of the cave; the words were faint but legible in part. Bailey muttered the words. "—cannot live much longer. Had it not been for Friday, I think I should have gone mad long ago . . . valuable cargo lost to the . . . What do you make the signature?"

"Looks like G. Holland, Captain," said Kromm.

"Three hundred years," muttered Bailey.

"Doing any more exploring?"

"No. Let's get back, and see if we can get anything on the radio."

"We'll be lucky," said Kromm gloomily. "If we'd had a bit bigger ship, we'd have had a generator for the radio, instead of batteries."

"Got to keep trying," said Bailey. He glanced up the rocky slope. "Shall we try going back that way?"

"Let's go by way of the beach," said Kromm.

They descended, made their way through the undergrowth and over the second stream, and thence onto the beach. The sand was the rich colour of the rocks; the vegetation was a

lush green, the sky a purplish blue. These facts Kromm noted as combining into a beautiful picture, but about which he was quite unable to raise any enthusiasm. He said, " I wonder how long that Captain Holland lived ?"

" If he could live here, then so can we ; I feel a lot better about this place, now."

Kromm scuffed at the sand. " Glad you do ; we could be here a hell of a long time. Tomorrow, we must look for the other skeleton."

" What other ?"

" Friday's."

" Could have been a dog. And if it—or he—died before Holland, he would have buried it."

" That's so—" Kromm began to answer, and then he stopped and stared in stricken astonishment at the sand. Then he went down on his knees to examine the marks ; Bailey did the same.

" A human footprint."

They looked hard at one another for about fifteen seconds. Kromm asked, " Reckon it is ?"

" Something very near."

" The heels are dug in deeply. Why's that ?"

" For the same reason that there are only two prints. He had been jumping from rock to rock ; right here is where the rocks are far apart, so he had to hop down onto the sand."

Kromm gazed round the brilliant landscape thoughtfully, his hand on his pistol. " This—humanoid might call on us, mightn't he ?"

" It might." Bailey got up, dusted the knees of his coveralls, and walked to the nearest rock. " See, here are some more scratch marks, like we found on that ledge where the cave was."

His companion came to look. " Uh," he said, " glad we didn't meet it up there, whatever it was. Shall we get back, and try that radio ?"

They ate frugally the next morning. Kromm seemed to take morose pleasure in enumerating the factors of their plight. " Food should last another six days ; water is here okay. The batteries won't last more than a fortnight, even using them about two hours a day. There's a skeleton in a cave waiting to be buried, and God knows how many humanoid creatures watching our every move. Pretty, isn't it ?"

Bailey stubbed his cigarette. "Shall we go?" He rose, went and knelt by the floor flap, and let his feet find the ladder. "I hate this ship, now. Once upon a time, I thought scouts were nice, but not now. I get claustrophobic, and frustrated because the repair of nearly everything in 'em is a specialist job. Mind my head with your feet."

Outside in the glowing light of the morning sun, they went down to the beach again, both eager to see the footprints, anxious to know if there were more. But all they found were the same marks as the previous day, slightly dimmed in outline by the wind. Once more they made their way through the undergrowth and across the second stream, and then they climbed up to the shelf.

"It occurs to me," murmured Bailey, as they advanced along the shelf, "that Holland might have had other caves which he used. We only got as far as the cave with his bones in, yesterday. After we've been through that, I suggest we look for his old store places—anything like that. We might pick up something useful."

They were at the entrance of the cave. Kromm was about to switch on his torch, when he stopped and gripped Bailey's arm.

"What's the matter?"

Kromm's voice was hardly audible; it came in a light gurgle as he slid his pistol out. "*Something in there moved*!"

Bailey skipped to one side of the entrance, and Kromm flung himself at the other. From inside, came a scraping sound. Kromm's finger slid back his safety catch; Bailey's was off already. The sound came once more—a kind of metallic shuffling; they were quite still, gripping their pistols tightly.

Then a voice said one word. "Master." It was a quiet voice, flat and without emotion. Kromm looked across at Bailey in open mouthed astonishment.

"Did you hear—"

"Master," said the voice, clearer this time. Deep in the gloom of the cave, a figure moved. The twin beams of their torches split the dark simultaneously, showing a shining humanoid figure. "Master."

Bailey stood in the entrance, holding his torch firmly on the robot. "Come here," he said, clearly.

The robot came and stood at the entrance. It was five-feet six, fully articulated, with the small egg-shaped head which

seemed to indicate that it had a brain of a fairly advanced pattern. Kromm read the details off its plate. " U-E robot. Birmingham, England. Serial number 43123. M/A. What's M/A ?"

The robot itself answered in its flat, steady voice. " I am multiple aptitudes robot. Friday."

" Friday ?"

" I have a name, as humans have a name."

Bailey said, " Tell us how you got here."

Friday said. " The *Thunderer* was one of the first of the big interstellar ships used for cargo. We had a blowout in the engines, and that threw us far off course. Then we had another accident to the engines, and we were forced to try to land here. We came down in the great bronze mountains. Only Captain Holland survived."

" Were you doing a job on the ship ?" asked Kromm, and then felt that it was a foolish question.

" No. The cargo was of robots—" suddenly, the voice faltered. " I am weak. Soon I shall be finished like the captain."

Bailey said, " But all this was three hundred years ago !"

" Yes," said Friday. " Years. Man's time measure. A long time, master."

" For three hundred years," whispered the awe-struck Kromm, " this thing has been walking about here, following the behaviour patterns built into him by his makers. *Three hundred years* !"

" How did you last so long ?" asked Bailey.

" Come," answered the robot, and led the way along the shelf to where, past a natural buttress of rock, a much larger cave ran into the face of the rock. The robot walked in a few paces, and then stopped.

" See," said Friday.

In the dim light they could see boxes and cases of all descriptions, but the thing which held their attention was the presence of scores of dismembered robot carcasses.

" This is how I carried on," said Friday. " The cargo, as I said, was mostly of multiple aptitude robots, self maintaining. I used them to continue, even after the Captain finished. But now, there are no more new spare parts. I shall soon finish. May I serve you ?"

" Let's look round," said Kromm. He went deeper into the cave, flashing his torch. " See, there's some food cases here ! Might be okay."

Bailey came up. " After three hundred years ?"

" You never know. What's this ?"

Bailey read the inscription on the case. " Beam radio, A7. Inf. Range." They looked at each other and knew that each was thinking the same thing.

" Supposing it works," said Bailey, " what do we do for power ?"

Kromm swung his torch. " What are these ?"

According to the labels on a dozen heavily sealed bottles of opaque plastic, they were part of sets of ' Acid Battery Power Kits.'

" *Acid* battery ?" asked Bailey.

Kromm was thinking furiously. " Yes, that's right. Chemical action as a source of electric power. That's what they used to have. If the stuff's all right it could still be made to work. Friday, come here !"

The robot obeyed. Kromm pointed out the cases and bottles he wanted moving, and using a couple of packing cases as a bench, he and Bailey got the old kit, incredibly bulky by their standards, spread out on the bench.

Kromm was bubbling with enthusiasm, when all at once, he stopped, clapped his hand to his head, and groaned.

" What's the matter ?"

" I'm a fool. All this will have to be moved up onto the plateau, close to the ship."

" Why ?"

" Because the only aerial we've got is there. And it will be quicker to have Friday take the stuff up there than it will to unship the aerial and bring it down here. Friday—can you lift these cases, and carry them, say, eight-hundred paces ?"

" I am weak, but I will obey."

Kromm looked at the robot queerly. " Feel sorry for the old fellow," he said.

" It's a machine," Bailey reminded him.

" But he's the last link with Captain Holland. This looks like a two-journey job. Let's go."

Kromm had been amazed at the feelings he had when he saw Friday staggering along up to the shade of the scoutship, bearing cases and boxes containing the gear they needed. He had had little to do with robots, and the sight of the humanoid machine struggling along with its burdens had been strangely affecting ; and when he spoke to Friday, and the robot had

answered in its flat voice, it seemed to him that he felt even worse. Three hundred years this machine had existed, three hundred years, as though it had waited for them.

By late afternoon he had the big old radio assembled, and the batteries, now made up, bubbled silently as he checked his linking. A thin cable snaked through the port of the ship, connection with the aerial.

" You about ready to try ?" asked Bailey.

Kromm clipped in his phones. " Just about." He eyed a lightly flickering needle. " This is double the power we had on the ship radio ; it should do it. Depends a lot on where the *Oppie* is now, of course, and I've no idea of what that sun might do to the transmission." He pressed a switch, and a tiny yellow bulb glowed. He breathed a sigh of satisfaction. Then he glanced round. " Where did Friday go ?"

The robot was not to be seen. " Don't know," said Bailey.

" He was weakening," said Kromm.

" It's a machine," said Bailey.

" Yes," said Kromm thoughtfully, " it's just that." He spun a dial. " Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," he said into the mike. " Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Scoutship two calling *Oppenheimer*. Kromm calling. Stranded on Krodos seven, Krodos seven." He said it several times, then he stopped, and listened. There was nothing—only the sigh and sputter of static from the little speaker.

Kromm and Bailey looked at one another. " Well—" asked Bailey.

Kromm said, " It's early yet." He took off his phones, gave them to Bailey and said, " You keep sending out ; I'm going into the ship to get the tape repeater, and rig it down here."

When he came down with the repeater, five minutes later, Bailey had stopped sending. Kromm recorded his message and put it on repeat, and then they sat and smoked and tried to pretend that they weren't straining their ears for a sound of a human voice from the speaker.

" Three hundred years," muttered Kromm. " I can hardly believe it."

The speaker crackled. " Hallo, Kromm . . . hello, Kromm. *Oppenheimer* calling Kromm—"

They yelled together and leaped for the transmitter. Kromm took off the repeater and got into direct touch. There was a lag of about three seconds. " Hallo ! Who's that sending ?"

The operator of the *Oppenheimer* identified himself.

" M'Bala here. What happened ?"

Kromm explained, and was interrupted by Bailey, who took the explanation to such a point of detail that his remarks about the engineers on the parent ship bordered on the offensive.

" —and you're safe ?"

" Not a scratch," said Kromm.

" Be sending number three scout for you in twelve hours Earth ; repair squad following up. Listen out in about ten hours Earth. Roger ?"

" Roger and out," said Kromm. He sank back, sagging with relief. He dragged off his phones. " Hell," he said, " I feel weak all over."

" So do I," said Bailey.

" But happy ; I want to tell somebody. That's it," he exclaimed, sitting up. " I'll find Friday, and tell him. Without him we mightn't have been found."

Bailey grinned. " Okay, we'll do that."

Once again they found the ledge, and walked along it. At the oval-shaped entrance of the cave lay the robot. No pilot light glowed on the front of it.

Kromm bent down. " Friday !" he whispered. This time, Bailey did not remind him that it was just a machine. Kromm flipped the activating switch up and down ; nothing happened.

" No joy," said Bailey.

Kromm stood slowly ; he thought of the skeleton in the cave for a moment, then he looked down at the robot. " The last link," he said, " gone." Then, without another word, he started down the slope. Bailey followed. When they reached the golden beach, and could walk side by side, Kromm stopped.

" Expect we shall bury Holland's bones tomorrow ?"

" Expect so," said Bailey.

" Do you think," asked Kromm, hesitantly, " that it would be too damn silly to do the same with Friday ?"

Bailey regarded him thoughtfully. " No," he said, "perhaps it wouldn't."

Kromm stopped once more, on the beach. It was to look at what was left of two almost human footprints, now nearly obliterated by a little drift of sand.

John Kippax

THE MESON STORY

By Kenneth Johns

This article could really be headed the Prologue to a story of scientific research only just beginning although a tremendous amount of preparatory work has already been done. At the most it can be the opening of Chapter One of a journey into the microcosm.

Of all the curious features of mid-twentieth Century Americo-European culture, perhaps the strangest is the widespread interest in science. Curious, in that interest lies not in the historical aspects but in the drama of present-day scientific frontiers and their extrapolation into the future.

This interest is separate from the ordinary man's reliance on technology for his everyday food and standard of living and cannot be compared with the general interest in science in the 18th and early 19th Centuries. Then science was the concern only of the upper and educated classes with sufficient leisure to ponder the meaning of the great new ideas then being debated. In those days, the mind of one individual could encompass most of the known sciences and was able to follow closely the individual work of the better known scientists.

This is impossible today. Science is so integrally bound up with specialisation that one scientist may never hear of another's work in a different field, let alone be able to comprehend its finer points. Yet, throughout the whole of modern society, there is a keen interest in the impact today and tomorrow of the latest scientific discoveries. Pick up any daily

paper and the odds are you'll find some item dealing with scientific research. Not, be it noted, with the laborious and often unsuccessful years of effort, but full only of the triumphant end products.

Nuclear physics is one of the fastest advancing—and most popularised of the sciences. Now backed by vast expenditure and awe-inspiring machines the basis of present-day physics is often less understood by the layman than was the work of the alchemists three hundred years ago—which does not stop the layman talking glibly of Bevatrons and Einstein's theories. Of course, part of the attraction of physics is that its practical results of experiment can be so easily seen and appreciated. A-bombs, H-bombs, nuclear power stations and the promise of H-power to come are greater miracles than any pagan deity dared dream of promising.

Yet, behind the planet-poisoning explosives and the masterful engineering feats, nuclear physics has a foundation built on our understanding of the atom and its internal force fields. Instead of using fine, delicate instruments, scientists have to resort to sledge-hammer tactics to break off pieces, analyse them and then deduce the structure of the original.

This apparently clumsy process has yielded startling results. Yet—the whole is not the sum of the parts, and the theoretical foundations of physics are ever in a state of flux as old theories are jettisoned for new.

By 1932, physicists were sure that the atom was a solid massive nucleus surrounded by a cloud of small negatively charged electrons. The latter may be vaguely thought of as being similar to planets circling a sun—although the analogy is very far from precise—if one can imagine planets jumping from orbit to orbit with the absorption or emission of gigantic packets of energy, and each orbit as a zone of probability rather than a well-defined ellipse.

The nucleus was thought to contain heavy neutrons and positively charged protons ; but physicists had difficulty in reconciling the packing of protons together in a small space with the macrocosmic rule that like charges repel. Here was a strong strange force acting as a glue to bind the protons together. It must be a nuclear field completely unlike magnetic, electrostatic or gravitic field forces.

In general, it became obvious that nuclear laws were weirdly different from the laws of the normal world. Go down to less

than one fortieth of a millionth of a millionth of an inch—the the size of a proton—and you can't be certain that time, distance, mass, energy, have the same meanings.

Of course, as these subatomic particles are the building blocks and basis of all creation, maybe they behave rationally, and our everyday world acts contrary to the intended laws governing all matter.

In 1935, H. Yukawa conceived a new theory. He suggested that the nuclear field holding particles together in the nucleus could only exist in special sizes. But such field energy acted so strongly over such short distances that it must be inseparable from mass. Calculations showed that this new particle must have a mass between that of an electron and a proton. Protons are 1837 times as massive as electrons, measured at rest since they gain mass with speed in accordance with Einstein's theory.

And so, the meson was born. In theory. Within three years physicists had discovered a particle of approximately correct mass, 210 times that of the electron. Like so many of the new particles, the mu meson, as it later came to be called, was found using the very simple equipment employed by most physicists prior to the 1940's. A microscope, a balloon and a pile of photographic plates, plus a great deal of ingenuity were enough for a nuclear physicist to go into business.

The first mu meson was discovered in the splinter products of a cosmic ray ; but, unfortunately, it did not easily react with atomic nuclei, whereas the meson postulated by Yukawa should react explosively with nuclear matter.

The mu meson was only the first of a whole flood of new particles that, often to the embarrassment of theoretical physicists, were discovered during the next twenty years. Eighteen hyperons and mesons have been identified positively —hyperons have a mass greater than that of a proton. Some of these new particles are negatively charged, some positively, whilst others are neutral. They are unstable and decay in series reminiscent of radio-actives and they interact with one another and protons and neutrons in complex energy-emitting reactions. Even more new particles have been reported but not confirmed.

Then, in 1947, one puzzle was cleared up. Vividly illustrating the difficulty of working with random cosmic rays and particles whose lives are measured in fractions of a millionth

of a second, it was realised that the mu meson is the product of decay of another type of meson. This particle, called the pi meson, fulfilled Yukawa's predictions as to mass and its reactions with nuclear matter.

Production quickly followed discovery and the Berkeley cyclotron was creating pi mesons in 1948, duplicating their natural production by using accelerating protons instead of cosmic rays and a solid target instead of the atmosphere. This fresh source of mesons at sea level sparked off an intensive investigation into the reactions and properties of all types of mesons.

Take the case of K mesons, created in the Bevatron.

Eight different types were discovered, all with the same 965 electron masses. All except one had the same lifetime, the only difference between seven of them being the products to which they decayed. Are there only two types of K meson, one of which decays in seven different ways ?

Working outside the matrix of the normal world, nuclear physicists have been able to follow the birth and death of particles which live a million lifetimes in one tick of the clock. An example of this ultra-rapid proliferation is the hyperon of mass 2583 which decayed in a ten thousandth millionth of a second to give our evanescent pi meson together with a gamma hyperon. The pi meson decayed in a hundred millionth of a second to a neutrino and a mu meson, which itself disintegrated in a millionth of a second to two neutrinos and an electron. Meanwhile, the gamma hyperon split into a proton and a pi meson which decayed as the other pi meson. Thus, in a little more than a millionth of a second, the one hyperon became nine other particles, not counting the intermediate ones.

This type of investigation was carried out with cloud chambers and photographic emulsions, the tracks of the particles and the way they curved in magnetic fields identifying the particles and their splinter products.

Needing far more associated equipment, but giving better results, hydrogen bubble chambers have been used to track particle paths. The advantage is that the target is the pure indicating medium. Perfectly clean liquid hydrogen can be warmed to just above its boiling point ; as soon as a particle slashes through it a line of bubbles appears and is instantly photographed. The Berkely bubble chamber contains 17,000

cubic inches of liquid hydrogen and physicists claim that it is cold enough for thermal effects to be eliminated, whilst the atoms are simple enough for the mathematics of collisions to be followed.

