# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 115
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2/6

Serial

JAMES WHITE

Field Hospital

Part Two

BRIAN W. ALDISS

LEE HARDING

B. N. BALL

JOSEPH GREEN

H. L. DRAPER

Guest Editorial

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE



A Nova Publication



16th Year of Publication



## **NEW WORLDS**

PROFILES

William

F.

**Temple** 

Wembley, Middx.



Back in 1937 an enthusiastic but energetic group of young science fiction readers met in a tavern in Grays Inn Road, London, to form a friendly club of kindred spirits, thereafter meeting regularly to discuss their favourite literature and ways and means of improving its pathetic lot. Inevitably, William F. Temple was there, just making his mark as a budding new author, and if anyone had forecast then that he would still be writing science fiction twenty-five years later Bill would have been the first to laugh at him—in that dry pungent manner which has remained with him for a quarter of a century.

Certainly, none of the 1937 group, listening to author Temple's pithy comments upon films, books and magazines of that time, expected him to make more than a casual mark upon the genre—after all, everyone in the group was trying to write science fiction for the growing American market—but where many failed or moved on to other fields, Bill stayed, to become part of the British scene. And very glad we are, too, that he did so, despite excursions into the thriller market and juvenile fiction

field.

As his current Guest Editorial shows, he has long been a provocative and thoughtful writer, and the recent up-surge of so-called "human interest" stories in s-f, with their inevitable inclusion of female characters, is a subject to which he has given a lot of careful thought. While there probably isn't any perfect answer to the problem (except the right treatment by authors) Mr. Temple's opinions are quite fascinating and speculative.

# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

**VOLUME 39** 

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### CONTENTS

Short Stories:			
The Pioneer	B. N. Ball		 4
Late	Lee Harding		 27
The Engineer	Joseph Green		 44
Conversation Piece	Brian W. Aldiss		 56
The Bundenberg Touch	H. L. Draper		 115
Serial: Field Hospital Part Two of Three Parts	James White		 66
Features :			
Guest Editorial	William F. Temple		 2
Film Review	John Carnell	<b></b>	 125
The Literary Line-Up			 126
Pauls Bautanus	Lastia Flood		127

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### **Guest Editorial**

All our Guest Editors have some highly controversial subjects they want to express in a form other than fiction, proving just how seriously they take the subject of science fiction. This month William F. Temple takes a tilt at the recently resurrected subject of "women in s-f."

# That Impossible She? by WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

In New Maps of Hell Kingsley Amis wrote: "Sciencefiction is a literature in which specific sexual interest of the kind familiar to us from other literatures, manifested in terms of interplay between individual characters, is rare, conventional, and thin."

Exemplifying at the Gloucester Convention, Easter, 1961, he read aloud passages from the work of a contemporary topranking s-f author which were intended to express love between the sexes. Amis seemed of the opinion that they were flatter than East Anglia, as true to life as a juvenile comic strip, as passionate as an inhibited sloth.

He believed s-f would not come of age until these relationships were handled as sophisticatedly as in more general fiction.

Discounting the fact that every specialist sees things in terms of his own speciality, Amis has a point. But it's not a new one. For instance, it was raised at the London Convention back in 1953. It was debated long, with all the warmth and

passion s-f lacked.

Around that time Philip Jose Farmer wrote *The Lovers* as an attempt to bridge the divide. Concerning his success, opinion, at least, remained divided. Another brave American attempt of those days appeared in (I think) *Fantastic Universe*. The author's name, for some Freudian reason, persistently eludes my memory, but the title, for another Freudian reason, glows in it like a neon sign: *She Knew He Was Coming*. It was

a sensitively written mood piece, the thoughts of a girl awaiting the arrival of her spaceman lover, soon due at the neighbouring Martian spaceport. She was a new employee at the house of pleasure, ruled by a tyrannical Madame, and wanted to get away from it all and take the path of true love.

The author, perhaps realising that his simple story might just as well have been set in a seamen's brothel in Rio today, introduces a brief flash of local colour, which misfires. The girl gazes out of the window at the distant mountains and

the rising of the third moon.

Mars has no mountains and but two moons.

So there's not even a mismating with s-f—because no s-f content exists. The result is unsullied mainstream.

More recent attempts are scarcely more successful. Not even Wells surpasses John Wyndham's power to plant a menace from space in Piccadilly Circus and make the consequent ferment seem disturbingly real. But "specific sexual interest" is a different matter. It seems to me he has a bachelor's idea of how married couples behave. Through many of his stories run the same stock pair, continually exchanging brittle banter that misses sophistication because it isn't based on known truths. A feverish cross-talk act between two people trying desperately to cover up the fact that they don't really exist. It was fascinating to see these two shadows sparring, as ever, on the TV screen recently in his science-fantasy playlet in the Storyboard series.

Sometimes J. T. McIntosh works hard to give the feminine viewpoint some latitude in his stories, and up to a point succeeds. Unfortunately, the viewpoint remains at the level of a common type of girl student, a sort of semi-intellectual sexkitten. Cheerfulness keeps breaking in—in the form of a

giggle.

John Christopher's female characters are older in every sense, and ripe for rape, and usually that's why they're there.

If our leading practitioners can't get the mixture right, what's

the solution?

The renowned originators of s-f never sought a solution,

simply because they never saw any problem.

Verne's heroes sailed for 20,000 leagues under the sea, orbited the moon, clipped the clouds, penetrated to the centre of the earth, took no women along and never gave them a thought. Doyle's Challenger Expedition to *The Lost World* 

A good first-trip-off-the-Earth spaceship story is hard to find these days, the science part having effectively caught up with the fiction, but new author B. N. Ball combines a neat secondary plot which makes the entire subject matter entertaining.

## THE PIONEER

## by B. N. BALL

"The delegation is here now, sir," announced the box on the Director's desk.

"Send them in," he said. He turned back to the *Times* crossword. 'Barbed—for a missile, (11)' read the clue to six down. He smiled slightly, a man completely sure of himself. The door opened and the woman and three men who made up the executive of the movement walked smartly to his desk as if they had rehearsed it. Before he looked up, the Director slowly filled in six down in his perfect Gothic script: 'trochidiate.'

"As you know, we represent the League of Sanity, Professor Grundig," began the leader. "We are here to reason with you about your proposal to shoot a man around the moon . . ."
"To attempt to shoot a man—we agreed on attempt,"

"To attempt to shoot a man—we agreed on attempt," interrupted the tall broad-hipped woman M.P. The Director looked once at her and returned his gaze to the leader of the League.

"Of course," said the alert-looking man, the TV campaigner of a dozen equally lost causes. "Thank you, Miss Buller. You are quite right: to attempt to shoot a man into space. We feel that it is against the laws of humanity to risk life in this way, and we call upon you as the principal motivator in this endeavour to cease this projected experiment." He breathed in

deeply and expertly as a trained speaker should. "Since man's earliest attempts to put his knowledge to the test of practical experiment there have been daring pioneers to risk their lives for the good of humanity and . . ." He was interrupted again.

"The Curies!" Miss Buller said. "Don't forget the

Curies!" She shook with a kind of passion.

"Thank you, madam," gravely said the leader, who was used to her. He bowed. "The Curies, of course, gave their lives, and hundreds—thousands." He paused. Millions have benefitted by their sacrifice! But who will gain by the sacrifice of this young man?" He gestured grandly. "Who will be the better for this offering on the altar of national pride? What purpose will be served . . ." The single telephone on the desk, vividly red against the green velvet, shrilled out, interrupting him.

The Director spoke twice in monosyllables and replaced the receiver without commenting on the interruption. The leader began to speak, but the lady M.P. could contain herself no longer.

"The poison, Professor Grundig, what about the poison? I have it from an unimpeachable source that you are putting a

poison capsule in the cabin !"

The Director frowned. There had been a leak.

"You say there's absolutely no risk for this young man, and you show your own lack of confidence by doing this! We cannot alow it. We really must prevent it. Really we must." She gripped the handle of her umbrella resolutely and stared at the impassive Director.

"Madam and gentlemen," he said in his level polite voice, "I can spare you five minutes."

"I've come two hundred miles for this!" exclaimed the burly delegate, who owned a whole town in the west country.

"Why, he's treating us like a lot of office boys!"

Then they all began talking at once, the tight-lipped woman opening her mouth slightly to spit out "Poison!" the leader eloquently and ineffectually continuing his speech, and the burly man getting red-faced and irate in his efforts to be heard. When they all stopped talking for a moment, the small young man who had not yet spoken could be heard saying primly, "Really, I must add my voice to this protest . . ." Realising he had the floor, he stopped, embarrassed. The Director looked at his watch. "Gentlemen—and madam—I have now three minutes to spare."

The leader of the delegation calmed the others and put his case concisely. He was an able man, astute enough to realise that when three minutes had passed they would be removed

from the office-politely, but firmly.

"We regard it as unethical to send a man in a machine which has not yet been proved to be perfectly safe," he said. "We believe, further, that this is experimentation of a useless kind; and when we think of a victim—yes, a victim!—being propelled into outer space with the possibility of his endlessly circling the earth, we are appalled. You cannot be sure of his recovery, and you even have to render him unconscious to alleviate the terrible strain of projection."

He stood erect, a dramatic and effective figure. The Director gazed interestedly back at him, but no sign of emotion was apparent on his face. The other members of the delegation looked admiringly at their leader and repressed their urze to applaud, protest, or burst into oratory, according to their several natures; they were waiting, tensely they found, for a

reply.

"This," said the Director. "Just this. If I could go in place of the astronaut, I should go." He gestured to the secretary at the door. "I accept your protest. Show the party

out."

The burly man stood his ground, but the Director brushed past him and went into the outer office. A tall ugly young man rose to meet him. "The last stage is ready, sir," he said triumphantly. "The fuel engineer found a fault in the tertiary rhomboid bearing on the . . ."

"No details," snapped the Director. "You can go ahead

with countdown?"

"Immediately, sir," the ugly man said quickly.

The group of Sanists listened, and seeing them Professor Grundig turned back. "Would you care to see the operation?" he asked.

The lady M.P. winced as if he had made an improper suggestion but the burly man's face showed a child's flash of

delight: he had always liked explosions.

"Thank you, Professor, but no," primly declared the leader of the delegation, who was already visualising the interview with the press afterwards which would bring another flood of sixpences and ten-guinea cheques.

Brand's ugly face creased into a wide grin as he fell into step beside the Director. "By the way, sir," he said, "Philip

Tasker was asking for a word with you."

Grundig's face was immobile, and Brand wondered what he was thinking. There had been rumours that the airforce officer who was to be the first man to make the moon-orbit had offended the Director; Brand could feel sorry for him. The Director never took his dislikes lightly.

"Ah yes, Tasker," Grundig merely said.

A girl in a white overall came chasing after them as they walked down the white-painted corridors: "Your wife just called, sir," she said. "Shall I have the call put through to control?"

Grundig glared at her. "Tell Mrs. Grundig that I am engaged," he snapped. Brand saw the girl look angrily after him, and caught the suggestion of an ungirlish phrase from her as she turned away. Grundig either hadn't got the trick of handling people, or he was just a plain bastard as the girl had said, he decided. It wasn't important though. The rocket was.

The atmosphere in the control bunker changed when the Director appeared. One man stubbed a cigarette. Another lowered his voice. There was respect in the air, but distrust also.

Brand, who was the Assistant Director, resented the atmosphere of distrust, and alerted the various control sectors with what was for him an unusual abruptness.

"Report, range control," he said sharply.

"Range control ready."

"Report, radar scanner one."
"Radar scanner one ready."

"Report, radar scanner two."

"Scanner two o.k."

"Report accurately, blast it!" Brand shouted. The voice was cold when it repeated the report.

Finally it was complete, and then ten-minute countdown began. Brand, not Grundig, was the centre of attention, although no-one in the room missed the tension of Grundig's stance. Belladonna was his own conception, planned and built by him. He was a man who could not accept failure. The crash programme to get the rocket completed had reached a fantastic momentum under the icy command of Grundig. It was the general opinion of the staff that if the rocket failed, Grundig would crack.

"Eight minutes to zero," breezed the twangy voice over the

loudspeaker.

Grundig had stressed repeatedly that his design was infallible. Only fools made mistakes. This was the last dry run: if this last test of the series went well, the moon-probe would be launched immediately afterwards.

"Seven minutes to zero," the voice declared, a world of zest

in its tones.

The scientists and technicians in the room glanced from their instruments from time to time to the figure of the dark-suited Director. Things were going well, and they knew it. They had always gone well for Grundig: his self-confidence had delighted the popular press, for he was arrogantly opinion-ative about his own ability and his contempt for failure. One or two papers, though, invariably played up his foreign birth. The sting was never obvious, but it was always there: foreigners can't be trusted.

One young physicist leaned to touch a colleague. "The

lucky bastard's going to be right again."

As Brand checked and re-checked with the various sectors he became aware of the growing feeling of confidence in the room. They had forgotten about the Director they didn't like, and the contained excitement of fifteen months was finding expression.

The Director's wife walked in.

"Four minutes to zero," called the cheerful voice. "Engaging

automatic control."

Elaine Grundig was well liked. She had worked with the team until the Director had insisted that she should retire when he married her the previous year; Brand noticed her and some of the others waved and called out as she went up to the Director. He ignored her.

A pretty blonde girl near to the couple heard Elaine say: "I had to come, Ludwig—you've got it all wrong. Please say

something! Please!"

Professor Grundig ignored his wife. She waited near him, a pleasant-looking woman who had been humiliated in front

of her friends, and who knew it.

"One minute to zero," called the announcer, a gulp of excitement in his voice, The control personnel looked intently at their instruments, carefully ignoring the Director and his wife. Brand sensed the alteration in the atmosphere. Dislike had returned.

The countdown ticked away on the watches; automatic registers flashed the seconds away. Brand watched the Director during the final seconds, but he could find no trace of anxiety. Elaine Grundig stood white-faced staring at the Safety Officer, the man she had worked for before her marriage.

"Here goes Bella!" shouted the twangy voice happily as zero registered. An excited babbling was cut short by the

range control reports.

"Rocket on flight path-steady."

"Congratulations, sir," dutifully said Brand to his chief. Elaine hesitated, took a step towards her husband, but Grundig moved away to the television screens. She turned and walked out.

"Stage three separating now," called the loudspeaker.

The screen had shown the bright glare of the rocket as it thrust powerfully upwards through the cloudless sky. But the poor pale light of the television image showed nothing of the majesty of the rocket's ascent, the steady surging volatility which flamed and roared and blasted in the morning sunlight.

The delegates from the League of Sanity saw it .and the League lost a member. The burly man decided to remember a number of pressing claims on his time when the League met in future. The noise, the sheer massive volume of sound, did it.

The press was there in force: the shoot had brought them out in dozens. The Director had his own views, however. Press releases were at his own time and place.

Elaine Grundig met the security chief, Colonel McDonnell, a few minutes after the excitement of the test. She would have hurried past, but he blocked her way solidly.

"Been to see the fun?" She forced a smile.

"It wasn't exactly fun, Jim. You saw ,didn't you?"

"Look, Elaine, we've been friends for a quite a while. Things haven't worked out too well, have they?"

"The launching was perfect," she said brightly.

"Not the rocket. You know, if I can help with anything,

anything at all, Elaine, just let me know. Anytime."

Brand had stopped, and together they watched the small slim woman walk away. "Why does he do this to her?" Brand said angrily.

"I don't know," McDonnell said slowly. "But I'll find out, and if there's any way of helping, I'll find that too."

"If only he wasn't so bloody infallible in anything he does," Brand said. The other man grunted in sympathy and moved away.

Philip Tasker caught up with Brand. He looked worried, thought Brand. "Have you seen the Director, Mr. Brand?" he asked. "I tried to see him earlier, but he was engaged."

"Anything I can do?" asked Brand.

"Well, no," said the man who would be the first astronaut to orbit the moon. "Just a misunderstanding." Brand sent him to the Director's office. He thought the whole idea of letting the spaceman wander around the establishment was insane—but it was the psychologists who had recommended it. One man had been retired from the special airforce unit which trained the astronauts because he had started investigating the effect of re-entry on the space-ship. When he brought an industrial asbestos suit his C.O. found another job for him.

Tasker wasn't the type—or was he? wondered Brand.

Brand looked back into the control room. It was hectic with self-congratulation. The rocket was on course, its flight almost over, and the final stage about to enter the correct orbital path. A party was quickly organised for the evening, and the Under-Secretary himself was prevailed on to be present, McDonnell crossed to Brand.

"What's troubling Tasker?" he said. "He's been jumpy

lately."

Brand looked appraisingly at the security man. McDonnell was very quick to spot these things. It must be an instinct after a few years, he supposed. Trouble: it must also have a smell for the security men.

He shrugged. "You know these flying types—all neck and neuroses. I'm all for the Russian idea—condition the man till he's so integrated with the machine that he buzzes and rings

with it." McDonnell didn't laugh.

"He's not going to start worrying about burn-up, is he?"

"No," said Brand definitely. He felt sure of it after reflection. "He's got faith in us. We're using the ceramic process, and that's been well-tried. He knows it. I think his trouble's some personal matter. Something between him and the Director."

"Why do you say that?"

"One thing and another—I can usually spot those Grundig doesn't like. Remember Staniforth?"

"The electronics man?"

"That's him."

"Vaguely," said McDonnell, but he was not being honest with the Assistant Director. He knew, as did Brand, that Staniforth had crossed Grundig over a minor matter. Relay circuits. And Grundig regarded himself as a master of electronics. So Staniforth went: he had found another job, but there was a mark against him.

When McDonnell had taken the job of security chief he had been given only one rule to work by: 'Get the rocket complete. Nothing else matters.' A lot of good men had fallen out, he reflected, mainly through Grundig's ferocious detestation of opposition. But he was too valuable to the government to be crossed, and he had been allowed his way. However, if Tasker had crossed him . . .

"Maybe he's been reading the stuff the League of Sanists are putting out," he said to Brand. "Maybe he's going soft on

us."

"I don't think so," said Brand. "Not Philip Tasker."
"I'll look into it—that's what I'm here for, I suppose," said McDonnell, who didn't usually explain himself at such length.

"See you tonight," said Brand. He liked McDonnell, and he would have been surprised to know that McDonnell had an

equal regard for him.

"What's our Assistant Director plotting?" asked the blonde who had called Grundig to the phone. She passed a progress report on the new satellite's radio signals.

He winked at her and lowered his voice confidentially. "Big rocket deal with the other side. Just sold Bella to the

Chinese."

"Tell me how."

"Easy when I turned my massive brain to it - of course the big problem was getting it to land near Peking."

"Go on," she said.

"You know the cone's made of pot?" She nodded. "Just before blast-off I painted it with glaze and when the rocket re-enters the atmosphere it must turn to china." The girl laughed and Brand felt interested.

"Buy me a drink tonight and I won't tell the Colonel," she said. "Or our Director." She made a rude gesture when she

mentioned Grundig.

"What's troubling Elaine—why the bother with Grundig?" he asked on the spur of the moment.

The blonde eyed him carefully. "She married Grundig,"

she said.

"And she shouldn't have?"

"He was just collecting a brilliant wife. And he's cracked down on her since they got married. Now it's much worse."

"Why?" Brand felt concerned. Elaine, after all, had been

one of the project team.

"Philip Tasker brought her home from the last dance at the Royal. Grundig had left early. The car stalled. Grundig was waiting, and that was that. No chance of explaining."

"When did this happen?"

"A week ago."

Tasker had been agitated ever since. He had tried to explain, Brand surmised, and Grundig had been too bloody arrogant to listen.

Brand arranged to see the blonde that night, and as she walked away down the corridor, he found himself getting more interested in the shape of her legs than in the rocket—or the Director and his marital troubles. But he rang McDonnell at once.

McDonnell stretched his long bony legs on his desk, and considered the project. It had been a simple operation so far as he was concerned. There had never been any question of secrets going astray, since the rocket was merely a refinement of conventional rocket ideas, and all the personnel had been thoroughly vetted before they began work on the crash programme.

They were people who had worked on various research projects but few were rocket experts; when his critics heard of Grundig's appointment to the team, they had predicted not breakdown but that the project would be a non-starter. His

judgment had been brilliantly vindicated.

He had taken first-rate men who were rusting in university backwaters and second-raters who had failed in purely theoretical fields. His team had more women in it than any other similar organisation. And his crowning folly, according to the experts, had been to make Bill Brand his senior assistant.

There was nothing against Brand. But McDonnell knew from his files the official opinion of him: a likeable oaf, handy in an organisation, but not the type to head a project. He hadn't got the vital quality of leadership.

They were wrong, thought McDonnell. The touchstone quality of leadership—the red-tab touch, the jollying goldenmouthed quality: the Director hadn't got it, and he was clever enough to know it; McDonnell could admire him for that. But Grundig had shown his skill in handling the project when he chose the gangling Brand to oversee his staff of rejects and non-starters. Grundig was the only one who had realised that Brand was a leader: not even Brand knew it.

He remembered Brand's message about Elaine Grundig and Philip Tasker, and rang one of his assistants. The short portly security assistant who entered listened for two minutes, but hesitated before he went.

"Just how important is this?" he asked. He wasn't questioning McDonnell's judgment in sending him on a job more suited to peepholers in divorce cases; he simply wanted

to know the size of the task.

"I'm not sure," McDonnell said truthfully. "Go carefully and don't tread on anyone's toes—especially the Director's. He still gets the eggshell treatment." The portly man sauntered off. Ostensibly he was an assistant technician in the radar section. He looked stupid, his section leader thought; in fact, he was McDonnell's best agent. If Grundig was causing trouble, he would find it.

McDonnell cursed when he was called to the Director's press conference soon afterwards. They were highly organised affairs, but Grundig liked to give the impression that they were

off the cuff.

After the initial announcement of the success of the final trial rocket, the Director waved questions back for a moment with an equable wave of his hands. "As to the question of the moon-probe, *Belladonna II* will be recovered in just over one week." The journalists were impressed. They had always loved his flair for the spectacular statement, and his authoritative delivery. Most of them had backed him on the strength of his confidence alone; they were delighted with him now.

The Onlooker and the Haste, however, had backed the wrong horse, the former through distaste with the whole business of rocketry, and the latter because its Space Expert—since replaced—had been tipped off by a friend in the Ministry that Grundig was a fool.

"You've no doubts at all about the success of the probe?"

asked the Haste man hopefully.

"None," said Grundig. "I take it you still have?" The Haste man grinned and shook his head. "I see," went on Grundig, nodding his head as if in complete agreement with the imbecility of the idea of failure.

"It's like God giving the tablets to Moses," Brand whispered

to McDonnell.

Three journalists jumped up, but it was the Onlooker's immaculate representative who spoke first. "But you have made some provision for—ah, a quick, and, ah—a merciful release, I believe?" He contemplated the yellow rose in his buttonhole, sniffed it, and said sharply, "Suicide, in fact." His voice commanded attention. "I have it on good authority, sir."

The Director took the news of the leak well, answering immediately. "Certain steps have been taken, but I am not at liberty to disclose details. You may be sure that the whole project is being conducted on strict humantarian principles. All contingencies have therefore to be faced. And they have been."

There was no sensation. Several of the reporters had got the same tip. McDonnell decided to go through the motions of finding the leak, but he knew better than to raise the matter

here in public with the reporters.

The Director was asked to elaborate, and he did so. "Well, gentlemen, I'll give you the facts. The astronaut will have food water, air—everything, in fact, to preserve life—sufficient for a much longer trip. You can collect some notes, by the way, on your way out. Now, as to the question of failure." The journalists stirred.

"There are scores of satellites hanging about the earth, and literally thousands of fragments of rockets. Space is not the emptiness it was once thought. Bits of cosmic dust, stray pieces of shattered worlds, hurtle through the universe. And the rocket, by some inconceivable mischance, may strike one of them. The possibility has been faced, but let me emphasise that it is a million billion to one chance we are considering.

"The astronaut, just possibly, could face a lingering death through the failure of some part of the space capsule after collision with such a bit of cosmic rubbish. He would not starve, and his air supply would last for several weeks longer than the planned length of the space flight. He would have to wait for death." The journalists scribbled furiously. Grundig excelled at popular exposition of science "Cur psychologists have advised, therefore, that there should be some means of self-destruction in the capsule for the final emergency."

"And you say it's a form of poison?" called the *Haste* man.
"Did I?" asked Grundig. "I'm sorry, that's as far as I can

go.

The reporters had to be content with this, but it was enough to rate front-page headlines with photographs of the trial rocket's flight. It made a good chilling story: POISON PILLS FOR ASTRONAUT? The awful choice Tasker might have to make was analysed horrifically. They took up Grundig's phrase: THE LAST EMERGENCY?

McDonnell was looking through his secret files. He had Tasker's open in front of him, and he had just entered the information the plump operative had sent in. 'Tasker seems interested emotionally with Elaine Grundig, wife of the Director, but has shown restraint. Misunderstanding by Director has estranged him from wife. Apparently no compromising circumstances, however.'

He turned to the Director's file. 'Wife thought to be

He turned to the Director's file. 'Wife thought to be compromised with Tasker. Apparently a hasty judgment by Director. Tasker the third party. Query: Is this just another of the Director's hate-relationships, or is it a compulsive

obsession? (see Staniforth file).'

There was another note to put on the Director's file, but this would be in McDonnell's own code. He fingered the long report on the establishment which said in five thousand words that there was something fishy going on somewhere in the establishment, but that it could not be said with any accuracy just where. McDonnell was, however, to be on the alert, especially where the Director was concerned.

McDonnell whistled a north-country air badly. The trouble with these reports was that they were so confoundedly vague;

but trouble usually followed them.

He read again every detail of Grundig's file. He knew the main facts by heart, especially those relating to Grundig's spells abroad. One period had particularly interested him on several occasions. It was just possible that the Director might have been associated at one time with a suspect group in Prague, where Grundig had held a chair for a year or two before the war.

He had initiated several probes into the period off his own

bat, but nothing had been turned up.

There had been many like Grundig, of course, men who had seen the way things were developing in the immediate pre-war years, and who had hopped on a boat for Britain or the States. It was the natural thing to do, justifiable to their consciences by the view that science was developing in safety elsewhere, and one's first loyalty was to science after all: one could escape with one's cake, and then eat it. Grundig took the prize, though. From obscurity in the forties he had risen meteorically to the directorship of the establishment.

"A scheming bastard," McDonnell found himself saying, as he finished the file. He decided to superintend personally all stages of the check on Grundig. He tried to answer honestly when he asked himself was he looking objectively at the facts on the Director, whether he was doing his job impartially, or if he was prejudging the man because of his unpleasant character:

he found himself avoiding an answer.

Watching Grundig himself would mean a good deal of extra work just when there was a build-up of work in his department. It could be, he told himself, that I want to catch him at something.

"Anything interesting in the Director's mail lately?" he asked his assistant who had promptly answered when he

buzzed for her.

"I'll bring a copy of something I wanted you to see,

Colonel," she answered.

It was an invitation to a folk-dance society dinner. Mc Donnell thought about it, but he let the girl work it out for herself.

"Folk-dancers travel," she suggested. He gave her full

marks: short and to the point.

"Send for a check on them," he told her. "Any affiliations with our friends. See if they've been to Prague."

The Royal had been taken over for the evening. All the establishment's personnel were there to celebrate the success of the rocket, except for the few who were still doing routine checks on the lunar probe.

