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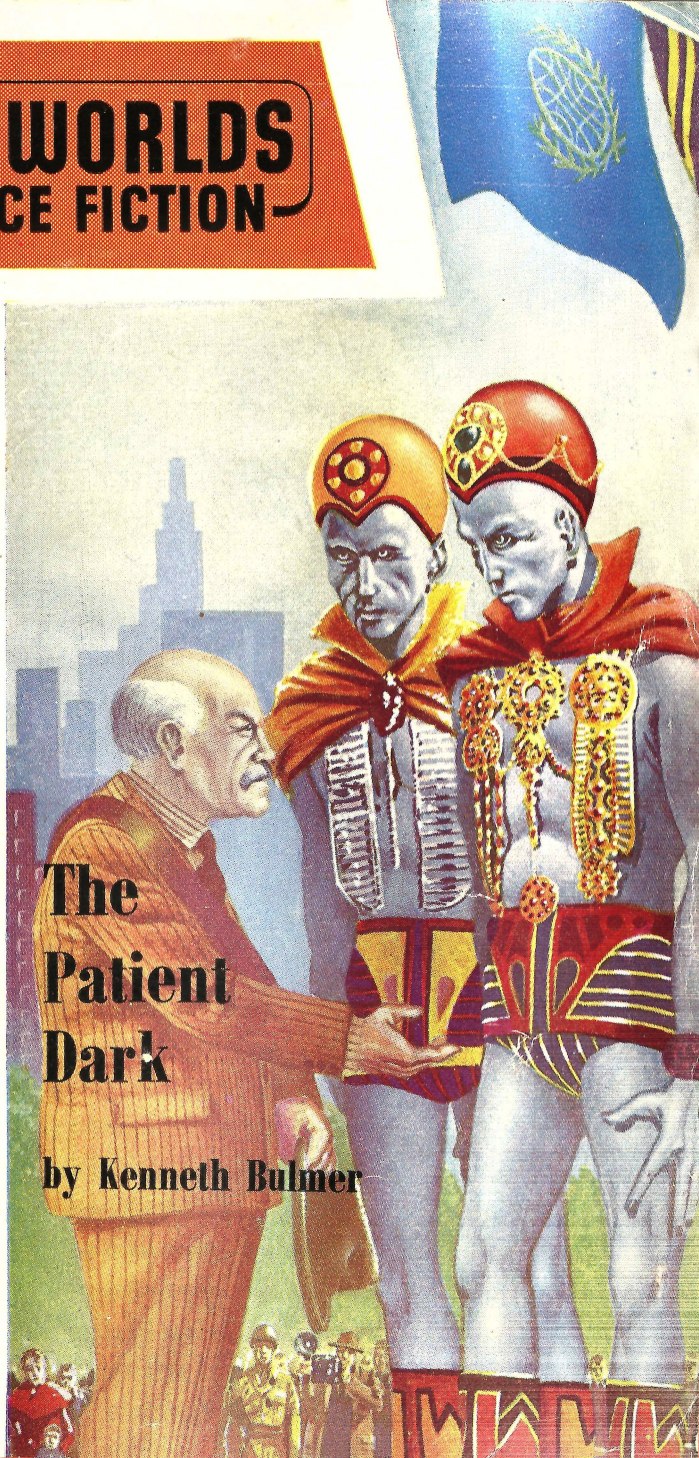

The Patient Dark

by Kenneth Bulmer

NEW WORLDS
PROFILES

Kenneth Bulmer

London

Serials and novels are traditionally two very different literary forms and there are very good reasons for this. Of late in the magazine science fiction field the true serial has been pushed aside by the broken-up novel and whatever emotions this may arouse in the reader, the fact remains. At one time the science fiction magazines ran serials in six parts, or even more, and although a story of a mere six parts is a far cry from the old-time serials which ran for years, yet this method of presentation remained popular and retained the warmth of familiar affection which it is the art of the serial to arouse and maintain.

Commenting upon the current serial, Kenneth Bulmer states, "Today the serial in its pure form seems to have fallen into disrepute, and maybe we have to blame television for this as well as everything else. Life is a continuing process of ups and downs and it is no more unreasonable to present a story with a series of cliffhangers at the end of each instalment than it is to present a long formless plateau-like novel (that has itself fallen into disrepute in the mundane field). "The Patient Dark" is, I hope, a three-part serial-novel that, in being broken down from a novel, retains the best of both worlds.

"As for the story itself, the basic scientific premise caught my fancy; the idea of an underground movement matter-of-factly using scientific help as distinct from the World War II variety intrigued me; and the hospital scene came straight out of real life. These three facets built up into the story you are about to read—with additions—and I sincerely hope that you enjoy it."

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CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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1958 Survey . . .

This month gives me the opportunity of publishing our 1958 *Survey* figures on behalf of our female readers, which are less exciting than those for the males published in the May issue, but nevertheless point up some interesting trends.

Of necessity there is a wider margin of error with the figures given below—from the 500 Returns which formed the basis of our calculations only 10% were from women, so the statistics are compiled from 50 replies. The interesting factor here is that in 1955 the Returns from the ladies only recorded 5%. The tendency therefore appears to be a gradually increasing interest in science fiction amongst female readers although some of the interest may have been stimulated by husbands being readers.

As with the male results in May the 1955 figures are given in brackets, where applicable.

Age: 30·1 years (28). 56% Single (60%). 44% Married (40%).

Age Groups: 12% under 20 years; 20%, 20-24 years; 32%, 25-30 years; 20%, 31-40 years; 12%, 41-50 years; 4% over 50 years.

Salary Groups: per annum
24%, No Income; 12% under £250; 36% £250-£500; 16% £500-£750; 4% £750-£1000; 8% over £1000.

Degrees: 8% B.A., 4% B.Sc.

Technical Employment: 16% Teachers; 8% Telephones.
24% divided between Computers, Draughtswomen, Catering, Services, etc.

Non-Technical Employment: 24% Housewives; 8% Civil Service; 20% divided between Students, Secretarial, etc.

Education Groups: 24% Elementary; 8% Secondary; 32% Grammar; 12% Technical; 8% High School; 4% College; 8% University.

New Worlds features in order of preference:
1. Novelettes. 2. Short Stories. 3. Serials.
4. Book Reviews. 5. Articles. 6. Postmortem.

. . . The Ladies

Library: 80% stated they belonged to one or more (60%).

Preference for books as opposed to magazines:
60% preferred books; 20% didn't mind; 20% preferred magazines.

Average number of other magazines read: 4.

Membership of the Science Fiction Book Club: 12%.

Hobbies: Averaged 2 per person.
64% Reading and/or Literature, and 16% added Science Fiction. 20% The Arts; 12% each Photography, Sport, Knitting and Dressmaking. 8% each Music, Motoring, Cinema, Astronomy, The Sciences, Do-it-Yourself.

This pattern follows fairly closely to that of our male readers, except that where we had 14% male students with 11% showing no income, in the female category we have 24% housewives with a corresponding percentage showing no income. As with the males, the females also show a higher educational bracket—Technical, High School, College and University combined give a total of 32%—and, of particular interest, 8% earn over £1000 a year.

Our statistics also show that the female of the species is an insatiable reader—80% belonging to libraries as opposed to 74% of the males and 64% stating that Reading and/or Literature was a hobby as against 33% of the men.

Combining both the male and female statistics we can summarise our readers as being generally of mature age, having a higher-than-average standard of education and, correspondingly, belonging to the enquiring-mind type of person who wants to know what is going on in the scientific world at present and what effects modern developments will have upon his or her own later life. On average they are already in, or will eventually reach, the higher income brackets because of their education and training. A very healthy sign in this age of automation.

Once again, many thanks for your co-operation.

John Carnell

Kenneth Bulmer's new serial has all the ingredients necessary for a long and exciting drama—an underground resistance movement on Earth facing impossible odds against alien conquerors and of a two-hundred year old legend which could or could not be the salvation of Mankind.

THE PATIENT DARK

by Kenneth Bulmer

I

Had it not been for the emotional shock caused by the murder he would never have allowed himself to be trapped into driving his car on the highway at night. In an attempt at isolation that he knew would probably be futile he had switched on all the four headlamps and now drove looking from darkness into a bright dazzlement splashing the unwinding road ahead.

How long he could keep that antisocial behaviour up without being stopped by a highway patrol was questionable ; he was hoping with futile anger that he could reach the turnoff before they—

" Stop pretending," he said aloud, harshly.

The highway patrol and the police had an understandable place in the reality of things. He had no wish to be picked up for a murder he had not committed ; if only Sheila had listened to him! But it was not fear of the police that threatened his sanity now, nor anything that he could have given a name to if pressed by a psychiatrist.

Driving habit broke through his enforced ban and forced him to glance into the rear-view mirror. At once vertigo seized him. He was drowning in that tiny oblong of reflections. Stretching away into prolonged perspective and ranked in undeviating lines the road lamps seemed to be beseeching arms, pulling him gently backwards into their embrace.

He caught the flicker of the nearer lamps as they rushed in blurring speed past the car and a red confused madness mounted to his brain. It took a compulsive effort of will to reach up and switch on the dome light. The movement broke the mirror's hypnotism ; he could turn his aching neck and let his smarting eyes once more peer forward into the onrushing area of illuminated highway. He was trembling all over and sweat lay cold and unpleasant upon him.

The automobile was a black spider unreeling on its thread of light, its four glaring eyes like pitiful antennae groping into the night. Somewhere above him black clouds massed, intermittently hiding the moon, and wind gusts prowled the highway and shook angry fists against the closed windows. Now that the dome light was on it had become difficult to see through the glass ; a defence against encroaching madness had brought also a new barrier against escape from that madness. Coloured dots of light swam towards him from the darkness beyond his headlamps. Before he could interpret them they had passed, gone in a silent rush of brilliance. He thought, in his confusion of anger and fear, that it had been the turnoff for Leinster. That meant the next would be Clarendon. And in Clarendon he could use his hotel room to change his identity again. If he was extraordinarily lucky, he might reach the midnight airship.

The idea of simply stopping the car and walking occurred to him to be immediately rejected. The whole idea was to get away, even at the enormous risk he was running, and he was well enough aware of police efficiency to know that they would pounce on any solitary pedestrian.

He was driving as fast as he dared, half-blinded by lights in wrong places, and through all his self-contempt for the completeness of his failure he yet had sufficient control to restrain his twitching nerves from thrusting the throttle to the floor boards. He had to balance himself nicely between too much speed, which would kill him in a smash, and not enough, which might allow either of the pursuers to catch him before he turned off this naked ridge of light.

He could still hear Sheila's shrill, hating voice, and it was easy to open his mind and let the memories come spilling in. Of Sheila, standing panting in her dishevelled negligee, her husband dying on the carpet with the fumes from the gun still stinking in the too-warm room, of Sheila, loathing him, saying : " You'll never get away. No matter where you go, they'll find you."

And before that, his own voice, for all his training betraying raggedly his horror : " You didn't have to shoot him."

Of Frank, Sheila's husband, walking in, arrogant and assured, with the gun in his hand making very sure that he would not any longer wear horns on his forehead.

The memories spun the wheel of Time backwards ever faster. Of meeting Sheila, on instructions from Horner, and of making the big play for her. She had been wearing a white nylon blouse and skirt, crisp and pleated ; he could see every fold as clearly now as though she were sitting in the car with him—at the time he had scarcely noticed her dress.

And farther back still, old Horner saying ; " Never forget, Rupert, that what you learn here may one day turn the scales in Earth's favour."

A crystal clear image of himself, young, fresh-faced, eager with that pathetic eagerness he could now only recognise with a cynically contradictory heart-pang of remorse, of himself, saying enthusiastically : " I understand, sir. You can rely on me."

And of old Horner, grey lips grim under the grey moustache: " You'll forget all you ever heard or saw here, Rupert. You will become an ordinary citizen until the time Earth calls upon you."

The road swooped round a wide sweeping curve and he held the car to it blindly. Farther back into the pit of memory his mind excavated, drawing pictures of flashing moments that at the time had seemed of supreme importance. Of being selected for special training. Of understanding just what a Double-I man was and what he might be called upon to do. And ever as his mind leaped down the long corridors of memory he struggled against that backward tread, guessing with a craven's fearful anticipation what lay at the end of that benighted journey.

The highway lamps flashed past his head now like tracer bullets. The turnoff to Clarendon and safety must lie only

seconds away. But quicker than the speed of his car, quicker than the flashing wheels could carry him, the horror pounced.

It was as cold as death. In that cold lay blankness. And from that icy blankness streams of light burst and poured in a chain of fire.

His mouth was open and agape, his lungs expanded and bursting, his head flung back and his throat muscles rigid. Silently, he struggled to scream, and could not. His fingers gripped the wheel to numbness. There was an awful hissing in his ears and his voice in mental echoes alone shrieked unintelligibly up the scale, piercing higher, octave by octave, until there was nothing but a bubbling silence that grew and swelled and burst in a silent flash of fire in his brain.

The car hit the kerb, the front wheels jarred once, it turned completely over, and smashing through splintering fencing, rolled three times and flung itself down the embankment. It lay obscenely in the darkness, its four wheels idly spinning under the stars.

The statistics that Doctor Eddington considered vital were those having to do with the job of a brain specialist and neurologist, with a post-operative interest on the psychotherapeutic level. To those fortunate enough to be associated with Doctor Eddington—including patients—the statistics of the doctor that were vital were thirty six, twenty one, thirty five. These added to a smoothly waved crown of unrepentantly carroty hair, and a mouth that, a complete stranger to lipstick could raise goose-pimples on a man's spine, had created complications in the doctor's life, until it had been thoroughly understood by all that the doctor's one interest was the human brain.

" I don't know who you are," Doctor Eddington was saying to the man whose armpit gun had worn a shiny patch on his suit. " And I don't care what you want. This man is my patient and my duty is to him. You can't move him. That's final."

The man sighed patiently and tried again. He was about the same height as the doctor ; but it was obvious that he was having to buy trousers with a larger waist-line at distressingly frequent intervals. He had thinning sandy hair and the felt hat he ran continuously in circles through his fingers showed traces of hair on the sweat-band.

" Now, look, doc, my partner and me—"

" Doctor, please."

" What's that, doc ?"

" My name is Doctor Eddington. You call me doctor."

The second man broke in quickly. He was younger, with the freckled face and broad hands of a quondam farmer. " Sure, doctor. It's just that this man has to come along with us." He gestured around the operating theatre ante-room, white, aseptic, efficient, chilling. " We understand your feelings, doc—doctor ; but we can look after him okay."

" Don't talk rubbish ! Do you know what he's—"

Doctor Henderson, the senior house surgeon, grey-haired, flabby-faced and the husk of a once brilliant surgeon, harrumphed uncomfortably, and smiled placatingly. " You see, doctor, these gentlemen are from the police. They must have a very good reason for asking this. They insisted I bring them to the patient right away."

The older policeman put his hat down carefully on a chair and visibly put on all the charm he was capable of. " My name's Grandison, doctor. It is absolutely vital that that man in there "—he nodded towards the glass doors leading to the theatre—" comes with us now. We can take care of him."

Doctor Eddington didn't bother to argue it out. She knew that every second of delay might be the second that would kill the man lying in there with his skull smashed in. She walked calmly towards the theatre and assistants opened the doors for her. Doctor Henderson half-raised a futile hand, and then let it drop. He looked vaguely at the two policemen.

" Doctor Eddington is a brilliant surgeon—remarkable. I really don't think that your police surgeons—begging their pardons, of course—could possibly better the care and attention your prisoner will receive here."

" How bad is he, doc ?"

" He has multiple contusions and a number of fractures of the lower limbs ; but they can be dealt with in the normal way. What Doctor Eddington is particularly concerned about is a depression of the occipital. We are not yet sure of its precise degree of extent and damage; the dura mater and the cerebrospinal fluid have probably done their job as shock-absorbers ; but in these cases there has to be—"

" Spare me the gory details, doc," Grandison said, and cut Henderson off in mid-flight. " He's been hit on the back of the

head. So? Our skull surgeon could take care of that, couldn't he?"

Doctor Henderson might have been an old has-been, whose hands could no longer guide a scalpel with the precision of a microtome; but the semi-contemptuous reference to a 'skull doctor' coupled with the barely veiled insolence of these two policemen and his own growing reliance on the judgments of Doctor Eddington, brought back a flash of the old fire. He put both hands in the small of his back and breathed deeply. "This man may be the criminal you say he is. But you are laymen and have no conception of the risks involved in what you demand. I have no choice but to refuse your request and I warn you that if you persist and the man dies, then you will both be chargeable with murder."

Grandison looked at Henderson admiringly. "Big words, doc." He turned on his partner and nodded his head towards the exit door. "You heard the doc, Jimenez. Ring the Chief and tell him we're staying here. Tell him we're sticking to Harris like a plaster. It'll be a round the clock watch, so ask him to send along a relief."

Jimenez said: "Okay, Grandison," and went out.

"Now," Grandison said briskly, turning to Henderson and stripping off his coat. "Where's a mask and smock. I'm going in there."

"But you can't—"

"Listen, doc, and get this straight. Either me or one of my men will be on duty at all times with this Harris. Got that? At all times."

"But why?"

Grandison smiled and let his eyes scan the ante-room. Apart from a few white-clad assistants at the far end, he and Henderson were alone. He bent closer.

He said: "Just in case—under the dope, you understand—he wants to get chummy. Talkative." Grandison stretched his shoulders under his shirt and began to unbuckle the gun harness. He took another look round and glanced through the glass portholes of the exit doors. His voice sank until Henderson in turn had to lean forward.

"Alishang," Grandison said quietly.

The old doctor's big flabby face jumped with reflexive shock. The pouches of skin tautened. But his eyes stared steadily back at Grandison. "If you'd told me that in the first place there

would have been no argument." He moistened his lips with a furtive flick of his tongue. " But what have those swine got to do with—"

" Never mind. And forget it. They've got stooges everywhere." Grandison chuckled nastily as he buttoned the neck of the smock close under his chin. " We know we can trust you, doc. We haven't forgotten, down at Headquarters, what you did in the Twenty Five."

" Ah, yes, The Twenty Five." For a moment there was a stillness, a silence of memory between them, a moment of memory that could be shared by every Earthman on Earth. Then Doctor Henderson sighed. " I was a damned young fool then. Twenty Five. A long time ago."

" Forty seven years ago," Grandison said. He added, inconsequentially ; " I was in the process of being born. My old man's told me a few of the things that went on—"

" A damned young idiot," repeated Henderson.

" Like catching a couple of Shangs and running them through the sawmill—lengthways. My old man said the whole interior of the saw shed was running blood."

" Red blood, like ours, Grandison."

The policeman's face started to go stiff and belligerent and hating, so that Henderson had to say, quickly : " Don't get me wrong, Grandison. I'm no Shang sycophant, like that man in there."

Grandison puffed air from his lips, and smiled. " I didn't think you'd changed, doc. But you never know. You never know." He began to walk towards the theatre doors. " Anyway, you've got me wrong, too," he said softly to Henderson as the doctor fell into step beside him. " Harris is no Shangsyc, either. But, knowing this, would you have sanctioned our moving him ?"

" No. You'd likely kill him if you did. I gather, now, that he isn't a criminal ?"

" Eh ? Oh, sure, he killed this Frank Burgess all right. He'll be arraigned on a capital charge. But there are other angles involved." Grandison slapped the gun which he had placed in the smock pocket. " I'm only telling you this because you're trusted ; your record is on file down at Headquarters. But you'll forget it all, now, understood ?"

As Grandison finished speaking the theatre doors opened and a smocked and masked man emerged, walking purposefully towards the doors and pushing an anaesthetics trolley.

He brushed past Henderson and Grandison with a little tinkle of metal against metal from the trolley. Henderson gripped the policeman's arm.

" Perhaps I ought to mention to you—although I hate doing it because I'm not sure—that I believe that man to be a Shang sycophant. He could have heard what you were saying."

" I didn't hear the trolley before, either," said Grandison.

II

The Wasp Building rose from mid-Manhattan's East River waterfront, near the end of Forty Second Street, an angular, uncompromising slab like a steel and glass book standing upright, waiting for the first page to be opened.

Two hundred and fifty years ago it had been known as the United Nations Building.

Today, it was the most hated structure in the world.

The Chrysler Building had gone and over the area of its fall incredibly small ten and twenty storey structures grew like pygmy brothers in a family of giants. Only half of Grand Central remained, like an apple cut cleanly in two. Standing majestically over the lesser monsters of the man-made forest, the Empire State still stood. Apart from that small area of destruction and apathetic reconstruction pointing like an accusing finger from the erstwhile site of the Chrysler, New York City presented exactly the same appearance as it had when the last decade of the Twentieth Century was drawing to its close.

The Lincoln Tunnel still possessed only five tubes, there was still a three-quarters of an hour wait to get onto the George Washington Bridge and on the Hudson bank opposite Cathedral Parkway the piers of the Dwight D. Eisenhower bridge lay rusting and neglected ; washing still blew from fire escapes in the Bowery.

And the statue of Liberty lay twenty five thousand feet beneath the grey rollers of the North Atlantic.

Tokyo, once the largest city in the world, had vanished, and in its place the scarred desolation left mute evidence of the holocaust that had raged unchecked for six cataclysmic weeks. No single great city on the earth's surface but could show some wound, some half-healed scar, as a permanent reminder of what had befallen humanity in that year of terror, 2025. All

over the world, spreading in a delicate precision of control that was at once the despair and envy of surviving humans, the Wasp stations peppered the planet like ulcers.

But no building, no single centre of Wasp authority, was hated with the undying, implacable enmity reserved for the pile that once had been the United Nations Building.

Up until a few years ago Terrans when walking past the Wasp building—which they did only when completely unable to choose a different route—used ceremoniously to spit upon the paving. Wasps had stopped that, at last, by installing a roving patrol which seized any offender immediately, no matter of which sex, and administering an on-the-spot beating. The system worked. Even Terrans weren't stupid enough not to see that getting a beating for the pleasure of spitting didn't hurt the Shangs at all ; but it most certainly hurt the Earthmen. Thinking about that, Robert Ney realised that that was a typical instance of the simple methods by which the aliens from Alishang had first taken over the Earth and then completely subdued it to their wills by outright force.

Well—not quite completely.

He walked smartly past the two Earthmen on guard at the foot of the sloping ramp which was one of the few additions to the building. They were dressed in black breeches and tunics, crossed by leather shoulder straps, and the buckles on their equipment and high boots glittered like silver. Their plastic helmets with the characteristic exaggerated peak, like some alien conception of a baseball or Mitscher cap, were a dull golden colour. Their short capes were a flaring yellow. Their yellow kid gloves this hot June day were thrust through loops on their right shoulder ; their hands rested on pistol butts.

Ney had his usual retching feeling of impotent hate as he passed them ; a horrible crawling sensation up his spine and churning in his stomach that consistently amazed him by not betraying itself to these watchdogs.

Wasps.

World Alishang Police.

Renegades.

Hated by men and despised by Shangs.

He walked past them and acknowledged their crisp salutes with an arm-cracking salute that was a model for all his subordinates. He sensed their relaxation into their normal

watchful poise after he had passed and took a tiny morsel of comfort from the fact that he could make them smarten up whenever he appeared. Somewhere deep down in his devious brain he kept, tightly shuttered and locked, his real feelings, and always he was aware of the vague horror that one day he might lose those feelings and become what he seemed to the outside world to be. If that ever happened he could always shoot himself—if he still wanted to, that is.

His office was on the twentieth floor, and the elevator girl—dressed in black and yellow nylon, a feminine counterpart to the Wasps outside—took him up without exchanging a word. She knew his floor, all right.

He turned sharp right outside the elevator and strode through the ante-room, sending a scurry of nyloned legs and flaring petticoats back to typewriters, went into his office and threw himself into his swivel chair. Reports lay thickly on his desk. He rang for Jerome.

" Yes, sir ?" Jerome was slight and stooped, with contact lenses and thinning hair and the blue stain from the ball point shining behind his right ear. He was a very clever man, and Ney kept always a careful rein upon himself in his secretary's presence.

" Jerome—what is the latest situation on the Harris case ?" He was abrupt, ignoring the report which was probably somewhere on his desk.

Jerome's eyes flicked towards one buff folder among the many, and then, almost resignedly, as though he was quite used to this sort of time-wasting procedure, said : " Harris is still in the Saint Mary's Hospital, sir. The local police are intending to arrest him as soon as he can be moved. I've given instructions that he is to be turned over to Wasp jurisdiction immediately."

" Immediately now, or immediately he can be moved ?"

Jerome did not flush ; but his lips firmed down a fraction of an instant of rebellion. Then, smoothly, he said: "Immediately he can be moved, of course, sir."

" I see no ' of course ' about it, Jerome. What else ?"

" His prints were on the gun, along with the murdered man's and his wife's. The woman is—is well, a little strange."

" What do you mean ?"

" It's hard to say exactly, sir. She doesn't act as though her husband has just been murdered. There's a hard sort of

vengeance in her ; she said some pretty foul things about Harris."

" If someone had just shot your wife, wouldn't you say some hard things, Jerome ?"

" I'm not married, sir."

" Oh—!" Ney said impatiently. He snatched a tissue from the dispenser and blew, hard. " I suppose there's no doubt that she was his mistress ?"

" None at all, sir. She's denied it, is still denying it. We can't ask Harris, obviously, or the dead man. But the whole set-up points to it. The neighbours' reports are all in there." He pointed at the folder.

" All right. Get me the local Chief on the line, will you ?"

Jerome put the call through and Ney took the handset his secretary handed across. He breathed deeply and put on his official Wasp voice.

" This is Colonel Ney, World Police, here. This Harris. Can he be moved yet ?"

The voice which answered him carried all those nuances of tone and expression that made Robert Ney feel very small and contemptible and yet, at the same time, gave him an ever renewed well of strength to carry on his work.

" Duryea, St. Mary's County Chief, here, sir. Harris is still unconscious. The surgeons say he won't be fit to move for at least a week. That's minimal time—sir."

" I understand. This is Wasp business, Duryea. I want Harris in our own cells as soon as possible. I don't believe that the Terran police can handle the case ; there are angles. You understand that, Duryea ?"

" Yes—sir." Reluctantly.

" Good. I don't think there is any chance of his, shall we say, escaping ? But I'm holding you responsible for him. I don't have to tell you the sort of trouble you'd be in if he was—mislaid. You understand me ?"

" I understand." There was a new note in the voice in the earpiece now ; a note of anxiety, of dawning fear.

" You've got a clean record down in Saint Mary's County, Duryea ; I wouldn't like to see a blot on that record."

" Very good—sir."

" Goodbye."

He put the handset down before there could be any reply.

Jerome was still standing, perched on one leg, his face impassive.

" What the hell are you hanging about here for, Jerome ? There's work to be done. That fool tinkering in his garage in Dayton blew an apartment house up and killed fifty people—men, women and children. That puts him squarely into the lap of Homicide. And that's us. I've had a word with Palmgren over at Invention Control and he's quite happy to toss him to us. The gadget the maniac was working on was completely demolished, some sort of matter converter, Palmgren was vague, but it's something that Alishang knows all about. So there's no danger there. We'll probably get him on first degree murder under the Prohibition of Experimentation and Research acts. Look into that, will you ? That's all for now."

" Very good, sir." And Jerome went out, quiet, inconspicuous, and very deadly. Ney leaned back in his chair and thought about the first cigar of the day.

He tried not to think of the poor devil in Dayton as he cut and pierced the Havana and fired it up. But he could never rid himself of the oppressive feeling of guilt that swamped him every time he had to prosecute under the Research Acts. The Alishang were very sure of their dominance over Earth ; but they discouraged any initiative, any basic research and experiment with savage thoroughness. The aliens who had come first in friendship, and then in morale and will-sapping treachery and finally in open conquest, desired to maintain every level on Earth just as it was. Technically, Scientifically, Economically, Agriculturally, in all walks of life, they maintained the status quo just as it had been that bright summer of 2025, two hundred and forty seven years ago. They had handled the Earth then, and so, by keeping her perpetually in the same state of development, they could smash her at any time they willed, any time at all. Ney expelled a huge cloud of smoke and went to crush the cigar out in his ashtray ; it tasted vile. Then economy, caution, fear of betraying any fraying of his nerves, held his hand poised above the tray. Slowly he put the cigar back between his teeth and bit down. Thinking back to the Twenty Five, of what his father and his uncles had told him, he began to feel better and the cigar taste more like the expensive Havana it was and less like a hank of tarred rope.