Negative mesons are of greater interest than neutral or positive ones since they can substitute themselves for the electrons circling round the nucleus of an atom. These mesonic atoms are the strangest matter yet created by physicists.

Negative pi mesons were discovered in 1950 and by 1952, the first of the mesonic atoms was built up with them at Chicago University. But it was violently unstable. Following Yukawa's prediction, a negative pi meson has only to be in the vicinity of a proton and the two attract and annihilate each other, in a savage burst of raw energy. There is little chance for the pi meson to circle a nucleus before the meson's whole mass explodes into energy and disintegrates the atom. The pi meson holds the answer to the puzzle of how the nucleus is constructed ; but no good, quantitative theory of the attractive forces has yet been advanced. What is known, however, is that there is a powerful *repulsive* force between pi mesons and the particles of the nucleus—and this somehow leads to an attraction.

More recently, mu mesonic atoms were created and caused a considerable stir in scientific circles since they pointed to the way nuclear fusion could be caused without the use of multi-million degree temperatures—and might therefore lead to a method to bypass machines such as Zeta.

Whereas in hydrogen an electron circles the nucleus and emits light when it jumps from orbit to orbit, a mu meson is far more energetic. Mu mesons are 210 times as heavy as electrons. So the radiation they give out when they drop to orbits nearer the nucleus contains 210 times the electron energy. This takes the radiation out of the visible light range and pushes it into the X-ray band.

Normally, a mu meson decays in two millionths of a second to an electron plus neutrino. It has to be slowed down and caught by a nucleus before this time has elapsed, so that it can create a mesonic atom. At Columbia University they slowed mu mesons from their synchrocyclotron by passing them through blocks of metal and then into the target material. Theory said X-rays should be generated and, in fact, X-rays were found issuing from the target.

Then, analysis of the X-ray wavelengths revealed a curious fact. Inside the heavy atoms in which they were caught, the mu mesons were actually orbiting inside the dense nuclei.

This is further evidence that the nuclear structure bears no relationship to what we think of as normal matter. Imagine it as a dense liquid in which any particle dissolves ; as a perfectly fluid cloud of energy with no mechanical resistance ; think of it as anything but a collection of solid particles.

The next step in this challenging probing of the ultra small was a discovery at the University of California Radiation Laboratory of a strange process involving mu mesons. They sprayed a liquid hydrogen bubble chamber with negative mu mesons and each one left the expected trail of bubbles until it came to rest. However, it was noticed that a new mu meson was sometimes ejected from the spot where the old one had stopped. After fifteen such occurrences, the physicists realised that mesonic atoms were being formed and, at a temperature of -250 degrees Centigrade, undergoing fusion. What had needed the power of an atomic bomb to start was occurring at a temperature equivalent to that on the surface of Pluto.

The mu meson is captured by a heavy hydrogen atom, the meson replacing the electron. Because it is 210 times as massive as the electron, the meson orbits 210 times as close to the nucleus and so creates an atom 210 times as small as normal heavy hydrogen.

With such a change in size, the negative charge of the meson effectively blankets the positive charge of the nucleus and makes it possible for a hydrogen atom to sidle up and fuse with it to form helium -3. At the same time, a meson 5.4 MeV of energy is ejected.

Simple. Meson + heavy hydrogen + hydrogen gives helium + energy + a meson to carry on the next fusion.

But it is precipitate to rush away with the idea that here we have continuous fusion along the lines of the well-known uranium 235 fission chain. There are snags—as is to be expected. Present-day crude methods of making mesons require thirty times as much energy as is released in fusion. Too, mesons are expensively produced in expensive accelerators and the fusion produces only one meson for each meson consumed. With a half life of only two millionths of a second, a mu meson can do little more than catalyse one fusion before

it decays, so losses due to decay, escape and absorption are not made up.

What is now required is a nuclear reaction in which one mu meson produces several mu mesons and some useful energy.

Or, failing this, we need a long-living negative mu meson.

News has come out of Russia that the physicist Alikhanian has indeed discovered such a particle. He is said to have evidence that there is a negatively charged mu meson with a life-span of twenty minutes—long enough to give us a thousand million fusions per meson.

And—enough to add mesonic bombs to our vocabulary. Or, enough to create the controlled fusion power which is now realised to be the master key, not only to Man's continued comfortable existence on his own planet, but to the Exploration of the Galaxy.

Every story should have an ending. But the meson story has only just begun. It will continue for as long as physicists remain to question " Why ?" and " How ?"

Kenneth Johns

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

As this month's Editorial is devoted to forthcoming stories there is little point in duplicating the information in this section. Short stories next month, however, do deserve some advance publicity—there is a rather fine John Brunner entitled " The Trouble I See," plus " Squeeze Box " by Philip E. High, and a longer-than-usual Bertram Chandler story " Chance Encounter " centred out in deep space. They make a better-than-average issue.

Ratings for No. 76 were :

Equator (conclusion) - - - -	Brian W. Aldiss
Deny The Slake - - - - -	Richard Wilson
The Different Complexion - - -	William F. Temple
Dreamboat - - - - - -	Bertram Chandler
The Guardian - - - - -	Philip E. High

Author Donald Malcolm has done considerable research into dreams and our dream-worlds, as you will realise when you read this story. For instance, do you dream in black and white or colour ? Not many people are in the latter category but in the story the character who dreams in technicolour is unluckier than he thinks.

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

By Donald Malcolm

A telephone rings.

" *Central* 4831."

" 31-10-60 ? *DREAM here. Can you sleep for us three nights from now ? Yes, that's the correct date. Good. Usual place and fees. This will be a music-stimulus run. See you then ? Good-bye.*"

" *Good-bye.*"

Click.

The electro-oculogram recording pen of research subject 31-10-60 had finished its eight minutes of furious activity and settled down again.

Looking at Screen 31, Doctor Edward Maxwell pressed a button. In the cubicle, a bell sounded quietly. This was keyed to the individual's alpha rhythms and, in this case, only 31 would respond. The old method was out. A door-bell had rung and, as the subject had wakened, a doctor had

gone into the cubicle and started a tape-recorder. He left without speaking in case his voice influenced the dream.

The subject stirred and rose up on the cot. She looked like a creation of Frankenstein. Electrodes were pasted to her scalp, to the bony ridges of her eye sockets, to her back and to her chest. A forest of wires thrust out from her head giving her the appearance of a bad tempered hedgehog on the rampage.

Behind the panel of screens, a cardiotachometer and an electroencephalograph converted her heartbeats and her brain rhythms into inked traces on callibrated rolls situated in transparent windows under the larger, close-circuit TV screens.

Maxwell cut out the music from her headphones and activated a tape-recorder and she began to dictate her dream. He could listen in to any dream but he seldom did until the recording was complete.

He chuckled and rubbed his square, blue chin. He wondered what she would produce this time. A small, plump, homely housewife, she had a very fertile imagination and sometimes produced four or five dreams in one session. He had encouraged her to take a short story course in the hope that she could cash in on her imagination. Her work was showing promise.

Maxwell noted that 18-10-60 had a dream coming on. Normally a very restless young man, his twitchings, jerkings and general movement of body and limbs had ceased. The usual slow rolling of the eyes, somewhat eerie, was replaced by frantic activity. He was now absolutely motionless except for this.

From a study of eye movements, the research group at Chicago had gradually been able to tell when a subject was dreaming and whether the dream was of an active or a passive nature. The eye movements were a reflection of what happened in dreams.

Maxwell thoroughly enjoyed his work with DREAM. The official designation was actually Dream Research Establishment but some wag had added the letters AM, because most of the work took place in the early hours of the morning. The tag had stuck and the men in the research groups were known to the regular nurses as the Dream Boys.

The initial research programme designed to probe into what went on in the misty world of dreams was started at the

University of Chicago in 1953. Seven years later a number of universities and hospitals throughout the world had research centres. The London one, in which Maxwell worked, was one of the larger, better equipped ones.

Much had been learned with the help of people who came from all walks of life. 31-10-60—he always thought of them as numbers, which indicated their place on a list for a certain month in a certain year—was a housewife ; 18 was a young student ; 45 was a drifter, having no fixed job, and his dreams were almost as commonplace as himself. All dreams, of course, are unique. No two are ever alike.

A number of Chelsea artists had co-operated in a group research test. Some of the craziest, weirdest dreams ever, came from them, not to mention a series of paintings that defied description and gave the critics plenty of ammunition.

A number of fallacies concerning dreams had been exposed. It was shown that, almost without exception, everyone dreams every night. People who claim they don't dream have simply failed to recollect their dreams, which occupy about twenty percent of their sleeping time. Again, they may have unknowingly suppressed their dreams.

Maxwell went through the procedure for 18.

Dreaming was now known to be as natural as breathing. And, contrary to popular belief, a dream does not happen in seconds ; if you dreamed that you were, say, totalling up a column of figures, it would take the same time to add up the sum in your dream as it would in reality.

An experiment at DREAM, involving a group of university students and a group of labourers, revealed that the dreams of the former group displayed a vastly wider range of subject, description, dramatisation of character and scope of situation.

It was inferred that the intellectual type who had, on the average, interests in more topics than the labourers, was likely to produce deeper, more *real* dreams.

Dr. William Elliot, the Chief of DREAM, called it "three-dimensional dreaming," stemming from greater concentration and emotional stimulation.

A second electro-oculogram pen indicated a cessation of eye activity. Subject 45. He repeated the usual procedure. Consulting his watch, he saw that the time was 11.38 p.m.

Something prompted him to listen in to 45's dream. Lighting a cigarette, he leaned back, relaxed.

He didn't remain relaxed for long.

" I am standing on a flat, extensive concrete apron. About three hundred yards away, in the foreground, is a ship, hexagonal in shape, about one hundred feet tall, I would estimate. Behind the ship and stretching away on both sides at the horizon, is a range of mountains.

" The whole landscape is a fantastic array of colours. There are two stars in the sky ! One, deep blue, is setting in the west, while a yellow star is not far above the eastern horizon. A beautifully lacey luminous mist is swirling all around and dozens of delicate hues are intermixed through it in ever shifting patterns.

" The predominant colour is green. In the direction of the blue sun, the green is tinged with azure and sapphire and ultramarine. In the east, the sky is lambent yellow with a touch of topaz and tints of green in apple and leaf and glacier and viridian. Overhead the heavens are black shot through with cobalt and green. Long streaky grey-yellow clouds are trailing over the eastern mountains.

" The ship itself is gleaming softly like a Christmas trinket, all metallic yellows and greens and blues.

" Some things are emerging from the mist. They look like vari-coloured jelly-fish in globular shape. There must be at least twenty of them and they are passing into the ship. But wait ; they're going straight through the hull ! The ship lifts —no splash of flame or anything. I . . . "

45's dream came to an end.

Maxwell sat transfixed, staring at the screen, his cigarette dangling from his fingers unheeded. That one certainly beat the band ! What a description ! What colours ! The man had spoken with the feeling and the soul of an artist.

Two bells pinged softly almost simultaneously and he cut out the music from the subjects' earphones and activated the tape-recorders. 45 had gone back to sleep. The exact duration of his dream, when it had commenced and when it had ended, was automatically recorded. This duration period was very important.

Through the day, when Maxwell was sunk in his own world of dreams, all the data gathered during the night would find its way into the hands of the experts.

Most people tend to dream in allegories and enigmatic symbols. Each new subject, before he began the task, had a personality pattern drawn up by a psychologist. The data gathered from dreams were matched against the personality

patterns. The findings were passed on to a psycho-analyst whose job was to find out what motivated the subjects, what gave them the stimulus for their dreams.

Dreaming occurs several times in a night, but only at one particular stage of sleep. The times of dreaming were matched against a master graph to derive more information on the mystery of dreaming and why people dream.

When a person drifts into sleep, his dreams are fragmentary, transitory and disconnected, as if takes on a moving film were blocked off at random.

The plunge into the deepest sleep is sudden, like stepping over a precipice. This period lasts about thirty minutes. The sleeper then approaches the lightest phase of sleep, reaching it just over an hour after falling asleep. On the average, the sleeper remains in this stage for nine minutes and has his first organised dream during this time. A sleep not quite as deep as the first thirty-minute period again claims the person. Dream passages of nineteen, twenty-four and twenty-eight minutes occur at intervals until the final dream which lasts until awakening.

Maxwell went through the procedure for 21, an attractive, full-of-life blonde. His mind wasn't really on his job. He was still thinking about 45's dream. It had been so uncharacteristic, vivid and coherent as to seem almost *real*. He caught himself chidingly for thinking such nonsense. The music had obviously triggered off some hitherto untapped dream sources, that was all.

But, his mind nagged, there's the question of 45's insistence that his dream had been in full colour. And he had heard it for himself.

He frowned and panned a close-up of 45's face. It was a thin, haunted face with nothing to render it outstanding. Nondescript. No ; he corrected his estimate. The eyes. He remembered them, a curious grey, with amber flecks, like nothing he had ever seen before.

The colour business was most unusual. Few people dreamed in colour. He himself had never done so. 45's descriptions made him feel slightly cheated as if he were a small boy confined to seeing black and white films and allowed only to hear about the wonders of colour.

This added one more problem to the list awaiting answers. Where do dreams come from ? Are they misty snippets

drawn from behind the veil of memory, randomly invoked, of no value? Is sleep a time in which secret hopes and fears are acted out upon the stage of dreams, partly peopled by figures from our waking life, partly by figures of fantasy? Or are they warning messages, prophetic of things to come, told in symbol and enigma?

He found himself waiting impatiently for 45's next dream. He shivered. The silence seemed to press in on him. The fear of night, the darkness—even though the control room was well lighted—and the unknown brooded over him like a deeply buried, dimly remembered, racial memory.

Are we right, he wondered, to tamper, to pursue this attempt to find out the stuff that dreams are made of? Doubt assailed him. Then the feeling passed. He pulled himself together with an effort. His brow was damp with sweat.

He found himself keyed up as, at 1.41 a.m., 45 awoke and dictated his second dream. It was plain and drab, lifeless, the anti-climax left him limp and frustrated.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Maxwell realised that perhaps only a certain passage in the music had evoked 45's colour dream. He couldn't alter the programme without the Director's permission. Noting the times of 45's dream, he checked to see what piece of music had been playing at that period. The last thundering, tempestuous part of the Mars theme from Holst's *The Planets*. He'd see the project engineer when he came in later that morning and ask him for a tape recording of that part. The night maintenance engineer wouldn't have time to help him.

He'd suggest that 45 be withdrawn from the group experiment. His idea was to keep feeding the Mars theme into 45's earphones—each subject had earphones so that the music would not disturb him when he was dictating; the music automatically cut out—and observe the stimulated effects.

All over the world the work went on. The Quito, Ecuador, team was running tests to determine the effects of climate on dreaming. The influence of environment on dreams was under investigation in a Chicago prison. In Paris, a group of blind subjects were co-operating in an inquiry into the blind world of dreams.

In the morning, about 8.30, he button-holed the engineer and stated his request.

Next, he approached 45—Paul Russell—and asked him to stay behind for a few minutes.

In a room, Maxwell motioned the other to a chair. He activated the tape recorder and Russell's voice described his strange colour dream.

Maxwell watched him closely. He showed no expression. The recording ended.

" That was my voice," Russell stated.

" Yes. Can you think of anything that might have stimulated such a dream ?"

The man looked at him blankly. Standing, he said emphatically, " I do not even remember the dream. May I go now, please ?"

" You'll be here tonight, I believe ? Good. As you know, we were on a music-stimulus run. I've isolated the piece of music that was playing as you dreamed the first time."

He closed the lid of the tape-recorder and went on, " I hope to obtain the Director's permission to withdraw you from the group and try this passage of music on you. Will you co-operate ?"

Russell nodded assent. " I'll see you to-night, then, doctor."

After he had left, Maxwell was left with the impression of unblinking grey amber-flecked eyes . . .

Lifting the recorder, Maxwell made his way to the office of the Director, Dr. William Elliot. He was a small, neatly-tailored, horn-rim spectacled man with a well-kept look about him.

Maxwell laid his evening report on the desk.

" Something very interesting came up last night, sir," he opened, plugging the tape-recorder plug in. " I'd like you to listen to this dream dictated by 45-10-60, a Mr. Paul Russell."

The Director, who was an open-minded man, sat back, his attitude one of objective interest.

As Russell's recorded voice related the dream, the other took on a slight air of amazement. And he was not easily stirred.

Maxwell switched off. Leaning forward, he said, " Full *colour*, doctor."

" Last night was a music-stimulus run ; what was playing?"

"I checked. It was the last part of the Mars theme. I spoke to Russell about his dream. He doesn't remember a thing."

Elliot interposed, "That's a common and discouraging occurrence. Few people *do* remember their dreams, which leads them to the mistaken conclusion that they seldom or never dream. Many others suppress parts of their dreams. It's valuable when the psycho-analysts can match the recording against the subject's recollected dream."

Maxwell shifted in his chair. "I don't think we have much on colour dreaming, have we?"

Elliot shook his head. "Apparently, it's a most unusual phenomenon. It is odd in view of the fact that we are surrounded all our waking hours by every conceivable colour."

He pushed a cigarette box across to Maxwell, who lit up. Elliot did not smoke.

Maxwell informed, drawing deeply on the cigarette and reminding himself of his need of breakfast and sleep. "As a matter of interest, I have asked a large number of people if they have ever dreamed in colour. Only a handful replied in the affirmative and some of them didn't seem reliable."

Flicking ash off his cigarette, he continued in an amused tone, "One man started off by telling me that he couldn't possibly dream in colour because he was partially colour-blind. Almost in the same breath he asserted that he dreamed in colour when he was sexually excited!"

Elliot laughed heartily for a small man. "I fail to see the connection."

"I haven't puzzled it out myself, yet. He finished off by saying that he saw patterns in colour."

Maxwell grinned at the memory. He stubbed out the corpse of his cigarette. Finally he outlined his idea concerning 45 to the Director and was granted permission to give it a try.

"I'm off home to bed, now. I'll be back at ten tonight."

"Right, Edward, I'll pass your report and the tapes on to the eggheads."