Grundig had ignored his wife, McDonnell observed; she held herself erect as she stood near him. The Director was the hero of the moment, and he answered the numerous toasts

proposed with a wry good-humour which was almost

convincing.

Tasker looked ill now, McDonnell thought. It was a mistake to let him mix so freely with these people : he could get to know they were humans. And humans are fallible. Better to keep him apart at the training depot; the psychologists had advised otherwise, however, and they had the ear of the Ministry. Informality was the key-note, and at all costs a light tone should be maintained.

Suddenly the youngish pilot downed his drink—fruit juice, saw McDonnall, who noticed these things—and went to the Director's wife. She smiled hopelessly at him, but he took her arm firmly and led her away to the bar. The security man followed indolently. He wasn't noticed. It was his job not to

be noticed.

"What did he do to you?" Tasker was saying.
"Nothing," the woman answered. "He said and did nothing. That's the thing that worries me most. He just seems to be waiting for something."

"You've explained about us?"

"I said he was stupid—that we just went to the dance with the rest, and coming back the car stalled. What did he say to you?" Tasker shrugged his shoulders but didn't reply. "Tell me what he said, Phil."

"Nothing much, Elaine. He sat listening like a judge, then he said, 'We all make mistakes, Mr. Tasker. Everyone makes

mistakes. All of us."

"What did he mean?"

"I wish I knew."

The girl made up her mind. "I'll leave him. Tonight." Tasker nodded.

"After the shot, we'll work it out," he said.

They smiled and looked round the room together. No one seemed to be watching; the staff were being discreet. Then they caught Grundig's look; McDonnell saw it also for a second or two : cold bitter hatred.

Grundig enjoyed hurting people, that much McDonnell knew. And Tasker had offended Grundig badly. McDonnell wondered how far Grundig could take his hates. After a moment's consideration he thought he knew. He decided to have a talk with Brand.

The barman seemed to have something urgent to say, but he was trying to be discreet. He beckoned, winked, frowned, and

nodded to McDonnell, who followed his gestures.

The short portly operative was at the other end of the long bar idly twiddling with a brandy glass. McDonnell crossed to him and listened. They might have been discussing their drinks.

"You're certain?" McDonnell said after a while.

The other man looked offended. "Certain."

"And the other lot-the dancers?"

"Just folk-dancers."

"Right. Let's have the story," said McDonnell.

"You know Grundig's been getting letters from Poland? You remember the sort of thing: Klausmann's not too well. Schultz got a professorship in East Germany, Rapacki's book is out at last. Chatty stuff, nothing technical."

"Innocent," said McDonnell.

"Agreed. But there's a new development. We looked under the stamps."

McDonnell blew a long trail of smoke over the bar.

" Microdots ?"

"Worked into the grain of the paper. Very skilful job," said the portly man admiringly. "They must have a new man on the job." He passed over some pictures. "These are the blow-ups."

There was no letter. Just the photographs of four men, with

the names they were now using.

"Refugees," explained the operative. "They all got through in the last year or two. This one's dead-killed in the fog at Wimbledon yesterday. Hit and run. Hit very hard. Ran very fast."

" Accident ?"

The other man shook his head. "On the face of it, yes, but there's a pattern emerging in these things now. Too many accidents to refugees."

"What about the others?"

The operative pointed them out one by one. "He's in America. We didn't publicise his transfer. This one's a physicist. Brought some interesting ideas on neutrons we might find a use for in about a hundred years' time. The other's marking time for a year or two in a library till he's cleared."

McDonnell stopped himself asking the other why the man had been killed. It was a simple way of pointing out to others the danger of defection.

"So what about Grundig?" McDonnell was thinking aloud, so the operative didn't interrupt. "He just spotted for

them?"

"It looks that way. He's in the ideal position for the job. He finds them, sets them up like little clay pigeons. Then, bang, bang, bang."

"What have they got on him—family?" Grundig could have relatives over there which security hadn't heard about.

"Nothing," McDonnell's operative said. "It makes it a lot nastier. They've no hold at all that we can find. No family—we've accounted for all of them. No record with the party. He just likes it so far as we can make out."

"Any direct evidence—anything we can use?"

"No. We can't touch him. They're much too clever to link him up with their organisation here. We'll work on of it, of course, but they're getting much better at this sort of thing."

They would be, thought Brand. Grundig couldn't be touched legally. Any court in the country would throw out a case brought against him as things stood at present. There was no proof that Grundig was a traitor.

"So there's nothing we can do," said McDonnell slowly.

"We'll make sure he gets no more messages. Might even get some fakes up for him." The operative was looking more

cheerful. The idea appealed to him.

"Nothing we can do," repeated McDonnell reluctantly. "Nothing for the present." At the back of his mind an answer was developing, but as yet it was vague and without form. But something would have to be done about the Director. Soon.

Again McDonnell had the feeling that a talk with Brand

would help. He went to look for him.

The blonde let Brand go reluctantly; McDonnell could feel her looking hard at them as they talked, until at last she was pulled forcibly into a noisy group from her section.

pulled forcibly into a noisy group from her section.

"About the Director," McDonnell was saying. "What's your honest opinion? What's he really like—as a man, I

mean ?"

Brand looked at him with an expression that meant he wasn't supposed to discuss his boss, but that the convention was

not binding. "Finest brain in the country," he said. "I don't think anyone else could have done what he's done—not in the time."

"Go on," invited McDonnell. "This could be important."

"We both know what's wrong," said Brand definitely. "He's crook. Nasty little bug of a man. He's magnificent, too, with a combination of know-how, drive, genius—the sort of man that's never been wanted before for any kind of project. He's one of the brand new men. And you feel he'd enjoy seeing snakes feeding on babies when he's with his wife. He'd kill her if he could get away with it."

McDonnell nodded. "Agreed. It's not her I'm worried

about now though."

"Tasker?" asked Brand. He thought about it, and McDonnell wondered how anyone could have taken him for a buffoon.

"I'm not sure," said McDonnell. He waited.

"He could get away with it," said Brand at length. "Easily. Safely." McDonnell thought he knew what Brand meant.

"We're talking about the rocket?" he asked.

"Too right," said Brand. "It would be his idea of justice. The only difficulty I have in visualising him doing it is whether or not he'd risk his reputation by knocking-out the rocket with Phil in it."

"A big bang on the pad?" suggested McDonnell. "Wouldn't

look good on page one?"

"True. The flight itself would have to be successful.

Would he do it, though? A thing like that !"

"He couldn't get at Phil any other way—he's too well looked after, though he doesn't know it."

Brand grinned. McDonnell was really lifting the lid. "As a scientist," he said to the security man, "as a man who lives for success—would he risk the loss of the rocket?"

"We know he's capable of killing," said McDonnell.

"We—?" began Brand, then paused. He looked critically at the other man's face and said. "Yes, I see. Your people have got him tagged for something."

"I didn't say that," McDonnell pointed out.

"So you didn't," Brand said, grinning now. "It changes the picture. I'd say he's certainly capable of seeing off Phil Tasker if he could be sure the rocket would make its flight."

"And he could do that?"

"Easy," said Brand promptly. He explained. A tiny circuit misdirected here, a tube flawed slightly by heat, a complicated system disorganised—a clever man like Grundig might find something spectacular and ingenious, but it wasn't necessary to be flamboyant. Simplicity, Brand pointed out, had always been Grundig's motto.

"What about the checks?" asked McDonnell.

"He'd have to put the bug in after the last of the major checks. And it would have to be something that wouldn't show up till after blast-off."

"Tomorrow morning," said the security man. Grundig would have to act within the next few hours. "What would he

aim for, knowing Grundig?"

"Nothing quick for Phil," said Brand.

"Air supply?"

"No. Asphyxiation's a relatively easy death. Just a minute or so. Anyway, it's the strongest system in the capsule."

"Food? Water?" queried McDonnell. There was sufficient for weeks aboard, he knew, but he wanted to keep

Brand talking.

Brand looked at his watch. It was almost twelve. Most of the party had left, the two men waving back when somebody shouted cheerfully at them. McDonnell looked for Elaine Grundig, but couldn't spot her. Brand's blonde had passed angrily without speaking, but the assistant director hadn't noticed. Philip Tasker would be getting ready for his flight.

Brand scratched his ear idly whilst McDonnell waited for him to speak, but when he did say something—McDonnell could only catch a mumble about the rocket—the scientist stalked off rapidly out of the hotel and along the road to the

establishment.

"It's quicker by car," said McDonnell. Brand settled into the comfortable seat, but still didn't speak until they reached the rocket. They passed the sentries, crews working by arclights, more sentries, and finally found Ted Dunford, Brand's deputy, who was on a standard checking operation.

"Anyone been about?" asked Brand.

"No, dead quiet, Bill," answered Dunford.
"How's the checking going?" asked McDonnell.

Dunford looked at Brand, but Brand nodded for him to go on. "Almost complete. All in order."

"Sure no-one's been about, Ted?" repeated Brand. Dunford was more alert now. The two men's casual air wasn't fooling him.

"Just the Director," he said slowly. Being a sensible man he made no enquiries. He sent the nearer members of his crew

for a break, and waited patiently.

"What did he look at—anything in particular?" asked Brand. McDonnell decided the assistant director was quite capable of looking after the questioning.

"The space capsule," said Dunford, pointing to the lift. He

would have led the way, but Brand stopped him.

"No, you carry on Ted. We can handle this." His voice had acquired a hard edge of command, noticed McDonnell. Brand picked up a tool-kit, and together they passed up the side of the huge glittering rocket.

It took the assistant director only half an hour to find what

he was looking for.

"Might have known," he said, pointing out a tiny neat circuit which looked almost, but not quite, part of the elaborate circuit he had exposed. "Clever," he said. "He's a very clever deadly bastard."

They looked at one another for a moment, but it was Brand who spoke first. "I've got an idea about this joker," he said. McDonnell listened. Finally he nodded and smiled. Not

pleasantly.

"Attention!" bellowed the loudspeakers. "Attention!

Blast-off in sixty minutes !"

Philip Tasker would not have been recognised by his own mother if she had seen him; in his shining helmet and space-suit, padded and bulked, he was lapsing into unconsciousness.

He would wake five minutes or less after blast-off, and he was wondering if he would wake at all. He tried to form an image of Elaine Grundig, but the dim fog was stopping him. Elaine, who deserved better. Gentle Elaine . . .

The Director's wife had not slept. She stayed at the establishment pacing about one of the offices, and sitting occasionally to stare at the blank white walls. She was a brilliant woman, a well-trained and clear-thinking technologist accustomed to difficult problems. But now her mind was not working in a calm logical manner. When she finally made up her mind, she acted intuitively.

At four o'clock in the morning she moved swiftly and

silently on her errand.

The Director dressed quickly and then eagerly opened his private photograph album. He lingered over the faces of the men he had caused to be killed and smiled. His masters were supremely ingenious in arranging accidents, but he thought they would defer to him if they ever knew how he was going to kill the man who had insulted him.

He thought of his wife and determined to kill her too. Not too soon though. Perhaps his masters would be able to help.

A quid pro quo, as it were.

He was charming to his chauffeur on the way to the establishment. As he walked along the corridor to the control bunker, he was only mildly irritated when a man he didn't recognise

stopped him.

Excuse me, sir, there's an emergency—Room 7b, Colonel McDonnell wants you immediately—please sir!" The man's alarm was laughable. Poor stuff, thought Grundig. That was the trouble with these people—obsession with detail. None of them had imagination, the flair for the big things. The esemplastic view, as one of their poets had put it. He thought of the tiny subtle apparatus which would avenge Tasker's insult to him, and smiled again.

He walked through the doorway swiftly holding his head rigid and assuming a deep frown: he wanted to show these ridiculous security people that he did not appreciate interrup-

tions of a trivial kind before an important operation.

He stopped when he saw McDonnell and Brand together. He was almost too quick for them. His hand went to a pocket for the .25 Maschelli which could blast a way through the sturdiest human body at this range. He was just too late. Seconds could be aeons.

McDonnell fired before Grundig could bring the automatic to bear. The needle took him in the neck, and immediately he stiffened, still straining to bring the gun up. The paralysis held him fast. He retained consciousness, however. McDonnell wanted him to know what was going to happen.

They heaved him to the trolley, and as they turned his body, he saw the unconscious form of Philip Tasker stripped of the space-suit, and with a blanket hurriedly thrown over it.

The Director's ordered mind immediately conceded defeat. There was no way out. He heard Brand's hearty nasal voice in a strange terror, ice-cold hideous terror.

"Height five-nine. Phil's another inch—plenty of room! You're fatter, but the suit'll stretch. And there's no chance of recognition on the way to the capsule. Look—my special blast-off mask. Good idea, Grundig?" He placed the piece of opaque plastic on the inside of the helmet's visor.

Grundig's eyes gleamed wetly, the pupils tiny with strained

hate and fear.

"No more good men fingered, you bastard," said Mc-Donnell. "I'm almost sorry for you though."

They fastened the helmet and slid the trolley through the private security corridor. Four men took the trolley to the gantry-lift. Brand himself helped secure the Director in place.

"Look, there'll be no come-back for you, will there," Brand said urgently when they got to the control bunker.

"No angle you've not seen?"

"I'll have to let my boss know what happened," said Mc-Donnell. Brand looked alarmed. "But he's a very understanding sort of person. And you know he did say he'd like to go in his own rocket. That's the line we'll hand out, of course, 'Scientist substitutes for spaceman! The Ultimate Sacrifice!' We'll hint that he had faithful accomplices, he drugged Tasker, got a dose of the take-off plasma they use, and set off for the moon. Officially I'll get a shellacking, but I don't mind. In a way, this couldn't have turned out better for my people." He winked, and Brand thought he understood. He hoped McDonnell would tell him the full story one day.

The rocket steamed into life. From being a tower of steel, erect and seemingly immovable, it shuddered into movement. Stephenson must have felt like this, thought Brand; the Wrights too; and some day someone would be wondering how the people standing waiting for this rocket to move had felt. The man who built the first starship.

Then as the fantastic pressures built up it moved slowly

upwards on a column of white fire.

McDonnell sighed with relief as it disappeared from sight. If it had failed on the pad things could have been awkward. He looked round and found Elaine Grundig smiling. He meant to ask why she smiled in that odd fashion, but things were happening fast.

Control was trying to contact Tasker, but there was no answer. Brand looked suitably concerned and winked at

McDonnell. Reports flooded in from the tracking stations. Still no contact with Tasker.

They had wrecked the radio and TV transmitters in the

capsule: not the receivers though.

No-one missed the Director for the first seven or eight minutes after blast-off. Until Philip Tasker came pushing into the room still with his blanket round him. Medical people, technicians, and security men flocked in with him.

The Director was missed about then.

Several people worked it out. Then more. And the laughter started. Thinking about it later, McDonnell thought it a suitable epitaph for Grundig: the raucous laughter of his team.

McDonnell and Brand explained to Elaine an hour after blast-off: Tasker was never to know the full story. His training had been hard, and his indoctrination effective. He might feel compelled to put in a report. Elaine listened, the two men thought, without overmuch emotion or attention. When they had finished she laughed at them.

Brand misunderstood. "It's for the best, Elaine," he said, "any other way would have hurt you. And Phil. This way,

the Director's a hero."

McDonnell thought he had never seen a woman take the news of a disaster of this scope with such calmness. She even looked happy.

"You knew, of course," said McDonnell. It wasn't a

question. "How?"

"Knowing the way he thinks, it wasn't hard."

"You knew about Phil? The retro-rockets?" asked Brand.

She nodded. "He couldn't help dropping hints. And I

found out from Ted Dunford where he'd been."

Brand surveyed the girl. She had guessed the rest—or perhaps she too had spotted the clever piece of wiring which would burn out the retro-rockets immediately after blast-off, the vital retro-rockets which alone ensured that the space-capsule would turn out of its orbit and return to earth; without them, the satellite would never return from its journey round the moon.

"He deserved it," said McDonnell. "If ever a man deserved a death like that, he did. Cut off and cast out. Eternally."

"What do you think he'll do?" asked Brand. "Wait for the air to give out?"

"No," said McDonnell. "He's a man who can't take failure. For him it doesn't exist. He'll try to rig up something and when he finds he can't, he'll take the poison."

Elaine said nothing.

"He'll think about the poor devils he's sent to their deaths," the security man went on, "about Elaine, about you and me, and Philip Tasker, and it'll be too much for him."

Brand shivered when he thought of it. Grundig would be alone as no other man had ever been alone, the loneliest man in the history of time. He would be able to see Earth, and compare it with the limitlessness of the universe. Below, the world he had known; and beyond, nothing that had ever been part of him. And the air would be getting foul after a week or

Grundig was probably dead by now, he thought.

"It'll be quick," he said, relieved at the thought. "Painless, too, thank God."

"No," said Elaine, still smiling slightly as if the smile had

been painted on her. McDonnell stood up.
"What have you done?"
"No," she said calmly. "No easy way out for him. I thought about it all last night, and I couldn't let it end so easily for him."

They sat watching her until at last the box on the desk buzzed. Brand snapped the switch and listened, hardly hearing shocked by the calm desperate hatred Elaine Grundig was revealing.

"Brand here," he said. "Repeat, please."

"Aw, nothing much," the booming voice of Roberts, the communications chief, rolled out. "Just to say there's nothing from our Director-I didn't think he'd have the guts, by the way—but we're trying to cheer him up. We've got someone nattering to him all the time, so he won't be lonely." Brand didn't answer. "Still there? Oh, Bill, something else struck me. Would Mrs. Grundig like a word with him? Sort of reassure him everything's going to be all right. Nothing like a word of comfort from the missus !"

The slim girl snapped her compact case, rose, and said

pleasantly, "Yes, that's rather a good idea."

She let something fall on the table before she left for the communications centre: a small capsule. 'For the last emergency,' it read.

B. N. Ball.

LATE 27

It was a ceaseless quest—the search for the Other Race who had studded the galaxy with their passing—and Man was always just too late. Even when he found them.

## LATE

## by LEE HARDING

"We can't get any sense out of the computers, sir," Evans said. "They're just turning out a lot of gibberish."

A look of exasperation passed over Thornton's face. Were

the machines going mad as well?

He turned around and faced the young engineer. "What about the radar?" he asked, hopefully.

"It bounces-but that's about all. We can't get a clear

picture of the surface."

Thornton turned back and faced the forward viewscreen, where the planet hung rich and ripe like a fuzzy golden peach against the impersonal night of space. It was a big world, at least three times Earth diameter, and it was touched here and there with vague, indefinable smudges, as though some giant had pressed his fingertips into the blurred golden face of the planet, and departed.

No planet had a right to look like that.

"Send off a probe," he directed, and wondered whether it would accomplish anything. None of their devices seemed capable of interpreting the enigmatic planet ahead of them. They were unable to pierce that peculiar golden sheath that covered it so completely.

Evans hurried off to set his order into operation, and Thornton sat down before the screen and lit up another cigarette. He stared thoughtfully at the planet suspended slightly off-centre of the screen. In all his twenty-four years of scouting he had never seen anything quite like this.

Until now the sweep had gone pretty smoothly. Four borderline worlds suitable for terraforming; three idyllic Edens wide open for colonization and sufficient methaneammonia worlds to satisfy the most ardent suicide. And no sign of the Race anywhere.

Now there was this to contend with. He could find no reason for the peculiar appearance of the planet. With the computers unable to pierce the blanket surrounding the world then they were left with nothing more than

speculation.

It could be, his mind argued, some form of defensive screen thrown up by the inhabitants, to prevent anything coming through, and that presupposed a very high order of technology. Such being the case they would have to proceed with the utmost caution. Then again, the planet before them might be completely contra-terrene, an inter-galactic wanderer from another island universe.

Or they could have caught up with the Race at last.

The tiny probe accelerated away from the *Bristol* at maximum speed and quickly consumed the distance between the ship and the golden sphere ahead. Immediately it entered the alien atmosphere its transmitter burped and faded. The tiny mote assumed an erratic course until finally all contact was lost.

Thornton swore and ground another cigarette into the bulkhead.

"What do we do now, sir?" Evans asked. Strain was already beginning to show itself in his nervous articulation. If they didn't accomplish some sort of breakthrough, Thornton realized, the entire crew would go down with a bad case of the jitters.

"Do?" he echoed. "You don't think I'm going to risk setting the Bristol down there, do you?" his brief anger subsided and he added: "Get one of the P.R.'s ready. And

have Davis and Goehr report to me immediately."

They were two of the toughest, most resourceful planetaryreconnaissance men he had. They would make an ideal team to attempt a landing on the golden planet.

They were also the most expendable.

LATE 29

An orifice opened in the side of the *Bristol* and spat out the tiny space craft. It hovered for a moment, receiving last minute instructions from the Captain, and then headed off

towards the world below.

Inside the Planetary Reconnaissance craft Frank Davis sat very still and stared out at the vast reach of space around him. Here only a few wan stars sputtered uselessly on the Galactic Rim, the great black void of space stretching endlessly between their isolated pin-points. Behind the *Bristol* it was possible to see how the galaxy thickened towards the central lens, a veritable white coal of suns. But out here space was cold and lonely and almost deserted. They had approached the very fringes of the universe in their relentless quest for the other Race, following a myriad clues from thousands of colonized planets, forever searching for the Race that had beaten them to the very same planets. And never quite catching up with them,

The golden planet was the only child of a senile sun, the last remnants of a dying system. Between the orbit of the planet and its sun, space was filled the accumulated debris

from a half dozen or more disintegrated worlds.

Davis was a tall, muscular negro out of New Africa. Arthur Goehr was slightly smaller yet more tenacious in his appearance. Both men faced their coming ordeal with customary calm. There would be time for fear when there was occasion for it, but not before. Thornton had chosen his men well.

Davis was thinking: Reconnaissance with the utmost caution. The Captain's directions. In other words, they were to stick out their necks as far as possible without getting

them blown off. Which was reasonable enough.

"Some job," he growled, as men are apt to do in such circumstances. Even the best of them. Goehr nodded his head in silent agreement and kept his eyes on the golden sphere swelling before them.

They entered the upper fringes of the atmosphere and descended cautiously. At the same moment their contact with the *Bristol* gurgled and died and their own detection devices refused to operate now that they were in the vicinity of the planet itself. The gravity-coil still functioned smoothly enough, but then it was almost a thousand times more powerful than the one directing the lost probe.

They flattened out at five miles up and cruised cautiously over the surface of the planet. Even at this close range it was impossible to make out surface detail. Everything seemed suffused with the same golden glow they had seen from outer space. Colour seemed absent from the world below; everywhere swathed in the eternal gold that puzzled the eyes and baffled the brain.

But they could make out the oceans—vast, placid ponds separating three large land masses and a string of archipeligo. But for all this the world seemed nothing more than

a badly out-of-focus picture.

"It looks like a mirage," Goehr suggested.

"Possible. The whole thing could be some sort of atmospheric trick, just to keep us guessing."

"You're suggesting intelligent life forms, then," Goehr

said. "And superior ones, at that."

"Not necessarily. One trick doesn't make us inferior."
Goehr just shrugged non-committally and continued staring down at the land unfolding beneath their small craft.

Lower they dropped. And found the cities. At first they thought that their imaginations were taking too much rein; it was only after they had passed over a number of the sprawling, anamorphic masses that they began to think they were right, after all. The vague blurs below them could only be alien constructions of some kind. They could even make out the connecting lines of roads and rivers drawing the masses together.

Sometimes, the scenes would disappear momentarily so that the cities were lost from view as the atmosphere appeared to pulsate erratically and shift in some alien

approximation of motion.

"I don't like it," Goehr announced.

Davis let the P.R. hover above one of the city structures and then dropped down directly over it. As they descended the alien building blurred alarmingly, like a motion picture going rapidly out of focus.

Davis cursed and clawed for altitude. As they rose up the city—if it was that—rapidly assumed its previous shape-

lessness.

"The whole place is crazy," Goehr commented with his usual displeasure. "What do you think is doing all this?"

LATE 31

Davis shook his head, and then his eyes narrowed thought-

fully. "Let's try looking at it through filters."

So they gazed through a succession of coloured glasses that flashed quickly across the forward vision screen. All to no avail. Not even the aid of ultra-violet or infra-red eyes could pierce whatever was blanketing the planet in its swathe of gold.

"No use," Goehr grunted. "Not one bit of difference.

Damn!"

"We'll go down and have a closer look," Davis decided. They descended slowly towards the golden surface of the planet. They were forced to avert their eyes and leave the ship on automatic because it became increasingly difficult to look down at the blurring land beneath them. Their heads were aching from the strain imposed upon their eyes.

I wonder, Davis thought, if we'll really land on that stuff

or whether we'll just keep sinking and sinking.

His eyes darted across to the altitude level and was relieved to see the narrow line just passing the five thousand feet mark. There was a faint hum as the repeller field came on. Minutes later the level dropped to zero and there came the

familiar gentle thump of a planetary landing.

They both relaxed a little. Goehr flicked off the gravity coil experimentally. Expecting a pull of at least twice normal G on his body, he was surprised to discover that the surface gravitation of the planet was little more than one third Earth normal. For a planet of this size and possible density that was rather peculiar.

They exchanged puzzled looks as they climbed into their

survival suits.

The atmospheric analyser poked out its little container and whipped in a sample of the atmosphere, tasted it, digested it and typed its verdict on to a narrow tape that was expelled into Davis's waiting hand.

Safe for breathing and non-corrosive.

But they were taking no chances. Even though the analyser went on to type out a list of the atmospheric constituents they were still sufficiently distrustful of everything about the planet that they wanted to make doubly sure of their survival.

Davis opened the inner door of the air-lock and stepped into the chamber. Goehr followed, dogging the door shut behind them. And then, apprehensively, they opened the outer door and stepped out on to the surface of the planet. They felt dizzy from the very moment they set foot on the fuzzy golden surface beneath their feet. Their legs beneath them were weak and shaking a little as they tried to focus their eyes on the blurred ramparts of the city ahead of them.

It was impossible to get an accurate idea of the size of the structure. Possibly a quarter of a mile high and towering into the wavering golden atmosphere, and about three miles long as it stretched away on either side of them. Those measurements were as approximate as Davis could get before his eyes watered and his head twisted inside from the strain of trying to focus a scene that stubbornly refused to become sharp. He blinked inside the helmet of his suit and turned back towards the P.R.

"I can't take much more of this," he said, thickly.

"Nor I. We'd better get back inside the ship."

So having satisfied themselves that the ground beneath their feet was solid and not a product of their imagination they crawled inside the P.R. and divested themselves of the cumbersome suits.

Goehr sat in front of the radio and tried to pick up the *Bristol*, but without any luck. Only a hiss and crackle sputtered ominously from the electronic vitals of the machine. After ten minutes of trying he gave up and prepared a handwritten First Report and sent it aloft in a communications Bird.

He loaded it into the breech of the launcher and pressed the firing stud. There was a soft thump that rocked the P.R. slightly and then the Bird was aloft and pushing through the atmosphere towards the *Bristol*, a tiny transmitter in its nose cone twittering out a message for the mother ship to home in on.

At least, Goehr fervently hoped so. But there was no way of knowing that the tiny projectile would even make its way through the atmospheric blanket. After all, the Probe had konked out readily enough. Given even maximum acceleration, as he had given the Bird, there was an equal chance that it had described a neat arc after leaving the P.R. and ploughed itself into the alien soil not far from where it set off.