His telephone rang. No Terran in the Wasp building, however trusted by his masters from Alishang, had the privilege of a private line. Ney answered crisply.

" Bob ? Meet you for lunch. The Windjammer."

" Sure, pleased to," Ney said. As he replaced the phone his face held an inscrutable look ; at least, he told himself, he hoped it was inscrutable. If any Shangs could fathom what he was thinking, or any of their Wasp stooges, then he would very quickly be most unpleasantly dead.

He did not hurry going out to lunch ; but he was in the Windjammer precisely as the hands of his watch were both perpendicular. The restaurant was well filled ; business men and women from the offices hidden behind the cliff-fronts rising on every hand met friends, called for drinks, found tables and talked the same supremely important trivia every office worker talks when let out for his midday airing. Apart from a casually contrived and yet very thorough avoidance of him, no-one seemed to be aware that a Wasp had entered. The table he selected, half screened by a booth wall, gave him all the privacy he required. How many of those Terrans, cheerfully gabbling and eating and representing the higher executive portion of office workers with secure positions and money to blow on a good lunch, were in fact planted spies he did not know. Certainly at least half a dozen.

So that, when Raoul Palmgren joined him, there were two empty tables flanking the two open sides of his own table. Palmgren sat down with a grunt, wiped his forehead and cheeks and patted his swelling stomach. " Hi, Bob. I'm hungry. Haven't eaten a thing since coffee break."

" If the Wasps pin another medal on you, Raoul, I'd wear padding, if I were you, just to be on the safe side."

" How's that ?"

" You'd explode if they stuck a pin in you."

" Skinny runts like you always do envy a well proportioned figure. And we haven't got a lot of time."

The meal was eaten in silence. The two men presented a complete contrast : Raoul Palmgren, large, bulky, with the perfect skin and fair hair of a Viking, looking the hearty extrovert ; Robert Ney, thin, dark, intense, with all the symptoms of acute dyspepsia. Neither view would have been correct.

When they had eaten they paid the bill in cash—neither ran a checking account at the Windjammer—with a little heavy banter about whose treat it was. They went through the glass doors and felt the heat on the street strike them like a physical blow after the air conditioning. But to Ney the atmosphere had lost all stuffiness ; the too easily sensed

hostility to them as Wasps, the hate smouldering below the surface of every single Terran man and woman in the restaurant, stifled him in claustrophobia.

They walked slowly along the crowded streets, not bothering to dodge and squirm as everyone else had to do to make headway. A path opened up before them and closed in their rear. It was something they had grown used to ; this royal road of progress ; it lacked the cold ferocity of other ways in which Terrans showed their repugnance.

" Anything special, Raoul ?"

" Condition Red. I suppose that means you'll be off on one of your mysterious jaunts again tonight ?"

"You pass on the messages, Raoul, and leave me to do the worrying. You'll probably be on Earth Resistance Council yourself, soon—although I shouldn't even mention it to you—and you'll have plenty of time to worry then. No special instructions ?"

Palmgren was quite obviously seething with his usual desire to know just what went on in the higher echelons of Earth Resistance. He contented himself with : " Business about a murder, I'm told. Fellow—"

They waited for a traffic signal and then crossed with—but not part of—the crowd. Ney had a little shock of prevision. " Who ?" he asked ; frightened that he knew the answer.

" Fellow called Harris. At least, that what he's called now. Expect you know about the case. Did for a guy with whose wife he'd been carrying on. Damned fool."

" I know. She's accusing him of everything, I hear, except of what he actually did."

" Really. That's what you have to expect, I suppose. Harris is unconscious, as you know. But the real problem is this. He might talk." Palmgren's face, like Ney's, in the crowd mirrored only complacent post-prandial thoughts. " You see, Bob, Harris is a Double-I man."

The implications and possibilities exploded in Ney's brain. He forced himself to continue walking with that imbecilic look of surfeit on his face. " If the Wasps get hold of him, and he babbles whilst he's unconscious—inconvenient, to phrase it loosely." Ney thought of his morning's work. " Unfortunately, Raoul, I've just ordered him to be handed over to me, to the Wasps' Homicide Division. It's a Shang matter, now. I can't cancel that order."

Raoul Palmgren stared straight ahead. " If the Shangs get at him," he said hollowly. " We're sunk."

III

Day and night, night and day, at least one man sat at the bedside of the murderer Harris. Doctor Eddington on her regular checkups after the operation felt awkward, repelled, chilled by that implacable watch. It was uncanny, this silent, remorseless, painstaking surveillance. It smacked of the beady-eyed poised waiting of a snake. At the slightest suspicion of a sound from Harris, the faintest movement of his lips, the smallest whistle of escaping breath, anyone in the room would be immediately bustled away from the bed by the watchdog. Crowded into a corner, with the watchdog's hoarse voice raised into a drowning smother of sound that cloaked, anything the unconscious man on the bed might say, nurses doctors, surgeons were forced to interrupt whatever they might have been doing until the spasm had passed.

Certainly, Doctor Eddington puzzled out, they weren't wanting to hear anything Harris might say. Rather the reverse. They wanted to prevent him from saying anything at all. Which, when she thought about it, was rather odd behaviour for the police intent on finding evidence on which to sentence him to death. But perhaps that wasn't the way the Terran Police operated. Perhaps that sort of evidence was inadmissible in court. Of course, with the Wasps it was different ; they made up their own laws just as they liked.

She looked across at the watchdog sitting in his chair pulled hard against the bedhead, with Harris's head mere inches away, and could not find it in her heart to dislike the man. He was young, good-looking, freshly-scrubbed ; not un-like the other youngster, Jimenez, and quite different from their immediate superior, Grandison. Grandison, for all his approaching baldness and stoutness, carried with him a sense of chilling efficiency. She closed the door quietly and walked slowly along the corridor.

It was annoying to have these police breathing down her neck all the time—young Jimenez had had to be put very firmly in his place on the first night shift—but she supposed it was just one of the things that had to be borne nowadays. A little smile curled the corner of her mouth. As though she had any experience of what life had been like in the old days, before the aliens from Alishang had come !

She knew what it was like in those days, of course, from books and films. The Shangs had made an attempt to scrub

out all man's knowledge of his past along with their enforcement of the status quo ; but to destroy an entire culture had been beyond even their star-begotten powers. So they had tried to put all Earth under glass. They had taken the world as it had been on that long-ago day in 2025 and said : " Halt!" And everything of progress and advancement had halted. Why, even the brain techniques were the same today as those developed by the late Brazilian school in 2003—and Doctor Eddington knew far too much about what would happen to try to conduct experiments to improve those familiar techniques. Not that she didn't interpret them loosely, when she was operating, of course . . .

" Hullo, Doctor, you look pensive."

She looked up, smiling slightly, as Doctor Henderson fell into step beside her. He looked tired. She saw the bags and flaps of his face even more prominently displayed ; she felt a quick spurt of affection for this old man who had helped her in her own career.

" I was just thinking how nice it would be to be able to experiment along the lines Vantuski was developing—"

" Doctor !" Henderson's reaction of outrage and fear was greater than normal. She quelled a quick flash of rebellion—she was the one very clearly at fault.

Henderson went on, sombrely ; " You must not think like that, especially now. I'm no longer sure who is loyal among the staff. Anybody could be a Shansyc, just anybody." He turned to stare back the way they had come ; the corridor was empty. " Unfortunately," he finished, looking at her, " that Spillersby has disappeared and I'm certain he heard what Grandison, the detective, was saying. And I wasn't exactly reticent, either."

" But you don't know Spillersby is a Shangsyc."

" With this sort of business only a one hundred percent certainty is worth looking at. The slightest doubt—and you immediately suspect the worst. There is more than a little doubt here. Spillersby overheard ; he has disappeared. I don't need to draw a diagram."

" What does Grandison say ?"

" I'm expecting him here in a quarter of an hour. He's been to see his chief, Duryea. I anticipate action." He sighed. " But what sort of action is beyond me."

They walked for a moment in silence, emerging onto the sweeping balcony, fenced with glass and overlooking the marching ranks of trees sweeping up to the ridge of hills away to the northwest. It was very peaceful.

" Well," Henderson said gustily, changing the subject. " A most successful operation. That man Harris owes his life to you, my dear."

" I don't suppose he'll thank me," she said. " They'll sentence him to death, won't they ?"

" Probably. Although Grandison tells me that the man killed was a Shangsyc of the worst sort. If the trial was left in Terrestrial hands, Harris might get off."

" But it won't be. Even I know that. The Shangs leave us local government, they let us run industry and all the usual functions of a people, they seldom intervene in any internal Earthly dispute and they simply take their skimming of what we produce at the finished end of the assembly line. But just let us mess-up one of their little friends, and then see what happens !"

Henderson showed no surprise at her outburst. He took her arm and squeezed it affectionately. He could remember the time when her mother and father had been haled off to the Wasp building in New York. After that, of course, no-one had ever expected to see them again. Their expectations had materialised. If you messed about with Shangs or Shangsycs, and were caught, you were as good as dead.

To take her mind off that old grief, he said : " Against my own edicts I'll express my own curiosity about this man Harris. I mean, he's murdered another man, a man admittedly a Shangsyc and therefore best out of the way "—Henderson laughed, shortly and bitterly. " And there speaks a civilised human being of the 23rd Century—my God, what we have become, we humans, during this alien oppression."

" I can understand your humanitarian viewpoint with the top of my head, but I'm hanged if I can sympathise with it in my heart ! I can't forget Earth's past. Not so much the greatness we might have achieved, but the individual lives—"

" Oh, Liz, come now ! I hate the Shangs as much as anyone. But at least they cemented the bonds of world friendship among humans that had only just gropingly begun when they first landed."

" And that's a back-handed way of looking at it."

" So it is. But you have to make what you can out of the situations you find yourself in. A culture isn't all bad ; it wouldn't last if it was. Look—we'd reached the Moon by 1975 and were all set to carry on out to Mars and Venus. And then these gigantic alien spaceships from another star landed on Earth in 1977. Well—it rather—"

" It took the wind right out of our sails !" Doctor Elizabeth Eddington's face was beginning to grow rosy ; and clash horribly with her flaming hair. " They were all friendly and nice at first ; exchanging information, telling us what it was like out there among the stars, offering to let us have one of their starships and the Negfield drive. And we fell for it ! Hook, line and sinker !"

Henderson shook his head vaguely. " I suppose anyone might have done. They seem to have been so smoothly convincing. But what I was going to say was that the Earth was all set to blow up ; you know as well as I do the stupid set-up they had then. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. growling and making faces at each other and acting like a couple of kids showing off to convince themselves that they were the better—and the rest of the world looking on and wondering where the pantomine would finish. At least, the nebulous idea of World Government was forced to become a reality when the Shangs began trading with us. From then on, of course, well, they just took over, bit by bit. It must have been very unsettling to have lived in those days."

" Very," Doctor Eddington said cuttingly. " But what about the great treachery in 2025, when they just made war and took over completely ?"

" Well, it's obvious why they waited. They had lulled our suspicions and they knew our potential down to the last machine gun. And that's odd, too, when you think about it. When they started the war, we went under far faster than we had any right to. It was as though half our fighting forces were on leave."

" Or had run away."

" I don't know. We didn't run away either time in the Twenty Fives. I didn't see 2125—but it was bloody. In the Twenty Five—2225—I was in there with a knife and a bow and arrows I'd made at home. The Terran Police had their few guns. We made a mess of any Shangs we caught outside their bases."

Elizabeth Eddington made a snorting sound of disgust. " Sure ! You made a mess of a few of them. A world-wide revolt, planned for a hundred years ; it lasted a week and then we were back under an iron repression again with over three million casualties. And still the Shangs let us work in our old ways and produce for them to reap the benefits."

They had walked along the balcony now and were turning the corner to reach the twin flights of stairs curving down to the entrance hall. Through tall glass windows on the first landing they could look towards the main road. A low black saloon car was pulling off the highway and creeping like a beetle down towards the hospital.

" Grandison," Henderson commented. " I'm worried about Spillersby. I'm too old to be mixed up in anti-Shang plots. If he heard what we were saying, and if he is a Shangsyc—" He did not finish. Doctor Eddington looked at him obliquely, descending the stairs. His big body wasn't filling his clothes as it had done when she'd first come to the hospital.

" You just told me that in this business you had to assume the worst." The car had swung around on the gravel and halted before the hospital. They could look through the main doors and see it now. Elizabeth Eddington said slowly : " It seems obvious to me that someone wants to stop this man Harris from giving away a secret, or secrets. He killed a Shangsyc, so that means he might be a thug for one of the undergrounds." She moistened her lips with a pink tongue. Henderson stopped sharply on the last step. His hand went out to her instinctively.

" You were with him for a considerable time, alone, before the police arrived, Liz."

" They must know that, too."

" Did he say anything ?"

She hesitated, and then shook her head. Beneath the fine flame of her hair, her face was very pale and drawn. " I'd rather not say."

" I understand." He shivered. " The Shangs play rough. I know." The car doors slammed. Feet crunched the gravel.

Henderson pulled his coat straight and went down the last step.

"Here comes Grandison, and his boss, Duryea. And they're running."

IV

" All the lives of my command are in danger until Clinton is dealt with," Horner said flatly.

" But surely," Robert Ney said impatiently, " this sort of situation could have happened at any time. Double-I men are being trained all the time ; they all know a certain amount of the preparations we are making. The whole system we've set up—the cell system that Cromwell here is so proud of—sees to it that if anyone blabs, then the Wasps can trace back the chain of command only so far."

"I know, I know, Bob." Horner brushed his grey moustache and sat back more heavily in the chair. The room rocked slightly with the motions of the swell as the tide ran out, and the air was full of the green damp odour of a tidal estuary. Electric light dispelled shadows with cunningly arranged interplays of radiance ; outside, England was dark and warm under the mid-summer moon. The houseboat was a mere darker shadow in the blackness along the river edge, moored with half a hundred other mouldering house boats and ancient motor torpedo boats and Thames barges.

Horner felt the tiredness and the pressures closing in on him. He looked past Ney to where Bennett sat calmly.

" So what is the special danger here, Horn ?" asked Bennett, his limpid eyes and soft mouth and straight nose odd features for a cold-blooded killer with no other thought in life but the extermination of Shangs.

" The danger is simply this. Clinton—that's Rupert Clinton, his father was appointed to be Ambassador to Alishang but never got there, you remember—was being groomed by me, personally. I had him in mind for one of the most crucial positions when we—ah—when we moved."

" So he knows you, Horn, and could sing. Okay, so you move. You've moved around before."

Horner interrupted, raising his hands expressively. " Too late."

The man who sat hunched and quiet and wrapped in an all enveloping army greatcoat—a relic from days when Earth had possessed its own armed forces—moved a hand that was like a yellow chicken's foot of sinew and shrunken flesh, and moistened his purple lips with a sound like the dry rustle of a crow's wing. At once, the others sitting in the cabin of the houseboat fell silent. He pointed towards the emblem carved from ancient and smoke-blackened oak which hung, shield-like, from the low overhead.

" What does that tell us ?" he asked in his vault-sweeper's voice.

" ZI," said Bennett at once.

" You are the newest member of the High Council of Earth, are you not, Bennett ?"

" Yes, Cromwell." Bennett's classic features expressed nothing but polite expectancy. The others in the cabin waited with a tenseness that built up with each dramatic second old Cromwell allowed the silence to continue.

The shield was half split down the centre, and black smoke marks gave the surface a two-tone in amber and ochre. Deeply incised into the wood was a large, meticulously proportioned letter ' Z.' Depending from the centre of the diagonal stroke and crossing the centre of the lower horizontal stroke a further line made a cross, hanging, as it were from the ' Z.' ' ZI.' The symbol that was one day to lead Earth from the tyranny of the aliens from Alishang.

" Yes," Cromwell said at last. " ZI."

There was a sighing and shifting from the others as though some great obstacle had been passed, as though they had just emerged from a dark tunnel into the light of the upper air. Bennett sat back, puzzled. Robert Ney stepped immediately into the gap in the conversation.

" Horn's quite right. It is too late now. But the fact remains that I've issued orders for Harris—Rupert Clinton—to be brought in by my Wasps. I can't rescind that order. There must be some other way."

" I can think of a way." Bennett was matter-of-fact and cold and deadly. Instinctively, Horner raised a hand, palm outwards.

" No ! Only in the last resort. I trained young Clinton and I like him. He's potentially very valuable. If we are to retain the respect of our new armies, then we can't just toss a man aside as soon as the going gets tough."

Cromwell rustled from his greatcoat. " Horner is right."

Before he could say more the electronic spy-ray on the deck outside was cut. The newcomer gave the correct answers and was admitted, bringing with him a gusting burst of damp night air. The overcoated figure straightened under the light and revealed a thin white face and two startlingly alive eyes. The overcoat was tossed aside. The man's face twitched every now and again, and his hands trembled.

" You're late, Steeger," Cromwell said hoarsely.

" I was being followed. I had to detour."

" You had no right to come at all if you were being followed, Steeger," said Bennett roughly.

Steeger blinked. "I don't think I was really being followed." He put a hand to his mouth. " Just that I might have been." He was starting to shake all over. "It's getting more dangerous every day."

" Give him a drink," Horner said. He controlled his voice and waited until Ney had rummaged in the locker and brought out the bottle. They all had a shot, except Cromwell. He lay back wrapped in his greatcoat, his thin face grey and oozing sweat continuously. Horner looked at the old man with compassion and affection. Old Cromwell was dying of cancer —he was ninety-nine years old and refused to give up until he had seen the High Council of Earth achieve the function for which it had been designed, two hundred and fifty years ago. That design was so secret that even Bennett, an intimate of the other members of the Council and the executor of terrible commands, because he was still young in the ways of the Council had not been initiated into the profoundest secret the world had ever known.

Sometimes Horner felt small and old and frail when he thought of that secret and realised afresh that he was one of the only four men in the world—in the Galaxy—who knew it and what it meant. He guessed that the others—Bob Ney, Steeger and Cromwell himself—occasionally had that feeling of immense impotence. As for Steeger, the man was patently cracking up. When that happened—Bennett might find himself performing one more—function—and thus becoming a member of the Four Who Knew.

Of course, Steeger, with his reponsibility for all of Asia, had paralysing problems on his plate. Horner, with Europe and Africa to look after, knew those problems, the way they could blow up and encompass in destruction all the careful planning of a decade. As witness this Rupert Clinton affair. Robert Ney, with the Americas to look after, and Bennett, cutting his teeth on Australasia, would also be not unfamiliar with that frustrating habit of the Wasps of dropping out of the blue right into a beautiful scheme and killing it—and its participants—stone dead. He roused himself and watched Bob Ney put the bottle back. Ney was their inside man with the Wasps ; but even a man as good as Ney was couldn't be everywhere at once.

" All right, Steeger. Here it is." Horner rapidly sketched in the situation anent Rupert Clinton. He finished : " The operation was a success ; but if this Elizabeth Eddington had only let our men move Clinton we wouldn't be bothered now. We've had information—from the House Surgeon Henderson, and from the local Terran Police Chief—that an anaesthetist called Spillersby is a suspected Shangsyc, that he overheard Henderson and a detective talking, and that he has disappeared. From that—"

Steeger exploded. " From that I deduce that the whole affair is known to the Wasps ! The whole thing has been bungled, incredibly bungled ! Why was any man so low down in the hierarchy allowed personal contact with you, Horner ? And why was he assigned to watch this Shangsyc Frank Burgess in America if he was being groomed by you, Horner, when you are responsible for Europe and Africa ? Are we all going mad, that this sort of thing is allowed to go on when there are only two more years—"

A number of voices raised suddenly, talking loudly, blotting out what Steeger was saying. Inconsequent, absurd remarks.

Only Bennett remained silent.

The voices dropped ; Steeger was half lying on the bunk under the curtained porthole, his whole body trembling, his face ashen, his eyes sparkling with abnormal brilliance.

"I think we had best decide what we are to do." Cromwell's old voice had gained fire and determination ; his tones were acid with contempt. " Instead of wrangling like pre-Alishang children. Rupert Clinton was trained as an International Intelligence operative. As a Double-I man he was told of our plans to overthrow the aliens from Alishang, he knows the location of at least one arms cache, he knows approximately twenty associates in International Intelligence. All very serious matters to be revealed should he fall into their hands or reveal information whilst unconscious. That was a very real danger and was quite rightly handled as such by those on the spot by placing a man on guard at all times to monitor anything that Clinton might say in his delirium. However, the peril is not so great as it might be feared. We have had other operatives fall into the aliens' hands. In this case it is unfortunate that Horner, the Double-I Chief of Area, should be involved. I will add here, in parenthesis—and for the benefit all of you as well as Steeger—that I know the reasons for this and fully approve."

He moved his bloodless lips stiffly. " It is the problem of Horner that must engage our full attention."

Horner said : " I was asked to put a man from my area on Frank Burgess and he was to work on him through his wife Sheila. Burgess is dead, so we'll never know the extent of his commitments to the Shangs. I—like Clinton ; it was good training for him. But because he thought he was in love with the woman, and killed the husband, it's brought the whole plan, however unwittingly, into peril."

" He doesn't know about ZI—" Steeger began.

" Bob Ney can tell you the Wasps should have brought him in already. What he does know will add up to them."

" Not quite, Horn." Ney allowed himself to smile." I sent a wire to Duryea telling him to hold himself ready to bring Clinton in as soon as he could be moved. That's what has saved us—and saved Horn here so far."

Horner moved his shoulder uneasily and brushed his clipped grey moustache. He was a man who liked to do things directly, even subversive activities. " Look," he said slowly. " Don't think I'm scared of being taken in—hell, yes, you know I am—but what I mean is, if it wasn't for ZI I'd be quite happy to change identity and move on. I've had so many different covers . . . We'll have to get Rupert Clinton out before your Wasps get to him, Bob."

Cromwell emitted his hoarse, rustling laugh.

" At last," he said bitingly. " We can get some action."

" It means that Duryea and his men will be sacrificed."

" Tell them to do it. And then enroll them. ZI is nearly here." Cromwell relished the words.

" All agreed ?" Horner looked around. Each man present raised a hand perfunctorily. Bennett raised an eyebrow. Horner shook his head. " Let the locals handle it, Ben. You're in charge of Australasia now, not a trigger-man anymore. Don't forget it."

" Kind of dull, though," Bennett said lazily.

" The next business on the agenda," Horner said, glancing at Cromwell, whose eyelids had closed, giving his parchment face a long, yellow horsey look. " Is stepping up production of the Urals arms factory. Time is running out."

They would be talking late into the night, these five men—the Four Who Knew, and Bennett. Then they would take their private aircraft and fly innocuously back home halfway round the world to their ordinary, every-day jobs. An age of science bred a new sort of Resistance—a global underground.

V

Lights, strings of lights. Concussion. Wind. Fear—blazing, petrifying panic. And silence and darkness.

And now he was groping upwards through veils like clinging, dewed spiders'-webs, breaking through layer after layer of consciousness, back to an awareness of self.

Rupert Clinton.

No ! No ! That was danger, that made spelled disaster. He was Harris. That was it. Just plain Harris. But—he laughed weakly and startled himself—he'd lost the paddle of his boat. And the creek was a diminishing avenue of light, receding like beckoning arms, growing smaller and smaller until all the blaze melted into one tiny round glowing eye.

A hand torch.

A torch, throwing a spot of light across his body. His body, swathed in uncomfortable clothes, doped, strapped down, with only his mind fighting like an animal caught in a snare. He was in bed and this must be a hospital.

" Ease him gently, Grandison." A low voice. " Take his feet, Jimenez."

Movement. Rising from the bed, slow surging swings that brought him round to gaze at the ceiling and see the procession of dimmed lights marching past above his head. His eyes rolled. He felt sick. He made an inarticulate sound, gurgling, and the forward motion ceased. His eyes closed. He felt someone's breath on his cheek.

" I think he coming round. Get him out of it quick, before he starts wondering what's going on. He might yell."

A low, different voice. " He won't yell much in his condition."

Movement again. Descending rubbery, liquid oscillations that he realised must be his two bearers going down stairs with infinite caution and care. How had he got here ? Car. Smash. That was it.

And then, in the same instant as he felt cool night air fan his cheek, he remembered. He recalled it all ; from the time he had seen Sheila in her white nylon outfit and became blindly infatuated, only too happy to make love to her, acting, as he thought, on instructions from Horner to find out the truth about Frank Burgess. And then the growing dissillusion, the revealed hollowness of the woman, her pettiness her extravagance, her cruelty—above all her habit of boring him to distraction. There was nothing to her. She was a husk, outwardly attractive and inwardly—nothing.

And of going to see her that last time, to tell her it was all over. He could see her pretty, vacant face now, suddenly assuming a mask of anger, of outraged vanity. That he, a mere *Earthman*, could wish to throw her over ! And of Frank coming in, all the man's suspicions of the past weeks brought into the open, with the sneer on his lips and gun in his hand. Of the struggle, of Frank's sudden frenzy, the fear, the stark terror in his eyes, as his wife took the gun and shot him in the stomach. It had not been pretty.

Sheila's blazing eyes seemed to haunt him now. She had taunted him, waving the gun, her hair almost stirring of its own volition.

" Sure, Frank was a Shangsyc—and was getting plenty of money from the alien monsters. But you had to break it up—and now you want to throw me over before I'm finished with you ! Well, that's where you're wrong, Harris ! Because I'm finished with you ! And when the Shang police have finished with you, you'll wish you were dead—long before you are."

He could still feel the window smashing as he went through. Of Sheila's crazy voice : " You'll never get away !"

And then the stark insanity of attempting to drive at night on the main highway. He could see now, in retrospect, that whatever he might have done, driving at night was the worst possible choice. Ever since he could remember the sight of lights, flicking past, had disturbed him. He could stand it as a passenger—he could always close his eyes. Even to drive at night could be managed with difficulty when he was in tip-top condition ; disturbed in his emotions as he had been by the murder, driving himself had asked for the trouble to fall upon him.

And it had come in coldness and blankness and bursts of light.

Something had happened to him when he was a child that caused this. So he had been told by Horner—although Horner had never known the truth ; no-one apart from himself knew what he experienced when the fits came upon him. And he could not explain what that was. Horner had just said, casually, that he had been in an accident when he was a child. It had been given to him as the explanation of why he had no father and mother and old Horner had had to bring him up as his own child.

It had been strange, living a life with no knowledge of himself as he was when a child. All memories began for him

when he was about eight years old. Most people, he had been told, could remember back to four years old. But he could not explain why it should be strange ; it did not affect him in everyday dealings ; only when the fits came upon him. And he had become very cunning at avoiding any chance of bringing on the fits.

Except just after a woman he thought he had loved had killed her husband at his feet.

They bumped down more steps and then changed direction and he realised, swimming back to the present, that his bearers were walking over gravel. The crunch of their feet sounded loud in the silence of the night.

That silence shattered in the gunshots. The stretcher lurched violently. He felt no pain. He was securely strapped down. A voice said : " My God ! I'm shot !"

The stretcher swayed into jerky life. They were running with him. A man was gasping and groaning at his side. More gunshots sounded. Some were very loud and he caught a reflected flash of fire from some tall shining surface. The shine disappeared and he slid forward into darkness. Momentary panic assailed him ; then he worked out that they must have slid his stretcher into the back of an ambulance. Somewhere more guns coughed and an engine awoke to life. The ambulance started. Someone was resting a hand on his stretcher ; he could feel it riding the swerving and lurching as the ambulance raced fast into the night.

A final fusillade, and then the ambulance was riding smoothly under full throttle. They must be on the highway. The memory meant nothing to him. He slept.

Colonel Ney, of the Wasps, paced his office fuming and swearing and hurling insults at the cringing form of Jerome. A photograph lay on his desk.