He was a man who could laugh at himself and at his colleagues.

Maxwell left the building and climbed into his car. He sat thinking for a minute, decided that he was too drowsy to drive and that some fresh air would freshen him up a bit. The morning was clear, the air clean and crisp.

Then another thought occurred to him. That double star mentioned in the tape. One deep blue, the other yellow. His knowledge of astronomy was scant, but he didn't think there would be many double stars with that colourful combination.

He left the car and went to a phone booth. Watkins, at Herstmonceaux, would know off hand, or would be able to find out.

"Royal Observatory, Herstmonceaux; inquiries," an appropriately heavenly voice came over the line. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Edward Maxwell. May I speak to Dr. Watkins, please?"

"One moment, doctor. I'll put you through . . . go ahead, please, Dr. Watkins. A Dr. Maxwell is calling."

"Hello, Ed? Watty here. What can I do for you this early?" There was no mistaking his familiar gruffy tones.

"Have I routed you out of bed, or something?"

"Out of bed. I put in a few hours observing at the 92-inch last night."

"Sorry, Watty! Here's what I want. You know I'm working on dream research? Well, a subject dictated a fantastic dream last night—in colour."

Briefly, he described the dream and finished, "He was quite adamant about the double star and that the components were deep blue and yellow."

Watty grunted. "Sounds as if he's been reading too much science fiction . . . read the stuff myself, but between you and me, don't tell the Astronomer Royal! Now, about this double star," he continued, as Edward laughed. "My speciality is long-period variables. Hold on; Drummond is your man."

Maxwell listened droopily while Watty contacted Drummond and put the question to him.

He heard the double star specialist say, "Deep blue and yellow. That's—ah, let me see—sounds like Albireo, in Cygnus the Swan. But I'll check if you like and let you know."

"Did you catch that, Ed? Good. I'll phone you back at your flat."

"Thanks, Watty. I'm off home, now."

"Cheerio. Glad to have been of assistance. And Ed—pleasant dreams!"

The phone clicked.

Yawning mightily, Edward strolled home, a ten minute walk, oblivious to the stares of work-bound commuters. While he was enjoying breakfast, Watty phoned to tell him that Drummond thought the star was most likely to be Albireo.

Edward crawled into his bed like a tired dog. His dreams were full of strange colourful suns, curious alien blobs that undulated and floated—and of a man with grey amber-flecked eyes.

That evening, about 9.30, he caught Russell as he came in.

" Mr. Russell, I have the tape. We spoke about it this morning. Are you still agreeable ?"

" Yes, I'll co-operate, doctor." His eyes bored into Maxwell's making him feel vaguely uncomfortable and ill at ease. He filed this observation away for future examination.

" Mr. Russell—does the name Albireo mean anything to you ?"

The gaunt man's mouth quirked, but his face retained its —not exactly hostile, more unapproachable—expression. Had he meant to say something and changed his mind, Maxwell pondered.

" No. It means nothing to me at all. Sorry."

The tone was carefully blank. Any normal person would have asked what it *did* mean.

" Well, never mind." Edward changed the trend of the conversation adroitly. " If you will come into the cubicle, I'll tape you up."

He and two others did the necessary taping for the subjects and, when it was over, he checked the various recorders along with the duty engineer.

Jill Drake, a pert, shapely young brunette and not long qualified, was waiting for him when he entered the control room.

" I'm to take over your duties for the night," she greeted him, smiling.

Maxwell returned her smile warmly. " That's right, Jill. Dr. Elliot did mention someone this morning but he didn't specify whom it would be."

He affected a comic leer. " Lucky me !"

She pretended to shrink back in horror and said, " Keep off, you beast, or I'll scream !"

" You probably would, too !" Edward shot back, grinning as she pouted prettily at him. " Anyway, wench, down to

business. I know you are familiar with the procedure. I'll be here, so you'll be all right."

She sat down. "There's something kind of—weird?—about all this. Prying about in peoples' dreams."

He eyed her keenly, noting her furrowed brow.

"So you feel it too?" he remarked, passing her a cigarette and lighting up. He shrugged and walked around a little. "Damned unscientific of us, I suppose, but it's not altogether easy to cast off thousands of years of racial fear and superstition of the unknown."

"Oh, hush, Ed! I'll have nightmares when I go to sleep tomorrow!" she admonished him.

At 3.34 a.m., 45 began to dictate his third dream of the night. To Edward's intense disappointment, the first two had been mundane and oddly disconnected. 45 said that, on both occasions, he had experienced a great wrenching sensation.

Now they listened in, hardly daring to breathe.

"I am looking into a metallic grey room with consols on the walls. In the centre is a large, clear globe, featureless. Four blobs are around it, pulsating. Two are pale green, the others are pink and dark blue respectively.

"Now the globe is clouding. A pattern of lines is appearing criss-crossing the globe at random, some straight, some curved, some wriggly. They are in every conceivable colour. This is a four-dimensional representation of something. Dotted on the globe are lots of opaque whorls of various colours and sizes.

"The dark blue blob pulsates furiously. In turn, the pink blob does likewise. The two green blobs float towards a hair of consols. They hover there. Lights appear on the screens which seem to simulate the picture on the globe. On both screens a distinct black line appears, emanating from a double whorl in the bottom right hand corner. It is slowly but perceptibly moving.

"The blue blob and the pink blob move over behind the green pair. One green blob flows over to the other's screen and that one's black line alters slightly as his companion returns to his own screen."

There was a pause.

"The dream fades out there."

As Maxwell shut off the tape recorder, 45 lay back down and went to sleep. His eyes met Jill's. They looked a little frightened.

" It's—it's uncanny . . . weird," she whispered into the silence. " It's as if he were actually looking in on the scene as it is happening."

She hugged herself and hunched her shoulders. A bell pinged. Maxwell waited as she completed the recording procedure for another subject. He handed her a cigarette which she lit shakily.

" I agree with you." He kept his voice calm and measured. " The funny thing is, it more or less follows on from his previous colour dream."

He rubbed his chin and drew hard on his cigarette. The tip glowed like inspiration. He moved restlessly in his chair and continued, " You know, Jill, that a dream action takes the same amount of time to complete as one in reality—"

Her eyes widened a little and she clenched her hands. " You mean—this might really be *happening* ? But what does it mean ?" She sounded slightly hysterical.

He rose and paced about. " I don't know. Perhaps I'm jumping to conclusions but I've listened to many dreams and 45's two are the most consistent and well-integrated dreams I've ever heard. And I've never heard a dream serial—until now."

That did little to reassure Jill.

Maxwell walked up and down. Then he remarked, " As to the meaning, I haven't a clue."

He stopped before her and asked, " 45's dreams—what do they remind you of, Jill ?"

She frowned. " Why—some of those science fiction films they show. Fantastic."

" Exactly ! Just what I thought and just what Watty suggested—he's a professional astronomer who reads science fiction."

He snapped his fingers in decision. " I'll phone him right away. 45 will not be dreaming again for some time."

He crossed over to the phone. A bell pinged and he heard Jill going through the motions as he rung Watty's home number.

" What, you again ?" a gruff, sleepy voice complained. but not unkindly.

" Simmer down and listen, Watty. That chap has dreamed again—a continuation of the first one."

He could almost hear the other's ears perk up like a gun dog's.

Accurately he related 45's dream. "What does that suggest to you?"

"Does that character write science fiction? That's a pretty imaginative account of a ship travelling through hyperspace."

"Through *what*?"

The other gave him a description of what hyperspace meant to a science fiction fan.

When Maxwell cradled the instrument, he had a perplexed expression on his face. He went to his chair, automatically reaching for a cigarette as he sat down. Then he decided against it and put his case away without offering one to Jill.

"Well?" she prompted, leaning forward.

Maxwell spread his hands, looking critically at his broad fingernails. He told her Watty's suggestion.

Her expression was, if anything, more puzzled than Edward's had been. A bell pinged and she cut out the music and activated the tape recorder.

Maxwell went on to explain: "Watty was merely guessing but he thinks that the various blobs held different ranks according to their colour. The dark blue blob is the Commander, the pink one his Executive while the others—the green pair—appear to be Navigators.

"The central globe could be a four-dimensional representation of hyperspace"—here, Jill screwed up her face at the phrase—"with all the various lines currents of some type of force. The dark whorls are stars."

He paused for breath and concluded, "The green blobs are navigating a path through hyperspace, integrating the information taken from the master globe. Each is checking the other's navigation."

Jill gnawed at a worried knuckle, then asked, "But how do they communicate? They don't appear to have mouths or anything."

"Oh, yes, that. Watty thinks that their pulsations are actually their form of talking. It must be a complex system."

"Ed—we're discussing these—these *beings* as if they were *real*."

He was unable to make any answer to that one.

45 dreamed no more that night, in itself an odd occurrence. He spent a very restless night, occasionally contorting his face

and body as if something was putting a great strain on him. Maxwell remembered that Russell had mentioned wrenching sensations before.

At 8 o'clock the next morning, he again played the recording back to 45. But the subject couldn't recall a thing. He departed, leaving Maxwell more convinced than ever that 45 was either holding something back—*or was unable to tell.* He mulled that disconcerting thought over as he went to Elliot's office with his reports.

Night again ; outside it was a raw, bleak rain-swept late October storm smashing against streets and cars and buildings and people, trying to force them into the ground.

Inside the control room it was warm and quiet and tense. The subjects were all taped up and fast asleep, as if awaiting some esoteric ritual. Edward and Jill were again on duty, wondering what the night might bring.

Maxwell sat reading over the reports of the psychologist and the psycho-analyst on 45's two dreams. The dream periods had corresponded well with the peaks on the master graph so there was nothing unusual there.

However the subject matter of the dreams was absolutely at variance with the type of dream that a man of 45's personality would be expected to have. The psycho-analyst's interpretation of the dreams was cagey almost to the point of vagueness. A cryptic note at the foot of the report asked, " What am I supposed to make of this ?"

In the body of the report, he was more scientific, pointing out the consistency of the dreams, the detail, colour and continuity. He was inclined to the view that the man had *not* dreamed in symbols ; if he *had*, they were the most complex he had ever encountered.

Maxwell gave Jill a brief resume of the reports, concluding, " That tells us virtually nothing we didn't already know."

Seconds fled into minutes and minutes dragged into hours.

At 11.14 p.m., 45 had his first dream, a seven-and-a-half minute affair inextricably mixed up. After he had heard it, Maxwell thought of it as a kind of shadow dream, like an event which took place just at the edge of vision and thus never clearly seen. It was not coloured.

Meanwhile, Jill attended to the normal routine, which suddenly ceased to be routine at 11.23 p.m. when, in the middle of relating her first dream, an eight-and-three-quarter minute one, 31, the plump woman, without warning, mentioned a

flash of colour dreaming. For an instant, she had seen an object with a dull metal sheen moving against a black, star-speckled background. Then she reverted to the rest of her normal dream.

Maxwell made a quick note of that. Something was happening, he realised, but what ?

The four other subjects dictated their first dreams but there was nothing out of the ordinary noted.

At 1.44 a.m., 45 began dreaming again. It occupied sixteen and-a-half minutes. To Maxwell and Jill it crawled past like aeons.

He hurried through the waking and recording procedure, anxious to hear the dream.

45 began to dictate.

" I am looking into a metallic grey room. There are consols on the walls. In the centre is a large globe. Five blobs are pulsating around it. One is dark blue, one pink, one yellow and two are green.

" The central globe is black with a lot of steadily shining stars of various colours and brightnesses. Just to the right of centre of the globe is a planet with rings round it.

" The blobs are pulsating excitedly and one of the green blobs detaches itself and goes over to a screen which comes to life with a pale grey light. The other blobs crowd round it as a close-up of the planet appears on the screen. The view is practically in plan. The rings are like great silver haloes round the yellow-white of the planet. The swirling atmosphere is quite plain.

" On the globe, the planet is gradually drifting towards the bottom.

" One of the green blobs activates another screen. Nine circles—well, *near*-circles—appear. A black line is visibly passing a ringed dot on the fourth circle from the outside, moving inwards. Even as I watch, the line is approaching the next circle.

" The dream faded out there."

While 45 went unconcernedly to sleep, Maxwell and Jill sat staring at each other.

" That black line is moving *fast*, isn't it ?" he remarked casually, at length, feeling not at all casual. He felt wound up like a rusty spring.

She nodded mutely, her eyes uneasy.

" Look—I know something about astronomy. There are nine planets in the Solar System. Nine circles. One of them, Saturn, has rings of ice or dust or something round it. I'm not sure just where it is but it *is* far out. So—"

" So," Jill interrupted in a flat monotone, " you think a ship is passing into the Solar System and moving. . . towards Earth."

He threw himself out of his chair. " Oh, this is too fantastic. A ship from another star, operated by coloured blobs, heading for Earth." He stood, gazing down at her, his hands thrust deep into his white smock pockets. " Why ?"

" I don't know, Ed. I'm frightened. I knew this would come to no good." She twisted her handkerchief till it was more like a piece of string.

" Now, now, we're becoming unscientific again."

She was about to flare up when a bell pinged. Seconds later, they listened in to the dream of 18, the restless young man. For fourteen minutes, his dream was ordinary, then :

" One minute I was riding bare back on the white stallion, going like the wind, then I was looking at an hexagonal-shaped spaceship, with the full Moon in the background. The ship was moving some, too. Quick as a flash, I was back on the horse, flying along the beach, holding on like grim death . . . "

" They're here !" His voice was cold and certain.

" But it's all *dreaming*, Ed ! It's queer, odd, call it what you will, but *dreaming* !"

" Full Moon," he muttered, walking a pace or two then stopping. " Diary ! Yes, that's it."

He dived a hand into an inside pocket and brought out a red diary. Quickly, he flicked over pages. " Here we are." His finger on the spot, he looked levelly at Jill. " Tonight is the full Moon," he said quietly.

Her hand flew to her throat and she stared at him helplessly.

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed along the corridor, slow, unhurried, measured.

" Who can that be ?"

" I don't know ; an orderly, maybe."

" Ed—I'm *frightened* !"

" I'll tell you something—so am I !"

She moved over beside him and stood close.

The footsteps stopped at the door and both their hearts almost stopped, too.

The handle rattled and turned.

The door opened.

Dr. Elliot came in.

Maxwell and Jill gave a collective sigh of relief.

Jill babbled, " You gave us such a fright, your footsteps sounded so sinister, Dr. Elliot. I—"

" I am not Dr. Elliot !" The voice was harsh, stilted, as if the owner wasn't used to the feel of it.

" I *knew* something was wrong !" Jill whimpered, half-turning towards the screens.

" Please ! You must listen !" Dr. Elliot's voice commanded as Maxwell started forward. The eyes ; grey, with amber flecks. Like 45's !

Jill screamed and pointed.

Cursing, Maxwell whirled. His mouth suddenly went dry as he looked at 45's screen. The thing behind him was momentarily forgotten.

45 was writhing on his cot. From his head was emerging . . . Watching in horror, Maxwell saw an elongated blob detach itself and assume globular shape.

Four blobs swam into view and quickly boxed the other in.

It attempted to dart away, then, as a blob attached itself to it, began to swell. Just as quickly, it shrivelled.

The four blobs floated through the wall with their prisoner.

Jill fainted.

As Maxwell stooped to pick her body up he sensed a lassitude creeping over him and he slumped into a chair.

From very far off, a voice spoke softly, " I am sorry, but we had to take our fellow-being back. He is a dangerous criminal who has been hiding on this planet for three hundred of your years, living on the nervous energy of many humans, changing bodies frequently.

" A searching Police vessel at last detected his ship and sent for help.

" Do not fear. The humans we have used have suffered no injury."

Maxwell listened dully, unable to do anything else.

" Now I shall erase all trace of what has happened from your memories. The records and the other people who know have been taken care of."

Maxwell experienced a not unpleasant warmth before his face. Then something seemed to implode in his head. Dr. Elliot's body was guided back out of the room.

The door closed.

Maxwell shook himself, blinked his eyes and gazed owlishly around. Funny, he thought, I must have fallen over.

He saw Jill on the floor.

Picking her up, he put her into a chair and shook her awake.

" What—what happened ?" she mumbled, running her fingers through her tumbled hair.

" You must have fainted . . . or something," he answered, thinking that she looked very attractive with her hair mussed.

A vague feeling nagged at the back of his mind, but, what the heck, he couldn't be bothered thinking *that* much. He got two cups of tea and they carried on for the short time remaining.

In the morning, he stood saying " cheerio " to the subjects as they went off home. 45 looked fresh, his pale blue eyes sparkling.

Eyes . . . eyes . . . something . . . but it eluded him.

He filed his report and walked out into the early sunshine.

Somehow, he was reluctant to go home.

Reluctant to sleep.

Reluctant to dream. *Donald Malcolm*

17th World Science Fiction Convention

As reported in our October 1958 issue, Detroit, Michigan, USA, was voted as the site of the 1959 World Convention. This will be held at the Pick-Fort Hotel from September 4th to 7th and has been nick-named " The Detention," which augers well for attendees !

European readers can support the Convention by enrolling their membership through the Convention's British representative, Mr. Ron Bennett, 7 Southways, Arthur's Avenue, Harrogate, Yorkshire, for only 7/2d, and will receive progress reports, a membership card, and the programme booklet, even if they cannot attend.

American readers should send $2.00 direct to : Detention, 12011 Kilbourne, Detroit 13.

All the major events in the Galaxy that are taking place between the Traders and Earth have their focal point in Richard Argyle, the man with 'something' for which both sides urgently want him—for entirely different reasons. The concluding instalment of our fast-paced serial.