Thornton had given them twenty-four hours.
"Well, it's no use just sitting on our hams," Davis said.
"We've got to do something."

LATE 33

But what?

They were about three miles from the City. Davis took the P.R. aloft again and let it cruise slowly towards the towering construction. The nearer they approached the more indefinite became the lines and form of the City, until it seemed to fragment across their line of vision and become lost in an unmoving grey fog.

Davis punched the hover button and tore his aching eyes away from the viewscreen. "At least its not the same colour as the rest of the planet," he announced, relieved that the grip of the golden atmosphere had been broken, if only to present them with this formless blob of grey outside.

present them with this formless blob of grey outside.

They would have to refrain from looking outside as much

They would have to refrain from looking outside as much as possible. It was no use ruining their eyesight this early in the game.

Nervously, Goehr said: "Do you think it's them, Frank. Do you think we've finally found them after all this time?"

The negro slumped back into his seat. Why not? What better place than out here, on the very fringes of the universe, where those who have exhausted the fruits of a billion stars must finally flee?

It had been a long chase. You measured it in time as well as distance, even though the latter was inconceivably great in lives and tears and hope and all the trappings of the unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

They had found evidence of a long vanished race when mankind's first stellar ships probed the nearer systems. That was almost three centuries ago. And as man's empire expanded it seemed that with every new world discovered, they had been there before, and left evidence of their occupation and of their passing in weird, fantastic artifacts which defied comprehension. Except, that is, for a few mysteries that man managed to penetrate, more often than not with catclysmic results.

But they wanted, they must have that alien knowledge. Even if they had to wrest it from that other race by risking extinction, for man believed as he had always believed, that anything he wanted badly enough he would have to fight

to obtain.

So they extended their questing fingers amongst the stars in search of the race which had come, by now, to be known as The Race. But the universe was a big place. On almost every system they found evidence that the ones they sought had been there before them—but in a time unimaginably distant in their past. The wisdom of gods now seemed too distant to obtain. The universe was so vast a thing that they might never locate what they were after in a thousand years.

So the Scouts came into being. Gigantic ships capable of naked, brutal acceleration across the gulf of space in search of mankind's new gods, and also to locate and catalogue star systems for future colonization. But the Scouts roamed so far that it would take more than half a century at a generous estimate for Colonial Survey to even map the

worlds they had entered in their logs as 'habitable.'

This, however, was only a secondary prize. Nobody really worried about the number of beautiful worlds recorded by the Scouts; Earth already had more than she could handle for centuries to come. What mattered was the ultimate tracking down of the Race responsible for leaving behind them the tantalising glimpses of power beyond mortal comprehension.

So the Scouts, the great ships with nine tenths of their bulk taken up by the massive gravitic engines capable of twisting them into an eerie sub-space and sending them hurtling across the universe, these hot-rods of the Terran space fleet scoured the depths of space in an effort to make contact with the enigmatic Race, and each time landed on a world which revealed a little more about the new Gods, but as ever they were always a little late. Sometimes by five centuries or more, sometimes by five hundred millenia. But always late.

Davis lowered the P.R. upon the soft, golden grass and

it lay there basking in the warm silence.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Goehr wanted to know. It was too quiet. They had realised that when they had stood, briefly, on the surface of the planet and waited for the familiar sounds to penetrate through their earphones. But not even the soft sighing of a breeze was audible through the ageless silence.

The world seemed lifeless, a vast catacomb shrouded in

a blanket of gold. It just didn't make sense.

"I'm going to try making some noise," Davis said, impatiently. "If we can't make contact with whoever hangs

35 LATE

out around these parts, then maybe we can get them interested in us."

So they got back into their suits and began trundling out their bag of tricks on to the golden grass, keeping their eyes averted from the swollen bulk of the city in front of them.

The whole procedure reminded Goehr of a couple of natives eager to demonstrate their spear-throwing prowess to impress the civilised Terran. In giving in to this analogy he realised that he was openly admitting that the inhabitants of the mysterious city were quite likely their technological,

if not their mental, superiors.

Davis would have no truck with this line of reasoning. He was ready enough to acknowledge the baffling alienness of their surroundings, but as it was quite possible the whole business might be nothing more than an artificially induced mirage, he was unwilling to bow as an inferior to the unseen masters of the planet. After all, an unexplainable atmospheric phenomena was no excuse for imagining oneself at the home of The Race.

There were two things Davis could not tolerate. Being made to feel inferior and being ignored.

But ignored they were.

They began by sending aloft a duo of nuclear-headed signal rockets. The projectiles exploded with an impressive display of colour and aural concussion high above the ramparts of the city, but failed to bring forth the curious group

of aliens Davis had hoped to produce.

When this didn't produce the desired response he hauled the tri-dimensional projector a little way to the rear of the P.R. and activated the screen build-up. An invisible cube of force sprang into life above the shimmering golden plain outside the distorted shape of the city. Davis touched another switch and Greater New London sprang to life on the empty landscape. It was a great wedge of the metropolis hacked out by the tri-di cameras and projected on to the invisible cube that was half a mile high and three miles long.

A succession of scenes moved over the screen, presenting a veritable panorama of human achievement. Port Clarke started out with its piece of ancient Mars for a few short minutes, to be ousted by the glittering terraformed worlds of the Jovian and Saturnian system, which in turn were pushed aside to make way for the fairy-tale cities of Aldebaran and Sirius, the raw and savage lands of Altair and Wolf which had been tamed by the ingenuity and tenaciousness of mankind.

It went on for a long time and then, when it was finished,

it began all over again.

It was standard procedure, an efficient method of instilling awe in the superstitious and reverence in the meek and fear

in those who could grow to hate the Earthmen.

Goehr, however, had grave doubts of it working with the present inhabitants—if there were any. He was beginning to wonder if the whole planet might not be deserted after all. But that still left the enigma of the golden atmosphere to be explained.

And the answer could only lie in the city, or any one of the anamorphic masses they had passed over during their

reconnaissance flight.

After four hours had passed with not a soul emerging from the city to study the projected might of mankind, Davis switched the tri-di off in disgust and trundled it back into the P.R. Now the golden plain lay as silent as before. The great human noise was stilled.

"Well," Goehr said. "What now?"

Davis stared back at him with a defeated look in his eyes. "Shall we go back?" Goehr asked. The safety and sanity of the *Bristol* now seemed infinitely more appealing than the peculiar strangeness around them.

"To report a failure?" Davis demanded, angrily. He refused to be beaten by an hallucination, "What good is that,"

"If Thornton lands the Bristol-"

"Rubbish. What can they do that we can't here and now? And don't think for a moment that our Dear Old Captain would risk landing the old tub on this planet. He's too concerned with getting back home in one piece."

Well, they all knew that this was Thornton's last Sweep. You couldn't blame the man for wanting to get home safely, and there was enough mystery shrouding the golden planet

to make the prospect of fear quite acceptable.

Already Davis was seeing the planet slipping out of their grasp, all because their eyes could not face up to the swirling blur of the world outside. Was this further evidence of The Race, left behind to taunt them?

LATE 37

Or was it the home planet of The Race itself? Had they finally reached harbour after all these centuries?

Goehr wrote another report and sent it aloft in a second Bird. Then they sat down and began chewing over what little data they had managed to assimilate.

It was the gravity which worried Goehr more than anything else. A planet this size should have a much higher

G factor than they were experiencing.

And just where was everybody? It was easy enough to concede that the alien intelligences responsible for constructing the hideous cities were hidden deep within the forbidding walls. But what of the animal life? Surely the entire planet couldn't be without it? They hadn't seen a single sign of life in their entire reconnaissance. Only the tall grasses stood stiffly to attention and the rivers wended their silent ways. Even the seas were strangely calm and unmoving, as though they were waiting.

Waiting for what?

Davis said: "I'm going to take a look at the city."

Goehr looked at him, unable to accept the decision as rational.

"You're out of your mind. You can't get any closer to

that thing."

"Yes I can. I can go blind and feel my way by touch. It can't be more than a quarter of a mile away. Don't you

see, Arthur, we can't go back without something?"

Goehr knew that, for he too was beginning to feel that they were close, very close, to the riddle of The Race. If what they thought was correct, then they had never come this close before.

"You can't go alone," he pointed out, dutifully, and was

relieved when Davis said:

"Of course I can. If we go together then Thornton will not have our report if anything . . . happens. If I don't come back within say, two hours, then you'd better lift ship and get back to the *Bristol* as fast as you can. Maybe Thornton will even be able to swallow enough of his fear to come back down here and see what happened to me."

He could always joke in the face of death. He was that

sort of man.

"All right," Goehr assented. "But shouldn't we try and get word to Thornton first?"

"What's the use? There's no guarantee that a Bird would get through. Remember, we still haven't got a reply back from our first Bird yet."

Which was true enough. At least Davis was trying, in a practical way, to unravel the mystery of the golden planet.

The negro made no ceremony of his departure. He shrugged himself into a survival suit, mumbled a grim good-bye to Goehr and scrambled through the airlock and on to the golden grass. He immediately felt sick and dizzy, but after squinting briefly in the direction of the city he closed his eyes and began walking steadily in the direction of the vague, anamorphic shape looming ahead. He held a Nielsen blaster tightly in his hands, ready to face whatever the city had to offer. Inside the P.R. Goehr waved a limp farewell and sat down heavily before the controls. To wait.

Davis's plan was simple enough. Close his eyes and walk for a good distance, then open them to a squint and look around and make sure that the clearly defined shape of the P.R. was still behind you. Sometimes it wasn't, and he spent a few cruel moments aligning himself again while the world around him heaved and constricted.

He seemed to be walking for an eternity before the cold shape thwacked against his side. He froze, and put out one

hand to explore the obstruction.

It felt like the outer surface of a wall, the wall of the city. But its smooth surface felt alive, as though a million tiny

vibrations were pulsing away beneath its shell.

Shaking a little, he withdrew his hand and sidled up against the wall. He could feel the gentle throbbing through his hips as he moved cautiously along the smooth surface,

keeping it next to him as a reference point.

A couple of times he opened his eyes and was rewarded with the grey shape of the wall beside him. It wasn't very tall, no more than twenty feet if he could trust his judgment. But unscaleable. He would have to try and find some door, some orifice, an opening in the smooth expanse of any kind that would permit entry.

The throbbing worried him. It seemed oddly familiar, and yet elusive to his questioning mind. If only he could pin-

point why.

Time was running out, and there seemed to be no end to the wall. His head was reeling with the ocular strain imposed upon him by the mad world. LATE 39

Very well, then. He would *blast* an opening in the wall. This was no time for worrying about destroying native property. A mystery was at stake—perhaps the whole universe. More than ever Davis believed that he had uncovered a stronghold of The Race.

This close failure was a taunt he could not endure.

He stepped back a couple of paces and raised his Nielsen against the outline of the wall and pressed the trigger. The charge spewed out at the wall and was received—and then something extraordinary happened. It was returned, and consumed Davis in a thousandth part of a second, leaving him no time even for amazement, and crisped his life to a stop.

Momentarily.

He was unaware of the shock of death. Instead he was conscious only of something grasping at his body, wrenching it somehow, and sending it spinning down an endless,

ageless corridor.

When the buffetting winds had subsided he was little more than an awareness floating within a miasma of suspended thought. Strange forces seemed to be moving around him, weaving a subtle web that kept him poised within the confines of a neutral sort of existence, as if he were only half alive, and then no more.

There was no sensation of time, of anything really. It seemed to have frozen and cast him upon the shore of

entropy. To be reborn.

He became aware of rocking, rocking on a gentle wave

of thoughts.

Not his thoughts—theirs. He was powerless to reject the overflow of their thoughts just as they were unwilling to prevent this excess power of their's from washing over his moist, naked mind.

You have tampered, little one, they said. You were

very . .

The word, Davis was ashamed to realise, was presumptuous.

He had eyes but he could not see. The world around him was a blank, featureless dimension without colour, without form, without any reference point he could associate with. But it radiated friendliness and understanding as the planet had radiated its golden glow. To a man of Davis's character

this was a new, priceless thing, for he had never known compassion and understanding in all his weary life.

A little of what they had done flowed over and was

absorbed by his growing consciousness.

He had died.

And they had taken his cinder of a body and fed it into this incomprehensible device (he could not call it a machine, it was beyond that) and it had flown like an arrow down the corridor of Time and had been returned to the instant before its own death.

And his other body pulled swiftly through into the tem-

poral vortex and back to now.

So that he had died and yet had not died. The paradox was too vast to consider. He knew then that the winds that he had thought he had imagined buffetting his body had been real enough. They had been the harsh winds of time plucking at his frail body as it hurtled down the brief corridor of time to another now.

Strangely enough, he could accept all this knowledge without going mad, for he knew that it must be so. They were incapable of deceit just as man was incapable of truth. They had no need for subterfuge.

So they had taken his dead body, in much the same way as Davis might have picked up a wounded bird, and had mended it. And now they were going to cast this human bird

back into its nest.

No! he screamed, but soundlessly, so that the fabric of their minds might understand. I do not want to go . . . yet.

But you must, little one. Not for you the long journey. And the voices were warm and chiding now that the scolding was over.

Briefly, before they took his frail body and cast it back on the sea of reality, he held within his grasp the tantalising wisps of knowledge that could open suns, knit dimension upon dimension, or learn a man the sense of truth, and he knew that he had found The Race at last.

But he could not stay, There wasn't time.

Goehr watched the familiar figure emerge from the blurred outline of the city and let his tension out in a thankful sigh. His eyes were streaming tears and his head ached terribly—but Davis was coming back. Thank God he had been able to see that.

LATE 41

But something was wrong. It was the way Davis was approaching the ship, walking drunkenly like a man in a dream. Goehr was about to turn around and get into a suit to go out and help him in when the figure broke into a frantic run towards the P.R.

Goehr didn't need any further inducement. The grav coil was already humming impatiently when Davis pushed open the inner door of the airlock and stumbled into the ship. His

face was wild and drawn.

"Get us up," he said. "For god's sake get us up!"

Goehr didn't waste time in asking silly questions. The look in Davis's eyes was enough to convince him of the need for haste. Why, he would discover when there was time for talk. But not now.

As Davis shrugged out of his suit he felt the P.R. lift and accelerate skyward. The blurred shape of the city fled from the view-screen to be replaced by the shimmering golden

atmosphere.

He felt cold inside. His whole mind had been turned upside down by what had happened to him out there. Somewhere in the background Goehr was peppering him with impatient questions. Another part of him ignored them and tried to retain a hold on the slivers of knowledge he had held within his grasp, but already they were melting away and in no time would be gone altogether.

But they had left him something. A warm glow burned inside the great gulf inside him which had never known the meaning of love, of compassion, of understanding. They had left him that so that he would remember . . . and would

not have ventured in vain.

And although they had taken him like a fish left gasping on the shore of an unknown lake, and cast him back into the human sea and forbidden him the knowledge of the universe, he could not find it within him to hate them, for they had cast him back a better fish. He could never know the cruel barbs of loneliness again.

"But what happened?" Goehr was insisting. Only the coldness of the Rim showed on the viewscreen now, spotted

with a few wan stars.

Ahead loomed the welcome haven of the Bristol. Below them the golden planet was rapidly receding. Already the faint markings that had marred the smooth surface were gone, so that it presented only a golden sphere to the human eyes on board both of the Terran ships.

It was almost time.

He began, then, to explain to Goehr some of what had happened, so that the man might relax a little, and when his companion learnt the solution to the riddle of the planet's blurred reality he turned around and stared into the rear viewscreen, as though he really didn't believe what his mind insisted *must* be the truth.

But it was already too late. The golden sphere was growing hazy and indistinct. In a short time it would have disappeared

altogether.

Davis had never seen the outside of a ship going into overdrive. For that matter, *nobody* had. But now he knew exactly how it would look, and why the throbbing vibrations of the planet had seemed so familiar.

It would take the *Bristol* a good eight hours to warp itself into sub-space before it could begin the long journey Home.

How much longer would it take to shift an entire planet into that pseudo-reality? Days? Weeks? Years? Centuries even?

They'd never know, for there hadn't been enough time left. As it had happened so often before, they were just a little late to do anything about it. The bird had flown—but for the last time. The Race had departed from its last foothold in the Galaxy and had launched itself upon a journey which man could never follow.

Where to? Davis wondered. Andromeda? Messier 81? Lyra? Or further still, to the uttermost reaches of the distant island galaxies?

No matter, really. Wherever they chose to go man could

not follow them. Not yet.

Perhaps now, instead of chasing all over the galaxy in search of the wisdom of the gods, man might now return to his own ways and discover that wisdom within himself. Which was probably what we should have done in the first place, Davis reflected, instead of trying to pirate somebody else's.

It was intriguing to wonder just how much energy The Race had required to warp an entire planet into sub-space and launch it across the great inter-galactic gulf. No wonder LATE 43

Goehr had been puzzled by the low gravity, for a great deal of the bulk of the planet already existed in this other dimension when they had landed.

But wherever they had gone, man might one day follow. Once he had found his own wisdom. Perhaps that was what

they had intended all along.

The P.R. rose to meet the great shape of the Bristol. The long search was over. They had been late for the last time. Now they must return and begin at the beginning again.

A while later, after they had explained everything to Thornton, they stood in the control room of the great ship and stared out through the viewscreen at the empty void of the Rim, and at a particular position in space where the golden planet had rested, but where now only the endless gulf of inter-galactic space stared back.

Lee Harding

As the tempo of our technological age increases, so, too, do the number of our pyschosomatic illnesses, and it may well be that we shall soon need drastic therapy to cure them.

# THE ENGINEER

### by JOSEPH GREEN

SCENE: Sergil felt the d-grav forces tear at him through the protection of the lifesuit as the retro-rockets fired, felt the gripping strain on muscles and heart as the lifeboat slowed for its final descent. The small ship settled on its tail toward a clear area on the edge of the plateau. The blue fire streaming from the propulsion chambers first seared, then disintegrated the grass, a small fire starting and dying out after the rockets cut off. When his heart had slowed to normal, and he knew he would live, he pressed the button that started the air sampler and waited. To his surprise the atmosphere was breatheable, though rich in nitrogen, and he undid the hatch cover and slipped it back. The world that met his startled eyes was almost Earth. The vegetation was green, though an off shade never seen on Terra. The sky was blue-purple. The sun was white, but tinted by the atmosphere so that it seemed to be encircled by a huge purple ring.

Reality. The young nurse was rather pretty, her auburn hair going well with her Asian features. She turned from her intent scanning of the dials as the doctor entered, giving him a small, faint smile. The greying, paunchy doctor released and flipped back the covers on two of the recorders, checking heartbeat and brainwaves for the past hour.

"Where are we, Miss Knox?"

"He's just landed and is going through the usual atmospheric and food tests, Dr. Carter. Response is fair for secondary awareness, and bodily reaction to programmer stimuli is excellent."

The doctor stopped in front of the programmer, a low but massive machine at the head of the table, and checked its many gauges and its two graphs. The two tiny steel arms holding their hot extensions burned their composite data on to the graph paper as it rolled smoothly and swiftly along. Nylon-sheathed cables led from the grey skin of the machine to the head, heart, spine and ears of the man on the table, where some of them terminated in tiny needles that penetrated deeply into the flesh. A separate machine fed a steady dose of hypnotic anaesthetic to his nose. He was strapped firmly to the table, but his muscles bunched and relaxed as he was fed orders to walk, turn, reach, stand and speak. When the latter occurred he spoke clearly and loudly.

SCENE: Sergil finished the simple tests permitted him by the small chemistry set in the lifeboat and decided the fruit he was holding was probably edible. To test his work he took a small bite and chewed, then spat it out. Not too good, but bearable.

He had a three month's supply of concentrates in the lifeboat, but disdained to eat them unless he must. And apparently it would not be necessary. This unexplored world was amazingly Earthlike. A thought came, how great a coincidence it was to have been so close to so ideal a planet when the reactor went critical, but it faded under the necessities of the moment. It was imperative that he examine the terrain and determine the presence or absence of inimical life forms, as called out in the handbooks he had helped draft. As for the invisible life, such as bacteria, he would have to take his chances. No test yet devised could prove a strange world's microscopic life malignant or harmless.

The memory of the terrifying moment when the intercom had announced a malfunction in the boron control rods was with him still, but very faint and distant, which was odd considering only three days had passed. The hasty choosing of lots for the two lifeboats, his surprise at winning and the suppression of the impulse to give up his chance to someone else, seemed not to have happened to him at all. Yet here he was, and it might be months before someone answered the

distress call and came seeking the lifeboat.

Sergil stopped trying to clarify the faint memories and concentrated on exploring the immediate vicinity, surprised to find himself keenly alive and alert for the first time in years. He was a short, balding man of just past forty, and his busy life left him little time in which to exercise his muscles. He breathed deeply and exhaled, enjoying the woodsy taste in the air. Too many cocktail parties in the evening, too many of the suppers and dances Suzanne insisted he attend with her, too much worry over bills she ran up, combined to leave him little time to enjoy his expensive house in the SanFran hills or walk among the redwoods in the park nearby. When the job got to weighing on his mind, as it frequently did, he was short with his kids and snappish with Suzanne, and when they turned on him and retaliated with bored disinterest in his life he was hurt far worse than they. He spent as much time as possible in the office or lab, fighting the problems he felt were too big for him and longing desperately for enough money to take a sabbatical year and get his advanced master's. The office boys in his division were in better contact with the present state of the art than he. Suzanne made his ambition impossible, and knew it, and didn't care.

He shook off the dreamy feeling of unreality that had plagued him since he emerged from the torpor induced by three motionless days in the lifesuit, and looked around with sharpened eyes. The first thing he saw was that the cluster from which he had plucked a sample for analysis had been

recently picked of ripe fruit.

Reality. The first of the two primary arms on the programmer recorder swung deeper into the graph. "The time sequence has slowed to Normal Plus Two and he went into strong awareness right on schedule," said the nurse.

"Good. How many objective hours before he reaches his

decision, Miss Knox?"

"In about fifty minutes, doctor. What odds that he'll stick

where he is?"

"I wouldn't take a thousand to one on that bet, Miss Knox. It's been so long since someone chose reality I've forgotten the case entirely." He heaved his bulk erect and lumbered toward the door, a big man who had once been a mountain, before the steady erosion of the years of overwork wore him down to a craggy hill. "I'm going home now and try to get

some rest. I'll be back for the climax about twelve. In the

meantime, call me if you need me."

Miss Knox watched the tired, lined face turn away, watched the heavy body the feet seemed barely able to carry pass out the door marked *Rehabilitation*, and knew she wouldn't call him before he had some sleep if the man under the programmer died. The doctor was perilously close to following Sergil to the table.

SCENE: Sergil's hand moved to the gun on his shoulder while he looked around, thoroughly, for the first time since landing. The scene was the same, but his perspective had sharpened and now he saw details he had overlooked before. It was immediately obvious that he was in a cultivated area. Well-defined trails ran through the light brush in several directions. The base of the tree where he stood, and all others like it nearby, had been cleared of smothering undergrowth. He was in an orchard.

"Sergil, old boy, you're more engineer than human," he said aloud. His voice was a lonely sound in the quiet grove and he did not speak again. He stopped acting like a machine, though, and behaved more rationally. He hastily sketched the area around the ship on a pocket-pad, outlining the trails and obvious landmarks, including the shape of the mountains not too far away. When he felt that he could find his way back he pocketed the pad and headed down the largest trail

toward the lowlands, the rifle in his hands.

A ten minute walk brought him to the edge of the small plateau. The area below him was the gradual beginning of a plain that stretched away for miles, and he could see the edge of a huge body of water in the distance. At his feet, so close a hard-thrown stone would have reached the edge, stood a small village of some sort, with pink-skinned, naked children, very humanoid from this distance, playing in the grassy areas behind the neat rows of houses. The dwellings were of wood and seemed fairly large, laid out in precise squares around a central plaza. The walkways were bare of grass, but every house had behind it a large area planted with flowering bushes and trees, making the rustic scene one of beauty and apparent simplicity. He studied the small town a moment and saw that the innermost square fronting on the plaza was a commerce mart and the other squares surrounding it were dwelling areas. There were quite a few adults in and around

the central plaza. In the distance, toward the body of water, he saw tilled fields, mile after mile of them, and herds of some unknown animals being grazed by pink-skinned figures.

Apparently he had dropped into a rural paradise.

So might Tahiti have looked five centiries back, before the first European set foot on that rich and beautiful land, or the magic island of Bali, before the Dutch established their slave-trading centre there.

A girl, clad in loose flowing robes that left her arms bare and partially exposed her legs, rounded a turn in the path

about fifty feet away and stopped, staring at him.

There were only two words to describe her. The first was beautiful, and the second clean.

It was almost too good to be true.

The feeling of unreality came back, briefly, and then the girl stepped toward him, smiling, and it faded again. She walked up quite close, the free swing of her body under the clinging robes a thing of grace and beauty, and spoke. The words were alien, but the sounds were simple and would be easy for his larnyx to master, and the expression on her face was reserved but friendly. Apparently she saw no reason to be frightened of a strange man, even one who wore different clothes and whose brown face must seem unusually dark to her.

"Well, pretty one, I don't speak the language, but I think it will be quite easy to learn, especially with you as a teacher," said Sergil, smiling as he spoke and keeping his voice very

pleasant and friendly, with no abrupt rises or falls.

The girl, who looked even better at close range, seemed astonished that he spoke a different language. She moved up within touching distance and spoke directly into his face, obviously a question about his origins and tribe, and he felt an impulse, so strong it frightened him, to take her into his arms and kiss her then and there. She was about five feet in height, with bright blonde hair that went beautifully with her light pink complexion. On Earth she could have passed for an unusually pink-skinned Nordic, though a small one. The bright hair was well-groomed, held in place by a simple band, the face lovely though not with the perfection of an Earthly beauty, the lips especially rich and very inviting.

When she spoke he noticed that the dentition of the white teeth was omnivorous, and the voice was low-pitched and very appealing. The bare arms were firmly, though not obviously, muscled, and what he could see of the legs was shapely and strong. Her hands were calloused from physical labour, the feet protected now by open sandals but calloused as well. In age she might have been an Earthly eighteen, just out of adolescence into womanhood.

She repeated her question, the face still friendly but showing signs of unease, and he reached for her hand and took it in

his own with a slowness that caused no alarm.

"Come on, baby, and I'll act out the answers now and give you the story in detail later."

She came unresisting, and he led her to the boat. Her eyes went very round and she clung tightly to his hand as he led her around it and then opened it up. He gave her a few moments to calm down and then freed his hand and took out the notebook. With pen and sketches, helped greatly by pantomime and the boat itself, he explained that he was from another world, such as the small moon now setting past the mountain tops, and that the ship was dead and could carry him no further.

When she understood his origin she dropped to the ground and hugged him about the knees, the oldest gesture of homage known and as apparent to him in its meaning as to her.

He raised her to her feet and stopped resisting the impulse he had contained since he first saw her. He kissed her, and did a thorough job of it. The memory of Suzanne faded like smoke before the wind.

She met the embrace eagerly, though clumsily, and sensed his want of her when his arms tightened about her slim form. When he released her she stepped back, definitely frightened now but not disposed to run. The robe had slipped out of place and one tender young breast was exposed, the curved flesh a little pinker than her arms and legs. With more curiosity than lust he removed the robe entirely and carefully examined her.