" Incompetent, bungling, slack idiots ! I'll have 'em all in the penal battalions ! Look at this !" He gestured at the photograph. It showed a gravel path with marks of many feet. In the centre a man lay, sprawled, hat lying a few feet away, arms twisted out in unnatural positions. He was very dead.

" Duryea ! The local Police Chief ! Shot dead by my men !"

The impact of that would hit him later. No man who aspires to high rank in a state which prospers on evil deeds can shed responsibility for those deeds. Ney tried to ignore his own

culpability for the foul deeds done in the name of the Wasps. It was not easy. But sometimes, as now, there came a little reprieve.

" This man Harris," he raged on. " Escaped. Spirited away by the Terran Police—and my men do nothing. Jerome—you'll arrest every Wasp on duty there and await my pleasure with them. Now get out !"

Inside, he was full of joy in that Rupert Clinton alias Harris had been rescued. He would have been even more happy if poor Duryea had not been killed. Nothing, it seemed, could be quite right and blameless in these dark days.

After the Alishang-spawned ships had reached Earth, travelling through the murky depths of something the aliens called " Negative Space " and which had been traditionally translated by Earthpeople as " hyperspace," and which allowed them to complete the seven light-year journey in a matter of weeks, it was not long before Earth and its people came to realise that these aliens had very little in the way of technology and science not possessed by Earth. Terrans had landed on the Moon in 1975—only two years later the Shangs had come, and for a time it seemed that a new world had opened its arms to Earth. The brief honeymoon was soon over.

The world was divided against itself, nation spoke anger unto nation, and the Shangs had the insuperable advantage of being one race united, so that with contemptuous ease they had infiltrated into positions of power—positions of real power, not mere political appointments. They took control of the cartels, the monopolies and so tightly was the economy of Earth organised that a mere half hundred cartels in their possession was enough to ensure their full control of all Earthly processes.

They must have laughed.

Their great trump card was the negfield drive. With it they could span the empty deeps between the stars. They had other solar systems within their sphere of interest. On Earth they maintained a rigid hegemony buttressed by Earth people who put personal aggrandisement and fortune before thoughts of loyalty to planet. And those loyalties were nebulous in the extreme ; hungry bellies, starving wives and children count more than some vague ideas of the Earth as an entity in its own right. Planet against planet seemed as nonsensical a concept as nation against nation.

Where nature has a chance to operate under similar conditions it is more likely than not that she will produce an end

product of striking similarity, no matter what the distance between may be. Under a GO star, on a planet of approximately one gravity, with an oxygen and nitrogen atmosphere, with the succession of seasons in relatively approximate exactitude it was not unnatural that the Shangs should be humanoid, that they should look superficially like a human being. There was nothing of the alien monstrosity about them. Which was probably one reason why their conquest had been in three sharply delineated phases. From 1977, when they first landed, to 1990 they were all smiles and favours. From 1991 to 2025 they gradually unveiled their designs, crushing the working masses ever more closely into the mud that had never been far away and taking control more and more overtly of all processes of life and economy and big business.

In 2025 they had unsheathed the sword and Earth had submitted.

To many men, studying those times, that act of war had seemed nonsensical. The Shangs had everything they wanted without conquest of the naked sort. They took Earth's produce and shipped it via the negfield-driven ships to Alishang. Why destroy twenty millions of humanity just to govern with an iron hand the remainder, and destroy a million of those a year until the remnants realised at last just who were the masters ?

That problem had one answer. And the Four Who Knew would not allow a whisper of it to pass their lips. They all carried the traditional hollow tooth filled with poison.

But the secret that the Four Who Knew carried locked in their brains was of far more importance than being merely an explanation of why the Shangs had attacked Earth.

That the aliens suspected was known. The Four extended their agents throughout the world ; International Intelligence itself a name stemming from times when men were subdivided against one another—as well as training and equipping underground armies against the day of reckoning also insinuated agents into every walk of life there to check on Shang activities. Murder was a common inheritance of alien domination of Earth.

Spillersby, for instance, when he was found would be dealt with exactly for what he was, a traitor to Earth.

The obverse of the coin operated too, however. All men knew enough to beware of the Shangsycs. Shang sycophants were everywhere. Double games were played as a matter of course. Thinking over the report he had had in from Bob Ney,

Horner fingered his moustache and wondered just how successful they had been in evading the watchful eyes of the Shangs. Certainly, he could not have stood idly by and allowed young Rupert Clinton to go down to his death tamely and dishonourably. He owed him—and his father—more than that. He'd been a young fool to have become so emotionally tangled with the woman. But he'd get over that soon enough. As for Frank Burgess, the murdered man, he had been a Shangsyc, and that was sufficient reason to forget him.

Horner looked up at the ZI emblem casually matched into his bedroom's cornice decoration and smiled. Even Bennett hadn't yet realised—and only two more years off—as that doddering incompetent Steeger had been going to say. Horner's face grew grim as he contemplated the problem of Steeger.

The telephone rang. He stretched a hand from the bed—he was sleeping in this morning and hang the routine—and answered. It was his secretary, reading a report from just one of his innumerable agents scattered throughout Europe and Africa.

" Yes ?"

" This Clinton case, sir. Report to hand from Cape Town suggests that the Wasps have followed Clinton there. Request further orders."

Horner sat up, the bedclothes falling untidily onto the floor.

" Damn !" He thought about the trouble his own lapse of thoroughness was causing him, and cursed himself, condemned himself for wasting time cursing, and said brusquely : " He'll have to be taken care of. If you can't get the job done quickly and cleanly, then move Clinton again. Have you any information upon his condition ?"

" Only that he is conscious ; but weak. Therapy will be intensified, I'm told, and he should be walking strongly in three days. After that it's a matter for his own strength."

" Toughest young devil I've ever known," growled Horner, thinking. Then he said : " If they can't shake the Wasp, shift Clinton to the Antarctic. Okay ?"

" Okay, sir."

Horner moved to replace the phone ; his secretary had not hung up and Horner could hear him breathing. Exasperatedly, he said : " Well, what is it ?"

" That doctor, sir. You know, Doctor Elizabeth Eddington. She has disappeared. It is feared the Shangs have her."

VI

He stood where Scott and Amundsen and Shackleton and Fuchs and Hillary had stood—not geographically the exact same spot—but in the same segment of time cut from a different conception of what made up a world. A world of whiteness and whiteness and ever more whiteness, until the sky bleached of colour and painted its own whiteness over the land. That was the first time he was allowed aloft, warmly wrapped, with snow goggles, and two helpers at his elbows. In the succeeding periods on the surface he came to realise that that first impression of whiteness was completely illusionary. There was colour here. Sensitive tendrils of pastel tints, delicate whorls of trembling illumination that broke like bubbles if he moved his vantage point.

He ate and slept and drew upon his reserves of strength until once again he was as he had been before that chaotic night ride away from a murdered man and his wife who had once been a mistress. The episode faded, as episodes will, until he came to believe that it had occurred to another man.

Until he recalled the horror that had fallen upon him during the car ride in the night. And then the whole weight of the incident, its terror and remorse and horror, fell upon him again. Then his doctors would gentle him and talk profoundly and give him dope and tip-toe away.

Horner came to see him a week after his last attack.

The crisp military figure with its grey moustache, and crows-feet fanning from the corner of brown eyes and warm handclasp did much to bring Rupert Clinton back into the present.

" Glad to see you're looking so well, Rupert."

" Thank you, sir. I do apologise. I know I was a damned fool ; but, well—"

" That's all right, now. Forget it. You must get prepared for your next assignment."

" You mean—"

Horner smiled. " Look, Rupert. You are young, and the young make mistakes. It's a process of nature called evolution, growing up. If the young didn't do damn fool things and make mistakes they'd be old fogey's with no life in 'em when they were thirty-five. So now just shut the mouth and open the ears. Right ?"

Clinton warmed to this man, the only father and mother, in one, he had ever known or ever wanted. " Right, sir."

" This is going to be difficult. I cannot tell you enough to ensure what you are to do makes sense. But you will carry out orders unfailingly. That I know."

" I—I think I've grown up, sir."

" One last word on that subject, and then we'll leave it. Any mistakes you may have made are attributable to me. I brought you up. After your people were killed I took it upon myself to turn you into a man ; God knows what divine powers I expected to possess for the task. So now you've got to remember that from now on—you're you. You are Rupert Clinton. You have an ego. Use it. All children have to make the apron string-cutting ceremony a part of their growing-up processes ; I'm telling you now that you've done that."

" I understand, sir. At least, I hope I do."

Horner looked at Clinton. Then he looked away. There was the laying down of a burden in that withdrawn glance. Clinton sensed it, mentally braced himself for the tasks ahead.

" You're going to Alishang, Rupert," Horner said.

Clinton did not reply. He was incapable of speech.

" When you arrive, you will meet a man called Alverez. He is forty-eight years old, silver haired, walks with a limp, wears a monocle and contact lenses. He is the Alishang agent for us there, and his cover is Produce Inspector at the Central spaceport. You will be working with him. Normally, you would be taking over ; but—"

Horner stopped talking and his thoughts twined around the disability of being one of the Four Who Knew. Even with this boy, who might have been his son, there were barriers of knowledge that could not be scaled.

" Your job," he went on briskly, " will be to integrate yourself completely with the background. You will become just another Terran on Alishang during the day. But, during the evenings and nights, you will—"

Clinton interrupted, his face serious. " I'm not relieving him because of ZI, is that it, sir ?"

Horner was completely cool and unruffled. " You believe this talk of ZI, Rupert ?"

" I know the signs of ZI were painted up everywhere during the Twenty Five. Very often, when a Shang or a Wasp is found down some alley with his throat slit, there is ZI carved on his forehead. That means something."

" We've discussed this before. The people of Earth had to have something they could pin their hopes to, some sign to lift their spirits. Man always cries out to God or the spirits of his fathers, anything to give him power that he feels he does not alone possess."

" Very often God answers, sir."

" Very often," assented Horner quietly. " He gave you back to me when I thought you were dead. But I cannot equate this talk of ZI with God. Do you know what ZI means ?"

" No, sir. Nor does anybody, if you ask me. Oh, they've thought up all kinds of meanings from Zoroaster to the ultimate I as a cult of personality. But no-one knows."

" No-one knows."

" I've heard talk that a great revenge is prepared against the day, and that on that day the initials ZI will be explained to the world, and they will change into a fiery sword to sweep the aliens from our planet. Does that make sense ?"

Horner passed his hand across his moustache, and then said decisively : " No, it doesn't make sense. There have been many legends in the past telling of mighty heroes laid to rest waiting to rise again on the day they are needed. Drake, Siegfried and the rest. This is just another wishful dream, I'd say, Rupert."

" And in the evenings I'm to do what, sir ?"

" In the periods you are not working at the spaceport you will attempt to become a Shang. It won't be easy. But you should manage it. Alverez will guide you there."

" Sounds interesting, if a trifle obnoxious."

" Obnoxious ! Well, that's one way of putting it. The Shangs aren't fools, Rupert. You'll have to watch every move you make and treble check before you lift a foot."

" At least you taught me to speak Shang fluently."

" Just how fluently remains to be seen."

One of his doctors entered the little cubicle at that moment carrying a glass with a ruby-coloured liquid that Clinton recognised for the gunk he was supposed to drink every odd hour. The even hours it was a blue mixture.

He tossed it back, grimaced and putting the glass down, said: " When do I cease pouring this stuff down me, doc ?"

" Day after tomorrow. You've recuperated nicely here." The doctor, young and briskly efficient, glanced sideways at Horner. " May I ask you, sir, what you intend to order

Clinton to do ?" He coughed quickly to cover the gaffe. " I mean, sir, physically. If he gets into a gunfight too soon, or has to go leaping over housetops during the next few days, he might have a relapse."

Horner chuckled. " I don't think he'll be doing that. He'll be sitting on his backside having a nice long ride."

The doctor said something suitable in reply, and then ventured : " I suppose no-one has thought to congratulate you, sir, on the efficiency of this place ? This hideout in the Antarctic was a master-stroke, if I may say so."

" You may," Horner said frostily. " But you won't get any medals for doing it. Someone else was responsible for the planning down here." He thought of Cromwell, dying of cancer, and felt a physical pain that the old boy must soon die.

The doctor seemed reluctant to leave. Horner said : " Is that all, doctor ?"

Clinton moved away, began to look through the tapes of the language spoken on Alishang that were racked over his bed. He selected one and began to thread it between the heads of his tape recorder. Horner began to become annoyed with the young doctor. The man stared back, and then nodded his head slightly ; Horner got it and, standing up, walked across to the door and went out. " Won't be a minute," he said.

Outside, the doctor shut the door and took Horner's arm. " I didn't want to say this in front of Clinton, sir. But I'm not altogether happy about his condition. Whilst he was delirious, he apparently rambled on at great length, oh, the usual stuff, about this woman Sheila and the murder. Not a lot about his work as a Double-I man, though."

" That's at least good. But go on, man, go on."

The doctor was considering his words. " He talked a great deal about driving a car at night on the main road. He evidently dredged up hidden memories, triggered by that experience when he was in an excited frame of mind."

" Well ?"

The bombshell burst.

" He was talking about seeing long lines of light, marching into the night, rank after rank of them, shining as though they were tracer bullets. He didn't know what they were. But he'd seen them ; it was no hallucination."

* * *

VII

The change of plan did not disturb Clinton overmuch. He looked forward to a visit, however short, to England and he had been told that from there he would go on the regular run to Alishang. Contemptuously almost, as though handing out largesse, the Shangs allowed the Terrans to operate a shipping line to Alishang. They provided the starships powered with the negfield drive. There was a booby-trap in all the negfield drives so that anyone without the know-how who attempted to get at one to find out how it worked would be very nastily blown to pieces.

Earth lost a lot of technicians that way. Then the orders went out, from that shady region of authority that men knew and respected, that no more men were to lay down their lives uselessly. All in good time, went the edict, we would find out all we wanted to know about the negfield drive. Come ZI day, said the masses ; come ZI day.

The jet-plane made a perfectly legitimate landing at London Airport and Crawfurd made as legitimate a passage through the Wasp customs. Earth had no need of customs barriers any more ; but the Shangs liked to keep a check on the movement of their subjects. Crawfurd and his companion, a stooped middle-aged gentleman with a nose irrigated by the whisky bottle, were met by a hired car and driven rapidly to a small house in the rivers of similar houses in the southern suburbs of the metropolis.

Inside the house, with the front-room blinds drawn and the June afternoon stoking up the atmosphere in the rooms, the stooped gentleman straightened up and detached his whisky nose and said : " Well, Rupert, that was a pleasant journey."

Crawfurd mentally tossed Crawfurd away and, as Rupert Clinton, said : " So you really are confident that we weren't spotted ?"

" Sure of it. Wouldn't have come here if I wasn't."

The door opened. Horner turned, smiling. " Ah, Bennett, this is a pleasure. You haven't met my son—that is—Rupert Clinton, this is Bennett."

The classic profile turned to face Clinton full-face. Clinton was aware of the strength, the latent power behind that handsome exterior. He extended his hand.

Bennett, taking it, scrutinised Clinton gravely. Finally, as though coming to a decision, he said : " I can see your point of

view, Horn. It is a risk. But the final decision, as you say, is up to Cromwell. We meet him in an hour."

" Good. Let's have some food. The aeroplane must have curdled all the milk, haven't had a decent cup of tea in hours."

They had a light snack prepared by the taciturn man who had driven them here ; the hired car was parked a hundred yards up the road on a bomb site—another relic of the Twenty Five. Once Horner and Clinton had their pipes going and Bennett his cigar, they went out singly and wandered up the road and met at a telephone booth. The car drove up in a few moments and they entered. It was warm inside ; but the windows were kept firmly rolled up. The car started.

Despite himself, Clinton had a drying-up sensation in his mouth. Horner had told him, in carefully guarded phrases, of the legendary Cromwell. He knew him as the head of Double-I—no more—but that was an eminence of aweful grandeur to a young man freshly entered the ranks of freedom fighters.

Bennett was sitting next to the driver, with Horner and Clinton in the back seats. Presently Bennett turned round and said pleasantly : " Bert says there is a car following us. Big job. Four men. Could be Wasps."

The dryness in Clinton's throat vanished. Here was a situation he could deal with. Bert, the driver, increased speed. The car snaked up a hill, turned right-handed and then immediately pulled across to the off side of the road and stopped. Bennett reached under his seat and pulled out a violin case.

Horner laughed shortly. " Old-fashioned, Ben. I thought you knew that only Terran Police were allowed to carry firearms ?" He spoke genially. " You're making us break the Shang laws, you know." There was an air of tight expectancy in the car.

Bennett handed Clinton an automatic and passed a second to Horner. Bert seemed to have a gun. Bennett himself fussed over a sub-machine gun. All the weapons were probably three hundred years old. Clinton's felt heavy and oily.

The following car swung round the corner with a quick thrust of gears, began to accelerate away to decrease the ground the driver imagined existed between him and his quarry. As the car flashed past, Bert said casually : " Local Wasps all right. Recognise that big feller up front."

" Follow slowly, and turn off as soon—ah ! Too late." Bennett rolled down the window on his side. " They've spotted us. Well, it's their funeral."

And then the world exploded about them. Clinton was flung violently upwards, his head caught the padding lining the car roof, the door flew open and he fell out, all a tumble, to sprawl on the pavement. Intolerable heat smote him. Instinctively, he scrambled away. On all fours, feeling the road rough beneath, he scrabbled along and then, half-rising, more fell then ran to lie crouched against a mouldering brick garden wall. He twisted over.

Standing regarding him gravely was a small girl, not more than three years old, dressed in a white blue-checked frock that fell out gracefully in simple curves from her shoulders. Her hair was very blonde. She was looking at him with great interest, and her rag doll was temporarily forgotten, tucked up under one chubby arm.

The little tufts of dust that rose from the old brickwork made no sense to Clinton. It seemed to him a very long time before he heard the machine-gun's noise.

Someone started to scream hysterically, a long way off.

From the corner of his eye Clinton saw the driver, Bert, running across the road. The man was a living torch. Then there was nothing else in Clinton's mind but the driving necessity of getting this little girl under cover. He groped forward, making idiotic soothing noises, snatched her up, doll and all, and pitched himself bodily over the garden wall.

The sound of the machine gun racketted up excruciatingly and, quite distinctly, through its clamour, he heard the thud as the bullets struck the brickwork. Any minute now and the Wasps would be here in person. He thought of Horner and Bennett and knew there was nothing he could do for them now that they couldn't do themselves. The child claimed all his attention.

She was beginning a little whimper now, as if the game had suddenly turned a little too rough. Clinton could see a fiery glow reflected from the house front and gleaming in the windows. Even as he looked, one large window disappeared in a smother of glass and splintering woodwork. The car was burning like a torch ; the Wasps must have rolled a thermite bomb or something similarly deadly under it. Only then did

Clinton recognise the fact that perhaps Horner and Bennett had not got out of it alive.

He raised his head cautiously over the wall, trying to keep in the flickering shadow of a straggly privet bush. The machine gunner was walking stiffly, the gun thrust at an awkward angle against his hip, striding down towards the burning car. Another man was just leaving the blackened corpse of Bert and, gun in hand, was running swiftly towards the house. Clinton drew his own weapon and shot the man.

The machine gun sprayed everything ; but Clinton, the child under his left arm, was running in a crouched-over scuttle towards the side passage of the house, unbending as soon as he had the angle of wall between him and the gunner, fleeing down towards the back garden. Behind the house a wooden tool shed with a door sagging from one rusty hinge was the obvious place to put the child. Then Clinton paused. The Wasp, rounding that corner, would spray everything with bullets. That wooden planking would be riddled. The child was rapidly becoming an embarrasment. The open French windows this sunny June afternoon provided the answer. He put the child down gently, forced a gay smile for her, and patting her little bottom said : " Now run in there and find your mummy." She ran off at once and Clinton heard a sudden whimpering screaming begin and die and guessed the woman had never thought to see her child again.

He pushed other people's problems from his mind. He had to deal with a Wasp stalking him with a sub-machine gun.

The Wasp played it clever. He put the gun barrel around the corner and cut a swathe of death stomach high through a full ninety degrees, the angle between the fence and the back of the house. Had Clinton remained where he was he would have been cut in two. In that moment of time between saying a mental farewell to the child and the appearance of the machine gun, he had leaped up and balanced himself precariously upon the open french windows. Now he gave a horrible choking gasp and for good measure, hamming it up, fired a shot into the garden turf.

The Wasp fell for it. As he came round the corner in a rush of black and yellow and ready machine gun, Clinton shot him. He dropped, the gun skidding across to pulp a beautiful little tree lupin, thickly covered with yellow blooms. Their scent cut through the stink of cordite.

The block of ice that had encased Clinton's mind since the moment the action had commenced began to thaw at the corners. He was suddenly aware that he had killed two men. That they were Wasps should have been enough to have exculpated him in the eyes of anyone of whose good opinion he was desirous ; but he couldn't rid himself of the odd notion that they were men, just like himself, each probably with a wife and child—a child like that little girl whom he had brought into ugly actions that, thank God, she had not been able to understand. The shakes ran over his body and punished him and left. He swallowed, walked across and picked up the sub-machine gun. It might be useful in dealing with the other two Wasps

Clinton put into operation some of the things he had been taught by Horner. He went carefully back up the side passage and reconnoitred. The road seemed full of cars and Wasps and it was obvious that at any moment they would be boiling down that passage in search of their comrade. A handful of sporadic shots sounded. So that meant that Horner and Bennett were still on the run. Clinton swung on his heel and ran down the passage, threw the sub-machine gun across the dead body and carried on, over the rear fence and so out into the parallel street. He walked briskly away.

It had been some time since he was last in London and today his only contact point was the house where he had been taken from the airport. He felt secure enough in thinking that the Wasps had no idea of his appearance ; after all, he argued, they must have had the house under observation for a considerable period and were waiting for a good haul before they struck—and then they would make their arrests away from the house so that it might again be used by the unsuspecting Double-I men. But he had to go back there.

After a carefully casual walk, he arrived back at the suburban street, tired and thirsty, just as the long June day was thinking about turning over and going to sleep.

He was studiously careful in his approach.

He was wasting his time.

Where the house had stood was now only a blackened shell.

There were no inquisitive people, standing gossiping at street corners and in friendly doorways ; there was no apparent interest whatsoever in the ruin. The street was quiet. Too quiet. Clinton walked past the house as though bent on an errand, glanced casually at it, and then went on and turned

down the first available turning. For the first time he began to feel worried. Here he was, alone in London, stranded, without a single friend to whom to turn for help. There was no way of regaining touch with Horner now ; he made up his mind that he would have to put into effect the escape plan he had learned a long time ago, during his early training. He would have to get out of London and go down to the school in Sussex, making suitable prior contacts, and from there wait until he could contact Horner again. He refused to sanction any thoughts that Horner might be dead.

Walking with an aimless briskness towards the local railway station, he contemplated ridding himself of the gun. There was a chance, however slight, that he would be picked up by police or Wasps on any stupid charge, and to be found carrying a gun would be a death sentence alone. Even if that gun wasn't the weapon which had pumped bullets into Wasps—and they'd find that out quickly enough—any gun in the wrong hands was death. Which, he realised with a grim quirk of the mouth, was a profound thought.

The school in Sussex was his rendezvous point when in England, a means of regaining touch with International Intelligence. The man and woman who ran it were brave with a type of bravery that Clinton could understand and yet of which he could still feel fear. It was a trifle too cold-blooded for him ; although Double-I men were by the very nature of their business traffickers in cold-blooded heroism quite out of the ordinary person's conception. He wished he had a contact in London ; he did not relish finding his way south to the Downs.

But the cell system was so finely organised that a man might meet another every morning on the commuter's train to the city and never know, even till the day he died, that the other was also a member of International Intelligence. Old Horner had mentioned that a certain man—no names—had devised the system and was inordinately proud of it. Now, Clinton began to see the obverse of the coin.

He dropped into a small restaurant, still with the old coffee machines regurgitating on the counter and with plastic-topped tables and islands of condiments. He ate quickly, eggs and bacon and bread, two cups of tea, and came out of the restaurant with an automatic check of the street. No-one seemed to be following. He set off for the station.

He bought a single ticket to Brighton and found that he could either take an up train to London Bridge and from thence cross to Victoria and so take the last fast train down, or he could wait at this station for a slow stopping train that would deposit him in Brighton a few minutes before midnight.

" Relics of the pre-Alishang days, mate," the ticket inspector told him. " We can't put any new stock on, and when we want just to replace stock that's worn out them Shangs sniff around as though we were building a secret weapon."

" Do I look so hateful of Shangs, then ?" asked Clinton.

The inspector looked at him quickly. " They've been at it again, round here, I hear. Blew up a car and then went and blew up a house. Looking for a feller, they tell me." He studied his fingernails. His head was bent and quite defenceless to a sudden blow.

Clinton laughed. " If they ask questions—as they will—I'm sure you won't know anything."

The inspector raised his eyes to Clinton's. He was thin and stooped, thin hair plastered inneffectually over his scalp and his eyes were weak and watery. He had a straggly moustache much stained by tobacco and his clothes were old and shiny. His face was expressionless.

" Why should I know anything, mate ? I'm just an Earthman. I can't help them Wasps, now can I ?" He laid a thin finger alongside his nose. " Course I can't, because I don't know anything. All I know is—ZI is coming."

The train came into the station at that point and closing doors sounded like an artillery barrage along the platform. Clinton walked through the barrier and caught a door just as a girl was swinging it vigorously closed. He turned and shouted: " Thanks. Guess you're right, mate."

He settled back into the compartment which was empty, and considered afresh his chances. If all Earthmen were as helpful as that, then his only fears were from the Wasps. The Terran Police would be happy to play the game as their local citizens dictated ; or so Clinton believed.

The night darkened steadily until lights outside began to flash past with demanding attention, forcing themselves on his tired brain with insistent power. He closed his eyes at once. He could not afford to fall into one of his fits again, when the horror closed in on him from out of the cold and blankness and silence. He dozed. When, by the light of the electric lamp above the sign he saw the name WAGSHOTT HEATH, he

alighted and walked slowly along the platform, gave up his Brighton ticket and said to the porter :

" Station-master about ?"

" He's gone home, this hour of night. Can I help you ?"

" Yes. Tell me where he lives, will you. Oh—and save that ticket for him. He'll want it."

The man's reactions in the indifferent light were not lost upon Clinton. His mouth opened and then shut. He slowly extended the ticket to Clinton and said : " You'd best take it yourself." He told Clinton the address.

The house was two-storied, brick-built and lightless. Clinton knocked. Long-long-short-short. Short-short.

Light glimmered fractionally above the door, and through the transom Clinton saw light and shadow writhe along walls and descend to shine through the leaded door glass. He leaned against the frame, feeling his tiredness seeping through his bones. He hoped that Horner was all right. He couldn't envisage a future which did not include his boyhood mentor. He thought of the doctor in the Antarctic base telling Horner not to let Clinton get into any gunfights—and the memory was sourly amusing. He knew he would not ordinarily feel as beaten as he did now ; he had not been told the full extent of the injuries he had received in the car smash but they must have been extensive by reason of the length of his convalescence and his heady weakness now.

The door opened. He braced himself.

The station master was wearing a red velvet dressing gown and held his right hand in his pocket. The bulge was revealing, but then, Clinton would expect such a man to carry a gun. Double-I men never knew what the night-time knock at the door might summon them to. Or to what treachery they might open.

" My name is Crawfurd," Clinton said. " I have go to school. I need your help."

The man lifted his upper lip, stirring the black moustache and revealing yellow teeth. " I've heard of you, Crawfurd. Come in." Clinton obeyed and stood in the tiny hall. " Yes," the station master went on, his voice level and suddenly, shockingly, full of hate. " I have heard of you, Crawfurd, and have been waiting for you. As a good Double-I man it is now my duty to kill you."

He took the gun from his pocket and pointed it at Clinton.

To be continued

This is one of those rare stories where any attempt at an introductory paragraph would completely spoil the plot. When you have finished reading it do a little thinking about the complexity of the main situation. It would be a tough one to overcome.