A MAN CALLED DESTINY

By LAN WRIGHT

Conclusion

FOREWORD

Richard Argyle, maintenance engineer on the spaceship Lady Dawn *trading between the stars, is temporarily stranded on Jones' Planet when the drive unit is broken. He is approached by a man named Spiros who offers him a job with the Company Dellora, one of the largest trading combines in the galaxy, informing Argyle that his wife Angela, whom he had not seen for years, had been working for them but was now dead. Suspicious, Argyle agrees to meet Spiros on Rigel Five when his ship reaches there.*

Some weeks later the repaired Lady Dawn *arrives on Rigel Five and Argyle enquires for Spiros—only to find that he has been murdered. Involved with Lawman Sworder, head of the Rigellian Crime Squad, he learns that the murderer is probably a teleport —the first in the Galaxy—and because of Spiros' offer, Sworder suggests that he should visit Pietro Dellora, head of the Company, and find out what he wants.*

Argyle takes ship to Dellora Planet and eventually comes face to face with Pietro, a man so fat he lives in an artificial satellite outside the planet's atmosphere where his gross bulk is unaffected by gravity. Pietro tells Argyle that his wife Angela had the gift of precognition and because of what she could see in Argyle's future she had left him, eventually meeting her death in a mysterious spaceship explosion probably engineered by the unknown forces now trying to disrupt the commerce of the galaxy.

Argyle leaves Pietro without accepting a job with him. Later in his hotel he is awakened by a mysterious intruder who warns him not to meddle in his affairs and asks about a certain Preacher Judd, a person completely unknown to Argyle. After the intruder disappears Argyle finds a thin poisoned needle in the pillow beside his head. In a panic he disposes of it down the waste chute.

The next morning he is awakened by three Army officers who search his room and find a needle gun, produce the dart he had disposed of, and tell him Pietro Dellora was murdered during the night by just such a gun—and Argyle was the last to see him alive ! Placed under open arrest, Argyle is confined to the city limits, a sonic transmitter being chained to his wrist which records his whereabouts at Police HQ. Watching a TV news-cast Argyle sees a picture of Pietro's son Alfredo who is on his way to the planet—and is horrified to identify him as the teleport intruder. Realising he must escape from Dellora Planet he mingles with the evening crowds and eventually attacks a policeman, changes clothes with him, breaks the chain holding the sonic transmitter and reaches the spaceport before the alarm is raised.

Stowing away, Argyle returns to Rigel Five and reports to Lawman Sworder who tells him that Preacher Judd is Earth's leading politician at present preparing to make a stand against the Traders' encroachment into galactic commerce. He suggests that Argyle goes to Earth to see Judd and gives him a letter of introduction to Arnold Matheson in charge of the European Law Squad.

While waiting for a spaceship to Earth Argyle stays at an hotel and awakes one morning feeling ill. Later he finds an empty hypodermic syringe on his bedside table. An unsigned note suggests that he has the fluid analysed. It turns out to be a selective poison to which there is no antidote. A further note instructs him to report to the crew of a private spaceship the

following day—Alfredo Dellora has ensured getting Argyle away from Sworder without kidnapping him !

The spaceship delivers Argyle to an asteroid world two days' journey from Rigel Five where underground he meets Alfredo Dellora. Alfredo informs him that this time his death is assured and that his removal is necessary because he would have played too prominent a part in the affairs of the Company Dellora and that he had had to kill his father, Pietro, because he was too friendly towards Earth. Alfredo intended that the Traders should be all-powerful throughout the Galaxy. The spaceship having left, Alfredo teleports himself away, leaving Argyle to die of the poison.

Sworder, however, rescues Argyle, and they return to Rigel Five where every effort is made to find an antidote, but this is found to be unnecessary as the poison has become ineffective. Argyle reaches Earth and goes to London to report to Matheson, but is once again trapped in an hotel by Alfredo—this time Alfredo shoots and kills a jewel merchant named Grant, teleporting away and leaving Argyle with the gun and the body just as the Law Squad arrives. Argyle meets Matheson quicker than he expected but by this time Judd knows that Argyle is on Earth and arrangements are made to get Argyle off the planet despite the clear-cut charge of murder against him.

XV

Before he had very much time to think about it Argyle was in a Law Squad cruiser looking at the receding disc of Earth. The cruiser was a small interstellar craft with a crew of eight, and sufficient armament to make her feared by many a larger craft. The crew were all Lawmen ; tough, trained out of surprise, and quite unconcerned at the strangeness and speed of their assignment. How much they knew Argyle couldn't guess, but a last minute instruction from Matheson had puzzled him and set his nerves on edge once again.

" Don't tell anyone more than you have to about anything," Matheson had said. " The less anyone knows the less they'll by able to pass on to anyone else. Don't discuss the matter with the crew. They have their orders and they will carry them out. Beyond that, they aren't interested." He shook hands with Argyle and was gone from the small cabin.

Five minutes later the ship had taken off.

As the days passed it became clear that the crew—from the captain down—had received similar instructions. Argyle was made welcome in the mess, he ate with them, played games with them and chatted away the long hours. But never, even by the briefest comment, was there any reference to his presence aboard the ship or the reason for it. True, he found the ship's captain eyeing him speculatively on more than one occasion but the speculation stayed in the man's mind. It was never translated into words.

They were ten days out from Earth when the captain, a hefty young man named Palatzer, came to his cabin as Argyle lay reading on his bunk.

He knocked on the door and called, " Can I come in, Argyle ?"

Argyle swung his legs off the bunk. " Sure. Come ahead."

Palatzer slid the door open and stepped inside with a brief nod and a smile. He waved a white envelope at Argyle.

" This," he announced with ironic pomposity, " is zero hour. Matheson ordered me to give you this on the morning of the tenth day out from Earth. And here it is."

Argyle frowned and felt apprehension tug at his nerves. He took the envelope and broke the seal. Inside was a single sheet of white paper, and he read the few lines on it with ever growing bewilderment.

My Dear Argyle,

You are not going to Rigel Five as you suppose. That was purely for local consumption. Even Palatzer doesn't know differently yet. Judd decided that it was far too risky for anywhere as open and populous as Rigel Five to be used for a meeting place, and I agree with him. He knows what we are up against and I trust his judgment. I give below a set of space co-ordinates which you will hand to Palatzer. He is to change course for them as soon as he receives this note which you will pass on to him and from then on the matter is out of your hands and in his. Good luck.

Arnold Matheson.

Argyle read it through twice before the entire meaning made itself clear on his surprised mind. Matheson wasn't taking any chances—and neither was Judd. Wordlessly, he passed the letter to Palatzer who read it through with pursed lips and a deepening frown. When he'd finished he cocked an eye at Argyle.

" Any ideas about this ?"

Argyle shook his head.

" Well, I'll make a note of these figures."

" You'd better keep the letter," Argyle told him. " I shan't want it."

" It looks as if Matheson is being cautious to me," commented Palatzer. He grinned at Argyle. " Not that I have any idea as to why he has to be. I'll let you know at lunch how long it'll be before we reach our new position."

When Argyle went to lunch in the mess an hour later Palatzer grinned at him. " We don't know much more," he said. " Those co-ordinates are just empty space."

Argyle frowned. " That means another ship."

" Probably." Palatzer's grey eyes were fixed steadily on him and Argyle realised that the captain hoped he would continue talking. He applied himself to his food with some regret. It would be a relief to talk to someone, but if Matheson said he shouldn't—!

Palatzer sighed audibly, and bent to his own meal.

" Sorry." Argyle lifted his head and smiled across the table.

They reached the co-ordinates indicated in Matheson's letter four days later, and, as Argyle had assumed, another ship was waiting for them. It was a Law Squad ship of similar design to the one in which he had travelled from Earth. There was a brief exchange of signals by light before Argyle was shipped over in a powered space suit. During the entire exchange radio wasn't used once even though the nearest star was—according to Palatzer—four light years distant.

The skipper of the second ship was an even younger man than Palatzer. He was short and stocky with a rakish air of adventure, and he was obviously treating the whole affair with great seriousness. His name was Achmed Khan, and that, together with his dark skin, bespoke his ancestry. Argyle had him taped as being of Asian descent—probably an immigrant native of one of the Delphi worlds.

He showed Argyle to a cabin exactly similar to the one he occupied on Palatzer's ship, and then proceeded to bombard him with a tirade of questions about every aspect of what he termed, " this secret operation."

" You've been reading too many adventure stories," Argyle told him after a while. " Didn't they ever teach you not to ask too many questions in the Law Squad ?"

" Oh, sure." Achmed Khan was quite unabashed. " But who cares about that ? If you don't ask questions you don't get any answers. If you do that, how the hell are you going to know what goes on around you ?"

Argyle grinned. " Look, Achmed. You've had your orders. Right ?"

" Sure."

" What are they ?"

The youngster looked slightly embarassed. " Well—er—um, that is—"

" Can't tell me, eh ?"

" Well—er, no, I guess not."

" Same with me. All right ?"

Achmed Khan nodded vigorously and a huge grin spread across his chunky face. This was a man he could understand, and Argyle knew he had handled the youngster in just the right manner. There would be no further questions.

Their destination didn't show for six days, and when it did Achmed Khan didn't tell Argyle until the very last minute : even then he didn't say where they were. He called Argyle to the bridge on the morning of the sixth ship-day, and pointed to a bright disc of planetary size that gleamed in the heavens before them.

" There it is," he announced.

Argyle studied it with more than academic interest. There was slight apprehension as he realised that the comparative peace of his journey across space was over, and soon he would be back in the centre of the conflict.

" Where is it ?" he asked.

Achmed Khan tutted indignantly. " Some people ask too many questions," he stated pompously. " Seriously, though, Argyle, I'd better leave it to someone else to tell you. Even my crew doesn't know—and that's something I'll never live down."

The security of the whole project emphasised the importance which Judd attached to it. The fact that the ship wasn't allowed within one million miles of the world which shone ahead, was yet another indication to Argyle that security was being maintained at top level. Another craft came out to meet them, and Argyle had to shuttle himself across to it to complete his journey. He shook hands with Achmed Khan and went out through the airlock.

The crew of the pickup ship were nonentities he never got to know. The trip planetwards took bare hours, and he was too interested in speculating as to its identity to bother much about anything else.

As they drew near Argyle realised that they were headed for a dead world. There was no aura around the globe as there would have been had there been an atmosphere of any sort. It shone brightly, like a giant emerald, by the light of its parent star, but the markings on it were not familiar to Argyle. There were too many worlds that could have measured up to what he could see as they approached. There were scores of tiny globes scattered through the Galaxy whose only function was to guard and maintain the great trade routes ; they were oases of civilisation in the barren wastes of deep space that could render aid to stricken vessels who would not, otherwise, have reached the haven of a larger world. The great interstellar liners passed them by and ignored their existence—unless they were in trouble.

But which one this was Argyle couldn't guess.

They came in to land on a wide, flat plain. It was daylight, early afternoon from the position of the parent sun, but the sky was jet black and the surface of the world was ashimmer with sheer, black shadows. To the right of the field a large, elliptical dome swelled, gleaming, from the flatness of the terrain. It shone with inner lights and the low bulks of small buildings could be seen within it. Three smaller domes flanked it at safe distances, and Argyle knew that these housed the air plants and power rooms on which the tiny colony relied for its existence. On the edge of the great rock field he could see the shining hulks of four other ships, two of them fast cruisers, and two stubby, ungainly salvage ships with odd-shaped noses and blunt, powerful bodies. He knew he had been right in thinking of it as a security base. He climbed into a space suit which was given him and went out through the airlock in company with the captain and two other men. They crossed the uneven ground towards the gleaming bulk of the dome, and an armed guard passed them through the airlock into the interior.

Argyle snapped the catches on his suit helmet and lifted it from his head. As he did so he saw a group of men coming towards him from the entrance to one of the buildings. They drew nearer until he was able to pick out individuals.

The leader was Arnold Matheson.

Sheer incredulity made Argyle stop in his tracks, and Matheson's face broke into a smile of pure delight as he saw the expression on Argyle's. They shook hands, and Matheson said calmly. " Nice to see you, Argyle."

" How the hell— ?"

" Did I get here ?" Matheson chuckled. " You don't even know where you are, that is, if my orders were carried out."

" Well, where ?" demanded Argyle. " I've been shunted around so much I don't know whether it's Christmas time or—dammit, where am I ?"

" Centaurus One. Planet named Leemos," Matheson told him.

" What ?" Argyle's astonishment was complete. He knew of Leemos, it was the nearest extra solar planet to Earth and was used only as a crash depot. Earth was a bare four light years away.

" Let's go inside," Matheson took his arm and they went into the building and along a short corridor to a small but comfortable private room.

" This is yours while you're here," Matheson told him. " You'll stay here until Preacher Judd can get away from Earth, and that might be a week or two."

Argyle nodded. That made sense. Earth was barely three days direct flight away by a fast ship and Judd need only account for about a week of his time if he left.

" I still don't see why you didn't just bring me here without all that fuss with Palatzer and Khan," he said. " I've spent nearly three weeks travelling a distance that need only have taken three days."

Matheson pursed his lips seriously. " I thought it necessary to take as many precautions as we could—and so did Judd. He couldn't get away for several weeks and we thought it preferable to have you moving around as much as possible instead of sitting in one place. It was just as well we did."

Argyle looked at him quickly. " Why ?" he demanded.

" Palatzer's ship was attacked by two unidentified craft sixteen hours after you left it."

" My God !"

" There were no survivors."

Argyle dropped into a chair stunned and sickened by the news. The narrowness of this latest escape was not something which worried him—it was the mere fact that another attempt had been made ; that Dellora had sufficient resources to track

him in a Law Squad ship through the tightest of security blankets ; and finally, that a Law Squad ship had been attacked and destroyed.

War had started with a vengeance. He wondered how it would end.

" How did you know ?" he asked suddenly.

" We had a teepee aboard," said Matheson. " There were half-hourly checks with your ship from the time you left Earth. That's how much Preacher Judd values your safety."

Argyle rubbed his hands down over his face. The feeling was back again, stronger than ever, that he was part of a chain which both Judd and Dellora were fighting over. Judd was trying to keep it intact—Dellora was trying to break it, and his own fate rested on whoever was successful.

There could be no doubt now that the Traders were in real earnest about their challenge to Terran domination of the Galaxy. True, they were Terrans themselves, but racial pride had long since been subjugated beneath the ever-growing power they had accumulated. Unless Judd was strong enough and clever enough the future of the Galaxy lay in the hands of the Traders—and, from what he had seen, Argyle did not relish the prospect.

The next few days were spent in idleness and speculation. Matheson didn't leave him alone for long, and even when Matheson wasn't there two of his agents were always within reach ready and waiting, Argyle knew, to blast anyone who appeared too suddenly or too suspiciously. During the long period of waiting Argyle had the opportunity of talking for long hours with Matheson, and he was able to develop and extend his ideas under the Lawman's careful interest and prompting. There opened before him vistas which he hadn't considered before, and there was a considered confirmation from Matheson on many of the ideas which he had already thought out. The only one of which there was any disagreement, was the subject of Dellora's original attempt to murder Argyle. They talked about it on several occasions and Matheson said suddenly one day, " I can't see it as an attempt not to kill you, Argyle."

" That's double talk, I must say."

Matheson grinned. " No, what I mean is, Dellora meant to kill you—he wasn't simply trying to frame you with his father's

murder. That came later when he realised he hadn't killed you."

" I don't understand."

" Look at it this way." Matheson leaned forward in his chair. " It couldn't matter to Dellora whether you were dead or alive. No one knew he was a teleport as far as he was aware, therefore what was the point of trying to frame you for murder? You would have been as well out of the way dead as you would have been locked up in prison with a murder charge hanging over you. I think he tried to kill you and missed his aim in the darkness—"

" But I told you he flashed a light."

" Still, it might not have been enough to make sure of his aim. Once you had woken he decided against another attempt since it was obvious that you didn't realise what had happened. Then he saw a brilliant opportunity to put you out of the way without any more trouble. He planted the gun and tried to frame you for the murder of his father. He'd have succeeded, too, if you hadn't managed to get off that planet."

" He's had ample opportunity since then to put me safely out of the way," Argyle pointed out morosely.

" Yes, that puzzles me." Matheson studied his fingertips for several long seconds. " One can only assume that he hoped to avoid actual murder—"

" Look, Matheson, I've been over this a hundred times in my own mind," broke in Argyle. " Why should he want to avoid actual murder when he had already killed two men—one of them his own father ?"

Matheson nodded reluctantly. " There's something that just escapes me. I don't think I have quite enough knowledge to put all the facts together. Somewhere there is a key—"

" Preacher Judd has it."

" Yes, that's probably true," admitted Matheson. " All we can do is to wait for him to come."

That night he slept heavily and was awakened early by Matheson who knocked on his door and entered without waiting for an acknowledgement.

" You'd better get up and dressed, Argyle," he said abruptly. " Armadeus Judd is arriving within the hour."

" What ?" Argyle was awake in an instant.

" Just had a call from his ship in code. You'll have time for breakfast and that's about all."

" Right with you." Argyle jumped out of his divan and set about a hasty toilet. He joined Matheson in the canteen fifteen minutes later and they ate a hearty breakfast together.

Argyle felt a mounting tension of excitement within him as the minutes ticked by and brought nearer the arrival of Preacher Judd.

" Worried ?" asked Matheson as they drank a third coffee.

" No." Argyle grinned. " No, not worried. A little apprehensive, maybe. I've lived with this thing too long to be worried any more. I just want to know what I'm fighting, that's all."

Matheson nodded. " Some things can go on too long."

" That's an understatement. Four attempts to kill me and you say it can go on too long."

Matheson smiled. " I still keep thinking—" He shook his head. " I don't know."

" I believe your more worried than I am."

" No, just puzzled. Somewhere along the line there is a link that I can't fit in, and when a thing like that happens I can't forget it. I suppose that's what makes me a good Lawman."

A bell rang, muted, over the station's intercom and a voice announced, " Ship for landing in five repeat five minutes. Landing crews close up. No repeat no emergency."

" I should hope not." Matheson drained his cup. " Come on, let's make it to the lock."

They left the canteen and walked the few hundred yards to the main airlock. As they arrived they could see the distant line of lights that marked the approaching ship as she came down from the star-flecked heavens. The light within the dome dimmed their view but they could see enough to know that the ship was big. High above, almost out of range of the naked eye, Argyle could make out other dots of light that circled slowly and twisted in and out in a complicated pattern. He pointed up to them and asked Matheson what they were.

" Escort," replied Matheson briefly. " Judd isn't taking any chances, and I can't say I blame him."