She was perfectly normal in appearance, barring the accentuated colour of the skin protected from the sun. She had two nipple-tipped breasts, a navel, very fine body hair, normal sex organs. Her face turned as pink as the body as he stared at her, but she did not attempt to reclaim the robe or turn away.

Slightly ashamed, he handed the garment back and she hastily clothed herself.

Springing up full-grown, seemingly out of nowhere, the thought came: Why not shut off the distress signal and stay here. The faces of Suzanne and his two children sprang before his eyes, and faded away. His home he would never miss, and he knew it. He was inadequate for his job and they would be better off with a younger man. He could not name one soul who would truly mourn his going, nor one he wanted to see again. And all the frantic, scurrying little people who comprised humanity, each intent on his particular section of madness. What did they have to offer in contrast to the peace of mind and soul he would find here?

Sergil knew it would be wise to gather more data before making such a decision, but some irresistible force seemed to be pushing him into it now. It would help if he knew the tribal customs, the life spans, the ethnology of the other peoples of the world, all items far more important than the shape of a pink breast on a young girl. Somehow, though, he felt that it would not affect the outcome. This world was just what it appeared to be, a simple world occupied by simple people. The issue was squarely before him, the decision his to make.

and he must do so now.

He walked to the boat and with a sense of satisfaction that was immense he shut off the distress signal.

Reality. Miss Knox turned away from the scope with an angry shake of her auburn head. Why did he do it? she asked silently of the empty room. A man of his promise, his ability, choosing to live out his life among primitives with a hoe in his hand! And she knew as she asked that the answer was larger than the man on the table, larger than herself and the doctor, as large, perhaps, as the future of man.

SCENE: Sergil turned back to the girl, feeling a peace of mind such as he had not known in years. Just for the fun of it he took the girl in his arms again and gave her a second

kiss. She seemed to be learning fast.

Events began to happen with a rapidity that cast him into the dreamy half-world again. He walked with the girl to the village below them, met her people, found himself accepted as a friend and equal but not as a god. He set himself to learn the language and accomplished the task with ease. In a few days he could converse with the girl, whose name was Micbe and who was not, as some faint and lingering suspicion seemed to insist she should be, the daughter of the chief. He sojourned as a guest of Micbe's family for a month, during which time he absorbed the culture of the people and learned their do's and don'ts. They were simple herdsmen and farmers, their only deviation from thousands of known tribes like them on other worlds, including Earth in the past, being their almost complete lack of superstition. They had a medicine man, but no priests and no gods.

When the month was up he married Micbe, and carried her off to the small house assigned to them full of tenderness and joy. And he had no reason to complain next day when the sun coming through the single window brought him to awareness of the golden head lying serenely on his arm. She had been inexperienced, but warm and wonderfully giving.

As a member of her family he was assigned, that very morning, to work in the fields. When he joined the party heading for the cultivated area he was handed an instrument he recognized immediately, but only from having seen pictures of one.

A hoe.

He accepted it without any particular emotion and used it for an hour before the strokes came easily to him and he gained proficiency at cutting away the tough weeds. After that it was a boring but not unbearable three hours till lunchtime.

It was during the long six hour afternoon that he got

extremely sick of it.

It went on like that for a month, steady, monotonous labour, unrelieved by thought or change in action. The work became sheerly mechanical, a motion of which he was almost unaware, never so hard as to compel him to quit but always leaving him with aching muscles and a tired back. And after he gained sufficient endurance to relieve the necessity of tumbling into bed immediately after the evening meal, the nights began to be as dull as the days.

He was not a young man and his sexual capacity was not equal to Micbe's. At the time he started work they reversed roles and she became the aggressor in bed, and after two weeks of that she let him alone and they made love infrequently.

The evenings became as long as the days.

As he started his third month with the people he found himself bored enough to commit suicide. He hardly spoke to Micbe, who did her work with downcast head and averted eyes. To pass the dull hours in the fields he had begun thinking of his work on his last project, the lifeboat that had brought him here and from there had gone into some design improvements.

He could not keep his mind from being active. It began to create as a defence against the intolerable boredom of the daily grind of existence and for the first time in years he felt

glad to see it happen.

In the middle of the third month he awoke in the night. Micbe was asleep on the floor, where she slept if he did not call her to share his bed. There was a strong pain in his side.

"Oh my god!" he whispered aloud. He had a medical

history of two light appendicitis attacks.

He woke Micbe and she ran for the medicine man.

He came and fed Sergil some powders that tasted vile but dulled the pain, and mixed him a concoction that seemed to ease him for a time. But then the pain came back stronger than ever and he knew he was going to die.

Reality. Miss Knox watched the primary arm on the programmer recorder swing deep into the graph to record the second Normal Plus Two time sequence, and turned away. A doctor had to be in attendance when a patient ran through a climax. Unless Dr. Carter came she would have to turn off the machine. Even he was only an M.D., not a Psycho-Therapist. He handled cases where stock treatments such as this were indicated, but not the more complicated ones. Thousands like him were doing the work of Therapists through hard necessity, the need being so great, but she knew he would be far happier handling only patients with physical ailments.

The door opened and Dr. Carter came in, still in his street clothes, and examined the patient. Some of the exhaustion was gone, and he walked in a normal manner. The lines in his face were less pronounced. He had obviously got some rest.

"He seems to be taking the pain quite well," the doctor remarked to Miss Knox. He pulled a chair to the head of the table and sat down by his patient. He was quiet for long moments and the nurse did not interrupt him. The programmer hummed and chuckled in its own unfeeling way, and Sergil called out in pain and spoke words in a strange tongue. and lav there simulating dving.

In one of Sergil's quiet spells the doctor spoke. "I often wonder, Miss Knox, if we have the right to do what we are

doing here."
"Why, of course you do, doctor. His wife signed the authorization. It's a standard, medically approved procedure. Why shouldn't you send him through a therapy routine?"

"I'm thinking of moral, not legal, rights. The man's mind stopped functioning because of unbearable tensions in his life. And you must remember, Miss Knox, that we are treating the symptom, not the cause. It is our job to return him to the world as it is, not correct the conditions that caused him to retreat from it. As a consequence he'll be returning to the same tensions that broke him. Do we have the right to send him back to that?"

"You're not responsible for him, doctor. He built his own life."

"Yes, and yesterday he rejected that life entirely and went into a private world of his own. Why does anyone choose a life among primitives in preference to civilization? Why do men capable of handling empires buy a south seas island and retire to raise coconuts? Sergil reacted precisely as we expected he would at decision time. In our mechanical and materialistic society life has reached the point where complexity is the norm and simplicity a lost art. Our sanitoriums are crowded with broken men, men who were once near giants. One half the world is content to live on subsistence, asking nothing of life but the daily bread and access to the free entertainment provided by our benevolent government. In the old days businessmen and leaders developed ulcers handling their jobs and retired to raise oranges or chickens or some such. Now its spread to engineers and scientists as well. A lot of potentially good men don't even start the fight. They finish compulsory schooling and go on subsistence, never doing a day of work in their lives."

"But this man is no giant," protested Miss Knox. "He's a comparatively young man of forty-two, and nothing more than a sort of engineering foreman. He has a wife and two kids and a reasonably normal home life. The only bad things we could dig up last night were that his wife overspends and

leaves the kids with sitters a lot, and he overworks."

"He had a mental breakdown for some reason, Miss Knox, or he wouldn't be in our hands. I think you're underestimating the complexity and depth of his job. His superiors assured me this lifeboat we use in the sequence is an engineering marvel, and most of the credit goes to him. He's been under severe stress working with it for the past year. As for his home life, I imagine a thorough check would show severe quarrels with his wife over money, all done discreetly inside the bedroom, and poor relations with the children. No, Mr. Sergil is not a contented man. He has been living under a sense of tension for some time and it finally got the best of him."

"Yes, obviously," agreed Miss Knox. She was thinking of the fact that Suzanne Sergil had made the decision to allow Psycho Therapy only after Dr. Carter had assured her the alternative of a rest home would probably result in Sergil going on subsistence when he emerged. Very few men came out of a rest home and returned to the jobs that had put them there. Psychotherapy, when it cured, did a much better job. Occasionally, though, it killed, and it was hard to predict who would live through it and who would not. A rest home was perfectly safe.

The doctor and the nurse sat quietly, waiting for Sergil's

climax to end.

SCENE: Sergil asked the medicine man about operations, illustrating the Earthwords he had to use with gestures, and discovered that setting a broken bone was the limit of their

knowledge of the internal mechanism of the body.

He lay there and suffered an agony of pain the medicine could only partially arrest for the remainder of the night, and in the morning his appendix burst and he knew only instant surgery could save him. There was none forthcoming, and the pain began to fade as awareness slipped away. His last thought was a regret that he would never regain consciousness.

Reality. But he did, and sat up on the bed in a reflex action,

expecting the pain and not finding it.

Dr. Carter stepped to his side and eased him back among the open straps. "Lie down, Mr. Sergil," the older man said pleasantly. "You've been having some pretty vivid dreams, but that's all they were, so lay back and let me give you

something to calm your nerves."

He permitted the heavy man to ease him down and accepted the tablet and water. After gulping it down he looked about with uncomprehending eyes, which slowly cleared.

"Psycho Therapy, huh?"

"Yes, Mr. Sergil. You suffered a nervous breakdown on the job yesterday and they brought you here. You've been driving yourself too hard and your body rebelled and quit on you. We're going to keep you a few days and let you rest up, but you'll be ready to go back to work soon."

"Me, a psycho," said Sergil wonderingly.

"Not really, Mr. Sergil. You retreated from reality for a

time, that's all. You're back now."

"And darn glad to be back," said Sergil, shuddering. The pain-wracked memory of dying of appendicitis in a primitive village was still vivid in his mind, and the feel of the hoe handle still rough against his palms. He was surprised to discover he did not have calloused hands from the dull labour.

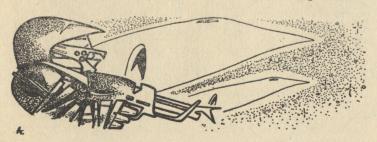
"My wife signed the okay for Psycho Therapy?"

"Yes, she did. It was that or send you to a rest home.

She's waiting outside now to see you, incidentally."

When Suzanne came in, tall, dark, composed, small rosebud mouth set in a mechanical smile, he said good-bye to a blonde young primitive whose heart was open and giving and held out his arms to his wife. She came into them gladly, and her composure broke and she began to cry, clinging to him with a possessiveness that was both love and need. He patted her back with his free hand and soothed her, the stronger as always, and wondered how long he could take it before he would be back here for his second visit.

Joseph Green



Brian Aldiss's latest short story is a nicely turned monologue, in strange circumstances, which packs a lot of futuristic possibilities.

## **CONVERSATION PIECE**

### by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Mister, this may be a funny place to say such a thing, but I've always held that if a man can't get on with society, that's his fault, not society's, and I still stick to that—and I'm a man who's seen our society from top as well as bottom.

No, you've always got to blame yourself. Not but what troubles don't come up and hit you unexpectedly. Yet even those troubles can have their roots in some flaw in your own character, timidity or concupiscence or whatever; we don't do any good by hiding the fact. I could give you an instance.

It was last Christmas Day—Christmas 2061, only a month back, though as far as I'm concerned it might be a century ago—that Randy Kellylarge was charged with murder.

Nowadays, in our finely adjusted society, murder's the rarest of crimes, and you might think Kellylarge would be an exceptional man. Well, I never met him, but I've concluded that far from being remarkable he was just a weakling, and that what's more he deserved all he got.

Of course, as far as the actual murder was concerned, as the marrijudicator admitted afterwards, while deducting twenty whole points from Kellylarge's Ability A card, there was provocation. Heck, here you and I stand in this lousy queue; I may as well tell you about it. Seems Kellylarge had undergone a pretty trying day on the game preserve. The zambuck, or whatever those deer are with curly horns, had been stampeding, and three of them went over a precipice. That's a mark against anyone's Proficiency C, as you can imagine. Costs about forty mahounits a day to maintain, does one zambuck—you don't want to lose any.

So Kellylarge was not too agreeable that evening when he got into the marrena. His proxi sensed this and said she would take him for a spin. They'd just had new batteries and A-G

plates installed, and the bug went like a boom.

Kellylarge's proxi was a pleasant-looking blonde girl called Ida Cassilis. She had, besides the usual female curves, the usual female range of moods. An exciting girl, generous, and full of life—far too good for Kellylarge. This evening she was reckless, driving like jazz through the city. Why? Well, she had a new green wisp of scarf on, and probably she wanted to see it flutter in the wind. You know women, stranger; in a word, unpredictable.

Yes, as you say, that's what marrenas are for-to see how

well a man responds to such womanliness.

Anyhow, Ida gears in on a levelway, U-turns, and is A-Ging up a flyup in the city centre before you can say "World President." She bats out on to a level above the rooftops without signalling, and they run slap into an oncoming biwheel,

pflatt!

Of course Kellylarge and Ida were strapped; they weren't hurt, although the bug was a write-off. Since its A-Gs were still functioning, it hung there in the air, slightly lop-sided and six feet off the level. He jumped down. He called to Ida to jump down into his arms. She couldn't; she was scared. He persisted. She got hysterical. He couldn't get up to her again. Big scene.

The biwheel, being roboted, had staggered on after dropping an audibuoy to mark the spot of the accident. A passing tellicopter picked up the audibuoy signal before the militia did, homing in on it in time to catch the big scene. I saw it myself. I was passing through McKenna Concourse when it came up on the public globe and stopped to watch.

Certainly it looked funny to an onlooker, with him down there shouting and her up there shouting back—was his neck red! Anyhow Kellylarge didn't find it amusing. Ida looked

nice even in that absurd position.

When the militia had rescued her, they caught the pneumat back to his flat, where a good old row started. Kellylarge said he had wanted to go out for a quiet ride, Ida said of course he had: his flat was small enough to give anyone claustro-

phobia.

That really hurt Kellylarge, slap in his pride. I don't know if you understand the social stratifications here in the United African Republics, stranger, but the situation is roughly like this. Now that the last slice of the Amazon Basin has gone under the plough, these big wild life reserves we run here—particularly the Kasai Park, which is the most highly organised—are the last stretches of undeveloped land in the world. In consequence, they're worth a mint of money. Countries like Common Europe and the United States of Both Americas, that are almost entirely covered by urbanism, send their executives here to untense among the animals, and pay through the nails for the privilege. Kellylarge was sent here on leave in this way, and at the same time he was carrying on his marriage trials here in Manono.

His social ratings stood at about 30:60:75:80. Low on

Ability even then you see.

In a small town like this—we only cover an area of twenty-five square miles, but we're growing—accommodation is short all round. Same thing all over UAfR, but particularly bad here. So we allow floor space in ratio to social ratings. A real crack 95:95:95:95 man would be allowed maybe as much as fifty square feet to live in, and so down on a sliding scale. Poor old Kellylarge only rated twenty-six square feet.

You know what that means—shared amenity rooms. Being an insecure sort of individual, Kellylarge took this personally. No social sense! Funny how often Common Europe breeds

that type nowadays.

Don't shuffle like that, chum. The queue's beginning to

move, and I'll get on with the tale.

"You damned hutch-dweller!" Ida called him. Not that I don't think twenty-six square is enough for any man—particularly a punk like Kellylarge—but you know how these proxi queens live! They're privileged, rightly so, to my mind, considering the ardours of their jobs.

"Call me that again if you dare," Kellylarge said, moving

towards her.

"I called you a damned little hutch-dweller," Ida said.
"You come home stinking of animals, and then you expect

me to stay cooped up in here with-"

He jumped her. He had his hands round her throat and was choking the life out of her before they could get to him. Boy, I'm anti-social, I know, or I wouldn't be in this queue, but why don't they show that sort of stuff on the tellyglobes? Wishywashy, that's what the world's become. With fifty thousand million people around, naturally they're scared of violence.

Anyhow, the flat door burst open, and in rushed the marrijudicator, a man called Ben Manjaro, his continuity girl, and

a couple of the marriage ministry boys.

They pulled Kellylarge off Ida and clapped a stun on him. "You're a murderer, Kellylarge!" Ben Manjaro said, mopping his brow.

"You didn't give me time," Kellylarge said.

"You know the law, Kellylarge—only the intent to murder has to be proved. Prevention is better than the crime. That's twenty points off your Ability A, and you know it."

"Please not that, sir. I can't face the disgrace. Why, if I drop twenty I shall lose my job with Eldorado Els. You know this was just a test—I'd never treat my real wife like that!"

"No? Well, with your new rating you'll never get the chance. With a 10:60:75:80, you don't think they'll let you marry your intended, do you? You're all washed up, Kellylarge."

Kellylarge staggered back, white as a shirt, robbed of the power of speech. And at that point, Ida got up and made

her speech!

Eh? No, thanks, chum, I'd never dare to smoke here, and I'd advice you not to either. You must come from Common Europe—cigarettes may be lit on the streets there, but you're in a smokeless zone here, which includes reefers and cigarettes.

As I was saying, Ida Cassilis started letting fly at the marri-

judicator then.

Manjaro let her have her say. Any lesser breed would have been knocked right down the rating hierarchy on the spot. Still, you know what proxies are. Since they stopped marriage being a lottery and took to testing men for matrimonial suitability the proxi girls have become more glamarous than drama stars; so the marrijudicator stood with his mouth open,

letting Ida have her say.

That's what comes of paying people on a scale outside the ratings. They get too much those girls, and for what? For just acting a part, that's all. Does that make them better than us? Does that qualify them for dual consumption quotas?

Okay, buster you're right-it does. But it shouldn't.

I'm all mixed up. I admire the proxies really, but look at it historically. (You can see I'm an educated man, even if I do stand here flattening my feet with you abil-nils.) Once you start getting whole regions of the world covered with two- or three-level cities, you get population troubles, even with planktrition to ease feeding, right? You have to breed inhibitions, right? To keep Billy Blank from elbowing his neighbour or stepping into someone else's centimetre of space, right? That was how we progressed from world peace to the concept of Personal Peace.

To have that, you want nice quiet docile kids growing up everywhere like those flowers they used to have that you see in the period globies. Okay, then that means systematised mating-husband and wife well adjusted, no trouble, no friction, all nice and quiet and docile. Heck, it's not as difficult as it sounds. They don't have to be happy, just so long as they don't quarrel.

It took some organising at first. Not that there were protests, I don't mean; we've been lucky the way we've been able to trim calorie intake so that those old civic liberties so-called -all that medieval ritual of voting and stuff-became a nuisance and were abolished. But the trouble was to pass the

right legislation.

Probably you remember how World President Soepoena took a hand in polishing some of the final clauses himself. What it boiled down to in the end is two main laws: that it is criminal to bear children out of wedlock—since the Church flung in its hand with the State, that went through easily enough—and that marriage can only be permitted where the couples have undergone tests to prove they aren't suffering from violent tendencies or any other retrogressive emotions.

Under the newly established Ministry of Marriage, the marrenas were set up, with proxies and all, to carry out these tests, and of course Kellylarge had to go through the hoop like anyone else. His intended was some girl who worked on the Zuyderzee collective as a gametophyticists' assistant, a nice quiet little creature who had already passed her tests. She'd never have been capable of jumping off on the slanging spree

that Ida did.

"You're just a log of cog!" Ida told Manjaro. "Why didn't you stay outside and let Randy murder me? Maybe we'd both have been happier! I'm sick and tired of this job. Look at all I had to put the poor boy through today—faking that stupid bug accident on the upper levels, needling him about his floor quota, and all that! Do you wonder he got angry at me? Who can blame him?!"

"The question is not one of blame but of classification," snapped the marrijudicator. Manjaro was a big man, swelling now like bagpipes, the likeness increased by a tartan flush on his face caused by an amalgam there of blue vein and red flush. "Kellylarge has proved himself unfit for modern

marriage, and it's no further concern of yours."
"So much the worse for modern marriage!"

"You mustn't say that," Kellylarge interrupted. "I just forgot myself, Ida, and I'm sorry, but don't get yourself into trouble for my sake."

"You stay out of this, Randy, you darned fool. You've put

your foot in it far enough as it is."

"What do you mean, put my foot in it? I'm trying to apologise, aren't I? Is this Christmas or isn't it, when people of goodwill are nice to each other?"

"What's Christmas to do with it? Don't be old-fashioned! No wonder you only qualify for enough floor-space for a

chipmunk."

"Why. you cow, I wish I had really got you down there and got my hands round that damned white delicate delicious neck—"

"Just because you've been fraternising with animals you think—"

Ben Manjaro seized her by one white delicate delicious

wrist and swung her away from Kellylarge.

"Now see here, Miss Cassilis," he said sternly, "just you cool down, you've been through these tests with a thousand men before. Many of them muffed their tests, and you never gave a chirp. Why all the excitement this time over a lousy 30:60:75:80?"

She stamped with anger, swished her arm free, swirled her hair. It must have been a marvellous sight.

"Because he's not just a 30:60:75:80. He's not just a cog like all the rest of them. He's Randy Kellylarge, and he's the first man ever to offer me violence."

"Ida, I said I'm sorry—"
"You keep out of this!!"

"Okay, Miss Cassilis, he offered you violence. Is that any reason why you should offer violence back?"

"Yes it is. I love him!"

"But Ida-"

"Don't keep interrupting, you lovely crazy hunk of maladjusted manhood, you!" she cried, and flung herself upon

him with an orgy of kisses.

You know the old saying about the course of true love never running counter to one's rating. It didn't hold true in this case. There was a real dust-up, I tell you, the reverberations of which were heard in the highest quarters, and it wasn't long before things started moving—talking of which, I detect a sluggish shuffle at the head of this dead-and-alive queue. We're on our way, feller!

This row, you'll recall, took place on Christmas Day. By the middle of Boxing Day, both Ida Cassilis and Randy Kellylarge were in trouble—and both were giving trouble back. Let's take this girl Ida first, because she is definitely the

more interesting of the two.

Manjaro stood just so much maladjustment from her, and

then he hit back.

"Miss Cassilis, carrying on like this in front of witnesses

will do you no good," he warned her.

The gesture she made at the marriage ministry boys showed exactly what she thought of them. Indicating Kellylarge, she said, "Can't you see why I'm upset? For heaven's sake, what's going to happen to this poor boy? One man in a thousand with spirit, and you inflict this brutal punishment on him."

Manjaro sighed heavily.

"Brutal nothing. The law's the law, whether you kid yourself you're in love or whether you don't. Calm down before I get irritable, Miss Cassilis, and stop trying to buck against the status quo."

"To hell with the status quo, Mr. Manjaro! I'm fed up with it. It stinks! Oh, for a man with spirit, with fire, with daring!"

Manjaro went tartan-faced again.

"You've gone just too far, you trumped-up little proxi. As of now, you're fired from the marriage ministry. Now get out of here, the lot of you!"

Well, Ida wasn't the girl to sit down under that; she organised all the other proxies to go on strike on her behalf.

I've always argued that these proxies get far too many privileges, and nothing will ever make me change my mind. Yet you can see that they hold a unique position of power in our well-organised society. I mean, through their pretty hands go all the men who ever aspire to marriage, so that they are for ever indulged, for ever having men trying to court them nicely. Then again, they have to play up and be more cantankerous than a normal woman, just to make the tests rigorous enough, and you can't tell me this does not make them something of a race apart.

So the proxies staged a strike. They refused to test any more men till Ida was reinstated. As a result—pouff!—no more marriages! World President Soepoena sent them an address all about working for the greatest integration of the greatest number. Made no difference. The girls stuck to their guns.

As for Kellylarge, he went back to the Kasai Park preserve like a beaten dog. Knowledge of his derating had preceded him, but the authorities there left him alone. They knew that as soon as his company got the news it would jerk him back to Europe. He had just a few hours left before his leave was cancelled.

What did he do? He headed into the bush, where he had struck up a relationship with some sort of gazelle—a gerenuk, I believe it was. During his range work, he had found this animal with its foot wedged between two boulders. Kellylarge rescued it, and they'd been close ever since; the way I heard it, Kellylarge saw Boxing Day in with his gerenuk.

Came morning and he had to face up to reality. As he reported back to the lodge, the beam came through from his company, and there was Kellylarge's boss glaring at him from a private globe.

"Kellylarge, your leave's cancelled," that individual said. "Your marrena report's just in. As a result, you're reclassified. From date you're working as assistant artificer with our subsidiary firm in the Lofoten Islands. Report there by midnight tonight, General European Time."

Huh! Kellylarge was a lunk, a clot, a real abil-nil, I grant you, but he had his feelings the same as the rest of us, and you can imagine how his feelings were. For one thing, he'd never see his intended again; with his new rating, they could

not even meet, let alone marry.

Don't get restless, stranger, we're nearly at the top of the queue. And then, zippo, the old free trip to Callisto! Yes, I've heard all those rumours about it being just a penal colony. Don't believe a word of it; it's this intense secrecy about deportees Earthside that gives rise to the ugly talk. We're being shipped out there as misfits, right? Right, then on a frontier world we'll have a chance to fit. Anyhow, back to Kellylarge.

No sooner had he had this kick in the teeth from his company, than Ida came through on the beam to him. Most of what I'm telling you is more or less common knowledge, but some of it I heard from a friend at Beam Central. Unfortunately, Ida came through on scramble, so we don't

know what was said-but we can guess.

For sure she told Kellylarge that the strike had now succeeded. The proxies had won their point, Ida was reinstated, mainly through the intercession of one of the other girls, who had tested World President Soepoena's brother before his marriage; she got the President personally interested in Ida's case. He brought pressure to bear on the marriage ministry, so that Ida was reinstated.

And no doubt when Kellylarge heard that, he saw a way to save himself from the Lofoten Islands. Probably he was in love with Ida I don't know, but who wouldn't be with an item like her? So he proposed marriage then and there, and she turned him down flat. A proxi marry a 10:60:75:80?

Not likely?

So he broke loose in despair. Beat it into the bush, back to this gerenuk. Poor lunk! You know how close a man and a critter can be, now this law is passed and we don't have to hunt 'em. Kellylarge hid out on the ranges among the acacias for two working weeks before they caught him. Only last week that was; they say he had grown very thin.

Still, who cares what happened to Kellylarge? He was just a small cog in a big big machine. What happened to Ida Cassilis was much more interesting. World President Soepoena unfortunately had his interest in her aroused by the strike. He sent for her secretly, and, well, they knew each other for rebels, and they fell in love with each other.

That was awkward, I tell you, with the World President forced to be celibate by church-state law. They married, anonymously and secretly, in Chile, in a little chapel five thousand metres above sea level. My God, there was a fool for you! It lasted only twenty-four hours before some dirty spy found out-and, well, the law is the law.

But Kellylarge: small time! A failure. He's probably standing in some wretched deportee queue now, just as we are!

What's that, stranger?

I said I'm Randy Kellylarge, butch, How I've stood here

listening to you spiel for so long I'll never know.

For your information, you have the tale all wrong at several crucial points, despite all your prying. Just in case you intend to blab my private business all over Callisto. let me tell you that when Ida Cassilis beamed me at Kasai, she proposed to me. I didn't propose to her: I turned her down, if you must know.

I turned her down because I thought she was a malajusted monster. She had none of the qualities I look for in a woman. I preferred the peace and sweetness of being with my poor little Gerenuk. Ida was a hateful creature, gross, unspiritual, and only attracted to me because of my unfor-

tunate lapse into violence . . .