ALIEN

by Francis G. Rayer

The ship came like a shadow out of the clouded sky, her speed of descent decreasing. Around her outline hung a faint blue halo, slowly fading in strength, and vanishing as she came to rest on the dry turf. The summer storm was closer and a brisk wind had arisen beyond the nearby copse, and blew across the field, carrying scattered drops from the thunderclouds.

The ship had come without sound, and remained quiet, giving no indication of what she carried. Fifteen minutes had passed when a boy came along the lane at one side of the field, cycling fast to reach home before the storm broke. At a point opposite a low place in the hedge he glimpsed the ship, wobbled and stopped, almost in the ditch. His eyes astonished, he let his cycle fall, and clambered up out of the ditch to the hedge, grasping two stakes as he gazed across the field. Then he slithered back, lifted his cycle and jumped on, pedalling frantically, coat flying, along the lane.

Barry Miller slid from behind the wheel, leaving the parking lights on. It would soon be completely dark. He wondered why it had taken quite so long for information about the ship

to filter through. The boy's parents had been frankly incredulous, and only after nearly an hour had his father consented at least to look. The rain had gone, the ship was still there—but the local police had seemed to regard the message that reached them as a hoax. Only after a visit, in person, from father and son did they send a constable. The constable's report brought out the local inspector, who would not commit himself with a communication to his superiors until he had in turn seen for himself. Even then it was a long time before a police car came out from the neighbouring town, and a scattering of sightseers already edged the lane.

Barry studied the ship across two hundred yards of open turf. It was already too dark for detail to be visible, but it looked perhaps sixty feet long and twenty high, of similar shape both ends, and was without any lighted port or other sign of life.

" What will we do now, sir ?"

Barry found the local inspector behind him. He took down his binoculars and snapped them back in their case, slinging it over a shoulder by its straps.

" Cordon the area to avoid trouble, and wait until morning," he said. " Then to establish communication—we'll have men working on that. Meanwhile, the main thing is to keep local busybodies away."

" We can do that, sir."

By dawn all traffic had been diverted, idle sightseers cleared away, and initial steps made towards establishing communication with the newcomers. Covered lorries stood in a corner of the field, temporary headquarters until wooden buildings were erected. As soon as it was light Barry left the junior intelligence officers gathered there, and went to study the ship. He had scarcely emerged from among the closely parked trucks when a voice called him.

" I was looking for you, sir !"

Barry halted. Charlie Rand, his adjutant, was hurrying towards the parked vehicles. His expression was rueful, but that was not unusual with Charlie, Barry reminded himself. Slight, a few years Barry's junior, Charlie was pessimistic by nature.

The younger man stopped. " It seems we may have been hoaxed after all, sir !"

Barry's gaze flashed instinctively towards the ship. The light was still too poor for details to be seen, but the vessel looked factual enough.

" What do you mean ?"

" It's easier to show you, than explain." Charlie Rand gestured. " I've just been walking round, looking—"

He left it at that, but turned back the way he had come, walking near the hedge that ran out at right angles to the lane. Fifty yards from the trucks, Charlie halted.

Barry gazed at the ship. The light was improving every moment. Seen from here she was just as impressive, just as inscrutable. Not, perhaps, quite as long as he had supposed, but a good fifty feet.

Charlie Rand pointed back at the trucks. " The lane only runs along that side of the field, Barry." He indicated the nearby hedge. " This is pretty high. The ground rises beyond it, and there are bushes and the copse." He turned half circle. " Right across the field there it drops to the stream, which practically meets the copse half a mile farther on."

Barry nodded, taking it in at a glance. The field was roughly triangular, with the lane along its shortest side. He saw Charlie's point.

" You mean we've only seen it from this side, so far, Charlie."

" Just that ! The trees and bushes prevent easy observation from this side. The ground sloping down towards the stream hides it that way. You can see it from the lane easily enough, but that's all."

Barry frowned, wondering where all this led. Charlie was not the man to make a fool of himself, or others. Had he been, he would not have become an intelligence officer chosen for a job like this.

" And what does the ship's position mean ?" Barry asked.

" That some joker could have set her up as a stage prop !"

Charlie walked on quickly, and as he followed Barry saw what he meant. The farther they went, the shorter the ship became. It was not the normal shrinkage, as would be expected when coming into line with bow or stern, but much more abrupt and final. As she shrank, Barry's steps automatically slowed. She looked forty feet long, thirty, twenty . . . Then much narrower than her height, and still shrinking. Mere feet, then perhaps inches, then nothing. Barry halted exactly behind Charlie Rand, looking over his shoulder.

" See what I mean ?" Charlie said. " She's cardboard, or paper on a wire frame ! Not thickness at all."

Barry nibbled his lower lip, his dark brows drawn together. He rubbed his long chin.

" It's impossible !"

" But you're seeing it," Rand said factually.

Moving back, Barry saw the ship reappear. As Charlie said, it was exactly as if they now had an edge view of a mere flat card or paper outline, meant to be seen from the lane only.

" But its size !" he said. " And who'd waste their time with a game like that ?"

He did not feel convinced. Walking on, he found that the ship again began to appear. He returned to the zero point, and began to walk out across the field. Each time he deviated from a straight line, the ship became visible, as would a flat card outline. Yet he was sure this was no hoax. Nor was the edge of the material, or any supporting frame, to be seen.

He walked more slowly as he drew closer, pausing often. Men by the trucks were watching him. Following a curved path, so that a little of the ship remained visible, he carefully approached its nearer end. He noticed dew on the grass, distant mist under the dawn sky, and felt a slow mounting of inner tension. Then he was at the end of the ship. When he stood exactly in line with it, it remained invisible. Moving a trifle to left or right made it begin to appear. It apparently had all the properties of a canvas stage backdrop, but no thickness. Reaching out, he felt a cool, smooth surface. He could put one hand flat on each side of the ship, bringing his fingers one upon the other. When he pressed, his finger tips flattened, but touch told him it was not one upon the other, but upon a shiny, metallic surface. Drawing his head close, he had an odd stereoscopic effect of seeing both sides of the ship at once, lane side with his right eye, field apex side with his left. There was no visible separation between his finger tips.

He withdrew a pace, looking towards the trucks, and grunted. Vehicles and men were oddly distorted, drawn askew like a twisted tapestry pattern.

He returned the way he had come. Charlie Rand's round, sober faced expressed curiosity.

" It's no hoax," Barry said heavily. " It's real enough—but has infinitesimal thickness."

He did not try to explain, but started back towards the trucks. Two staff cars had just draw up near them, and three men got out, and a girl who stood motionless, staring out across the field at the ship. A mongrel dog sniffed the earth at her heels.

Barry stood erect behind the chair, a hand on its back. His grey suit was tight buttoned, exact as the uniform he had discarded, and his cheeks were drawn in with thought, accentuating the length of his high boned face.

" As I see it, our first job is to establish communication with whatever may be in the ship—if there is in fact anything in it," he said.

A high ranking officer on his right ceased doodling on his pad. " You're not certain there is—anything in the ship ?"

" Not yet." Barry glanced from him to the others in the recently erected H.Q. hut. " The ship is apparently without thickness, but we must act on the assumption that this an oddity in its spatial relationship with this planet, unless we admit two-dimensional objects can exist."

" There has been no indication of life in the three days since it came," a girl said down the table.

Barry nodded. He had already learnt to respect Diane Everford's opinion. " No. But such a waiting period does not mean the ship does not contain life."

" You have plans ?" the officer asked.

" Ideas, sir." Barry pulled his chin. " We already have an excellent radio technician in Rand, my adjutant. He will try to communicate with the ship by radio, and search for signals from her. Miss Everford has been sent here because of her ability as a linguistic decoder. Other specialists are available. By one means or another communication should be possible."

The meeting left it at that. Outside, Barry stood bare-headed under the sun, studying the ship. She remained exactly as at the moment of landing, except that a hazy green ring about six inches in diameter hung at one end, nearly at ground level. It was without visible support or purpose, and had appeared when he was not watching.

" You're wondering what it is," Diane Everford's soft voice said at his elbow. She whistled, and the wire-haired mongrel that had arrived with her in the staff car shot out from under a truck.

Barry watcher her fondle its dappled ears. " At present, my guess is no better that your dog Trotter's, Miss Everford," he said sombrely. He studied the ring for the twentieth time that day. It was hazy, rather like a weak electrical discharge. " It may be some manifestation of the drive. If so, I hope that doesn't mean they're leaving."

Her keen grey eyes sought his quickly. " You're keen to establish communication, aren't you."

He did not deny it. " This is much of a test case for me. I've been working upwards of five years to hold my place in the first manned ship to leave Earth. If I can't establish contact with the beings in her," he jabbed a finger towards the ship, " what chance have I of getting the selectors' vote for Mars or Venus ? What's more, I've always told myself that it would be possible to set up intelligent contact with *any* alien life form, with no intermediate steps, go-betweens or translators."

She nodded. " What's your first step ?"

" To get Charlie's radio equipment set up. To watch and listen for signals from them, and try to signal back."

" Was that what you were doing before dawn this morning?"

He looked a trifle sheepish. " Signalling with a torch ? Yes. I admit it was a bit primitive, but worth trying. Just one flash, a pause, two flashes, another pause, then three. The inference is, that we're showing we can count. When they realise that, they signal back four, five, and so on—"

She stopped him. " A first step, I know—a lot of my work begins with things just as simple."

She left him, going off towards the covered truck which had become her temporray office. Barry stood considering the ship, wondering what she contained, if anything. She had length, height, but no apparent thickness. Theoretically, she could not exist. A mere plane, having only length and breadth, was an abstract, never found on Earth.

The commander of the Flatlander ship turned from his instruments, discouraged, and locked himself in the temporal continuum of his aide. His cilia vibrated.

" Has any significance been found in those aurora observed in the arrismeter ?"

" No, sir. They appeared to be fairly regularly spaced, but without temporal extension. When beginning, each was of 9,000 pagliton units, but that soon fell to about 7,000 PU'S. That, and their lack of uniformity in spacing, suggests they were some natural phenomena."

" According to the arrismeter, their source moved slightly."

" Yes, sir, but motion does not necessarily indicate life."

That was so, the commander agreed. So far, their instruments had only yielded chaotic information from outside. There were no pauses or interruptions in the temporal flow, to which instruments could be locked, only a ceaseless avalanche of impressions too brief to record or observe.

" Possibly this planet has no intelligent life," the aide suggested.

" It may be so." The commander reviewed his scanty store of information. " There is a body in continuous movement some short distance from us ?"

" Yes, sir. Its length is so great it cannot be charted. Its width and depth are very variable. Its movement so far has always been in one direction."

" Could it be some kind of—of serpentine being ?"

The aide's cilia hung limp for a long time. " I do not know, sir."

" The many thousands of tiny objects which were recorded as striking our hull, when we landed, were believed to be of somewhat similar constitution to the continuously moving serpentine object, I understant ?"

" So our computer stated, sir."

" Could those thousands of tiny objects have been this serpentine object's young, attacking us ?"

" I do not know, sir."

It was clear that they must gain more information, the commander decided. He returned to the arrismeter, but nothing showed on its screen. The temporal observation screens, with the time locks off, were worse, and the senseless flurry they presented sickened him. With the time locks on, the screens were alike blank.

He left that at last, and floated through the slot into the plane of his second-in-command.

" Have significant electro-magnetic vibrations been detected ?"

The second was morose. " No, sir. There is a high background level, but nothing intelligent has been found. We are trying the effect of radiating signals of basic significance, beginning with numerals."

" Good." The commander drifted on, but paused in the slot. " You are using the universally accepted time standard notation ?"

" Yes, sir. Infinity minus 1, infinity minus 2, and infinity minus 3. If any intelligent being is reached, and has the means to reply, we expect the infinity minus 4 numeral—"

" Good." The commander felt all within his power was being done, and propelled himself towards the beam slot room from which a report could be sent back to base, many worlds away.

" Only a lot of static and interference," Charlie Rand said. He wiped his brow and sat back in his chair, gloomily surveying his equipment. " Unfortunately the direction finder doesn't give a reading on it."

" Then we'll assume it's from the ship," Barry said. " If you get anything definite, or anything which might be a signal, let me know."

Rand grimaced. " If I saw a needle in a haystack I'd stop you sitting on it—but I wouldn't promise to find it."

He returned to his equipment, slowly adjusting dials as he searched the bands.

Barry surveyed the equipment. The bright bulb over the bench gave him an idea.

" I'd like to run a wire out and signal with a powerful light. My torch was none too good."

Charlie Rand did not look round. " Help yourself. Any other ideas ?"

" The square root of the product of the squares is a fairly generally accepted phenomena. I'd like to get it set out in lights. If we establish only one point of contact in mathematics, it's something."

" Could be," Rand agreed.

Barry went out, sending a man to hook up the lead. Diane Everford was approaching with the dog Trotter at her heels.

" Any information, Mr. Miller ?"

" Not a thing you can work on."

She seemed disappointed. " I thought you looked purposeful—"

" Only with a stronger light. Meanwhile, I'm also having rigged up a board with the old hypotenuse theorem. Four lights for the horizontal, three for the vertical, and five for the hypotenus. Four squared plus three squared equal five squared. A universal truth that demonstrates at least some appreciation of science."

She clicked her fingers, calling back the dog. " I've seen it work in stories."

Barry sighed heavily. He had noticed that people seemed to think that he should automatically produce immediate success. Yet all he could do was try everything, to obtain one point of contact from which they could progress.

He saw the board wired up, connected, and had it propped vertically fifty yards from the ship. Then he took the mains lamp and switch, on its cable, and returned to his original position, where the hand lamp had failed to evoke any response.

The Flatlander commander jerked out of repose as his aide's arm came through the slot, stirring him.

" The arrismeter is responding, sir !"

The commander was fully awake, now, and propelled himself through the slot into the instrument chamber. A waving line danced on the arrismeter screen, crossing a circle that drifted from right to left.

" The aurora is much stronger, this time, sir," the aide pointed out, " and it is modulated."

" Give me the readings."

" It is nearly uniform at its peaks at 180,000 PU's, and modulated at just over ninety-eight standard units per interval." Lines danced across the screen, interlacing. " There is a background of secondary aurora, but the arrismeter cannot deal with the simultaneously presented data."

They observed the screen for a long time. At last the dancing lines showing the characteristics of the more powerful aurora ceased. The commander remembered the very powerful aurora discharges at the time of their landing.

" You think these manifestations are from the intelligent beings ?" he asked at last.

The interval before the reply was long. " No, sir. First, we have observed no living beings whatever on the planet. Second, the aurora appear to carry no information. I have had the time lock on each individually, without success. I believe they are some natural phenomena."

" You are probably correct."

Disturbed, the commander went again to his own observation screens. As depicted by his instruments, the surface of the planet was in a state of continuous flux. Great volumes of material were constantly in motion. Some, only dimly

recorded on the monor-echo screens, apparently extended for many miles above, and in all directions. Nearer, heavier objects slid along, following the same wandering course. At other points, more or less solid objects seemed to move at random. As a background to it all was the constant rush of time, and nowhere could his instruments detect a time lock, or the quiescence of temporal stability. The endless cataract of time outside the ship sickened him, and he wondered if it were indeed possible that any being could exist in it.

At length he returned to his communicator slot, and beamed out a provisional message. In his view, the planet was not inhabited. It had no temporal stability permitting life as he knew it. But if the planet were irradiated for eventual occupation, that could be overcome. Settlers would require personal time lock equipment, until conditions were modified, but that would not be impossible.

A reply came soon, with a request that data be furnished as obtained. The commander signed off, feeling the heavy burden of his responsibility. The Flatlanders could not afford to miss a good planet, like this might become. Yet they would never risk the total elimination of any life it might contain.

He descended a slot to the lower deck of the ship, and located the deck officer.

" You have had nothing in the spatial extension ?"

" No, sir." The other referred to instruments linked to a dim green ring outside the ship. He could not observe the ring directly, because it was locked to the chaotic temporal progression of the planet, but his equipment showed that it was undisturbed.

" Inform me at once if anything arises," the commander ordered. " This planet experiences a conjunction of gravity fields which limits our stay."

He made a brief tour of the ship. His officers were each at their posts, and had in no way relaxed vigilance. Electrostatic discharges were going out regularly on 300, 400 and 500 eneries, and the time lock screens were in constant use, with the vague hope of chancing upon some manifestation which would show life existed on the planet. But every locked screen was blank, and every running screen presented such a mass of confused data that sifting and intelligent study were impossible. The commander doubted whether any creature could indeed live outside the ship, enduring the relentless, impossible cataract of time there.

" There's a bit of a hiss just under 30 megacycles," Charlie Rand said. " But I doubt if it means much. It may be some kind of direction beacon for other ships to home on."

He turned up the volume on a speaker. A series of dots jabbed endlessly at Barry's ears. They conveyed no more than the 50 cycle whine of Rand's other equipment.

" Personally, I doubt if there's any living thing on the ship," Charlie said, turning down the volume. "It's thin as a shadow. How can anything be inside ?"

Barry sat on the edge of the bench, swinging a long leg. " You have a point there, Charlie. But they may have other dimensions to compensate for that, or be able to do without them."

" Then why no radio messages, light signals, or the like ?"

Barry sighed. " If I knew the answer to that, I might have the answer to my own problem—how to communicate." In his mind's eye he could see Earth's first manned ship taking off: without Barry Miller. And in addition to the personal challenge, there was a challenge to humanity. Mankind apparently had an alien race's representatives in its back garden, and couldn't communicate.

A junior Officer tapped on the half open door, looked in, saw Barry, and saluted.

" This was for you sir."

Barry took it, thanked him, and slit the envelope. Its code heading was that of his immediate superior. His face was without emotion as he read the contents. He folded the sheet, replaced it, and put the envelope in an upper pocket.

" Good news," Charlie Rand asked sadly.

" For those who envy my job. I've a week to get results, then will be removed."

It was not unexpected, he thought. Someone would have been sitting on his superior. It was inevitable. He wondered if the ship, thin as a shadow as Charlie so aptly put it, could indeed carry intelligent beings with whom even a single common point of contact could be established.

Later in the day Charlie reported two other signals, on different frequencies, but apparently not an attempt to establish contact. They resembled the endless series of dots first heard, though the periods were perhaps infinitesimally longer. Rand classified them as some kind of radio beacon. They did not vary in power or speed, and no specialist at the camp could read any significance in them.

Several times Barry walked slowly round the ship. From the lane and apex of the field she looked real. But seen from each end, she vanished to a line, then to nothing. Her thickness was zero. One very essential dimension, required to make a complete solid, was absent.

He studied the hazy green ring, squatting before it. Strangely enough it was the only manifestation which did not shrink to nothing and vanish, when he stood in line with the ship. He decided that test equipment must be brought to bear upon it, in an attempt to analyse its purpose or nature.

As he went round the ship, and back along near the stream, he heard rapid feet scurry in the grass. Trotter came from behind trees, followed by Diane Everford.

They walked in silence side by side, then she halted. "How many dimensions do we have ?"

He looked at her. " Three. Height, length, breadth. They make up a solid." He pulled his long chin. " Some call time the fourth, but not in the same sense."

She nodded, looking at the ship, just visible over the rise. " That ship has height and length, but no breadth. Could time be their third ?"

" I doubt it."

" Then how do you explain this effect we get of her having no thickness ?"

" I don't explain it," Barry pointed our morosely.

He watched Trotter run on ahead, sniffing at an abandoned rabbit hole. His nose went in enthusiastically, and emerged covered with old leaves.

" My investigations have been about as useful as that," Barry said.

He left her, and walked back towards the huts and trucks. He was beginning to wonder if Charlie were right, and the ship empty, or some kind of mock-up or remote-controlled model sent for unknown reasons.

The Flatlander commander thought for a long time before energising his transmitter. Arrismeter, monor-echo, and all other instruments had given negative results. Repeated broadcasts of 10^{x}-1 and allied symbols had brought no response. Privately, he was of the opinion that no life existed on the planet. Lacking any control of the important dimension of time, intelligent life could not exist, he thought. And nowhere within range of the time-lock apparatus had any halt

in the temporal progression been found. Lacking an essential dimension, the planet must be empty.

Contact established, he began to give his report. The coincidence of gravitational fields was imminent, and they must soon leave. No intelligent signals had been located on any electro-static or other band, and no time lock had been found. His headquarters base was cautious.

" You have seen nothing whatever which could suggest any form of life exists ?"

" Nothing. There are many natural phenomena of unknown origin, as would be expected. The inter-spatial ring has been out with no result. Personally, I cannot conceive that any rational being, or life form as we know it, could exist on the planet. There is no indication of any control whatever of the progression of time. In such circumstances, there could be no stability. Indeed, exterior conditions, as they now stand, are intolerable. We will make final checks, but I see no reason why the planet should not be set down for irradiation. Settlers will require personal time-lock units, until conditions have been improved, of course."

" Very well. We will list the planet for irradiation and colonisation."

The commander signed off, and drifted down through his slot for a final check of the screens. The mad dance of time outside the ship sickened him, stealing away reason and tranquility, and he switched off the equipment hastily. It was unthinkable that any being could survive when exposed to such temporal currents, he thought.

The monor-echo and arrismeter technicians had relaxed, knowing no further discoveries were possible. The instruments had conveyed all the information of the external world that was within their power. For a time he had supposed that the grouped aurora located by the arrismeter might be an attempt to signal, but each source had been of slightly different intensity, and they thus had to be dismissed as natural phenomena.

The commander ordered that the ship's drive motors be made ready. There was obviously no life on the planet. He would personally be glad when the ship could leave. Holding her there was like having anchorage on the lip of a cataract.

Outside the headquarters building, Barry chewed his lips, seeking a solution where he knew none existed. The remaining

period of his command could now be counted in brief hours, and he had accomplished nothing.

A truck was coming in, bringing equipment which had been used to analyse the green ring. Charlie Rand got off it as it slowed, and Barry went to meet him.

" You've found nothing ?"

Rand's expression had shown it, and he nodded. " Nothing useful. The ring has a very localised oscillatory field, stable in frequency and power. Exact information is in the truck. It could be to do with their method of propulsion, or have some association with the radio beacons."

Barry felt keen disappointment. " You've made nothing more of the radio signals ?"

" No. I'm convinced they're location or identification beacons."

" They're not trying to get over some information to us ?"

" Not so far as anyone here can see. The signal around thirty megacycles is just dots. You heard it first. The transmissions around forty and fifty megs are almost identical. None of the signals has varied by a hair's breadth."

Barry admitted he could make nothing of the signals himself. They had the regularity of auto-coded radio beacons. He wondered at their own inability to get any radio response from the ship.

" None of your transmissions raised them, Charlie ?"

" Not a one. I've just been explaining one possible reason to Miss Everford, who is longing to have something to work on. Their radiations have characteristics ours lack. So we can hear them, but they can't hear us. I'll give a simple example. If you've got a transmitter radiating Morse in the form of modulated radio-frequencies, I can hear you on any set. But if I'm radiating Morse as an interrupted radio-frequency, you can't hear me unless you've got an oscillating detector or beat frequency oscillator to beat with my signal and produce audio." He sighed. " I've not got any signal over to them because our transmissions lack something their receivers need, if you ask me."

Charlie Rand went on into the radio hut, and Barry unslung his glasses to study the ship, perhaps for the last time. He wondered what odd interaction of dimensions made it seem without thickness.

An exceedingly faint blue halo hung completely round the vessel, just visible because of the light-collecting power of the large lenses. Diane Everford came from among the trucks. He handed her the binoculars silently. She gazed at the ship through them, and her brows shot up.

" You think it's leaving ?" she asked quickly.

" Could be ! If it does, with no communication made, the remains of my career wouldn't be as valuable as one of Trotter's old bones." The dog sat pawing Barry's trouser leg. Barry patted his piebald head. " Apart from that, it's pretty damning that we've been too dim to establish contact some way or the other."

His face heavy, he started off across the field. If the ship was going to rise, he might at least witness that at close quarters. If there were personal danger, it did not seem important.

As he drew nearer, he noticed a faint humming, as if equipment inside was reaching operating trim. He walked completely round the ship, aware that the hum was steadily increasing. The green ring still hung at ground level, but he would not be surprised if it vanished any moment.

Small feet came scampering across the turf. Bary halted, patting the dog's wiry back.

" You're as good as I am at this, Trotter ! Find 'em !" Barry knew he was trying to make a joke of it, delaying the impact of his superior's criticism.

Trotter shot round the ship, disappeared, and reappeared beyond one end. He halted, nose twitching, pointing at the green ring.

Barry's interest quickened. " Rabbits !" he said. " Find 'em !"

Trotter arrowed for the ring. His nose went through, and half his head, but his ears seemed to stick. His back toes sank into the turf, as if he was pulling a rabbit from its hole. Then he came out backwards with a rush, his teeth closed on something that glittered brightly.

Barry ran, squatting to take it. Metallic, so thin it seemed to have no thickness, it was etched with ideograms. One series showed the ship amid pairs of wavy lines, then rising. A long space, while the wavy lines disappeared, then the ship returning.

" You've got something here, Trotter !" Barry said.

Abruptly the green ring snapped out. The blue halo round the ship increased, and the vessel began to rise. It seemed to

recede, rather than move, and went like a shadow into the blue sky.

Barry turned from the spot, composing his words, the ideograms in one hand. The ship was leaving . . . but it would be back . . . and there would be communication . . .

The Flatlander commander sensed his aide's urgency as the aide came through the slot from the lower deck.

" We're well away ?" he asked.

" Yes, sir." The aide's cilia bristled with excitement. " A moment before rising, just as we were going to remove the inter-spatial ring, part of a living organism came through it, and took away the prepared ideogram."

The commander felt astonishment. " You are sure ?"

" I witnessed it, sir ! At the last moment. The organism cannot be classified as yet, but showed intelligence and purpose—"

" Very well." The commander began to propel himself towards the communications equipment. " I will send out a cancellation of the irradiation order. When the interaction of local gravitational fields has ceased, we must return."

He paused a moment at the arrismeter screen. On time lock, it was blank. Keyed to exterior time, its presentation of the remote planetary surface below was chaotic. He wondered what manner of beings could possibly exist there, living amid the cataract of moving time, apparently with no means of isolating themselves from it. He shuddered involuntarily, personally glad that some time must pass before the position of the planet's satellite permitted the ship to return.

Francis G. Rayer

It is pleasant to see author James back with us again after a lengthy absence and, as usual, with a plot which has a surprising twist in its later stages. Conditions on other planets may differ only slightly from those on Earth, but . . .

SPRINKLER SYSTEM

by E. R. James

Cambridge followed John out of the alien heat into the coolness of the prefab hut. They halted. A middle-aged man with hair prematurely white was watching a sample of some liquid dripping through a series of filters. On a portable stove, a large saucepan puffed up steam as its contents bubbled at a slow boil.

Cambridge made a gagging sound in his throat. John, turning, saw his young companion was becoming an unhealthy greenish white. " What's hit you ?"

" Always want to vomit—" Cambridge clapped a hand over his bloodless lips, mumbled incoherently, " It's that stench . . . Oh, dear ! See you outside—"

John watched him run out. Then, belatedly, Cambridge's words gave sensitivity to his own sense of smell. Entering the unfamiliar atmosphere of this hut, other impressions had

swamped it. Where had he smelt such an odour of charnel houses before ? It had been in a cookhouse on another planet, when food had been rationed, and they had been cooking bones to extract the fat from the marrow.

The man at the workbench looked away from his apparatus, at the door left open by Cambridge. His clear blue eyes moved on to glare at John, and his fresh complexioned features twisted in an intensity of fury. " Couldn't you wait ? Had you got to come stamping straight in here ? How the blazes am I ever to get results if there are always to be interruptions ? Get to hell out ! I'll be with you when I've finished."

John, taken aback, retreated out of the door, closing it after him.

Cambridge, still green, eyed him self-consciously. "Sorry... but it's some kind of phobia I've got. I ought to have had treatment for it, but it seems such a silly thing to go to a doctor and say some smells make me feel sick."

" It's all right, Fred," said John. He put his thick arm around the thin young man's shoulders and they walked together back towards the helicopter which had brought them. " Most people have some involuntary actions in their make-up. It's probably some sort of defence reflex started off by experiences when you were a kid. I know human beings try to change the laws of evolution to suit themselves, but they can't get away entirely from basic things. Selection of the species and that sort of thing. In nature, if there are two identical animals, but one reacts better to a danger than the other and survives, then it will have learned to go on reacting in that way even though the next time such a reaction may not have any value. Get the idea ?"