The great bulk of the ship came down as gently as a feather to rest on the white bed of the rocky field. Amidships a blaze of light announced the opening of the main hatch and several bulky, spacesuited figures appeared. They moved laboriously down the landing ramp and walked towards the airlock.

Argyle watched them in silence.

" Argyle," said Matheson softly. " I know what it is that I couldn't figure out."

The excitement of the moment slipped away as something in the man's voice registered on Argyle's senses. He looked at Matheson sharply.

" When you took the sample of that selective drug to that chemist—what was his name ?"

" Ramchand ?"

" Yes, Ramchand. He analysed it and said that it was dangerous."

" I told you so !"

" Then if it was dangerous at that time it must have been equally dangerous when it was injected into you. Mustn't it ?"

A cold hand slid over Argyle's heart. The airlock began to whine, and the suited figures stepped in through the outer door. They paused while it closed and the inner one began to open. There was something in Matheson's questions that struck fear into Argyle's very being. He couldn't define it or explain it, but it was there. The figures began to remove their helmets and the massive, craggy features of Armadeus Judd came clear into view. What was Matheson hinting at ? Judd moved forward, closely followed by the escort of figures around him. He dominated the scene with his presence, and the power of his personality dimmed everything, even the fear that had risen in Argyle's mind.

Matheson stepped forward and bowed slightly.

" Mister Minister. May I present Richard Argyle."

XVI

Argyle pushed the questions frantically aside as Matheson's words brought to him the necessity of concentration on other things. A slight feeling of awe brought apprehension to him as Judd stepped forward with his hand outstretched, and Argyle took it automatically.

" Mister Argyle. I have been waiting for this meeting for a very long time."

His grip was as powerful as his frame promised it to be, and Argyle had full and early knowledge of his physical strength. He towered over the figures grouped around him, topping Argyle's own six foot one by a good head. The bulky shape-

lessness of the space suit added weight and power to his figure, and the dark pools of his eyes had an almost hypnotic aura about them. Argyle realised, too, that the speech he had heard on the videoscreen had robbed Judd's voice of a lot of its inherent power. The dozen words which had been addressed to him in greeting made a deeper and more lasting impression than the several thousand that had boomed at him from the speaker of the video set.

In all his presence Armadeus Judd was a figure of imposing dignity and frightening power.

Argyle tried to say something in reply but his mouth was dry and his tongue got tangled up somehow. He bobbed his head in greeting and managed a slight, ineffectual smile.

" Everything quiet, Matheson ?" asked Judd.

" Yes, sir. No trouble since we arrived. I expect you know about the ship which brought Argyle from Earth ?"

" Captain Palatzer ? Yes." Judd's lips tightened and his face settled into hard, uncompromising lines. "A bad business. It gives us a clear idea of what we are up against. The Traders are beginning to show their hands, and they must be well informed of our intentions."

Argyle realised in sudden panic that he hadn't uttered a single word so far.

" I think," remarked Judd, " that I should like to get rid of this suit as a first step."

Matheson smiled. " Of course. Your quarters are ready, sir. How long do you think you'll be staying ?"

" I do not know. It depends on the situation at home. I think it unlikely that I shall stay longer than three days. I may be forced to leave tomorrow."

They moved slowly away towards the building in which Judd and his party were to be housed. Matheson went with them and so did Argyle. Two of the party had ' Lawman ' written all over them, and Argyle knew they must be Judd's personal bodyguard. He tagged aimlessly in the rear of the party and looked at the others who made up the group. Two of them were sleek-haired young men who carried stylopens and notebooks almost as if they were weapons. Two more were clearly spacemen, the gleam of their officer's markings showing on the shoulders of their suits. The last and most unobtrusive of the group was a small, thin man of quite indeterminate age who seemed lost in the bulk of a small-sized suit. Argyle studied him with interest but he could not see his

face, and he could not even begin to label his use in Judd's official party.

Judd and Matheson chatted together as they walked, and from their glances and gestures it was clear that Judd was asking questions about the dome and the colony which nestled beneath it. Once Judd turned to one of the sleek-haired men and made a long comment which was noted on the pad.

The whole group paused inside the entrance lobby of the accommodation building and one of the staff indicated which rooms had been allocated to each person.

" I hope you will be comfortable here, sir," said Matheson. It's the best we can do under the circumstances."

Judd chuckled cavernously. " Comfort is the least of my worries, Matheson. At least, while I am here, I shall not have every pompous politician on Earth dropping in to see me with his latest idea on how to solve the troubles we are in." He turned his attention to Argyle. " I should be grateful, Mister Argyle, if you would call upon me in a short while. I want to have a long talk with you as soon as possible in case I am forced to return hurriedly to Earth. Matheson, perhaps you will check with Janus about nine thirty. That should give me time to make myself comfortable."

" Of course, sir."

Judd nodded and smiled amiably before passing inside his rooms.

Matheson turned away down the corridor, and Argyle wandered after him, feeling like an interloper to some high and important group who hadn't noticed his existence. He expected to be thrown out any minute.

" Who's Janus ?" he asked Matheson as they reached the main lobby.

" Janus ? He's Judd's personal attendant," replied Matheson. " The little fellow with the face like a pekinese."

" Was that him who followed Judd into his suite ? I didn't get a good look at him."

" Yes. Judd never lets him out of his sight. He goes everywhere with him."

" Everywhere ?"

Matheson nodded. " Acts as secretary at all his meetings and conferences, takes notes, keeps records, handles all the important correspondence. He's Judd's servant too."

Argyle's eyebrows arched in surprise.

" And bodyguard," continued Matheson. " Shares Judd's quarters, carries a needle gun." Matheson shrugged. " You name it, and Janus is it as far as Judd is concerned." They turned left out of the entrance in the direction of the canteen. " Let's have some more coffee. I can do with it."

He drank hot coffee with disinterested silence, brooding and moody, until Matheson asked, " What do you think of him ?"

" Judd ?" Argyle shrugged. " He seems quite a guy. That's quite a party he totes around with him."

Matheson smiled. " Not half as big as those of his predecessors in office. The Minister before him never went anywhere without at least thirty people tagging along. There was one named Harding about fifteen years back who had a staff of seventy-three. They went everywhere with him. Harding's Three Ring Circus they used to call it."

" I remember him vaguely. Were they all necessary ?"

" To Harding they were. He needed them to carry on his job as First Minister. Judd gets by with five normally—seven when he leaves Earth. When you consider all the work he has to do, it's a wonder he manages with so small a staff. I've heard it said that he can give a decision on anything in two minutes, and he's never wrong. That's the secret of his success. He has the ability to study any problem objectively for a very short time and then give a prompt and concise evaluation of it, without needing to think about it for days on end. He rarely calls in any experts to advise him, and that saves a lot a time, of course."

" He sounds quite a man."

" He is. I think he is the only man I know who could cope with things as they are in the Galaxy today."

Argyle looked up quickly, and saw from the set of Matheson's face how utterly sincere he was.

" You mean—the Traders ?"

" And Alfredo Dellora." Matheson looked at his watch. " Wait here, I'll see if Judd's ready for us."

By the time Argyle had drained the last of his coffee Matheson was back.

" Ten minutes," he remarked briefly. " If we stroll across now and take it slowly we shan't be too early."

They left the canteen and made their way at a leisurely pace towards the accommodation building once again. " Here we are," said Matheson. " All set."

Argyle nodded, and they walked down the wide corridor to the room which Judd was occupying. Matheson knocked and the door was opened by the tiny figure of Janus. As Matheson had said earlier, Janus had a face like a pekinese now that Argyle could see it clearly. He smiled and opened the door wider to let them in.

" Mister Judd is ready for you now." His voice was high and piping, and Argyle reflected that, incongruous though it might be, it was just the voice he had expected the little man to possess.

Janus waved them to separate chairs and disappeared into the inner room. A few moments later the massive figure of Judd appeared, clad in a black dressing gown with a dazzling floral design woven in gold and silver thread against the midnight background.

" Ah, gentlemen." He smiled impartially on them both. "I must apologise for keeping you." The black pools of his eyes settled on Matheson. " And I must apologise further to you, Matheson."

" To me, sir ?" Matheson looked surprised.

Judd nodded. " In advance. I wish to see Mister Argyle alone. What we have to talk about is for our ears alone."

Matheson turned his startled gaze on Argyle who met it with equal bewilderment. There was a moment of silence while Matheson gathered the remnants of his shattered pride around him and retired with as much dignity as he could muster.

" Please, sit down, Mister Argyle."

Judd took his seat in a deep chair facing Argyle, and the small figure of Janus settled in another chair at the side of him. On a table was set a tridi map of the Galaxy—a transparent block about a foot square, the interior of it shone with a myriad points of light and the centre was a globe of red. Not quite a globe, Argyle realised as he looked at it, it was oval-shaped with slight irregularities here and there as though the maker's hand had trembled as he fashioned it.

" I carry that with me everywhere I go," remarked Judd softly as he saw Argyle's eyes fixed upon it. " It isn't a very accurate representation of the Galaxy. There are only about one tenth of the stars depicted there that exist in the reality. Only the most important are shown." He sat on the edge of his chair and pointed his finger deep into the heart of the shimmering cube. " If you look closely into the centre of the red sphere, Mister Argyle, you will see a small, blue dot. It is a little bigger and brighter than the rest on the map."

Argyle leaned closer and looked as Judd directed him.

" Yes," he replied, after a minute. " Yes, I see it."

" That dot represents our sun, Argyle, the sun of Earth and Mars and Venus. It is very small compared with the vastness around it. You will see that it sits almost in the centre of the red globe, and that red globe encompasses the sphere of Man's conquests." The black eyes swivelled sombrely and fixed Argyle's gaze with almost hypnotic compulsion. " I carry that tridi map to remind me of the greatness of the Human Race, and to remind me of the vast responsibilities which lie on my shoulders—and on the shoulders of every living man, be he Earthman or Colonist or Trader. Whatever he is, and whatever he does, the responsibility, in some small measure, for that vast area is mine and yours and Matheson's—every man owns some part of it. Earth is a small world on the rim of the Galaxy, but by her own power and by the power of her people, the centre of Galactic affairs rests on that small planet. Without that centre of control can you imagine what would result ? It isn't hard when you think about it—and I've been thinking about it for many years." The dark eyes bored into Argyle's. " In a word Mister Argyle, chaos."

Argyle sat very still, a feeling of awe sweeping over him as the resonant voice hammered home facts which he had never even bothered to think about before. In a few short sentences Preacher Judd had shaped and altered his entire concept of human life and responsibility.

" A long time ago, Argyle," went on Judd more softly now, " two men met by chance at a dinner party given by an obscure Terran ambassador on a planet whose name really doesn't matter any more. Whether it was the influence of good food and good wine, or whether it was the simple meeting of like minds, is not important either, but that meeting changed the lives of both of them. In a few short minutes—certainly no longer than an hour—they opened up between them the concept which I have just outlined, and because they knew a little more than the average man and cared a little more than the average politician, they were able to determine the road along which mankind was heading. Neither of them liked very much what they saw. Any other two men might have left it at that—just another stimulating conversation that was an offshoot of a dinner party, but these two were different. They parted after an hour and never met again, but they kept in touch and what they did separately and together thereafter

went a long way towards shaping the destinies of the Human Race and of the rest of the Galaxy." He paused and drew in his breath deeply before expelling it in a long sigh. " Now, those plans are threatened. One of those men is dead, and without his power and help the other is very nearly helpless."

The words drifted away into silence as Argyle sat tense with concentration.

" I think—" he whispered and stopped. He had spoken without even realising that he was going to.

" Yes ?" asked Judd softly. " What do you think, Argyle?"

" I think that one of those men was—you." He stopped in sudden fear at his own boldness. Then, encouraged, he said more loudly, " And the other was Pietro Dellora."

Judd chuckled drily and nodded. There was a note of sadness in his voice as he said, " Yes. The other was Pietro Dellora. I only met him once and yet we were closer than brothers. That meeting took place nearly thirty years ago, just before Pietro's father died and he succeeded to the ownership of the Company Dellora. And that, really, is the beginning of the story." He relaxed in his chair, and so did Argyle as he sensed that Judd was going to take his time in the telling of his tale.

" Pietro Dellora was very much the senior partner," went on Judd. " He was born to power, and he inherited power. I had to work for it and earn it the hard way. Only in the past eight or nine years have I been able to match Dellora's ideas and help him in their execution. Before that time we both planned the way things should develop, but only he was in a position to do anything about it. I could only stand and watch, suggest, criticise and applaud."

Under the deep, sonorous voice of the speaker Argyle's mind built up the picture that it was meant to see. The appellation ' Preacher ' was a natural adjunct to the oratorical abilities of Armadeus Judd, and every word he spoke came alive in the mind of the listener. Judd told of the growing power of the Traders, of Dellora's fight to keep the growth of mankind where it truly belonged—in the hands of all men, not just the select few. The Traders had the power and the means to finance, to explore, to colonise and to exploit the vast outer reaches of the Galaxy. By the power of their fleets they could strangle the economy of Earth and the Solar System, and force the colony worlds to accept domination and control of their

resources because of one, simple factor. The Traders controlled communications.

The vast industrial and financial empires of Earth in Pre-Stellar days, had financed and built the ships for the stars. True, they had been backed by government co-operation—but their price for the services they gave was franchise in the territories that were to be conquered. It had seemed a small thing in those far-off days when Earth had spawned her stellar legions, but from small beginnings had grown the mightiest empires of power that Man had ever know. They were greater than governments, more powerful than ministers ; their wealth grew with their power, and the centres of that power shifted, inevitably, outwards and away from Earth. The bonds of sentiment died under the demands of more power, and as the Traders grew so did Earth's dominion dwindle.

Only one thing held them in check. Pietro Dellora !

" And now, Pietro Dellora is dead," ended Judd sadly. "Only one person stands between the Traders and the complete domination of the Galaxy."

" Armadeus Judd." Argyle's statement was flat and hard.

" No, Argyle." Judd shook his head. " Not I. On my own I can only strangle myself in the web which the Traders are weaving."

" Then who ?"

" You, Argyle." Judd leaned forward in his chair, the black eyes boring into Argyle's. " You are the only man who stands between Alfredo Dellora and his personal ambition as leader of the Traders. All they are waiting for is for Dellora to give them a positive sign, and, were it not for you, that sign would have been given months ago."

Argyle didn't feel surprise or shock. This was what he'd waited to hear for so many weeks. Sworder had been right when he suggested that Judd could supply the answers. Now, apprehension was all Argyle felt. All fear and surprise had long been drained from him, and he felt only the apprehension that precedes the answer to a question. The months of wonder and tension had built to a climax which was dead of all emotion.

" Why me ?" he asked slowly.

Judd relaxed again. " In a moment. First, you must realise that the Company Dellora is the largest and most powerful of all the Traders. Through old Pietro and his ancestors it was pledged to support and aid the home world—Earth. In the

face of a combination like that the rest of the Traders dare not make a move."

" Go on."

" Second," Judd ticked the point off on the fingers of his left hand, " Dellora knew his son. He knew his lust for power, and he knew in which direction it would turn. He knew, too, that Alfredo was a teleport."

" What ?" Argyle sat up straight, shocked by the information. " How ?"

" Do you think a son—a growing boy—could keep such a secret from his father ?" Judd shook his head. " Pietro was a shrewd man, and he kept to himself those things that would show no profit by being revealed. He could not trust his son with the power that was represented by the Company Dellora, so he took steps to remove that power from Alfredo's attainment." Judd sighed. " I know just how long old Pietro searched for a solution. He realised, when Alfredo was in his late teens, just what his son was like, but it was only in the past six or eight years that he had the means to do something about it."

Argyle stirred restlessly.

" Your wife provided the solution," said Judd softly.

" Angela ! But—"

" As a result of what she told Pietro about you, and as a result of enquiries over a long period, Pietro Dellora decided to nominate you as the head of the Dellora Company on his death."

The silence which followed Judd's words could almost be felt. Argyle sat more stunned and shocked than he had ever been in his life before, than he had ever believed possible. He gripped at the side of his chair and swayed slightly in sheer, numb surprise. The confusion in his mind raged and roared like a maelstrom as utter disbelief tried to flood the sense of Judd's calm statement.

" That's ridiculous—!"

" But it is true."

" I—but, why me ?" Argyle stared blankly at Judd as he found his voice was able to express his torrent of incredulity. " He—he never knew me. We only met once, and he was dead an hour later. It just doesn't make sense ! Dammit, Judd, I wanted answers not fantasies."

" It isn't fantasy, it is true," persisted Judd calmly.

Argyle could have no doubt that Judd was speaking the truth. He wasn't the sort of man to make wild, unproven statements in such circumstances as these. If he said it was so, then Argyle could be very sure that he knew beyond fear of contradiction that indeed it was so. When he thought about it, was it so ridiculous ? At least it would account for Dellora's murderous attacks which, until now, made no sense whatever. A motive such as that would account for almost any homicidal effort which Alfredo Dellora might try.

" The will was registered secretly in the Inter-Galactic Bureau of Records about a year ago," went on Judd. " A large block of private shares was transferred to your wife and, through her death, to you. Six medical specialists testified to Pietro's sanity—without knowing why they were called upon to do so."

Argyle leaned forward, his head in his hands.

" Only Pietro, his lawyers, your wife and myself knew of this, but with the precautions he took any authority in the Galaxy will uphold your right to the succession of the Company Dellora, unless—" Judd paused significantly.

Argyle lifted his head. " Unless—what ?"

" Unless you disappear."

Argyle laughed without humour. " Or die, is that it ?"

" I heard a recording of the story you told to Matheson after the murder of that jeweller," remarked Judd with sudden incongruity.

" Sigmund Grant ? What has he to do with this ?"

" Nothing. The most important thing was the story you told Matheson. I listened to it, and while I listened the whole thing fell into place. All the facts which you found so puzzling were quite clear to me." He shrugged. " I must admit to having some prior knowledge—more, at any rate, than you did. Even so, I think you could have come up with the right answers if you'd thought sufficiently about it and allowed your imagination more rein, all the clues were there for you to see."