Anyhow, what's all this to you?

You ask me that? Kellylarge, if we could remove our deportee chains and masks you'd know. Up to last week, I was World President Soepoena.

Brian W. Aldiss

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\*\*Gone Away—No known address\*

\*\*Gone Away—No known address\*

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Sent out on a Good Samaritan trip by Chief Psychologist O'Mara, Dr. Conway finds that circumstances have forced a major war upon the Galactic Federation and that Sector General Hospital is going to be the prime target for the attackers.

# FIELD HOSPITAL

by JAMES WHITE

Part Two of Three Parts

#### foreword

Far out on the galactic rim, where star systems were sparse and the darkness nearly absolute, Sector Twelve General Hospital hung in space, its three hundred and eighty-four levels reproducing the environments of all the intelligent life-forms known to the Galactic Federation, its ten thousand or so medical personnel, composed of over sixty different classes of beings all having one common denominator—to cure the sick. Supply and Maintenance is handled by the Monitor Corps, the Federation's executive and law enforcement arm—both military and medical members working in perfect harmony.

Senior Physician Conway is ordered by Chief Psychologist O'Mara to visit the planet Etla, where a being called Lonvellin had discovered a world of humans desperately in need of medical help. Before leaving on the cruiser Vespasian, Conway goes to see Nurse Murchison for whom he has a great affection, hoping to propose to her, but she neatly holds him off. During the voyage Conway learns that the Etlans have a violent aversion to non-human extra-terrestrials and Lonvellin has not only been unsuccessful in helping them but is confined to his spaceship. An Earth-human doctor just might be able to gain their confidence although Lonvellin felt that the Etlans could well be a colony world of the Empire, another humanoid federation with whom the Federation had made little contact. In which case, the task might well be difficult.

Arriving on Etla, Conway is appalled at the amount of disease prevalent, particularly physical disfigurement. He learns that medical supplies are sent from the mother world once every ten years but that distribution and the dissemination of up-to-date medical knowledge is so slow that the effects are negligible. Lonvellin feels that the Etlans are in quarantine but before any real help can be given to them Lonvellin is killed when his ship is blown up by an atom bomb. Conway escapes with the crew of the Vespasian before they suffer a similar fate and reads a report from a medical officer who has been planted on the mother world.

The report states that when the Etlans originally contracted diseases the parent world subscribed large sums for their relief but in a decaying Empire much of this money was siphoned off to support the home world's crumbling financial structure. Eventually, relief for the Etlans became part of the basic economy of the mother world and it was necessary to keep the Etlans in poor health to retain the sympathy of

the peoples of the Empire.

Dr. Conway rationalises that the Empire will not brook any interference in its carefully balanced plan for Etla and that the Corps visit could very well lead to war. While it might take up to twenty years for the Empire to discover the Federation worlds it would only be a matter of days before they found the co-ordinates of Sector General.

#### eight

The only constructive thing that Conway did during the trip back to Sector General was to catch up on his sleep, but very often the sleep was made so hideous by nightmares of the coming war that it was more pleasant to stay awake, and his waking time he spent in discussions with Williamson, Stillman and the other senior officers on Vespasian. Since he had called the shots right during that last half hour on Etla Williamson seemed to value any ideas he might have, even though problems of espionage, logistics and fleet manoeuvres were hardly within the speciality of a Senior Physician.

The discussions were interesting, informative and, like his

dreams, anything but pleasant.

According to Colonel Williamson an interstellar war of conquest was logistically impossible, but a simple war of extermination could be fought by anyone with sufficient force and a strong enough stomach to withstand the thought of slaughtering other intelligent beings by the planet-load. The Empire had more than enough force, and the strength of its collective stomach was dependant on factors over which the Monitor Corps had no control, as yet.

Given enough time agents of the Corps could have infiltrated the Empire. They already knew the position of one of its inhabited worlds and, because there was traffic between it and the other planets of the Empire, they would soon know the positions of others. The first step then would be to gather intelligence and eventually . . . Well, the Corps were no mean propagandists themselves and in a situation like this where the enemy was basing his campaign on a series of Big Lies, some method of striking at this weak spot could be devised. Because the Corps was primarily a police organisation, a force intended not so much to wage war as to maintain peace. And like any good police force its actions were constrained by the possible effects on innocent bystanders—in this case the citizens of the Empire as well as the people of the Federation.

That was why the plan for undermining the Empire would be set in motion, even though it could not possibly take effect before the first clash occurred. Williamson's fondest hope—or prayer might be a more accurate word—was that the Corpsman who was now in Empire hands would not know, and so would not be able to tell, the co-ordinates of Sector General. The Colonel was realist enough to know that if the

agent knew anything the enemy would get it out of him one way or another. But failing this ideal solution the hospital would be defended in such a way that it would be the only Federation position that the enemy would know—unless they diverted a large proportion of their force to the time-wasting job of searching the main body of the Galaxy, which was just what the Corps wanted.

Conway tried not to think of what it would be like at Sector General when the entire mobile force of the Empire was

concentrated there . . .

A few hours before emergence they received another report from the agent who was now on the Empire's Central World. The first one had taken nine days to reach Etla, the second was relayed with top priority coding in eighteen hours.

The report stated that the Central World did not seem to be as hostile towards extra-terrestrials as Etla and the other worlds of the Empire. The people there seemed much more cosmopolitan and occasionally e-ts could be seen in the streets. There were subtle indications, however, that these beings had diplomatic status and were natives of worlds with which the Empire had made treaties for the purpose of holding them off as a group until such times as it could annex them individually. So far as the agent personally had been treated, things could not have been nicer, and in a few days time he was due for an audience with the Emperor himself. Nevertheless, he was

beginning to feel uneasy.

It was nothing that he could put his finger on—he was a doctor who had been yanked off Survey and pre-Colonisation duty, he reminded them, and not one of the Cultural Contact hot-shots. He got the impression that on certain occasions and among certain people, all mention of the Federation's aims and constitution by himself was discouraged, while at other times, usually when there were only a few people present, they encouraged him to talk at great length. Another point which worried him was the fact that none of the newscasts he had seen made any mention of his arrival. Had the position been reversed and a citizen of the Empire made contact with the Federation, the event would have been top-line news for weeks.

He wondered sometimes if he was talking too much, and wished that a sub-space receiver could be built as small as a sender so that he could ask for instructions.

That was the last they ever heard from that agent.

Conway's return to Sector General was not as pleasant as he had thought it would be a few weeks previously. Then he had expected to return as a near-heroic personage with the biggest assignment of his career successfully accomplished. the plaudits of his colleagues ringing in his ears and with Murchison waiting to receive him with open arms. The latter had been a very slim probability indeed, but Conway liked to dream sometimes. Instead he was returning from a job which had blown up most horribly in his face, hoping that his colleagues would not stop him to ask how or what he had been doing and, with Murchison standing inside the lock with a friendly smile on her face and both arms hanging correctly by her sides.

Meeting him after a long absence, Conway thought sourly, was the sort of thing one friend did for another—there could be nothing more to it than that. She said it was nice to see him back and he said it was nice to be back, and when she started to ask questions he said he had a lot of things to do now but would it be all right if he called her later, and he smiled as if calling her to arrange a date was the most important thing in his mind. But his smile had suffered through lack of use and she must have seen that there was something definitely insincere about it. She went all Doctor-and-Nurse on him, said that of course he had more important things to

attend to, and left quickly.

Murchison had looked as beautiful and desirable as ever and he had undoubtedly hurt her feelings, but somehow none of these things mattered to Conway at the moment. His mind would not think of anything but his impending meeting with O'Mara. And when he presented himself in the office of the Chief Psychologist shortly afterwards it seemed that his worst forebodings were to be realised.

"Sit down, Doctor," O'Mara began. "So you finally

succeeded in involving us in an interstellar war . . .?"

"That isn't funny," said Conway.

O'Mara gave him a long steady look. It was a look which not only noted the expression on Conway's face but such other factors as his posture in the chair and the position and movements of his hands. O'Mara did not set much store by correct modes of address, but the fact that Conway had omitted to say 'Sir' was also being noted as a contributory datum and given its proper place in his analysis of the situa-

tion. The process took perhaps two minutes and during that time the Chief Psychologist did not move an eyelid. O'Mara had no irritating mannerisms; his strong, blunt hands never twitched or fiddled with things, and when he desired it his features could be as expressive as a lump of rock.

On this occasion he let his face relax into an expression of

almost benign disfavour, and finally he spoke.
"I agree," he said quietly, "it isn't a bit funny. But you know as well as I do that there is always the chance of some well-intentioned doctor in a place like this stirring up trouble on a large scale. We have often brought in some weird beastie of a hitherto unknown species who requires treatment urgently, and there is no time to search for its friends to discover if what we propose to do is the right procedure in the circumstances. A case in point was that Ian chrysalis you had a few months ago. That was before we made formal contact with the Ians, and if you hadn't correctly diagnosed the patient's condition as a growing chrysalis instead of a malignant growth requiring instant removal, a procedure which would have killed the patient, we would have been in serious trouble with the Ians."

"Yes, sir," said Conway.

O'Mara went on, "My remark was in the nature of a pleasantry, and had a certain aptness considering your recent experience with that Ian. Perhaps it was in questionable taste, but if you think I'm going to apologise then you obviously believe in miracles. Now tell me about Etla.

"And," he added quickly before Conway could speak, "my desk and wastebasket are full of reports detailing the implications and probable dire consequences of the Etla business. What I want to know is how you handled your assignment

as originally given."

As briefly as possible Conway did as he was told. While he talked he felt himself begin to relax. He still had a confused and very frightening picture in the back of his mind of what the war would mean to countless millions of beings, to the hospital and to himself, but he no longer felt that he was partly responsible for bringing it about. O'Mara had begun the interview by accusing him of the very thing he had felt guilty of, then without saying so in so many words had made him see how ridiculous it had been to feel guilty. But as he neared the point where Lonvellin's ship had been destroyed, the feeling returned full strength. If he had put the pieces together sooner, Lonvellin would not have died . . .

O'Mara must have detected the change of feeling, but allowed him to finish before he said, "It surprises me that Lonvellin didn't see it before you did, it being the brain behind the operation. And while we're on the subject of brains, yours does not seem to be thrown into complete disorder by problems involving large numbers of people requiring differing forms of treatment. So I have another job for you. It is smaller than the Etla assignment, you won't have to leave the hospital, and with any luck it won't blow up in your face.

"I want you to organise the evacuation of Sector General."

Conway swallowed, then swallowed again.

"Stop looking as though you'd been sandbagged!" O'Mara said testily. "Or I will hit you with something! You must have thought this thing through far enough to see that we can't have patients here when the Empire force arrives. Or any non-military staff who have not volunteered to stay. Or any person, regardless of position or rank, who has in his mind detailed information regarding the whereabouts of any Federation planets. And surely the idea of telling people nominally your superiors what to do doesn't frighten you, not after ordering a Corps Colonel around . . ."

Conway felt his neck getting warm. He let the dig about Williamson pass and said, "I thought we might leave the

place empty for them."

"No," said O'Mara drily. "It has too much sentimental, monetary and strategic value. We hope to keep a few levels operating for the treatment of casualties sustained by the defending force. Colonel Skempton is already at work on the evacuation problem and will help you all he can. What time is it by you, Doctor?"

Conway told him that when he had left Vespasian it had

been two hours after breakfast.

"Good," said O'Mara. "You can contact Skempton and go to work at once. With me it is long past bedtime, but I'll sleep here in case you or the Colonel want something. Goodnight, Doctor."

So saying he took off and folded his tunic, stepped out of his shoes and lay down. Within seconds his breathing became

deep and regular. Suddenly Conway laughed.

"Seeing the Chief Psychologist lying on his own couch," Conway said through his laughter, "is something of a traumatic experience. I very much doubt, sir, if our relationship will ever be quite the same . . ."

As he was leaving O'Mara murmured sleepily, "I'm glad. For a while there I thought you were going all melancholy

on me . . ."

# nine

Seven hours later Conway surveyed his littered desk wearily but with a measure of triumph, rubbed his eyes, looked across at the desk facing his. For a moment he felt that he was back on Etla and that a red-eyed Major Stillman would look up and ask what he wanted. But it was a red-eyed Colonel

Skempton who looked up when he spoke.

"The breakdown of patients to be evacuated is complete," Conway said tiredly. "They are divided first into species, which will indicate the number of ships required to move them and the living conditions which must be reproduced in each ship. With some of the weirder types this will necessitate structural alterations to the vessels, which will take time. Then each species is sub-divided into degrees of seriousness of the patient's condition and this will determine the order of their going . . ."

Except, thought Conway sourly, when a patient's condition was such that to move it would endanger its life. In which case it would have to be evacuated last instead of first so that treatment could be prolonged as much as possible, which meant that specialised medical staff who themselves should have been evacuated by that time would be held back to treat it, and by that time its life might be endangered by missiles from an Empire warship anyway. Nothing seemed to happen

in a tidy, consecutive fashion anymore.

"... Then it will be a few days for Major O'Mara's department to process the medical and maintenance staff," Conway went on, "even though he just has to ask them a few questions under scop. When I arrived I expected the hospital to be under attack already. At the moment I don't know whether to plan for a panic evacuation within forty-eight hours, which is the absolute minimum time for it and which

would probably kill more patients than it would save, or take

my time and plan for a merely hurried evacuation."

"I couldn't assemble the transport in forty-eight hours," said Skempton shortly, and lowered his head again. As Chief of Maintenance and the Hospital's ranking Monitor officer the job of assembling, modifying and routing the transports devolved on him, and he had an awful lot of work to do.

"What I'm trying to say," Conway said insistently, "is

how much time do you think we've got?"

The Colonel looked up again. "Sorry, Doctor," he said, "I have an estimate which came in a few hours ago . . ." He lifted one of the top layer of papers on his desk and began to read.

Subjecting all the known factors to a rigid analysis, the report stated, it appeared likely that a short time-lag would occur between the point at which the Empire discovered the exact position of Sector General and the time when they acted on this information. The initial action was likely to be an investigation by a scoutship or a small scouting force. Monitor units at present stationed around Sector General would attempt to destroy this force. Whether they were successful or not the Empire's next move would be more decisive, probably a full-scale offensive that would require many days to mount. By that time additional units of the Monitor Corps would have reached the area . . .

. . . Say eight days," Skempton concluded, "or three weeks if we're lucky. But I don't think we'll be lucky."

"Thank you," said Conway, and returned to work.

First he prepared an outline of the situation for distribution to the medical staff within the next six hours. In it he laid as much stress as possible on the necessity for a quick, orderly evacuation without overdoing it to the extent of causing a panic, and recommended that patients be informed via their physicians so as to cause the minimum distress. In the case of seriously ill patients the doctors in charge should use their discretion whether the patient be told or evacuated under sedation. He added that at present an unspecified number of medical staff would be evacuated with the patients and that everyone should be prepared to leave the hospital at a few hours notice. This document he sent to Publications for copying in print and tape so that everyone would be in possession of the information at roughly the same time.

At least that was the theory, Conway thought drily. But if he knew his hospital grape-vine the essential data would be

circulating ten minutes after it left his desk.

Next he prepared more detailed instructions regarding the The warm-blooded oxygen-breathing life-forms could leave by any of several levels, but the heavy-G, highpressure species would pose special problems, not to mention the light-gravity MSVKs and LSVOs, the giant, waterbreathing AUGLs, the ultra-frigid types, the dozen or so beings on Level Thirty-eight who breathed superheated steam. Conway was planning on the operation taking five days for the patients and an additional two for the staff, and for this rapid clearing of the wards he would have to send people through levels foreign to them to reach their embarkation points. There would be possible oxygen contamination of chlorine environments, danger of chlorine leaking into the AUGL wards, or of water flooding all over the place. Precautions would have to be taken against failure of the methane life-forms' refrigerators, breakdown of the anti-gravity equipment of the fragile, bird-like LSVOs and rupture of Illensan pressure envelopes.

Contamination was the greatest danger in a multi-environment hospital—contamination by oxygen, chlorine, methane, water, cold, heat or radiation. During the evacuation the safety devices usually in operation—airtight doors, double, inter-level locks, the various detection and alarm systems—would have to be overridden in the interests of a quick getaway.

Then staff would have to be detailed to inspect the transport units to ensure that their passenger space accurately reproduced the environment of the patients they were to carry . . .

All at once Conway's mind refused to take any more of it. He closed his eyes, sunk his head into the palms of his hands and watched the after-image of his desk-top fade slowly into redness. He was sick of paperwork. Since being given the Etla job his whole life had been paperwork; reports, summaries, charts, instructions. He was a doctor currently planning a complicated operation, but it was the sort of operation performed by a high-level clerk rather than a surgeon. Conway had not studied and trained for the greater part of his life to be a clerk.

He stood up, excused himself hoarsely to the Colonel and left the office. Without really thinking about it he was moving

in the direction of his wards.

A new shift was just coming on duty and to the patients it was half an hour before the first meal of the day, which made it a very unusual time for a Senior Physician to do his rounds. The mild panic he caused would, in other circumstances, have been funny. Conway greeted the intern on duty politely, felt mildly surprised to find that it was the Creppelian octopoid he had met as a trainee two months previously, then felt annoyed when the AMSL insisted on following him around at a respectful distance. This was the proper procedure for a junior intern, but at that moment Conway wanted to be alone

with his patients and his thoughts.

Most strongly of all he felt the need to see and speak to the sometimes weird and always wonderful extra-terrestrial patients who were technically under his care—all the beings he had come to know before leaving for Etla having been long since discharged. He did not look at their charts, however, because he had an allergy towards the abstraction of information via the printed word at the moment. Instead he questioned them closely, almost hungrily, regarding their symptoms and condition and background. He left some of the minor cases pleased and flabbergasted by such attention from a Senior Physician, and some might have been annoyed by his prying. But Conway had to do it. While he still had patients left he wanted to be a doctor.

An e-t doctor . . .

Sector General was breaking up. The vast, complex structure dedicated to the relief of suffering and the advance of xenological medicine was dying, succumbing like any terminal patient to a disease too powerful for it to resist. Tomorrow or the next day these wards would begin to empty. The patients with their exotic variations of physiology, metabolism and complaints would drain away, In darkened wards the weird and wonderful fabrications which constituted the alien idea of a comfortable bed would crouch like surrealistic ghosts along the walls. And with the departure of the e-t patients and staff would go the necessity for maintaining the environments which housed them, the Translators which allowed them to communicate, the physiology tapes which made it possible for one species to treat another . . .

But the Galaxy's greatest e-t hospital would not die completely, not for another few days or weeks. The Monitor Corps had no experience of interstellar wars, this being their first, but they thought they knew what to expect. Casualties

among the ship's crews would be heavy and with a very high proportion of them fatal. The still-living casualties brought in would be of three types; decompression, bone-fractures and radiation poisoning. It was expected that two or three levels would be enough to take care of them, because if the engagement was fought with nuclear weapons, and there was no reason to suppose otherwise, most of the decompression and fracture cases would be radiation-terminal also—there would be no danger of overcrowding.

Then the internal break-up begun with the evacuation would continue on the structural level as the Empire forces attacked. Conway was no military tactician, but he could not see how the vast, nearly-empty hospital could be protected. It was a sitting duck, soon to be a dead one. A great, fused

and battered metal graveyard . . .

All at once a tremendous wave of feeling washed through Conway's mind—bitterness, sadness and a surge of sheer anger which left him shaking. As he stumbled out of the ward he didn't know whether he wanted to cry or curse or knock somebody down. But the decision was taken away from him when he turned the corner leading to the PVSJ section and collided solidly with Murchison.

The impact was not painful, one of the colliding bodies being well endowed with shock-absorbing equipment, but it was sharp enough to jolt his mind from a very sombre train of thought on to one infinitely more pleasant. Suddenly he wanted to watch and talk to Murchison as badly as he had wanted to visit his patients, and for the same reason. This

might be the last time he would see her.

"I—I'm sorry," he stammered, backing off. Then remembering their last meeting, he said, "I was a bit rushed at the lock this morning, couldn't say much. Are you on duty?"

"Just coming off," said Murchison in a neutral voice.

"Oh," said Conway, then; "I wondered if . . . That is, would you mind . . ."

"I wouldn't mind going for a swim," she said.

"Fine," said Conway.

They went up to the recreation level, changed and met inside on the simulated beach. While they were walking towards the water she said suddenly, "Oh, Doctor, when you were sending me those letters, did you ever think of putting them in envelopes with my name and room number on them?"

"And let everybody know I was writing to you?" Conway

said. "I didn't think you wanted that."

Murchison gave a lady-like snort. "The system you devised was not exactly secret" she said with a hint of anger in her tone. "Thornnastor in Pathology has three mouths and it can't keep any of them shut. They were nice letters, but I don't think it was fitting for you to write them on the back of sputum test reports . . . !"

"I'm sorry," said Conway. "It won't happen again."

With the words the dark mood which the sight of Murchison had pushed from his mind came rushing back. It certainly wouldn't happen again, he thought bleakly, not ever. And the hot, artificial sun did not seem to be warming his skin as he remembered it and the water was not so stingingly cold. Even in the half-G conditions the swim was wearving rather than exhilarating. It was as if some deep layer of tiredness swathed his body, dulling all sensation. After only a few minutes he returned to the shallows and waded on to the beach. Murchison followed him, looking concerned.

"You've got thinner," she said when she had caught up

with him.

Conway's first impulse was to say "You haven't," but the intended compliment could have been taken another way, and he was lousy enough company already without running the risk of insulting her. Then he had an idea and said quickly. "I forgot that you're just off duty and haven't eaten yet. Shall we go to the restaurant?"

"Yes, please," said Murchison.

The restaurant was perched high on the cliff facing the diving ledges and boasted a continuous transparent wall which allowed a full view of the beach while keeping out the noise. It was the only place in the recreation level where quiet conversation was possible. But the quietness was wasted on them because they hardly spoke at all.

Until halfway through the meal when Murchison said,

"You aren't eating much, either."

Conway said, "Have you ever owned, or navigated a space vessel?"

"Me? Of course not!"

"Or if you were wrecked in a ship whose astrogator was injured and unconscious," he persisted, "and the ship's drive had been repaired, could you give the co-ordinates for reaching some planet within the Federation?"

"No," said Murchison impatiently. "I'd have to stay

there until the astrogator woke up. What sort of questions are these?

"The sort I'll be asking all my friends," Conway replied grimly. "If you had answered 'Yes' to one of them it would

have taken a load off my mind."

Murchison put down her knife and fork, frowning slightly. Conway thought that she looked lovely when she frowned, or laughed, or did anything. Especially when she was wearing a swimsuit. That was one thing he liked about this place, they allowed you to dine in swimsuits. And he wished that he could pull himself out of his dismal mood and be sparkling company for a couple of hours. On his present showing he doubted if Murchison would let him take her home, much less co-operate in the clinch for the two minutes, forty-eight seconds it took for the robot to arrive . . .

"Something is bothering you," Murchison said. She hesitated, then went on, "If you need a soft shoulder, be my guest. But remember it is only for crying on, nothing else."

"What else could I use it for?" said Conway.

"I don't know," she said, smiling, "but I'd probably find out."

Conway did not smile in return. Instead he began to talk about the things that were worrying him—and the people, including her. When he had finished she was quiet for a long time. Sadly Conway watched the faintly ridiculous picture of a young, dedicated, very beautiful girl in a white swimsuit coming to a decision that would almost certainly cost her her life.

"I think I'll stay behind," she said finally, as Conway knew

she would. "You're staying too, of course?"

"I haven't decided yet," Conway said carefully. "I can't leave until after the evacuation anyway. And there may be nothing to stay for . . ." He made a last try to make her change her mind. ". . . and all your e-t training would be wasted. There are lots of other hospitals that would be glad to have you . . ."

Murchison sat up straight in her seat. When she spoke it was in the brisk, competent, no-nonsense tone of a nurse prescribing treatment to a possibly recalcitrant patient. She said, "From what you tell me you're going to have a busy day tomorrow. You should get all the sleep you can. In fact, I think you should go to your room right away."

Then in a completely different tone she added, "But if

you'd like to take me home first . . ."

### ten

On the day after instructions to evacuate the hospital had been issued, everything went smoothly. The patients gave no trouble at all, the natural order of things being for patients to leave hospital and in this instance their discharge was just a little bit more dramatic than usual. Discharging the medical staff, however, was a most unnatural thing. To a patient, Hospital was merely a painful, or at least not very pleasant, episode in his life. To the staff of Sector General the hospital was their life.

Everything went smoothly with the staff on the first day. Everyone did as they were told, probably because habit and their state of shock made that the easiest thing to do. But by the second day the shock had worn off and they began to produce arguments, and the person they most wanted to argue

with was Dr. Conway.

On the third day Conway had to call O'Mara.

"What's the trouble!" Conway burst out when O'Mara replied. "The trouble is making this . . . this gaggle of geniuses see things sensibly! And the brighter a being is the more stupid it insists on acting. Take Prilicla, a beastie who is so much egg-shell and match-sticks that it would blow away in a strong draught. It wants to stay! And Doctor Mannen, who is as near being a Diagnostician as makes no difference. Mannen says treating exclusively human casualties would be something of a holiday. And the reasons some of the others have thought up are fantastic.

"You've got to make them see sense, sir. You're the Chief

Psychologist . . ."

"Three quarters of the medical and maintenance staff," O'Mara said sharply, "are in possession of information likely to help the enemy in the event of their capture. They will be leaving, regardless of whether they are Diagnosticians, computermen or junior ward orderlies, for reasons of security. They will have no choice in the matter. In addition to these there will be any number of specialist medical staff who will feel obliged, because of their patient's condition, to travel with their charges. So far as the remainder are concerned there is very little I can do. They are sane, intelligent, mature beings capable of making up their own minds."

Conway said, "Hah."

"Before you impugn other people's sanity," O'Mara said drily, "answer me one question. Are you going to stay?"

"Well . . ." began Conway.

O'Mara broke the connection.

Conway stared at the hand-set a long time without reclipping it. He still had not made up his mind whether he was going to stay or not. He knew that he wasn't the heroic type, and he badly wanted to leave. But he didn't want to leave without his friends, because if Murchison and Prilicla and the others stayed behind, he couldn't have borne the things they would think about him if he was to run away.

Probably they all thought that he meant to stay but was being cov about it while the truth was that he was too cowardly and at the same time too much of a hypocrite to admit to them

that he was afraid.

The sharp voice of Colonel Skempton broke into his mood

of self-loathing, dispelling it for the moment.

"Doctor, the Kelgian hospital ship is here. And an Illensan freighter. Locks Five and Seventeen in ten minutes."

"Right," said Conway. He left the office at a near run,

heading for Reception.

All three control desks were occupied when he arrived, two by Nidians and the other by a Corps Lieutenant on stand-by. Conway positioned himself between and behind the Nidians where he could study both sets of repeater screens and began hoping very hard that he could deal with the things that would inevitably go wrong.

The Kelgian vessel already locked on at Five was a brute, one of the latest interstellar liners which had been partially converted into a hospital ship on the way out. The alterations were not quite complete, but a team of maintenance staff and robots were already boarding it together with senior ward staff who would arrange for the disposition of their patients. At the same time the occupants of the wards were being readied for the transfer and the equipment necessary for treating them was being dismantled, rapidly and with little regard for the subsequent condition of the ward walls. Some of the smaller equipment, heaped on to powered stretcher-carriers, was already on the way to the ship.