" I suppose so." Cambridge lighted a cigarette.

They both began to take interest in their surroundings. Except for the bluish tint to the sun high in the sky, they might have been on one of several groups of tropical islands on Earth. Upthrust volcanic cones, mostly extinct, such as the one on which they stood, were fringed around with green vegetation—which, on nearby islands, looked like circlets of emeralds against the shimmer of a shot-silk sea.

Away to the south, smoke and steam made a slanting column into the azure sky, but here all seemed idyllic.

The door of the hut opened and the man came out, looked around, saw them and hurried over. " I'm Peacock," he said. " You'll be the replacements from Base, I suppose."

John nodded.

Peacock suddenly smiled. " Sorry I blew up. But the situation here can't go on like this. I hoped I was getting somewhere. And you interrupted." He held out his hand.

John took it in his own firm grip. " All right. I'm not surprised you're on edge. You've been lucky to have survived here, let alone find out what makes the place tick."

" H'm." Peacock's face creased into a grimace of tiny wrinkles. He shook hands with Cambridge and, introductions over, they sat on the rock.

Cambridge saw him eyeing the smouldering cigarette. " Would you care for one, sir ?"

" Don't smoke. Don't approve of it." Peacock pursed his lips. " Bad habit. Interferes with work. Can't stand it."

Cambridge hesitated, and then took a long pull, and exhaled smoke slowly.

Peacock's thin lips parted, but he changed his mind and said nothing. After brooding a moment he turned to John. " What exactly is your position. I've always only had one assistant before. Why two this time ?"

" Fred Cambridge here is the replacement. I'm to look around and try to find out what happened to your other assistants."

" I see. Well, Quickly's things have all gone back, and there's no trace of him left here that I can think of." Peacock scratched his chin, the faint stubble on it shining silver in the brilliant sunshine. " Pfaff's things are still in his hut. I haven't had time to pack them up. You could look through them for me and get them ready for the supply copter to take away. And, if you like, I can show you the place on the beach where I imagine he was—I was busy in the lab—when the sea took him."

" How about doing that right now before you get busy again ?"

Peacock hesitated. "Well, all right," he agreed reluctantly and started off at once down one of several paths through the coastal undergrowth.

John and Cambridge hurried after. Amongst tangled greenery, just over shoulder high to John, head high to

Cambridge and Peacock, the sea breeze, redolent of wide oceans and rich soil, made John take deep breaths. Sweat was beginning to drip from them when Cambridge, bringing up the rear, suddenly gasped.

" You all right, kid ? asked John.

Cambridge stepped on his cigarette, half smoked on the path in front of him. " Burnt myself. Forgot the confounded thing."

Peacock halted on the edge of a narrow beach. " About twenty feet along there."

John passed him and continued along. " This the place ?"

" Yes." Peacock hung back instead of following.

Bits of undergrowth and other debris littered the beach for some distance on either side of John. Inland such foliage that still stood was curiously tinged with white rime. Over a considerable area it was beaten right to the ground and in some places scoured out by the roots.

John picked a leaf from a surviving shrub, tested it against his tongue. " Salt."

" The only thing I found," Peacock said nervously, " was Pfaff's oxygen breathing equipment, right on the water's edge, half buried."

" Oxygen equipment ? Do you mean he went skin diving ? I didn't think he was that sort of man."

Peacock looked irritated. " Oh, he was an old fool in many ways. He never told me why he sent for the frogman stuff, if that's what you're getting at."

John poked around in the bedraggled undergrowth. A harpoon gun glinted and he picked it up. Loaded but not fired, he noted.

" What was Pfaff doing here, on the beach, anyway ?"

" I tell you, I've no idea. Nor do I care, Mr. Fyfe. He lived his life and I lived mine." Peacock reached up into a springy bush and prized loose a curved briar pipe. " Maybe he came here to smoke this horrible thing of his without annoying me." He passed the pipe to John. " Well, have you seen enough for now ? I'm sure we could all do with refreshment. Then back to work."

" We'll go back then," nodded John. The pipe seemed somehow to bring home the disappearance of a human being, lost while doing a job of research on a planet far from Earth.

The living hut's bare walls were adorned with landscapes of the island and sea around it. " I did them," said Peacock, and

thawed visibly at their appreciation of his artistry. " Haven't time for it recently. You see, what I'm doing is so important. This plant we're studying could be very valuable to Earth. But the special properties it has when grown here, are lost if it is planted anywhere else, and the original settlers of the planet won't live on these islands to farm it. It seems they got a bit primitive in outlook during the war, owing to the isolation I suppose, and reverted to a sort of taboo of these places—although they stayed sane enough in other ways." His chin, stubble bedewed with sweat, rested against the collar of his bush shirt. " And it does look as though there is something here . . ."

After the meal, Cambridge went off with Peacock—grimacing at John as though to say, hope he doesn't brew any more bones. And John went into the quarters left vacant by the disappearance of Pfaff.

Beside the camp bed, a little table held an alarm clock, stopped at five o'clock, an ash tray and a framed photograph in colour of a middle-aged woman and two boys, evidently Pfaff's wife and family.

Another harpoon gun leaned in a corner of the little room. An aqualung shone gleams on its compressed air cylinders as the slanting sunlight touched it from the windows. Flippers peeped out from amongst a pile of sandals and light shoes in another corner. A pile of magazines, a shelf of text books, a polythene wardrobe, and a rack of assorted pipes completed the first impressions of the man John had never met, but whose disappearance—and presumed death—had brought him out here to investigate.

Under the bed, adjacent to the hands of anyone lying down, were bottles and a glass, and many tins of tobacco. Pfaff had enjoyed his quiet times here, by the look of things. The suitcase under the foot of the bed held other personal things, but nothing which seemed to improve John's picture of the man.

John tidied things up and, seeing the laboratory hut lights on, and not wishing to interrupt in there, moved his own few personal things in, and then went into the cookhouse and made himself a meal before turning in.

A tap on the door came after darkness closed with a whispery silence over the island. Cambridge came in, looking worn out and fed up. " That man's a slave driver. And he's got a

phobia about smoking which beats me with my smell reaction."

"Humour him," suggested John, sitting up in bed. "Remember his reputation as a sound researcher. On a job like this the man who gets the most information is the one most likely to come up with the right answer. This plant could be very valuable to Earth, but the secretions it gives are small and we've got to find out how to mass-farm the stuff. That means we've got to find out what's so special about these coastal belts so we can make the same conditions elsewhere."

Cambridge lit a cigarette. "First one since that with you."

"Cheer up," said John. "What have you been doing in that lab anyway?"

"Soil analysis. He's been dissecting plants all the time I've been boiling the dirt and making the trace element tests. When I'd done, he just said, 'Not bad. Same as my own analysis six months ago,' and I gathered he'd just been testing me as a botanist. A most irritating man."

"And your orders for tomorrow?"

"We're going collecting specimens. He thinks the plant we're concerned with lives in symbiosis with some other plant, or perhaps with some small animal."

"I'll try to tag along with you, then," said John.

The alarm clock woke him at sunrise, but he was only just in time to see Peacock go striding off, with Cambridge, dragging his feet and rubbing his eyes, close behind. Peacock looked at John indifferently, and did not even answer his 'good morning.' They made a strange procession down into the lush undergrowth.

John, however, soon began to enjoy the invigorating cool new morning. When Peacock began digging up specimens of a small plant like a dwarf marrow, he watched carefully, but knew better than to speak.

Peacock kept glancing up at the glorious sunrise. Its beauty seemed to melt his habitual irritation. "Wonderful, wonderful," he murmured, eyes shining with the appreciation of the artist, silvery hair rumpling under his dirt-flecked hand. ". . . only man is vile . . ." he muttered. He jabbed the trowel under another little marrow plant. "Come out my beauty. You're going to flower with just one of your companions in this dirt. Perhaps you'll be the one to tell us the secret of your difference."

John helped carry the bag of little marrow plants while the two other men collected specimens of as many other species as they could. He followed them, when all three were laden, to where lines of cloches already held little marrow plants paired off with other labelled specimens.

" Slow work this," said Cambridge to John. " Might take years—even though the seasons on this part of the planet are practically non-existent."

" Stop talking, Fred !" snapped Peacock. " How can I work while you're distracting me."

" My kingdom for a cigarette," whispered Cambridge in John's ear.

Peacock made a tut-tutting sound. " Confound this stuff." He stood in front of a clump of something like reddish brown grass perhaps rushes, and glared down at it.

John went closer, stepping over the cloches. He risked a question. " What is it ?"

" I don't know. I simply don't know. It's like an animal growing in the ground." Peacock turned agonised eyes to stare with a wild appeal at John. " Yesterday morning I dug this stuff out to four feet down. Where its roots finish, I don't know. You found me boiling it. To all intents and purposes it is some kind of animal cell, rather like hair, or bone or fingernails. That's the best description I can give it. It grows here and there all over the place, up to about five feet high. It never flowers ; it replaces itself, growing up to its original size and shape if disturbed or damaged—like I disturbed this one." Peacock halted, glowering, as though realising he had confessed ignorance to a layman. " Go look around," he suggested harshly. "You'll soon find specimens to examine for yourself." His tone became tinged with sarcasm. " Perhaps you'll find out something about it I've missed."

" All right," said John as evenly as he could. " I will."

He headed for the beach. About twenty paces from the place he had left Peacock, just beyond the edge of the cultivated section, he halted in front of a clump of fibrous reddish brown stalks, or filaments which grew to a height almost level with his eyes. Smaller filaments or very fine hairs streamed away from the tips of the stalks, moving like gossamer in the sea breeze. Something about the curious sight made his skin crawl.

He skirted around it. About twenty-five paces along the winding path through the thick vegetation he saw more reddish

brown amongst the green, and stopped again, frowning and his skin pricking as before.

It was, as far as he could tell, identical with the first object. He was far enough puzzled to mutter to himself. " Wonder why Peacock hasn't grown this with his laboratory plant."

He stood, deep in thought, or rather with his mind a blank before the unknown and waiting for an impression to reach it. At length he moved on. Thirty-one paces along the winding path he found another clump of tall filaments.

He stared at it. Then continued. Twenty-four paces along the inevitably winding path, there was yet another clump. He scratched his chin.

He sniffed. The sea breeze was very strong here. Salt and drying shingle and sea plants and creatures, all added their odours to the delicious tang which was redolent of the coastlines on any Earth type planet. It made him think of drying nets and seagulls and fish for breakfast . . .

" Confound that man. He got me out before I had eaten." John grinned to himself.

He returned to the huts, made and ate a breakfast as the sun climbed higher in the sky. He was going out again when the sight of the lab hut halted him. Returning inside the cook-house, he cut sandwiches and then took them to the others.

" Huh," said Peacock absently, eating automatically as he continued some delicate work with a fibrous leaf from one of the morning's collection of plants. Cambridge's young face, however, seemed to lose some of its appearance of strain as he drank coffee from a thermos and bolted bacon sandwiches.

" Never tasted anything better in my life," he said.

John grinned. He had never considered himself as a cook. Cambridge winked. " I could smell you cooking, and even old Peacock looked up and wrinkled his nose once or twice long before you arrived," he whispered.

Peacock's blue eyes glared at them. " Thank you for the food. Er—very welcome. But you're delaying us now," he ended with pointed sharpness.

John nodded. Outside, he headed straight for the helicopter. Settling in the cabin, he fed fuel to the little jets in the rotor arms, ignited it. Smoke trailed away in the breeze as he rose swiftly to a few hundred feet. Shifting into the wind he held the aircraft steady as he could over the lush coastal belt while he looked down through binoculars. He got out a camera with telescopic lens and took several shots.

Some commotion on the other side of the island caught his eye. A great mass of spray was settling, after having been apparently flung up in a great wave over the low coast belt. Drifting with the wind, he slid the craft towards the spot, and dropped it to within a few yards of the water rushing back into the foaming sea over the same kind of shingle beach as on the other side of the island.

As the water drained off, he landed the machine. His heart beat a little faster, but nothing happened. He got out and walked into the undergrowth. Fish flopped and gasped amongst the bruised and flattened bushes and plants. Small creatures of amphibious habits scurried from his feet, dragging pieces of stranded fish with them. Some debris had been carried out into the quietening sea and drifted off in the gentle breeze striking over the quiet land.

John returned to the copter, lifting it and taking photographs of the part of the curving coast land. The film roll used up, he set the machine to print it, and studied the coloured pictures.

" Look how evenly spaced the brown stuff is over the whole of the coast land," he told the others when he took their dinner and showed them the photos at the same time.

Peacock pored over them. " You've got something here," he had the grace to say, and the next instant scowled at Cambridge who was feeling automatically for cigarettes. " Not in here ! How many times must I tell you."

Cambridge compressed his lips and followed John out to light up outside with evident satisfaction. " That man thinks of nothing but his work—except those pictures of his, I suppose." He looked uneasily about them and at the closed door of the laboratory hut behind. " You don't think that . . . he could have done Pfaff and the other man in ? He's always going on about the way they smoked and drank and such-like as though he was threatening me with the same fate. He is a bit unbalanced, isn't he ?"

John frowned. " I've been here about twenty four hours and this place gives me the willies. He's been working here half a year—in my book that entitles him to be a bit odd."

" You're right there," agreed Cambridge. " But, anyway, he knows his job and I'm getting interested in what he's doing, so I doubt if he thinking of . . ."

Peacock's pink face came irritably around the door edge. " Are you going to be all day out there ?"

" Coming." Cambridge shrugged at John.

Left alone, John collected Pfaff's frogman gear from the living hut. He scribbled a note.

Dear Fred,

The last we know of Pfaff is that he seems to have gone skin diving. I'm going to try just that in the same place as he did. Pfaff seems to have been an amateur as well as middle-aged. I've done a lot of skin diving on Earth and other planets too, and I'm not much more than half his age. I should be back to remove this note before you get away from Peacock to have your next meal.

Good luck !

John.

Just clear of the huts, he paused to look back. Strictly utility structures against a background of almost barren rock, they had nevertheless assumed some of the attractions of home even during the few days he had spent here. He took a deep breath, settled harpoon gun and flippers more comfortably over his shoulder and started downwards.

From slope of rock to fairly level soil just above sea level the sudden transition struck him as never before. He glimpsed a tuft of brownish-red just above the general level of green foliage. He strode along the path to the beach.

He took off his clothes and made a tiny heap of them on the dry shingle. In underpants only, he walked a little way first one way and then the other along the beach on either side of the place where they had found Pfaff's pipe, looking back each time and trying to imagine what Pfaff had done.

He put on the flippers and mask and swung the oxygen cylinders on to his back. With the breather in his mouth, he splashed out into the clear water, realised that in his excitement he had forgotten the harpoon gun, went back for it, and ran with it out to sea until, suddenly, the shingle ended and he sank into the warm, refreshing water. It closed over his head, clear greeny blue, shutting out the blistering heat of the noon sun.

He turned down into the flickering depths. About twenty feet below he swung his feet down on to a kind of shelf, so puzzlingly rubbery to his flipper soles as he stood looking around, that he bent down and touched it.

His blood ran cold and his heart began to pound. Surely this was the hide of something alive ? He allowed himself to rise a few feet above the unexpected surface, and saw that it

reached, flat and unmarked except for only a few bits of ocean debris, as far as he could see, and, in the flicker from the surface, it seemed to move with pulsating motion.

His hand clutched the harpoon gun tightly as he began to swim further out to sea. The edge of the strange surface showed through the green. Fish and floating weed and small sea things darted or hung or drifted over the edge, taking little notice of him as he swam cautiously out over the dark chasm of deep water. The chill of the depths struck up at him and he turned to peer down.

A gentle current drew him down into the shadowy reaches beneath the shelf over which he had swum. The shelf's apparent movement over his head quickened and he began to use his flippers to control his descent.

The gloom closed in around him. The edge of the shelf outlined against the flickering surface of the ocean, receded behind. Fish made flashes of reflected light around him as they turned and darted hither and thither, unafraid of the current.

A shadow loomed up through the deepening murk, huge and terrifying in that alien place, so that he swung the harpoon gun into defensive readiness.

The shadow was a honeycomb of mouths and it was into these that the water was being drawn. Reassured by the realisation that none of these openings was big enough to engulf him, he dived deeper, plumbing the extent to which this living wall reached below the surface.

And suddenly the flow of water changed, pushing him instead of pulling so that he went drifting away in the direction which he had been thrusting with his flippers.

Ghostly shapes of deep water weed moved around him in the emerald gloom, agitated with the current going away from the island. His feet brushed against the slick of ooze and his flippers cast up a trail of mud particles like rocket smoke.

The taste of the place, rank and putrid, found its way into his mouth. Scaly creatures and worms touched his shuddering skin with their cold bodies and he fought free of the soft grip of the mud and thrust wildly upwards with the current and did not stop until he broke surface.

Still shaken, he swam inshore and scrambled to his feet on the familiar shingle under the sun. Heat closed in around him

and he began to steam almost at once. Slipping out of the harness in order to move more freely, he dumped it just clear of the water and ran, staggering a little, up the beach into the shadow of the bushes.

He sank down gratefully, and relaxed with his back against the thick undergrowth. He shook the water clear of his eyes and wiped it from his face.

The neat pile of his scanty tropical clothes stood where he had left it, only a few feet from his wet trail across the pebbles. He frowned. Pfaff must have sought the shade, just as he had done. Pfaff, however, would have gone out for that pipe of his in a pocket of those clothes. John scratched his chin.

The prevailing wind from the sea, warm and gentle, dried him as he relaxed there.

He stood up and dressed. Hoisting his frogman equipment on to his shoulder, he set off back along one of the paths. He dropped the gear outside his hut and headed for the lab.

Peacock looked around sharply and seemed about to say something even more sharp ; then wrinkled his nose. His eyes widened in fear. " You've . . . been in the sea ?"

" Yes. Where's Cambridge ?"

" Cambridge ?" Peacock made an obvious effort and pulled himself together. He brushed back his white hair from his eyes. " That smell of brine on you upsets me. Sorry. I suppose it's because the sea or something in it has taken two of my assistants . . . What did you ask me ?"

" Where's Cambridge ?" John almost shouted the query.

Peacock bit his lip. " What happened, now. Oh yes, he said he wanted a drink . . . Where are you going ?"

John was half out of the door, running for the cookhouse. He halted just inside, staring an instant at the table where he had left the note.

He turned in frantic haste.

Peacock was coming hurriedly out of the lab. " What's happening ?"

" Cambridge—when did he leave you ?"

" Not long—a few minutes ago I think."

" Pray we're in time !" John hared down towards the undergrowth. Peacock shouted something and then his footfalls were ringing over the rock in pursuit. John thrust through a bush and sprinted along the winding path in front of

him. He hurdled cloches that came shining into his way, pelted on at full tilt. Peacock was shouting something behind him.

And suddenly the coastline directly ahead seemed to rise up in a wall of sparkling water which was flung inshore to crash like a giant bomb explosion down on the undergrowth. Splashes from the deluge leapt up and came hurtling through the bushes. John halted dead, shoulders bent and chest heaving from his exertions.

The huge mass of water which had been thrown inland spread out through the undergrowth and gurgled and sucked almost to their feet before rushing back into the sea.

" Cambridge ?" asked Peacock between gasping pants from behind.

John nodded. " He'll have gone down to the beach to wait for me to come up from the sea. He'll have sat down and lighted a cigarette to while away the time and that killed him."

" I don't understand . . ." gasped Peacock.

John breathed deeply. " I don't altogether. But it happens . . . as you saw this time."

They stood looking at each other, and then John turned and walked quickly in the wake of the retreating water. He halted, listening.

Other feet, ahead of him, were squelching through the saturated ground. Cambridge, drenched to the skin, came around a curve in the path. " Fred ! By God, I'm glad to see you. I thought you'd been washed out and sucked down by the thing in the water."

John grabbed Cambridge's arms, and Cambridge grinned rather foolishly. " I thought I was a gonner too."

They stood grinning at each other.

" What did happen ?" asked John. " Tell us right from the time you left Peacock in the lab. It's important."

" Eh ? Oh, I went into the cookhouse for a drink, and found your note. It worried me, you know."

" I didn't think you'd find it until meal time at the earliest."

" Well I did find it and it scared me. I didn't go back to the lab. I thought Mr. Peacock would scoff at me because I was worried. I went straight out of the hut and down to the beach where Pfaff had disappeared. I thought I could see wet marks in amongst the pebbles and sat down in the shade to wait."

" And you lit a cigarette ?"

" That's right. How did you guess ?"

" Go on !"

" Well—" Cambridge looked shamefaced. " I was worried about you and I forgot to smoke and burnt my fingers and dropped the cigarette. It went down in the undergrowth and although I could see the smoke coming out from the mess of sticks and things, I couldn't find it. It tantalised me. I tried to find another one in my pockets but they were all up here. I told myself that you would be all right, and started up here to get a fresh packet, when the sea seemed to come after me and knocked me flat, washed me inshore and then very nearly drained me off with it into the ocean."

John chuckled. He laughed. "You and your peculiarities—" He frowned. He looked over Cambridge's head to where, on the horizon a column of smoke and steam slanted into the sky. " Incredible. But . . . Yes, it must be." He swallowed hard. " We're looking at this thing in the light of our experiences. This is a strange planet, with unfamiliar life forms. We never thought that we might be standing on dirt accumulated on top of a kind of primitive, although gigantic animal which attaches itself around the islands in this tropical ocean."

" Huh ?" said Cambridge and Peacock as though with one voice.

John smiled at them. He was feeling rather light-headed. Reaction, no doubt. " It eats plankton just like the whale, the largest mammal back on Earth. It doesn't move, because it doesn't need to. But its habit of growing up around islands like this does give it need for one single sense. The islands are all volcanic. A lot of them are quite extinct now, but they must have all thrown out a lot of hot stuff in the past. These monsters, like this one of ours, had to have a sort of fire alarm system. That's provided by the reddish-brown clumps—which are primitive and outsize olfactory nerve-ends unless I am very much mistaken—"

" Like the scent organs in our own noses !" Peacock was getting excited now.

" That's right." John had got things sorted out in his mind now. " Smoke triggers off a mindless, defensive reflex in a sort of skirt over the creature's back. The skirt heaves up enough sea water on to the land to put out any blaze which might hurt the animal. It's easy to see how evolution might have selected

those of its kind able to scent the smallest quantity of smoke and to throw up the largest volume of water."

" And, although the reflex is no longer required around this extinct volcano," Cambridge said eagerly, " it has survived as an essential part of the creature." He opened his eyes very wide and shook his head. " What a monster it is."

John nodded. " Too big for us to think of straight away," he said soberly, and turned back towards the huts.

They all glanced down every now and then at the dirt, and put their feet down rather gently.

" The presence of the animal beneath the soil must be the missing ingredient for our plant," said Peacock as they reached the huts. " Excuse me." He headed for the lab.

John and Cambridge looked at each other, and John made a motion as though tilting a glass. They went off the other way towards the hut Pfaff had occupied.

E. R. James

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Although Earth's first expedition to Mars found the Martians they failed to discover any cities above ground—the sands were flat and unmarked. Then, overnight, a fantastic structure appeared, incredibly high, impossible to diagnose. That is the opening gambit of Peter Hawkins' lead novelette " The Birdcage " in next month's issue which builds up to a fine climax of suspense and mystery.

Short stories will probably be shared by Donald Malcolm, Philip High and E. R. James and the second part of Kenneth Bulmer's intriguing serial " The Patient Dark " produces some startling surprises and deeper mysteries as the field of operations against the Shangs and their sycophants is widened.

Ratings for No. 81 were :

1.	Count-Down (Part One)	Charles Eric Maine
2.	Dogfight	James White
3.	Chance Encounter	Bertram Chandler
4.	The Trouble I See	John Brunner
	Squeeze Box	Philip E. High

Before very long another age-old mystery will be solved when a Moon-probe successfully circumnavigates our satellite and photographs the side we have never seen. Let us take a look at our nearest neighbour in space in the light of this forthcoming event.

MOON BRIGHT

by Kenneth Johns

Much attention has been centred on the Moon as a target. Scientists and astronomers have been studying the Moon for years ; but nowadays the satellite is subject to a new type of restless and enquiring mind. Various people have thought of it as a target for H-bombs, thermite flares and powdered pigments—the latter to produce a vivid splash of colour on the lunar surface. Others think of it as a symbolical target, as the way-station to the planets—a step towards the stars. A few realise that it is a scientific target to be approached warily.

Splashing an H-bomb onto the surface and then analysing the radiation spectrum to obtain information on the Moon's structure had a certain direct, brutal attraction at one time. A refinement was the suggestion that a second lunar probe should orbit through the dust cloud spouting from the lunar surface and collect samples. It might well have been thought to be the only way—but if it had been carried out it would have been the most useless and expensive analysis in history. Responsible people have long since abandoned the idea. It would have been on a par with tinkering with the Sun's

thermonuclear processes to see if we could make it go nova—just so we could be certain that we did know the correct way of exploding a star.

No ! There are more subtle ways of approaching the problem and parallel to the direct method of orbiting or landing a rocket probe on the Moon, scientists are quietly going ahead with other methods of obtaining information of the Moon's surface. They may not be so accurate as the direct approach but they are certainly quicker and cheaper—and safer.

The ill-fated Pioneer carried a magnetometer, a gadget to measure the direction and intensity of the lunar magnetic field. It has been postulated for some years that the Moon, unlike the Earth, cannot have a measurable magnetic field. This thinking is based on the small mass of the Moon being unable to sustain electrical currents deep in its interior necessary for the production of magnetism.

Earth has a dense molten core that carries sluggish rivers of liquid that amplify and sustain small electric currents. There is some argument whether the terrestrial core is molten iron and nickel alloy or the mineral olivine collapsed by pressures greater than 1,400,000 atmospheres until it is in a physical state similar to a dense molten metal. Some people believe that the inmost core, 1,630 miles in diameter, is a solid compressed type of the iron and nickel molten core surrounding it on a radius of 1,360 miles. Whatever may be the true Earthly composition, both Mars and the Moon are too small to create internal pressures high enough to collapse olivine and both are small enough to have cooled sufficiently for any iron and nickel in their centres to be solid rather than liquid.

The effect of this is that any magnetism present would be the relatively faint field of a permanent magnet rather than the intense field of the dynamo processes that occur deep in the Earth.

With this clearly in mind, American physicists still thought it worth while trying to measure the lunar magnetism and their experiment failed only because of failure of subsidiary equipment—the rocket.

Meanwhile, other physicists have shown that the Moon can have, at the most, a very weak magnetic field. They did this by an analysis of moonlight.

Moonshine means different things to different people ; to the physicist it is a clue, a key to unlock the mysteries of our satellite. Not all moonlight is reflected light from the Sun. During the middle of the lunar day equatorial temperatures exceed 100°C and the Moon is a fine emitter of infrared radiation, and, also, minerals on the Moon's surface are luminescent and transform other forms of energy into visible light. Approximately one percent of moonlight is due to luminescence.

Now, luminescence is a well understood phenomenon whereby energy absorbed by an atom is released in a series of steps. If the energy absorbed is above the energy of a quantum of infrared radiation, the released light can be in the visible spectrum. This is the basis of fluorescent lamps where invisible ultraviolet light from the gas discharge is transformed into visible light by absorbtion by the phospher coating the walls of the tube.

Uranium minerals glow when an ultraviolet lamp is held near them and the effect of luminescence is well known on TV screens, which glow because the energy of a jet of electrons is absorbed by the phosphor.

Knowing these things, and being aware that the invisible shield of Earth, our atmosphere, absorbs most of the ultraviolet light from the Sun, we would expect that the Moon, having for practicable purposes no atmosphere, where the environment of space reaches right down to the surface, would show some luminescence of the surface minerals as unltraviolet light excited them. In fact lunar emission bands have been discovered in moonlight. But quantitive measurement showed that their intensity was extraordinary high ; far more than could be accounted for by ultraviolet absorbtion alone.