Argyle rubbed his hands over his face. His head ached slightly, and his pulse was racing. He felt suddenly angry at the pressure of events that were piling up around him. He was annoyed with Judd's methodic logical extrapolation of facts and events.

" Hell," he snapped. " Get to the point, Judd. Only one thing makes sense. With me dead Alfredo would inherit the Company Dellora with no one to stop him—right ?"

Judd chuckled. "Ipso facto. Yes. Argyle, how many attempts have been made on your life?"

"Dammit. Four."

"Correction. One?"

"For heavens sake—!"

"Only one," went on Judd calmly, "and that was the poisoned needle gun after the murder of Pietro."

"Then what the hell do you call the others?"

"They weren't attempts on your life, they were mere efforts to put you out of the way and so render the conditions of Pietro's will invalid."

"What's the difference?" demanded Argyle angrily.

"Argyle," Judd leaned forward in his chair. "Why didn't Alfredo kill you any one of the half dozen opportunities he had? Why didn't he kill you with the needle gun that killed his father?"

Argyle shrugged. "He tried and missed—that's why."

"Then why didn't he try again?"

Argyle was silent.

Judd stabbed a finger at him. "You thought he merely wanted to put you out of the way because he dare not murder you. Yet he dared to murder Spiros and his father and Sigmund Grant—and your wife."

Argyle's head jerked up. "You think he killed Angela?"

"I know he did. Now. With all that behind him, why should he stop at killing you?"

"I don't know—perhaps he feared me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. He didn't fear you that much. One final point—the selective drug he injected into you. It was dangerous, Ramchand proved that. You thought it was simply an effort to get you quietly off Rigel Five without resorting to violence."

"Well, it worked."

"Why should he go to all that trouble when he knew the poison would kill you?"

Argyle ran a hand through his hair and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "I don't know. Maybe he didn't want a body lying around."

"Maybe, always maybe," taunted Judd. "Hasn't it dawned on you yet, Argyle. Dellora didn't kill you because he couldn't."

Argyle gaped at him dazedly.

"You can't be killed, Argyle," said Judd softly.

XVII

" The Galaxy is aswarm with novelty," Judd's voice droned on deep and sonorous. " The mind of Man giving up it's secrets, Argyle, because Man himself is being forced to adapt himself to new and everchanging conditions. When we were mere planetary creatures we needed nothing but our own ingenuity and ability to think. Then, as our world expanded around us, so the mind of Man expanded too. We stretched our wings out across the deeps of space and reached the stars, and with the changing status of our race the mind of Man gave forth its power so that Man himself could adapt to the ever changing needs of the Universe. We accept the teepees for what they are—the means by which we communicate across the vastness of space between the stars. Levitators and Pyrotics are just growing out of the low status, of clever entertainers. Your wife was a prognosticator—possibly one of the best we've had to date. Dellora is a teleport, and his father was a kineticist. All these things are new and unexplored, and there are a dozen others we know about, who can be useful in the growing community of Interstellar Man. In every generation there are more people born with odd gifts that show the adaptability of the species to new and strange conditions. You, Argyle," Judd paused for one instant, " are the first of a new branch of the family—the Immortals."

Argyle gazed at him in stark horror.

Judd smiled slightly. " It's a frightening name, but not strictly correct. The average life span of a man today is one hundred and seven years, roughly. The term Immortal applies to a person whose life span is more than treble that period. There have been several of them known to us over the past century or so—men and women whose bodily metabolism is so slowed down that the ageing processes do not act so quickly or so effectively on them. They are in the prime of life for periods estimated at two and a half centuries. I say estimated because those we know of are still the subject of study and research, and the period of their lives is put at a three and a half centuries by the study of their bodies."

" And they—" the words stuck in Argyle's dry throat, " they can't be—be killed ?"

" Oh, yes. They can be killed. It is you who are the next step in the line. Once the body adapts itself to fighting off old age there are other things to which it must also adapt itself.

The destruction of outside causes of death—the sheer, primeval ability to survive. Survival has been the basic instinct of Man ever since he first evolved into a thinking creature, and now his mind has taken up the battle which was, until now, a purely physical thing. For centuries man's body was a prey to many and varied types of death. Germs, viruses and diseases of a myriad kinds took their toll of the human race. The race survived because it adapted itself physically and mentally. It learned to fight artificial death with means until death by disease became no longer a thing to be feared. The ability to survive has spread to the mind and been transmitted to the body. Any form of artificial death aimed at yourself is nullified by your bodily mechanism which is, in turn, controlled by your mind. That is why the poison died in your body, that is why Dellora failed to kill you with the needle gun."

" But he couldn't know such a thing," protested Argyle incredulously. " No one could have known—I didn't know myself." He shook his head in sheer dazed bewilderment. " Even now I—I can't bring myself to believe it. It's too horrible to think about." He dropped his head into his hands. " No one could have known."

" Your wife knew."

" Angela ? But how ?"

" Why do you think she left you ? After all, she loved you, didn't she ?"

Argyle nodded dumbly.

" Do you think any woman could stay with a man who was, seemingly, eternally youthful, while she lost her youth and slipped into the wrinkles and sterility of old age ?" Judd shook his head. " No woman could stand that, Argyle, no matter how much she loved a man."

" But she couldn't know."

" She was a prognosticator, wasn't she ? A very good one according to Pietro Dellora. She could predict the future based on current data with ninety-eight per cent accuracy. You lived together for a long enough period for her to be able to predict the course of your lives together. And what she saw drove her from you."

There was a dull ache in Argyle's being. His head reeled and his whole body felt as if it had been pummelled unmercifully so that every muscle reflected soreness and distress. His

mouth was dry and his brow feverish, his whole physical being seemed steeped in discomfort. He could not doubt Judd's words. Every piece of the vast complicated puzzle that had been with him for so long fell into position, everything was answered, every entry in the catalogue checked, ticked and filed neatly in its own place. The few odds and ends that remained were unimportant details that would, in time, find their own level in the scheme of things.

" Who told you all this ?" he demanded dully.

" Pietro Dellora."

" Then why didn't he tell me ? He denied all knowledge of it the only time we met."

" Simply because it was the first time. He couldn't tell you much within an hour of meeting you for the first time. He did the next best thing by offering you a job so that you could be with him and near him for a long period. The rest would have come later—if he had lived."

Argyle nodded. He stumbled to his feet, eager only to get out of the room and back to his own quarters. There was too much to think about, too much to know, too much to learn, and he could only do it on his own. Judd stood up too, realising with apparent intuition the need of the younger man.

" If I am called suddenly back to Earth," he said, " will you come with me ?"

Argyle nodded, his hand already on the door handle. " Of course."

He stumbled out leaving it open behind him, and somehow found his way back to his room. He passed Matheson in the entrance lobby, but didn't see him. Matheson moved towards him, and stopped as he saw the white, shaken agony of the man. Too clearly, Argyle needed to be alone.

He reached his room, slammed the door shut, and threw himself down on the bed with his head in the softness of the pillow. The physical fact of shutting out sight from his eyes was symbolic of the desire to shut out knowledge from his mind. The seconds passed into minutes and the minutes into an hour as he wrestled with his mental turmoil as though it was a physical enemy to be sought out and conquered. Gradually, his body relaxed, his mind quietened, and from the chaos emerged the dull acceptance of inevitability.

He glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was well past midday, local time. It was almost three hours since he had first

gone into Preacher Judd's suite to talk with him. Those three hours had changed his life, and Argyle had wit enough to realise it, and sense enough to recast his thinking along new lines. One inescapable fact emerged from the welter of his new consciousness. Judd had said that only he could save Earth and the rest of the Galaxy from domination by Alfredo Dellora and the Traders. That might be true, but it was equally true that without Judd to advise and help him he wouldn't stand an earthly chance of coming out on top in any clash with Dellora and the Traders. In fact, if the Traders took it into their heads to act now, then all the laws and edicts and authorities in the Galaxy wouldn't be able to force acceptance of Pietro Dellora's will. The old edict of possession being nine points of the law would hold just as true as it had for centuries past. The trump card in the Trader's hand was their control of communications. Only one comparable power to their own might have existed, and that was a combination of Earth and the Company Dellora.

And if Alfredo Dellora could separate the Company Dellora from Earth, then his battle was three parts won. Argyle realised grimly that even now action on his part might be too late. Action, if it was taken, would have to be taken now.

He would have to see Judd again.

He rose from the bed and crossed to the door, pausing with his hand on the handle before leaving the room. What happened in the next hour or two might settle the fate of Earth and the whole Galaxy for centuries to come. How different was his position now compared with yesterday. An obscure space engineer named Richard Argyle held the fate of the Universe in his blunt, strong hands. Somehow the weight did not seem heavy on his shoulders.

The gnome-like figure of Janus opened the door as he knocked, and there was no question of his admission as soon as the man saw who had knocked. He stepped inside and saw Judd relaxed upon the divan reading a heavy book.

Judd looked up as he entered and smiled his welcome. "How do you feel, Argyle ?"

" I'll live."

" Good." Judd put the book down and gestured at it briefly. " I never could get used to microfilm and autoreaders. If people knew I read books it might destroy their confidence in me."

" It might enhance it. The average man has a great regard for idiosyncrasies in his elected representatives."

Judd nodded and smiled. " I shall have to think about that, Argyle. It might be useful if I ever need an election gimmick. Well, what can I do for you ?"

Argyle sat down in the same chair that he had occupied on his previous visit. " I don't think you're going to like this, Judd, but I can see only one way of getting at Alfredo and the Traders."

" And that is ?"

" Head for Dellora Planet at once and establish my legal right and title to the assets of the Company Dellora. Once we're on Dellora and are sure of our position we break the news all over the Galaxy through the teepees. Until then, we clamp down on teepee communication from Earth and the neighbouring systems. That way we might be able to keep Dellora and the Traders in the dark about our movements until it's too late."

Judd looked at him speculatively. " You didn't waste any time, Argyle. By ' we ' I assume you want me to accompany you to Dellora ?"

Argyle nodded. " You and your escort ships up there are the only force likely to establish me on Dellora. With your authority and that squadron of ships I might take over Dellora Planet, and that'll be the first step to taking over the Company. After that—" he shrugged and left the sentence hanging significantly.

Judd looked away and pondered deeply. Clearly, he was bothered about the fact that he would have to remain absent from Earth for a considerable period, and in that Argyle could not help him. But, if Judd would come to Dellora Planet—!

" All right. I'll come." Judd lifted his head and spoke decisively. " I'll get a teepee hook-up with Earth to cover my absence. Janus, fix that." He looked at Argyle. " I'll lay on an Earth ship to bring photostat copies of the relevant documents from the Galactic Records Bureau. Oh, yes, and at the same time they can bring a Central Court order enforcing the terms of Pietro's will. It's only paper but it will strengthen our hand." He grinned slightly. " People have an odd fear of pieces of paper with legal phrases and impressive signatures. They fear them more than guns or weapons."

" What if Dellora gets wind of this ?"

" I'll freeze the teepee lines."

" What ?" Argyle gaped at him. " Can you do that ?"

" I can cover Terran controlled planets, and that should be enough. The Trader's own teepees can't operate if there's no one to operate with." He nodded. " Yes, I'll take care of that."

" It may be too late."

" We'll take that chance." Judd got off the divan and waved an arm at him. " Now get out of here, Argyle. I've got to fix up a government on Earth while I'm away. Be ready in—say, eighteen hours. Oh ! And send Matheson in on your way out. I'll use him as a messenger in one of the escort ships back to Earth. And you get a good night's sleep. You look as if you need it."

Argyle laughed and turned towards the door. As he opened it Judd called to him again.

" Argyle."

He turned back.

Judd looked at him sombrely across the width of the large room. " As from now, this minute, we've got a fight on our hands, boy. How do you feel ?"

" Does it matter ?" Argyle smiled crookedly. " If we fail, I'll have three centuries to think about it !"

XVIII

Earth was far distant now. Sixty light-years and twelve weeks of monotony lay between the squadron and their home world. The single giant cruiser with its attendant guard of eight smaller ships had lanced away from Leemos, by-passing the main trade routes and carving a straight path towards Dellora Planet. In almost three months they had encountered only one other vessel, and that was the small scout that had brought the documents from the Galactic Records Bureau. The pre-arranged rendezvous had been simply and precisely made, and Judd was as well-armed for the future as he could be. The two teepees had made no contact with their fellows on other planets, and Argyle was forced to admit that Judd did things as efficiently as he had promised. The lone exception to the teepee links was that with Earth itself. Judd remained in constant touch with those in the Terran government whom he had appointed to carry on in his absence. For

him, at least, the trip was no rest cure. Monotony might dog the rest of those on board, but he stayed in his cabin with Janus and one or other of the teepees, and from him flowed a steady stream of orders and instructions, advice and comment on the conduct of Terran affairs. He appeared at meal times in the officers' mess and for a couple of hours each ship evening. For the rest, he worked harder than any man on board.

In addition, Matheson had, on his return to Earth, set up a vast security screen that covered every ship arriving on Earth. Quietly, and without fuss his agents trod their way among the passengers, the crews and the officers of every ship that arrived from the stars. Hints and rumours were assembled into an overall picture, and the resultant information was teepee'd straight to Judd. With Judd's permission Matheson had left open one other teepee hookup ; that between Earth and Rigel Five, and from that point, via Earth, came news and rumour from the Galaxy.

The mere fact that Trader ships were still plying their normal business was comfort in itself. As Judd remarked to Argyle, " The moment those ships stop travelling we're in trouble."

But they didn't stop. Traffic from Earth and through Rigel Five remained the same, but from the work of Matheson and his agents a composite picture was built up that was confused and, in part, contradictory. It was important too. Something was happening in the Galaxy, but no one was sure just what. The Traders were quiet, but it was the quiet of a volcano before an eruption. A tension in the affairs of Man throughout the Galaxy was noticeable and it was rising steadily The freight and passenger rates remained at their high level, and in other directions the Traders were applying the pressure which their position threatened for so many centuries. That pressure was slight, but it was there and it could be measured.

" It is," said Judd, one day, " as if they know they can do as they wish, but they are holding back for some reason." His dark eyes had fixed Argyle steadily. " I think that reason is you. Dellora daren't move until he knows what you are doing and where you are doing it."

Of Dellora himself there was no news.

Dellora Planet was two days away and it was the middle of the ship night when Argyle was rudely awakened by an

officer of the watch with an urgent summons to go to Judd's cabin. He stumbled—still half asleep—from his bunk, and threw on his clothes hurriedly. The urgency of the summons was enough to wash the sleep from his brain by the time he reached Judd's quarters. He knocked and went in as Judd's voice boomed at him.

The cabin was brightly lit, and Judd had obviously been awake for a long time—if, indeed, he had slept at all. Janus was there, fully dressed and alert and so was one of the teepees, a slim young man with a doleful face and long, slender hands. One of the junior secretaries was busy taking notes on the pad which was his emblem of duty.

As Argyle entered Judd glanced up from the desk at which he sat, and one look at his face told Argyle that there was trouble in the air.

" Oh, hallo, Argyle. Sorry to wake you."

" Guess you had a reason," replied Argyle.

" Yes. We had a flash from Matheson about half an hour ago. We've got a line on Alfredo Dellora."

" And ? "

Judd laid down the stylopen with which he had been scribbling, on the desk and sat back. " The news came from Rigel Five. Dellora is calling a personal meeting of all the Trader chiefs. The invitations went out weeks ago, before we got our teepee blackout working. Two of them, Tamuri Yosaka and Vanden Forester passed through Rigel Five two weeks ago headed for the meeting. There's a rumour that Tabori broke up his holiday on New Earth about eight weeks ago, but that's not confirmed."

Argyle pursed his lips. Dellora was marshalling his forces, that was the only construction that could be put on the rumours—if they were true.

" This is the first time in centuries that the Trader chiefs have thought it necessary to get together, Argyle," went on Judd grimly. " It means that they are bent on some form of concerted action, and it means that Alfredo Dellora is leading them into it."

" What about the others ?" asked Argyle.

Judd shrugged. " Matheson may dig up some more information. But you can bet that Vanderlinden and Heilinger will be there." His fingers drummed lightly on the arm of the chair. " We know where the meeting is to be held as well."

Argyle met his gaze. " Where ?" he asked.

Judd grinned humourlessly. " Can't you guess ?"

" Yes." Argyle nodded. " Dellora Planet."

" Right."

" Well, at least we have some idea when it will be."

" Uh huh ! It's five weeks flight from Rigel Five, so if Yosaka and Forester passed through two weeks ago they won't be there for at least another two or three weeks."

" And we're two days flight away."

Judd nodded. " I've already thought of that. We'll lie up here and see if Matheson can dig up some more information. If not we'll take a chance and drop in on them about—let's see—the twentieth Central Galactic."

Argyle felt uncertainty shiver through him as he realised what Judd's plan was. It seemed to him that they were placing themselves—the Traders two chief opponents—at the mercy of Alfredo Dellora and his associates.

" You think that's wise ?" he asked cautiously.

Judd's eyes flashed at him. " What else do you suggest ? Run away and leave them to parcel out the Galaxy among themselves without so much as a protest." He shook his head. " No, Argyle. We've got a chance here to strike one final blow. It may not come off, but if it does—"

" One throw of the dice, is that it ?"

Judd chuckled and shook his head. " A neat simile, Argyle. Yes, one throw of the dice—but the dice are going to be loaded in our favour."

On Judd's instructions the fleet slowed its headlong flight, and by the time Argyle woke once more the nine ships were motionless in space. Argyle was late rising after his disturbed night, and when he finally entered the officers' mess Judd was just enjoying a final cup of coffee to finish off what had obviously been a mammoth breakfast. Even at that time and under those circumstances Judd was working. He had a large notebook and a stylopen and was writing copiously.

While Argyle ate, Judd wrote. At the same time he kept up a running flood of comment and conversation about the projected visit to Dellora, and he reiterated the importance of knowing the actual date on which the conference would take place.

" Once we know that we can walk in on them right in the middle of it," he told Argyle grimly.

"Then what?" queried Argyle sourly. "Kill 'em all off at one stroke?"