Altogether it looked like being a fairly simple operation. The atmosphere, pressure and gravity requirement of the patients were exactly those of the ship, so that no complicated protective arrangements were necessary, and the vessel was big enough to take all of the Kelgian patients with room to spare. He would be able to clear the DBLF levels completely and get rid of a few Tralthan FGLIs as well. But even though the first job was relatively uncomplicated, Conway estimated that it would take at least six hours for the ship to be loaded and away. He turned to the other control desk.

Here the picture was in many respects similar. The environment of the Illensan freighter matched perfectly that of the PVSJ wards, but the ship was smaller and, considering its purpose, did not have a large crew. The preparations for receiving patients aboard were, for this reason, not well advanced. Conway directed extra maintenance staff to the Illensan freighter, thinking that they would be lucky to get away with sixty PVSJs in the same time as it took the other ship to clear three whole levels.

He was still trying to find short-cuts in the problem when

the Lieutenant's screen lit up.

"A Tralthan ambulance ship, Doctor," he reported. "Fully staffed and with provision for six FROBs and a Chalder as well as twenty of their own species. No preparation needed

at their end, they say just load 'em up."

The AUGL denizens of Chalderescol, a forty-foot long, armoured fish-like species were water-breathers who could not live in any other medium for more than a few seconds. On the other hand the FROBs were squat, immensely massive and thick-skinned beings accustomed to the crushing gravity and pressure of Hudlar. Properly speaking Hudlarians did not breathe at all, and their incredibly strong tegument allowed them to exist for long periods in conditions of zero gravity and pressure, so that the water in the AUGL section would not bother them . . .

Conway said quickly, "Lock Twenty-eight for the Chalder. While they're loading it send the FROBs through the ELNT section into the main AUGL tank and out by the same Lock. Then tell them to move to Lock Five and we'll have their

other patients waiting . . ."

Gradually the evacuation got under way. Accommodation was prepared for the first convalescent PVSJs aboard the Illensan freighter and the slow trek of patients and staff

through the noisome yellow fog of the chlorine section commenced. Simultaneously the other screen was showing a long, undulating file of Kelgians moving towards their ship, with medical and engineering staff carrying equipment charging up and down the line.

To some it might have seemed callous to evacuate the convalescent patients first but there were very good reasons for doing so. With these walking wounded out of the way the wards and approaches to the locks would be less congested, which would allow the complicated frames and harnesses containing the more seriously ill patients to be moved more easily, as well as giving them a little more time in the optimum conditions of the wards.

"Two more Illensan ships, Doctor," the lieutenant said suddenly. "Small jobs, capacity about twenty patients each."

"Lock Seventeen is still tied up," said Conway. "Tell

them to orbit."

The next arrival was a small passenger ship from the Earthhuman world of Gregory, and with it came the lunch trays. There were only a few Earth-human patients at Sector General, but at a pinch the Gregorian ship could take any warmblooded oxygen-breather below the mass of a Tralthan. Conway dealt with both arrivals at the same time, not caring if he did have to speak, or even shout, with his mouth full.

Then suddenly the sweating, harrassed face of Colonel Skempton flicked on to the internal screen. He said sharply, "Doctor, there are two Illensan ships hanging about in

orbit. Don't you have work for them ?"

"Yes!" said Conway, irritated by the other's tone. "But there is a ship already loading chlorine-breathers at Seventeen, and there is no other lock suitable on that level. They'll have

to wait their turn . . ."

"That won't do," Skempton cut in harshly. "While they're hanging about out there they are in danger should the enemy attack suddenly. Either you start loading them at once or we send them away to come back later. Probably much later. Sorry."

Conway opened his mouth and then shut it with a click over what he had been about to say. Hanging grimly on to

his temper he tried to think.

He knew that the build-up of the defence fleet had been going on for days and that the astrogation officers responsible for bringing those units in would leave again as soon as possible—either on their own scoutships or with the patients leaving Sector General. The plan devised by the Monitor Corps called for no information regarding the whereabouts of the Federation being available in the minds of the defending forces or the non-combatants who remained in the hospital. The defence fleet was deployed to protect the hospital and the ships locked on to it, and the thought of two other ships swinging around loose, ships which contained fully qualified astrogators aboard, must have made the Monitor fleet commander start biting his nails.

"Very well, Colonel," Conway said. "We'll take the ships at Fifteen and Twenty-one. This will mean chlorine-breathers travelling through the DBLF maternity ward and a part of the AUGL section. Despite these complications we should

have the patients aboard in three hours . . ."

Complications was right . . . . Conway thought grimly as he gave the necessary orders. Luckily both the DBLF ward and that section of the AUGL level would be vacant by the time the chlorine-breathing Illensans in their pressure tents came through. But the ship from Gregory was at an adjoining lock taking on ELNTs who were being shepherded through the area by DBLF nurses in protective suits. Also there were some of the low-G, bird-like MSVKs being brought to the same vessel through the chlorine ward which he was hoping to clear.

There weren't enough screens in Reception to keep properly in touch with what was going on down there, Conway decided suddenly. He had the horrible feeling that a most awful snarl-up would occur if he wasn't careful. But he couldn't be careful if he didn't know what was going on. The only course was for him to go there and direct the traffic himself.

He called O'Mara, explained the situation quickly and

asked for a relief.

### eleven

Dr. Mannen arrived, groaned piteously at the battery of screens and flashing lights, then smoothly took over the job of directing the evacuation. As a replacement Conway could not have hoped for anyone better. He was turning to go when Mannen pushed his face within three inches of one of the screens and said "Harrumph."

Conway stopped. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Mannen, without turning round.
"It's just that I'm beginning to understand why you want to

go down there."

"But I told you why!" said Conway impatiently. He stamped out, telling himself angrily that Mannen was indulging in senseless conversation at a time when unnecessary talk of any kind was criminal. Then he wondered if the ageing Dr. Mannen was tired, or had a particularly confusing tape riding him, and felt suddenly ashamed. Snapping at Skempton or the receptionists hadn't worried him unduly, but he did not want to begin biting the heads off his friends—even if he was harrassed and tired and the whole place was rapidly going to Hell on horseback. Then very soon he was being kept too busy to feel ashamed.

Three hours later the state of confusion around him seemed to have doubled, although in actual fact it was simply that twice as much was being accomplished twice as fast. From his position at one of the high-level entrances to the main AUGL ward Conway could look down on a line of ELNTs—six-legged, crab-like entities from Melf IV—scuttling or being towed across the floor of the great tank. Unlike their amphibious patients, the thickly-furred, air breathing Kelgians attending them had to wear protective envelopes which were sweltering hot inside. The scraps of Translated conversation which drifted up to him, although necessarily emotionless, verged on the incandescent. But the work was being done, and much faster than Conway had ever hoped for.

In the corridor behind him a slow procession of Illensans, some in protective suits and the more seriously ill in pressure tents which enclosed their beds, moved past. They were being attended by Earth-human and Kelgian nurses. The transfer was going smoothly now, but there had been a time only half an hour back when Conway had wondered if it would go

at all.

When the large pressure tents came through into the water-filled AUGL section they had risen like giant chlorine bubbles and stuck fast against the ceiling. Towing them along the corridor ceiling had been impossible because outgrowths of plumbing might have ruptured the thin envelopes, and getting five or six nurses to weigh them down was impractical. And when he brought in powered stretcher carriers from the level above—vehicles not designed for but theoretically capable of operating under water—with the idea of both holding his super-buoyant patients down and moving them quickly, a battery casing had split and the carrier became the centre of a mass of hissing, bubbling water which had rapidly turned black.

Conway would not be surprised to hear that the patient

on that particular carrier had a relapse.

He had solved the problem finally with a magnificent flash of inspiration which, he told himself disgustedly, should have come two seconds after he had seen the problem. He had quickly switched the artificial gravity grids in the corridor to zero attraction and in the weightless condition the pressure tents had lost their buoyancy. It meant that the nurses had to swim instead of walk with their patients, but that was a small thing.

It was during the transfer of these PVSJs that Conway learned the reason for Mannen's 'Harrumph' up in Reception—Murchison was one of the nurses on that duty. She hadn't recognised him, of course, but he knew there was only one person who could fill a nurse's lightweight suit the way she did. He didn't speak to her, however—it didn't seem to be

the proper time or place.

Time passed rapidly without another major crisis developing. At Lock Five the Kelgian hospital ship was ready to go, waiting only for some of the hospital's senior staff to go aboard and for a Monitor ship to escort them out to a safe jump distance. Remembering some of the beings who were scheduled to leave on that ship, many of them friends of long standing, Conway decided the chance offered by the quiet spell to say a quick good-bye to some of them. He called Mannen to tell him where he was going, then headed for Five.

But by the time he arrived the Kelgian ship had gone. In one of the big direction vision panels he could see it drawing away with a Monitor cruiser in close attendance; and beyond them, hanging like newly-formed constellations in the blackness, lay the Monitor defence fleet. The build-up of units around the hospital was proceeding as planned and had increased visibly since Conway had looked at it yesterday. Reassured, and not a little awed by the sight, he hurried back to the AUGL section.

And arrived to find the corridor almost plugged by an

expanding sphere of ice.

The ship from Gregory contained a specially refrigerated compartment for beings of the SNLU classification. These were fragile, crystalline, methane-based life-forms who would be instantly cremated if the temperature rose above minus one-twenty. Sector General was currently treating seven of these ultra-frigid creatures, and all of them had been packed into a ten-foot refrigerated sphere for the transfer. Because of the difficulties expected in handling them they were the last patients for the Gregorian ship.

If there had been a direct opening to space from the cold section they would have been moved to the ship along the outer hull, but as this was not possible they had to be brought through fourteen levels from the methane ward to their loading point at Lock Sixteen. In all the other levels the corridors had been spacious and filled with air or chlorine, so that all that the protective sphere had done was to collect a coating of frost and chill the surrounding atmosphere. But in the

AUGL section it was growing ice. Fast.

Conway had known this would happen but had not considered it important because the sphere should not have been in the water-filled corridor long enough to cause a problem. But one of the towing lines had snagged and pulled it against some projecting conduit and within seconds they were welded together with ice. Now the sphere was encased in an icy shell four feet thick and there was barely room to pass above or below it.

"Get cutting torches down here," Conway bawled up to

Mannen, "quick."

Three Corpsmen arrived just before the corridor was completely blocked. With the cutting flames of their torches set to maximum dispersal they attacked the icy mass, melting it free of the projection and trying to reduce it to a more manageable size. In the confined space of the corridor the heat being applied to the ice-ball sent the water temperature soaring up, and none of their suits had cooling units. Conway began to

feel a distinct empathy towards boiled lobsters. And the great, awkward mass of ice was a danger to life and limb—danger from being crushed between it and the corridor wall, and the scalding, nearly opaque water which made it so easy to put an arm or leg between the ice and a cutting flame.

But finally the job was done. The container with its SNLU occupants was manoeuvred through the inter-level lock into another air-filled section. Conway rubbed a hand across the outside of his helmet in an unconscious attempt to wipe the sweat from his forehead and wondered what else would go wrong.

The answer, according to Dr. Mannen up in Reception,

was not a thing.

All three levels of DBLF patients had left with the Kelgian ship, Mannen told him enthusiastically, the only caterpillars remaining in the hospital being a few of the nursing staff. Between them the three Illensan freighters had cleared the PVSJ wards who would be aboard within a few minutes. Among the water-breathing types the AUGLs and ELNTs were clear, and the SNLUs in their baby ice-berg were just going aboard. In all, fourteen levels had been cleared and that was not a bad day's work. Dr. Mannen suggested that Dr. Conway might take this opportunity of applying a pillow to his head and going into a state of voluntary unconsciousness in preparation for an equally busy day tomorrow.

Conway was swimming tiredly towards the inter-level lock, his mind revolving around the infinitely alluring concerts of a

large steak and a long sleep, when it happened.

Something which he did not see struck him a savage, disabling blow. It hit simultaneously in the abdomen, chest and legs—the places where his suit was tightest. Agony burst inside him like a red explosion that was just barely contained by his tortured body. He doubled up and began to black out, he wanted to die and he desperately wanted to be sick. But some tiny portion of his brain unaffected by the pain and nausea insisted that he did not allow himself to be sick, that being sick inside his helmet was a very nasty way to die . . .

Gradually the pain receded and became bearable. Conway still felt as if a Tralthan had kicked him in the groin with all six feet, but other things were beginning to register. Loud, insistent, gurgling noises and the extremely odd sight of a Kelgian drifting in the water without its protective suit. A second look told him that it was wearing a suit, but that it

was ruptured and full of water.

Further down in the AUGL tank two more Kelgians floated, their long, soft, furry bodies burst open from head to tail, the ghastly details mercifully obscured by an expanding red fog. And against the opposite wall of the tank there was an area of turbulence around a dark, irregular hole through which the water seemed to be leaving.

Conway swore. He thought he knew what had happened. Whatever had made that ragged-edged hole had, because of the non-compressibility of water, also expended its force on the unfortunate occupants of the AUGL tank. But because the other Kelgian and himself had been up here in the corridor

they had escaped the worst effects of it.

Or maybe only one of them had escaped.

It took three minutes for him to drag the Kelgian nurse into the lock ten yards along the corridor. Once inside he set the pumps going to clear the chamber of water, simultaneously cracking an air valve. While the last of the water was draining away he struggled to lay the sodden, inert body on its side against one wall. The being's silvery pelt was a mass of dirty grey spikes, and he could detect no pulse or respiration. Conway quickly lay down on his side on the floor, moved the third and fourth set of legs apart so that he could put his shoulder into the space between them, then with his own feet braced firmly against the opposite wall he began to push rhythmically. Sitting on top of it and pressing down with the palms was not, Conway knew, an effective method of applying artificial respiration to one of the massive DBLFs. After a few seconds water began trickling out of its mouth.

He broke off suddenly as he heard somebody trying to open the lock from the AUGL corridor side. Conway tried his radio but one or the other of their sets was not working. Taking off his helmet quickly he put his mouth up against the seal, cupped his hands around it and yelled, "I've an airbreather in here without its suit, don't open the seal or you'll drown us! Come in from the other side . . .!"

A few minutes later the seal on the air-filled side opened and Murchison was looking down at him. She said, "D-

Doctor Conway . . . " in a peculiar voice.

Conway straightened his legs sharply, ramming his shoulder into the area of the Kelgian's underbelly nearest its lungs and said. "What?"

"I... You... the explosion..." she began. Then after the brief false start her tone became firm and purposeful as she went on. "There's been an explosion, Doctor. One of the DBLF nurses is injured, severe lacerated wounds caused by a piece of floor plating spinning against it. We coagulated at once but I don't think it's holding. And the corridor where it's lying is being flooded, the explosion must have opened a way into the AUGL section. The air-pressure is dropping slightly so we must be open to space somewhere, too, and there is a distinct smell of chlorine..."

Conway groaned and ceased his efforts with the Kelgian, but before he could speak Murchison went on quickly, "All the Kelgian doctors have been evacuated and the only DBLFs left are this one and a couple who should be around here

somewhere, but they're just nursing staff . . ."

Here was a proper mess, Conway thought as he scrambled to his feet; contamination and threatening decompression. The injured being would have to be moved quickly, because if the pressure dropped too much the airtight doors would drop and if the patient was on the wrong side of them when they did it would be just too bad. And the absence of a qualified DBLF meant that he would have to take a Kelgian physiology tape and do the job himself, which meant a quick trip to O'Mara's office. But first he would have to look

at the patient.

"Take over this one, please Nurse," he said, indicating the sodden mass on the floor. "I think it's beginning to breathe for itself, but will you give it another ten minutes . . ." He watched while Murchison lay down on her side, knees bent and with both feet planted against the opposite wall. This was definitely neither the time nor the place, but the sight of her lying there in that demoralisingly tight suit made the urgency of patients, evacuations and physiology tapes diminish for just an instant. Then the tight, moisture beaded suit made him remember that Murchison had been in the AUGL tank, too, just a few minutes before the explosion, and he had an awful vision of her lovely body burst open like those of the two hapless DBLFs.

"Between the third and fourth pair of legs, not the fifth and sixth!" Conway said harshly as he turned to go. "You

ought to know that, Nurse . . . !"

Which wasn't what he had meant to say at all.

### twelve

For some reason Conway's mind had been considering the effects of the explosion rather than its cause. Or perhaps he had been deliberately trying not to think along that line, trying to fool himself that there had been some sort of accident rather than that the hospital was under attack. But the yammering PA reminded him of the truth at every intersection and on the way to O'Mara's office everyone was moving twice as fast as usual, all in a direction opposite to Conway's. He wondered if they all felt as he did, scared, unprotected, momentarily expecting a second explosion to rip the floor apart under their hurrying feet. Yet it was stupid of him to hurry because he might be rushing towards the spot where the next explosion would occur.

He had to force himself to walk slowly into the Chief Psychologist's office, detail his requirements and ask O'Mara

quietly what had happened.

"Seven ships," O'Mara replied, motioning Conway on to the couch as he lowered the Educator helmet into position. "They seem to have been small jobs, with no evidence of unusual armament or defences. There was quite a scrap. Three got away and one of the four which didn't escape launched a missile at us before it was clobbered. A small missile with a chemical warhead.

"Which is very odd," O'Mara went on thoughtfully, because if it had been a nuclear warhead there would be no hospital here now. We weren't expecting them just as soon as this and were taken by surprise a little. Do you have to take

this patient?"

"Êh? Oh yes" said Conway. "You know DBLFs. Any incised wound is an emergency with them. By the time another doctor had a look at the patient and came up here for a tape it might be too late."

O'Mara grunted. His hard square oddly gentle hands checked the fitting of the helmet then pressed Conway down on to the couch. He went on "They tried to press that attack home it was really vicious. A clear indication I would say, of their feelings towards us. Yet they used a chemical head when they could have destroyed us completely. Peculiar. One thing, though, it has made the ditherers make up their minds. Anybody who wants to stay here now really wants to stay and

the ones who are leaving are going to leave fast, which is a good thing from Dermod's point of view . . ."

Dermod was the fleet commander.

". . . Now make your mind a blank," he ended sourly, " or

at least make it blanker than usual."

Conway did not have to try to make his mind a blank, a process which aided the reception of an alien physiology tape. O'Mara's couch was wonderfully soft and comfortable. He had never appreciated it properly before, he seemed to be sinking right into it . . .

A sharp tap on the shoulder made him jump.

O'Mara said caustically, "Don't go to sleep! And when you finish with your patient go to bed. Mannen can handle things in Reception and the hospital won't go to pieces without you unless we get hit with an atomic bomb..."

With the first evidence of double-mindedness already becoming apparent, Conway left the office. Basically the tape was a brain recording of one of the great medical minds of the species of the patient to be treated. But the doctor taking such a tape had, literally, to share his mind with a completely alien personality. That was how it felt, because all the memories and experience of the being who had donated the tape were impressed on the receiving mind, not just selected pieces of medical data. Physiology tapes could not be edited.

But the DBLFs were not as alien as some of the beings with which Conway had had to share his mind. Although physically they resembled giant, silvery caterpillars they had a lot in common with Earth-humans. Their emotional reactions to such stimuli as music, a piece of scenic grandeur, or DBLFs of the opposite sex were very nearly identical. This one even liked meat, so that Conway would not have to starve on salad if he

had to keep the tape for any length of time.

What matter if he did feel unsafe walking on just two legs, or found himself humping his back rhythmically as he walked. Or even, when he reached the abandoned DBLF section and the small theatre where the patient had been brought, that a part of his mind thought of Murchison as just another one of those spindly DBDGs from Earth.

Although Murchison had everything ready for him, Conway did not start at once. Because of the mind and personality of the great Kelgian doctor sharing his brain he really felt for the

patient now. He appreciated the seriousness of its condition and knew that there were several hours of delicate, exacting work ahead of him. At the same time he knew that he was very tired, that he could barely keep his eyes open. It-was an effort even to move his feet, and his fingers, when he was checking over the instruments, felt like thick, tired sausages. He knew that he couldn't work in this condition unless he wanted to kill the patient.

"Fix me a pep-shot, will you please?" he said, biting down

on a yawn.

For an instant Murchison looked as if she might give him an argument. Pep shots were frowned on in the hospital their use was sanctioned only in cases of the gravest emergency. and for very good reasons. But she prepared and injected the shot without saying anything, using a blunt needle and quite unnecessary force to jab it home. Even though half his mind wasn't his own, Conway could see that she was mad at him.

Then suddenly the shot took effect. Except for a slight tingling sensation in his feet and a blotchiness which only Murchison could see in his face Conway felt as clear-eyed, alert and physically refreshed as if he had just come out of a

shower after ten hours sleep.

"How's the other one?" he asked suddenly. He had been so tired he had forgotten the Kelgian he had left with

Murchison in the lock.

"Artificial respiration brought it round," she replied, then with more enthusiasm, "but it was still in shock. I sent it up to the Tralthan section, they still have a few senior staff there . . ."

"Good," said Conway warmly. He wanted to say more, to be more personally complimentary, but he knew that there was no time to stand and chat. He ended, "Let's begin, shall we . . ?"

Except for the thin-walled, narrow casing which housed the brain the DBLF species had no boney structure. Their bodies were composed of an outer cylinder of musclature which, in addition to being its primary means of locomotion, served to protect the vital organs within it. To the mind of a being more generously reinforced with bones this protection was far from adequate. Another severe disadvantage in the event of injury was its complex and extremely vulnerable circulator system, the blood-supply network which had to feed the tremendous bands of muscle encircling its body ran close under the skin. The thick fur of the pelt gave some protection here, but not against chunks of jagged-edged, flying metal.

An injury which many other species would consider super-

ficial could cause a DBLF to bleed to death in minutes.

Conway worked slowly and carefully, dissolving away the coagulant so hastily applied by Murchison, repairing or partially replacing damaged major blood vessels and sealing off the minor branches which were too fine for him to do anything else. This part of the operation worried him—not because it endangered the life of the patient but because he knew that the beautiful silvery fur would never grow properly in these areas again, that if it grew at all it would be yellowed and visually repulsive to a male Kelgian.

The injured nurse was a remarkably handsome young female and such disfiguration could be a real tragedy. Conway hoped she wouldn't be too proud to keep the area covered with surrogate fur. Admittedly it did not have the rich, deep lustre of living fur and would be immediately recogniseable for what it

was, but neither would it be so visually distressing.

An hour ago this would have been just another caterpillar, Conway thought drily, an 'it' about whom he felt only clinical concern. Now he had reached the stage of worrying about the patient's marriage prospects. A physiology tape certainly made one *feel* for one's e-t patients.

When he had finished Conway called Reception, described the patient's condition and urged that it should be evacuated as quickly as possible. Mannen told him that there was half a dozen small vessels loading at the moment, most of them with provision for taking oxy-breathers, and gave him a choice of two Locks in the vicinity. Mannen added that, with the exception of a few patients on the critically ill list, all patients of classifications A through G had either gone or were on the point of going, along with staff members of the same classifications who had been ordered to go by O'Mara for security reasons.

Some of them had displayed extreme reluctance to leave. One in particular, a hoary old Tralthan Diagnostician who was unfortunate enough to own a personal space yacht—something which in normal conditions would *not* have been

considered a misfortune !—had had to be formally charged with attempted treason, disturbing the peace and incitement to mutiny and arrested, that being the only way to get it aboard this

ship.

As he broke the connection Conway thought that they wouldn't have to go to such lengths to get him to leave the hospital. He shook his head, angry and ashamed of himself, and gave Murchison instructions for transfering the patient to the ship.

The injured Kelgian had to be enclosed in a pressure tent for the initial stage of its trip through the AUGL ward, which was now open to space. There were no water-breathers left in the big tank and no water, there being more urgent things to do than repairing and refilling a section that would very likely never be used again. The sight of the great tank, empty now, with its walls vacuum dry and the lush, underwater vegetation which had been designed to make the ward seem more homelike to its occupants hanging like pieces of brittle, discoloured parchment made Conway feel horribly depressed. The depression remained with him while they negotiated the three empty chlorine levels below it and came to another air-filled section.

Here they had to pause to allow a procession of TLTUs to pass. Conway was glad of the chance to stop for a while because, although the pep-shot had him still feeling full of artificial beans, Murchison was beginning to droop. As soon as their patient was aboard he thought he would order her off

to bed.

Seven TLTUs filed slowly past, their protective spheres anchored to stretcher-carriers driven by sweating, tense-faced orderlies. Unlike those of the methane life-forms these spheres did not collect frost. Instead they emitted a high-pitched, shuddering whine as their generators laboured to maintain the internal temperature at a comfortable, for their occupants, five hundred degrees. Each one of them passed in a wave of heat Conway could feel six yards away.

If another warhead was to strike here and now, and one of those globes was opened . . . Conway didn't think there was a worse way to die than to have the flesh boiled off his bones in

a blast of super-heated steam.

By the time they had handed the patient over to the ship's medical officer at the Lock, Conway was having difficulty focussing his eyes and his legs had a definite rubbery feel to them. Bed was indicated, he thought, or another pep-shot. He had just decided on the former course of treatment when he was collared respectfully by a Monitor officer wearing a heavyduty suit which was still radiating the cold of space.
"The casualties are here, sir," the officer said urgently.

"We brought them in on a supply ship because Reception is tied up with the evacuation. We're locked on to the DBLF section, but the place is empty and you're the first doctor I've seen. Will you take care of them?"

Conway almost asked what casualties, but stopped himself in time. There had been an attack, he remembered suddenly, the attack had been beaten off and the ensuing casualties, whether great or small, were obviously of prime concern to this officer. If he had known that Conway had been too busy to think about the battle and its casualties . . .

"Where did you put them?" said Conway.

"They're still in the ship," the officer replied, relaxing "We thought it better for someone to look at them before they were moved. Some of them . . . I mean . . . Uh, will you follow me, sir ?"

There were eighteen of them, the wreckage of men who had been fished out of the remains of a ship, whose suits were still cold to the touch. Only their helmets had been taken off, and that had been to ascertain whether or not they still lived. Conway counted three decompressions, the rest being fractures of varying degrees of complication one of which was quite definitely a depressed fracture of the skull. There were no radiation cases. So far it had been a clean war, if any war could have been described as clean.

Conway felt himself getting angry, but fought it back. This was no time to become emotional over broken, bleeding and asphyxiated patients or the reasons for them being in that condition. Instead he straightened and turned to Murchison.

"I'll take another pep-shot," he said briskly, "this will be a long session. But first I'll have this DBLF tape erased and try to round up some help. While I'm gone you might see to getting these men out of their suits and moved to DBLF theatre Five then you can catch up on your sleep.

"And thank you," he added awkwardly, not wanting to say too much because the Corpsman was still at his elbow. If he had tried to say the things he wanted to say to Murchison with eighteen urgent cases lying around their feet the officer would have been scandalised, and Conway would not have blamed him. But dammit the Corpsman hadn't been working beside Murchison for the last three hours, with a pep-shot heightening all his senses . . .

"If it would help you," said Murchison suddenly, "I could

take a pep-shot, too."

Gratefully, Conway said, "You're a very silly girl, but I was hoping you would say that . . ."