In addition, the emission varied widely from month to month, whilst the total ultraviolet output of the Sun does not widely change except in the occasional solar flare outbursts.

It was then realised that the emission bands were not being shown through excitation by sunlight but, instead, by the spray of hydrogen nuclei and electrons known as plasma that is continuously ejected by the Sun. Accelerated by the Sun's magnetic fields, billions of particles are ejected from each square inch of the solar surface every second. Also they are funnelled outwards by the magnetic fields over sunspots so that this funnelling or channelling forms intense jets that sweep over

the Earth from individual sunspots in a little under monthly cycles.

As they approach Earth after their day's trip from the Sun, the plasma particles are accelerated and guided in great spirals to the polar regions by the terrestrial magnetic field. There they smash into the upper air to excite it to the lavish luminescence of the aurorae borealis and australis.

Since there is no effective atmosphere on the Moon, it might be thought that the aurora effect would be completely missing. This is not so. The Moon has a very fine aurora. The main difference is that it takes place at ground level.

The lunar emission bands are radiated only by the sunlit areas of the Moon, showing the plasma travels in what are essentially straight lines—otherwise they would curve in and cause the shadowed parts of the surface — the lurking mysterious shadows of the crater walls—to luminesce. This fact alone shows that the Moon has no strong magnetic field. It also proves—if the extra proof were needed—that Earth does indeed possess a magnetic field, curving the plasma around to strike the dark side. After all, the aurora borealis is seen during the long Arctic night.

The terrestrial magnetic field accelerates the plasma as it orbits in and any similar field around the Moon would increase the speed of the plasma before it struck so that the luminescence would be four to nine times more bright than has been measured.

Quite apart from detecting these facts without ever going to the Moon, more accurate spectra analyses of the lunar luminescence should also enable accurate identification of the minerals on the Moon's surface without our ever venturing closer to the Moon than we are at present.

The emission appears to be greater from the rays extending from the crater Aristarchus than from other areas of the Moon.

Interest in our satellite has grown considerably in recent months with the serious and determined efforts to send a probe to peer more closely at the dead and barren and airless surface. Airless ? Well, yes and no. Surprising though it may seem, the Moon does have an atmosphere. Even though the pressure at moon level is a little less than a millionth of a millionth of Earth's atmosphere at sea level, it is definitely there.

With a surface gravity only a sixth of Earth's, the only gases permanently held are the heavy gases ; but, at the same time,

light gases are continuously being boiled off from the Moon. One instance of this is the helium produced by radio-active decay of lunar minerals and by cosmic ray bombardment of the surface. Other gases are released by heating of the seven hundredweights of meteor which collide with the Moon each day. Since these light gases take a finite time to escape from the satellite they can be considered to be a temporary but ever-renewing atmosphere.

The atmosphere of the Moon can only be compared with the faint traces of air 250 miles above Earth, where missilemen consider they are already in space and only the physicist has to take into consideration that there is another step of 350 miles or so before true space is at last reached. Both the Earth's high atmosphere and that of the Moon are completely ionised by the Sun's ultraviolet, X-ray and plasma outpourings.

Several thousand ions are present in every cubic centimetre of the lunar atmosphere. This has been measured by the way it refracts radio waves from an extra-solar system radio source—the Crab Nebula. It was found that the Moon took longer to eclipse the metre radio waves from the Crab Nebula than it did light from the Crab, thus proving that around the Moon was a diaphanous shroud of atmosphere acting on the radio waves without effecting the light waves.

Even though we are still learning new facts about the Moon, the picture from the point of view of the first men to land there is basically the same. With a diameter of only 2,160 miles and temperatures ranging from + 100°C to -150°C the lure to go there will still be mainly romantic and scientific. The emission spectra show no signs of any uranium ores . . .

One new factor emerges—the first Men on the Moon needn't bother to take the magnetic compasses—they won't work.

If the current race to reach the Moon first is allowed to boil on without adequate control, it behoves all physicists working on the Moon's mysteries to find out as much as they possibly can about the atmosphere before the first rocket lands.

Some of the projected schemes for landing upon the Moon and setting up bases there would give the Moon the largest and densest atmosphere it has enjoyed for millenia—for a short time, that is, until it all wafted away into space. But it would eventually do so—and once again the Moon would be its old familiar self, airless, cheerless and barren.

Kenneth Johns

Purely by coincidence, this particular issue of New Worlds *is almost an 'all-alien' one, each story showing how individual authors approach the same theme. It is interesting to compare their various techniques. Especially the manner in which Bob Silverberg has tackled his.*

MALNUTRITION

by Robert Silverberg

When our ship left its carefully planned trajectory and started to wobble through space in dizzy circles, I knew we shouldn't have passed up that opportunity for an overhauling on Spica IV. My men and I were anxious to get back to Earth, and a hasty check had assured us that the *Aaron Burr* was in tip-top shape—so we had turned down the offer of an overhaul, which would have meant a month's delay, and set out straight for home.

As so often happens, what seemed like the most direct route home turned out to be the longest. We had spent far too much time on this survey trip already, and were rejoicing in the prospect of an immediate return to Earth when the ship started turning cartwheels.

Willendorf, computerman first class, came to me looking sheepish, a few minutes after I'd noticed we were off course.

" What is it, Gus ?" I asked.

" The feed network's oscillating, sir," he said, tugging at his unruly reddish-brown beard. " It won't stop, sir."

" Is Ketteridge working on it ?"

" I've just called him," Willendorf said. His stolid face reflected acute embarrassment. Willendorf always took it personally whenever one of the cybers went haywire, as if it were his own fault. " You know what this means, don't you, sir ?"

I grinned. " Take a look at this, Willendorfe," I said, shoving the trajectory graphs toward him. I sketched out with my stylus the confused circles we had been travelling in all morning. " That's what your feed network's doing to us," I said. " And we'll keep on doing it until we get it fixed."

" What are you going to do, sir ?"

I sensed his impatience with me. Willendorf was a good man, but his psych charts indicated a latent desire for officer-hood. Deep down inside, he was sure he was at least as competent as I was to run this ship, and probably a good deal more so.

" Send me Upper Navigating Technician Haley," I snapped. " We're going to have to find a planet in the neighbourhood and put down for repairs."

It turned out there was an insignificant solar sytem in the vicinity, consisting of a small but hot white star and a single unexplored planet, Terra-size, a few hundred million miles out. After Haley and I had decided that that was the nearest port of refuge, I called a general meeting.

Quickly and positively I outlined our situation and explained what would have to be done. I sensed the immediate disappointment, but, gratifyingly, the reaction was followed by a general feeling of resigned pitching-in. If we all worked, we'd get back to Earth sooner or later. If we didn't, we'd spend the next century flip-flopping aimlessly through space.

After the meeting, we set about the business of recovering control of the ship and putting it down for repairs. The feed network luckily, gave up the ghost about ninety minutes later; it meant we had to stoke the fuel by hand, but at least it stopped that damned oscillating.

We got the ship going. Haley ; navigating by feel in a way I never would have dreamed possible, brought us into the nearby solar system in hardly any time at all. Finally we swung into our landing orbit, and made our looping way down to the surface of the little planet.

I studied my crew's faces carefully. We had spent a great deal of time together in space—much too much, really, for

comfort—and an incident like this might very well snap them all if we didn't get going again soon enough. I could foresee disagreements, bickering, declaration of opinion where no opinion was called for.

I was relieved to discover that the planet's air was breathable. A rather high nitrogen concentration, to be sure—82% but that left 17% for oxygen, plus some miscellaneous inerts, and it wouldn't be too rough on the lungs. I decreed a one-hour free break before beginning repairs.

Remaining aboard ship, I gloomily surveyed the scrambled feed network and tried to formulate a preliminary plan of action for getting the complex cybernetic instrument to function again, while my crew went outside to relax.

Ten minutes after I had opened the lock and let them out, I heard someone clanking around in the aft supplies cabin.

" Who's there ?" I yelled.

" Me," grunted a heavy voice that could only be Willendorf's. " I'm looking for the thought-converter, sir."

I ran hastily through the corridor, flipped up the latch on the supplies cabin, and confronted him. " What do you want the converter for ?" I snapped.

" Found an alien, sir," he said laconically.

My eyes widened. The survey chart had said nothing about intelligent extra-terrestrials in this limb of the galaxy, but then again this planet hadn't been explored yet.

I gestured toward the rear cabinet. " The converter helmets are in there," I said. " I'll be out in a little while. Make sure you follow a technique in making contact."

" Of course, sir," said Willendorf. He took the converter helmet and went out, leaving me standing there. I waited a few minutes, then climbed the catwalk to the airlock and peered out.

They were all clustered around a small alien being, who looked weak and inconsequential in the midst of the circle. I smiled at the sight. The alien was roughly humanoid in shape, with the usual complement of arms and legs, and a pale green complexion that blended well with the muted violet colouring of his world. He was wearing the thought-converter somewhat lopsidedly, and I saw a small, green, furry ear protruding from the left side. Willendorf was talking to him.

Then someone saw me standing at the open airlock, and I heard Haley yell to me, " Come on down, Chief !"

They were ringed around the alien in a tight circle. I shouldered my way into their midst. Willendorf turned to me.

" Meet Alaree, sir," he said. " Alaree, this is our commander."

" We are pleased to meet you," the alien said gravely. The converter automatically turned his thoughts into English, but maintained the trace of his oddly-infected accent. " You have been saying that you are from the skies."

" His grammar's pretty shaky," Willendorf interposed. " He keeps referring to any of us as ' *you* '—even you, who just got here."

" Odd," I said. " The converter's supposed to conform to the rules of grammar." I turned to the alien, who seemed perfectly at ease among us. " My name is Bryson," I said. " This is Willendorf, over here."

The alien wrinkled his soft-skinned forehead in momentary confusion. " We are Alaree," he said again.

" We ? You and who else ?"

" We and we else," Alaree said blandly. I stared at him for a moment, then gave up. The complexities of an alien mind are often too much for a mere Terran to fathom.

" You are welcome to our world," Alaree said after a few moments of silence.

" Thanks," I said. " Thanks."

I turned away, leaving the alien with my men. They had twenty-six minutes left of the break I'd given them, after which we would have to get back to the serious business of repairing the ship. Making friends with floppy-eared aliens was one thing ; getting back to Earth was another.

The planet was a warm, friendly sort of place, with rolling fields and acres of pleasant-looking purple vegetation. We had landed in a clearing at the edge of a fair-sized copse. Great broadbeamed trees shot up all around us.

Alaree returned to visit us every day, until he became almost a mascot of the crew. I liked the little alien myself, and spent some time with him, though I found his conversation generally incomprehensible. No doubt he had the same trouble with us. The converter had only limited efficiency, after all.

He was the only representative of his species who came. For all we knew, he was the only one of his kind on the whole planet. There was no sign of life elsewhere. Though Willendorf led an unauthorized scouting party during some free time on the third day, he failed to find a village of any sort. Where

Alaree returned to every night and how he had found us in the first place remained mysteries.

As for the feed network, progress went slowly. Ketteridge, the technician in charge, had tracked down the foulup and was trying to repair it without building a completely new network. Shortcuts, again. He tinkered away for four days, setting up a tentative circuit, trying it out, watching it sputter and blow out, building another.

There was nothing I could do. But I sensed tension heightening among the crewmen. They were annoyed at themselves, at each other, at me, at everything.

On the fifth day, Ketteridge and Willendorf finally let their accumulated tenseness explode. They had been working together on the network, but they quarrelled and Ketteridge came storming into my cabin immediately afterward.

" Sir, I demand to be allowed to work on the network by myself. It's my speciality, and Willendorf's only screwing things up."

" Get me Willendorf," I said, frowning.

When Willendorf showed up I heard the whole story, decided quickly to let Ketteridge have his way—it was, after all, his speciality—and calmed Willendorf down. Then, reaching casually for some papers on my desk, I dismissed both of them. I knew they'd come to their senses in a day or so.

I spent most of the next day sitting placidly in the sun, while Ketteridge tinkered with the feed network some more. I watched the faces of the men. They were starting to smoulder. They wanted to get home and they weren't getting there. Besides, this was a fairly dull planet, and even the novelty of Alaree wore off after a while. The little alien had a way of hanging around men who were busy scraping fuel deposits out of the jet tubes, or something equally unpleasant, and bothering them with all sorts of questions.

The following morning I was lying blissfully in the grassplot near the ship, talking to Alaree. Ketteridge came to me. By the tightness of his lips I knew he was in trouble.

I brushed some antlike blue insects off my trousers and rose to a sitting position, leaning against the tall, tough-barked tree behind me. " What's the matter, Ketteridge ? How's the feed network ?"

He glanced uneasily at Alaree for a moment before speaking. " I'm stuck, sir. I'll have to admit I was wrong. I can't fix it by myself."

I stood up and put my hand on his shoulder. " That's a noble thing to say, Ketteridge. It takes a big man to admit he's been a fool. Will you work with Willendorf now ?"

" If he'll work with me, sir," Ketteridge said miserably.

" I think he will," I said. Ketteridge saluted and turned away, and I felt a burst of satisfaction. I'd met the crisis in the only way possible ; if I had *ordered* them to co-operate, I would have got nowhere. The psychological situation no longer allowed for unbending military discipline.

After Ketteridge had gone, Alaree, who had been silent all this time, looked up at me in puzzlement. " We do not understand," he said.

" Not *we*," I corrected. " *I*. You're only one person. *We* means many people."

" We are only one person ?" Alaree said tentatively.

" No. *I* am only one person. Get it ?"

He worried the thought around for a few moments ; I could see his browless forehead contract in deep concentration.

" Look," I said. " I'm one person. Ketteridge is another person. Willendorf is another. Each one of them is an independent individual, an ' I '."

" And together you make *We* ?" Alaree asked brightly.

" Yes and no," I said. " *We* is composed of many *I*, but we still remain *I*."

Again he sank deep in concentration ; then he smiled, scratched the ear that protruded from one side of the thought-helmet, and said, " We do not understand. But *I* do. Each of you is—is an *I*."

" An individual," I said.

" An individual," he repeated. " A complete person. And together, to fly your ship, you must become a *We*."

" But only temporarily," I said. " There still can be conflict between the parts. That's necessary, for progress. I can always think of the rest of them as *They*."

" I— They," Alaree repeated slowly. " *They*." He nodded. " It is difficult for me to grasp all this. I . . . think differently. But I am coming to understand, and I am worried."

That was a new idea. Alaree, worried ? Could be, I reflected. I had no way of knowing. I knew so cursed little about Alaree—where on the planet he came from, what his

tribal life was like, what sort of civilization he had, were all blanks.

" What kind of worries, Alaree ?"

" You would not understand," he said solemnly and would say no more.

Toward afternoon, as golden shadows started to slant through the closely packed trees, I returned to the ship. Willendorf and Ketteridge were aft, working over the feed network. The whole crew had gathered around to watch and offer suggestions. Even Alaree was there, looking absurdly comical in his copper alloy thought-converter helmet, standing on tiptoe and trying to see what was happening.

About an hour later, I spotted the alien sitting by himself beneath the long-limbed tree that towered over the ship. He was lost in thought. Evidently whatever his problem was, it was really eating him.

Toward evening, he made a decision. I had been watching him with a great deal of concern, wondering what was going on in that small but unfathomable mind. I saw him brighten, leap up suddenly, and cross the field, heading in my direction.

" Captain !"

" What is it, Allaree ?"

He waddled up and stared gravely at me. " Your ship will be ready to leave soon. What was wrong is nearly right again."

He paused, obviously uncertain of how to phrase his next statement, and I waited patiently. Finally he blurted out suddenly, " May I come back to your world with you ?"

Automatically, the regulations flashed through my mind. I pride myself on my knowledge of the rules. And I knew this one.

ARTICLE 101 *A*

No intelligent extra-terrestrial life is to be transported from its own world to any civilized world under any reason whatsoever, without explicit beforehand clearance. The penalty for doing so is—

And it listed a fine of more credits than was ever dreamt of in my philosophy.

I shook my head. " Can't take you, Alaree. This is your world and you belong here."

A ripple of agony ran over his face. Suddenly he ceased to be the cheerful, roly-poly creature it was so impossible to take seriously, and became a very worried entity indeed. "You cannot understand," he said. "I no longer belong here."

No matter how hard he pleaded, I remained adamant. When to no one's surprise Ketteridge and Willendorf announced, a day later, that their pooled labours had succeeded in repairing the feed network, I had to tell Alaree that we were going to leave without him.

He nodded stiffly, accepting the fact, and without a word stalked tragically away, into the purple tangle of foliage that surrounded our clearing.

He returned a while later or so I thought. He was not wearing the thought-converter. That surprised me. Alaree knew the helmet was a valuable item, and he had been cautioned to take good care of it.

I sent a man inside to get another helmet for him. I put it on him—this time tucking that wayward ear underneath properly—and looked at him sternly. "Where's the other helmet, Alaree?"

"We do not have it," he said.

"*We*? No more I?"

"We," Alaree said. And as he spoke, the leaves parted and another alien— Alaree's very double—stepped out into the clearing.

Then I saw the helmet on the newcomer's head, and realized that he was no double. He was Alaree, and the other alien was the stranger!

"I see you're here already," the alien I knew as Alaree said to the other. They were standing about ten feet apart, staring coldly at each other. I glanced at both of them quickly. They might have been identical twins.

"We are here," the stranger said. "We have come to get you."

I took a step backward, sensing that some incomprehensible drama was being played out here among these aliens.

"What's going on, Alaree?" I asked.

"We are having difficulties," both of them said, as one.

Both of them.

I turned to the second alien. "What's your name?"

"Alaree," he said.

"Are you all named that?" I demanded.

" We are Alaree," Alaree-two said.

" They are Alaree," Alaree-one said. " And *I* am Alaree. *I*."

At that moment there was a disturbance in the shrubbery, and half a dozen more aliens stepped through and confronted Alarees one and two.

" We are Alaree," Alaree-two repeated exasperatingly. He made a sweeping gesture that embraced all seven of the aliens to my left, but pointedly excluded Alaree-one at my right.

" Are we-you coming with we-us ?" Alaree-two demanded. I heard the six others say something in approximately the same tone of voice, but since they weren't wearing converters their words were only scrambled nonsense to me.

Alaree-one looked at me in pain, then back at his seven fellows. I saw an expression of sheer terror in the small creature's eyes. He turned to me.

" I must go with them," he said softly. He was quivering with fear.

Without a further word, the eight marched silently away. I stood there, shaking my head in bewilderment.

We were scheduled to leave the next day. I said nothing to my crew about the bizarre incident of the evening before, but noted in my log that the native life of the planet would require careful study at some future time.

Blastoff was slated for 1100. As the crew moved efficiently through the ship, securing things, packing, preparing for departure, I sensed a general feeling of jubilation. They were happy to be on their way again and I didn't blame them.

About half an hour before blastoff, Willendorf came to me. " Sir, Alaree's down below," he said. " He wants to come up and see you. He looks very troubled, sir."

I frowned. Probably the alien still wanted to go back with us. Well, it was cruel to deny the request, but I wasn't going to risk that fine. I intended to make that clear to him.

" Send him up," I said.

A moment later Alaree came stumbling into my cabin. Before he could speak I said, " I told you before, I can't take you off this planet, Alaree. I'm sorry about it."

He looked up pitiably and said, " You mustn't leave me !" He was trembling uncontrollably.

" What's wrong, Alaree ?" I asked.

He stared intensely at me for a long moment, mastering himself, trying to arrange what he wanted to tell me into a coherent argument. Finally he said, " They would not take me back. I am alone."

" Who wouldn't take you back, Alaree ?"

" *They*. Last night, Alaree came for me, to take me back. They are a *We*—an entity—a oneness. You cannot understand. When they saw what I had become, they cast me out."

I shook my head dizzily. " What do you mean ?"

" You taught me—to become an *I*," he said, moistening his lips. " Before, I was part of *We— They*. I learned your ways from you, and now there is no room for me here. They have cut me off. When the final break comes, I will not be able to stay on this world."

Sweat was pouring down his pale face and he was breathing harder. " It will come any minute. They are gathering strength for it. But I am *I*," he said triumphantly. He shook violently and gasped for breath.

I understood now. They were *all* Alaree. It was one planet-wide, self-aware corporate entity, composed of any number of individual cells. He had been one of them, but he had learned independence.

Then he had returned to the group—but he carried with him the seeds of individualism, the deadly, contagious germ we Terrans spread everywhere. Individualism would be fatal to such a group mind ; they were cutting him loose to save themselves. Just as diseased cells must be exercised for the good of the entire body, Alaree was inexorably being cut off from his fellows lest he destroy the bond that made them one.

I watched him as he sobbed weakly on my acceleration cradle. " They . . . are . . . cutting . . . me . . . loose . . . *now* !"

He writhed horribly for a brief moment, then relaxed and sat up on the edge of the cradle. " It is over," he said calmly. " I am fully independent."

I saw a stark *aloneness* reflected in his eyes, and behind that a gentle indictment of me for having done this to him. This world, I realized, was no place for Earthmen. What had happened was our fault—mine more than anyone else's.

" Will you take me with you ?" he asked again. " If I stay here, Alaree will kill me."

I scowled wretchedly for a moment, fighting a brief battle within myself, then I looked up. There was only one thing to

do, and I was sure, once I explained on Earth, that I would not suffer for it.

I took his hand. It was cold and limp ; whatever he had just been through, it must have been hell. " Yes," I said softly. " You can come with us."

So Alaree joined the crew of the *Aaron Burr*. I told them about it just before blast-off, and they welcomed him aboard in traditional manner.

We gave the sad-eyed little alien a cabin near the cargo hold, and he established himself quite comfortable. He had no personal possessions. " It is not *Their* custom," he said and promised that he'd keep the cabin clean.

He had brought with him a rough-edged, violet fruit that he said was his staple food. I turned it over to Kechnie for synthesizing and we blasted off.

Alaree was right at home aboard the *Burr*. He spent much time with me asking questions.

" Tell me about Earth," Alaree would ask. The alien wanted desperately to know what sort of a world he was going to.

He would listen gravely while I explained. I told him of cities and wars and spaceships, and he nodded sagely, trying to fit the concepts into a mind only newly liberated from the *gestalt*. I knew he could comprehend only a fraction of what I was saying, but I enjoyed telling him. It made me feel as if Earth were coming closer that much faster, simply to talk about it.

And he went around, begging everyone. " Tell me about Earth." They enjoyed telling him, too, for a while.

Then it began to get a little tiresome. We had grown accustomed to Alaree's presence on the ship, flopping around the corridors doing whatever menial job he had been assigned to. But though I had told the men why I had brought him with us, and though we all pitied the poor lonely creature and admired his struggle to survive as an individual entity, we were slowly coming to the realization that Alaree was something of a nuisance aboard ship.

Especially later, when he began to change.

Willendorf noticed it first, twelve days out from Alaree's planet. " Alaree's been acting pretty strange these days, sir," he told me.

" What's wrong ?" I asked.

" Haven't you spotted it, sir ? He's been moping around like a lost soul, very quiet, and withdrawn, like."

" Is he eating well ?"

Willendorf chuckled loudly. " I'll say he is ! Kechnie made up some synthetics based on that piece of fruit he brought with him, and he's been stuffiing himself wildly. He's gained ten pounds since he came on ship. No, it's not lack of food !"

" I guess not," I said. " Keep an eye on him, will you ? I feel responsible for his being here, and I want him to come through the voyage in good health."

After that, I began to observe Alaree more closely myself, and I detected the change in his personality too. He was no longer the cheerful, child-like being who delighted in pouring out questions in endless profusion. Now he was moody, silent, always brooding, and hard to approach.

On the sixteenth day out—and by now I was worried seriously about him—a new manifestation appeared. I was in the hallway, heading from my cabin to the chartroom, when Alaree stepped out of an alcove. He reached up, grasped my uniform lapel, and, maintaining his silence, drew my head down and stared pleadingly into my eyes.

Too astonished to say anything, I returned his gaze for nearly thirty seconds. I peered into his transparent pupils, wondering what he was up to. After a good while had passed, he released me, and I saw something like a tear trickle down his cheek.

" What's the trouble, Alaree ?"

He shook his head mournfully and shuffled away.

I got reports from the crewmen that day and next that he had been doing this regularly for the past eighteen hours—waylaying crewmen, staring long and deep at them as if trying to express some unspeakable sadness, and walking away. He had approached almost everyone on the ship.

I wondered now how wise it had been to allow an extra-terrestrial, no matter how friendly, to enter the ship. There was no telling what this latest action meant.

I started to form a theory. I suspected what he was aiming at, and the realization chilled me. But once I reached my conclusion, there was nothing, I could do but wait for confirmation.

On the nineteenth day, Alaree again met me in the corridor. This time our encounter was more brief. He plucked me by the

sleeve, shook his head sadly and, shrugging his shoulders, walked away.

That night, he took to his cabin, and by morning he was dead. He had apparently died peacefully in his sleep.

" I guess we'll never understand him, poor fellow," Willendorf said, after we had committed the body to space. " You think he had too much to eat, sir ?"

" No," I said. " It wasn't that. He was lonely, that's all. He didn't belong here among us."

" But you said he had broken away from the group-mind," Willendorf objected.

I shook my head. " Not really. That group-mind arose out of some deep psychological and physiological needs of those people. You can't just declare your independence and be able to exist as an individual from then on if you're part of that group-entity. Alaree had grasped the concept intellectually, to some extent, but he wasn't suited for life away from the corporate mind, no matter how much he wanted to be."

" He couldn't stand alone ?"

" Not after his people had evolved that *gestalt*-setup. He learned independence from us," I said. " But he couldn't live with us, really. He needed to be part of a whole. He found out his mistake after he came aboard, and tried to remedy things."

I saw Willendorf pale. " What do you mean, sir ?"

" You know what I mean. When he came up to us and stared soulfully into our eyes—*he was trying to form a new gestalt—out of us* ! Somehow he was trying to link us together, the way his people had been linked."

" He couldn't do it though," Willendorf said fervently.

" Of course not. Human beings don't have whatever need it is that forced those people to merge. He found that out, after a while, when he failed to get anywhere with us."

" He just couldn't do it," Willendorf repeated.

" No. And then he ran out of strength," I said sombrely, feeling the heavy weight of my guilt. " He was like an organ removed from a living body. It can exist for a little while by itself, but not indefinitely. He failed to find a new source of life—and he died." I stared bitterly at my fingertips.

" What do we call it in my medical report ?" asked Ship Surgeon Thomas, who had been silent up till then. " How can we explain what he died from ?"

" Call it *malnutrition*," I said. *Robert Silverberg*

If we could go back to the point in space where the ultimate origin of the galaxy began—what would we find? Nothing probably—but author John Brunner suggests that there might be something.

ROUND TRIP

by JOHN BRUNNER

To the most noble, most magnanimous and most beautiful of evolved creatures, the Lady Libreel bez Hamath, I, Darak bez Hamath, send greeting and these words by own hand. Hail —and farewell !

Forgive me, wife, for addressing you as though you were a stranger ; forgive me for the agony which will come into your eyes when you take this letter from the hand of its bearer, who is after all myself, and know that I am indeed writing as the stranger which I have become. It is a long farewell which I must take of you, the longest that any man ever took of his beloved, and yet it is with the certainty that we shall meet again. Indeed, in a manner of speaking, when you read these very words we shall already have met again. In a manner of speaking . . .

Where was the beginning ? In what deity-foresaken pit of primeval time did I decree for myself this torment—and for you ? But . . .

Oh, Lireel my darling, I sit here looking at your portrait, where it stands on the communicator, and know that I could call you and see your features move in reality, instead of in that

eternal delightful smile which the artist captured and prisoned in that cube yonder. But I dare not ; I would rather remember you smiling, even if the memory is of a poor shadow of your true self, than remember you as you would look were I to call and speak to you . . .

Let me marshal my thoughts if I can. Let me recount the things you already know in order to prepare you for what you do not yet know—and indeed for what I myself do not yet know, but am even so certain of beyond the chance of doubt.

Do you remember our last day together a-planet ? The day when we took the children to look at the cradle of our race ? That was a lesson you had been saying for a long time we ought to teach them ; I had held back, maintaining that their minds were too youthful and unformed for them to withstand the shock as yet. And that day you prevailed ; I yielded for your sake although I knew that it would cast a shadow of melancholy over our parting.