Judd laughed and shook his head. "I'm a man of peace. No, the only one of them we need fear is Alfredo Dellora. If he gains absolute control of the Company, and gets Yosaka and Tabori and the rest to line up with him, then we're finished."

"To all intents and purposes he has got control of the Company."

"Only in the eyes of the Traders, and I think they are probably wavering over their final decision to act because they're not sure just how Pietro's alliance with Earth is to be broken. That's why Alfredo has called this meeting, unless I'm very wrong. He wants to convince them that he has control of the Company and that he intends reversing the policies of his father. If he does that then he'll be able to talk them into concerted action against Earth and the colony worlds. He'll do it too, unless we stop him."

"And you figure to do it by charging in on this conference?"

"Maybe."

"I don't see how," objected Argyle.

"Little bits of paper."

"Those legal documents? Hell, Judd—"

"Plus your most important presence as heir apparent."

"I don't see what good I'll be able to do."

"Neither do I at the moment. Only one thing is sure. If you turn up with legal proof that old Pietro nominated you in his stead, then Alfredo's position will suffer psychologically if not physically. Apart from that I think we shall have to act as the situation demands, and that may well depend on your quickness of action—if we get into the meeting."

Argyle eyed Judd morosely. For a man who had shown himself to be so brilliant in the past he seemed to be leaving an awful lot to chance on this occasion. The very fact of walking into the middle of Dellora's domain with no apparent safeguards was not calculated to improve Argyle's humour.

"Worried?"

Argyle looked at Judd, shrugged and nodded. "A bit."

Judd leaned forward in his seat and laid the stylopen carefully on the table before him. "Argyle, whatever happens on Dellora Planet, there is a Galaxy at stake. I'm not happy about this and I don't mind admitting it. We have one or two trump cards to play provided the circumstances are right

for us. If they're not," he shrugged, "just remember one thing. I could have gone back to Earth and buried my head in the sand. I could have left you to fight your own battles and hoped that everything would come out right." He looked grimly at the younger man. "Make no mistake, if Alfredo is clever enough and lucky enough he'll break any attempt we make to unseat him, and there won't be a thing we can do about it—legal backing or not."

"Then how— ?"

"I think we may be forced to kill Alfredo Dellora."

"Kill a teleport ?" snapped Argyle. "In heavens name how ? Dammit, Judd, I've been asking myself that question for months. You can't do it—unless you can poison his food or set a trap that you're sure he will walk into. Somehow I don't think Alfredo will be stupid enough to walk into a trap with his eyes open."

Judd smiled grimly. "Perhaps I'll have an idea."

"You'll need a good one."

The long, monotonous wait was not entirely unproductive. After a couple of days Judd had the crew of the ship outside in spacesuits altering the markings of the vessel. Argyle didn't see exactly what changes were made, but the comment of one of the junior officers was eloquent enough.

"Can't tell her from a damned Trader ship, now. They've even altered the registration number and the name."

Judd was smart, Argyle was forced to admit it. It was extremely unlikely that an Earth ship would be allowed within spitting distance of Dellora Planet once she was recognised. Judd was clearly banking on the excessive amount of traffic that would be heading for Dellora to cover the arrival of one extra ship. The camouflage might see them through.

There was another result for their patience, too. Ten days after they had stopped, Matheson came through with the news that the conference was scheduled for the Twenty Second Central Galactic Time, and, equally important, it was to be held on the space station which had been Pietro Dellora's prison.

"I might have expected that," commented Argyle when Judd gave him the news. "It would add to Dellora's stature to stage his act on the scene so closely connected with his father."

" Either that or sheer psychological need," agreed Judd. " He may need some reminder of his father's power to bolster his confidence. Well, we'll make tracks on the twentieth, that's in nine days, and we'll try and pick up recognition signals on the way in."

" What about the rest of the squadron ?"

" They stay out here and wait for us. Either they can escort us to Earth or they can take back the news that we failed."

On the twentieth they left the escort behind and slid away, alone, into the depths of space towards Dellora Planet. As the hours passed tension built up in everyone on board, and even the lucky chance that gave them the radar recognition signs for Dellora Planet didn't help to ease matters. That happened when they were a bare three hours flight from the planet, and already the parent sun was a brilliant disc in the sky far ahead of them. The planet itself came into view soon after, and Judd issued orders for the landing party.

Argyle was shocked when he heard of its makeup. Judd himself was to be accompanied only by Janus. Argyle was the third and last member. No ship officers were to go with them, and no armed escort. For a moment Argyle was tempted to seek Judd out and argue with him, but he knew that it would be of little use. Judd had some ideas at the back of his mind which he was not prepared to tell anyone. Perhaps he was being subtle, or reckless, but Argyle could not imagine him being stupid.

XIX

The space station gleamed—a bright child's toy—to one side of the bulking arc of Dellora Planet. The great, spoked wheel with its bulbous central hub, hung motionless against the backdrop of space. Around it like scattered confetti, floated a score or more vessels of varied types and sizes.

The tension that had been with them for so long mounted to a climax as Judd and Argyle stood on the control bridge and watched the scene before them. The wheel of the station grew larger, and the planetary disc slid from view as the ship manoeuvred into position.

A curt, questioning message from the radio control of the station was answered laconically by the cruiser's captain.

" Delegates for the Trader conference."

Judd smiled and nodded his approval. There was a long pause before the station came back.

" Lay to five hundred yards planetward of the station on declination thirty degrees. A tender will be sent to you."

Argyle stirred restless. " Alfredo must be getting careless," he commented. " He hasn't bothered to check who the delegates are."

" Why should he ?" countered Judd. " I doubt if he's even been told of our arrival. I imagine some minor official is checking arrivals, and he would hardly take any action that might offend either Dellora or his guests. If we say we are for the conference then he believes it because he has no reason to do otherwise."

" You sound as if you planned it this way."

Judd laughed. " Not planned it. Hoped for it. Luck is with us so far, Argyle. Let's hope it stays with us for the next few hours."

" What do I do when we get to this—this meeting ?"

Judd looked at him sombrely from his dark eyes. " You act as the situation demands, Argyle. I can't give you any advice because I don't know what will happen myself. I can only tell you this, you will be the central figure and you will have to carry yourself accordingly. You are the head of the Company Dellora and you must act as such. You will have to gain a psychological advantage over Alfredo Dellora that can never be challenged in the future whatever happens today." He paused, and then said quietly, " If the opportunity occurs Alfredo must die."

Argyle grimaced in distaste. " I don't know. I just don't know."

" I do," snapped Judd. " Here—now—today, you are the most important person in the Galaxy. I am nothing. I can only stand by—once I have created the opening—and watch you take advantage of it—if you can. On what happens in the next few hours depends the fate of the Galaxy for the next thousand years." His eyes bored relentlessly into Argyle's. " The history of the Universe will be shaped by your hands, and yours alone. Don't forget it, Argyle, don't forget it for a single instant."

The cruiser manoeuvred into the position allocated, and hung motionless. Minutes later from the shelter of the station rim, a small tender shuttled across the intervening gap and

made contact with the main airlock of the cruiser. The landing party—Judd, Janus, and Argyle—boarded the tender in silence, and minutes later the familiar clang that Argyle had heard on an earlier occasion, rang through the tiny craft as it made contact with the station lock.

The lock doors slid open with a whine of hidden machinery, and they stepped through into the lighted brilliance of the station rim. Gravity, Argyle noticed, was normal.

Inside the station three officers waited to welcome them, and Judd greeted them imperiously.

" I fear we are late. Has the conference begun ?"

" An hour ago, excellency," replied the senior of the three. " What na— ?"

" Then be so kind as to conduct us there," rasped Judd. " Dellora will be most anxious."

" Yes, excellency." The man looked unhappy. " But—"

" Come, man," roared Judd. " Don't let us keep our host waiting any longer."

The officer licked his lips, hesitated and was lost. He turned away along the curved corridor that was so familiar to Argyle. Nothing had changed since his previous visit so many months before—except the gravity. As they walked he felt a tremor in his stomach ; his hands were clammy, and stark apprehension plucked ragged fingers at his nerves. The corridor widened before them, he knew that the vast circular room at the hub of the station was the place where the conference was being held. Even as the thought crossed his mind the officer halted and motioned them to wait. Only a sector of the great room was visible, but from somewhere just out of sight the murmur of voices came plainly to their ears.

The murmur stopped abruptly, and the sharp angry voice of Alfredo Dellora snapped into place.

" What is it, Colonel ?"

" Delegates to the conference, sir—"

" What ? Dammit, man. Who ?"

" Sir, I—"

Judd stepped lithely forward, moving surprisingly fast for one of his build ; his voice boomed massively through the chamber, drowning the colonel's attempted explanation, as he announced,

" Armadeus Judd at your service, Dellora."

Argyle moved forward instinctively with Janus so that all three of them stood together in the entrance to the great room.

"Judd!" Dellora's voice roared at them from a long crowded table that hadn't been in the room when last Argyle had been there. He stood at the far end of it, his blanched face and wide eyes staring, astounded, at the group before him. The eyes moved a fraction and Dellora lurched, his hands reaching for the table to steady himself as he saw Argyle. His voice croaked and choked in sheer, bewildered amazement.

"You," he whispered. "Argyle!"

This was the moment Judd had spoken about. The opening had been created for him, and now Argyle had to use it.

He felt, rather than saw, Judd and Janus move back a little from him so that he stood alone and a trifle to the front of the little group. Instinctively he reacted. A sense of power and exultation swept through him as he realised that, for the first time, he had the advantage of Alfredo Dellora. Judd was nobody. He, Richard Argyle, was the person that Dellora feared beyond all men. He was the centre of the whole grim charade. And Dellora was afraid.

He smiled tightly and stepped forward with slow, steady confidence, his feet sinking into the familiar softness of the flame-red carpet. Behind him Judd and Janus moved too, flanking him as he approached the table. His eyes flickered over the men seated there. There were ten of them, without Dellora. The ten most powerful men in the Galaxy. Sleekly groomed, grim-faced men with power written in every line of their faces, and wealth in every crease of their varied, elaborate dress. Nearest to him a slim, brown skinned man fixed him with slanted, icy eyes; this, he knew, could only be Tamuri Yosaka. Further along the table the bulking black giant with the cropped hair must be Vanden Forester whose ancestors, centuries ago, had come from the primeval jungles of central Africa. The others he could not identify. Was the grey haired oldster with the hawk face, Heilinger? Or Tabori? Or Vanderlinden?

"Argyle!"

He switched his attention back to Dellora who was still staring at him, chalk-faced and shaken.

"Good day, Dellora." Unconsciously, he copied the sarcasm that Judd might have used. "I heard that you were trying to usurp my position as head of the Company Dellora. I felt it was time to assert my power."

The short silence was broken by a burst of laughter from the throat of the black Forester. " Head of the Company Dellora, is it ? What of that, eh, Tabori ?"

The old man with the thin hawk's face sneered, his thin lips twisting as he did so. " I think that Dellora was right in calling this meeting."

" And I," rumbled Forester. " We know of you, Argyle, and your companion, Armadeus Judd—"

" And know this, also," rasped Argyle, " the Company Dellora was willed to me by one Pietro Dellora. His deed and title were registered with the Central Galactic Records Bureau. I have with me copies of the relevant documents backed by a Central Court order from the Galactic Council of Justice."

As if at a cue, Janus stepped forward and laid the folder containing the documents on the table before them.

" If there is to be a meeting," went on Argyle quietly, " it is I who will conduct it, not this charlatan who stands before you."

Dellora had not uttered a word. The silence was stark and impenetrable as eleven pairs of eyes fixed on the slim neat folio with its red cover.

" Did Alfredo tell you of this ?" Argyle's eyes swept round the seated men as he asked the question softly and with a tinge of irony. " Did he tell you that his own father had so little trust in him that he took steps to prevent the accession of his son to the control of the Company Dellora ?"

The papers rustled slightly as Yosaka lifted the folio and scanned it quickly. He passed it to the man next to him, and slowly it went along the table, passed from hand to hand while silence cloaked the room. Dellora picked it up at last with a hand that trembled badly ; he looked at the papers as if he was in a trance.

" I did not know of this," he whispered, astounded, and for a moment Argyle almost believed him. Then his head came up and his eyes flashed fire and defiance down the length of the table. " These are fakes," he shouted. " My father would never have been a party to such an outrageous plan. Judd, you faker, what trickery are you planning now ?"

Dellora carried it off well, Argyle had to admit. The sheer bewilderment, the refusal to admit that such a thing could be,

the indignation, and finally the blunt accusation of trickery. The whole facade was broken and shattered beyond repair by the deep, ironic chuckle that rippled round the room from Judd's own lips. Even without speaking he could be more expressive than any other ten men. Argyle was still in command.

"You are not wanted here, Dellora," said Argyle coldly. "The law of the Galaxy does not want you—I do not want you—your own father did not want you. Get out of here, out of this room, this station, this planet."

"One minute." Yosaka's voice was soft and calm after the fire of Dellora and the harshness of Argyle. "You are taking a great deal for granted, Mister—ah—Argyle. There are ten of us at this table who do not subscribe to your dislike for the presence of Dellora. Let us look at this thing calmly and objectively. You do not appear to be aware of one simple fact. This conference was called to discuss the future conduct of the Company Dellora in collaboration with the rest of the Trader groups. That, and that alone, is the only reason for our presence here today. It is the only discussion which is of importance." The slanted eyes bored stonily into those of Argyle. "What you want is of very little interest to us. Under Alfredo Dellora the Company will come more into line with the accepted ideas and policies of the Traders, and with the needs of the Galaxy. If the control of the Company passes into your hands, Argyle, legally or otherwise, then the state of affairs which held good during the lifetime of Pietro Dellora and his predecessors, would be perpetuated. We do not want that to happen."

Argyle said nothing.

Tabori chuckled throatily. "Well, Argyle? Is that not clear?"

"That being so, Argyle," continued Yosaka, "it would seem that you are the one who is not wanted here. We are not prepared to allow—"

"You are not prepared to allow," broke in Argyle angrily. "Legal—"

"To hell with you and your legality," roared Forester. "We have waited too long for the death of Pietro Dellora. Control of the Company Dellora is essential to the Trader plan for the betterment of the Galaxy. Through Alfredo we've gained that control. We shan't let it slip from us again."

Argyle walked slowly round the table and stood looking down at the giant, black-skinned man. " And how do you propose stopping me ?" he asked quietly.

" Please, Argyle," put in Yosaka pityingly. " Spare us these histrionics. We are well aware of your immunity to death. There are several alternatives left to us that will accomplish your removal from the scene. Once that is accomplished we shall only have Judd to worry about, and he has kindly walked into our parlour thus making the task easier." He smiled coldly. " Without you to help him, Judd is helpless. Without Judd to lead them, his gang is equally helpless. Therefore, Argyle, we have little to fear."

" Earth would never surrender to you under the terms you would demand," rasped Argyle. " There is an old story about killing the goose that lays the golden egg, Yosaka—"

" Who said anything about Earth ?" broke in Yosaka mildly.

Argyle was suddenly nonplussed. He glanced hurriedly at Judd who stood, sphinx-like, in the position he had held since they first entered the room. There was no comfort there.

" Let's get rid of them," Dellora quavered, his voice harsh and almost unrecognisable in his anxiety. " Yosaka, let's—"

" I repeat," Yosaka's eyes were hard upon Argyle like two bright diamonds, cold and without emotion, " who said anything about Earth ?"

" Yosaka—"

" Be quiet, Dellora," rumbled Forester impatiently.

" Well, Argyle ?"

Desperately Argyle sought for a reply, knowing that in his own hesitation lay the diminution of moral ascendancy.

" When you spoke about Judd and his gang," he said, grudgingly, " I thought—"

" Ah, and there we have it." Yosaka sat back in his chair, his face alight with understanding, a grim smile on his lips as he turned his gaze on Judd. " Tabori what do you think of that ? And you, Forester ? Heilinger ?"

The silence lay like a cloak over the ornate luxury of the room. Argyle could feel the initiative slipping from him fast as the slim brown man pulled it easily from him.

Tabori rose in his seat, his hawk eyes wary, hooded, yet with a gleam of surprise.

"I think, Yosaka," he said, "that our friend, Argyle, does not know as much as we thought he did." He looked at Dellora. "Alfredo, you told us that Argyle was a member of Judd's group."

Dellora was white faced and clearly panic stricken. His hands flapped in vague despair as he stammered, "I thought he—he was. I—he seemed—"

"Seemed?" roared Forester. "You're a fool, Dellora. I would to heaven you had your father's guts. Get to the point, Yosaka."

"Ah, yes. The point." Yosaka looked back to Argyle. "Would you care to explain, Judd? You may if you so desire?"

Judd's chuckle echoed again through the room, humourless and menacing, as if the man himself was quite unsurprised.

"No," continued Yosaka, "perhaps not." He turned to Argyle again. "When I spoke of Judd's gang I was not referring to Earth, nor was I referring to the political group which Judd leads. I was talking about his other activities as leader of an organisation which has no name, no identity, no headquarters—"

"What in hell are you talking about?" snarled Argyle. "Talk sense, Yosaka. Judd is here as the representative of Earth and her stellar empire."

"With what object?" Yosaka queried softly.

Argyle cursed luridly. "I thought Dellora was master in his own house—"

"I repeat, with what object?"

"To keep the Company Dellora out the hands of you and your associates," shouted Argyle.

"I am sorry to disappoint you on both counts," smiled Yosaka, unperturbed. "Alfredo is master in his own house only so long as he conducts it in a way which meets with our approval. Isn't that so, Alfredo?"

Dellora was silent, a pale, shaken shadow of the man he had been bare minutes earlier.