# thirteen

By the eighth day all the extra-terrestrial patients had been evacuated and with them had gone nearly four-fifths of the hospital's staff. On the levels maintaining extremes of temperature, pressure or gravity, the power was withdrawn causing the ultra-frigid solids to melt and gasify and the dense or superheated atmospheres to condense into a sludgy liquid mess on the floors. Then as the days passed more and more Corpsmen of the Engineering Division arrived, converting the one-time wards into barracks and tearing out large sections of the outer hull so that they could erect projector bases and launching platforms. Dermod's idea now was that Sector General should defend itself instead of relying completely on the fleet, which had already shown that it wasn't capable of stopping everything. By the twenty-fifth day Sector General had made the transition from being a defenceless hospital into what amounted to a heavily armed military base.

Because of its tremendous size and vast reserves of power—several times greater than that of the mobile forces defending it—the weapons were many and truly formidable. Which was as well because on the twenty-ninth day they were tested to the

utmost in the first major attack by the enemy.

It lasted for three days.

Conway knew that there were sound, logical reasons for the Corps fortifying the hospital as they had done, but he didn't like it. Even after that fantastic, three-day long attack when the hospital had been hit four times—again with chemical warheads, luckily—he still felt wrong about it. Every time he thought of the tremendous structure which had been dedicated to the highest ideals of humanity and medicine being made into an engine of destruction, geared to a hellish and unnatural ecology wherein it produced its own casualties, Conway felt angry and sad and not a little sickened by the whole ghastly mess. Sometimes he was apt to give vent to his opinions.

It was five weeks after the beginning of the evacuation and he was lunching with Mannen and Prilicla. The main dining hall was no longer crowded at mealtimes and green uniformed Corpsmen heavily outnumbered the e-ts at the tables, but there were still upwards of two hundred extra-terrestrials in the place

and this was what Conway was currently objecting to.

". . . I still say it's a waste," he said angrily, "A waste of lives, of medical talent, everything! All the cases are, and will continue to be, Monitor casualties. Every one an Earthhuman. So there are no juicy e-t cases for them to work on. The e-t staff should be sent home! Present company included," he ended, with a glare at Prilicla before he turned to face Mannen.

Dr. Mannen made an incision in his steak and hefted a generous forkful mouthwards. Since the disappearance of all his light-gravity patients he had had his LSVO and MSVK tapes erased and so had no mental restrictions placed on his diet. In the five weeks since the evacuation he had noticeably put on weight.

"To an e-t," he said reasonably, "we are juicy e-ts."

"You're quibbling," said Conway. "What I'm objecting to is senseless heroics."

Mannen raised his eye-brows. "But heroics are nearly always senseless," he said drily, "and highly contagious as well. In this case I'd say the Corps started it by wanting to defend this place, and because of that we felt obliged to stay also to look after the wounded. At least a few of us feel like that, or

we think a few of us feel like that.

"The sane, logical thing to do would have been to get while the going was good," Mannen continued, not quite looking at Conway, "and not a word would have been said to those who got. But then these sane, logical people have colleagues or, uh, friends who they suspect might be in the true hero category, and they won't leave because of what they imagine their friends will think of them if they run away. So they'd sooner die than have their friends think they were cowards, and they stay." Conway felt his face getting warm, but he didn't say anything. Mannen grinned suddenly and went on, "But this is a form of heroism, too. A case of Death before Dishonour, you might say. And before you can turn round twice everybody is a hero of one kind or the other. And no doubt the e-ts..." He gave a sly glance at Prilicla. "... are staying for similar reasons. And also, I suspect, because they don't want it thought that Earth-human DBDGs have a monopoly on heroism."

"I see," said Conway. He knew that his face was flaming red. It was now quite obvious that Mannen knew that the only reason he had stayed in the hospital was because Murchison, O'Mara and Mannen himself might have been disappointed in him if he'd left. And at the other side of the table Prilicla, the emotion sensitive, would be reading him like a book. Conway thought that he had never felt worse in his whole life.

"You are so right," said Prilicla suddenly, deftly inserting its fork into the plate of spaghetti before it and using two man-

dibles to twist. "If it had not been for the heroic example of you DBDGs I would have been on the second ship out."

"The second?" asked Mannen.

"I am not," said Prilicla, waving spaghetti for emphasis, "completely without valour."

Listening to the by-play Conway thought that the honest thing would have been for him to admit his cowardice to them, but he also knew that to do so would be to cause embarrassment all round. It was plain that they both knew him for the coward he was and were telling him in their seperate fashions that it didn't matter. And looking at it objectively it really did not matter, because there would be no more ships leaving Sector General and its remaining staff were going to be heroes whether they liked it or not. But Conway still did not think it right that he should be given credit for being a brave, selfless, dedicated man of medicine when he was nothing of the sort.

Before he could say anything, however, Mannen switched subjects abruptly. He wanted to know where Conway and Murchison had been during the fourth, fifth and sixth days of the evacuation. He said that it was highly suggestive that both of them were out of circulation at exactly the same time and he began to list some of the suggestions which occurred to him—which were colourful, startling and next to physically impos-

sible. Soon Prilicla joined in, although the sexual mores of two Earth-human DBDGs could have at most only an academic interest to a sexless GLNO, and Conway was defending himself strenuously from both sides.

Both Prilicla and Mannen knew that Murchison and himself, along with about forty other members of the staff, had been keeping at peak operating efficiency by means of pep-shots for nearly sixty hours. Pep shots did not give something for nothing, and Conway and the others had been forced to adopt the horizontal position of the patient for three days while they recovered from an advanced state of exhaustion. Some of them had literally dropped in their tracks and been taken away hurriedly, so exhausted that the involuntary muscles of heart and lungs were threatening to give up with everything else. They had been taken to special wards where robot devices massaged their hearts, gave artificial respiration and fed them intravenously.

Still, it did look bad that Conway and Murchison had not been seen around together, or separately, or at all for three

whole days.

The alarm siren saved Conway just as the counsels for the prosecution were having it all their own way. He swung out of his seat and sprinted for the door with Mannen pounding along behind him and Prilicla, its not quite atrophied wings aided by its anti-gravity devices, whirring away in front.

Come Hell, high water or interstellar war, Conway thought warmly as he headed for his wards, while there was a reputation to blacken or a leg to pull, Mannen would be there with the latest scandal and prepared to exert traction on the limb in question until it threatened to come off at the acetabulum. In the circumstance all this scandal-mongering had irritated Conway at first, but then he had begun to realise that Mannen was making him see that the whole world hadn't come to an end yet, that this was still Sector General—a frame of mind rather than a place—and that it would continue to be Sector General until the last one of its dedicated and often wacky staff had gone.

When he reached his ward the siren, a constant reminder of

the probable manner of their going, had stopped.

Pressure tents hung slackly over all twenty-eight occupied beds, already sealed and with their self-contained air units operating against the possibility of the ward being opened suddenly to space. The nurses on duty, a Tralthan, a Nidean and four Earth-humans, were struggling into their suits. Conway did the same, sealing everything as the others had done with the exception of the face-plate. He made a quick round of his patients, expressed approval to the Tralthan Senior Nurse, then opened the switch of the artificial gravity grids in the floor.

Irregularities in the power supply, and that was no rare occurence when the hospital's defensive screens were under attack or its weapons went into action, could cause the artificial gravity grid to vacillate between one half and two Gs, which was not a good thing when the patients were mainly fracture cases. It was better to have no gravity at all.

Once patients and staff were protected so far as was possible there was nothing to do but wait. To keep his mind off what was going on outside Conway insinuated himself into an argument between a Tralthan nurse and one of the red-furred Nidians about the modifications currently going on in the giant Translator computer. This vast electronic brain—the Translator packs which everyone wore were merely extensions of it, ust sending and receiving units—which handled all the e-t translations in the hospital was, since the evacuation, operating at only a small fraction of its full potential. Hearing this Dermod, the fleet commander, had ordered the unused sections to be re-programmed to deal with tactical and supply problems. But despite the Corps' reassurances that they were allowing ample circuits for Translation the two nurses were not quite happy. Suppose, they said, there should be an occasion when all the e-ts were talking at once?

Conway wanted to tell them that in his opinion the e-ts, especially the nurses, were always talking, period, so that there was really no problem, but he couldn't think of a tactful way

of phrasing it.

An hour passed without anything happening so far as the hospital was concerned: no hits and no indication that its massive armament had been used. The nurses on duty were relieved by the next shift, three Tralthans and three Earthhumans this time, the senior nurse being Murchison. Conway was just settling down to a very pleasant chat when the siren sounded a steady, low-pitched, faintly derisive note. The attack was over.

Conway was helping Murchison out of her suit when the PA hummed into life.

"Attention, please," it said urgently. "Will Doctor

Conway go to Lock Five at once, please . . ."

Probably a casualty, Conway thought; one they are not sure how to move . . . But then the PA shifted without a break into another message.

". . . will Doctor Mannen and Major O'Mara go to Lock

Five immediately, please . . ."

What, Conway wondered, could be at Lock Five which required the services of two Senior Physicians and the Chief

Psychologist. He began to hurry.

O'Mara and Mannen had been closer to Five to begin with and so were there ahead of him by a few seconds. There was a third person in the lock antechamber, clad in a heavy-duty suit with its helmet thrown back. The newcomer was greying, had a thin, lined face and a mouth which was like a tired grey line, but the overall harshness was offset by a pair of the softest brown eyes Conway had ever seen in a man. The insignia on his collar was more ornate than Conway had ever seen before, the highest ranking Corps officer he'd had dealings with being a Colonel, but he knew instinctively that this was Dermod, the fleet commander.

O'Mara tore off a salute which was returned as punctiliously as it had been given, and Mannen and Conway received handshakes with apologies for the gauntlets being worn. Then

Dermod got straight down to business.

"I am not a believer in secrecy when it serves no useful purpose," he began crisply. "You people have elected to stay here to look after our casualties, so you have a right to know what is happening whether the news is good or bad. Being the senior Earth-human medical staff remaining in the hospital, and having an understanding of the probable behaviour of your staff in various contingencies, I must leave it up to you whether this information should or should not be made public."

He had been looking at O'Mara. His eyes moved quickly to Mannen, then Conway, then back to O'Mara again. He went on, "There has been an attack, a completely surprising attack in that it was totally abortive. We did not lose a single man and the enemy force was completely wiped out. They didn't seem to know the first thing about deployment or . . . or anything.

We were expecting the usual sort of attack, vicious, pressed home regardless of cost, that previously has taken everything we've got to counter. This was a massacre . . ."

Dermod's voice and the look in his eyes, Conway noted, did

not reflect any joy at the victory.

"... Because of this we were able to investigate the enemy wreckage quickly enough to have a chance of finding survivors. Usually we're too busy licking our own wounds to have time for this. We didn't find any survivors, but ..."

He broke off as two Corpsmen came through the inner seal carrying a covered stretcher. Dermod was looking straight at

Conway when he went on.

He said, "You were on Etla, Doctor, and will see the implications behind this. And at the same time you might think about the fact that we are under attack by an enemy who refuses either to communicate or negotiate, fights as though driven by a fanatical hatred, and yet uses only limited warfare against us. But first you'd better take a look at this."

When the cover was pulled off the stretcher nobody said anything for a long time. It was the tattered, grisly remnant of a once-living, thinking and feeling entity who was now too badly damaged even to classify with any degree of accuracy. But enough remained to show that it was not and never had

been a human being.

The war, Conway thought sickly, was spreading.

# fourteen

"Since Vespasian left Etla we have been trying to infiltrate the Empire with our agents," Dermod resumed quietly, "and have been successful in planting eight groups including one on the Central World itself. Our intelligence regarding public opinion, and through it the propaganda machinery used to guide it, is fairly dependable.

"We know that feeling against us is high over the Etla business," he continued, "or rather what we are supposed to have done to the Etlans, but I'll come to that later. This latest

development will make things even worse for us . . ."

According to the Imperial government, Dermod explained, Etla had been invaded by the Monitor Corps. Its natives, under the guise of being offered medical assistance, had been callously used as guinea-pigs to test out various types of bacteriological weapons. As proof of this hadn't the Etlans suffered a series of devastating plagues which had commenced within days of the Monitors leaving? Such callous and inhuman behaviour could not go unpunished, and the Emperor was sure that every citizen was behind him in the decision he had taken.

But information received—again according to Imperial sources—from a captured agent of the invaders made it plain that their behaviour on Etla was no isolated instance of wanton brutality. On that luckless planet the invaders had been preceded by an extra-terrestrial—a stupid, harmless being sent to test the planet's defences before landing themselves, a mere tool about whom they had denied any connection or knowledge when later they contacted the Etlan authorities. It was now plain that they made wide use of such extra-terrestrial life-forms. That they used them as servants, as experimental animals, probably as food . . .

There was a tremendous structure maintained by the invaders, a combination military base and laboratory, where atrocities similar to those practised on Etla were carried on as a matter of course. The invader agent, who had been tricked into giving the spatial co-ordinates of this base, had confessed to what went on there. It appeared that the invaders ruled over a large number of differing extra-terrestrial species, and it was here that the methods and weapons were developed that held them in bondage.

The Emperor stated that he was quite willing, indeed he considered it his duty, to use his forces to stamp out this foul tyranny. He also felt that he should use only Imperial forces, because he had to confess with shame that relations between the Empire and the extra-terrestrials within its sphere of influence had not always been as warm as they should have been. But if any of these species who may have been slighted in the past were to offer their aid, he would not refuse it.

". . . And this explains many of the puzzling aspects of these enemy attacks," Dermod went on. "They are restricting themselves to vibratory and chemical weapons, and in the confined space of our defence globe we must do the same, because this place must be captured rather than destroyed. The Emperor must find out the positions of the Federation planets to keep the war going. The fact that they fight viciously

and to the death can be explained by their being afraid of capture, because to them the hospital is nothing but a space-

going torture chamber.

"And the completely ineffectual recent attack," he continued, "must have been mounted by some of the hot-headed e-t friends of the Empire, who were probably allowed to come here without proper training or information about our defences. They were wiped out, and that will cause a lot of e-ts on their side who are wavering to make up their minds. In the Empire's favour," he ended bitterly.

When the fleet commander stopped speaking Conway remained silent; he had had access to the Empire reports sent to Williamson and knew that Dermod was not exaggerating the situation. O'Mara had had similar information and maintained the same grim silence. But Dr. Mannen was not the silent type.

"But this is ridiculous!" he burst out. "They're twisting things! This is a hospital, not a torture chamber. And they're accusing us of the things they are doing themselves...!"

Dermod ignored the outburst, but in such a way as not to give offence. He said soberly, "The Empire is unstable politically. With enough time we could replace their present government with something more desireable, the Imperial citizens would do it themselves, in fact. But we need time. And we also have to stop the war from spreading too much, from gaining too much momentum. If too many extraterrestrial allies join the Empire against us the situation will become too complex to control, the original reasons for fighting, or the truth or otherwise of these accusations, will cease to matter.

"We can gain time by holding out here as long as possible," he ended grimly, "but there isn't much we can do about

restricting the war. Except hope."

He swung his helmet forward and began to fasten it, although his face-plate was still open for conversation. It was then that Mannen asked the question Conway had wanted to ask for a long time, but fear of being thought a coward had stopped him from asking it.

"Do we have any chance, really, of holding out?"

Dermod hesitated a moment, obviously wondering whether to be reassuring or to tell the truth. Then he said, "A wellsupported and supplied defensive globe is the ideal tactical position. It can also, if the enemy outnumbers it sufficiently,

be a perfect trap . . ."

When Dermod left, the specimen he had brought with him was claimed by Thornnastor, the Tralthan Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology, who would no doubt be happy with it for days. O'Mara went back to bullying his charges into remaining sane, and Mannen and Conway went back to their wards. The reaction of the staff to the possibility of e-ts attacking them was about equally divided between concern over the war spreading and interest regarding the possible methods necessary to treat casualties belonging to a brand new species.

Two weeks passed without the expected attack developing. The Monitor Corps warships continued to arrive, shoot their astrogators back in life-ships, and take up their positions. From the hospital's direct vision ports they seemed to cover the sky, as if Sector General was the centre of a vast, tenuous star cluster with every star a warship. It was an awesome and tremendously reassuring sight, and Conway tried to visit one of the direct vision panels at least once every day.

Then on the way back from one of these visits he ran across

a party of Kelgians.

For a moment he couldn't believe his eyes. All the Kelgian DBLFs had been evacuated, he had watched the last of them go himself, yet here were twenty-odd of the outsize caterpillars humping along in single file! A closer look showed that they were not wearing the usual brassard with engineering or medical emblems on it—instead their silvery fur was dyed with circular and diamond patterns of red, blue and black. This was Kelgian military insignia. Conway went storming off to O'Mara.

"I was about to ask the same question, Doctor," the Chief Psychologist said gruffly, indicating his vision screen, "although in much more respectful language. I'm trying to get the fleet commander now, so stop shouting and sit down!"

Dermod's face appeared a few minutes later. His tone was polite but hurried when he said, "This is not the Empire, gentlemen. We are obliged to inform the Federation government and through it the people of the true state of affairs as we see them, although the item about our being attacked by an enemy e-t force has not yet been made public.

"But you must give the e-ts within the Federation credit for having the same feelings as ourselves," he went on, "Extraterrestrials have stayed behind at Sector General, and on their various home worlds their friends are beginning to feel that they should come out here and help defend them. It is as simple as that."

"But you said that you didn't want the war to spread,"

Conway protested.

"I didn't ask them to come here, Doctor," Dermod said sharply, "but now they're here I can certainly use them. The latest intelligence reports indicate that the next attack may be decisive . . ."

Later over lunch Mannen received the news about the e-t defenders with the deepest gloom. He was beginning to enjoy being only himself and guzzling steak at dinner, he told Conway sadly, and now with the likelihood of e-t casualties coming in it looked as if they were all going to be tape-ridden again. Prilicla ate spaghetti and observed how lucky it was that the e-t staff hadn't left the hospital after all, not looking at Conway when it said it, and Conway said very little.

The next attack, Dermod had said, may be decisive.

It began three weeks later after a period during which nothing happened other than the arrival of a volunteer force of Tralthans and a single ship whose crew and planet of origin Conway had never heard of before, and whose classification was QLCL. He learned that Sector General had never had the opportunity of meeting these beings professionally because they were recent, and very enthusiastic, members of the Federation. Conway prepared a small ward to receive possible casualties from this race, filling it with the horribly corrosive fog they used for an atmosphere and stepping up the lighting to the harsh, actinic blue which QLCLs considered restful.

The attack began in an almost leisurely fashion, Conway thought as he watched it through the observation panel. The main defence globe seemed barely disturbed by the three minor attacks launched at widely separate points on its surface. All that was visible was three tiny, confused swirls of activity—moving points of light that were ships, missiles, countermissiles and explosions—which looked too slow to be dangerous. But the slowness was only apparent, because the ships were manoeuvring at a minimum of five Gs, with automatic anti-gravity devices keeping their crews from being

pulped by the tremendous accelerations in use, and the missiles were moving at anything up to fifty Gs. The wide-flung repulsion screens which sometimes deflected the missiles were invisible as were the pressors and rattlers which nearly always stopped those which the screens missed. Even so this was merely an initial probing at the hospitals defences, a series of offensive patrols, the curtain-raiser.

Conway turned away from the view-port and began moving towards his post. Even the unimportant skirmishes produced casualties and he really had no business being up here sightseeing. Besides, he would get a much truer picture of how the battle was going down in the wards.

For the next twelve hours casualties arrived in a steady trickle, then the light, probing attacks changed to heavy, feinting thrusts and the wounded came in an irregular stream Then the attack proper began and they became a flood.

He lost all sense of time, of who his assistants were, of the number of cases he dealt with. There were many times when he needed a pep-shot to clear the fatigue from his mind and hands, but pep-shots were now forbidden regardless of circumstances—the medical staff were hard-pressed enough without some of them becoming patients. Instead he had to work tired, knowing that he was not bringing everything he had to the treatment of his patients, and he ate and slept when he reached the point of not being able to hold his instruments properly.

Sometimes it was the towering bulk of a Tralthan at his side, sometimes a Corpsman medical orderly, sometimes Murchison. *Mostly* it was Murchison, he thought. Either she didn't need to sleep, or she snatched a catnap the same time as he did, or even at a time like this he was more inclined to notice her. It was usually Murchison who pushed food at his unresisting

face and told him when he really ought to lie down.

By the fourth day the attack showed no signs of diminishing. The rattlers on the outer hull were going almost constantly,

their power drain making the lights flicker.

The principle which furnished artificial gravity for the floor and compensated for the killing accelerations used by the ships also lay behind the weapons of both sides—the repulsion screen, originally a meteor protection device, the tractor and pressor beams, and the rattler which was a combination of both. The rattler pushed and pulled—vibrated—depending on how narrowly it was focussed, at up to eighty Gs. A push of eighty gravities then a pull of eighty gravities, several times a minute. Naturally it was not always focussed accurately on target, both ships were moving and taking counter-measures, but it was still tight enough to tear the plating off a hull or, in the case of a small ship, to shake it until the men inside rattled.

There was a lot of rattler work going on now. The Empire forces were attacking savagely, compressing the Monitor defence globe down against the hospital's outer hull. The infighting that was taking place was with rattler only, space being too congested to fling missiles about indiscriminately. This applied only to the warring ships, however—there were still missiles being directed at the hospital, probably hundreds of them, and some of them were getting through. At least five times Conway felt the tell-tale shock against the soles of his shoes where his feet were strapped to the operating room floor.

There was no fine diagnostic skill required in the treatment of these rattled men. It was all too plain that they suffered from multiple and complicated fractures, some of them of nearly every bone in their bodies. Many times when he had to cut one of the smashed bodies out of its suit Conway wanted to yell at the men who had brought it in, "What do you expect me to do with this . . .?"

But this was alive, and as a doctor he was supposed to do

everything possible to make it stay that way.

He had just finished a particularly bad one, with both Murchison and a Tralthan nurse assisting, when Conway became aware of a DBLF in the room. Conway had become familiar with the dyed patterns of colour used by the Kelgian military to denote rank, and he saw that this one bore an additional symbol which identified it as a doctor.

"I am to relieve you, Doctor," the DBLF said in a flat, Translated, hurried voice. "I am experienced in treating beings of your species. Major O'Mara wants you to go to

Lock Twelve at once."

Conway quickly introduced Murchison and the Tralthan—there was another casualty being floated in and they would be

working on it within minutes—then said, "Why?"

"Doctor Thornnastor was disabled when the last missile hit us," the Kelgian replied, spraying its manipulators with the plastic its race used instead of gloves. "Someone with e-t

experience is required to take over Thornnastor's patients and the FGLIs which are coming in now at Lock Twelve. Major O'Mara suggests you look at them as soon as possible to see what tapes you need. And take a suit, Doctor," the DBLF added as Conway turned to go. "The level above this one is losing pressure..."

There had been little for Pathology to do since the evacuation Conway thought as he propelled himself along the corridors leading to Twelve, but the Diagnostician in charge of that department had demonstrated its versatality by taking over the largest casualty section. In addition to FGLIs of its own species Thornnastor had taken DBLFs and Earth-humans, and the patients who had that lumbering, irascible, incredibly brilliant Tralthan to care for them were lucky indeed. Conway wondered how badly it was injured, the Kelgian doctor hadn't been able to tell him.

He passed a view-port and took a quick look outside. It reminded him of a cloud of angry fireflies. The stanchion he was gripping slapped his hand, telling him that another missile

had struck not too far away.

There were two Tralthans, a Nidian and a space-suited QCQL in the antechamber when he arrived as well as the ever present Corpsmen. The Nidian explained that a Tralthan ship had been nearly pulled apart by enemy rattlers but that many of its crew had survived. The tractor beams mounted on Sector General itself had whisked the damaged vessel down to the lock and . . .

The Nidian began to bark at him. "Stop that!" said Conway irritably.

The Nidian looked startled, then it started to bark again. A few seconds later the Tralthan nurses came over and began to deafen him with their modulated fog-horn blasts, and the QCQL was whistling at him through its suit radio. The Corpsmen, engrossed in bringing the casualties through the boarding tube, were merely looking puzzled. Suddenly Conway began to sweat.

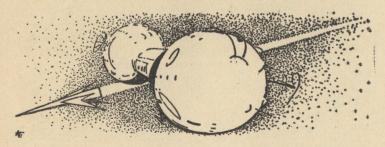
They had been hit again, but because he had not been holding on to anything he had not felt it—but he knew exactly where they had been hit. Conway fumbled with his Translator, rapped it sharply with his knuckles—a completely futile gesture—and kicked himself towards the intercom. On every circuit he tried things howled and trumpeted and moaned and made gutteral barking sounds, a mad cacaphony that set Conway's teeth on edge. A picture of the theatre he had just left flashed before his mind, with Murchison and the Tralthan and the Kelgian doctor working on that casualty and not one of them knowing what the other was saying. Instructions, vital directions, demands for instruments or information on the patient's condition—all would be given in an alien gabble incomprehensible to the theatre staff. He was seeing the picture repeated all over the hospital. Only beings of the same species could make themselves understood to each other, and even that did not hold true in every case. There were Earthhumans who did not speak Universal, who spoke languages native to areas on their home planets and who had to rely on Translators even when speaking to other Earth-humans . . .

From the alien babel Conway's straining ears were able to isolate words and a voice he could understand. It was intelligence battling through a high level of background noise, and all at once his ears seemed to tune out the static and hear only the voice, the voice that was saying, ". . . Three torps playing follow-my-leader, sir. They blasted a way right through. We can't jury-rig a Translator, there's nothing of it left to do it with. The last torp went off inside the computer-room . . ."

Outside the intercom niche the e-t nurses were whistling and growling and moaning at him and at each other. He should be giving instructions for the preliminary examination of his casualties, arranging for ward accommodation, checking on the readiness of the FGLI theatre. But he could not do any of these things because his nursing staff would not understand a

word he said.

#### To be concluded



### Editorial (continued)

likewise took no excess baggages with it. Wells's heroes explored the moon, hyper-space, the ocean depths, and fought the Martians—without a woman's help. His time-traveller did pause to dally with the Eloi girl, Weena, but she was a mere child. In *The War of the Worlds* the hero's wife was just a voice

off-stage.

Otherwise, the only women in the basic s-f romances are landladies or housekeepers. That is, if you except She and if you except Haggard as a s-f author. But She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed is not so much a woman as an archetypal figure (for instance, she crops up again, though diluted, as Stanley Weinbaum's Margaret of Urbs). She's the infant schoolboy's fantasy-conception of his attractive young schoolmarm or governness—omniscient and mysterious, and somehow both old and young.

Until these new doubts arose, the average s-f author wrote about "Man" and conceived his audience as the race called "Man"—not "Woman." And it's a fact that the s-f readership, like that of the genre called "Westerns," is predominantly male. For the most part, women are interested in new scientific ideas only to the extent of being unreasoningly afraid of them: they cast a "Shadow on the Hearth," as Judith Merril phrased it. And although history may justify their attitude, "unreason-

ingly" is the key-word.

Man doesn't reason as much as he likes to think he does, but woman reasons hardly at all. She thinks with her glands,

including glands which men don't possess.