It must have been a beautiful world once, that planet where our stock was born. Even now it has its own sad loveliness, which I think I saw reflected in the children's eyes when at last they understood what had happened there. The pain and agony which the sight of that scarred Earth still evokes in the human brain after—how long do the archaeologists say ? Eleven thousand years ? And yet for every one of those years more than a thousand human beings, creatures at least a little like ourselves, died, in lingering agony.

It is a memory we like to flee from, when we can ; at our parting, I suspect that I was almost glad to flee from the image of that memory mirrored in your eyes, and the children's.

Yet it is always with us. Maybe it was the original root cause of our need to know, our need to understand and comprehend the universe in which we find ourselves. But the day will come—sooner for you than for me, by a very long way—when mankind will have to find another motive for continuing to live, because it is within our grasp to know everything—literally and without qualification everything—about the cosmos.

I took you and the children to Oyalet before I left, to see the computers there, and I remember your little shiver when you first really felt in your bones that here was the analogue of the universe. It is a gigantic concept, isn't it ? The peak and perfection of nearly two millennia of concentrated effort have

fruited on Oyalet. In the beginning, they were satisfied to cope with every particle of matter in our one galaxy, tracing back its history to the moment of the Ultimate Origin. But before they reached that point they had to start taking into account the other galaxies, and decided there was nothing for it but to build an analogy for the cosmos entire.

The observations ! The life-time-long excursions into the uttermost corners of the universe at speeds so great the we overtook time itself and could look—from a distance—at our own galaxy in its youthful prime ! And the analysis of the results ! It staggers the mind.

And consequently we know the answer to a problem which has baffled the best intelligences since before the dawn of history. At many stages of our growing knowledge, it seemed that the very problem was itself meaningless, although it is recorded of the prehistoric sage Newton that he suspected the point of absolute relative non-motion might be found among the stars, which at that time his people had no means of visiting.

But the computers at Oyalet gave us the answer, and located for us the point at which there is an equal amount of matter plus velocity—of energy, one might say—in every conceivable direction. Insofar as the term has any meaning at all, which it strictly speaking hasn't, one might say that " here " is the point at which it all began : you, me, the planet Earth, Oyalet, Sirius, the other galaxies . . . This point, this theoretical location in space, is on the empty worldline once occupied by the primal ylem.

" Here "—within a few thousand miles of this room where I am writing to you.

If it wasn't so important to us, as human beings, to *know* beyond a shadow of doubt, to verify with our direct perfections what is predicted by our tools the computers, we would never have troubled to come here. But we did, expecting, I may say, to find exactly what we had been told we should find—*nothing*.

I remember so clearly that it almost blinds me to the page on which I am setting these inadequate words down, how we assembled in the observation room to—well, to look at that nothing we expected to find. Illogical ; but we as a species have never been noteworthy for our logical behaviour.

As you well know, there are six ships in the expedition, identified to one another by hyperspatial links, and aboard them

I have about fourteen thousand picked men and women, experts to the last. I have never been director of an expedition which so satisfied me ; which so impressed me with the unison wave of excitement and enthusiasm which boiled up during the course of the uneventful journey. Somewhere deep in our minds it must have sprung from the sense of triumph—from the feeling that we puny material creatures, for all our mistakes, had unfailingly pursued our quarry to its lair : the *fons et origo* of the very matter in which we consist.

I remember saying to Incoratchuatar, my assistant—whom you haven't met, but who will doubtless visit you after this trip—that if our predictions were verified, we should have a deal of trouble gathering more data after this in order to base yet other predictions. He laughed, as if the idea was new to him ; then he frowned, and after that he went away quietly, to come back in a few hours' time with a plan for testing the predictions resulting from running the Oyalet computers in reverse.

You will doubtless at once see what he was getting at. We had traced back the motion of every particle in the detectable universe, in the plenum, to its common point of origin. Conversely, we could extrapolate from these observed motions—we had all the necessary information by now—in order to find out what will be the end.

" In my spare time," said Incoratchuatar—and this I may say amused me for he is the most dedicated man I have ever met, having neither family nor recreations (which was why they passed him over and selected me to be director of the expedition despite my actually inferior record of achievement in purely scientific fields)—" in my spare time," and he blinked as if aware of my amusement, " I have worked out two possible ends for the universe. One cannot grasp sufficient factors to decide between them. Possibly, the recession from the point of Ultimate Origin will continue, until energy is so diluted in space and time that every particle in effect is contained in a universe of its own, having receded from every other particle to the point at which it cannot influence any other ; and this, although indicated by some trends, seems inherently unlikely unless some agency other than simple recession dilutes available gravitational force past the point at which any agglomeration of matter like a star or planet can exist . . . Or the universe may be a closed continuum, so that after a very long time indeed it—turns a corner, to use an obvious metaphor,

and the recession without changing its direction becomes an approach, and brings all matter and energy back to its point of origin. Time and space would close in with them ; at the last, there would again be only ylem, surrounded by emptiness so complete that it would possess not even the property of existence."

Into the silence in which we were contemplating the nature of such emptiness broke a voice—that of our chief pilot. He spoke in the deliberately controlled tones in which men always announce momentous news, as that of a death or disaster.

You must remember that we were closing in on the point where we expected to find nothing ; we were waiting for the sensitive instruments which indicated the relative amounts of energy existing in all directions from us to quaver into the absolute dead centre of their mountings. And it was at this moment that the pilot said, " Director, there is a spaceship ahead of us."

We didn't believe it at first, naturally. Kopdet, the pilot, informed me afterwards that he had been observing it for some seconds before he concluded that the thing ahead *could* only be a spaceship, despite the fact that it was perfectly spherical and incredibly highly reflective.

And a spaceship it was. We closed to within two hundred miles of it, puzzling, and sent our six ships into orbit about it as if it had been a planet. For it was gigantic ! I had imagined our own ships to be large, with their crews of more than two thousand apiece, but this thing could have qualified as a planetoid. It was—well, it was like a sort of marker. It was balanced precisely at the centre of the universe. It had exactly the same amount of matter and energy on every side of it.

Someone had known we were coming, I thought to myself, but I didn't utter the thought to Incoratchuatar. He was thunderstruck as he contemplated the—the object.

And it was only after a full half hour of silent amazement—shared by everyone in the expedition, I believe—that he turned to me and spoke in a shaky voice. " Director, I had been envisaging just such a means of verifying our—our other predictions."

I told him to make himself clearer, while we waited to see if the spaceship would react to the arrival of strangers. He stumbled and was confused, but the gist of what he was saying was this : that given the time, and the effort, and the desire to

know (all of which we human beings have in abundance) it would be possible to design and build a spaceship. Only not just a spaceship—a device that would be able to withstand billions on billions of years of waiting, so that if the universe was cyclical, if one infinitely distant day the stars crashed together again, it would survive to tell—the next visitors.

To tell—us !

If Incoratchuator's inspired guess was correct, this spaceship around which we orbited was exactly as old as the universe itself ; it had been placed here—last time around—to await the arrival of someone else who wanted to know about the fate in store.

Or it had been placed here more recently, during this universal cycle, by another race with the same aims as mankind . . .

There was only one way to find out. I called for space garb and a rocket-sled, and we went to look.

One would have thought that so gigantic an object would have had an appreciable gravitational field. It didn't, and when one thought it over, that was logical. It must not react or influence its surroundings in any way.

But in that case, what was the good of it ?

Perfectly reflective, it hung awaiting our approach, and then, as if a switch had been pulled (maybe it had) it turned black. I thought for an extraordinary moment it had vanished ; then I saw its bulk outlined against galaxies a trillion lightyears distant, and gestalt put it back in the place from which it had seemed to disappear.

Cautiously, unsure of our next move, we circled it, and made out that there were features on its surface. There was an opening . . .

We closed on it, flashing torches into the yawning hole, and found that there was, now, a fair gravitational pull to contend with. It drew us gently down, and we found we could walk upright.

I reflected that this metal on which I stood had survived—perhaps—the Ultimate Origin, which we now suspected was not after all the beginning of things, and looked into the heart of the ship.

And we saw—though at first we didn't recognise it, for our minds were geared to anticipate something wholly alien and strange—a word written up. In our own language.

WELCOME.

Oh, now we have fought down our disbelief, and already we can think and reason with the knowledge which the discovery has brought. But it took us days to convince ourselves, even after we had dug our way through layer after layer of the ship's hull, finding renewed evidence at every turn . . .

All right, you want to know what exactly we found. We found pictorial records—film, exposed through gigantic telescopes at six points on the sphere, at a rate of about one frame every hundred thousand years. I've seen that film ; it's fantastic, magnificent, unbelievable. The film fits our projectors. We found magnetic recordings and instrument readings for every conceivable waveband of energy from cosmic radiation to gravity. And we simply dropped the tapes into our players. The most interesting of all are the tapes which record the Ultimate Origin—there, you see, I can't even yet free myself of the old habit pattern of thinking that the universe has only happened once.

We now know, to be brief, that we have been here before. Perhaps more than once. Perhaps only once. It doesn't matter. Let me get to the most important point of all.

In the very heart of the ship we found another featureless sphere, about—oh, about nine hundred or a thousand metres diameter. Things connect with it. But we can't penetrate the exterior—no wonder, for it possesses the same properties which enabled the hull of the ship to withstand the pressures and temperatures of the—of the Origin and End. You see, towards the end of the cycle, the defences of the ship go up automatically, and thereafter the only record is one of the energy required to resist what happens. Since the energy has been stored continually since the ship was first built, there is plenty available. Stolen from the universe, you may say—and this has interesting consequences.

Why can't I keep my thoughts straight ? I've missed out one very important thing. When we entered the ship the first time, underneath the message of welcome, we found a warning, which said, among other things, that the defences of the ship would remain down for as long as it took a certain dial to complete one revolution. We couldn't interfere with the mechanism—we tried, of course, but failed—and we calculated that the time allowed was one year. That year is up today. So I ordered my crews to do the best they could ; we ripped out all

the old records, tapes, films and so forth, and replaced them for the benefit of the next visitors. We feel quite sure no one else in the entire remainder of this universal cycle will be able to look into this ship. After all—we built it.

We built it. Let me spell it out. In the very first cycle of the universe men were undecided as to whether there was a cycle, so they built this spaceship, using energy and matter stolen from the universe, which would never—except briefly, during this one year out of every universal cycle—influence the rest of the cosmos again. Only—I've been calculating, and I find that there was a first cycle which never would have been repeated. Mathematically I could express it tidily, and have done so. In words—the energy and matter of the cosmos *bounced* off that first ship. And because it was perfectly reflective, the energy and matter repeated itself barring one small qualification. There was a very slight diminution in its total amount—locked forever and ever in the spaceship.

So it's our doing. There was a first time which was unique, but the repetitions will continue until some discrepancy builds up, until the minute difference due to the quantity of energy forever locked away from the rest of the universe causes someone (myself, presumably, or the echo of myself) to plant a hydrogen bomb inside the spaceship instead of refilling the recording devices . . .

You see, there is a difference, cumulative, building up from universe to universe, partly due to the knowledge that our cosmos *is* cyclical. (Ah, how clumsy and fumbling words are compared to the simplicity of mathematics !) And there is that sphere-within-the-sphere which I mentioned above.

Just lately, over the past few weeks, it became to me a matter of desperate importance to know what was in there. I left my routine work to Incoratchuatar, and spent my time prowling about, inspecting, investigating, wondering, until I came to the conclusion that I already knew why that sphere was there ; that it would open—briefly—and close again. Probably tonight, when the dial marking our allowance of time reaches the last segment of its progress.

I mentioned our reason for coming here at all, when we might have been satisfied to rely on the predictions of the Oyalet computers. We came because we wanted to verify with our own senses what our tools had told us. This spaceship, which has seen the universe grow old and grow young again,

is also a tool, and human beings built it. There would have been an urge to verify its data too.

This is what makes me believe—beyond any chance of scientific proof—that this cycle we are in is not the first, or the thousandth, but probably something of the order of the ten to the tenth. You see, the first Darak bez Hamath—the first " myself "—could not have been married. He could not have faced going into the dark unknown if he had left behind someone like you, my darling. Or two beautiful children like ours. This is where the effect of theft of energy from the universe strikes on the personal level.

But that amount of energy is so minute in comparison with the total that from the last universe to this one not even the language has changed. So I shall do what I have to do. I shall go into the ship when there remains only a few hours until the defences go up again. No one else will be permitted to follow me. I shall leave this letter propped up against your portrait ; I shall go and find the defences of the inner sphere down. And inside that sphere—?

Why, myself.

So, after more billions of years than one can imagine, my predecessor will come out and take my place as I am taking his, and he will bring you this letter. You will find him a very little different from me ; he will look at you across a gulf of inconceivable ages, but that is all. I hope, my darling, that the little difference will not be enough to cause you suffering.

And I myself ? In a few hours from now (or so it will appear to me, at any rate) I shall come forth again, and know I am looking on a new universe, and I shall find just such a letter as this and take it to someone who will not be you precisely, but very much like you. And as she reads it, I shall think of you, but after that I shall try to forget that we are in a different cosmos. I shall try to forget myself, and become the man who will have released me.

So, I hope, will the man I go this moment to release become—

Your adoring Darak bez Hamath.

John Brunner

The previous Johnny Dawson stories, published during the past three years, were well-liked, and Lan Wright thought that it was time he reintroduced this scheming, conniving, almost honourable specimen of the human race once more—as usual doing his utmost to uphold the traditions of the Space Commission in their latest piece of galactic skullduggery.

JOKER'S TRICK

by Lan Wright

At the time he resigned from the Space Commission, Johnny Dawson looked forward to a long and pleasurable retirement. At thirty-four he had sufficient money in the bank to obviate the need to work, and the annoyance which his resignation had caused Hendrix, his immediate superior, was an added pleasure for him.

After six months the pleasures of Venus City began to pall, and the efforts of a succession of nubile young women to trap him into marriage, while pleasant, were definitely embarrassing. An urgent call from his bank summoning him to Earth was a diversion which he welcomed, and, by the time he landed at White Sands Space Port, Dawson found the attractions of Earth far more nostalgic than he would have believed possible six months earlier.

It was late afternoon when he landed, and he sent a videogram to his bank telling them to expect him late the next day. The hotel at the spaceport gave him a room and an excellent meal, and, with little to occupy his mind during the evening

Dawson headed in the direction of the nearest bar. He spent a pleasant hour watching a floor show that had girls who were not burnt a deep brown by the unfiltered ultra-violet of Venus, and he realised that he had almost forgotten what normal, cream-smooth female flesh looked like. The drinks, too, had an indefinable something that they lacked on Venus, and he remembered the words of a bartender at Venus City who had solemnly assured him that good Scotch did not travel well away from Earth.

The amber liquid in the crystal glasses was good taste—even the final one which hit him straight between the eyes so that the bar-room did a queasy somersault and the floor pirouetted to meet him as he fell.

Dawson awoke with a raging headache and a nauseous stomach that threatened to deposit its meagre contents on the floor at any moment. He lay quiet, his eyes closed while indefinable sounds pierced his hearing. There were memories, dim and vague, of drinks and bars and laughter—of more drinks and then oblivion. He groaned and tried to sit up.

" Hallo, Mister Dawson. Feeling better ?"

The girl's voice was pleasant and familiar, so familiar that it shocked Dawson into some semblance of order. His eyes opened and he shot a horrified glance around the all too familiar office with its neat furniture and the pretty secretary sitting at the desk.

" Judy ! What in the world—?"

The girl smiled. " Would you like some coffee ?"

Dawson shook his head, a nasty feeling of finality sifting through him as a well-remembered tickle of apprehension made itself felt. It was a feeling he hadn't had in more than six months.

" What happened, Judy ?" he asked after a minute.

" You had a few drinks too many," the girl told him primly. " Mister Hendrix brought you in with him this morning and said I was to let you sleep it off."

" And of course he'd like to see me when I'm fit," Dawson nodded and looked at the door which led to the inner office.

The girl nodded brightly. "Just go right in, Mister Dawson."

One of Dawson's nightmares was of Hendrix, black-haired and bulky, complete with black cigar and cold smile, waiting for him like a spider in the middle of a large web. He got up

from the couch and the nightmare grew as he crossed to the door that led to Hendrix' office. He knocked and went in.

Hendrix looked up from behind his desk, and greeted him with a broad smile.

" Well, well, Johnny. How are you feeling ? Long time no see."

" Not long enough," growled Dawson. " What the hell is all this ?"

The cigar twitched in a well remembered manner, and the black eyes widened in an air of mock surprise. " Why, Johnny, is that the way to greet an old friend after all this time ?"

" Six months isn't long. What happened ?"

Hendrix shrugged. " The Chief of Police gave me a call this morning and said you were residing in one of his less comfortable cells. He thought you still worked for me, so—"

" You got me out."

" It was the least I could do, and anyway I wanted to see you. As a matter of fact I sent a videogram to Venus yesterday. I didn't know you'd left there until the police call this morning."

The ticking inside Dawson grew stronger and nastier. After years of experience the fact that Hendrix wanted to see him sent itchings of anticipation tingling along his nerves. It was an odd sensation, at once unpleasant and subtly pleasing, like a drug to an addict who knows very well that his addiction is an evil thing.

" Now let me guess." He cocked an eye at Hendrix. " Why should you want to see me ? No, no—" he waved away Hendrix interruption. " Don't tell me. You've got a job that no one else can do. Right ?"

Hendrix nodded sombrely. " Frankly, Johnny, I'm in a spot. I've got a job all right—a tough one, and I need the best man I can get to do it. Sure, I know, you quit for good, and I wouldn't try to get you back on a permanent basis—"

" Fat chance," snapped Dawson. " Not any more, Hendrix."

" Pity." The cigar depressed a few degrees. " I wanted you to escort Martin Gill to Mylon. You heard of Gill ?"

Dawson frowned. A tough job, Hendrix said ? Escort to a man like Martin Gill didn't sound very tough. Gill was perhaps the finest classical pianist that Earth had produced in decades. He was the greatest exponent of Chopin since

Rachmaninoff, and he was the only man who even began to understand the beauty and the intricacies of Mylonian music.

" Now tell me the real story," said Dawson softly.

Hendrix grinned wryly. " We're sending Gill on a short tour of Mylon as a morale shot for the local Terran population. There's a lot of tension between them and the native Mylonians, and it needs quietening. The Mylonians are great musicians, you know—"

" I've seen them on the video screens," replied Dawson.

" We figure a visit by Gill will impress them a bit and help to quieten things down. We daren't do other than send the best musician we have—and Gill is the best."

" And you want your best man just to escort him ?"

Hendrix leaned back in his chair and gazed myopically across the room. " Gill's trip is a cover, Johnny—"

" That I already figured."

" Something is going on and we can't find out what it is. We already lost four men out there, and there's a good chance that number five has joined them. The Commission thinks it's time we took some drastic action, and that action demands the best man we can get." He looked hard at Dawson. "Whether you like it or not, you're the best man we ever had, Johnny."

" Why should I stick my neck in a noose to help you out ?" asked Dawson sourly. " I don't need the job."

" Well, if you feel like that about it—" Hendrix studied the desk top before him.

" I do. Anyway, just what is going on ? It must be pretty big for five good agents to be lost."

" We haven't one single thing to go on," replied Hendrix. " All we know is what I've told you, and every effort to add to that knowledge has failed. That's why we're sending Gill. First, we think it will calm things down a bit, and second we think that a man who is apparently his personal escort will meet with less suspicion. It won't be easy, but we've got to do something."

Despite himself, Dawson felt a prickle of interest. It was a fascinating prospect, he had to admit, even allowing for the obvious dangers involved.

" Anyway," went on Hendrix, " I can probably transfer someone from another job. You go back to Venus and enjoy yourself, Johnny." He smiled wryly and rose from his chair.

" It was nice seeing you, just drop in any time you're around. We'll be glad to see you."

" Don't be in such a damned hurry to lose me," grunted Dawson. He thought briefly of the possible matrimonial complications that awaited him on Venus, and there was certainly a challenge in tackling a job that had so far defeated all the resources of the Space Commission. " If I took this job," he asked slowly, " no strings ?"

" Aw, look, don't take it if you don't want it."

" No strings," Dawson insisted, " and I might do it."

Hendrix grinned like a cat and the cigar jutted several degrees higher. " No strings," he agreed. " It's nice to have you back, Johnny."

Mylon was the single planet of the star Beta Eridani, and it lay well within the sphere of Terran commercial interests. It had been discovered a hundred and thirty years before, and the intervening years had seen Earth pouring in money and personnel to raise the natives' standard of living preparatory to a full scale commercial development of the planet's natural resources.

The natives were humanoid but not human. They lived in a squalor that Terrans found nauseating, and the vast efforts to lift them from their low level of existence had met with little success. It was plain, stated a dozen different ecologists, that they enjoyed their squalor—it was a part of the Mylonian psychological makeup. The one redeeming feature of the race was its ability to create music of infinite and delicate beauty. In the light of their lack of achievement in other directions this was surprising, and Terran anthropologists gave as the reason for it the fact that the race as a whole was possessed of an acutely perceptive sense of hearing. In comparison the human race was almost completely tone deaf.

In almost every other direction the Mylonians were ignorant, treacherous, cunning, and as untrustworthy a crew as could be found anywhere in the Galaxy.

All this Dawson learned from tapes and stereo records which Hendrix supplied for his consumption during the trip from Earth. He learned a great deal more that wasn't connected with Mylon and its unprepossessing race.

His only previous acquaintance with the person of Martin Gill had been through stereo records, and although those records were accurate in showing the physical appearance and

technical ability of the great pianist, they did not show the more personal characteristics with which Dawson was more intimately concerned. On personal contact Martin Gill was an imperious, overbearing, thick-skinned snob, with an effeminate simper that Dawson found distasteful in the extreme. He was tall and willowy, and he walked with his head held high and a slight sneer on his too-red lips as if an unpleasant smell hovered perpetually on the verge of his olfactory senses. Added to all this was an overburdened sense of his own importance engendered by the fact that he looked on Dawson as his own personal bodyguard supplied by the Space Commission to protect his most important person.

His continual mode of addressing Dawson was, " I say, you there," and after a month of it Dawson was ready and eager to throttle the words in the skinny throat from which they issued. His first impulse on landing was to run as far away as possible and hide until Martin Gill returned Earthwards once again.

The entire Terran community was centred around the single space-field which was about a mile from the largest of Mylonian cities. City was a loose term for about a hundred thousand natives who lived in an untidy, dirty and depressing collection of one and two storied buildings made of timber and stone—reminiscent of the worst conditions of the Terran middle ages. By keeping to themselves the Terran population avoided the smells, the germs, and, as far as possible, the natives. Some did act as servants in the Terran community, and there were several in evidence as Dawson and Gill took up residence in the apartment which had been prepared for them.

Dawson was in his room unpacking, when the door was pushed open and the high simper of Gill said, " I say, you there," for the thousandth time.

He straightened and turned an angry eye on the pianist.

" Now what ?"

" The Terran ambassador is giving a party in my honour this night. We are to be there at eight." He turned and swept from the room before Dawson could utter a word.

He shrugged and went on unpacking. The Terran ambassador was as good a place as any for him to start. He had no credentials, nothing to identify himself, but Hendrix had assured him that suitable information would be sent ahead, and someone would get in touch with him.

He spent the rest of the day getting himself sorted out, and in preventing the majority of his belongings disappearing with one or other of several Mylonians who visited the apartment on clearly improbable excuses for the exact purpose of stealing as much as they could before the new arrivals had been told what to expect. Dawson wasn't impressed with them. They were of roughly Terran height, but slender to the point of emaciation ; the fine bone structure was covered by a layer of soft, velvety muscle that gave notice of far greater physical strength than the frame indicated. There were no ears and no nose to break the round continuity of the head, and the eyes were lidless orbs of black set in deep, wide sockets. The wide mouth had the double function of serving as a breathing orifice, and for that reason Mylonian eating habits tended to be noisy and uncouth —rather like a Terran with a permanent nasal blockage. The hearing organs were set flat against the head at the side of the eyes, and were covered by a thin, fleshy membrane which, so the scientists said, was far more efficient that having it inside the ears as was the case with humans.

Looking at them for the first time, Dawson thought that he had never seen a more crafty looking bunch, and the experiences of his first few hours on Mylon confirmed the first impression that he wouldn't trust one of them as far as he could throw one.

The ambassador's apartment was, fortunately, in the next building, and all Dawson and Gill had to do was go down in one elevator, walk fifty yards, and go up in another elevator. The whole trip took only five minutes, but during that time Gill fluttered and fiddled and managed to ask two dozen different questions about the correctness of his dress.

Dawson said, " Yes, the tie's straight," and " No, there's no dust on your collar," in a bored monotone that brought Gill's eyes sharply upon him.

" I warn you, Dawson," he snapped, as the elevator whisked them up to their destination, " I shall be asked to give a report on your behaviour when we return to Earth, so just watch your tongue when you address me."

Dawson kept his thoughts to himself.

The ambassador's apartments were large and luxurious. They combined his official offices as well as his personal residence. Hugo Ross, the ambassador, was a tall, heavy man with a bull-like frame and a hard, uncompromising face. He

greeted them both with equal warmth and Gill didn't trouble to hide the fact that the action displeased him.

The large, inner salon was crowded as Ross ushered them in, and Gill demanded nastily, " You did say eight, didn't you? We're not late you know."

Ross smiled. " I got all the other guests here early, Mister Gill, so that they could welcome you in style. After all," he went on smoothly, " we didn't want people dropping in at any old time and in small groups."

" Ah, yes. Of course." Gill simpered at the implied compliment, but Dawson didn't miss the slight twinkle in Ross's eye. The twinkle made him feel a lot better.

" It isn't often that we have the honour of welcoming a man of your standing on Mylon, you know," said Ross.

Gill simpered even more. " No, of course. I suppose not."

" You can say that again," put in Dawson, and was rewarded by a glare of pure hatred from the pianist.

Fortunately, Gill was soon swallowed in the welcoming throng, and Dawson was able to circulate quietly sampling the food and drink, and exchanging polite comments with people who hadn't been on Earth in several years. The time passed slowly and pleasantly, but it wasn't long before Gill was called upon to show his prowess and Dawson knew from a month's experience that there was nothing Gill liked more than playing to an audience.

He went in to the small room which served as a bar and sat alone for almost half an hour drinking steadily, while from the crowded salon came the sombre strains and crashing chords of the piano as Martin Gill extracted musical fireworks for the benefit of the ambassador's guests. He wasn't very surprised when the bulky figure of Ross came into the bar and sat down beside him.

" It seems that Gill is going to be busy for an hour," he smiled.

" At least," Dawson replied. " I saw him in action during the trip from Earth, and he's his own favourite audience. He kept on and on until even his most rabid admirers were screaming for mercy."

" Then now seems as good a time as any for us to have a chat." Ross got up and led the way from the bar along a short passage to a wide, heavy door. He unlocked it and ushered Dawson inside.

" I don't think we shall be disturbed." He waved Dawson to a chair and seated himself in another. " Now then. How much do you know ?"

Dawson shrugged. " Practically nothing. I'm supposed to contact a Terran agent—if he's shown up. After that—" He shook his head.

" The agent hasn't shown up," Ross told him grimly.

Dawson digested the news without surprise. Hendrix had warned him. " That makes five," he said slowly.

" We don't know that all the others are dead," replied Ross. " Two of them just disappeared, but it seems a reasonable assumption."

" All right, then. Where do I begin ? What am I looking for ? Who do I contact ?" Dawson cocked a quizzical eye at Ross.

" I don't know," Ross told him bluntly. " If we had as much as a single clue it might break this thing wide open—but we haven't. We've known for over a year that something is going on here on Mylon. The disappearance of the first agent told us that. Since then the only lead we get is when another agent gets killed or just vanishes."

Dawson drew a long breath. " Well, that's a fine start. Haven't you a thing to go on ?"

" We do know that two of our people used a native drinking house in the city. It's one of the larger establishments, and some of the Terran community go there for a bit of excitement once in a while. Roughly translated it's called the House of the Purple Zotul."