"As to the second point, Argyle, Judd is not so altruistic as you seem to think. True, he wishes to keep Earth and the Galaxy free, as he calls it, but for an entirely different reason to the one you have given." He sighed. "Once upon a time, Argyle, there was a telepath—only one, and there was a

pyrotic—again, only one. To them in due time, were added others of their own kind, telepaths, kineticists, immortals—oh, there are a dozen more. In the beginning there were riots against these—these freaks, but later came tolerance and acceptance as it was realised what benefits these people could bring to humanity as a whole. Then, at some unknown point in time, there occurred a phenomenon which seems to afflict the Human Race. When people of like mind or like outlook or like ideas meet, they become something more than just people. They become a mass, a living entity with power and ideas and ambitions which grow stronger as the entity itself grows stronger. These people, with their special powers, did just that. They grew together, first for protection against those who would destroy them and then because they could find sympathy only with others of their own kind. Later came ambition. Much later came Armadeus Judd."

Argyle felt the fear rising within him once again as Yosaka's calm voice built up a picture in his mind that he fought to deny. He did not need more words to help him, more explanation

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to bedazzle him. Judd stood, five yards away, as if carved from stone, his head thrust slightly forward, his whole attention rivetted upon the scene before him. The scene which he had created.

" Judd wants the Galaxy for himself, Argyle," said Yosaka softly. " He wants it whole and intact and unfettered, so that he and his kind—your kind, Argyle—will inherit it from the people who hold it at present. We are these latter people. We represent the ordinary masses of Mankind who do not know what is going on around them. If they did I fear that in their anger they would rise up and fall upon you and destroy every last one of you. Even if you are immortal to all intents and purposes I do not think your life would be very pleasant."

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There was a long pause as Yosaka finished speaking, and then Forester said, " Now you know why we must control the Company Dellora. Without it we are nothing. With it we can fight Judd and destroy him. We can keep the Galaxy free forever from your kind, Argyle."

Your kind, Forester said. Argyle strove to retain his sanity. Panic was born and died in the same instant. Whoever Judd was and whatever he was, he was a part of Argyle just as Argyle was a part of him. You could not separate a teleport from an immortal, a pyrotic from a telepath. You could not embrace one and kill another. Vaguely, he wondered what power Judd possessed !

Argyle turned to look at Alfredo. How long his silent immobility had lasted he did not know. From the expressions and positions around him, not more than a few seconds. Alfredo was still standing, as he had been when they first entered the room, pale, frozen-faced, shocked beyond hope of recovery. He, who had for so long relied upon sudden shock, was lost in the face of a similar weapon. He had striven hard to protect himself behind a wall of ignorance—and he had failed. That failure was written plain upon his terrified face, and Argyle knew too well just what he had to do.

" You don't like telepaths, I take it ?" he asked mildly.

Yosaka shrugged. " They have their uses—"

" Of course." Argyle nodded. " They have their uses, and so you tolerate them."

"Don't fence," snapped Tabori. "We tolerate anyone who acts for the good of the Galaxy, and who does not try to upset the status quo. That is what Judd is trying to do. If he has his way the human race as we know it today is dead, or at best, dying. Mankind must fight the threat which you and Judd represent before it is too late, and we are the only people in the Galaxy who are in a position to do it without plunging the entire Terran empire into the most horrible catastrophe in history."

Argyle walked slowly round the table towards Alfredo Dellora. He stopped beside the man and rested one hand in friendly fashion on his left shoulder.

"I am surprised at you, Yosaka," he told them quietly. "You too, Tabori. I am surprised at all of you, who profess to be the champions of all normal human beings. I am amazed that you should have as your leader someone who represents the opposite of your own views."

Dellora croaked in sudden horror as if he realised just what Argyle was leading up to.

"No, Argyle. Please—you can't—"

"What do you mean?" rasped Forester.

"Simply that Alfredo Dellora is a teleport, one of the people against whom you are fighting."

Argyle wondered idly if anyone believed him, so still did they sit. Yosaka gazed at him implacably, neither belief nor disbelief showing on his face. Forester was grim and equally inscrutable. Tabori was white—but he gave no other sign.

"Don't believe him," gasped Dellora. "It—it's a lie—"

"Do I need to prove it?" asked Argyle.

"If you are merely trying to sow dissension—?" began Yosaka.

"Why should I? Dissension is already here."

Dellora croaked wordlessly as Argyle lifted his other hand and placed both of them on Dellora's neck. So slowly did he move, and so still did Dellora remain, that it seemed they might be acting a charade for the benefit of those that watched. Then, slowly, the scene changed. Argyle began to squeeze, and as he did so Dellora came to life. He struggled and clawed with scrabbling fingers at the rocklike grip around his throat. He groped madly while his face went red and then purple. Through glazing eyes he could see the bitter hatred in Argyle's own face, and he knew that there was death in those heavy hands clamped so firmly round his throat. There was only one thing he could do.

He did it.

No sound of surprise came from any one of the ten men seated at the table. They sat as if paralysed by the sight of Dellora ten yards away across the room, gasping hysterically while his frantic hands massaged his tortured throat.

"It—it's a trick. I didn't—" He choked and coughed horribly, retching as his larynx strove to return to normal, and the horrible animal sound that issued from his panting mouth and rasping throat broke the spell that seemed to hold the room in thrall.

"You see," said Argyle softly. He walked slowly round the room, catlike towards Dellora, and before the tortured man could move his hands reached out again and knocked away Dellora's own arms. He gripped the bruised throat again as Dellora screamed, and the noises were cut off by a terrible gutteral choking.

Dellora moved again and screamed with high insistance as Argyle moved towards him again.

Abruptly, Dellora was gone. The room was empty of his presence.

Perhaps ten seconds passed in frozen silence and then he was back again, wild eyed and choking still, and in one shaking hand he held a needle gun.

Argyle walked towards him again. "You can't kill me, Dellora," he intoned. "You're finished, Dellora. Run away and hide somewhere so that no one can find you. You're no good to yourself or anyone else. No one wants you any more."

Dellora slobbered insanely, saliva streaming from his mouth as he strove to speak, and the words came only indistinctly from his writhing mouth.

"Judd did this to me—Judd and you. I can't kill you, but I can kill him. Then where will you be, Argyle?" He laughed, choking as he did so, and his shaking hand raised the needle gun to point it straight at the frozen figure of Armadeus Judd.

In panic Argyle measured the distance. It was too far, and he could only stand and watch with dreadful fascination as Dellora strove to control the shaking of his hand for one vital instant.

The plop of an exploding gun echoed through the room—and Dellora crumpled slowly to the floor, horrified surprise spreading over his face—an expression to be fixed forever as death took hold.

Judd stood unmoving and unmoved. Argyle's gaze flashed wildly round the room and he saw the massive figure of Forester replacing an ornate, jewelled weapon into a shoulder holster. The giant slumped into a chair, and as Argyle looked at him he could see only dullness in the black eyes and a slackness in the great body which did not seem natural. His mind whirled at the sudden turn round of events. Dellora dead ; the conference in confusion ; even Yosaka had lost his innate calm. And Forester ? Why had he turned so unexpectedly on the man who controlled the destiny of them all ? Why should he save Judd's life at the expense of Dellora's ?

" Get out of here, all of you." Judd spoke for the first time, his heavy voice sweeping through the room like a great blast of wind. " The conference is ended, Dellora is dead, killed by your own hands. Go, and take your lives with you before I decide otherwise. Take your fear with you back to your private worlds and pray that we shall have more pity on you than you would have shown to us in the same circumstances. Begone, you little men !" The bitter scorn of his voice lashed them like a whip, and first Tabori, then Yosaka

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moved slowly away, too stunned to do other than obey the compulsion of his manner.

One by one they went their separate ways, slinking slowly at first like men in a dream who cannot control their own movements ; then, faster, until the last one scuttled and almost fell in his eagerness not to be left alone in the presence of these men who were more than men.

Only Forester remained.

A black giant slumped in his chair, with unblinking eyes gazing dully on the scene he had helped to create. The sprawled body of Dellora lay in the centre of the flame-red carpet with a tiny trickle of blood to show where the needle had pierced his skull. Janus stood, a tiny figure to one side of the entrance. Argyle dared not move, he was too stunned even to think properly, too shaken by the turn of events which had shattered the opposition so thoroughly. The seconds ticked into minutes, and then, after what seemed an age, Judd relaxed.

" All right, Janus," he ordered softly.

Janus didn't move, but the black figure of Forester shook itself and seemed to come alive. The eyes lost their dullness and bewilderment gleamed in them instead as the man gazed round the room, empty now of his associates. He looked at the dead figure of Dellora and moaned with sudden horror as remembrance came to him.

" You're finished, Forester, said Judd. " Dellora is dead and the others have fled back to their rat holes. Once they get to thinking about what they saw here this day they will know that you wrecked any chance they might have had of saving this whole wretched business. I wonder how you will explain yourself and your actions ?"

" I'll kill you, Judd. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll kill you for this."

" Get out of here."

Argyle watched as Forester left the room, stumbling slightly so that his giant figure lurched as he moved. How had it happened ? What manner of man was Judd that he could dismiss such a man by the wave of his hand ? There were no answers to the questions that raged in his mind.

" You are the master of the Company Dellora, Argyle."

Judd's voice broke in upon his thoughts and brought him back to reality.

" Is it true ?" he asked abruptly.

" About me ? About the organisation ?" Judd nodded. " Yes, it's true. I could not tell you in case we failed. They knew very little about us, but they could have learned a great deal. Janus and I could have removed ourselves from the scene, but you—" He shook his head. " Knowledge is a dangerous thing in the mind of a man who cannot be killed."

" You would have committed suicide ?"

Judd nodded. " If it was necessary to preserve our organisation."

Argyle slumped into the chair lately occupied by Yosaka. Nervous exhaustion was setting in fast and he felt weak with reaction.

" But why the secrecy ? Why don't you come out in the open ?"

" We dare not." Judd smiled wryly. " The human race has a hatred of anything new. If you've read your history you know of the early teepee massacres. Can you imagine how much worse things would be today if people knew that those whom they think of as servants and freaks and entertainers—that these people had an organisation that protected its members and planned for the future ?"

He shook his head.

" No, Argyle, we must move slowly and build even more slowly. We are few and they are many, and the Galaxy is not ready for us yet. The present greatness of Mankind lies in their hands—not in ours. We have the future, and it is for the future that we must prepare. That is why Pietro and I chose you to carry on where we left off."

" Chose me ?" broke in Argyle. " You chose me ?"

" I helped," admitted Judd. " You will be here long after I am gone. In three centuries of life you can weld the Company Dellora closer to Earth than it has ever been before. Forester and Tabori and Yosaka and the rest count for nothing now. Their day is done, their time is short. You will be here when they and their sons, and their sons' sons are dead and buried. And after you will come others to build and to prepare for the day when we are the human race, and when men like Yosaka are in the minority. When that day comes Man's greatest era will be born. I shan't be here to see it, and neither will you, but what we have done here, today—you and I and Janus—will shape the Universe for a million years."

" Janus ?" asked Argyle.

Judd chuckled. "Oh, yes. Janus is one of us. He is the reason why I am such a successful politician. I am a telepath, Argyle—but not just another telepath. I can read minds, any minds, yours and Dellora's and Yosaka's—the mind of any living being is an open book if I wish. But Janus can do something more. He cannot see into a person's thoughts but he can shape them for me. He can create receptibility in the brain of another to receive my ideas. I know what others want, and Janus convinces them that they should want what I think is best for them to have." He smiled. "You see, already we are shaping the future."

"Is that why Forester shot Dellora?"

Judd nodded. "It is what I planned before we came here. That was why Janus accompanied us. Alfredo Dellora had to die and that was the way I planned that it should be. It was the only way—his whole attention was focussed on you and on me. He would hardly be fearful of his own associates whatever the circumstances. Janus had instructions to act as soon as an opportunity presented itself."

"The opportunity almost passed me," said Janus in his high, fluted voice.

Argyle's head whirled. Under everything was a sense of power and jubilation that he had never thought possible. Dellora was dead and the Traders were broken. He need have no more fear of the unknown. There lay before him three centuries of work and effort for a cause whose end he would never see. He wondered how Angela had felt when she knew of all this. No, he didn't wonder. She had thought enough of it to give her life in its defence, and in that lay the answer. If men—and women—could die for an ideal then it could not be bad. If people like Judd and Pietro could see the ultimate end of all their efforts then there might be doubt as to their motives, but they would never see that end. They could only live with hope that they would be successful and with the unconquerable knowledge that they were right.

Argyle's only worry was in his own ability to fulfil the obligation which was being placed on his shoulders. He would have three centuries of responsibility before him—and Judd would not always be there to guide and help him.

"There are others," said Judd softly. "And after them there will be more. There are thousands of us spread across the Galaxy, Argyle. You will never be alone."

Lan Wright

Dear Mr. Carnell,

Let me tell you something shocking—there is no annual suicidal pact among the lemmings ! The lemming's Season for Suicide is not and has probably never been. Incredible ? It's a fact. If you want to know the truth I can tell you that there are fewer lemmings in the whole of Scandinavia than in Mr. Aldiss's story. ("Incentive," December, 1958.) And Scandinavia is the lemmings' home country. I live in Sweden, so I should know.

About the interior artwork. I was very glad indeed to see it go, mostly on account of the big, ugly, whole-sided illustrations. Now I've started to miss them. I don't want them back like they were before, but I see that you have got very small drawings at the bottom of some pages. Why not move them to a more exposed place, at the same time making them a little less oblong ? A few very small but finely made drawings could go a long way towards giving your magazine a brighter look.

For your covers there is just one suitable word—wonderful ! Keep it up ! And, Mr. Sandfield, you are all wrong about skies having to be blue everywhere in the universe. It is perfectly possible, with the right kind of atmosphere, to have a yellow sky. That we happen to have a blue sky depends solely on the fact that in an oxygen-nitrogen gas mixture, such as our atmosphere, blue light disperses more strongly than any other kind. Okay ? In some other gas mixture maybe yellow light disperses more strongly, and so, if you have a planet with that gas mixture for an atmosphere, you have a yellow sky. Q.E.D. So you see that Mr. Lewis knows more about skies than you thought he did.

For a final word, please avoid reprinting American stories as much as possible. Most of them have been anthologised, and many of your readers have read them before. I have read the last four or five of them.

But apart from this *New Worlds* is very, very good. And after all, you can't make everyone one hundred percent satisfied. That is perhaps a good thing.

Sven Hansson,
Grastorp, Sweden.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

Your prefatory paragraph to " The Still Waters " in the December *New Worlds* won't do. For me the issue *was* the spaceship and not the man. It must not be forgotten that men have held great affection for machines, so great as to think of them as living things. Steam locomotives and small steamers are cases in point. Incidentally, I should like to see the departure of the introductory paragraphs ; at least they are harmless but unnecessary, at worst they give the story away or they are irritating in that they have the effect of a nudge in the ribs, and the remark " just in case you are a bit thick in the head this is what the story means, chum !"

As for the other stories, I am resolutely against Time Travel and for me the last word has been said on this subject by P. S. Miller in " As Never Was " (in the collection *The Titan*).

" A Man Called Destiny " is so like another story of planetary pursuit and skullduggery that I cannot rid myself of the idea I've read it before. I am also set against the psi story and it takes the sheer virtuosity of *The Demolished Man* and *Tiger, Tiger* to make it acceptable—a virtuosity Mr. Wright does not have. But my own feelings about telepathy in particular are contained in John Christopher's " The New Wine " and Katherine McLean's " Defence Mechanism."

" Another Word For Man " left me indifferent, while I never finished " Incentive." All in all, not a good month.

Finally, if you will permit me my ha'porth in the illustrations question. The discontinuance of interior illustrations is a good thing ; no art is better than bad art, and also illustrations can give the game away prematurely. Some of the so-called abstract covers have irritated me sorely by their very meaninglessness, especially that one of a figure crossing a road or bridge flanked by totem poles or something. On the other hand the cover to the issue of *Science Fantasy* containing " Earth Is But A Star "— a giant metal hand—I found very pleasing indeed and the very best of any you've ever done.

F. Haller,
Derby.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

A few words of explanation might be helpful. As a scientist I like good science in my stories, perfection is not expected because authors are not inventors, but sheer elementary ignorance is exasperating.

A good story is one built round an idea, extrapolation of a trend or scrutiny of the implications of a detail. A good magazine covers as many sciences, social, biological and physical as possible.

Characters and characterisation are essential to any story which involves people but science fiction can never be successful if they dominate the science. Adventure is the third ingredient in order of importance.

Fantasy in the sense of ' fairy tales ' has no place in adult science fiction, but in the sense of ' wild thinking ' trying to enter the field of the at present unknown, it can be a valuable ingredient.

Having read some of the books I decided that libraries and the Science Fiction Book Club were not worth continuing at the rate at which tolerable books continued to appear.

E. W. R. Little,
Ruislip.

Dear Editor,

I am one of those who was sorry you ceased to have illustrations, though there was only Quinn who was any good, from my point of view. I agree with a lot of your correspondents who complain that science fiction lacks " characterisation." It is inevitable in a short story—development of character requires excursions into side issues, or, perhaps even more, into *non* issues of the tale. When I saw one of Quinn's " photographic " drawings I thought " Oh, that's the guy " or " That's the girl " and the character then went from cardboard to some degree of three-dimensional. So many characters in science fiction are just robots. One sees them only in one set of circumstances, often just in their " work," so to speak. But when, as in *Wild Talent* Tucker writes : " He spanked the girl, lightly, fondly," I immediately thought, " Good God, the guy's human after all," he becomes a human being to me, not just a machine going through his routine in the story.

Dedicated heroes, one-track minded villains, men with nothing but a colossal driving force to accomplish some great

goal, are possibly very laudable, *but* what a bore ! ! ! Give me the character who can spare an occasional glance from his dials, his test tubes, his space compass, his mission to save humanity, or what-the-hell-will-you, to notice the existence of a *girl*. After all, it seems a bit futile for a hero to spend vast energies and concentrations and to run great risks, for the benefit of entities who, so far as can be judged, don't even exist for him.

L. Thaxton,
Bradford, Yorks.

Dear John,

In "Another Word for Man" (*New Worlds*, December), Robert Presslie really is relying too heavily on other people's ignorance . . . Medoc, Chablis, and St. Emilion are French wines. St. Emilion is, as a matter of fact, my favourite. These three coming together in the same story rather spoil it.

G. B. Tait,
Stockport, Cheshire.