Man reasons and explores. Woman reacts and stays at home. This is the chief temperamental difference between the sexes, applying both to the physical world and the world of ideas. (There are exceptions, which can be counted on the fingers. E.g., Rosita Forbes, the explorer. Madame Curie—and even she was just carrying on the research initiated by her husband, as much from devotion to him as to science).

But the true s-f story must of its nature be a foray into hitherto unknown territory in space or thought. Any soldier going into battle with a woman on his sword-arm or his mind

will be handicapped. Similarly, so will a s-f narrative.

Kids groan when the heroine appears in the Western movie. They know she's only there to clog the action, to wrap herself around the hero and cry "Don't go, Luke, he'll kill you!" whenever he tries to go about his proper business of gunning

for Black Jake. (No Western film heroine seems to have any

faith in her man doing a job properly).

The kids don't realise that the woman is there because the producer, not the author, insisted on her being there. Unlike the s-f audience, the cinema audience consists of male and female mixed in roughly equal proportions, and the female half must be catered for.

Yet the kids' instinct is right. The only women truly belonging in the story of the West are the wives of the pioneers. They were courageous and hardy, but they were not themselves pioneers. They initiated nothing. They were an adjunct, worthy of mention—but an adjunct.

The West, like space, like thought, is the realm of Man the

explorer.

This being so, if men without women is the fitting theme of s-f, why these recurrent phases of uneasiness, re-examination, re-assessment, and assertions, that s-f if it is to be regarded seriously as literature, must grow up?

Clearly something is unsatisfactory about the male characters

as depicted. Something is lacking.

One feels this about the famed Starship Troopers. A typical member of this happy band of brothers says, grinning, that the Army is the life, and after another forty years or so, when he's pensioned off, he might get married and settle down to some quiet fishing.

Marriage, instead of being a key-point in life, is considered as a kind of hobby one might take up together with fishing and stamp-collecting. The raising of children isn't considered at all. Where are all the new little Starship Troopers to come

from?

The general impression is that of a troop of perennial boy scouts. This was Kipling's and Hemingway's emotionally stunted world too. The only love interest likely to occur in it

is an affair between a private and his sergeant.

But these Peter Pans feel compelled to prove that they aren't just a bunch of fairies from the Never-Never-Land. Sometimes they perilously approach what Robertson Davies describes as "the false and excessive manliness of the tough homosexual" in their attempts to show that they are not only men but, in fact, homo superior.

Consider their manly attitude towards death. They know that death is real, death is earnest, and never far away. (So does the civilian on today's highways, where casualties far outnumber those on the battlefields . . . but no matter). They discipline themselves to live with the thought of death. In fact, like Hemingway, they're downright obsessed by the thought of death. They seem to suffer from some inner frustration which can be dissolved only by death.

Remember, it was Peter Pan who said, wistfully: "To die

must be an awf'ly big adventure."

But at least Heinlein's Troopers have some sort of character. They're a cut above the featureless hordes of ship's officers who march through space-fiction monotonously snapping, barking or growling their orders until their space-ships must sound like so many dogs' homes.

As against which we have the bloodless pedagogues still exhumed (by Arthur C. Clarke, among other culprits) who don't think about death at all—because they're dead already.

"Professor Tompkin cleared his throat. 'As you see, gentlemen, here is the—ah—retro-oscillator and that is the—ah—super-insulator . . . '"

It's long past time that all Professors Tompkin went and

jumped in the-ah-super-lake.

So we reach an impasse. S-f heroes can't live with women and they can't live without them.

Confine s-f to male characters and they remain emotional

dwarfs.

Bring women into it, and they gum up the works.

The solution, as I see it, is to try one's best to leave women, as characters, out of the plot if possible. But also try not to ignore their influence on men. Aim at depicting men who have some knowledge of women—not just carnal knowledge, either—who, indeed, have learnt something of life from their womenfolk.

Then maybe we'll have spacemen who are complete human

beings.

The universe is an amalgam of what is external and what is projected upon it by our creative minds. It needn't be merely a dog-eat-dog jungle. Nor a grey barrack-square to bawl across. Nor a bare mathematical equation. Nor a conglomeration of gadgets. Nor a dark cave to retreat into.

There are such things as colour, optimism, compassion, beauty, parenthood, sympathy, empathy, patience, tenderness

. . . even love.

Women fit into s-f by reflection, not presence.

William F. Temple

A new author brings a little light relief to the arduous task of pilotling a spaceship to Venus, in the form of a unique experiment which turned out to have a very different outcome to the one planned.

# The Bundenberg Touch

### by H. L. DRAPER

Its all different now of course, streamlined and efficient. But when I made my first trip to Venus we were still having to rely

on the old time-lock system.

Bundenberg and I were rookies together. We'd both passed out of Galactic College with average marks as far as I was concerned, and top ones for Bundenberg. We'd done our routine training flights to the Moon on the same ship, and had a spell on the artificial satellite together, so we'd got to know each other pretty well. He didn't look much like a potential genius in those days, he was sandy-haired with rather pale blue eyes and a gangling sort of physique. Like me, he had acquired a rich space-tan, otherwise he would have had the thick pale skin that goes with that sort of colouring.

I was his opposite in every way, dark where he was fair, sociable where he was quiet, that's probably why we suited each

other.

Well, anyway, we both reported to the *Vortrex*, pretty bucked to find ourselves posted together, although Reg Bundenberg was a hydroponics bod, while I was just ordinary Cosmic Officer, third-class. The skipper was Charles Rode, a veteran who was travelling to the Moon when they still had to make the

trip direct, and the other two officers, Random and Ellis, were old cronies, so I was glad to be able to spend my off-time with Reg.

About the fourth day out, Earth-time, I went down to the Hydroponics Room and found Reg leaning over a small tank in the corner. I peered in, and saw what looked like a sort of reddish seaweed.

"Ugh!" I said. "What is it-tomorrow's dinner?"

He gave me an impatient look.

"This," he said "doesn't happen to be for eating. It's a

little thing of my own."

"You mean to say," I said hotly, "that they let you muck about with grubs and things down here? On this ship?"

"MacGregor—that's my chief—likes to encourage initiative," he said smugly. "He says we need hobbies in order to avoid the monotony opandering to the appetites of a lot of ignorant sybarites ye' ken'." This last was in an excruciating imitation of MacGregor's accent.

"Nobody encourages me to have initiative," I said bitterly.

"You don't need it—you're a split-second operative. Now down here, we've got time to think."

" And this is the result?"

I gazed disparingly at the seaweed, and at that moment it moved.

"What the-"

I leaned forward, and Reg grabbed me back.

"Careful, she's not very friendly to strangers—don't want to lose that handsome nose of yours, do you?"

" She ?"

"My Agnes." He leaned over the tank and made crooning noises and presently there was a swirl in the water, and a white blur showed, just beneath.

"There—you see, she knows me !"

He produced a portion of dessicated-looking fish with a

pungent odour and proffered it.

I expected to see a snap of teeth, but to my amazement, a little white hand appeared, to wrap itself lovingly round Bundenberg's wrist, while another removed the fish.

"Good God!" I said involuntarily.

The hand gave his arm a final squeeze and disappeared below water.

"What on earth have you got there, Bunny?"

"Not Earth, dear boy. This is a kind of Venus Materlink."

"What do you mean, kind of?"

"With humanoid variations. One of the former Hydro boys left the spawn behind, and I've amused myself with a few variations."

"What does it look like?"

"She resembles a mermaid, except that she's got rather more arms."

"How many more?"

"About fifteen actually. But she's a fetching little thing really—lovely eyes. I've christened her Agnes Bundenberg, after my mother."

I shuddered, and he put the cover back on the tank.

"Don't want to let her see you do that," he reproved.

"Hurts her feelings."

Just then the inter-com bawled my name, and I had to hurry back up top.

I didn't see Bundenberg much for a few days after that. We had run into a magnetic storm, and things were a bit dicey for a time. I was kept pretty busy.

A lot of the passengers were space-sick too.

The old *Vortrex* was primarily a cargo-ship, hurtling between the planets with governmental supplies, but she carried a few passengers, mostly government officials and their families. This trip there was a Mr. and Mrs. Pont, middle-aged, and experienced space travellers. Alexander Boon, a business tycoon, coming out to look over new locations; and his daughter Dinah, a pretty eighteen year-old, making her first trip and bubbling over with excitement. There was also a quiet, youngish chap, with a rather pompous air, whose occupation was given as research chemist, named Parland.

"Lieutenant," he said to me one evening, when I was having an off-duty drink in the lounge, "there's something wrong with

the ship, isn't there?"

"Nothing serious," I said. "A meteorite came a bit close and damaged the antennae."

"Will it delay our arrival?"

"I hope not."

"That's not the real cause for anxiety is it?" Pont joined in the conversation. "It's whether we're too late for the time-switch at Central point isn't it?"

"I don't think you need worry about that, Sir," I said. "You can leave it to the captain."

"I'm an old traveller," said Pont, almost apologetically.

"One gets used to the changes."

But of course, he was right, and the captain was pretty worried at that. The date and time of the time-switch had to be calculated to the exact moment in those days, and if the Vortrex was behind time she would miss it. I didn't know a lot about it then, but I did know that the shock could be fatal, especially to elderly people. Mrs. Pont was a particularly bad risk. Odd that a woman who was such a bad sailor had to do so much travelling, but there, when the alternative is not seeing your husbamd for the best part of a lifetime, its surprising what woman will put up with .

I went outside that day, with one of the engineers, and we did our best to patch things up. Some people can't work outside a ship, but I rather like it. It gives you an awe-inspiring feeling—as if you were the last man in space, a bit like being a God. I suppose one really gets a bit light-headed out there, what with all that extra intake of pure oxygen, after the close atmosphere on these old ships.

Dinah Boon was still young enough to be impressed by it. "You must feel like a fly crawling over a glass dome," she said, after dinner that night. "I could see your shadow, it

made me feel quite dizzy."

"Like the flies, we've got suction boots—we can't fall off,"

I laughed. "Of course, it takes getting used to."

I was young enough to enjoy looking a hero to a pretty girl—not that there's an age-limit to that!

"You've had lots of experience I suppose?"

"Some," I admitted modestly.

"What were you doing out there?"

I had to be a bit cagey.

"The ships' radar got a knock. We were doing a spot of

repair."

"I shouldn't have thought it mattered. You can't pick up anything from Earth now, and we're nearly half-way to Venus, aren't we?"

"Well, we shall want to pick up landing signals."

Old Boon joined us, to my regret.

"Young man, that's nonsense, and you know it. You know as well as I do that this ship is beamed on her course, and, barring accidents, can't deviate as much as a hair."

I was glad when the Captain's voice said, "You can't fool Mr. Boon, Clive, he's one of our largest manufacturers of scientific equipment, and an adviser to the Government."

I was glad to leave it to the Skipper, and rose hastily.

"Excuse me—I have some things to do." I escaped below to the Hydroponics Room.

Bundenberg was crooning over his mermaid, and I joined him.

"Don't you ever have work to do?" I asked morosely.

"I like that," he said indignantly. "It isn't me who gets a chance to wine and dine with the passengers, and boast about my death-defying deeds to pretty girls. What price the intrepid Space-man?"

News gets around fast on a small ship.

"Well, you've got Agnes," I said, looking into the tank.

"Where is she today?"

"She's off her food a bit, and won't come up. She gets a bit temperamental at times—lonely I expect."

I prodded the seaweed with an experimental finger.

"Don't do that," Bundenberg said nervously. "I've warned you before."

"Nonsense!" I said. "You just want to keep her all to

yourself. Agnes! Agnes, where art thou?"

I burst into song. (I have the kind of low-pitched baritone that comes over quite well with the accompaniment of a dance-orchestra.

The next instant the water surged up and I withdrew hastily, but not soon enough. A white hand had hold of my wrist, jerking me forward, while another wrapped itself around my neck. My face was uncomfortably close to the water and cold drops were trickling down my neck.

"For God's sake, Bunny, tell her to let go, she's drowning

me !" I spluttered.

The idiot was leaning up against the tank shaking with laughter. Something was making soft mewing noises in my ear.

"It's your singing," he gasped. "Agnes is crazy about music She likes you!"

"She'll have me in, in a minute. What the Hell is she doing

now?"

"She's stroking your hair." He pulled himself together, and crooned in dulcet tones, "Come up, Agnes, dear girl. You're making him all wet. Spoiling his lovely uniform."

The grip on my neck relaxed and I was able to raise my head. I looked into a pair of sea-green eyes, surprisingly beautiful. Her head, now above the water, was like that of a lovely child, with pale, reddish hair, streaming on the surface of the tank, like delicate fronds of sea-wrack, that looks so attractive in the water, but is nothing but a handful of string when you take it out.

There was a smile trembling on the pink lips. One of Agnes' hands still clasped mine, while another was stroking it. The whole thing could have been quite enjoyable, were it not for the rather ghoulish feeling of having my face stroked at the same time—by two other hands!

"Say something nice to her," urged Bundenberg.

"Agnes," I said, "you have the most beautiful eyes in the universe. I bet all the boys are mad about you, back in Venusburg, but please, please, loose me. I've got to get back to work."

Agnes lowered long silvery eyelashes modestly, and pouted her lips.

"Go on-kiss her!"

I lowered my head, and felt the faint cool, salty touch, like kissing a girl under water on some earth-bound shore. Then with a faint sigh Agnes released me and sank from sight.

I stepped back quickly. "So this," I said, when I could

speak, "is what you do in your spare time."

"Not me, old man. Agnes and I are just friends. It's you she loves."

He put back the cover.

"Can she come out?" I asked curiously.

"I think she could, for a short time. But she wouldn't be very comfortable. This is really to stop idicts throwing things in."

He came with me on deck, his face serious.

"Is it true we're going to be late at the time-point?"

I nodded. "It's my guess they'll have to try acceleration, otherwise we'll be stooging around this time next year."

He was silent. Ships like the *Vortrex* travelled at a maximum speed to which the passengers and crew were conditioned before take-off. Any alteration could cause discomfort. A sudden tremendous acceleration, such as would be necessary to enable the *Vortrex* to reach her proper place at the appointed time, could only be made once—but once would be too much for some of the passengers—and for some of the crew.

"Reg. you're the scientific brain, how bad is it likely to be?"

"The Skipper—he's nearing fifty himself, must be !"

"Right. His next trip back to Earth is his last, so I hear."

"Who else is around or over the age-limit?"

"Well, old Boon for a start, and the Ponts, old MacGregor, and some of the rest of the crew."

"There's not much hope for them," said Bundeberg grimly.

"As bad as that? What about the rest of us?"

"We may come off lightly. No one's quite sure. At the worst it affects the brain. Usually it's a slow process, they are gradually less able to concentrate until . . ."

"Thanks."

MacGregor came in at that moment. "You're wanted above-both of ve."

"Both of us?"

"Ave. The Captain's cabin." We went upstairs at the double.

With the Captain were Boon and Parland.

"Take a seat," the Captain was unusually polite. have something to discuss."

We sat around the table and looked at each other. He seemed to find it difficult to begin and I didn't blame him.

"Mayne-Bundenberg-these gentlemen have some suggestions to make regarding our predicament. I take it vou know to what I refer?"

"Yes, Sir," I answered for both of us.
"Good. Saves me going over it again. What you don't know is that Dr. Parland, here, is a very distinguished scientist. who has to his credit the discovery of quite a few new serums. He has recently been experimenting with a new drug 'Parlinn' which he has not yet been able to test on human bodies. Briefly the drug induces a state of catalepsy for a short period, during which bodies become weightless, and hang as it were in a vacuum. This state has, of course been achieved before, but only over a long period and a gradual reduction of bodily temperature. Am I right so far, Doctor?"

Parland took the floor. "I understand that the shock of severe acceleration would be likely to prove fatal to people past middle-age. Only the young would be likely to survive, and even these may suffer damage which may-or may not-be repairable. If I am correct in my calculations my new drug will induce a condition of timelessness, which means that the brain will remain oblivious as it were, during the period of adjust-

ment. Do I make myself clear ?"

"More or less," said Bundenberg, "What's the snag?"

"Snag?"

"You've been at great pains to explain the situation to Clive and myself, both junior members of the crew. Why?"

Parland polished his glasses.

"The fact is, there will have to be someone left. Someone able to put the ship into Venusian orbit, if the drug is slow in wearing off. Also someone to give the last injection."

"Naturally, this would have been my responsibility,"

interrupted Captain Rode.

"And I had to point out that you were beyond the danger point, and would be unlikely to survive long enough."

I began to see where all this was leaving. Bundenberg of

course was already there.

"You mean, of course, that Mayne and I, being the youngest members of the ship's company have the best chance of survival."

" After all, before our present advances, all spacemen had to

take the chance," put in Boon.

"Yes—and some are still alive—I know," said Bundenberg grimly. "On the retired list after less than three journeys."

"What's the alternative?" I asked.

"For the Captain, Boon the Ponts and some of the others, almost certainly death" said Parland giving it to us straight. "For the rest of us probable survival with a little damage, in varying degrees."

"Then there's really nothing more to say, is there?" I said.

"Thanks boys," said the skipper, "I knew I could rely on you to volunteer! Now I'm turning you over to Parland and Boon for technical instruction." I suppose you couldn't blame

him—he had a wife and family back on Earth.

For the next few days, we all worked hard, Parland and Bundenberg turning out the necessary quantities of the wonderdrug, and me on an intensive refresher course in landing spaceships. The skipper pointed out that if the other officers didn't wake in time, I would be in sole charge, invaluable experience. I only hoped I'd be in a position to take advantage of it!

Word got around of course, and Bundenberg and I found ourselves heroes! Which, though heady at first, can be rather a lonesome business, especially to someone like myself who feels uncomfortable at being regarded as a being apart. Bundenberg now blossomed out surprisingly, he used to hold forth in the bar, with Dinah hanging on his words, as if to the manner born.

After a bit I took to spending my free time down in the Hydroponics Room, talking to Agnes. She couldn't answer, of course, but she'd lie there on the water listening to me, with her beautiful eyes full of understanding and sympathy. Sometimes I'd croon to her, old-fashioned melancholy stuff for the most part, but she liked it. Sometimes I'd hold one of her hands.

Well, zero hour approached, and Reg and I prepared for Doomsday. The ship's company strapped themselves down in their bunks and took their injections like lambs. In the end there was only Parland, Bundenberg and I, active. Parland hesitated a bit, but in the end he muttered something about having to preserve himself and his discoveries for mankind, and allowed himself to be persuaded to take his dose.

Reg and I looked at one another. "Think it'll work?" I asked.

"Oh, I think so. That is, if Parland's formula is correct."

"About fifteen minutes to go," I said, "then I press the switch that makes the old ship leap forward to her appointed place."

"Clive," Bundenberg spoke hesitantly, "there's really no need for both of us—I mean you could show me what to do—"

"I've been thinking along those lines myself, old son," I said, "but with a different conclusion. Your job is done, mine is just beginning—the one I'm trained for. As the master-mind remarked, brains are a commodity that should be conserved. They can get plenty more like me."

Before he could argue, I stepped back and hit him sweetly on the point of his jaw. Split-second operative, thats me! I

picked up the syringe. I'd watched them often enough.

Afterwards I felt a bit lonely. I did all those things which I ought to have done, as the prayer-book says, and then I staggered down below.

"Agnes," I said leaning over her tank, "you and I are the sole survivors in this flying morgue." She waved a white hand

to show she was listening.

"Agnes, are you all right? It doesn't hurt?" Just then there was a sickening lurch, and I felt a sensation of pure agony in my brain. Then I black out.

I came to with a slightly drunken feeling, otherwise I was all right. For a few hazy minutes I fancied myself back in my college days, rocking peacefully in a canoe on the river. Then I began to feel wet.

"Bunny," I said aloud, "the boat's leaking again."

At the sound of my voice there was a soft sighing in my ear. Something tickled my face, and I opened my eyes. No wonder I felt wet—I was floating in the tank, supported by Agnes' embrace. It was her hair that tickled me.

"Thanks Agnes," I said. "You've saved me from a watery

grave."

I scrambled out. Apart from being soaked through, I felt as good as new. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that two hours had passed. Agnes must have been worn-out holding my head above water all that time. I changed and got on with the job. Twelve hours later, the first of my sleeping beauties started to revive. By the time we landed, they were all present and correct.

I was taken straight to the hospital for a check-up but none of the doctors could find anything wrong, beyond a heavy cold. It seems the water had cushioned me against shock, a thing that

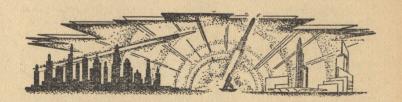
gave the backroom boys something to think about.

Bundenberg left the Service and went into partnership with Parland. The result was the present system of emergency water-locks on spaceships. Bun is quite a big noise these days.

As for me, I got a medal and went back to flying!

When I land up at Venusburg, I always go and see Agnes. She has a little home of her own in an ornamental lake there. After all it's not everyone that's had his life—and his reason—saved by the loving arms of a mermaid. All fifteen of them!

-H. L. Draper



### Film Review

### THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

Starring Vincent Price, John Kerr and Barbara Steele

Let's face it (if we have the moral courage) after more than fifty years of good, bad and indifferent horror films (mostly bad of late)—they are here to stay! Fortunately, since the making of Psycho, some of the movie makers have realised that better quality produced horror pays an even larger dividend. For which we can be thankful and sit forward on the edge of our cinema seat and savour the excellent performance of Vincent Price as Nicholas Medina in New American Film Company's colour version of Edgar Allan Poe's immortal short story The Pit and the Pendulum, a film which gets its chilling effects without the aid of a monster—praise be.

Apart from good acting (and thank you author Richard Matheson for a fine script) the story relies more upon a clever build-up of photography, music and sound effects for its tension than Poe's plot, of which there is very little similarity except for the Pendulum form of torture (if you have read or re-read the original story lately—Pan Books recently re-issued a collected Poe, Tales of Mystery and Imagination, containing this one) you will recollect that there is only one character, in a Toledo

dungeon being tortured by the Inquisition.

In the film version action centres round the growing insanity of Nicholas Medina in his castle home, where his wife Elizabeth (Barbara Steele) has died of an obscure illness with his fear that he had her bricked up alive in the family vault. Her brother Francis Barnard (John Kerr) is not satisfied that her death was natural and with the aid of Dr. Charles Leon (Antony Carbone) the vault is opened showing a grinning corpse and Nicholas's fears are confirmed. His sanity topples completely as more and more inexplicable events take place which can only be attributed to Barbara—the unidentified scream, the creaking door, the ghostly harpsichord music—combined with a magnificently macabre setting as climax chases climax, often producing a form of laughter in the audience, but it is the laughter of escaping tension rather than derision. After all, nobody really wants to earn the £10,000 which is guaranteed for the first person to die of fright during the performance.

Nicholas is drawn inexorably back to Elizabeth's tomb, through the corridors festooned with cobwebs, through the torture chamber of his father—to finally see the gory hands of his wife push open the lid of the tomb and rise above him in awful judgment. Nothing I have yet seem on the screen quite comes up to the reality of this particular scene, not even the superb climax with its pendulum knife swinging slowly lower on to the writhing body of Francis. Magnificent though this is and worthy of all the publicity department's releases, it pales into insignificance beside that earlier shudder—because you know Francis will escape in time, but in the tomb scene you cannot even guess what is coming next.

If this type of chiller is to be the new tempo of the old

horror film-more please!

John Carnell

David Rome

### THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Kenneth Bulmer is back next month with a long Fluxer novelette (you may remember that he has had several stories on this theme). "Flame in the Flux Field" comes up with a new invention which just might give Earth an edge over their alien enemies—but someone has to volunteer to try out the invention under combat conditions. John Brunner and Philip E. High both have longer than average short stories, "Stimulus" and "Probability Factor" and the conclusion of "Field Hospital" finds James White's famous 'Sector General' hospital very much a wreck as the Empire close in for the kill.

### Story ratings for No. 110 were:

The Fortress Of True -

6.

1.	Storm Wind (Part 1)	-	-	-	- J. G. Ballard
2.	Resident Physician	-	-	-	- James White
3.	Nelson Expects -	-	-	-	- John Kippax
4.	Change Of Heart	-	-	-	Bertram Chandler
5.	Stress	-	-	-	D. E. Ellis



The next best thing to a new John Wyndham novel is a new collection of his shorter stories even when as is the case of Consider Her Ways (Michael Joseph, 15/-) some of the "newness" is a trifle familiar. The title story was originally a worthy third partner—in the company of William Golding and Mervyn Peake—in a volume entitled Sometime Never published a year or two back, is now collected in its rightful place of honour, and a second reading confirms this penetrating and cynical account of the ultimate emancipation of womankind as a remarkable tour-de-force. Mr. Wyndham's idiosynchratic penchant for neatly translating some temporal vagary into a sparkling vignette is well exemplified in "Odd," quite delightful, lavender-scented, "Stitch in Time," and the formidable research of "Random Quest." And to round off this showcase of the talents of possibly the greatest living English writer of fantasy and science fiction, his impish humour is let loose to uproarious effect in "Oh Where, Now, Is Peggy Macrafferty?" the Hollywoodian transformation of a pretty colleen, and that devilish intrusion into the sanctity of a British institution, the football pools—"A Long Spoon" (which enjoyed a recent and successful translation to the small screen). Highly recommended.

A transatlantic contemporary on the same high level of readability is the widely-admired Frederik Pohl whose latest novel **Drunkard's Walk** (Victor Gollancz, (13/6) revealing little taint of its magazine serial original, carries support for this admiration. It holds up impressively for nine-tenths of its length as a superior mystery concerning the bedevilment of a mathematics tutor in a peculiarly convincing American university of several centuries hence, and Mr. Pohl once more scores heavily for another effective and ingenious future extrapolation. Unfortunately one gets the impression that with the denouement of the conspiracy, the author's imagination runs

desperately riot, more than somewhat affected by the alcoholic haze used as an effective weapon by the hero to defeat his enemies. Plenty of excitement, though, and ideas galore, and, of course, quiet professionally executed. Not to be missed.

Mr. I. F. Clarke in a recent essay prefacing his chronological checklist "The Tale of the Future" (to be reviewed later) stresses the importance of distinguishing the three main types of fiction about the future; the utopia, the political and the scientific romance, in order to make a point that the satirical or philosophically purposeful utopia and the scientific romance lack the total preoccupation with the fate of nations (the world?) that is the aim of the political forecast. In Olga Hesky's The Purple Armchair (Anthony Blond, 15/-) we have a subtle combination of all three. In a well-chosen and convincingly described utopia, decadent through over-regulation (from pre-cradle eugenics selection through peaceful, comfortable computer-controlled, non-alcoholic, non-smoking, hobby -chosen existence to "termination") an extra-terrestrial arrived on a mission. This is Lobos, from Ceta I, who resembles nothing better than an ambulant, plush-purple armchair, and is to report to his superiors on the expendability of the human race with a view to taking over our planet. He selects a neardeviate, the moderately disaffected Peter, a contemporary beatnik, whose eventual conduct refutes the worth for surcival of such a society and seals the doom of mankind. A cleverly constructed story, wherein the story development is viewed the the eyes and minds of the different characters in separate chapters, it is, despite its often cloying humour and thickly trowelled satire, a subtly chilling indictment of humanity not surviving as it has done in the past, without aggressive spirit. Well worth reading, if only for the unusually effective extrapolation of social and technological trends competently treated by a newcomer to the field (if, indeed, this is not her first novel).

Leslie Flood



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