" The purple what ?"

Ross chuckled. " Zotul. It's an animal native to Mylon. We have nothing comparable with it on Earth. I suppose a Terran approximation to the place would be—ah—the Stork Room, or—"

"—the Inn of the Yellow Firefly," finished Dawson.

" Something like that."

" All right. I go to this place. Then what ?"

" You're on your own," Ross told him. " The only thing I can do is to provide you with a good bit of local currency before you go."

" Bribery ?"

" It's the only way with this race. They're about as trustworthy as a pack of starving wolves, but they will sell information. A lot of it is useless, but something turns up from time to

time. Most of the contacts we've made have disappeared with sizable chunks of bribe money—they never had any intention of earning it." Ross shrugged. " We expect that. Apart from those incidents, three natives have met with serious accidents, and a couple more have turned up with the membranes of their hearing organs mutilated after a couple of weeks. That's a ritual form of punishment, so my tame Mylonian expert tells me. He thought it was done to warn us off as well as to punish the native for selling information."

" And it had the opposite effect."

Ross nodded.

" All right. So, how do I get away from Gill and get to work ?"

" Gill won't be away for any length of time. We don't think it wise. All his concerts are within a radius of a thousand miles of this base and on this continent. He just goes off, gives his concert, and comes straight back. All in, he won't be away more than eighteen or twenty hours on his longest trip, and that'll give you plenty of time for snooping around. There'll be plenty of the crew from that cruiser out sightseeing, so you won't be alone. As far as the local population are concerned, Terrans have ceased to be a source of curiosity."

Dawson pursed his lips and gazed unseeingly at the far wall. The whole thing was so nebulous as to be almost non-existent, and he didn't fancy the prospects of following five other men to an unknown and possibly unpleasant end.

" And that's all ?" He looked at Ross.

" I'm afraid so. Gill gives his first concert tomorrow at a large town on the far side of the continent. He won't be back until the following morning."

" Then I'll have about eighteen hours to snoop around while he's away." Dawson pondered for a moment. " A long first survey might be rewarding. Look, I want to be disguised and dressed as a crew member from that ship. I want to get into that native town and really tour the place."

" You're welcome," smiled Ross. " That dirty, smelling sewer might have come straight from medieval Europe. If you walk in the middle of the street you're likely to find yourself ankle deep in the main sewage disposal ditch, and if you stick to the sides there's a danger that similar material will be emptied on you from the upper floors of the houses."

Dawson grunted. " Sounds charming. Anyway, can you fix me up ?"

" Yes, leave it to me. Any more questions ?"

Dawson shook his head gloomily. " A thousand," he replied, " but you don't have the answers."

The next thirty-six hours were the most unrewarding that Dawson had ever spent. At breakfast the next morning he had to endure a long and vivid description from Gill on the way in which he had enchanted the Ambassador's guests the night before, and it was a positive relief when Gill departed soon after two in the afternoon. The pianist went in a whirl of pompous excitement, and it was clear from his attitude that he believed he was taking the benefits of an advanced civilisation to the poor culture-starved natives of an alien world. The fact that most Mylonian musicians were better by far than he could ever hope to be, did not apparently occur to him.

With Gill gone, Dawson went to the Ambassador's quarters and was fitted with a uniform belonging to a junior technician from the ship in which he'd travelled from Earth. He plastered his face and body with a chemical dye, and headed gloomily into the native city.

Ross hadn't exaggerated in his description of the place. Most of the buildings were of stone and timber construction and looked as if they'd fall down at any moment. Dawson went straight to the Zotul House and spent an hour or two sampling various evil alcoholic brews, and asking innocent questions of various waiters. Each time he was greeted with stony silence. As night came the town became less prepossessing, if such a thing was possible, and the hours rolled slowly past as Dawson went from place to place at the eager behest of native touts. In every dive he asked questions, flashed money about, and tried to get some lead on the deaths and disappearance of his predecessors. All he got was silence and blank, veiled stares. Twice he got into a fight with Mylonians who were eager to relieve him of his cash, and next morning found him back at the Zotul, bleary-eyed with lack of sleep and the accumulated effects of several gallons of native brews. His one consolation was the thought of the prophylactic shots he'd had before leaving Earth.

For sixteen hours he had bribed and threatened and promised in a score of dingy bars and inns. He had questioned several dozen Mylonians, collected a split lip and several

painful bruises. And the final result was nil—he'd found precisely nothing.

He left the Zotul House and returned to the Terran colony. Gill was due back, and the absence of his escort might be noticed by one of the natives employed in the apartment block. He let himself into the flat without being seen, and was relieved to find that Gill had not yet returned.

The skin-dye vanished under the application of another chemical, and a needle shower removed some of the tiredness from his limbs. Fresh clothes and a pot of black synthetic coffee completed the transformation. It was almost nine by that time and Gill had still not put in an appearance.

He lay down on his bed and dozed for a spell, to be awakened by the buzz of the visiphone. The rugged face of Ross swam on to the tiny screen as Dawson answered it ; he was grim and worried, and he said without preamble, " Gill is missing."

" What ?" The shock jerked Dawson into full wakefulness. " How do you know ?"

" He was due back soon after seven. That makes him almost three hours overdue, and we can't raise his copter on the air."

Dawson whistled. The immediate implications of the pianist's absence were quite clear. If anything had happened to Gill then he, Dawson, would be on the spot as far as Hendrix was concerned. He doubted if the Space Commission could do other than make an issue of it with the Mylonians if the matter turned out to be serious. It was possible for the copter to have met with an accident, but he doubted it.

" What about you ?" Ross cut in on his speculations.

" Me ?" Dawson shook his head. " A blank, Ross. The whole town seems to be sewn up tight. I tried bribery in a score of different places and I didn't get a single nibble."

Ross grunted. " Then you are the first one who hasn't."

" For one very good reason," Dawson told him grimly. "I've seen this sort of thing before. Whoever is at the back of all this has put the screw on the whole town. Those Mylonians are scared silly, they daren't say one word out of place under penalty of some threat or other. Every last one of them has shut up like a deaf mute, and that means only one thing—someone is very worried. The trouble is finding who."

" Are you sure that's the reason ?"

" Positive. In certain circumstances silence like that can be as eloquent as standing in the street and shouting at the top of

your voice. Whatever is going on here is big—of that I'm certain, but just how to dig it up," he shook his head again. " I'll come down and see you in a while. Maybe Gill will show up soon."

" Make it in about an hour, will you," replied Ross. " I'm going to get a search operation going. If anything serious has happened to Gill—"

" Don't tell me."

Dawson cut the phone and relaxed in a chair beside the table on which it stood. Slowly, ideas were beginning to form in his mind. They were nebulous and incomplete, and there was little evidence to back them up. All he had to go on was his own very limited experience and the natural instincts of the native Mylonians. They were an avaricious, untrustworthy crew, every last one of them, and to refuse a bribe was quite against their nature. Therefore . . .

The visiphone buzzed again, and he answered it hurriedly and with no surprise as Ross's face showed on the screen again.

" Gill's copter has shown up. It'll land in a couple of minutes."

" I'll come straight round."

" Meet me in the Field Superintendent's office," Ross told him. " That copter's been damaged and the crash crew has been called out."

The screen went blank and Dawson grabbed his jerkin on the way out of the apartment. He made straight for the Administration offices of the space field, and got there just as Ross and a couple of aides arrived. The copter had landed far off on the other side of the large field, and an emergency truck was already headed for it.

" The pilot only just made," said Ross, nodding grimly towards the distant speck. " The radio was right out—he didn't even send an arrival time."

" I just hope Gill is all right."

" So do I. We've got enough trouble as it is."

They watched the truck stop beside the copter. It waited barely a minute and then began its return trip.

" Come on," said Ross. " We'll meet them in the Superintendent's office. There won't be any ears listening there."

The field Superintendent left them in privacy as soon as they arrived, and Ross paced the room anxiously while Dawson gazed gloomily out of the window. The two aides did nothing

" I can't make it out, Dawson." Ross shook his head in obvious puzzlement. " What on Earth could have damaged that copter and put its radio out of action ?"

" Sabotage, maybe."

" I doubt it. The pilot is a security man. He'd know better than to leave the machine while it was on the ground in a strange place with a pack of Mylonians around."

The truck came close and passed out of sight round the curve of the building.

"Well, you won't have long to wait for an answer." Dawson turned away from the window. " They're here."

Even through the closed door of the office they could hear the loud, protesting voice of Martin Gill, and there was relief in the quick glance that Ross exchanged with Dawson. The door was flung open and the lean, angry figure of Gill stormed in followed by another man whom Dawson rightly guessed to be the copter pilot.

" It's an outrage," was Gill's first angry shout. " Ross, I demand that you do something—"

" Yes, yes. I agree, Mister Gill," replied Ross in a placating tone. " Suppose you tell me what happened first."

" I was attacked—that's what," hissed Gill. " Me a representative of the—"

" Yes, quite," broke in Ross hastily. " Who attacked you?"

"How the devil do I know? I tell you, Ross, if something—"

" What happened, Jackson ?" Ross turned wearily to the pilot.

The man shrugged. " We were headed in for a seven-thirty landing when someone opened up from the ground with missile weapons. That was about two hours out from the field. They hit us three times before I could evade them, and one shot put the radio out. The other two hit the body of the copter and cut a fuel line."

" What did you do ?"

" I turned away and made about five miles before the engine started popping. Then I put down and made what repairs I could. It took best part of an hour and a half, and I finished just as the reception caught up with us. They were about a mile away when I took off—too far to do any more damage."

" Did you see them ?" demanded Dawson.

" Not clearly. We were on a ridge and all I could see were a couple of ground cars pushing through the scrub. Luckily the

country was pretty rugged or they'd have caught up before I finished the repairs."

" Something must be done," shouted Gill.

" Shut up," snapped Dawson.

" What !" Gill gaped in goggle eyed surprise. " You—you'll pay—"

" Go fry your head, Gill." Dawson turned to the pilot. " Can you pinpoint the place where you were attacked ?"

" Sure." Jackson took a stylo from his pocket and crossed to a large wall map. " Here's our line of flight back to the field." He drew a straight line diagonally across the map. " Now, here—on this ridge—is where I set down, and I figure the attack took place about here—five miles south west." He put a small cross on the spot and tapped it with the stylo. " Right there."

Dawson nodded. " Fine, now get out of here and take Gill too."

The pianist's face was a bright purple by now, and he fairly gobbled with rage. " Dawson, I'll have your head for this."

" On your way," Dawson told him wearily, and the pilot led the raging man, still protesting from the office.

" Well ?" asked Ross as the door closed.

" They've shown their hand," replied Dawson with a grim smile. " I want a copter and a few other things ready in an hour." He scribbled rapidly on a piece of paper torn from the desk pad. " There's some other details for you to see about while I'm gone. I want to be in the attack area by two at the latest. Now, just get things lined up the way I've listed them, and make sure there aren't any mistakes. We'll only get one bite at this apple."

Ross took the list and studied it with raised eyebrows, but if he was surprised he made no comment as he passed it to one of his aides. " See to it," he ordered. Then to Dawson, "You've got some ideas, I can see that. Mind letting me in on it ?"

Dawson grinned. " Some of it. We're dealing with more than just the Mylonians. They don't have missile guns and ground cars."

" Outside interference, eh ?"

" I think so."

" Then why didn't they use a copter and some ray weapons?"

" Too easily detected," said Dawson. " On the ground they're safe—relatively, that is—and you can detect radiation weapons but not missile guns. Look, I've got to pick up that

that ground party today if we're to break this thing. I'll have five hours daylight left when I get to the attack area. I just hope it's enough."

Ross shook his head glumly. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"If I don't you'll soon know."

Ross's aide was efficient, and Dawson reached the attack area well before the two o'clock deadline he had set. He found the low ridge on which Jackson had been forced to land, and he set the copter down. A few minutes inspection of the area showed the marks of feet and wheels—more feet than could be accounted for by two humans, and several of the outlined footprints belonged to a race that was neither Mylonian nor Terran. There were copter tracks, and the rutted indentations of two ground cars from which he was able to trace the route by which they reached the ridge. The tracks ran away to the south-west, and there was another set which ran almost due west and directly away from the Terran base.

Dawson took the copter up to a hundred feet and headed due west. The attack group had a good seven or eight hours start on him, but he figured that the nature of the flat, scrub-covered plain was such that their speed would not exceed about fifteen miles an hour, and at that rate they would be no more than a hundred and fifty miles away when he caught up with them—unless, of course their base lay at a point closer than that, in which he would pass right over it.

As he flew Dawson pondered his course of action, but he realised quickly that he couldn't think too far ahead. All he could do was to hope that things went the way he had planned them back at the field. Providing Ross did his part—!

Three times he landed to check on the tracks and make sure he hadn't lost them. The second landing cost him a good quarter of an hour while he searched for them in a small plain of alien vegetation. The crushed path they had taken veered slightly south as if a compass check had altered their course a trifle.

It was almost four o'clock when he spotted them—a small group travelling in two ground cars and making good time over the bumpy terrain. Even as he came up to them at about fifty feet he saw the cars stop and figures pile out of them. Quickly he slipped the copter sideways and out of the danger area before they could open fire.

So that was the attack group sorted out. Dawson grinned to himself and set the copter on its course again, following the route shown by the ground cars. Somewhere, up ahead, lay the attackers main base—and the answers to a lot of questions. For half an hour he flew steadily on, and ahead of the copter a range of mountains rose from the mists of the horizon. Ten more minutes and he was over the foot-hills, while before him the dark slit of a pass cut through the jagged, towering peaks. He took the copter into the pass, and sheer, black cliffs towered on either side, grim and forbidding.

The copter lurched suddenly, and an explosion sounded somewhere in the back of the body. He took it up fast, weaving and dodging, and cursing for not having realised that the pass would be well guarded. The ground was dark and he couldn't see where the firing came from, but the fact that explosive missiles were used instead of radiation weapons was further reinforcement to the fact that those who used them dare not take any chances.

The mountains opened suddenly before him, and there was clear sky where before had been only sheer rock faces. A wide, flat plain, bounded by a ring of hills, spread before him, and Dawson felt no surprise as he saw the small, compact square of low buildings nestling in the shelter of the mountains away to his left. He swung the copter round and headed towards the tiny settlement.

There were no more than twenty buildings, single storied, long and low, with a larger, higher structure some two hundred yards closer to the hillside. As he circled nearer he could see a conveyor system running from it towards the mountains less than a mile off, and in the sides of the hills, low down, the gaping eyes of three mine shafts showed black. Symmetrical pyramids of waste rock and rubble completed the picture, and Dawson smiled in grim satisfaction as he realised that he had found what he had sought.

Already the noise of the copter had brought figures out of the buildings, and they stood watching him in the open spaces. Even at this height he could see that although they were humanoid, they were certainly not human.

For a brief instant he was tempted to head back to the pass and make a run through the gauntlet of fire in an effort to get back to the Terran base ; the thought died even as it was born. He had a chance to sew the whole thing up once and for all, and he couldn't let it slip away no matter what the risk to himself might be.

He swung the copter lower, heading for the largest of the open spaces, and as the ground came up to meet him he recognised the tall, slender beings who were gathering below waiting for him. He wondered if Hendrix and the Space Commission had considered the possibility that the Trachonii might be concerned in the Mylon incident. Genetically they were very close to the Mylonians, and their home world, Trachon, was barely twenty light years away. Dawson had not experienced any direct contact with the Trachonii as a race, but he knew that there had been minor diplomatic clashes in the past, when Earth had been forced to take strong action in certain economic matters. He wished that he could remember details, for it was almost certain that they might have a considerable bearing on the situation in which he would very soon find himself.

He put the copter down between the buildings and switched off the engine. From a locker at the side of the tiny cabin he took a small tridi-camera and slung it across his chest by a strap that hung round his neck—then he opened the hatch and climbed down to the dusty ground.

Several Trachonii crossed towards him, unhurried, and apparently, unsurprised. From close range he could make out the leathery skin, and the odd, plumed crest of quills that ran back across the centre of the skull. Their appearance showed clearly why the Mylonians were likely to be more friendly to them than they would be to Terrans. To a primitive race like them the Trachonii need only mention ' brotherhood,' and ' co-operation,' make a few promises and urge them to stand up for their rights. Oh, yes, thought Dawson, the Mylonians would fall for a play like that.

He walked away from the copter, and halted before a group of six Trachonii who had approached to within a few yards, and were regarding it and him without a great deal of interest. How the devil did he begin ?

Tentatively, he said, " Good afternoon," without much hope, but there was no response. He sighed and watched as several more Trachonii joined the group. There had been no call for him to take a hypno course of the Trachonii tongue before he left Earth, and it looked very much as if he was going to have to break out the electronic translator.

" I suppose it's too much to hope that one of you buzzards speaks Terran," he remarked gloomily, and was surprised by a

thin, rasping, alien chuckle that echoed from the rear of the gathering group.

" On the contrary, Mister Dawson, your hopes will be answered." The voice had the sybillant, hissing intonation of a being with small labial development, and through the crowd pushed a tall, thin, gorgeously attired Trachonii, his large crest bobbing gently as he moved. He stopped a few feet in front of Dawson and bowed in Terran fashion.

" My name is Tyro, and I have lived for many years on your world, Mister Dawson."

Dawson nodded slightly in return. " That's a relief, and I don't need to introduce myself, thats very clear." His surprise at being addressed by name was something that he had trouble in controlling, but control it he did for the very good reason that he didn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

" Your visit was not entirely unexpected."

" The party I left out on the plain, I suppose ?"

Tyro nodded. " They radioed to us the fact that you were on your way here. I may say that you would have found great difficulty in getting back through the mountains."

Dawson chuckled drily. " I already guessed that."

" That being so, I am puzzled to know why you have come at all. You must realise that your life is of little value now."

" Do we have to stand out here and talk ?" Dawson asked abruptly, ignoring the implied threat.

" Of course not. Forgive me. I have an office close by." Tyro turned and a path opened through the watching crowd. He led the way towards one of the long low buildings, and Dawson followed with two more Trachonii bringing up the rear. Now that he was close to them, Dawson could see that the buildings were of a prefabricated design and construction very similar to some that he'd seen on Terran-occupied encampments where temporary towns and camps had to be erected in a hurry.

Tyro turned and noticed his interest. He chuckled. " You are right, Mister Dawson, these are buildings which we purchased from your race. They have suited our purpose very well."

The office was alien in character, yet there was the indefinable air of human occupancy that Dawson had noticed outside. The furniture was high and narrow, admirably suited to the willowy Trachonii, but uncomfortable for the shorter, bulkier human

frame. On the walls were alien pictures—dull violet landscapes which probably brought glimpses of home to the Trachonii.

" Please, Mister Dawson, be seated."

Dawson cast a jaundiced eye at the object which Tyro had indicated, and shook his head. " Thanks, I'll stand."

Tyro smiled thinly and made a similar metallic chair look comfortable as he sank his thin form into it.

" And now, Mister Dawson ?"

" I suppose I can assume you're responsible for the deaths of the other Terran agents," Dawson said.

Tyro considered the question, his large, slanted eyes fixed inscrutably on his guest. " Yes," he replied at last. " Yes, I am afraid so. You see, we had to maintain complete secrecy here, and that was the only way we could do it."

" Why ?"

" Really, Mister Dawson." Tyro laughed harshly. " A quality I have always admired in your race is the way in which you come so quickly to the subject at hand. Why ? We need to get you off this planet so that we can take it over for ourselves. Until your base is closed down and your representatives here have been sent home, officially and legally, we can do nothing. All we can do is to help the Mylonians by providing background and evidence for a request which they will place before the Galactic Council in a short while now."

" And the request will be ?"

" That the Council terminates your authority under the Colonisation Treaty."

Dawson laughed ironically. " You'll have a job getting a thing like that to happen."

" Not if Earth violates the Treaty," Tyro replied. " Our campaign is now far advanced and will be completed with the active help of the Mylonian rulers. Oh, I know," he waved away Dawson's attempt to interrupt, " the Mylonians have to prove exploitation, slavery, ill treatment. Believe me, we know what we are about, and before long so will you."

" Manufactured evidence, is that it ?"

" It will mean the death and torture of several thousand Mylonians which is regrettable," admitted Tyro, " and this mining camp will be furnished with evidence of Terran occupation and Mylonian slavery. There will even be a few Terran corpses as additional proof."

Dawson said nothing. He had to admit that the plan was a good one, and if the Trachonii handled it properly they could almost certainly fool any inspection team that the Galactic Council might send in. It would be hard to fool Terrans, but the inspection teams would surely be made up of other aliens some of whom would be glad to get one up on the Terran Empire. Well, he knew how, but . . .

" What's at the back of all this ?" he demanded.

" Of course, there has to be a reason," agreed Tyro, " and I must say that your Terran surveyors were very inefficient when they first studied Mylon. Mister Dawson, do you know what —ah—I have to think of the Terran name—it is, I think, pronounced Scantinum—is ?"

Dawsons head jerked in surprise. " Scantinum ! Sure, I know what it is," he replied, and into his mind flooded memories which he had tried to recall earlier—the reasons for the past conflict between Earth and Trachon. Scantinum was the lightest and strongest pure metal known. Earth would give a great deal to possess a permanent source of it.

" Quite," said Tyro. " And no doubt you are aware that the only known supplies in the Universe are to be found—"

" On Trachon," snapped Dawson.

" Exactly. And if another source were found elsewhere it would mean the end of our monopoly and the collapse of our economy." Tyro looked across at Dawson. " You will appreciate the reasons why we cannot let that happen."

Dawson said nothing. The whole thing was all too clear now that he had the facts. There were other metals—Stellium was one — and some alloys, but there was nothing like Scantinum. It was almost into the precious metal class so scarce were supplies. It was a known fact that the Trachonii operated their monopoly so that the price was kept abnormally high. Any violent fluctuation in the quantities available would be a crippling blow at their economy.

" How did you find out about this when we had failed ?" he asked.

" Pure chance coupled with scientific deduction. Our astronomical scientists have been working for many decades on a theory that our parent sun and Beta Eridani—this star—were once a single gaseous giant star. Myriads of aeons ago this giant split in two and became two smaller stars which have slowly drifted apart, each of them capable of maintaining a planetary system which was formed as a result of the fission.

This theory was proved mathematically, and among other data that was formulated was the possibility that the make-up of the Mylonian system would be parallel to our own. If that was so—"

" There would be Scantinum here as well as on Trachon," ended Dawson.

" Exactly."

There was a long silence while Dawson digested the information. He chuckled to himself as he realised that, indirectly, Martin Gill was responsible for the fact that he'd broken the thing so quickly. If Gill . . . He looked suddenly at Tyro.

" Why did you attack Martin Gill ?"

" We had reason to believe that he was the latest Terran agent to be sent here, and we had to get rid of him if we could. We knew that you were here as his—ah—servant, and we knew also of your fame and reputation. Nevertheless, our sources of information told us that Gill was the one to be feared." He looked coldly at Dawson. " It appears we were wrong."

Dawson nodded, laughing as he did so. The very thought of Gill being an intrepid secret agent was almost too much. " Well," he said, " I think you've told me all I wanted to know. Thanks for your help, and we'll try not to be too hard on you over the price of Scantinum." He made for the door and found his way blocked by another Trachonii.

" Do you mind asking your boy to move ?" he said to Tyro.

The Trachoni shook his narrow head. " I am sorry, Mister Dawson, you are not leaving here. I am afraid that the price for the information we have given you is your life."

Dawson turned back grimly. " One thing you people never learn, Tyro, and that is never to under-estimate your opponents. We Terrans have been under-estimated for centuries by other races—yours included, and still they don't learn. That's why you always come off second best."

The Trachoni looked at him stonily. "I do not understand."

"I'm leaving here unharmed, Tyro," said Dawson, "because you don't dare kill me." He tapped the tridi camera which hung round his neck. " You see this ?"

" Yes, I see it." Tyro nodded. " It is a tridi camera. I have one myself as a souvenir of my visit to Earth."

Dawson laughed and shook his head. " Not one like this you haven't. I admit it looks like a camera—perhaps in a way it is. But it's something else as well—it is a miniature video and

sound transmitter that works on a tiny power pack. Every word and every move you've made has been transmitted back to the main Terran base, Tyro. Your little game is over before it has started."

The Trachoni's face was blank and expressionless, only the rigidity of his body muscles showed his shocked and stunned incredulity. It was a long time before he relaxed at last.

"So," he nodded. "You are as clever as you are brave, Mister Dawson. As you say, we under-estimated you. But you have merely accelerated our plans. It would be your word against that of the Mylonians and ourselves when the case comes before the Galactic Council. You, too, can be accused of manufacturing evidence."

"I hadn't finished," Dawson told him softly. "When the transmission is received at the Terran base it is boosted and redirected over the interstellar video bands direct to the headquarters of the Galactic Council. I imagine there are a dozen or so Council members of various races sitting in on our little talk at this very moment, and I also imagine that you'll be getting one hell of a blast from Trachon before many hours have passed, because the Council is just about to start climbing all over your government." He chuckled again and shook his head. "You people are way out of your class, Tyro. In future, just stick to things you know something about. And don't tell me I can't walk out of here and fly that copter through the pass back to my base, because if anything happens to me—" He nodded ironically at the Trachoni, "you can guess the consequences."

He crossed to the door, opened it, and stepped outside—and no one moved to stop him.

The great white bulk of the Space Commission building was a much more welcome sight to Johnny Dawson than it had been on a previous occasion, and the blue sky with its brilliant yellow sun was a vast improvement on the alien skies of Mylon.

Hendrix leaned back in his chair and blew a smoke ring towards the ceiling. "Well, we had to have a new approach, Johnny. When you lose five agents it's time to do some hard thinking. We couldn't risk another man on his own, and two working together seemed just as likely to go the same way."

"So?"

"So we came up with an idea. First, we needed a top agent, a good man who had a Galaxy-wide reputation and was as well-known to other races as he was to us. That was you."

Dawson grinned seraphically.

" Then we chose another personality who was equally famous but who couldn't be a secret agent by any stretch of imagination. That was Martin Gill. With that lined up we let it slip out that you were a decoy and that Gill was the real agent—oh, he agreed all right when we told him there'd be no danger."

Dawson laughed outright. " You should have seen him after his copter had been shot up."

" I can imagine. Anyway, it worked out pretty much as we figured. The Trachonii couldn't believe that we'd risk a top man like you without there was something at the back of it. They swallowed the story that Gill was the real agent and they went after him—"

" And gave me an opening." Dawson nodded. " You know, if they'd been a bit more careful in their thinking—"

" They weren't. Knowing you, we figured that you'd only want one chance, and we were right. You did a fine job, Johnny."

" Yes." Dawson didn't seem to be listening, his eyes were far away looking through the wall before him with frowning intensity. " Boss, what would have happened if I'd not taken this job ?"

" Eh ?" Hendrix gazed at him, surprised.

" I did a bit of thinking on the way back from Mylon. I got to wondering why my bank got me all the way from Venus on such a small matter."

Hendrix shrugged. " They had their reasons, I guess."

" And I got to wondering why I passed out after only six whiskies."

Hendrix said nothing.

" What would have happened if I'd said ' no '?" Dawson asked softly.

" Why, I suppose we'd have got someone else. Does it matter ?"

Dawson grinned. " No, I guess not. I wondered though, because I called in at Police headquarters on my way here. They were very nice and helpful—very informative."

Hendrix face turned a bright purple.

" They told me all the charges had been dropped on direct orders from the Space Commission." He cocked an eye at Hendrix. " Of course, you wouldn't know about that, would you ? You wouldn't know just how that mickey finn got into

my drink, or how I got mixed up with a drug smuggling charge, and a disorderly conduct charge, and a resisting arrest charge, and a—"

"All right, all right." Hendrix waved a despairing hand. He shook his head. "I doubt if I'd have been able to go through with it, though, Johnny."

"Don't give me that, Hendrix. You'd boil your own grandmother in oil if it suited you." Dawson chuckled. "Not that I haven't enjoyed myself. There's just one thing, though."

The cigar jutted hopefully. "What?"

"It's nice to be back, but—promise me—no more Martin Gills."

Lan Wright
